

Cross-Cultural Agenda**African and Confucian Environmental Ethics Contrasted**

Workineh Kelbessa*

Abstract: The aim of this study is to compare and contrast African environmental ethics and Confucian environmental ethics and show what they can contribute to the solution of local and global environmental problems. Although there is no reference to God in Confucianism, African and Confucian environmental ethics emphasise similar values and principles including: relationality, harmony without homogeneity, reciprocity, commitment to humaneness and civility, community, family love, sympathy, compassion, beneficence, generosity, altruism, tolerance and the like. Both recognize the interconnectedness of humans and nature. For both African and Confucian ethics, individuals develop their personhood through other persons. Relationships are necessary to realise one's personhood. In ubuntu (humanness) ethics, one becomes a person/human because of other persons. African environmental ethics also teaches that the full realization of human being is impossible outside relatedness with the natural environment. It regards human beings and the nonhuman world as extensions of each other. Similarly, Confucian environmental ethics is anthropocosmic rather than anthropocentric. It considers humans as an integral part of 'the chain of being' rather than apart from it. It affirms relationality between and among different components of nature. Human beings and nature are believed to be in an ontological and epistemological continuum although they have different moral status and roles. Confucianism also teaches that humans have the responsibility of using moral judgments to assist the Way of Nature. Thus, for both African and Confucian ethics, the self cannot realise itself in isolation but in relationships with specific others, with different communities, and with nature. Furthermore, like many cultural groups in Africa, Confucians recognize nature as the basis of a stable society, human cultural values and practices and that the over exploitation of natural resources would result in imbalance. Thus, this study shows that humanity can derive important lessons from African and Confucian environmental ethics and address environmental problems in the world. This paper suggests that environmental philosophers and others should study Chinese and African environmental ethics to derive environmentally friendly values and insights.

Keywords: African environmental ethics, anthropocentrism, Confucian environmental ethics, harmony, relationality, maat, ubuntu, saffuu

Introduction

This paper examines the common features of African and Confucian environmental ethics and their contribution to environmental well-being. No author has directly studied the relationship between the *environmental ethics* of African and Chinese traditions. However, recently some writers have studied different aspects of African and Chinese worldviews.¹ It is not my intention

* Workineh Kelbessa, Ph.D & Prof. at Philosophy Department Addis Ababa University Ethiopia.

1 See Daniel A. Bell and Thaddeus Metz, "Confucianism and *Ubuntu*: Reflections on a Dialogue between Chinese and African Traditions," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38(supp.) (2011):78-95; Jean Pierre Miahouakana Matondo, "Cross-cultural Values Comparison between Chinese and Sub-Saharan African," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 3(2012):38-45; Jim Unah, "Finding Common Grounds for a Dialogue between African and Chinese Ethics," in Elvis Imaldon and John Bewaji (eds.). *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African*

to deal here in any detail with the comprehensive account of African and Chinese worldviews. I shall restrict myself to common values of the two traditions that are relevant to environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics as a subject began during the early 1970s when some philosophers in English-speaking countries began to reflect on the role of philosophy in addressing environmental problems. Environmental ethics studies the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Environmental ethics is part of environmental philosophy and focuses on ethical issues concerning the protection of the environment. As I stated elsewhere, environmental philosophy studies metaphysical issues including the relationship between human beings and nature; animal ethics and animal studies; the natural environment and its component parts, aesthetic value associated with nature; ecojustice; social justice; global justice; climate justice; water justice; technology and the natural environment; the relationship between environmental ethics and environmental economics, political participation and its impact on the environment, the impact of environmentalist or green policies on politics and constitutions, planetary mechanisms, tourism and travel; etc.¹

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part briefly discusses the nature of African environmental ethics. The second part looks into Confucian environmental ethics. The third part explores the common features of African and Confucian environmental ethics. Finally, tentative conclusions will be drawn. This paper aims to make a modest contribution to the debate on intercultural environmental ethics.

African Environmental Ethics

The existence of different worldviews in Africa makes it literally impossible to speak of a unilateral notion of environmental ethics in the continent. Although each cultural group can have its own unique environmental ethics in Africa, there are some commonalities, justifying the concept of a generic African worldview. So, African environmental ethics is based on the environmental and ethical dimensions of African worldviews.

African philosophers have been slower to reflect on the human-nature relationships and the growing environmental problems. Only after the publication in 1990 of “Traditional African Land

meta-Ethics (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), pp. 107-120; Kweku Ampiah, “Who’s Afraid of Confucius? East Asian Values and the Africans,” *African and Asian Studies* 13(2014):385-404; Thaddeus Metz, “Harmonizing Global Ethics in the Future: A Proposal to Add South and East to West,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 10(2014):146-155; Thaddeus Metz, “Values in China as Compared to Africa,” in Hester du Plessis (ed.). *The Rise and Decline and Rise of China: Searching for an Organising Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Real African Publishers, 2015), pp. 75-116; Thaddeus Metz, “Confucian Harmony from an African Perspective,” *African and Asian Studies* 15(2016):1-22; Thaddeusi Metz, “Confucianism and African Philosophy,” in Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola (eds). *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017a), pp. 207-221; Thaddeus Metz, “Values in China as Compared to Africa: Two Conceptions of Harmony,” *Philosophy East and West* 67(2) (2017b):441-465.

1 Workineh Kelbessa, “Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought,” *Environmental Ethics* 40(4) (2018):313.

Ethics”¹ of C. K. Omari, a Tanzanian sociologist, some African philosophers and non-African writers have begun to document the worldviews of various ethnic groups in Africa. For instance, Henry Odera Oruka,² Kwasi Wiredu,³ Segun Ogungbemi,⁴ Workineh Kelbessa,⁵ Munyaradzi Felix Murove,⁶ John Baird Callicott,⁷ Godfrey B. Tangwa,⁸ Munamato Chemhuru and Dennis Masaka,⁹ Chigbo Joseph Ekwealo,¹ Kevin Gary Behrens,² Polycarp A. Ikuenobe,³ Ademola

1 C. K. Omari, “Traditional African Land Ethics,” in J. Ronald Engel and Joan Gibb Engel, ed., *Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge, International Response* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), pp. 167-75.

2 Henry Odera Oruka and C. Juma, “Ecophilosophy and Parental Earth Ethics (on the Complex Web of Being),” in Henry Odera Oruka, ed., *Philosophy, Humanity and Ecology. Vol. I. Philosophy of Nature and Environmental Ethics* (Nairobi: ACTS Press and AAS, 1994), pp. 115-29.

3 Kwasi Wiredu, “Philosophy, Humankind and the Environment,” in Henry Odera Oruka, ed., *Philosophy, Humanity and Ecology. Vol. I. Philosophy of Nature and Environmental Ethics* (Nairobi: ACTS Press and AAS, 1994), pp. 30-48.

4 Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” in Louis J. Pojman, ed., *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 330-37.

5 Workineh Kelbessa, “Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Ethiopia,” in Katsuyoshi Fukui, Eisei Kurimoto and Masayoshi Shigeta, eds., *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: Papers of the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Kyoto: Shokado Books Sellers, 1997), pp. 264-303; Workineh Kelbessa, “The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa,” *Diogenes*. 207 (2005):17-34; Workineh Kelbessa, “Africa, Sub-Saharan,” in J. Baird Callicott, and Robert Frodeman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. Vol. I. (Detroit, Michigan: Macmillan Reference USA. A Part of Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 10-18; Workineh Kelbessa, *Indigenous and Modern Environmental Ethics: A Study of the Indigenous Oromo Environmental Ethic and Modern Issues of Environment and Development: Ethiopian Philosophical Studies. I* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2011a); Workineh Kelbessa, “Indigenous Environmental Philosophy”, in Jay Garfield and William Edelglass (eds.). *Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011b), pp. 574-581; Workineh Kelbessa, “Can African Environmental Ethics Contribute to Environmental Policy in Africa?” *Environmental Ethics* 36(1) (2014): 31-61, and Workineh Kelbessa, “African Environmental Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Challenges,” *Environmental Ethics*, 34(4) (2015):387-410.

6 M. F. Murove, “The Shona Concept of Ukama and the Process Philosophical Concept of Relatedness, with Special Reference to the Ethical Implication of Contemporary neo-liberal Economic Practices,” MA Thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1999; Munyaradzi Felix Murove, “An African Environmental Ethic Based on the Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu”, in Munyaradzi Felix Murove (ed.). *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), pp. 314-331.

7 Callicott, *Earth's Insights*.

8 Godfrey B. Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” in Kwasi Wiredu, ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), pp. 387-95.

9 Munamato Chemhuru and Dennis Masaka, “Taboos as Sources of Shona People’s Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 12(7) (2010):121-133.

Kazeem Fayemi,⁴ Thaddeus Metz⁵, Michael Onyebuchi Eze⁶ and others have studied various environmental issues in African traditions of thought. Rainer Ebert and Anteneh Roba also edited a book entitled *Africa and Her Animals*.⁷ This book explores the relationship between humans and non-human animals, and the place and status of non-human animals in Africa. African and non-African scholars discussed various topics under five parts: animals and philosophy in Africa; animals, religion and society in Africa; African animals in law, legislation and policy; the use of animals in Africa; and public health, the environment and African wildlife. Moreover, in a recently published anthology on *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader*, certain writers examined various issues including moral status and the African environment, *ubuntu* and the environment, African ecocentric environmental ethics, environmental justice in African philosophy, questions of animal rights in African philosophy and issues of environmental pollution in Africa.⁸

Some writers characterize African philosophy as purely anthropocentric.⁹ For this group, Africans promote the primacy of humans over other species and natural entities. Thus, Africa lacks environmental ethics. In contrast to this view, the majority of the above mentioned writers hold the view that various African traditions have embodied environmental values that can be used to address the current environmental problems in Africa. In one of my latest articles, I summarized their views as follows:

They stress that Africans believe in the interdependence of human beings, animals, plants and the natural world. African worldviews regard human beings and the non-human world as extensions of each other. They do not regard earth as a commodity, but as the source of survival. In African worldviews well-being is relational, as the well-being of

1 Chigbo Joseph Ekwealo, "Metaphysical Background to Igbo Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics*, 34(3)(2012):265-74.

2 Kevin Gary Behrens, "An African Relational Environmentalism and Moral Considerability," *Environmental Ethics* 36(1) (2014):63-82.

3 Polycarp A. Ikuenobe, "Traditional African Environmental Ethics and Colonial Legacy," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 2(4) (2014):1-21.

4 Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, "African Environmental Ethics and the Poverty of Eco-Activism in Nigeria: A Hermeneutico-Reconstructionist Appraisal," *Matafu* 48 (2016):363-88.

5 Thaddeus Metz, "How to Ground Animal Rights on African Values: Reply to Horsthemke," *Journal of Animals Ethics* 7(2) (2017c):163-74.

6 Michael Onyebuchi Eze, "Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism): An African Environmental Theory", in Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017), pp. 621-32.

7 Rainer Ebert and Anteneh Roba (eds.). *Africa and Her Animals* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2018).

8 Munamoto Chemhuru (ed.), *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019).

9 See for instance, Callicott, *Earth's Insights*; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); Penny Enslin and Kai Horsthemke, "Can Ubuntu provide a Model for Citizenship Education in African Democracies?" *Comparative Education* 40(4) (2004): 545-58; Kai Horsthemke, *Animals and African Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

humanity cannot be achieved without the well-being of the earth. They are related. They are part of the same whole. In African worldviews, human beings are in nature and part of nature in balance with the whole. When human beings see themselves as outside of nature, it is purely for the purpose of conceptual need. The purpose here is to make conceptual analysis. Even here humans are still in nature.¹

African environmental ethics recognizes the interdependence of different members of the natural environment. Human beings are not isolated from the non-human world. They are all related to each other as individuals and to the rest of nature. Human societies and natural systems are interdependent.

Various cultural groups in Africa use different concepts to describe social relationships and the interconnectedness of human beings and the natural environment. The concept “*ubuntu*” is a case in point. In *ubuntu* ethics, one becomes a person/human because of other persons. The existence of a person depends on the existence of others. Nguni speakers including Zulus, Ndebeles, and Xhoas in southern Africa consider humanness or a true human being or living a genuinely human way of life as the highest-order goal of a person. This is also common in other sub-Saharan African ethnic groups. Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha confirms this when he writes, “[i]n Africa, to be a human being is a project to be fulfilled by each individual. Being a human being is an ongoing process. Birth alone does not define humanity. One has to ‘become’ a real **Muntu**. One becomes more fully human through one’s ‘way of life,’ by behaving more ethically.”² Harmonious relationship is the common key concept here. It is equally true that the full realization of human being is impossible outside relatedness with the natural environment.³

Ancient Egyptians also developed a holistic view of the world. *Maat*, the ancient Egyptian ethical and spiritual principle, integrates the sacred with a mundane or secular situation, and holds all things in place. On this account we cannot think of the existence of the universe without *maat*, as “everything in the universe that is real and orderly is the expression or manifestation of *Maat*.”⁴ The Oromo of Ethiopia also recognize the unity of *Waaqa* (God), Earth and human beings. *Saffuu* or *ceeraa fokko*, an ethical principle, governs human activities, and the relationship between different things. There is *saffuu* between *Waaqa* and Earth, human beings and *Waaqa*. The violation of *saffuu* will result in disturbance of the balance between different things. *Saffuu* balances the *Ayyaana*, spirit, which is the ideal, and *uumaa*, which is the physical world. *Saffuu* also enables us to understand the distance and respect between different entities. As Lambert Bartels persuasively states, *saffuu* “implies that all things have a place of their own in the cosmic

1 Kelbessa, “Environmental Philosophy,” p. 321.

2 Emphasis in original, Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009, p. 144, quoted in Metz, “Values in China as Compared to Africa,” p. 444.

3 See Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Rev. edition (Harare: Mond Books, 2002) and Workineh Kelbessa, “African Environmental Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge, and Environmental Challenges,” pp. 387-410.

4 Théophile Obenga, “Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy,” in Kwasi Wiredu, ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), p.47.

and social order, and that they should keep this pace. Their place is conditioned by the specific Ayyaana each of them has received from *Waaqa* ... *Saffuu* implies both rights and duties.”¹

Moreover, as discussed in my previous work, 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* and that of others. According to the Oromo, *saffuu* is *ulfina* (respect). We need to show respect to our father, mother, aunt, uncle and our mother Earth. Knowing *saffuu* helps us to maintain our culture and revere *Waaqa*.² So, different worldviews in Africa support human beings’ inherent connections to the natural world. African worldviews recognize the reality of the interconnectedness of human beings, non-human beings and nature.

Confucian Environmental Ethics

Various writers have discussed the nature and relevance of Confucianism to environmental issues.³ Very few of these writers show how Confucian environmental ethics differs from anthropocentrism.

Confucianism is not a single unified theory. It is based on the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, the second great Confucian thinker (372-289 BCE), Hsun Tzu (298-238 BCE) and other

1 Lambert Bartels, *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia. An Attempt to Understand* (Berlin: Dietrich Reinner, 1983), p. 170.

2 Kelbessa, *Indigenous and Modern Environmental Ethics*, p. 212.

3 See Julia Tao, “Relational Resonance with Nature: The Confucian Vision”, in Ian Lowe and Jouni Paavola (eds.). *Environmental Values in a Globalizing World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 66-79; Ruiping Fan, “A Reconstructionist Confucian Account of Environmentalism: Toward a Human Sagely Dominion over Nature,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32(2005):105-122; Marrion Hourdequin and David B. Wong, “A Relational Approach to Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32(1) (2005):19-33; Cecilia Wee, “Mencius and the Natural Environment,” *Environmental Ethics* 31 (2009):359-374; Evelyn Mary Tucker, “Confucianism,” in J. Baird Callicott and Robert Fredeman (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. Vol. 1. New York: Macmillan Reference US Part of Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 163-166; Evelyn Mary Tucker, “The Relevance of Chinese Neo-Confucianism for the Reverence of Nature,” in J. Baird Callicott and James McRae (eds.). *Environmental Philosophy in Asian Traditions of Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), pp. 133-148; Shih-yu Kuo, “Climate Change and the Ecological Intelligence of Confucius,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 7(2011): 185-94; Anh Tuan Nuyen, “Confucian Role-Based Ethics and Strong Environmental Ethics” *Environmental Values* 20(2011):549-566; Joel J. Kassiola, “Confucianizing Modernity and ‘Modernizing Confucianism’: Environmentalism and the Need for a Confucian Positive Argument for Social Progress,” in Joel J. Kassiola and Sujian Guo (eds.). *China’s Environmental Crisis: Domestic and Global Political Impacts and Responses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 195-218; Joel J. Kassiola, “China’s Environmental Crisis and Confucianism: Proposing a Confucian Green Theory to Save the Environment.” in Bingqiang Ren and Huisheng Shou (eds.). *Chinese Environmental Governance: Dynamics, Challenges, and Prospects in a Changing Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 227-242; Jan Erik Christensen, “Building an Environmental Ethics from the Confucian Concepts of Zhengming and Datong,” *Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East* 24(3) (2014):279-293; Pak-Hang Wong, “Confucian Environmental Ethics, Climate Engineering, and the ‘Playing God’ Argument,” *Zygon* 50(1) (2015):28-41.

Neo-Confucians. Confucius or K'ung Fu-Tzu (551-479 BCE) was the founder of the Confucian tradition.¹ Confucius is a sage who tries to lead the people to their liberation. It should be clear from the outset that Confucianism is not a theistic religion. There is no reference to God and afterlife in Confucianism. According to Daniel A. Bell and Theddeus Metz, "Confucianism prizes social ways of life in the physical world above all else.... [T]he good life is thought to lie in the here and now; it does not get better after we die."²

Mencius and Hsun Tzu developed the ideas of Confucius in their writings.³ Neo-Confucians further developed the ideas of Confucius in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In particular, Chu Hsi (1130-1200) provides the metaphysical synthesis of the central ideas of Confucius.⁴ The proponents of Confucianism have revised and further developed the major tenets of Confucianism and tried to relate it to contemporary problems. Confucian attitudes to the environment have been expressed in different ways throughout the history of Confucianism. Some writers label Confucianism as anthropocentrism. They think that Confucius himself was clearly anthropocentric, as he gave priority to human concerns. Although Nuyen asserts that "Confucianism is thoroughly anthropocentric"⁵, he is of the opinion that Confucian anthropocentrism differs from Western anthropocentrism. According to Nuyen, Confucianism can be characterized as weak anthropocentrism at metaphysical and epistemological levels but not at the ethical level. For him the *dao* or nature does not have an intrinsic value. Only human beings have intrinsic values. Nature has an inherent value the basis of which lies in itself, we are obligated not just to protect and preserve it but also to follow it, and not just to follow it but to do so with respect and reverence as if it were our teacher or indeed our parents, as stated in the 'Great Declaration' in the Book of History (5.1.1) 'Heaven and Earth are the parents of all creatures'.⁶ Inherent value is given to non-human Earth and Heaven by human beings. Nuyen states that this is non-instrumental value.

Similarly, for Marrion Hourdequin and David B. Wong, the non-human world doesn't have an intrinsic value. However, they don't restrict the value of the non-human world to instrumental value either. "Rather, the nonhuman can be so implicated in who we are that its having value is a necessary condition of our having value."⁷ Other writers characterise Confucianism as anthropocosmic.⁸ They stress that Confucianism considers human beings as an integral part of 'the chain of being'. According to Wong, although Confucian environmental philosophy centers on human values, "it is nonanthropocentric because the ground for those values goes beyond

1 Tucker, "The Relevance of Chinese Neo-Confucianism", p. 138.

2 Bell and Thaddeus Metz, "Confucianism and *Ubuntu*", p. 82.

3 Tucker, "The Relevance of Chinese Neo-Confucianism", p. 138.

4 For details see *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

5 Nuyen, "Confucian Role-Based Ethics", pp. 554.

6 Nuyen, "Confucian Role-Based Ethics", p. 563. The last statement was taken from *The Book of History*, in James Legge (1970), cited in *Ibid.*, p. 563.

7 Hourdequin and Wong, "A Relational Approach to Environmental Ethics," p. 27.

8 See for instance, Tu Weiming, "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature," in Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Berthrong (eds.). *Confucianism and Ecology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 105-121; Tucker, "Confucianism"; Wong, "Confucian Environmental Ethics".

human beings.”¹ It recognises the ontological and epistemological continuity between humans, Heaven and Earth. In other words, it affirms relationality not only between and among humans but also the interconnectedness of humans and nature. It shows that humans are interdependently linked with nature. Thus, the Confucian worldview might be described as a series of concentric circles in which the human is the center not as an isolated individual but embedded in rings of family, society, and environment.... All these circles are contained within the vast cosmos itself. Thus, the ultimate context for the human is the ‘10,000 things (wan wu)’ in nature in all its remarkable variety and abundance².

Anthropocosmic worldview holds that human beings form a triad with Heaven and Earth. The relationship of the three implies that human beings are considered as children of the universe. On this account, human beings and nature are believed to be in an ontological and epistemological continuum although they have different moral status and roles. “Although the Confucian anthropocosmic worldview takes humans and nature to be in an ontological and epistemological continuum, sharing the same ontological and epistemological origin does *not* mean that humans and nature have the *same* moral status.”³ The role of human beings is different from nature. Unlike human beings nature lacks moral capacities.

For Confucians, it would be wrong to interfere unnecessarily with nature. Instead, human beings should align with the great Dao of nature. Human well-being will rely on fostering nature. “Thus, the ‘human mind’ expands in relation to the ‘Mind of the Way’.”⁴ Harmonious relation with nature is a necessary condition for the achievement of human self-realization. Humans can only intervene in the process of nature when morally unacceptable things happen, as nature lacks moral capacities. The following statement in the *Analects* 15.29 explains the active role of human beings: “[h]uman beings can broaden the Way—it is not the Way that broadens human beings.”⁵ So, human intervention in nature is sometimes permissible. But unnecessary human exploitation of nature is impermissible.

For Tu Weiming, Confucians are committed to attain the “Great Harmony” which accommodates all of nature. For him, anthropocosmic is distinct from anthropocentrism. Confucian humanism is fundamentally different from anthropocentrism because it professes the unity of man and Heaven rather than the imposition of the human will on nature. In fact the anthropocentric assumption that man is put on earth to pursue knowledge and, as knowledge expands, so does man’s dominion over earth is quite different from the Confucian perception of the pursuit of knowledge as an integral part of one’s self-cultivation. He further writes, [t]he human transformation of nature, therefore, means as much an integrative effort to learn to live harmoniously in one’s natural environment as a modest attempt to use the environment to sustain basic livelihood. The idea of exploiting nature is rejected because it is incompatible with the

1 Wong, “Confucian Environmental Ethics”, p. 30.

2 Tucker, “Confucianism”, p. 163.

3 Emphasis in original, Wong, “Confucian Environmental Ethics”, p. 32.

4 Tucker, “Confucianism”, p. 166.

5 Slingerland 2003, 185, quoted in Wong, “Confucian Environmental Ethics”, p. 34.

Confucian concern for moral self-development.¹ So, in Confucianism, human beings are not the conquerors of nature. They regard the cosmos as an interdependent dynamic system.

Metaphysical holism is the central concern of Confucian and Neo-Confucian thinkers. Human beings are required to conform to this system. Nature is conceived as a relational whole and humans are regarded as anthropocosmic beings.² Accordingly, Confucianism looks upon human beings as a part of nature and not as an opposing 'other' of nature. Taking this into account, human life is originally a part of the action of nourishing the 'ten thousand things (wan wu)', thus taking care of people's lives extends to taking care of the ecology and the environment. This is a natural connection, and there is no gap between them.³

Mary Evelyn Tucker praises Chinese Neo-Confucianism for developing a holistic view of the universe. Neo-Confucianism recognises the organic wholeness of the world where the human person as a microcosm is related to the universe as the macrocosm. Different things in the world are interconnected and interdependent. The universe is a self-generating, interconnected entity without the intervention of any supernatural force. Neo-Confucians consider *ch'i* "the material force" as the driving force of "change and transformation in the universe."⁴ Material force is present in all life forms.

Accordingly, in Confucian environmental ethics, the self is constituted by its relations to other human beings and natural entities. It cannot realise itself in isolation but in relationships with others. According to Henry Rosemont, Jr., "there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others..."⁵ Therefore, self-realization cannot happen in isolation but in relationships with specific others, with different communities, and with nature. Confucianism holds that context determines who we are. Our identities are determined in relation to the persons we interacted with. Moral knowledge is partly based on social and physical environment. Personhood is based on relationships to particular places.

Various cultural groups including those of Arizona's Western Apache recognise that particular places and ecologies influence knowledge and identity and morality of the self. As Marrion Hourdequin and David B. Wong note, "[i]n the Confucian, Western Apache, and Inuit worldviews, individuals realise their full humanity by developing themselves in relation to other human beings as well as in relation to the broader world (*tian* for Confucians; the land for the Western Apache; and animals, people, and the environment for the Inuit)."⁶

Certain writers state that Confucianism has different concepts that can be the basis of environmental ethics. For instance, Jan Erik Christensen holds that a lack of a sense of responsibility toward the environment and a lack of a sense of care for what is outside of the confines of one's immediate environment are the two problems contemporary ecology faces. Two

1 Tu Weiming, 1985:75, quoted in Tucker, "The Relevance of Chinese Neo-Confucianism", p. 143.

2 Tucker, "Confucianism", p. 165.

3 Christensen, "Building an Environmental Ethics", p. 283.

4 Tucker, "The Relevance of Chinese Neo-Confucianism".

5 Henry Rosemont, Jr., "Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons", in Mary I. Bockover (ed.), *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1991), p. 90.

6 Hourdequin and Wong, "A Relational Approach to Environmental Ethics," pp.25-26.

Confucian concepts 1. *zhengming* 正名 (Rectification) and 2. *datong* 大同 (Great Harmony), Confucius' political ideal, can be employed as the bases of environmental ethics and address these problems. The concept “*zhengming*” insists that human beings are under obligation to protect the environment. The principle of *datong* considers ‘all under Heaven’ as the object of care.¹

African and Confucian Environmental Ethics Contrasted

What has been discussed above shows that African and Confucian environmental ethics share many things in common: relationality, harmony without homogeneity, reciprocity, mutual interdependence among the forces of nature, commitment to humaneness and civility, community, family love, sympathy, compassion, beneficence, generosity, altruism, tolerance, and the like. The African principle of *ubuntu* closely aligns with a central vein of Confucian thinking² in its conception of persons as centrally constituted by and through their relations to others. These relations, one might think, inform a person's understanding of moral behaviour and how to live in a community.

According to Chenyang Li, the “Confucian ... self is not an independent agent who happens to be in certain social relationships.” Instead the self “is constituted of, and situated in social relationships.”³ The identity of the Confucian self is determined by the social relations it occupies in the society. It cannot be realised outside of the society. Roger Ames and David Hall also state that the Confucian self “both constitutes and is constituted by the field in which it resides”, the “field of social activity and relations.”⁴

Similarly, for African environmental ethics, relationships are necessary to realise one's personhood. As stated earlier, Confucianism and *ubuntu* promote humanness, as for both relationships are the foundation of humanness. Both African environmental ethics and Confucian anthropocosmic environmental ethics also recognise the appropriate role and place of everything in nature and society. Humans and other species have a differentiated sense of appropriate roles. Like many cultural groups in Africa, Confucians recognize nature as the basis of a stable society, human cultural values and practices and that the over exploitation of natural resources would result in imbalance. For both human beings are required to restrain and control their material desires. They also teach that it would be wrong to cut down trees or kill animals needlessly.

Furthermore, African environmental ethics and Confucian environmental ethics praise the value of harmonious relationships. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains, “[h]armony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good.”⁵ Confucians also regard harmony as the highest virtue and grand ideal. For both harmonious relationships should be found in the family. Both consider the family as good in itself and as the basis of other relationships. A person is required to form a family and procreate.

1 Christensen, “Building an Environmental Ethics”.

2 See, for example, Rosemont, Jr., “Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons”, pp. 71-101 and particularly, pp. 89-92; as well, David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), particularly Chapter 2 on the Confucian Concept of self.

3 Chenyang Li, *The Tao Encounters the West* (Albany, NY: SUNNY Press, 1999), p. 94.

4 Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 43.

5 Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 35.

Confucius and his followers claim that harmony in the family can lead to the establishment of order in the society. So, for Confucianism, harmony in society presupposes harmony, filiality and decorum in the family. In this connection, it is important to state how both Confucianism and *ubuntu* consider partiality as an important value.¹ It would be morally acceptable to favour the members of one's family compared to strangers in both traditions. Both endorse "Family first," and "Charity begins at home" maxims.² This does not mean that both Confucianism and *ubuntu* ignore other human beings and the natural environment outside the family and society. Confucianism advises people to be filial both to their parents and nature. This reflects the deep relationship of humans, Heaven and Earth.

In Confucian environmental ethics, the normative ideal of unity of humanity and heaven is "understood in terms of harmony."³ The appropriate relationship between the two avoids mutual domination. Bell and Metz are of the opinion that African and Chinese traditions share communitarian concerns and rely on harmony "in thinking about our proper relationships to one another, to animals, and to the natural environment."⁴ Confucian conception of harmony includes peace and more integration, and the balancing of different things, the complementarity of acceptance and rejection. Harmony doesn't necessarily mean sameness. It is different from assimilation or sameness (*tong*). For Confucians, sameness is not conducive to human flourishing. Consider the expression in the *Anlalects* (Lunyu) 13:23: "[t]he gentleman harmonizes, and does not merely agree. The petty person agrees [i.e. seeks sameness], but he does not harmonize."⁵

Although Metz claims that Confucian conception of harmony is not advanced by African thinkers,⁶ I don't see any fundamental difference between Confucian and Ethiopian indigenous conception of harmony. In fact, what Metz says about harmony and meritocracy is correct. "In catchwords, the harmony of *ubuntu* prescribes consensual democracy, while Confucian harmony inclines heavily toward meritocracy."⁷ *Ubuntu* ethics supports a consensus based decision-making process. Very often Confucianism does not rely on consensus in political decision-making processes.

In addition, we should be aware of the fact that both Confucian and African worldviews do not advocate inappropriate rejection of the use of nature, but rather they emphasise the proper use of nature for survival, which is inherently mutual. For Confucians humans should give way concerning materialistic pursuits, and the environment needs to give way and allow the use of a part of its resources so that humans can continue to subsist. This mutual act of 'giving way' and achieving mutual coexistence is what we can call harmony.⁸ Similarly, as I stated elsewhere, the Oromo people in Ethiopia use what is appropriate but they "do not abuse nature's generosity by

1 Bell and Metz. 2011. "Confucianism and *Ubuntu*".

2 Metz, "Values in China as Compared to Africa", p. 450.

3 Wong, "Confucian Environmental Ethics," p. 32.

4 Bell and Metz, "Confucianism and *Ubuntu*", p. 81.

5 Sligerland 2003, 149, quoted in Wong, "Confucian Environmental Ethics," pp. 31-32.

6 Metz, "Confucianism and African Philosophy" p. 214.

7 Metz, "Values in China as Compared to Africa", p. 452.

8 Christensen, "Building an Environmental Ethics", p. 283.

consuming more than what is needed.”¹ Both understand the universe in general and human-nature relationship in particular as something beyond the extent of mundane and materialistic attributes.

In Confucian philosophy, the content of the universe is not only limited to the physical world, but also includes the spiritual world of humans. These two parts are mixed together and cannot be separated. From a Confucian view, the universe is not only a place for mechanistic physical activities, but also a place for the universal flourishing of life. All phenomena contain the creative productivity of ‘Heaven and Earth’ (tian di 天地). Therefore, from the theory of the ‘humane heart’ (ren xin 仁心) proposed by Mencius, humans are able to ‘extend kindness’ (tui en 推恩) and develop their feeling of concern to also include the ‘ten thousand things’ (wan wu 萬物)² Moreover, Confucian and African philosophers have a similar conception of virtue. In the *Analects*, Confucius writes, “[t]o be able to practice five things everywhere under heaven constitute perfect virtue.... Gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness.”³ Kwame Gyekye also explains similar virtues in Akan society in Ghana. “When a person is known to be honest or generous or compassionate, he would be judged by the Akan as a good person.... Used normatively, the judgment, ‘he is a person,’ means ‘he has a good character’, ‘he is generous’, ‘he is peaceful’, ‘he is humble’, ‘he has respect for others’.”⁴ The Oromo people have also a similar view. A person who has *saffuu* is honest, truthful, kind, humble and respects others. Similarly, individuals who have *ubuntu* in South Africa are believed to be “generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate.”⁵

Metz summarizes the common features of the mainstream variants of both *ubuntu* and Confucianism as follows: For *ubuntu* and Confucianism, the main goal in life should be to develop oneself by recognising the valuable parts of one’s nature. For both traditions, human excellence can be developed through a positive relationship with others, so that one cannot live a truly human way of life without others. In addition, the relevant relationships for both traditions include “compassion, generosity, tolerance, respect and related dispositions.”⁶ Although there are some similarities between African environmental ethics and Confucian environmental ethics, they also have distinct differences. To mention but a few, as stated earlier, Africans favour consensus-based decision environmental or otherwise. Generally, Confucians don’t consider consensus as the basis of decision.

Bell and Metz argue that Confucianism differs from African worldview in supporting political meritocracy, as it regards it as a key public good. But the Oromo of Ethiopia also support political meritocracy. Like Confucians, the Oromo hold the view that *gadaa* political office should be occupied by talented and knowledgeable individuals. The *gadaa* leaders of the Oromo are required to pass through different stages of training and transition rites before taking a leadership position.

1 Kelbessa, “The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics”, p. 25.

2 Christensen, “Building an Environmental Ethics”, p. 281.

3 Part 17, quoted in Metz, “Confucianism and African Philosophy” p. 211.

4 Kwame Gyekye, “African Ethics.” In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, 2010. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/african-ethics/>, Sects. 3,4.

5 Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, p. 34.

6 Metz, “Values in China as Compared to Africa”, p. 447.

Nonetheless, unlike Confucianism, the *gadaa* system does not endorse an autocratic meritocracy. It is an egalitarian democratic system where the *gadaa* leaders lead their people for one non-renewable eight-year term. The people have the right to remove their leaders from their position when they try to dominate them. Similarly, in sub-Saharan African countries, ideas of harmonious relationships incline towards egalitarianism in decision-making, whereas this is not the case with the Chinese.¹ Furthermore, the Oromo have not had books and other written sources to train their children. They have had their own informal and formal training methods. For the Oromo, rigorous personal merits and qualities should be the basis of social, economic and environmental governance. So, Metz was wrong when he generalises about all Africans: “In the traditional African case, unanimous agreement is thought to be ideal, whereas, in the traditional Chinese case, rule by the most qualified is considered best.”

We should also note that Confucianism accepts hierarchical roles between different groups of people. Confucians and more generally Chinese accept “the naturalness, necessity and inevitability of hierarchy. It is self evident to Chinese that all men are born unequal.”² Accordingly, “[h]armony exists when those in the lower position are respectful and deferential towards those in the higher one and when those in the higher position work for the benefit of those in the lower one.”³ In Metz’s opinion, virtue or self-realization is not entirely other-regarding in Confucianism. Independent self-regarding dimension is also embodied in Confucianism. He states that this trend is not explicit in African philosophy. However, this is not fully true. There are also independent environmental and philosophic sages besides folk sages in Africa who have their own authentic views based on reason and evidence. So, not all Africans are other-regarding.

Conclusion

The discussion so far shows that African and Confucians environmental ethics have many useful ethical principles that can be used to prevent local and global environmental destruction. Confucian and African ontologies are relational. For both African and Confucian environmental ethics humans and nature are interconnected. Humans can only realise themselves in relation to other human beings and nature. Tucker explains that the organic holism and dynamic vitalism of Neo-Confucianism “give us a special appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life forms and renews our sense of the sacredness of this intricate web of life.”⁴ So, both African environmental ethics and Confucian environmental ethics can have an important role to play in promoting human and environmental well-being. In one way or another both oppose the unnecessary exploitation of nature. Their environmental values and laws can also help Western societies to reconsider their attitudes and behavior toward the natural environment, technology and excessive consumerism. Unfortunately, the environmental records of Africa and China are not impressive. Both have not yet paid sufficient attention to their respective environmental ethics. This paper suggests that they need to re-examine their environmental values and use them to build socially and environmentally sustainable societies.

1 Metz, “Values in China as Compared to Africa”, p. 451, p.453.

2 Michael H. Bond, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 118.

3 Metz, “Confucianism and African Philosophy”, p. 214.

4 Tucker, “The Relevance of Chinese Neo-Confucianism”, p. 145.