

AFRICAN ECO-THEOLOGY: NATURE AND SOURCES

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Abstract

The activities of human beings from the dawn of modernity, specifically in the areas of degradation, pollution and destruction of the very environment that hosts and sustains them, have led to the serious danger of extermination. Not only have these human activities succeeded in making the environment hostile to life, they have also turned it into a breeding ground for usual and unusual diseases and sickness. This has led scholars of different backgrounds to begin to investigate better ways of addressing the present ecological crisis, seeking alternatives to the Western hedonistic, consumerist and technological approach. The emergence of an African eco-theology is, therefore, based on the fact that the world needs alternative perspectives or approaches, even within theology, to the problem of ecological crisis affecting the different corners of the world. An African eco-theology addresses the problem of ecology outside of the conventional theological, uniform regulations and technical interventions that have led to the overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they

need to be based in the local culture itself. African eco-theology adopts an approach that respects the rights of the African peoples and cultures, and appreciates that the development of the African people presupposes a theological and historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of the African people from within their proper culture. While there are a few papers written on African eco-theology, there is hardly literature that discusses its nature and sources in a profound manner in relation to the African worldview. This work, therefore, adopted the contextual approach to theology, and submitted that eco-theology is more relevant to African people when it is clothed with the categories of the African people.

Keywords: Eco-theology, Ecology, Ecosystem, African, Sources, Nature, Contextual

Introduction

The concept theology is from two Greek words Θεο (God) and λογία (study). Brought together, it means the study of God. Far back in history, Plato understood theology as an instrument for demythologizing the Greek Poets. Aristotle on his part saw theology as an aspect of philosophy that explains the cosmos in terms of an Unmoved Mover. When theology began to assume a Christian tone, Origen defined theology as a tool for expressing the Christian understanding of God as distinguished from Christian faith. St Thomas Aquinas, while working out the theory of theology used the concept in the context of a methodical elaboration of the truth of divine revelation by reason enlightened by faith. He understood theology as the science of Christian faith (Kanu 2010). These

notwithstanding, theology in the Christian context may be defined in the words of St Anselm as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectus*). It is a branch of learning in which the Christian, using his or her reason enlightened by divine faith, seeks to understand the mysteries of God revealed in and through history (Ephesians 1:9). These mysteries encapsulate the revelation of God himself and his love for humanity – mysteries hidden in God but revealed to humanity through the spirit (1 Cor 2:7-16).

While philosophy began by wonder at the marvels of nature, theology began with the self-conscious faith in God. As soon as human beings began thinking about the ultimate meaning of life, about their relationship with the whole cosmos, about the ultimate purpose and direction of human history, about the experience of the holy and the sacred, they were beginning to do theology. Christian theology, however, begins with the apostles, because the apostles had to reconcile themselves with the message of Christ and because they had to preach the Good News. From the time of the apostles, through the period of the edict of Constantinople in 313, the time of the breakdown of traditional social and political institutions, when theology passed to the Monasteries and to Monastic Theologians, the emergence of scholastic theology, to the theological transformation of the 19th century (Kanu 2010), theology has continued to reflect on human realities in relation to God.

One of the new faces of theology that emerged in the 19th century was contextual theology, which focussed on the particular experiences of particular people with the purpose of making theology relevant to people and their world (Oxford

English Dictionary 2021; Kanu 2020a-c; Butler 1951; Schineller 1990). Among these contextual theologies, was African theology, and the present piece on African eco-theology is a dimension of African theology which focuses on issues bordering on ecological crisis. This theological perspective puts into consideration the African worldview with the intention of presenting theology within the categories that the African people understand.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this study of the African eco-theology is the Igwebuiké theoretical framework which is an Igbo-African proverb translatable as there is strength in number, which philosophical speaks of the interdependence and complementarity of reality. It holds for a humane, respectful and polite attitude towards other human beings and realities within nature- knowing fully well that every reality has a purpose determined by the creator; and that there is a strong relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds to such an extent that the physical world is considered a manifestation of great spirit forces. Igwebuiké presents a worldview in which single individuals or communities cannot unilaterally define and pursue their purposes without recognizing their mutual foundedness, their complementary natures. The refusal to understand the wholeness, interconnected and complementarity of reality and to act outside of its principles will have resounding consequences on the human world in terms of disharmony and disbalance. Igwebuiké understands wholeness as the regulative principle of the African world since what is asserted is that the single

individual is incomplete without the other (Kanu 2017). This has implications for the development of an African eco-theology. It has to be developed within this framework of interrelatedness of reality, both physical and spiritual realities. This is the category that the African understands and responds to.

The principle of wholeness in Igwebuiké forms the basis for the relationship between human beings and nature or the environment. Thus, to care for one another as human beings is not enough; there is the need for caring for physical nature as well since there is a relationship between the human person and the physical world that constitutes his or her home—together the whole is constituted. It is by such care and respect that harmony and balance is achieved in the universe between human beings and the physical world or spiritual world. The human person has a responsibility to pursue harmony so as to maintain a comprehensive but specific relational condition among organism and entities (Kanu 2016). This responsibility is the prerogative of the human person given his or her nature as a rational being.

African Eco-Theology

African theology generally is doing theology from the perspective of the African cultural context. This must be distinguished from Black theology which originated from particular experiences of oppression in America and South Africa. African theology is more a dimension of liberation theology. However, the need for an African eco-theology is first based on the fact that the world needs alternative perspectives or approaches to the problem of ecological crisis;

and also needs to rise to her responsibility towards the environment. Nwaigbo (2015) defines eco-theology as “a reflective theology of social responsibility with a view to save the earth and the universe from further destruction” (p. 353). This theology begins from the understanding of the human person as a being created in the image and likeness of God and thus worthy of preserving. It also understands the human person as a being in the midst of other beings that are deserving of respect and preservation.

Francis (2017) observes that the contemporary world of production and labour governed by consumerist and hedonist’s vision of development, is at the base of this crisis:

A consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by the mechanisms of today’s globalized economy, has a levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity. Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based in the local culture itself (no. 144).

As a consequence of this insufficiency, Francis (2015) calls for perspectives or approaches that are relevant to the cultures or spiritualities of particular peoples; that is, if we must move beyond addressing symptoms to addressing the main issues. He writes:

As life and the world are dynamic realities, so our care for the world must also be flexible and dynamic. Merely technical solutions run the risk of addressing symptoms and not the more serious underlying problems. There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes a historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture. Nor can the notion of the quality of life be imposed from without, for quality of life must be understood within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group (no. 144).

Unlike the broader concerns and sources of eco-theology, African eco-theology distinguishes itself by focussing on the interrelationships of African religion and culture with nature in the light of environmental concerns. It taps from the rich African worldview, world of symbols and culture that holds that there is a very strong relationship between the human person and nature.

African eco-theology emphasizes the need for the African Christian to see pleasing God as incomplete without making an effort towards providing the ultimate good of the human person who is his or her neighbour and the conscious promotion of ecological balance in the whole creation. This broadens our relationship with God beyond the vertical relationship with God to include a horizontal relationship with both fellow human beings and nature. This calls for a holistic kind of spirituality.

Theological Imperatives for African Eco-Theology

The need for an African eco-theology, which is a contextualized theology has its theological imperatives from the Sacred Scripture and the historical development of the Church. This aligns with Jesus' pattern of ministry and the theological approach of early Church theologians.

a. Imperatives from the Scripture

Jesus came from the Jewish background whose religiosity, prayers and practices of worship were well defined. However, His attitude towards the Jewish cult was one of Fidelity and autonomy. In fidelity, Jesus had respect for the traditions of His time. He came not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17). He was faithful in observing the offering of sacrifices in the temple (Matthew 21:12), the service of Word in the synagogue (Matthew 6:6), observing the day of the Sabbath, the feasts of Passover, Tabernacle, and Dedication (Matthew 26:17-19). However, His fidelity did not lie in passivity, but represented that of a “critical yes”, a reforming fidelity, that placed a demand of purification to the worship of His time. His autonomy found expression in His challenge to fellow Jews to spiritualize and interiorize the Jewish religion (Kanu 2014; 2019).

When Jesus preached the Gospel, He used categories familiar to His audience. We hear of absentee Lords and Tenant revolts (Matthew 21:31-45); Small family-run farms (Matthew 21:28-30); debts and debtors (Matthew 18:25-35); extortion and corruption (Luke 16:1-9); uncaring rich (Luke 12:18); day labourers paid merely subsistent wages (Matthew 20:1-6); these graphically reflect the detail of the picture of Palestinian countryside during His time. St Paul writes, “To the Jews I

became a Jew, in order to win Jews... I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some” (9:20 & 22). In this context, St Paul was talking about mission, in a way that brings the Christian experience into the cultural experience of the people (Kanu 2021; Kanu 2012; Kanu and Obiefuna 2012).

b. Imperatives from Church History

Justin the Martyr holds that different cultures were inspired by God and should be appropriate for His service. He saw culture as a prefiguration of Christ: a Logos spermatikos (seed bearing word). He taught that the Spermatic Logos has been implanted in the heart of every human culture since all things were created through Christ, with Him and for Him.

Clement of Alexander established a fundamental theory- a harmony of faith and Greek culture, which places Greek philosophy at the service of faith.

Philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness until the coming of the Lord, and even now it is useful for the development of true religion, as a kind of preparatory discipline for those who arrive at faith by way of demonstration. ... philosophy was given to the Greeks directly; for it was a “schoolmaster”, to bring Hellenism to Christ, as the law was for the Jew” (Kanu 2014 p. 58).

As the Church expanded from Palestine to Rome, it became clear that it was going into a new culture and would have to have new ways of expressing herself. In 312 Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan decriminalizing Christian

worship. This paved the way for the initiation of large numbers of people to Christianity and the shaping of their belief systems on the Greek and Roman cultures. St Augustine taught that as faith runs on earth and takes its citizens from all nations and languages; and faith is not to be pre-occupied with customs, laws and institutions, neither is it to reject or destroy any of these, but rather it should observe and conserve them so that they do not constitute an obstacle to the religion that teaches the true worship of God. (Kanu and Ezenweke 2012).

Sources of African eco-theology,

There are several sources of African eco-theology that could be enumerated. However, in this work reference will be made to the Scripture, historical experience of the African people, African proverbs, African gods and spirits of nature, African mythologies, African totems and African taboos.

a. The Scripture

The Scripture is one of the most obvious sources of African eco-theology, both the New and Old Testaments. The Church understands the two Testaments as having the same authority. Scripture has always constituted the primary source of any form of theology and it is not an exception in this case. According to Stinton (2004), Scripture is the final authority on religious matters. It is the final court of appeal and constitutes the common to all controversies in eco-theology. It is literally and authoritatively definitive of all that is affirmed within eco-theology. The Scripture, thus stands out as the principal source of eco-theology for the African people. This explains why ecological theology finds its bedrock on the book of Genesis which presents the human nature as created in the image and

likeness of God. Therein, God created humanity and placed her in a beautiful forestation, acknowledging that everything was good. Given this circumstance, Veli-Matti (2015) argues that “a constructive Christian theology should be able to hold in a dynamic tension an attitude of reverent admiration for the beauty of creation in its endless diversity and creativity, and a deepening concern for nature's vulnerability and suffering from the current global economic-industrial rape” (p. 219).

With the creation of man and woman as the summit of creation, God gave them a mandate to increase, multiply and subdue or care for the earth. Not in the sense of exploitation but with a grave responsibility towards fecundity for procreation and stewardship of the entire creation. Sermons on passages of Scripture also contribute to the development of eco-theology. More effective in this regard are dialogical sermons, which allow for a high degree of interaction between the preached word and the congregation. Clarke (2011) states that it is through this dialogue between the preached word of God and the response of the congregation that the written word becomes the living word.

b. The Historical Experience of the African People

The historical experience of the African people is one of the basic sources of eco-theology; it provides materials for eco-theology, and further shapes its construction. This is very significant, as African eco-theology has got to do with the real life experiences of the African people. It reflects on their experiences of acidic rains, carbon dioxide emissions, depletion of national resources, floods, draughts, outbreak of diseases, pollution of seas, death of animals, shrinking of water bodies, etc.

c. African Proverbs

There are several African proverbs that bring out the richness of African ecological spirituality, and in such circumstances, these proverbs become a source of African eco-theology. Such proverbs include:

1. A tree on a hill is a meeting place for birds
2. Trees pull the rain
3. Hills with trees are footprints of God
4. The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, the second-best time is now
5. When there is something wrong in the forest, there is something wrong in the society
6. A person who has planted a tree before he dies did not live in vain
7. To plant a tree is to mix with God
8. Eat, but leave some in the forest for others
9. Do not finish the arrowroot; think of the future
10. Earth is our mother's womb
11. One will take a reserve if only one put it in the reserve
12. Treat the earth well; it was not given to you by your parents
13. Do not drain the river till it dries
14. A dried-up tree do not bear a green one
15. A tree blossoms with rain
16. No one throws a stone where he or she has placed a container of milk

d. African Spirit Forces

One of the motivations for the emergence of eco-spirituality is the understanding of the earth as the manifestation of the presence of great spirit. This becomes interesting when studied

from the African perspective where several African deities and spirit forces have taken the form of the different dimensions of the ecosystem. An understanding of these spirit forces can be a source of African eco-theology. These spirit forces include:

- a. Mmuo Mmiri: Igbo river goddess
- b. Ala: Igbo earth goddess
- c. Osun: Yoruba goddess of the river Osun
- d. Oya: Yoruba goddess of the river Niger
- e. Oba: The Yoruba goddess of rivers
- f. Oko: The Yoruba goddess of agriculture
- g. Osanyin: The Yoruba god of herbs and small plants
- h. Olokun: The Yoruba god of the seas
- I. Anyanwu: Igbo god of the sun
- j. Ahiajoku: Igbo god of agriculture and vegetation
- k. Sango: Yoruba god of lightening and thunder
- l. Amadioha: Igbo god of lightening and thunder
- m. Damballah: Benin Republic god of fertility and usually lives in springs and swamps. He is symbolized by a snake.
- n. Erzulie-Freda-Dahomey: Benin Republic Sea goddess.
- o. There are spirits that inhabit the mountains
- p. There are spirits that inhabit the trees
- q. There are spirits that inhabit the forests
- r. There are spirits that inhabit the animals
- s. There are spirits that inhabit rivers and seas

e. African Mythologies

The African world, with varied ethnic groups and languages, has several mythologies that can become sources of African eco-theology. These myths show how the divine gives special places to animals and plants to show that they are very

significant to the Creator God. Examples of such myths include the Nri myth of creation, the Ife myth of creation, Efe myth of Congo, the Basare and Wassa myths of Ghana, Nyanweze myth of Tanzania and the Abaluyia myth of Kenya, etc. An understanding of these myths helps the African theologian to think in such a manner that appeals to the world of the African people or worldview

f. African totems

Totemism is the assertion of kinship between the human person and a species of animals or some other animate or inanimate objects (Mbiti 1934; Theoderson et al 1975; Durkheim 1970; Meek 1937). It could also be understood in terms of species of animals or plants whose life have been bond up with the life of a particular tribe (Burton 1977). They could also be regarded as those things that a tribe or family bear their names and revere (Freud 1970). Totems are found in virtually every African society, and have been part of the culture of the African people handed down from one generation to another. Different groups or tribes have their totem or totems and this gives them their unique identity as a kinship, and in places where different groups share the same totem, they might begin to consider themselves as related to each other. What totems do is that it shows the relationship between human beings, animals and the environment, and constitutes the human person's earliest conservation behavior. Once a child is born, it becomes his or her duty to defend his or her totem as it is a part of his or her identity as a member of the clan or kinship. They have obligation to feed, protect, care for and rescue the totem where and when necessary. There are times great stories are told young people on how human beings became great by being

kind to these totems. This was a way of encouraging the young to keep to the tradition of their people by seeking greatness by keeping to the totems of the community or tribe. To each totem is attached a symbolic meaning which a taboo accompanies, such that to kill or destroy any of them has consequences. Examples of totems among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria include:

- a. Python, referred to as father or mother
- b. Utobi, a specie of money
- c. Fishes in particular streams or rivers
- d. Oziza, a type of crab
- e. Iroko tree
- f. Ogirishi tree
- h. Akpu onyima, silk tree
- i. Ofo tree Ngwu tree

These are considered totem not only because of their relationship with a tribe or people, but also because of their relationship with spirit forces that these tribes or people revere. A good understanding of these totems can be a good raw material for the African eco-theologian

g. African Taboos

Africans have moral principles referred to as taboos that serve as proscriptions, spelling out how African traditional societies ought to or ought not to relate with their environment and with one another. These taboos provide and preserve balance and harmony within the community, and in the community's relationship with nature (Magesa 2015). These taboos have ecological implications or relevance as they help in the management of natural resources and ecosystems. They

belong the class of local ecological knowledge that is a part of the cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief on the relationships of living beings with one another and the environment. There are specific-species taboos regulate the utilisation of particular species and are usually inclusive prohibitions, banning exploitation of a particular species at all times, may be because the specie is toxic, a religious symbol, etc., all for the ontological wellbeing of both the individual person and the environment at large.

Examples of these taboos as they relate to the conservation of the environment include:

- a. Not hunting an animal and not eating the meat
- b. Not killing a pregnant animal
- c. Not killing an animal fending for her young
- d. Not killing a python
- e. Not fishing in some particular streams
- f. Not killing an Iguana
- g. Not killing a tiger
- h. Not entering particular forests for hunting of cutting of tress
- I. Not going to the stream on particular days
- j. Not hunting on particular days
- k. Not washing cloth or taking bath on some parts of the stream
- l. Not fishing in some particular streams

These taboos were respected by members of African communities because of the spiritual background that they

possess, given that they are either promulgated by a deity or the ancestors. It also provided an understanding of the environment as something that there not just for consumption or satisfying human needs. There was a relationship with nature that was guided by respect.

Conclusion

The foregone reflection on African eco-theology has studied the nature of African eco-theology and attempted at defining its nature and sources with particular reference to Scripture, historical experience of the African people, proverbs, mythologies, totems, taboos, deities, etc. Just as African theology is determined and shaped by principles based on the African worldview, African eco-theology is shaped and determined by the African worldview without neglecting the Scripture and Sacred Tradition where necessary. This theology takes its imperatives from the Sacred Scripture where Christ presented the gospel message to people within categories that they could understand, a method of communication that the apostles adopted during their mission after Christ. It also takes its imperative from the history of the Church, with reference to the positions of Justine the Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Saint Augustine of Hippo, the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI on the relationship between theology and particular peoples.

The sources of African eco-theology that has been enumerated are not to be considered as theology in themselves, except for the Sacred Scripture which is at the heart of Christian theology. They are rather raw materials for theological reflection. The historical experiences of the African people, African proverbs, African spirit forces, African mythologies, totems and taboos are cultural and historical materials that the theologian

engages for the development of an African eco-theology. These raw materials are not dogmatic as the specific specialization of the theologian and the manner of theologizing employed by the theologian will determine what he or she considers necessary for thought. This notwithstanding, these sources contribute to the shaping of African eco-theology and contribute towards advancing the idea of wholeness in African eco-theology between the human community and the environment. Ramose (1999) referring to taboos avers that: “The principle of wholeness applies also with regard to the relation between human beings and the physical or objective nature. To care for one another, therefore, implies caring for the physical nature as well. Without such care, the interdependence between human beings and the physical nature would be undermined” (p. 34).

The beauty of this study is that it responds to the question of the possibility of an alternative perspective to environmental issues not only within the broader concerns of ecology but also theology. It does not only provide an African perspective but defines it in such a manner that responds to the worldview of the African people within the context of the Christian faith. Eco-theology is primarily a study in contextual theology, in the sense that it studies eco-theology or addresses ecological issues from African perspective in a theological manner. It is within this context that discussions on ecological issues will not only be understandable to the African Christian but helpful to the solving of concrete environmental problems.

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