Drawing on the Collective Wisdom of the Past to Develop a Transformative, Scripture-Infused Eco-Theology for Land Use in Africa[1]

Katharine Norton

SIL Nigeria; Theological College of Northern Nigeria

Abstract

How can eco-theology impact people, communities, countries, and continents? Two things are necessary. First, a thorough engagement with the beliefs, attitudes, and actions, both past and present, that make up a community's interactions with each other and with their environment. Secondly, an examination of these beliefs, attitudes, and actions in the light of Scripture. All aspects of land use should be considered as related and interconnected, whether farming, herding, fishing, hunting, tree cutting, tree planting, or mining. Engaging with traditional and current beliefs and practices in the local language in the light of Scripture helps churches and communities to consider local environmental degradation, celebrate local wisdom, and release community members to move forward with hope as they seek to make positive changes in every aspect of land use in their communities and beyond. This article laments the widespread environmental degradation in Africa but celebrates indigenous wisdom about the environment. It draws hope that the spiritual connections to nature and Scripture in the local language can inform a Scripture-infused eco-theology which will enable communities to flourish. Inspired by experiences of the Faith and Farming program in Nigeria and beyond, it concludes with eight practical steps that communities can take to help them move forward with hope.

1 My thanks go to my colleague Yunana Malgwi and all the other farmers, herders, colleagues, and Bible college students that I have worked with over the last few years. They have deepened my understanding of these topics and provided me with much of the insight shared here.

https://www.sats.edu.za/conspectus/
This article: https://www.sats.ac.za/conspectus/drawing-collective-wisdom
https://doi.org/10.54725/conspectus.2023.3.8

Conspectus

Keywords
Local languages, traditional land use, Scripture use, indigenous wisdom, sustainable agriculture

About the Author
Ms. Katharine Norton is originally from the Republic of Ireland but has spent most of her adult life in Africa. She works with SIL Nigeria, specializing in Scripture use, helping people to apply the Bible in their language to all aspects of their daily lives. In 2017 she and her colleague Yunana Malgwi co-founded Faith and Farming, a Scripture use program that helps farmers, herders, and other land users to engage with the Bible in the language that they use as they work on the land or with their animals. The program has been well received and has been taught in communities and Bible colleges in Nigeria, to participants from seventeen African countries, and it is also branching out into Asia. When Katharine is not writing or teaching, she enjoys working on the two acres around her house where she experiments with small-scale, environmentally friendly agricultural projects that can bless local farmers, students, and pastors.

E-mail: katharine_norton@sil.org

SATS
Bible-based. Christ-centred. Spirit-led.

1. Introduction

Many African adults lament the rapid degradation of the environment in their communities. Hauwa Madi (2022, 733) describes her shock at experiencing sandstorms for the first time in her village when she visited in 2021. Previously unheard of in her area of Adamawa, Northern Nigeria, these sandstorms are now a common experience, attributed by older people in the area to the indiscriminate felling of trees. Madi says "It was distressing to see the flat, treeless view across the village where once there had been a forest of trees." Their loss has also contributed to excessive heat, lack of shade, and air pollution which she describes as leaving one feeling suffocated (73).

Another example comes from Senegal. The Bible translator François Bagne Ndione has lived all his life in the village of Fandène, just outside Thiès. Now in his sixties, Bagne remembers playing as a child in the river at the edge of his village. However, when crossing the bridge into the village, it is clear that the river has now gone and only a dried riverbed remains (François Bagne Ndione, personal communication, December 10, 2022).

This is the reality across Africa. According to Attfield (2020, 283) Ethiopian farmers struggling with changing weather patterns, Nigerian coastal fishermen's work is affected by water pollution caused by oil extraction, and droughts are aggravating bushfires, soil quality is declining, and biodiversity is being lost.

As Christians, we serve a Creator God who delights in his creation. In Genesis, we read that "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31).[2] However, in many places today the environment in Africa is struggling, and so are the people. The environment is not experienced as very *good* but rather very *difficult*.

In his Faith and Farming presentations, Yunana Malgwi (2023a, 2023b) looks at the loss of connection with indigenous wisdom in regard to the local environment and how Scripture in the local language can inform how we engage with the environment. This article suggests practical ways to restore that connection and develop a Scripture-infused eco-theology. *Infusion* suggests a slow and complete permeating of one thing into another, hence this phrase suggests that all of Scripture is allowed to permeate the whole of a local eco-theology. This would transform it from, for example, an African Traditional Religion-based eco-theology to a Scripture-based eco-theology while maintaining the traditional local environmental wisdom. The paper will draw on academic research and personal correspondence from conversations and practical engagement with farmers and other land users in Africa.

2. Spiritual Connections to Nature

Traditional African cultures hold vast amounts of wisdom regarding the environment. "Centuries of co-existence with ecosystems has resulted in some of the richest collective memories on patterns and behavior of biological resources and environmental changes" (Bardy, Rubens, and Azupogo 2018, 8). In former times, one generation passed on to the next the skills and awareness needed to care for the land around them that had sustained them for generations. People used to know each tree and plant, where and when to get them, and how to use them for medicine, thatching, cooking, or other purposes. They knew each animal, bird, and insect in their environment, their names, and their habits. They knew when the season for hunting or fishing was and to leave the animals and fish to breed to ensure plenty of food every year (Malgwi 2022).

2 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations come from the NIV.

This wisdom was not just at the visible level, but also connected with the spiritual level. Each African community had traditional spiritual leaders who engaged with nature at a spiritual level, performing rituals to ensure, for example, good rainfalls, hunting success, and fertile soil. In his M.Th. thesis, Godwin Yahaya (2018, 54) mentions ten such traditional officers among his Bwatiye people in North-East Nigeria. These range from the *Nzofame*, the minister for rain, who took care of the *mosuto* (the sacred rain pot) and its shrine, to the *Nzokakei Bemti* who was in charge of the hunting grounds and associated rituals.

As Lyn White (1967, 1205) puts it, "In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men … before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation and to keep it placated." Much of the environmental degradation that we see across Africa today is spreading rapidly due to increased pressure on the land from growing populations, the widespread use of chemicals for farming, and international commercial enterprises such as logging (Mansourian and Berrahmouni 2021,14). The disconnection between spirituality and nature also contributes to this situation. There are many challenges to contextualizing Christianity in local contexts. Traditional ways of engaging with the environment are often condemned as anti-Christian for various reasons. For example, festivals involving the environment may include elements not condoned in the Bible such as drunkenness, libations to gods, or sacrifices to ancestors (Hill and Hill 2008, 79).

Inadequate Bible teaching has often encouraged people to use their "freedom in Christ" to exploit the environment. For example, people may feel that now that they are Christians, they can cut down ancient sacred forests that were formerly protected by taboos or rules of the local religion. Moreover, they may feel they no longer need to obey traditional hunting restrictions but can hunt at any time of the year since "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). This is just one of many such misapplications of Scripture. These kinds of activities can lead to severe environmental destruction at a rapid pace if the indigenous environmental wisdom is not respected after someone's spiritual allegiance changes (Hopkins 2018, 4).

Hopkins (2018, 2) describes the destruction of the Bwatiye land in North-East Nigeria as people moved away from the traditional cultural practices towards a form of Christianity that did not connect well with nature:

> Discerning such spiritual significance in nature, traditional culture built sustainability into its approach to the land, the water and the resources sustained by them. There were rules against destructive practices, such as bush burning and harvesting fish before they were mature, and officers in place to police these rules. A combination of mulching and leaving land fallow maintained the fertility of farmland naturally.... Christianity sacrificed rather than reinterpreting [*sic*] the spirituality of nature; it also fatally weakened the communal structures of society which had held the key to sustainable living.... The results have been dire. Natural vegetation—large trees, bush, grassland, fringing vegetation of lakes—has been destroyed along with the animals these habitats harboured: with this biodiversity has been hit hard, including species that had once been useful. Soil is impoverished, ponds overfished, grassland overgrazed: yields are not what they used to be. (Hopkins 2018, 2)

There are some well-known and inspiring examples of churches integrating care for the environment as carefully as local traditional religions, such as the Church Forests of Ethiopia. Here, the Orthodox churches are surrounded by remnants of the once prolific Afromontane Forest that is for the most part completely destroyed beyond the church compounds. The priests consider the caring for and preservation of the forest as part of their daily worship, so the forest is protected, leaving green oases that starkly contrast the over-farmed and over-grazed deforested surrounding landscape, captured from the air by author-photographer Kieran Dodds (2021; See also Bongers et al. 2006).

Western Christianity is also going through an eco-theological reawakening as the church of today considers its responsibility to care for God's earth. There has been rapidly growing interest in the A Rocha UK project, Eco Church. It has around 3,000 registered churches in the UK and is spreading to France and New Zealand as well (A Rocha, n.d.). Denmark has its own *Grøn Kirke* (Green Church) award scheme (*Grøn Kirke*, n.d.). Both of these examples are multi-denominational projects, but individual denominations are speaking out and taking action on environmental issues as well. The Church of England's website states that:

> As of the end of 2022, there are 1,155 Bronze, 401 Silver, and 23 Gold Church of England Eco Churches, and our first two gold cathedrals; Salisbury and Chelmsford. The [Eco Church] scheme is a fantastic resource for encouraging churches, cathedrals, and dioceses to embody the fifth mark of mission. (The Church of England, n.d.)

The fifth mark of mission is "To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth" (Anglican Communion, n.d.). In 2021, Pope Francis launched a seven-year *Laudato Si'* action plan to encourage environmental sustainability across the areas of influence of the church (Mares, 2021).

African Christianity is also ripe for a similar eco-theological reawakening. Fortunately, since there is such a deep and recent connection between nature and spirituality in Africa, there is great hope for a re-connection. This can be affected by using Scripture in the local language as our source for the spiritual foundation, and local wisdom that has sustained generations on the land as our source on sustainable land use.

3. Putting All Things to the Test, Keeping What is Good, and Avoiding What is Evil

The reality is that many, if not all, African communities already have an eco-theology, albeit in the context of traditional religion. In order to develop a Scripture-infused eco-theology, churches and communities must make a full examination of the beliefs, attitudes, and actions that make up a community's interactions with one another and with the environment. Both those patterns that existed in the past and those that continue up to the present day should be considered. Then a biblical process of discernment should be followed. Such a process can help believers to "Put all things to the test: keep what is good and avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess 5:21–22 GNB).

An exercise often employed in Faith and Farming[3] workshops or Bible college classes to aid in this process of discernment is to consider a list of

3 Faith and Farming is a Scripture use program founded in 2017 by SIL Nigeria that enables farmers, herders, and other land users to appreciate the dignity of their work as they act as stewards and caretakers of God's creation. They learn from Scripture how to grow in the knowledge of their Creator as they discuss, remember, and value their local, traditional, ecologically sound agricultural and environmental practices. For more information, see https://sites.google.com/sil.org/faith-and-farming.

the elements of a particular traditional event. For example, on a large piece of paper or board with Fishing Festival written at the top, participants note various activities pertaining to this traditional celebration. They will usually offer suggestions such as the calling of the festival at a specific time of year (e.g., after the rains); fishing; swimming races; boat races; drinking of local alcoholic brew, often leading to drunkenness; demonstration of local crafts such as nets and fishing baskets; traditional dress; libations to river gods; eating fish and other food together; singing and dancing.[4] This discussion is best done in the local language that people use for these events so that the ideas and terminology can flow easily. Once the list is finished, it can be examined in the light of Scripture in the local language, and the activities which are permitted in the Bible separated from those that are not, so that a biblically sound yet genuinely local fishing festival can be developed.

Activities condemned by Scripture	**Biblical parallels**
Libations to river gods.	King David declares the wrongness of pouring out libations to false gods (Ps 16:4).
Drunkenness.	The debauchery and carousing associated with drunkenness is prohibited (Rom 13:13, Eph 5:18).
The lyrics of some songs may not be in line with Scripture (e.g., those in praise of local gods).	Scripture forbids having and worshipping other gods apart from God (Exod 20:3, Ps 81:9).

Activities not condemned by Scripture	**Biblical parallels**
Calling of the festival at a specific time of year (e.g., after the rains).	The birds of the air are praised for doing things in the right season (Jer 8:7).
Fishing.	Jesus affirmed fishing and fishermen many times in Scripture. For example, in Mark 1:16–17, he used fishing as an illustration of evangelism (fishers of men).
Swimming and boat races.	The concept of racing is affirmed several times in Scripture when Paul uses a good race as an analogy for keeping the faith (e.g., Gal 5:7, 2 Tim 4:7).

4 Activities expanded from Hill and Hill (2008, 83).

Demonstration of local crafts and dress.	Traditional skills are affirmed in Scripture as craftsmen are often called upon in the Bible to do special work for the Lord, like making priestly garments (e.g., Exod 28:3) or constructing the Tabernacle (Exod 36:1).
Drinking of local alcoholic brew.[5]	Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:1–11) and Paul encourages taking a little wine to help the stomach (1 Tim 5:23).
Eating fish and other food together.	There are many examples in Scripture of Jesus eating meals with people, like in John 21:10–12, when they eat bread with fish that the disciples had just caught.
Singing and Dancing.	The Psalms often encourage us to sing and dance to the Lord (e.g., Ps 149:3).

This exercise highlights the fact that although a local festival may be grounded in traditional religion, many of its elements are in fact not forbidden by the Bible, and more than that, can be found in the Bible. The local ecological wisdom is also highlighted in calling the festival at the time of year when the fish are plentiful and have finished the breeding season. This way fish stocks can multiply so there are fish available to eat for the next year and beyond. Furthermore, the use of traditional fishing nets and baskets is an age-old method of fishing for larger fish while letting smaller fish swim free to grow and multiply. This is in stark contrast to modern methods of fishing which are prevalent in Africa today. Inoussa Maiga (2018) reports how "the use of Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), carbide, dynamite and light for fishing have become attractive to fishermen as a means to meet market demands." This kills all the fish, regardless of size, vastly reducing the breeding stock for subsequent years and generations.

Using a discussion method such as the one described above can contribute to the contextualization of Christianity in an area. Over time, as each aspect of the culture is considered in the light of local language Scripture, a Scripture-infused eco-theology will gradually develop that is relevant to the language, culture, and environment of that particular location. This process of "discerning what is best" (Phil 1:10) reveals that traditional cultures often contain much that is biblically and ecologically sound that we can embrace and celebrate.

However, Christians need to identify and consider what to do with non-Scriptural practices and find Scripture-based solutions (known as *functional substitutes*) to replace them. This will help to avoid the practice of syncretism, where people blend Christianity with non-biblical practices. Bauer (2007, 1) defines these functional substitutes as "Biblically appropriate replacements for cultural ceremonies, customs, celebrations, and procedures that replace the pre-Christian practices in order to avoid creating a cultural void or cultural vacuum." For example, at the beginning of the farming season, many farmers go to the local shrine to bring offerings

5 This point can be contentious as some church denominations ban the drinking of alcohol while others point out that it is drunkenness that is forbidden in Scripture, rather than the use of alcohol itself.

of tools, seeds, animal sacrifices, and so forth as petitions for a blessing on their land, the work, and the harvest. Tabona Shoko (2007, 37) describes the rain rituals among the Karanga people of Zimbabwe involving the sacred priest cutting his hair and wearing special clothes. Local people are also involved in the brewing of local beer for the ceremony (Shoko 2022, 29).

Rather than just condemning these practices, Christian leaders can have confidence that Scripture can speak into every situation in life (2 Tim 3:16–17). They need to understand why people are doing these traditional rituals and they need to provide biblically appropriate alternatives. They will likely find out that farmers feel at the mercy of nature as they work and would like spiritual help to overcome the challenges that they see as being outside of their control (e.g., drought, pests, insecurity, injury). It may also become apparent that, in contrast to the church where services and prayers are often conducted in a language of wider communication, the prayers and libations offered at the shrine are in the farmer's language.

In response, churches can organize prayers of blessings on tools and seeds in the farmer's language at the beginning of the rainy season as a biblical substitute for visits to the shrine. Similar research and responses can be designed for every element of land use, whether fishing, mining, tree cutting, or another activity, to form a holistic Scripture-infused eco-theology that addresses each interaction between the members of the community and the environment.[6]

4. The Importance of Local Language

This aspect of using the local language for cultural engagement is of vital importance. In their study on the interconnectedness between language diversity and species diversity, Gorenflo et al. (2012, 8037) conclude:

> Adopting a shared framework for integrating biological and linguistic conservation goals will facilitate monitoring the status of species and languages at the same time as it may lead to better understanding of how humans interact with ecosystems. Indeed, it may be impossible to achieve large-scale conservation of species and the ecosystems that contain them without incorporating resident languages and the cultures they represent into biodiversity conservation strategies.

Traditional information concerning the environment was and is communicated in the local language. Elsadig Omda is a highly educated Sudanese man who speaks excellent Arabic and English and who is studying for his Ph.D. in Germany. During a field trip to the River Nile in February 2023, Mr. Omda was asked in English which birds made the round nests hanging from the trees by the river. Although he is skilled in many languages, Mr. Omda shared that he only knew this particular word in the language he spoke growing up in Sudan, that is, Beria (Zaghawa), a Saharan language spoken in Sudan and Chad. For him, the name of the bird was '*oreoreda*' [ɔrɛɔrɛda] (a weaver bird) (Elsadig Omda, personal communication, February 9, 2023).[7] This illustrates the need to engage

6 Prayers of Blessing for Tools and Seeds, as well as many other relevant resources can be found in Norton and Malgwi (2022, 110). I am grateful to my colleague Yunana Malgwi and other farmers for sharing stories with me about this aspect of farming life since I did not grow up experiencing this as they did.

7 My thanks go to Elsadig Omda for letting me use this helpful illustration. He adds that the word *oreoreda* [ɔrɛɔrɛda] is composed of the lexical morpheme (also known as meaning carrier in linguistics) *ore*, meaning hanging, dangling, or floating, plus *-da*, meaning nominalizer. Neither the repeated part *ore* nor *da* can stand alone but the whole combination can be conceived as "the hanging."

with people on environmental issues in the language that they use as they engage with their environment because the informal education in the local context has taken place in the local language.

This is in stark contrast to most formal educational contexts such as kindergartens, schools, and universities which often do not take place in the local language but rather in a language of wider communication such as English, French, or Swahili. Automatically, the language of instruction creates a disconnect between the information taught and the local context. Furthermore, the information taught may not connect with the local environment. The hours spent in the classroom often do not relate to the experiences of the day-to-day life of the students playing in the bush, hunting, fishing, and farming. Tragically, school-based formal education is regularly valued over locally-learned informal indigenous wisdom. "Traditional knowledge and value patterns in relation to ecology and human life have always been intrinsically engrained in the lives of indigenous people. They have, however, not always been met with an open-mind by developed nations" (Bardy, Rubens, and Azupogo 2018, 8). This disconnect between indigenous knowledge and formal education often leads to a disengagement with precious knowledge of local languages, flora and fauna, and sustainable ways of interacting with the environment (Malgwi 2022).

Furthermore, the lack of Scripture or Scripture use in the local language can lead to disengagement between this local environmental knowledge and the daily outworking of faith. Local people may therefore revert to or continue with solutions from traditional religions to solve environmental challenges since these operate in the local language that they use as they engage with the environment. Without Scripture in the local language, there is no opportunity to understand fully what Scripture says about godly stewardship of the environment (Malgwi 2022).

In most contexts, church services are conducted in a language of wider communication rather than in the language that people use as they engage with their environment, thus obscuring that with which they are familiar. This is despite the fact that there are copious references to engaging with the natural environment in Scripture. For example, in Job 28 we are urged to seek wisdom as earnestly as a miner seeks treasures in the earth. Psalm 23 reminds us that the Lord is our Shepherd. Jesus used the birds of the air and the flowers of the field in his teaching (Matt 6:26, 28). James urges us to be patient like a farmer as we wait for the Lord's return (Jas 5:7–8). These kinds of Bible passages should be easily understandable to local people who engage with their environment in activities such as farming, herding, or mining. Yet, the lack of Scripture in the local language creates a disconnect between the day-to-day work engaging with the environment and the mention of these environmental features in the Bible. As Yunana Malgwi (2022) puts it: "Farmers risk becoming foreigners to the Scriptures and the church if the Scripture is not translated into the language through which they understand farming."

5. The Role of the Church

The church has a vital role to play in developing a Scripture-infused eco-theology for a community. The majority of people in African churches are land users such as farmers, herders, fisherfolk, hunters, and miners. These are the people who are out in the environment every day, changing it (for better or for worse) with their work. However, these occupations and the related environmental issues are rarely addressed in church. For example, many farmers complain that the only time they hear farming mentioned in church is at harvest time when they are asked to bring a tenth of their harvest as a tithe offering (Norton and Malgwi 2022, 109). Therefore, it is vital that church leaders engage with the activities of land users in their

teaching and preaching. This will help their congregants to apply Scripture to the whole of their life and it will help communities to develop a Scripture-based eco-theology.

A pastor will need more than a superficial understanding of the issues at hand. He can preach against a certain activity, such as excessive tree cutting, but if he does not address the underlying attitude, the preaching will be in vain. He needs to research the reason why people are cutting trees and what is driving them to do so. Usually, it is simply for survival (e.g., the search for fuel for cooking food), which is combined with a lack of spiritual connection with the environment. In the past, trees may have been plentiful, so cutting them freely did not seem to be an issue. However, as populations grow, the demand for wood for activities such as cooking, building, and furniture increases. Demand tends to outstrip supply.[8] Even if trees are planted as fast as they are leveled, which they rarely are, they cannot grow fast enough to replace the trees that are cut down. Therefore, a pastor can talk from the Bible about the importance of trees, the significance of trees in Scripture, and investigate local practical solutions for cooking options that reduce fuel.[9]

Churches also have a vital role to play in teaching the Bible in the language that people understand best. There are many challenges with this. Scripture in the local language may not be available. There may be many local languages represented in the church. The pastor may not speak the local language if he has been posted from a different area or he may have forgotten the language due to years spent away studying. These and other issues can lead to churches settling on a language of wider communication, which may be helpful in some respects, but ultimately will lead to a situation where many people understand something of the Bible but very few understand it well. The emphasis in a church must be good Bible teaching in the language that people understand best so that everyone can understand and apply the richness of God's word in every aspect of their day-to-day life.

6. Recommendations for Hope on the Way Forward

1) It is vital to acknowledge that humanity is intrinsically connected to nature. It is the environment that provides food to eat, water to drink, and air to breathe. Although there are differing views on climate change or eschatology that impact individual perspectives on environmental action, the reality is that when the environment suffers the people who live in that environment also suffers. Weakened soils cannot produce daily food, polluted waterways cannot provide clean drinking water, and unclean air cannot maintain health.

2) Continual observation of our environment is also required to assess the state of the environment. This follows the biblical example of the Psalmist. For example, Psalm 8:3: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place." Psalm 104 is another example of observation, as the writer considers the hills, the trees, and the lakes, all providing a healthy flourishing habitat to sustain people and animals.

3) This observation may lead to concern about environmental issues and then personal responsibility is needed. Each community member must see what they can do about the pressing issues. For example, if there is plastic waste blowing on the streets, blocking ditches, or piling up in rubbish heaps, each individual should consider how they and their family are contributing towards this. For example, what happens to the plastic

8 See "The Importance of Trees" in Norton and Malgwi (2022, 98).
9 For an example, see Creation Stewards International's (n.d.) fireless cookers.

brought to homes and neighborhoods every day from shops and markets, or the plastic rubbish generated by church hospitality events? Once communities have recognized their own contribution to this mess, they can move to confession, and then begin looking for solutions. Often African cultures have very appropriate local solutions to issues like this that should be highlighted and valued. For example, woven baskets can be carried to the market instead of collecting plastic bags that end up on the rubbish heap.

4) There is a need to read the Bible from a fresh perspective. An important aspect of forming a Scripture-infused eco-theology is noting Bible verses and passages about farming, herding, and other engagements with the environment during our regular Bible reading times. As one Gbari farmer in Nigeria put it: "I've been reading the Bible and preaching for many years, and I never noticed before that Noah was a farmer! (Gen 9:20) It's wonderful to read about so many farmers in the Bible. If you relate the gospel to someone's life work, they will understand it and accept it much better." When farmers and other land users see heroes of the faith in Scripture doing the same work that they do, it has a huge positive impact on their lives and how they feel about themselves and their work. It gives them pride and joy in their livelihood and a positive attitude towards creative problem-solving when the burden of negative perceptions is lifted. It gives them hope that the pattern of degeneration can be reversed.

5) In order to develop a Scripture-infused eco-theology for a particular environment, there is a need to value and appreciate each context. It is clear from Scripture that God is sovereign over our birth (Psalm 139:13). This affirms the location and culture that each person is born in. We also know from Revelation 7:9 that every language will be represented before the throne of God when worshipping the Lamb. This reminds us of the value of each context and language. No culture or language can be considered inferior; each is valuable and worthy of attention.

6) The use of local language Scripture in church activities should be intentionally encouraged and supported. Each church leadership team should know which local languages are represented in the congregation. Local-language Bibles need to be made available in hard or soft copy format for all members of the congregation, remembering that some members may prefer audio versions. In multi-lingual churches, a team of interpreters should be trained and available to interpret entire services, with two or three languages used each Sunday in turn. Midweek Bible study groups can be set up according to language so that anyone whose language was not used that particular Sunday has a chance to study the passage together with others in the language that they understand best so that everyone has the best opportunity to understand fully the richness of the whole Bible.

7) The training of pastors in Bible colleges should include guidance on how to reach out to the many farmers, herders, and other land users in their congregations and how they can relate the word of God to their day-to-day work in the local environment. This should include training pastors to use and encourage the use of local language Scripture, whether they speak the language of the area or not. Pastors should be trained in how to lead community discussions in the local language to help communities develop a Scripture-infused eco-theology that is relevant to their unique context.

8) School curriculums should include the use of local languages as well as connecting each subject with the local environment. Even if textbooks are from outside the community, teachers can be trained and encouraged to make connections where possible. For example, local languages can be used for greeting, morning prayer, and classroom commands. Traditional groups can come into school for music classes to teach songs and dances. Children can do nature walks with local traditional hunters (Malgwi and Norton 2023). During maths lessons, children can learn to count using local seeds or wild fruits. During science classes, children can learn the names

of local animals and how to identify the different parts both in their own language and in the language of instruction, if different. There are already Faith and Farming workshop participants across Africa looking at how they can include this kind of knowledge in school curriculums to help children connect with and value their local environmental knowledge.

7. Conclusion

Despite the many challenging environmental situations across the continent, traditional African wisdom and local language Scripture give reasons for hope. Firstly, valuing indigenous environmental knowledge highlights the pre-existing eco-theologies of African cultures. Secondly, Scripture in the local language is easily understood so it helps Christians to weigh that local wisdom alongside God's Word. This can enable the development of transformative, Scripture-infused eco-theologies to guide and inform sustainable and biblical engagement with each local environment.

Works Cited

A Rocha International. n.d. "Eco Church." https://arocha.org/en/theology-churches/eco-church/.

Anglican Communion. n.d. "Marks of Mission." https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx.

Attfield, Robin. 2020. "Africa and Climate Change." *Utafiti* 14(2):281–294. https://doi.org/10.1163/26836408-14010016.

Bardy, Roland, Arthur Rubens, and Helen Akolgo Azupogo. 2018. "Combining Indigenous Wisdom and Academic Knowledge to Build Sustainable Future: An Example from Rural Africa." *Journal of African Studies and Development* 10(2):8–18. https://doi.org/10.5897/jasd2017.0481.

Bauer, Bruce L. 2007. "Biblically Appropriate Functional Substitutes: A Response to Dual Allegiance." http://images.wikia.com/ministry/images/d/df/Functional_Substitutes.pdf.

Bongers Frans, Alemayehu Wassie, Frank Sterck, Tesfaye Bekele Ayele, and Demel Teketay. 2006. "Ecological Restoration and Church Forests in Northern Ethiopia." *Journal of the Drylands* 1(1):35–44.

Creation Stewards International. n.d. "Fireless Cookers: A Creation Stewardship Solution for Every Household." https://creationstewardsint.org/fireless-cooker/.

Dodds, Kieran. 2021. *The Church Forests of Ethiopia*. Edinburgh: Hide Press.

Gorenflo, Larry J., Suzanne Romaine, Russell A. Mittermeier, and Kristen Walker-Painemilla. 2012. "Co-occurrence of Linguistic and Biological Diversity in Biodiversity Hotspots and High Biodiversity Wilderness Areas." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109(21):8032–8037. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1117511109.

Grøn Kirke. n.d. "Why Go Green." https://www.gronkirke.dk/.

Hill, Harriet, and Margaret Hill. 2008. *Translating the Bible into Action: How the Bible Can Be Relevant in All Languages and Cultures*. Carlisle: Piquant Editions.

Hopkins, Mark. 2018. "Transforming Christian Attitudes to Creation Care: A Perspective from Public Theology." Paper presented at Academic Day at The Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Jos, Nigeria, November 30, 2018.

Madi, Hauwa. 2022. "The Children of Africa Retooling to Save the Environment: Re-imagining Eco-Diakonia." In *International Handbook on Creation Care and Eco-diakonia: Concepts and Theological Perspectives of Churches from the Global South*, edited by Daniel Beros, Eale Bosela, Lesmore Ezekiel, Kambale Kahongya, Ruomin Liu, Grace Moon, Marisa Strizzi, and Dietrich Werner, 733–738. Oxford: Regnum Handbooks.

Maiga, Inoussa. 2018. “Nigeria: Depleting Fishery Resources Make Chemical Fishing Attractive.” *SIPA*, May 17, 2018. https://sipanews.org/nigeria-depleting-fishery-resources-make-chemical-fishing-attractive/.

Malgwi, Yunana. 2022. “Hochma/Wisdom within the Context of Farming and Nature.” Paper presented at Bible Translation Day at The Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Jos, Nigeria, April 21, 2022. https://sites.google.com/sil.org/faith-and-farming/resources/Resources-2?authuser=0.

———. “Faith and Farming Program.” Faith and Farming. https://sites.google.com/sil.org/faith-and-farming/resources/Resources-2?authuser=0.

———. 2023b. “Farming and Farmers in the Bible.” Faith and Farming. https://sites.google.com/sil.org/faith-and-farming/resources/Resources-2?authuser=0.

Malgwi, Yunana, and Katharine Norton. “Pride in Our Heritage and Hope for the Future: Using Local Languages to Rediscover the Value of Indigenous Wisdom and Knowledge About Biodiversity, Sustainable Land-Use, and Education.” Paper presented at Multilingual Education for Transformative Education Systems and Resilient Futures Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, October 4, 2023. https://sites.google.com/sil.org/faith-and-farming/resources/Resources-2?authuser=0.

Mansourian, S., and N. Berrahmouni. 2021. *Review of Forest and Landscape Restoration in Africa 2021*. Accra. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; African Union Development Agency. https://doi.org/10.4060/cb6111en.

Mares, Courtney. “Pope Francis launches 7-Year *Laudato Si’* Action Plan.” *Catholic News Agency*, May 25, 2021. https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247777/pope-francis-launches-7-year-laudato-si-action-plan?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=copy_link&utm_source=bookmark.

Norton, Katharine, and Yunana Malgwi. 2022. “Faith and Farming Workbook 2022.” Faith and Farming. https://sites.google.com/sil.org/faith-and-farming/resources/our-workbook.

Shoko, Tabona. 2007. *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-being*. Farnham: Ashgate.

———. 2022. “African Traditional Religion and Climate Change: Perspectives from Zimbabwe.” In *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*, edited by Ezra Chitando, Ernst M. Conradie, and Susan M. Kilonzo. 22–33. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003147909-2.

The Church of England. n.d. “Echo Church.” https://www.churchofengland.org/about/environment-and-climate-change/eco-church.

White, Lynn, Jr. 1967. “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” *Science* 155(3767):1203–1207. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203.

Yahaya, Godwin B. M. 2018. “A Socio-Ethical Evaluation of Human Attitudes to Ecosystem: A Case Study of Vulpi State Development Area of Numan L.G.A., Adamawa State.” M.Th. thesis, Theological College of Northern Nigeria.