

An African Complementarist Critique of Plumwood's Idea of Political Solidarity with Nature

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Abstract

This work presents an African complementarist critique of Val Plumwood's idea of political solidarity with nature. Drawing on empirical examples from the African ontology of beings and complementary mode of relationship between humans and non-human entities in nature, this work examines Plumwood's notion of political solidarity with nature from an African complementarist perspective. This work presents a more nuanced understanding of political solidarity with nature that considers the ontological understanding of the nature of the relationship between human and non-human elements in nature. It critiques Plumwood's idea of political solidarity with nature by analyzing how the notion of complementarity rather than political solidarity provides a robust framework upon which the relationship between human and non-human entities in nature can be understood. It also explores how a complementarist based ecological solidarity provides a veritable tool for addressing the lingering environmental challenges and sustainability issues. By mirroring the interdependence and interconnectedness in nature and the idea that there are no superior beings, rather all beings in nature are of equal value and importance; one to another, this work seeks to awaken the ecological consciousness towards other elements in nature.

Keywords: Complementarity, Solidarity, Political Solidarity, Ecological Solidarity, African Complementarity.

Introduction

The need for a more critical framework that goes beyond the gender

arguments which will provide a more viable understanding of the relationship between humans and nature informed Val Plumwood's notion of political solidarity. Sameness and difference in Arne Naess and Peter Reed provided a foundation upon which she births a critical environmental philosophical ethic, a framework that can provide a useful background for environmental activism; the concept of “political solidarity” with nature.

In order to provide context for the critique of Plumwood's notion of political solidarity, I begin with an exposition of Plumwood's idea of 'political solidarity' with nature. I discuss how Plumwood resolved to develop a concept of Political Solidarity with nature where one does not claim identification with the other but rather a relation in which beings are motivated to act on behalf of the other with whom one does not necessarily shares experiences, interests, subjectivity, worldviews. In the second section, I critiqued Plumwood's notion of political solidarity, exposing its inadequacies. In the third section I discuss the concept of complementarity, and how it provides a more viable approach to the understanding of the human-nature relationship.

In the final section, I present a complementarist alternative to Plumwood's notion of political solidarity using some African Complementary theories like *Ndi-Mmili-Ndu-Azu* (the life of water is compatible and of the same status with the right of fishes), Yoruba Binary Complementarity, *Ibuanyidanda* (Complementary reflection), *Egbe bere ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch, whichever denies the other the same rights let its wings break), *Ubuntu* (humanity towards others), *Ezumezu* (Complementary). I conclude by arguing that Political Solidarity is not viable enough to

address the challenges of the human-nature relationship and how a complementarist based ecological solidarity firmly rooted in the African ontology provides a more viable approach.

Plumwood's Notion of Political Solidarity with Nature

The need for a new frontier for a critical environmental philosophy birthed Plumwood's idea of Political Solidarity with nature. In order to achieve a system of political solidarity with nature, Plumwood explores the positions of Arne Naess (1995) and Peter Reed (1989) on questions of whether the abstract foundation for the desired new relationship will be found in human unity with and commitment within nature or in the 'existential gulf' which is our discontinuity and difference from nature. She notes that Naess' notion of solidarity appeals to features of the human self and to the concepts of unity, identification and self-realization to provide a foundation for activist concern for nature that avoids the problems of dualism or moral extensionism (2002:196).

Plumwood also notes that one useful route that could be explored in a bid to answer diverse questions concerning the relationship between humans and the environment, and a ground upon which the idea of solidarity with nature could be grounded can be is the debate between identification and difference by Naess and Reed (Plumwood, 2002). She avers that despite the shortcomings of their positions, they are valid, and that the validity of the individual positions points to the need for a third position that provided for a combination of both identification and difference. She therefore sought a third resolve combining the concept of difference and identification with nature through what she calls-'political solidarity with nature.

Political Solidarity with nature, for Plumwood, is a relation where one does not claim identification with the other but rather a relation in which beings are motivated to act on behalf of the other with whom one does not necessarily shares experiences, interests, subjectivity, worldviews (Mallory, 2009: 8). This means that those who stand in solidarity are connected to the object of solidarity and others who are involved in the process through their shared recognition of injustice and oppression while working on a solution to the problems that arise therein.

The need for a form of political solidarity with nature by Plumwood was borne out of the need for a more rational approach to the resolution of the prevailing ecological crisis. She argues that the rational form of behavior and ethic needed to confront the situation is lacking, and that in relation to issues bothering on the environment, the use of the term 'sustainability' tends to obscure the seriousness of the situation (Plumwood, 2002:2). This position by Plumwood stems from the believe that indeed, the polity is yet to fully grasp the graveness of the issue at hand, hence not doing enough in grave areas like global warming, population explosion, energy consumption, waste management, deforestation, ecological injustice, depletion of the ozone layer among many critical issues. This is hinged on the fact that policymakers often pay lip service when it comes to taking real and practical actions where and when necessary due to the forces of capitalism and globalization.

Consequent upon the above, Plumwood's political solidarity with nature seeks a relation where one can accept that there is an element of sameness and difference between humans and nature. Mallory (2009) notes that in order to have a clear understanding of the use of

political language and the concept of solidarity, Plumwood provides the perfect answer. The concept of political solidarity for Plumwood, she notes, is a relation in which one (or as is more suitable for our purposes, the collective) does not claim an identification with the other.

Plumwood's position, therefore, asserts that the appropriate stance towards the non-human world is not a matter of identification or unity but that of solidarity in the political sense (Mallory, 2009:1). Plumwood explains that people who stand in solidarity are united with both the object with which they share solidarity and others involved in the struggle for the change through the shared recognition of injustice and oppression and through efforts made to change the situation. When it comes to having or sharing political solidarity with the more-than-human world, it is a process whereby one can imaginatively draw parallels between for example: systems of slavery, women's oppression and animal oppression and the way in which some cultures, mostly of Western world, humans are positioned as oppressors of the more-than-human world (Mallory, 2009:8). To stand in solidarity with the other (nature) is to position oneself as an external observer who is trying to put himself in the position of the environment. This is like asking the oppressor to put himself in the position of the oppressed, which seems fair and logical.

In articulating her notion of political solidarity, Plumwood presents an alternative analysis of solidarity based on a feminist theory that she thinks is more useful for environmental activism.

In her critique of Plumwood's position, Scholz (2009) argues that

humans cannot be in political solidarity with non-humans. This is because the more-than-human world lacks the requisite cognitive and deliberative capacities to engage in political choice and actions (Scholz, 2009:2). Given the background of what political solidarity seeks to achieve, I believe what Scholz's position suggests is that, it is difficult, if not impossible to know or understand nature's position. The implication is that humans end up taking positions for nature based on the perceived wants and understanding of nature's needs.

However, Scholz's argument is largely based on an anthropocentric worldview which denies that humans can be in any form of solidarity with the more than human world. Plumwood had addressed this in the course of her argument. Plumwood's political solidarity positions man through his shared similarities and difference with nature, and as an external observer who tries to put himself in the position of nature, and the need to effect necessary changes seems fair.

Plumwood argues that the western world has positioned humans as oppressors of other non-human entities and as such there is need to draw parallels in these relationships which she believes can be achieved through the recognition of the injustices being meted on the environment as a result of the exploitative acts committed by humans, this I argue is still inadequate. However, I believe that the implication of putting an oppressor (man in this case) in the position of the oppressed cannot critically address the situation. This is because often times, the oppressor (humans) might not fully grasp the pains or extent of suffering being experienced by the oppressed (nature) due to various factors, like education, poverty, survival, culture, technological, social, and economic advancement, globalization, to mention a few.

Complementarity

To complement, refers to the ability to add something to another in order to improve or make such thing more attractive, thus for anything to become complementary, there is a demand that such things are put together though they are of different forms, yet they are attractive and useful to each other (Oweh, 2014). It can be seen as a process, relationship or situation where two or more different entities improve or emphasize the qualities in each other. Complementarity as a principle cuts across various stratum of human endeavor, and it speaks to different levels of relationship that exist in various facets of human existence; legal, social, political, medical, ecological, biological, religious, and economic spheres to mention a few. It defines the kind of relationship that exists between individuals and groups and how such relationship affects the parties involved.

The logic of complementarity from the human-nature perspective is such that realizes that the environment and humans are a binary element whose existence is inseparable and functions interdependently. This means that humans and nature complement each other and complementary logic provides a situation where humans and non-humans (nature) are seen as binary elements whose existence are inseparable and functions interdependently. The complementary logic awakens the consciousness of humans to see nature as not just a tool for subsistence or survival, or self actualization, but rather as a complementary other whose survival largely depends on the other and vice versa.

This discourse on complementarity aligns with the African Ontology on the nature of the relationship between human and non-human

elements in nature. Therefore, in the next section, I will critique Plumwood's 'Political Solidarity' with nature using the various notions of complementarity as espoused by some African philosophers and will express how an ecological form of solidarity rooted in complementarity provides a better understanding of human and nonhuman nature, in a bid to proffer solution to the lingering human – non human challenge.

An African Complementarist Critique of Plumwood's Political Solidarity with Nature

The complementary mode of relation shares similarity with Plumwood's position that there is a relationship of difference and interconnectedness between humans and non-human aspects of nature. However, the notion of a political solidarity with nature is the diverging point. This is because the complementary mode of relation between 'beings' that makes up the universe reinforces the need for an ecological form of solidarity with the 'other' in order to ensure sustainability and mutual co-existence in the wake of recurring environmental challenges.

The need to provide a basis for a critical solidarity framework in assessing the existent relationship between humans and non-humans as espoused by Plumwood cannot be denied. While she notes that this rests in the ability to defend a concept of solidarity that is based on intellectual and emotional grasp of the parallels that lies on the logic of the 'one to the other' there is need to take it a notch further. Although she avers that this recognition would enable the establishment of a relationship where humans are motivated to act on behalf of others (non-humans); through solidarity in the political sense I argue that the identification with nonhuman nature as a

complementary other provides a better understanding and can shape the mode of relations that is long needed especially in the face of lingering human – nonhuman nature challenges.

Therefore, in answering Mallory's question as to if the term 'Political Solidarity' can accurately describe a relationship between humans and the-more-than-human world, the answer for me is no. Although Scholtz's (2008) also tried to answer this question, her response that humans cannot be in solidarity with non-humans because it lacks the requisite cognitive and deliberative capacities to engage in political choice and actions is also debatable. This is because there are humans who due to various medical conditions are lacking cognitive capabilities, yet humans still relate with such classes of people, not to talk of the environment.

Also there are other forms of relations between humans and nonhumans that do not require cognitive capabilities, for example, when plants are cut from the stem instead of their roots, they grow back. There are nonhumans, animals like dogs, cats to mention a few, that relate cognitively with humans. It is also important to note that the implication of Scholz's argument in response to Plumwood's political solidarity is that it places humans as solely determinant in the formulation of terms of the kind of relationship they share with the non-human entities based on their understanding of it. This means that for example, if humans see nature as a tool for survival, their relationship with the environment will be strictly based on sustenance. However, the relationship that exists there-in goes beyond sustenance as there are other elements, some are even beyond humans that shape the course of existence in the universe.

Political solidarity highlights the combination of identification and difference as a sufficient basis upon which relations with non-humans can be forged, and I agree with Plumwood that this element forms the crux of which a form of relationship can be established. However, I argue that the mere identification of sameness and difference in form of political solidarity is insufficient, and a deeper understanding of the mutual existence and destruction that could emanate as a result of these relationship lies at the door of a complementary form ecological form of solidarity.

Political solidarity with nature as a theory, suggests the degree to which a person 'stands with' a minority or majority group (as the case may be) and their cause while being committed to working alongside them to achieve the desired social change. This means that, political solidarity is seen in terms of ally-ship between the minority and majority group in an inherently relational mode. This involves having a sense of connection with other groups, a situation whereby the majority group feels solidarity in the political sense towards the minority group. When this idea is adopted in terms of human-nature relationship, it connotes that humans are the majority, while other non-human elements in nature are the minority.

The implication of this position is that it suggests that in order to have a political relationship with the non-human world, humans must betray one's kind, become a traitor to certain human narratives in order to allow other aspects of nature to flourish on its own terms.

While I agree with Plumwood that there is a need to establish solidarity with nature, however, rather than promote a principle of inauthentic mode of existence between a superior element in its

relation to other elements in nature, who just lets others have their way in the name of political solidarity, a relationship that identifies the mutual existence of all elements, I argue that the role each plays, the need for sustainability and preservation, rests on the shoulders of complementary ecological mode of solidarity.

Also, this narrative of having political solidarity with nature encourages denial, deception and promotes in-authenticity on the part of humans. I attest that it positions humans as manipulators and superior while merely pretending to go along with other components of nature. As Etieyibo (2017) notes, the African metaphysical / ontological framework as expressed in *Ubuntu* for example, promotes anthropocentrism from the ontological perspective, where all beings are seen as being of equal measure, worth and importance in nature. Asouzu (2011) also, with *Ibuanyidanda* illustrated the principle of mutual dependence in nature, a complementary relationship that hinges on the notion that all aspects in nature are missing links of a whole.

It is also pertinent to note that some of the factors that influenced Plumwood's position are the eco-feminist notion of oppression of women and nature, Western culture and colonialism which she argues plays major roles in shaping human relationships. She avers that solidarity requires more than affirmation of difference, it also requires sensitivity to this difference by positioning oneself with the other and positioning oneself as the other, which requires the recognition and rejection of oppressive concepts and projects (Plumwood 2002). She also notes that these oppressive projects can be found in hegemonic relationships that are by-products of colonialism.

This oppressive mode of existence can be corrected through a renewing of the human mind on the need for an ecological mode of solidarity based on the understanding that all elements in nature complement one another. This is because each element in nature stands as a missing link (Asouzu 2011) of the other as part of a whole which is nature itself. Humans exist, non-humans exist, the environment exists, and collectively, they are all different part of a whole (nature) with each complementing the other. I therefore agree with Diana-Abang's (2016) position that irrespective of the classification or names given to entities in nature, they are merely missing links and fragments of the whole (nature) and each is incomplete without the other.

Asouzu (2011) also notes that, “to be, is to be in a mutual complementary relationship (*ka so mu adina*) and its negation is to be alone (*ka so mu di*). In this sense, anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality” (Asouzu, 2011:42). This position strengthens the resolve that humans do not exist alone or in isolation, other entities exist in the universe, and it is the culmination of all these entities and components that make up the universe. Since each component is a missing link, and in order to prevent the exploitation of one aspect by the other, the need for solidarity with the other for sustainability becomes imperative and this I argue can be best achieved (but not limited to) through the understanding of their complementary mode of existence.

With this understanding, the need to toe the line of a political compromise through political solidarity as espoused by Plumwood, I argue, is no longer necessary. The ecological and complementary mode of existence makes it imperative for humans to see the

environment not just as a tool for sustenance, oppression or exploitation but rather as a part of itself, the other part that completes it. Oluwole (2017) avers that to be human, is to affirm one's humanity, and this lies in the affirmation of the humanity in others, and it is upon this principle that relationships can be established with 'the other'. This understanding will drive a major shift in the attitude of humans towards non-human entities, as they will become more conscious of the roles each element in nature plays and this will further influence how they treat the environment and the implications of their actions and inactions.

Also, this understanding at the minimum can address Plumwood's concern about how some societies treat humans as the privileged group and position them as oppressors of non-humans. This is because the realization that the non-human nature is a complementary other evokes the consciousness of humans towards the other. The interconnectedness between humans and non-humans as expressed by Naess (1973) also strengthens this resolve. If humans identify with non-human entities in nature as a complementary other, it would see any form of harm, oppression or exploitation of nature as a threat to its own existence. The identification with the non-human entities in nature enable humans to see nature as part of itself, and would evoke empathy, care, protection and preservation; solidarity towards its 'other'. The ecological self will preserve nature because it is indirectly, a form of self-preservation.

Conclusion

Complementarity mirrors the interdependence and interconnectedness in nature and the idea that there are no superior

beings, rather all beings in nature are of equal value and importance; one to another. It awakens the ecological consciousness of humans towards other elements in nature especially the immediate environment. If there is a conscious awareness that nature is part of its being and that they both complement each other, humans will have a rethink before engaging in activities that will harm/exploit nature because it knows anything that happens to nature will not only be suffered by nature, but humans also as their survival hinges on the survival and preservation of nature.

With the notion of complementarity rather than political solidarity as the framework upon which the relationship between human and non-human entities in nature is established, it sets the tone for policy direction in environmental based issues. This is because decisions taken and laws implemented would reflect the impact of actions or inactions on both. Environmental laws and practices are largely reflective of the idea of what relationship exists between humans and nature, how it is perceived, and what value or importance is placed on it. If other entities in nature are seen as the complementary other, attitudes, environmental policies and laws will be made to reflect this.

Having set the tone for the African ontological understanding of 'being' of all human and non-human entities in nature, the shortcomings of Plumwood's political solidarity with nature can be addressed with a complementarist based ecological solidarity. While agreeing with Plumwood that there is need to maintain solidarity in relation to nature, I argued that the concept is not viable enough to address the challenges of the human-nature relationship. I argue that rather than political solidarity, which hinges on the notion of a

superior being, doing what is best for the lesser/minority, and ecological solidarity based on the idea of complementary relationship between human and non-human entities in nature is a more viable approach.

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