

# ECO-THEOLOGY: RESPONSE OF AFRICAN RELIGION

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## *Introduction*

Of the major religions of the world, viz. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, African Religion [AR<sup>1</sup>] is arguably the least developed and known within and outside Africa. The religion has broad theological affirmations that are manifest over wide geographical areas but on the whole its influence still remains Africa. The inevitable question therefore is, what has African religion offered or about to offer to every kind and condition of humans in the same way as other global religions? Particularly, Hinduism has elaborate “ceremonies for the ritualist, immense pantheon for the devotee, innumerable narrative for the lovers of myth, broad variety of metaphysical and theological theories for the speculative ... a range of religious attitudes from intense emotionalism to profound detachment...”<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is a fact that African Religion flows from the primary intimations of the sense of the sacred. It is no wonder that Africans have a sense of the sacred and a high reverence for sacred places, persons and objects vis-à-vis the earth.

The purpose of this short essay is to bring to focus one fact that is generally unknown or too frequently overlooked, namely, that of all the major world religions, African Religion is the most earth-friendly. It also aims to show how this earth-friendliness provides a key to natural resource management and sustainable development and contributes to eco-theology.

## *The Earth Explained*

Etymologically, the earth *erets* in Hebrew means the physical world in which human beings live as opposed to the heavens thereof: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” (Gen. 1:1; cf. Deut. 31:28; Ps. 68:8). Also two Greek words *gê* and *oikoumenê* are used to translate the *earth* (2Sam

22:16; Matt 24:14; Lk 2:26; Rom 10:18; Heb 1:16; Rev 3:10; 16:14). In all, the picture of the earth as soil, dust or land is outstanding (e.g. Matt 13:5.8.23; 10:28; Mk 4:3-8, etc.) The Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English gives about four meanings to the word “earth”. It defines the earth as the planet in which we live, and also as dry land. Other meanings given to the earth are the ground and the soil. Strictly speaking, the earth is the embodiment of all physical realities.

In all the above descriptions, the earth is presented as the inanimate that is without life. This, however, contrasts with the notion of the earth in African Religion and culture as a “living thing”. It is for this reason that among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana certain animals considered as taboo are called “the people of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the earth is the mother of human beings, animals and plants – she is the source and sustainer of all that it contains. And because it is a symbol of fertility and procreation, the earth is considered sacred. Thus in many societies the earth and its components – streams, rivers, trees, animals, and forests – are revered. By so doing these elements and indeed the earth are protected, conserved and maintained through a combination of taboos, prohibitions, beliefs and restrictions which in turn promotes biodiversity and an ecological balance. It follows that African Religion underscores the worth and value of the earth. The earth is an object that should be preserved and not meant for destruction.

### *Eco-Theology: It's Meaning*

In the last four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new theologies emerged: Liberation theology, Feminist theology, Inculturation theology, Interfaith theology, theology of reconstruction, etc. These local and contextual theologies which in particular had shaped the progressive thrusts in African Christian theology during the 1980s emerged not just because the church at the time has become a world church but also because of the landmark doctrines and new directions developed during the Second Vatican Council. Of particular significance also is the emergence of eco-theology or theology of the earth at the time, chiefly because the church was no longer concerned only with emphasis on the spiritual and interior but was equally concerned

about the social and external. More importantly, social doctrines since Vatican II “manifest a new awareness that it is an essential part of the Christian mission to harmonize and thereby christianize political, social and technological life.”<sup>4</sup> Ever since then, ecological concerns, vis-à-vis the care of the earth, have come on the agenda. The fact is that the earth and its components have become a major focus of theological attention in churches, universities and at theological conferences because of its intrinsic worth and value.

In a nutshell, eco-theology is about reading the Bible from the perspective of the Earth. It is an earth-centred approach in doing theology. It focuses on retrieving pro-Earth traditions as well as analysing even anti-Earth texts. It employs eco-justice principles appropriate for interpreting the Bible and for promoting justice and healing of the earth. Like Liberation theology, eco-theology is not an intellectual assent to a body of truths inherited from the past. Rather, it is a theology discovered through involvement in the care of the earth as a divine imperative. “And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress and keep it”(Gen 2:15; cf. Rev 7:3). Eco-theology simply seeks to call the church and indeed all humanity to action for the care of the earth as the earth is a place for human habitation wherein Jesus lived and understood its usefulness for human development (John 9:6-7).

### *Perspective of Nature in Christianity and the Bible*

Though world religions notably Judaism and Christianity have been concerned with justice and compassion for the acts of humans towards one another, they have traditionally assumed nature to be a mere backdrop for the human being. The Bible is chiefly concerned with the drama of human salvation. What is central is human ethics and morality. This is obvious from certain historical events such as the Exodus from Egypt, the migration to the Promised Land, the building of the temple, and the coming of Jesus the Messiah. In these stories the relationship between human beings and nature is not important or of interest to the Biblical writers. More astonishing, the Bible teaches that human beings are divinely ordained to rule over and dominate all other species and nature generally.

It is perhaps in the theologies of two outstanding Christian theologians, namely Origen and Thomas Aquinas, that the unwholesome attitude of Christianity to nature is well substantiated. Origen (185-254) was the earliest and probably the best example of a Christian theologian who proceeded according to Neoplatonic principles and in the process tended to degrade nature and matter. According to Origen,<sup>5</sup> God created the material world for fallen spirits following the rebellion in heaven in which certain spirits turned away from God. For Origen, the material world serves as a kind of purgatory where fallen human beings are educated through trials and tribulations to return to the realm of pure spirits from which they have fallen.

Also, for Origen, nonhuman creatures have no other role or value outside their relations to human beings. They have no intrinsic goal and therefore are created entirely for human purposes. In the theology of Origen, therefore, there is a clear and definite degrading or depreciation of nature. Nature is interpreted solely in terms of the role in educating, refining, and reorienting human beings in their quest for salvation.

Next is Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) who lived nearly a thousand years after Origen. In his theology, themes that were central in Origen's thought appeared as important Thomistic emphases. According to Aquinas,<sup>6</sup> the creation of the world is intended to mirror God's goodness. In his view of creation, each kind of being has integrity of its own and is meant in its own way to suggest the nature of God. However, for Aquinas, an essential characteristic of the creation is its hierarchical nature. Among all creatures living in the world, a human being is the most spiritual and rational and so is seen by Aquinas as the most sublime. The lower and less spiritual creatures, mirror the divine by serving higher creatures. They do not share in divine goodness to the extent that humans do and because of this are subordinate to humans. Indeed, their natures are defined in terms of their subservience to human beings. The fact is that in Aquinas' theology nature is projected as object for human use.

### *Sacredness of the Earth in African Religion*

We already said above that of all the major world religions, African Religion is the most earth-friendly. This becomes

manifest in the various ways in which the earth and all its components are treated and respected. In the first place, belief in the sacredness of the earth engenders reverence to it. Thus in many places cult of the earth-goddess predominates. For example, the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria regard "the Earth-goddess [*Ala*] as the queen of the underworld, the 'owner' of men and women, and custodian of public morality in conjunction with the Ancestors."<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, the Akans of Ghana see land, that is earth, as a goddess.<sup>8</sup> For this view, human impact on land is regulated to secure its fertility. In fact, certain trees are not felled because they are considered *Nyame Dua* (God's trees) and therefore sacred and endowed with healing powers. This is also true of certain streams and animals.

To further buttress the sacredness and significance of the earth, certain actions or practices associated with it are either disallowed or prohibited. This follows the belief that the earth is seen as the mother of all living things, the home of the dead or the passage to the spiritual world or the link between the seen and the unseen world. Also, through the earth communication with the spirit-world to bring about either blessing or curse is effected. Consequently, everything is done to ensure that the earth is neither defiled nor damaged or destroyed wittingly or unwittingly. To this end, an unwritten law, which acts as a guide, required to protect and conserve the earth and all its components operates.

Traditionally, reverence is given to the earth through such ritual practices and ceremonies as swearing, greetings, and the pouring of libation. For one, swearing with the earth is tantamount to complete disposition or openness to the creator. Nothing else need be said. The whole truth is believed to have been said chiefly because of the sacredness of the earth. A good example is when one declares *ala kubuom, ala echekalam* – [the earth strike me dead; the earth withdraw its protection] in other words "let it not be well with me". Swearing with the earth indicates truthfulness. In the Yoruba traditional community the ritualistic administration of oath is termed *imule* – drinking the mother earth. This is proof indeed that swearing with the earth indicates one's honesty and truthfulness. Swearing with the earth has far-reaching effects on both the living and those yet unborn.

The rituals of pouring libation and breaking of kola nut demonstrate in full the reverence and recognition of the earth as

the mother of all living things and the abode of the ancestors. This is aptly shown by Chinua Achebe in his celebrated novel, *Things Fall Apart*. While celebrating Okonkwo's departure from Mbanta, Uchendu made the earth and ancestral spirits partake of the kola nut after praying thus:

We do not ask for wealth because he that has children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him ...' He then broke the kola nut and threw one of the lobes on the ground for the ancestors.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed libation, the pouring out of little quantities of palm wine on the earth together with offer of kola nuts, constitutes Morning Prayer among the Igbo. In this ritual, greetings and salutations are made by the paterfamilias thus,

Ani, ekene .....	Earth, greetings ....
Ani, ta oji ....	Earth, take kola,
Anyi na-ayo ndu	We ask for life
na nka	and old age
Nye anyi olili na oñuñu	Give us food and drinks.
Nye anyi omumu,	Give us children,
di ji na di ede ...	and rich harvest ... <sup>10</sup>

Another ritual gesture associated with Earth is the social ritual of greetings. Thus among the Yoruba, people always prostrate on the ground greeting one another, especially the elders. Also in Ibibio land, an offender always kneels with hands (palm) on the ground or lies flat to the earth to indicate humbleness and submission. Achebe again observed this when he wrote: "Uzowulu bent down and touched the earth with his right hand as a sign of submission."<sup>11</sup>

Because the earth and its components – streams, trees, and animals – are considered sacred, prescriptions are made against their defilement. The fact is that certain actions or behaviour are seen as offences or abomination (*alu, nso-ani* – Igbo) against the earth. These include patricide, incest and stealing of yams or sheep; and a host of other actions. These offences require sacrifices to restore the ontological balance.

*The Earth in the Global Face of African Religion*

The experience of African Religion as a World Religion is underscored by the persistence of a variety of cultural practices (such as dancing, drumming, funeral behaviours and so on) close to some African antecedents and which today are observed in various Afro-American communities. The fact is that African slaves never forgot or abandoned their religious heritage on and after arrival in the New World. Indeed there is a wide range of Yoruba and Dahomean deity names like vodun, candomble, and orisha [like shango] in various Afro-American religious practices. As a matter of fact, in the religious domain, proper institutional arrangements have continued though in modified form in a variety of cults in places like Brazil and Cuba.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular significance to the Afro-American religion is the reverence to the Earth as sacred. The African slaves in diaspora demonstrated this belief through the ritual practices of oath-taking and pouring libation. In one account, Charles Leslie wrote thus:

When anything about a plantation is missing, they have a solemn kind of oath which the oldest Negro always administers, and which by them is accounted so sacred, that except they have the express command of their Master or Overseer, they never set about it, and then they go very solemnly to work. They range themselves in that spot of Ground which is appropriate for the Negroes' burying place, and one of them opens a Grave. He who acts the Priest takes a little of the Earth, and puts into every one of their Mouths, they tell, that if any has been guilty, their belly swells and occasions their death.<sup>13</sup>

In another account, while writing on the religious practices and lives of the African American slaves, J. G. Stedman drew attention to the importance of libation:

I however think that they are a happy people, and possess so much friendship for one another, that they need not be told to 'love their neighbour as themselves,' since the poorest Negro, having only an egg, scorns to eat it alone; but were a dozen present, and everyone a stranger, would cut or break it into just as many shares; or were there one single gram of rum, he would divide it among the same number: this is not done, however, until a few drops are first sprinkled on the ground as oblation to the gods.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed the cultural and religious practices of Africans in the

diaspora are a reflection of the global face of African Religion in history. The similarities of the practices in Central and South America [Haitian voodoo, Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Santería] and their counterparts in West Africa [Dahomey vodun, Yoruba *eyo* and Igbo *mbari*] indicate the existence of a globalizing process and the broadening of cultural boundaries by African Religion in contemporary times.

### *Conclusion*

In concluding this paper, it is important to note that African Religion more than other World Religions is a key to natural resources management and realisation of sustainable development. The primordial concern for the sacredness of the earth engenders eco-ethics. Thus the destruction of the forest, for instance, through burning, wood gathering for fuel, tree felling and other practices that endanger the ecosystem are forbidden. In fact, traditional beliefs and practices not only protect the sacred groves but also promote biodiversity, conservation of vegetation and sustainable development. Eco-ethics propagated in African Religion and culture help to reverse the worldwide acceleration of soil degradation and integrate land and watershed management. This unique ecosystem-friendly religion encourages governments to articulate comprehensive rural policies to improve access to land, combat poverty, create employment and reduce urban migration from the rural areas. All these possibilities, which are important to achieving the goals of sustainable development, demonstrate to the fullest the significance of African Religion in the era globalization.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some say the T (for Traditional) in ATR is unnecessary and misleading.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Dye, *Religions of the World* (New York: Meredith Publishing Co., 1967), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1962), pp. 47-48.

<sup>4</sup> J. Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1976), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> See David Kinsley, "Christianity as Ecologically Harmful," in *Ecology and Religion* (NJ: Prentice Hall Inc.); See also Rogers S. Gottlieb (ed), *This Sacred Earth* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> Kinsley,

<sup>7</sup> F. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), p.15.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Anune, "Religion and Conservation in Ghana" in *Implementing Agenda 21: NGO Experiences from Around the World* edited by Leyla Alyanak and Adrienne Crux (NGLS: 1997), p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Arinze, pp. 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> Achebe, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Landers, "Review of Afro-American Anthropology" *American Anthropologist* 73(1971), 1317. Melville J. Herskovits, "The Social Organization of the Candomble" in *Anais do 31º Congresso internacional de americanistas* (Anhembi, Sao Paulo: 1955), vol. 1, pp. 505-532; William R. Bascom, "The Focus of Cuban Santeria", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6(1952), 64-68.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Leslie, *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica*, (Edinburgh: 1940, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), pp. 323-234. See *After Africa*, edited by Rose D. Abraham, et al (London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 143.

<sup>14</sup> J.G. Stedman, *Narrative of Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (Amberst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971 [1796]), pp. 264-266; *After Africa*.