

Exploring the Influence of Natural Environment on African Philosophy of History

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Abstract

Africa, with its diverse landscapes, possesses a deep-seated connection to its natural environment. This connection profoundly impacts the lives of its people and shapes their historical narratives. This paper argues that the natural environment is integral to the formation of African historical philosophies, influencing various domains such as agriculture, religion, art, and social structures. Vital resources like water and fertile land govern the daily lives of many African communities. Their accomplishments are interwoven with their historical accounts, creating a cyclical perception of history that corresponds with agricultural seasons of planting and harvesting. In areas where hunting is the primary livelihood, oral traditions flourish, filled with tales of survival and coexistence with nature. These stories foster a historical awareness that highlights themes of adaptability and resilience. Additionally, the environment significantly shapes African spiritual beliefs and artistic practices. Natural features are often seen as sacred spaces inhabited by spirits, influencing rituals and cosmological perspectives. The patterns found in nature inspire artistic expressions that reflect historical and cultural identities. Furthermore, the cooperative nature of agricultural activities strengthens community ties and shared histories, while resource scarcity can lead to conflict and migration narratives. This paper investigates the complex interplay between the environment and historical philosophy in Africa, highlighting how the landscape informs societal interpretations of the past, present, and future. Recognizing this relationship enhances our comprehension of African historical thought. The study delves into the effects of the natural

environment on the historical philosophies of selected African communities, drawing on various scholarly sources to provide a thorough examination of the subject matter

Keywords: Africa, Natural Environment, Philosophy of History

Introduction

Africa is known for its diverse environments, including rainforests, savannas, deserts, and mountains. These landscapes have influenced the continent's geography, history, culture, and the lifestyles of its people. Each environment poses different challenges and opportunities, resulting in unique communities and cultures tied to their surroundings. Traditional African communities value living in harmony with nature, leading to the development of knowledge systems about local ecosystems, agricultural methods, and sustainable resource management. Elders pass down this information through oral traditions and rituals. Many African beliefs emphasize balance and interconnectedness, viewing the community's well-being as linked to the environment's health. Nature is seen not just as resources but as sacred, with spiritual significance seen in rivers, mountains, and trees, often featuring in rituals and gatherings. This reverence is reflected in art, music, and storytelling, promoting respect for nature and a harmonious way of life.

This paper highlights how important the natural environment was in influencing the historical perspectives and philosophical thoughts of pre-colonial African societies. It suggests that to truly understand African history, one must consider factors like geography, climate, and distributions of resources. This paper provides examples from four distinct African societies namely: Ancient Egypt, where the Nile River played a crucial role in agriculture, social structure, and religious beliefs, shaping

their concepts of time and divinity; the Nok Culture in Nigeria, which flourished due to ironworking that was shaped by local resources and environmental challenges; the San People, who were hunter-gatherers with a deep ecological understanding that reflects ideas of interconnectedness and sustainability; and the Masai, whose social systems are closely linked to cattle herding and the environmental challenges they face.

Definition of Concepts

Natural Environment

The natural environment, commonly referred to as the natural world, encompasses all physical surroundings, living organisms, and ecological systems that exist without human intervention. It includes various elements such as land, water, air, and atmosphere, along with all organisms like plants, animals, and microorganisms that inhabit these areas.¹ Moreover, the natural environment is characterized by its ecological systems and complex networks, which comprised both biotic and abiotic components that function collaboratively to maintain environmental stability and sustainability. These systems include forests, wetlands, oceans, and a variety of other natural habitats that provide essential services such as air and water purification, soil formation, and nutrient cycling.²

Philosophy of History

Philosophy of history is concerned with the questions such as the meaning of historical events, the role of individuals and societies in shaping history, and the relationship between the past, present and future. One of the key

¹ E. F. Keller., *Making Sense of Nature: A Paradigm For Environmental Education*. Routledge. 2008, P.7

² G. C. Daily, S. Alexander & P. R. Ehrlich (2000). "The value of nature and the nature of value", in *Science*, Vol. 289, Pp. 395-396

aspects of the philosophy of history is the idea that history is not simply a record of the past events, but a process that has meaning and purpose.³ Historians have cited various perspectives on the philosophy of history, each offering unique insight into the study of the past. R.G Collingwood in his work “*the idea of history*” states that historians must strive to understand the people they study in order to grasp the meaning of historical events. He argues thus:

To understand history is to understand the
thoughts and feelings of those who made
it ...⁴

E. H. Carr asserts that history is a continuous dialogue between the past and present. He further argues that historians must be aware of their own biases and perspectives when interpreting the past. He famously states:

The historian is a product of his own age,
and bound to it by the conditions of
human existence ...⁵

Ultimately, the philosophy of history does not provide straightforward answers. It constitutes an ongoing process of inquiry, interpretation, and reassessment. This approach acknowledges that the past is not merely an external entity awaiting discovery; rather, it represents a dynamic construct that we continuously interact with and redefine through our comprehension of the present. The challenge, therefore, resides in embracing both Collingwood's appeal for empathetic understanding and Carr's emphasis on critical awareness, enabling us to navigate the intricate fabric of history

³ M. T. Gilderhus (2007). *History and Historian: A Historiographical Introduction*, Person Prentice Hill, London, P.53

⁴ R. G. Collingwood (1946). *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, London, P.25

⁵ E. H. Carr (1961). *What is History*, Vintage, New York, P. 13

with intellectual integrity and a deep appreciation for its lasting significance. Only by doing so can we aspire to extract meaningful insights from the past and utilize them in shaping a more informed and purposeful future.

African Philosophy of History

Fascinatingly, African philosophy of history explores the nature of time, existence and human experience from an African perspective. Key aspects include emphasis on community and interconnectedness, shared experiences and collective memory. These are based on the stride being made by African historiographers in debunking the Euro-centric view about Africa and portraying the glorious place of Africa as a cradle of human kind.⁶

Furthermore, to argue against the case for African history as an academic study is unnecessary. Only those who have either no first-hand experience of contemporary Africa or have made no attempt to study the continent's history can support such statements as Africa has no history, Africa is nothing more than the story of European activities in the continent. However, a balanced philosophical interpretation of history can demonstrate the ignorance and prejudice of such assertions.⁷ These, more often than not were geared towards justifying the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and racism in Africa. But the fact remains that Africans had a

⁶ A. Mohammed, (2009). "The Falsity of the Euro-centric View of Africa", Paper Presented at the 4th National Conference, organized by Isa Kaita College of Education Dutsinma Katsina State, P4.

⁷ G. N. Brown, (1995). "The Place of African History in Education in Africa", in J. C. Anene (Ed.), *Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Nigeria: Thomas Nelson Limited, P. 2.

spectacular history long before the arrival of the Europeans, the darkest ages of Africa started with the advent of Europeans on the continent.

However, African societies exhibited complex and nuanced methods of engaging with their history, intricately linked to a variety of cultural dimensions and a profound sense of historical awareness. Oral tradition played a pivotal role in the transmission of history through engaging narratives, myths, and songs that were carefully preserved by elders. This practice not only conveyed essential lessons but also protected collective knowledge. Additionally, material culture, represented by artifacts and monuments, established concrete connections to ancestral heritage. Rituals and ceremonies further solidified communal identity by venerating ancestors and reinforcing shared traditions and values. This reflects African historical philosophies, which often contrast with Western views by prioritizing cyclical notions of time and the significance of learning from the past. Storytelling, a vital aspect of community life, ensures that elders impart the wisdom of history in younger generations, preventing the erasure of their cultural legacy.

The strong historical consciousness within African societies is deeply embedded in their cultural practices, as evidenced by the intergenerational transmission of stories and oral histories that safeguard their heritage. Storytelling serves not only as a means of preserving history but also as a vehicle for imparting moral lessons and community identity, highlighting the critical role of oral tradition in shaping historical consciousness. In his seminal work, *“The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality”* Cheik Anta Diop delves into the rich oral tradition of Africa and its significance

in understanding the continent's history and culture. He emphasizes the importance of oral tradition as a means of preserving history from one generation to another.⁸ Similarly, Jan Vansina, in his work, explores the importance of oral tradition as a means of preserving historical knowledge. Drawing on his extensive fieldwork in Africa, he shows that oral tradition is a valuable source of historical information that can provide insights into the social, political, and cultural dynamics of African societies.⁹

Similarly, evidence of written documents in ancient African societies provides valuable insights into the history, culture, and social structures of their civilization. Cheik Anta Diop argues that written documents existed in ancient African societies long before the arrival of the colonizers. He pointed to the existence of hieroglyphic writing systems in ancient Egypt, such as the famous Rosetta stone, as evidence of the advanced literary and intellectual capabilities of African civilizations.¹⁰ He further also highlighted the presence of written records in other African cultures, such as the Nubians and Ethiopians as further proof of historical consciousness of Africans.¹¹ Overall, the significance of both oral tradition and written records has shed more light on the philosophy of African history and the intellectual achievements of the African societies.

The Role of the Natural Environment in African Philosophy of History

The continent of Africa is home to many cultures that have developed complex, diverse, and long-lasting systems of participatory government.

⁸ C. A. Diop (1974). *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago, P. 14

⁹ J. Vansina ., *Oral Tradition as History*, University of Wisconsin Press, U.S.A, 1985, P. 13

¹⁰ C. A. Diop (1974). *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*P. 15

¹¹ Ibid

Such systems underscore the indelible responsibility of each citizen for the group as well as the individual and common responsibility for the natural environment.¹² Rural communities have demonstrated a highly developed awareness of the local environment and processes of degradation in many ways, since they have had an intimate relationship with the natural environment.¹³ The culture of the ordinary people and their accumulated experience embody useful knowledge and techniques for environmental protection.¹⁴ The ecological principles and practices of the indigenous people of Africa have promoted sustainable resource management over a very long period of time.¹⁵ The indigenous people of Africa have also developed indigenous climate mitigation and adaptation strategies and have successfully dealt with the challenges of local weather and climate changes for hundreds of years.¹⁶

The relationship between Africa's natural environment and its historical discourse is steeply embedded in philosophical interpretations, practices and beliefs that have shaped the continent's past and present. In African traditional societies, the natural world was perceived as part and parcel of a wider cosmological framework which bound the community, ancestors, and the land together in a symbiotic relationship.¹⁷ Nature was not viewed as a separate entity to be dominated or exploited, but rather as a living library and spiritual reservoir from which knowledge, customs and the

¹² J. Smith., Environmental diversity in *Africa*. *Journal of African Studies*, Volume, 45 Issue, 2, 2018, P.123-145

¹³ L. Jones (2019). "The Impact of Climate Change on Africa", in *African Journal of Environmental Science*, Volume 12, Issue 3, P. 67

¹⁴ L. Jones (2019). "The Impact of Climate Change on Africa".... P. 67

¹⁵ L. Jones (2019). "The Impact of Climate Change on Africa"..... P. 68

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ J. Smith (2005). *Conservation in Africa: People, Policies and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, London, P. 24

moral fabric of society were drawn.¹⁸ This philosophy of interconnectedness fostered a deep respect for the environment, which was manifested in various indigenous practices aimed at sustaining ecological balances. In this regards, the paper will explore the philosophy of history in some selected African civilizations and societies, focusing on how the natural environment influence their views about their past, present and future and how these views shaped their understanding of history.

(a) The Nile's Influence on Ancient Egyptian Philosophy of History

North Africa's diverse geographical landscape, varying climates, and abundant natural resources have profoundly impacted how societies in the region understand and interpret their own history. This is particularly evident in the historical philosophy of ancient Egypt, where the natural environment, specifically the Nile River, played a crucial role in shaping their worldview and cultural identity. It holds a significant place in the ancient Egyptian belief system, serving as a central element in their religious practices and cultural identity.¹⁹ It was not just a river to the ancient Egyptians, but a divine entity that played a crucial role in their daily lives and beliefs.²⁰ The ancient Egyptians believed that the Nile River was a gift from the gods, and the annual flooding of the Nile was a blessing from the gods, as it brought fertile soil to the land allowing for successful agriculture and ensuring the prosperity of the people.²¹ This divine belief

¹⁸J. Smith (2005). *Conservation in Africa: People, Policies and Practice*P.25

¹⁹ B. John (1991). "Society, Morality and Religious Morality" in E. B. Sharfer (Ed) *Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myth and Personal Practices*, Cornell University Press, London, P. 124

²⁰ B. John (1991). "Society, Morality and Religious Morality" in E. B. Sharfer (Ed) *Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myth and Personal Practices*.....p.124

²¹ B. John (1991). "Society, Morality and Religious Morality" in E. B. Sharfer (Ed) *Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myth and Personal Practices*.....P. 125

of the divine nature of the Nile was reflected in their religious practices with temples and shrines dedicated to the gods.

Similarly, the cyclical nature of the flooding also influenced the Egyptian concept of time. They divided their calendar into three seasons based on the river's behavior: *Akehet* (the flood), *Peret* (the growing season), and *Shemu* (the harvest season).²² These seasons were not just practical divisions of time, but were also seen as reflections of the cyclical nature of life and the universe. On the other hand, the desert landscape that surrounded the Nile Valley also played a significant role in shaping the Egyptian philosophy of history. They view the desert as a place of mystery and danger. A place where the gods were said to dwell, and where the spirits of the dead roamed.²³ At the same time the desert was also seen as a place of renewal and rebirth. The natural flooding of the Nile River brought life-giving water into a fertile oasis. The Egyptians believed that the desert was a place of transformation, where the harsh conditions of the land could be overcome through perseverance and hard work.²⁴

(b) The Nok Culture and its Environmental Influences.

West Africa's varied landscapes, climates, and natural resources have greatly influenced its people's beliefs and practices. This relationship shapes their views, societal structures, and artistic expressions.²⁵ The area's rich biodiversity creates a strong bond with the land, fostering respect for

²² B. John (1991). "Society, Morality and Religious Morality" in E. B. Sharfer (Ed) *Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myth and Personal Practices*.P.125

²³ D. B. Redford (2002). *The Ancient gods speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*. Oxford University Press, London, P. 25

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ L. Candice (2019). "The Environmental History of West Africa", in *Africa Today*, Vol. 66, No.4, P.82

nature. This reverence appears in many spiritual practices through rituals honoring the earth and natural spirits. Resource availability shapes settlement patterns, migration, and trade. Control of resources, like water and land, affects community organization and power dynamics. Specific resources have also led to the growth of unique crafts and artistic styles, seen in pottery and architecture.²⁶ In many West African societies, land goes beyond geography; it is essential for life, cultural identity, and social hierarchies. Managing natural resources is linked to community structure and power dynamics over time.²⁷ Resources like timber, clay, and iron ore have led to specialized crafts and industries, boosting economic growth and cultural heritage.²⁸

The Nok culture, which thrived in present-day Nigeria between 1500 BC and 500 AD, provides a compelling example of how the environment shaped a society's development.²⁹ The environment of the Nok region significantly influenced the development of its culture, particularly in the realm of artistic and technological achievements. The abundant clay deposits in the area provided essential raw materials for the creation of the renowned terracotta sculptures, which vary in size from small pieces to life-size representations.³⁰ These sculptures, characterized by their intricate hairstyles and detailed facial features, reflect a profound understanding of

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ J. D. Fage (2001). *A History of West Africa, 1000-1800*, Cambridge University Press, London, P. 34

²⁸ C. Gert & M. Gerhard (2007). *The Nok Culture: Arts in Nigeria 2500 years ago*, Prestel, London, P. 6

²⁹ F. Jemkur (1992). *Aspects of the Nok Culture*, Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, P. 5

³⁰ C. Gert & M. Gerhard (2007). *The Nok Culture: Arts in Nigeria 2500 years ago*.....P.6

the medium and indicate a highly developed artistic tradition that emerged from the region's natural resources and climate.³¹

Additionally, the terracotta figures attributed to the Nok culture are believed to symbolize mythical entities or deities revered by the Nok people. The depiction of animal figures further implies a belief in the intrinsic relationship between humanity and nature within Nok spiritual beliefs. Moreover, the discovery of ritual artifacts, including altars and shrines at Nok archaeological sites, points to a nuanced framework of religious practices.³² The artifacts from the Nok culture likely served a dual purpose, being employed in rituals and offerings intended to appease deities or spirits while simultaneously reflecting the technological advancements facilitated by the region's iron ore deposits.³³ The Nok civilization exhibited remarkable proficiency in iron smelting, producing high-quality iron tools and weapons that were highly sought after in trade networks across West Africa.³⁴

However, the interplay between the environment and cultural development is crucial, as the region's natural resources and climate significantly influenced both the artistic expressions, evident in the abundance of clay, and the technological innovations stemming from the availability of iron ore. Such dynamics underscore the profound relationship between

³¹ P. Breunig & N. Rupp (2016). "An Outline of Recent Studies on the Nigerian NOK Culture", in *Journal of African Archaeology*, Vol. 14 NO.3, Special Issue, P. 240

³² P. Breunig & N. Rupp (2016). "An Outline of Recent Studies on the Nigerian NOK Culture".....P. 241

³³ Ibid

³⁴ P. Breunig & N. Rupp (2016). "An Outline of Recent Studies on the Nigerian NOK Culture".....P. 242

environment and culture that characterizes the broader West African context.

(c) The San (Bushmen) and their Relationship with the Land

One of the most significant ways in which the natural environment has shaped the philosophy of southern Africa is through the concept of land. Land holds immense cultural, spiritual, and economic significance for many southern African societies, and their relationship with the land is central to their understanding of history.³⁵ The San people, also known as Bushmen, are a prime example of this deep cultural and spiritual connection to the land.³⁶ The San people are one of the oldest known groups of humans, with a history that dates back over 20,000 years.³⁷ They are an indigenous people who have traditionally lived in the semi-arid regions of southern Africa, including present-day Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. The San people have a unique and intimate relationship with the natural environment, which is deeply intertwined with their cultural beliefs and practices.³⁸ They have a wealth of knowledge about plants, animals, and the seasons, which they use for survival, healing, and spiritual practices.³⁹ For example, they have developed sophisticated techniques for tracking animals and predicting their movements, which allows them to hunt effectively without depleting the animal populations.⁴⁰ They have also developed sophisticated hunting techniques, such as tracking and trapping

³⁵ L. Jones (2019). "The Impact of Climate Change on Africa", in *African Journal of Environmental Science*, Volume 12, Issue 3, P. 221

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ J. Suzman (2017). *Affluence Without Abundance: The Disappearing World of the Bushmen*, Bloomsbury Publishing New York, ,P,31

³⁸ A. Barnard (2017). *A History of the Bushman*, Cambridge University Press, P.4

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ J. Suzman (2017). *Affluence Without Abundance:P.31*

to secure their food supply.⁴¹ The San believe in the interconnectedness of all living things and the harmony with nature. They perform rituals and ceremonies to honor the spirits of the land and to ensure the success of their hunting and gathering activities. These practices reflect their deep respect for the natural world and their understanding of the needs to live in balance with it.⁴²

(d) The Maasai and East African Ecosystem.

East Africa is known for its diverse ecosystems, including savannas, forests, mountains, and lakes, creating a strong bond between its people and nature. This connection is vital in the traditional beliefs and practices of many cultures, highlighting the importance of living harmoniously with the environment. The Maasai people exemplify this relationship.⁴³ The Maasai, a semi-nomadic pastoralist people residing primarily in Kenya and Tanzania, exemplify this deep-seated connection to nature. Their lifestyle and cultural practices are intricately intertwined with the land and its resources. Traditionally, the Maasai rely on cattle herding, and their movement across the landscape allows grazing lands to regenerate, preventing overgrazing and maintaining biodiversity.⁴⁴ The vast grasslands and savannahs of East Africa provide ample grazing land for their livestock. They have also developed intricate systems of land management and animal husbandry to ensure the health and well-being of their land.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² J. Suzman (2017). *Affluence Without Abundance*:P.32

⁴³ J. Suzman (2017). *Affluence Without Abundance*:P.56

⁴⁴ J. G. Galaty (1992). "Pastoralism and Change in East Africa: An Overview", in *Nomadic Peoples*, Vol. 30, P.5

Additionally, the environment has influenced the social and cultural practices of the Maasai people. For example the traditional Maasai diet consists primarily of milk, meat, and blood from their livestock, which are all readily available resources in their environment. This diet has become a central identity and is often shared during communal feasts and ceremonies.⁴⁵ The Maasai people have a very strong spiritual connection to the land. They believe that the land is a sacred gift from god *Enkai*, and they have a strong sense of stewardship towards it.⁴⁶ This belief is reflected in their traditional practices, such as rotational grazing and controlled burning which are aimed at maintaining the health of the land. In Maasai culture, the environment is seen as a source of sustenance and spiritual nourishment. They relied on the land for grazing their livestock, which is central to their way of life.⁴⁷ They also believe that the land is inhabited by spirits and ancestors, and they perform rituals and ceremonies to honour and appease these spiritual beings. For example, the Maasai perform the *Eunoto* ceremony to bless the land and ensure a successful harvest. They also have strong connection to the wildlife, which they view as an integral part of their environment. They have the belief of respecting the nature which is reflected in their traditional taboos against killing of certain animals, such as lions and elephants, which they considered as sacred.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ P. Spencer, (2003). *The Maasai of Matapato: A study of Rituals*P. 6

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

Conclusion

This paper presented a critical examination of the symbiosis between environment and philosophical thoughts in pre-colonial Africa. By providing concrete examples from four distinct African societies namely: Ancient Egypt, where the Nile River shaped agriculture, social structure, and religious beliefs; the Nok Culture in Nigeria, whose ironworking prowess was determined by local resources; the San People of South Africa, whose hunter-gatherer lifestyle reflects profound ecological understanding; and the Maasai, whose social systems are intimately tied to cattle herding and environmental challenges. The paper demonstrated the enduring impact of the land on the continent's history, culture, and philosophical worldview. Understanding this profound connection is essential for a more nuanced and comprehensive appreciation of the richness and complexity of the African experience. Further research into the diverse ecological knowledge systems and philosophical frameworks of other African communities promises to enrich our understanding of the deep and lasting impact of the environment on shaping human thought and culture.