

## **Singer's Notion of Speciesism: A Case for Animal Rights in Ejagham Culture**

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**Abstract:** This work is an examination of Peter Singer's notion of speciesism: case for animal rights in *Ejagham* culture. It primarily deals with an evaluation of the phenomenon of Animal rights from the standpoint of Peter Singer's notion of speciesism. Singer's notion of speciesism deals with the moral obligation humans owe to animals as against the bias or prejudice that human animals have greater moral worth than non-human animals. Most opponents of speciesism contends that, animals are not members of the moral community as such humans have no moral obligation to them. Contrary to this view, proponents of speciesism argue that animals are capable of suffering and should be considered morally. Thus, the emphasis here is that just like many societies of the world, the *Ejagham* people are guilty of speciesism. Among the several ways by which speciesism is practiced, this work identifies hunting, deforestation, bush burning and fishing as ways by which the *Ejagham* people are guilty. Using the tool of critical analysis, evaluation and prescription, this work submits that animals have interest, as such, should be granted rights.

**Keywords:** Speciesism, Rights, Animals, Ejagham, Moral.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Speciesism was first used or introduced by Richard Ryder the English philosopher in the 1970s. It was popularized by Peter Singer the Australian philosopher with his 1976 publication *Animal Liberation* [1]. Singer was against any form of animal maltreatment. Examining the phenomenon of Animal Right from the standpoint of Peter Singer's notion of speciesism, it primarily deals with the moral obligations humans owe to non-human animals (the bias or prejudice that being human is enough for human animals to have greater moral worth than non-human animals). The central problem here is whether animals have intrinsic value that does not serve human interest (instrumental value) and so should be given moral consideration?

Most opponents of speciesism contend that, animals are not members of the moral community as such humans have no moral obligation to them. They also contend that animals are not moral agents even though they may have choices, their choices are not value choices. More so, they hold that animals are not ethical beings as such humans owe them no moral consideration. Some of the reasons for such opposing views include the notion that animals don't have soul and power of speech. One of such philosophers who argues that animals don't have rights is Rene Descartes. He is of the view that animals don't think and use language; as such don't have reason. In his "The Difference between Men and Animals" he asserts that "And this does not merely show that the brutes have less reason than men, but that they have none at all, since it is clear that very little is required to be able to talk" [2]. This work shall argue that language should not be the yardstick if animals have rights but do they feel pain?

Contrary to this view, proponents of speciesism approach the phenomenon from a utilitarian perspective. They argue that animals are capable of suffering and should be considered morally. They argue that animals should not be seen as having an instrumental value but with intrinsic value because there are subject-to-life. Thus, animals have feelings for pleasure and pain. One of such philosophers who argues that animals have rights is David Hume. Hume is of the view that just like men are guided by reason, carry out actions consciously for self-preservation in deriving pleasure and avoiding pain, animals also perform like actions. Therefore, animals have reasons [3]. This work therefore sees the view of the opponents as anthropocentric because human interest is what is central to this view; as such animals are abused, treated with cruelty and mostly killed, thereby leading to speciesism. Amongst the various ways by which animals are cruelly treated include: starvation, factory farming, scientific experimentation/research, hunting, deforesting animal habitations, genetic manipulation and cross breeding, restriction to zoos, using animals for sacrifices. Etc. Within the *Ejagham* culture, the prominent ones which they are guilty of include: hunting, deforestation, bush burning and fishing respectively.

In line with Singer's notion of speciesism, the work argues that since animals are sentient and because they are capable of suffering and are conscious of pleasure and pain, the *Ejagham* nation should try and recognize that animals have interests. Consequently, animals should be considered morally. This work will therefore expose the *Ejagham* people, explain the meaning of animal rights and speciesism respectively, and show how the *Ejagham* people are guilty of speciesism.

### **WHO ARE THE EJAGHAMS?**

The *Ejagham* nation is located in Cross River State of Nigeria. It is basically made up of three Local Government Areas, which include: the Etung Local Government Area (Etome, Bendeghe, Agborkim, Ajasor, Efriya, Abia, Nsofang, Ekimaya, Abijang, Nkport, Etara). Calabar Municipality (particularly the Big-Qua of Calabar people of Calabar) and Akamkpa Local Government Area which include: Njagachang, Oban, Alcor, Ndebiji, Ntaminyen, Ekong, Aningeje Mfamosing, Nkpot, Nsan, Obury, Old Netim, Awi, Mbarakom, Akampkpa, Osomba, Ekang, Abung, Nteba-achot, Ekong-Anaku, Mbebui, Okarara, Aking and Mmangor) respectively. Most people also say Ikom (Ekpache Nkomme) are *Ejagham* because of the similarity of their culture. Most people believe that the *Ejagham* nation extends to the southern part of Cameroon and some part of Ghana. They have rich cultural heritage. They are mostly known for their agricultural activities. Hence, they produce yam, cassava, plantain, palm oil. Etc. In terms of population, the *Ejagham* people are a minority ethnic group in Nigeria. But their rich history in Cross River spots them out where it appears they are in the majority.

### **THE NOTION OF ANIMAL RIGHT**

Animals are bred for food, animals are used around the world for laboratory experiments, causing these animals discomfort, pain and suffering; animals are hunted in need for food, personal use, experiment etc; animals are destroyed through pollution of the water, fishing, and even water encroaching leading to the extinction of the aquatic animals; forest are exploited to serve man's needs and leaving most animals homeless and at the risk of possible extinction. This calls for an advocacy and protection of animals. This is because about "...650 different species of animals now threatened may be extinct by the turn of the century" [3]. The central yardstick for the call of animal right is that animals are capable of feeling pains and sufferings, they are at the risk of possible extinction, they are co-existent beings and possess teleological existence. Peschke confirms this when he asserts that: Animals may be regarded collectively as species or individually as beings capable of feelings and suffering. In debates about the environment, questions about the threat of extinction for certain species of animals and the urgency of measures for their preservation stand in the foreground... societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals can look back on a comparatively long history already...The mass breeding of livestock in the narrowest space in the agro-economy gives rise to ever more emphatic criticism [4].

What this means is that, animals have been cruelly treated over the past and are still being maltreated today. This may be informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition that God gave man dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and everything that moves on the land (Gen. 1:28-28).

Several philosophers have argued that animals don't have rights. One of such philosophers is Descartes who argued that animals don't think and use language; as such don't have reason. In his "The Difference between Men and Animals" he asserts that "And this does not merely show that the brutes have less reason than men, but that they have none at all, since it is clear that very little is required to be able to talk" [5]. Also, David G. Ritchie holds that "if rights are determined solely by reference to human society, it follows that the lower animals, not being members of human society, cannot have rights" [6]. Furthermore, Ingemar Nordin in article titled "Animals don't have Rights: A Philosophical Study" argues that animals don't have rights. He argues that: "Non-human animals lack absolute and inviolable rights in this sense. They have neither full nor partial natural rights. The reason is that they simply lack the biological disposition for being moral agents... animals have what they have always had, namely the natural properties for survival and reproduction that are theirs" [7].

On the other hand, several philosophers have emphasized that animals have rights. Hume for instance holds that just like men are guided by reason, carry out actions consciously for self-preservation in deriving pleasure and avoiding pain, animals also perform like actions. Therefore, animals have reasons. [8]. Bentham on the other hand emphasizes that a day will come when rights are extended to animals just as slaves were given their freedom. He asked "But is there any reason why we should be suffered to torment them? Not any that I can see. Are there any reasons why we should not be suffered

to torment them? Yes, several...” [9]. Joel Feinberg advocated for an animal right because of the future generation. He asserts that “...there will still be a world five hundred years from now, ...we have it within our power now, clearly to affect the lives of these creatures for better or worse by contributing to the conservation or corruption of the environment in which they must live.

Animal rights therefore are those specific branches of environmental ethics that is concerned with the moral obligation owed to animals by humans. This obligation includes the need never to misuse, abuse or treat animals cruelly because there are conscious of their environment in which they live, they have a desire for pleasure and interest not to feel pain. Interest, desire, suffering, etc becomes the yardstick for animal rights. It is an advocacy for non-human animals against suffering, starvation, experimentation etc. Animal rights is an advocacy based on sentientism - the view that an entity is conscious of pleasure or pain. And denying animals these rights, one becomes guilty of speciesism - the bias and prejudice against animals like that of sexism and racism. Animal rights is a call for animal liberation from all forms of suffering, cruelty, pain etc and a need for animal care, emphasizing that the welfare of animals should not be underestimated, undermined, and treated with levity.

Singer’s book *Animal Liberation* [10] is seen as the bible for the animal rights advocates, and as such forms the basis for the animal liberation movements in counter-reacting against the Judeo-Christian tradition which permits domination and the use of animals as man pleases. However, animal rights have another important essence; which is the advocacy for the protection of the environment; this is because if the environment is protected, the possible extinction of animals will be abated. Animal rights is an advocacy for the need that man should realize that he owes any animal a duty to care, provide, protect, preserve, respect and see any animals as part of nature. Animal rights are an advocacy for justice towards animal cruelty, prejudice, bias and suffering. Animal rights advocate that some animals are social beings that need our continuous attention.

Animal rights are therefore an advocacy for the ethics of care for animals, whereby man has an obligation not to use animal as an instrumental value (extrinsic value) rather see animals from intrinsic value they possess. This accords animals some moral considerations. Animal rights, therefore, is an advocacy not to anthropocentrically see man as supreme species. No wonder Singer holds that all animals are equal. Animal rights is an advocacy for the need for humans not to eat animal meat rather resort to vegetarianism. Animal rights advocates for the abolition of animal exploitation, cruelty, maltreatment, suffering, mal-handling, pain etc.

### **SINGER’S NOTION OF SPECIESISM**

It was the Australian philosopher Peter Singer that popularized the term Speciesism. Although, it was first used or introduced by Richard Ryder the English philosophy in the 1970s. Proponent of speciesism holds that it is similar to sexism and racism and hence represents a bias, irrational discrimination and prejudice. Consequently speciesism finds itself in the field of applied ethics and holds strong arguments in the philosophy of animal rights. Speciesism is the practice of seeing one’s species as morally more important than members of the other species and justifying the practice.

Singer’s notion of speciesism therefore could be seen in an essay titled “Animals” where he emphasizes that “Sentient beings have interests, and we should give equal consideration to their interests, irrespective of whether they are members of our species or of another species [11]. Singer gave his meaning of speciesism below: Speciesism -the word is not an attractive one, but I can think of no better term-is a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interest of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species. It should be obvious that the fundamental objections to racism and sexism made by Thomas Jefferson and Sojourner Truth apply equally to speciesism [12].

This means that Singer’s speciesism is a mindset that favours the interests of one’s own species as against the interests of other species. He compares speciesism to the attitudes portrayed in racism and sexism emphasizing that there is no difference. For Singer, The racist violates the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interest of members of his own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. The sexist violates the principle of equality by favouring the interest of his own sex. Similarly the speciesist allows the interests of his own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case [12].

This unequal preference of the racist, sexist and speciesist made Singer to posit that all animals are equal [12]. Singer does not equate this equality to mean that both human and non-human animals should be treated equally but should be considered equally. He gives several examples to explain his position

and one of such is that women are entitled to vote because they are capable of a rationally deciding ability, while dogs are not capable of understanding the significance of the voting process.

Arguing from a utilitarian perspective, Singer holds that “If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” [13]. Suffering therefore becomes the yardstick for granting animals moral consideration not whether they can talk or reason. He emphasized that the principle of equality should be applied because humans and non-humans alike suffer. It should be noted that suffering comes with pain. Pain is what makes us know a being is suffering. Singer therefore maintains that “Pain is a state of consciousness, a “mental event”, and as such it can never be observed” [14]. He observed that refusing to attribute pain to non-human animal because they can’t talk or have the ability to communicate with humans is inconsequential because a young baby (new born baby) also feel pain but can’t speak. For this reason language should not be the prerequisite for measuring whether non-human animals feel pain. But he notes that pain may vary. For instance slapping a horse and slapping a child with the same force as the horse, the horse might feel smaller pain because of the tick skin while the child will feel greater pain because of the fragile skin. Singer therefore holds that: There is no good reason, scientific or philosophic, for denying that animals, feel pain. If we do not doubt that other humans feel pain we should not doubt that other animals do so too. Animals can feel pain... there can be no moral justification for regarding the pain (or pleasure) that animals feel as less important than the same amount of pain (or pleasure) felt by humans [13].

Suffering and pain felt by animals are key to argue for animal rights and this portrays Singers notion of speciesism – which makes claims that, no way should human beings nurse a prejudice or have a bias mindset that animals don’t feel pain. Hence, man must endeavour to end the attitude of animal maltreatment both in cruel and unpleasant manners such as experimentation, starvation, and factory farming, etc.

Singer provides an affirmative answer with regards to whether humans owe ethical obligations to non-human animals, especially when it comes to the unequal treatment of the lower species. This could be seen in his animal liberation when he argued that “All Animals are Equal”, but human experiences have continued to show man’s inhumanity to animals through cruelty, suffering and use as a means to an end. Using Bentham’s utilitarian principle he holds that all animals (humans and non-humans) are equal because of their biological significance of experiencing pleasure and pain. That is to say they are sentient. Based on this Singer emphasizes that: we should maximize the happiness of animals and minimize their suffering ... as a matter of valid logical consistency, what makes racism unjust in human-to-human relations is not fundamentally different from why it is wrong to oppress non-human animals by using them for experimentation, sport, entertainment and food, among other uses [13].

This implies that Singer frowns at any form of human use of animals and the continuous use that bridges the equality of humans and non-humans alike. Thus, this section shall x-ray or show how animals are being used the implication of Singer’s speciesism shall be deduced. What this implies is that if we accept the doctrine of animal rights, there shall be no scientific experimentation on animals, there shall be no hunting of animals, there shall be no keeping of animals in the zoos, there shall be no use of animals for entertainment and sport, they shall be no genetic manipulation on animals, there shall be no selective breeding of animals unless it benefits the animals, there shall be no use of animals for hard labour (beast of burden), there shall be no use or breeding of animals for food, clothes and experimentation for medical reasons.

## **SINGER’S NOTION OF SPECIESISM: A CASE FOR ANIMAL RIGHTS IN EJAGHAM CULTURE**

The following areas are ways by which the *Ejagham* people are guilty of speciesism.

### **1. Deforestation**

Deforestation which involves the destruction of a forest either for agricultural, construction or building purposes is one of the ways by which the environment is being tampered with and it leads to extinction of some animal species and other environmental challenges. The *Ejagham* nation is blessed with vast forest and land mass. One of their major means of survival and source of income is agricultural (farming) activities. Hence, they cut down the forest either to farm for food, timber for domestic or commercial use and building their houses. This has led to death and extinction of some animal species which use the forest as their homes. Thus, this activity is guilty of speciesism because of the destruction

of the natural habitat of the animals. Singer frowns at such activities because he sees it as a bias against the non-human species living in the forest.

## **2. Bush burning**

Bush burning just like deforestation is another major cause of animal extinction within *Ejagham* nation. After cutting down the forest, they leave it to dry before burning. More so, in areas where it does not involve forest, they burn bushes for agricultural and building purposes. This way, some animals that live around die in the process or run far away, making the values which these animals add to the environment to be lost. As noted earlier, the *Ejagham* people engage in agricultural activities that make them burn bushes thereby committing speciesism.

## **3. Hunting**

Hunting is another way by which the *Ejagham* people are guilty of speciesism. Hunting involves the act of killing animals with the intention of eating its meat, carrying them to the zoo, keeping them as pets or using them for experiments. Because the *Ejagham* people are blessed with forest, they take advantage of this opportunity solely for the purpose of eating the meat. This act is guilty of speciesism because the non-human animals are used as a means to the end of the human animals. More so, in the process of hunting animals run away from their homes and are either dead or go into extinction. Killing animals through hunting is guilty of speciesism.

## **4. Fishing**

Fishing is the act of getting or catching fish from the water either for eating, commercial or industrial purposes. Fishing is another way by which the *Ejagham* people commit speciesism because some communities in *Ejagham* nation are blessed with big streams and rivers. Some individuals in *Ejagham* engage in fishing activities by using what is known as *Ogunigbe* to shoot into the waters to kill large numbers of fish. This native gun has some chemical substances that not only pollute the water for humans, but also the animals that live in this water. These chemical substances make the natural water for the aquatic animals unbearable for them, leading to death and extinction of some aquatic species. In line with singer's notion of speciesism, this act is speciesist because it is a bias or prejudice against the aquatic animals.

## **CONCLUSION**

As stated earlier, the term Speciesism was first used or introduced by Richard Ryder the English philosophy in the 1970s, but it was Peter Singer that popularized it [15]. Speciesism is the practice of seeing one's species as morally more important than members of the other species and justifying the practice. Hence, Singer sees speciesism as similar to sexism and racism, thereby representing a bias, irrational discrimination and prejudice. This is the basis for which he used it to justify animal rights. This obligation includes the need never to misuse, abuse or treat animals cruelly because they are conscious of their environment in which there live, they have a desire for pleasure and interest not to feel pain. Consequently, interest, desire, suffering and pains, etc becomes the yardstick for animal rights. This work identified deforestation, bush burning, fishing and hunting as means by which the *Ejagham* nation are guilty of speciesism.

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