

# CHALLENGES OF BIOCULTURAL DIVERSITY IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION: THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

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## **Abstract**

*Nigeria is plagued by both ethnic conflicts and environmental problems. To ameliorate this situation, it is important that environmental education which his attentive to the issues of biocultural diversity is promoted. Promoting environmental education may involve designing a full curriculum for environmental education. It could also be done through spreading environment concerns across the curriculum. Philosophy and religious studies as aspect of education in Nigeria can play a vital role in promoting biocultural diversity. Respect for biocultural diversity will certainly help to promote tolerance for other people's culture and preserving the natural world. This paper examines all these issues especially in the light of the role philosophy and religion can play. The paper concludes that all disciples should face the challenge of the environmental crisis and promote biocultural flourishing. And finally the paper recommends that Christian curriculum and philosophical studies should enhance environmental protection; and education in general should be attentive to environmental conservation.*

Contemporary Nigeria is not exempt from environmental degradation and ethno-cultural conflicts. On the list of environmental problems are desertifications, deforestation, soil erosion, oil pollution, and land degradation. Various ethno-cultural conflicts have also happened in the land such as those in Ife-Modakeke, Jos, Warri, Emede-Igvide, and Aguleri-Umuleri. The central argument of this discourse is that both environmental degradation and ethno-cultural conflicts are partly attributable to lack of respect and care for biocultural diversity. The paper also argues that there is need to bring a new and challenging innovation into the Nigerian educational system, the recognition of biocultural diversity. While it may be true that many students may be aware of cultural diversity through studies in citizenship education, civil education, social studies, etc; very little is known about biocultural diversity. This is why it is both

a challenge and an innovation that needs to be introduced or emphasized in the educational system in Nigeria.

If there is a deep respect for biocultural diversity, it will help to curb environmental degradation and ethno-cultural conflicts. In order to promote this theme of respect for bio-cultural diversity, this paper will make some conceptual analysis, discuss the educational system in Nigeria, and examine the importance of bio-cultural diversity. The paper will also look at the philosophical and religious foundation for biocultural diversity.

### **Conceptual Analysis**

For better understanding of the subject, the following concepts will be examined. They are biocultural diversity, and education.

The *Wikipedia Contributors* (2010) define biocultural diversity as the “diversity of life in all its manifestations-biological, cultural, and linguistic- which are interrelated within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system.” The issue of biocultural diversity involves the dynamic interactions between all plants, animals, habitats, and human culture. The mutual and balanced interaction between human life on the planet and other non-human lives is vital to the continuous survival of the planet. It is because it is so vital that there should be harmony among humans in a community and that the human persons in turn should live in harmony with the environment. Biocultural diversity essentially includes the intricate and delicate interactions between nature and culture. Nature includes the entire ecological system and its dynamic interactions. While nature is not manmade and is spontaneous from the natural world; culture is the product of human interaction with the environment. Through culture humans make meaning of the world in which they live.

There is multiplicity or plurality of biological life forms in the natural world. There is equally a plurality or diversities of human cultures and ethnicities. Human survival on planet earth depends on the mutual flourishing of non-human life forms. There is no future for humanity without the survival of the planet and its biodiversity. The human interactions with biodiversity should take place in a healthy manner to enable other life forms flourish and for the well being of humanity. Promoting this symbiotic interaction between humano-cultural diversity and planetary diversity should be a challenge for all human agencies, education inclusive. It is a challenge that education and all other human agencies should accept for biological and cultural diversities are a quintessential for human progress on planet earth; for without a harmonious and peaceful interactions between humanity and other life forms there will be continuous environmental conflicts.

The challenge that this paper poses is within the Nigerian education and for the Nigerian society. “Education,” according to the *Wikipedia Contributors* (2011), “in the largest sense is any act or experience that has a formative effect on the *mind, character* or physical ability of an individual.” In a more specialized sense, “education is the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated *knowledge, skills* and *values* from one generation to another.” All the entire processes and systems involved in human formation and that leads to human learning constitutes elements of education.

Education has both a conservative and transformative elements. It should conserve healthy values from the past and equally transforms cultural items that have become outdated or impediment to human progress. Nigerian education or the educational system in Nigeria implies the educational system that takes place in Nigeria. Nigerian education refers to the education that is informed by the philosophy and ideas of the National Policy of Education.

### **Some Vital Issues on the Educational System in Nigeria**

The vision and function of the educational system in Nigeria will determine to a great extent the curriculum and how the educational system works. According to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) in the *National Policy on Education* in section 5 (22), the goals of secondary education includes raising students who will respect the views and feelings of others, and live as good citizens. A vital and fundamental purpose of education in Nigeria is to promote cultural integration and work to eradicate ethnic conflicts. National integration should not be construed to mean that the various ethnic cultures and languages in Nigeria will fuse to become one. Though tongue and tribe may differ, all Nigerians should respect one another's language and ethnicity and ensure that these language and ethnicities promote a spirit of tolerance and respect for diversity.

The National Policy on Education also requires that students should know the environment and the world around them. The world and environment around them that students should know of is not only the one made up of human persons but also the world that is made up of non-humans person such as trees, animals, mountains, rivers, etc. It is imperative then that the educational system promote environmental education either as a full curriculum or spreading the key issues in environmental education through the curriculum. In the light of the environmental challenges that Nigeria is facing, the nation's educational system should not neglect the issues that environmental education, environmental philosophy, environmental ethics, and eco-theology raise.

Maduagwu (n.d) writes regarding Nigerian education that: "The major challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" among many others include "designing an educational system that will be stable and global in outlook..." Speaking of global in outlook, it is difficult to see how the Nigerian educational system can face the challenges of globalization without taking into consideration, the ecological challenge and cultural diversities in the world. The Nigerian educational system should be fashioned to meet the challenges of the global community.

Okpilike (2010) has noted some of the problems facing Nigerian education and society. These problems include: "student indiscipline, student unrest, cultism, lack of respect, immodesty in dressing, examination malpractice, and prostitution.... tribalism, etc." He writes that there is need to reclaim the cultural values such as "honesty, truthfulness, kindness, wisdom, dignity of labor, loyalty, respectfulness, perseverance..." that constituted part of our indigenous education. In furthering his recommendation, he writes that the curriculum of education should emphasize among other things moral, character, and social issues.

This paper notes that the values of respect for each other, tolerance for other cultural values, and reverence for the earth and all life on it that indigenous cultural traditions fostered should be reclaimed and enhanced. As the educational system does this, it is promoting biocultural diversity which is necessary to eradicate ethnic conflicts and environmental degradation.

The Nigerian educational system can enhance biocultural diversity in various ways. One of such ways is through the educational curriculum. Ogueri (2004) writes that: "Environmental education is essential for developing a healthy, sustainable society. Many current environmental problems are due to ignorance of basic ecological facts of life." It should be noted that environmental education has not taken off fully as an independent course in many Nigerian educational institutions. But it is important to note also that environmental education to some degree has taken place through social studies education, civic education, integrated science education biology, etc. Using the present framework, every course of study should devote attention to issues of environmental concerns. Alero (n.d) has noted that

The growth of Environmental Education (EE) in Nigeria was enhanced in 1990 when the National Council on Education (NCE) approved the National conservation Education Strategy (NCES) and directed the infusion of EE elements into all school subjects at all levels, starting with the citizenship Education Curriculum. All states were further requested to designate state conservation education coordinators and encourage the establishment of conservation clubs in schools. Subsequently, governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as international agencies collaborated and are achieving some landmarks. The Nigerian Government, through the Federal Environment Protection Agency (FEPA) and other relevant agencies, has undertaken programmes to enlighten, educate, and raise awareness of the Nigerian population through media (both print and electronic) campaigns on environmental issues. Identification, education, and training of officials that would form the cores of the Environmental Education Network nationwide are being undertaken. In addition, the FEPA has encouraged the establishment of Environmental Conservation Clubs in Secondary Schools. It has also collaborated with the Federal Ministry of Education through the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) on the development of an Environmental Educational Master plan and Curricula for both the formal and informal educational system in Nigeria.

### **The Importance of Biocultural Diversity to Nigeria**

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (2011) notes that the areas in the world that are rich in linguistic and ethnic diversity are equally rich in biodiversity; and that most of the world's languages are spoken by indigenous and tribal peoples that have great deal of ecological wisdom. The implication of this statement is that full preservation of biological diversity cannot be fully achieved without equally promoting ethnic and linguistic diversity. This point is very important in Nigeria. Nigeria has more than 250 ethnic groups and more than 400 dialects and sub-languages. The preservation of cultural diversity will help to enhance biological diversity.

Ethno-cultural indigenous ecological knowledge is loaded with medical insights that could be very helpful in the desire for full health for the people. On other benefits of indigenous ecological knowledge, The International Union for Conservation of Nature (2011) notes that:

“Traditional ecological knowledge has very important functions and offers fundamental contributions to biodiversity conservation. Among other benefits, it can provide a long-term perspective of ecosystem dynamics, based on ancestral contact and interaction with habitats and species. It has been also frequently documented that traditional peoples have developed sophisticated classificatory systems, in many cases producing more complete taxonomies than those of Western science. Traditional knowledge is a fundamental component of the cultural adaptation to natural conditions.”

Respect for biocultural diversity inevitably promotes inter-ethnic cooperation and harmony. When you respect other people’s languages you are likely going to respect other people’s cultures and ways of life. In a country such as Nigeria that is plagued by ethno-cultural conflicts and deforestation; it is vital to promote the values of biocultural diversity.

Nigeria is a land where many languages are dying. Many young peoples can no longer speak their own native language. The International Conference on Endogenous Development and Bio-Cultural Diversity (2006) states that: “The loss of biocultural diversity has a negative impact on local governance, health, food sovereignty and management of natural resources....” A lot will be lost if biocultural diversity is lost or suppressed. The gifts and riches of various cultural ways of life and languages will be gone. The medicinal, aesthetic, meditative, and other life enriching values from biological diversities will all be gone. It is important then that biocultural diversity be preserved and promoted through the educational system in Nigeria. Respect for biocultural diversity will help Nigerians to honour and respect the human dignity and rights of every Nigeria. It will also help Nigerians to preserve and protect trees, plants, mountains, rivers, and animals.

### **The Role of Philosophical and Theological Education**

As it is all subjects and courses should become the vehicle for conserving and preserving the values of environmental education. Presently philosophy and theology as disciplines are taught in many Nigerian tertiary institutions. Among Nigerian universities that offer degrees or courses in philosophy and/or theology (religious studies) are University of Lagos, University of Ibadan, Delta State University Abraka, and University of Nigeria Nsukka. Now these various universities and departments that offer these courses or degrees are an important aspect of Nigerian education. These universities turn out graduates every year who join the labour force and are part of the Nigerian citizenry.

Because of the importance of biocultural diversity to the peaceful co-existence and harmonious living in Nigeria, a country that is fragmented by ethnic conflicts and endangered by environmental degradation; it is imperative that philosophical and theological education and indeed every other form of education takes this into

consideration. It is also important to note that philosophy and theology teach important biocultural diversity values. Ogueri (2004) notes: “Environmental issues and problems that face mankind are so broad that disciplines from all areas are concerned and relevant. Mankind cannot, for example, solve his biophysical environmental problems with just the physical or biological sciences; nor solve his social environmental problems with just the behavioural sciences.” This is why every course of human study should not exclude itself from conscientizing for educational protection.

### **Philosophizing for Biocultural Diversity**

Not until the 1970s, with the advent of environmental ethics and philosophy, philosophy paid little or no attention to biodiversity and ecological flourishing. While it is true that philosophy had written much on nature, nature was merely perceived as an object to be used and conquered. On cultural flourishing much of philosophy was driven by western imperialistic forces that perceived only western philosophy as real philosophy. Non-western ways of thoughts and linguistic patterns were perceived as primitive and hostile to human flourishing.

The American Environmental philosopher Holmes (2009) has helped us to understand the great value of biodiversity. He argues that humans have duties to species especially endangered species. For him philosophy has to go wild. It has to be concerned about what is happening to the varieties of life on earth. He argued for ethical extensionism. For too long ethics has been concerned only about human behaviour to other humans. It should move beyond this to include human behaviour with reference to the diversities of life on planet earth. Species have intrinsic value and the human task is to enable them flourish. Lamenting the lack of philosophical concern for the environment and the urgency to protect the diversity of life, he writes: “Looking to the past for help, one searches in vain through 3,000 years of philosophy (back at least to Noah!) for any serious reference to endangered species. Among present theories of justice, Harvard philosopher John Rawls asserts, ‘the destruction of a whole species can be a great evil,’ but also admits that in his theory “no account is giving of right conduct in regard to animals and the rest of nature.” Meanwhile, there is urgency to the issue. The Global 2000 Report (1980-1981) projects a massive loss of species, up to 20 percent within a few decades.”

The fact is that there is great need for philosophy, the foundational field from which all human knowledge gained their independence, to attend to the issues of biological diversity. There is need for philosophy not only to argue for biological diversity but to also critique ideological systems that impact and diminish biodiversity. This is what philosopher Curtin (2009) does in his work, *Making Peace with the Earth: Indigenous Agriculture and the Green Revolution*. He critiques the ideology of modern progress that emphasizes “developmentalism.” Only the big mechanized and technological agriculture is recognized. Small is considered to be backward and monoculture is preferred to diversity. There was something good in indigenous small agriculture that was healthy and promoted biodiversity. Indigenous small agriculture is built on a cyclical principle. The point of this paper is not to canonize everything in

indigenous economy. The point is to affirm that philosophers have a duty to promote biocultural diversity by critiquing every form of human knowledge that is hostile to biocultural flourishing.

Social and political philosophy has no doubt in the past devoted much space to the issues of cultural and linguistic diversities. The right to and preservation of languages, the value of cultural pluralism, and respect for peoples of all races and ethnicities have featured prominently in the literature of social philosophy. Now is the time to convert that interest to include biological diversity by devoting attention to it.

It should be realized that there can be no philosophizing without the earth. Philosophy as a discipline does not encourage dogmatizing anything. It is open and critically assesses every form of ideology and thought system. Philosophy encourages criticizing the various value systems and myths present in every culture. A creative and healthy study of philosophy opens up the teacher and students to be tolerant of other cultures and to cultivate a spirit of dialogue.

### **Theological/Religious Studies**

Theological and religious studies also can play a vital role in promoting biocultural diversity in Nigeria. The concern here is with Christian religious studies. Depending on how you read the Christian scriptures, it promotes diversity or uniformity. It is the position of this paper that Christian religion promotes biocultural diversity.

In the very first book of the bible, the creator God commands that all created things should team and flourish. God created all kinds of seed plants and commanded them to reproduce. God created various kinds of animals and fishes and commanded them to flourish. Even at the time of the flood of Noah, God commands that seven of each animal should be preserved in the ark and they will repopulate the earth after the flood. Despite the flood, vegetation is still present for when Noah sent a dove out of the ark it came with an olive tree branch. Jesus in the gospels admires the beauty and wonder of the flowers and the birds of the sky.

In the holy scriptures of Christianity ethno-cultural diversity seems to be part of the divine agenda. Cain acknowledges before God that wherever he goes he will meet people living elsewhere who may harm him. At the tower of Babel, God permissively at least sees humanity becoming various peoples and languages without stopping it. God acknowledges that besides the people of Israel there are people of other nations that deserve to be loved and protected. At the making of the covenant in Sinai, he affirms, all the earth is his. The prophet Isaiah thinking of the time after the exile figuratively depicts what will happen thus: On this mountain God has prepared for all people a banquet of rich food. On the day of Pentecost people from all nations were present.

One's biblical hermeneutics certainly informs one's position on contemporary issues. This paper affirms re-reading the scriptures so that it becomes relevant in the light of modern challenges. O'Brien (2010) is right to opine that: "The bible is an incredible diverse collection of texts and views, and it is not accurate to say the book as a whole advocates an ethics of biodiversity" (p. 27). He notes that Christian thinkers like the Methodist ethicist James Nash, the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, and the

Evangelical ethicist Steven Bouma-Prediger all affirm the complexity and biodiversity of life.

The fact is that in a country like Nigeria that is troubled by ethnic rivalries and ecological suffering, religious studies and indeed other curricular forms should not neglect emphasizing ethnic tolerance and biocultural harmony. The bible to a great degree opts for biocultural diversity.

### **Conclusion**

There is need to innovate the Nigerian educational curriculum. The environmental crisis that Nigeria and the world in general are facing is so deep that the nation should not wait until there is a full independent curriculum on environmental education. It is time for all disciplines, philosophy and theology inclusive to accept this challenge and promote biocultural diversity education, which is a sub-set of environmental education.

### **Recommendations**

There is need to transform and redesign the curriculum of philosophy and theological studies in Nigeria to take into consideration the ecological and socio-cultural context of the nation. A vital way to do this is to seek for a new innovation, the innovation of educating for biocultural diversity.

This paper recommends the followings:

- (1) Christian ministers should use the Christian pulpit to galvanize for respect for the human dignity of every Nigerian, respect for other Nigerian cultures, and preservation of plants, animals, and the natural world.
- (2) The formal curriculum of Christian religious studies should foster a new hermeneutics of the biblical texts that fosters biocultural diversity.
- (3) Philosophers should give more attention to the new discipline of environmental philosophy that advocates for biocultural flourishing.
- (4) Nigeria education in general should not fail to attend to the social and environmental context in which it operates. Since a prime goal of Nigerian education is to foster national integration and also foster ecological conservation; the issues of biological and cultural diversities should feature more prominently.

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