

DOING ECOLOGY WITH AFRICAN CREATION WISDOM

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Introduction

A brief examination of literature review on ecological hermeneutics seems to indicate that African theologians and biblical interpreters have not coined a distinctive terminology for their interpretive efforts regarding the Bible and ecological issues.¹ According to Teresa Okure, “African women (and men for that matter) do not as a cultural rule start with the issue of methodology. Their primary consciousness in doing theology is not method but life and life concerns, their own and those of their own peoples.”² The ecological crisis is the most urgent concern for Africans as they have come to identify themselves as victims of natural and human-made environmental calamities.³ This article focuses on the contribution Africans are making in ecological hermeneutics through their attempts to contextualize (Africanize) theology. A major concern rests with the interaction between biblical witness and African religion and worldviews may contribute to the healing of creation.

Most African studies addressing ecology recognize the African worldview, particularly their cosmology, provides the most influential factor on the way they relate to the earth and other forms of life.⁴ The studies however emphasize how African ways of relating to nature have changed as a result of Western influence, which has changed the cosmology that informs their view of life and community.⁵ It is claimed that the Western cultural views have impaired Africans’ hermeneutical process including the process by which Africans appropriated their own heritage, corrupting their thought system and destroying their value system. This influence has resulted in Africans ceasing to understand the world through their own cultural system or through the symbolic interpretation given by their cosmology. Theorists define the western worldview as:

[A] mechanistic perspective that views all things as lifeless commodities to be understood scientifically and to be used for human ends [in contrast to the African life-centred cosmology] which can better serve their needs for cultural development and social justice in an ecologically responsible context.... since it stresses the bondedness, the interconnectedness, of all living beings.⁶

¹ African theologians and biblical interpreters in context of this study refer to African Christians who read the Bible with sensitivity to the ecological crisis.

² Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa” in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching Scripture: A Feminist Introduction* (Vol. 1, London: SCM Press, 1993), 77.

³ Whereas the question of generalizing Africa is often raised in various studies, it is justifiable in this study because all African countries have the common experience of ecological calamities. The calamities include deforestation, persistent droughts and diminishing water supplies, declining productivity from agricultural and pastoral lands, worsening food security and heightened levels of poverty.

⁴ See Harvey Sindima, “Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective” in Charles Birch, William Earkin, and Jay B. McDaniel (eds.), *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 137.

⁵ Sindima, in *Ecological Theology*, 137.

⁶ Sindima, in *Ecological Theology*, 137

Based on this understanding, scholars (especially Africans) seek to recover aspects of the African worldview which predominantly inform their ecological practices in dialogue with biblical witness. Their hope is to transcend Western views, recognized to be “largely responsible for many eco-disasters faced by Africa and which has led us in many ways to the global crisis we faced today.”⁷

From the literature available, to coin an expression that would best describe African Christian interpretative efforts in context of the current ecological crisis one might choose “Doing theology with African creation wisdom.” This term embraces three basic aspects/beliefs through which Africans have articulated their environmental concerns.⁸ The aspects are: identification of Christ’s body with creation, a religious view of the universe, and a community of creation/life. In the following section, we examine how the identification of Christ’s body with Creation has been used within the ecological debate, illustrating how it influences ecological practices.

Identification of Christ’s body with Creation and its application to ecological practices

In the attempt to halt deforestation, desertification, and soil degradation, some African churches have adopted a reforestation/tree-planting Eucharist as a way of celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ. In the celebrations a close identification between Christ’s body and creation is made in attempt to embrace the fullness of what it means to live under the lordship of Christ, who after resurrection said: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’ (Mt. 28:18). This announcement is understood as mandating Christian churches, as the body of Christ, to build a unity amongst themselves “but also to build new relationships with the entire creation in attempt to avoid destruction and preserve life for all creatures.”⁹ This understanding has generated a tree-planting Eucharist in an attempt to integrate creation into the body of Christ. The central argument among proponents of a tree-planting Eucharist is that the body of Christ is more than the church.¹⁰ The concept also includes relationships with all creation: ‘For by him all things were created... in him all things hold together ... and through him to reconcile to himself all things’ (Colossians 1:16-20). Acknowledgement is made to the relationship of the unity in the body of Christ (the church) and also Christ’s presence in all creation is commemorated through Holy Communion by including tree planting. According to Daneel, “[r]eplacing the trees in sacramental recognition of the lordship of Christ – the ultimate guardian, who reigns over yet suffers within the stricken earth – brings life and celebration to creation.”¹¹

⁷ Sindima, in *Ecological Theology*, 137.

⁸ These elements of African perspectives on ecology are generally gleaned from environmental literature and particularly African contributions to other approaches to ecology such as ecofeminism, ecojustice hermeneutic, among others.

⁹ M. L. Daneel, “African Independent Churches face the Challenge of Environmental Ethics” in D. Hallman (ed.), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (WCC Publications, Geneva and Orbis: Maryknoll, 1994), 250.

¹⁰ See Daneel, in *Ecotheology*, 248-263; M. L. Daneel, “Earthkeeping churches at the African grass roots” in D. Hessel and R. Radford Reuther (eds.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the well-being of earth and human* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 531-558.

¹¹ Daneel, in *Ecotheology*, 262.

As a way of Africanizing the sacrament one regards Christ, through his death and resurrection, as the real guardian of the land. Christ identifies with the abused and barren soil against human injustice; in contrast to or fulfilment of the African ancestors traditionally believed to be the guardians of the land. Below, we limit our focus on reforestation/tree-planting Eucharist celebrations in Zimbabwe's ecumenical earth-keepers' movement, formalized in 1991 as the Association of African Earth-keeping Churches (AAEC). Further we will examine Easter-tree planting celebrations under the initiative of Kenyan Brackenhurst Environmental programme, a ministry of care of creation.

According to Daneel's report (AAEC),¹² the sacrament begins with public confession. Ecological sins are named such as cutting trees without replanting, overgrazing and soil erosion resulting from riverbank cultivation. These sins are associated with wizardry, the most serious of all sins. Creation-destroying wizards are well known to the church's prophets, who act as guardians of the land. They are people who cut trees indiscriminately for quick profit, refuse to abide by the principle that firewood can only be cut by those who planted the trees for it, and resist traditional and government laws prohibiting tree-cutting in sacred groves and cultivation of riverbanks. A healing ceremony with laying-on of hands, sprinkling of holy water and prayers is performed for those afflicted by ecological sins. Those who do not repent may be barred from Holy Communion, or even excommunicated.

Liturgically, tree planting accompanies the Eucharist. It does not replace but supplements the historic procedures for Holy Communion. Preparation begins with the digging of holes for planting trees in the church compound. The site is sometimes called "The Lord's Acre". Seedlings are placed on the communion table along with the bread and wine. After public confession of ecological sins, participants line up and file past the table picking up a seedling and partaking of the elements. Each participant then proceeds to the prepared holes, where the bishop sprinkles holy water on the ground and says:¹³

This is the water of purification and fertility.
 We sprinkle it on this new acre of trees.
 It is a prayer to God, a symbol of rain,
 So that the trees will grow,
 So that the land will heal
 As the *ngozi* (vengeful spirit) we have caused withdraws.

Prayer is also given for the 'Holy Soil' after which it sprinkled in the Lord's acre with the words:

You, Soil ...,
 I bless you in the name of Christ
 For you to make the trees grow
 And to protect them.
 Provide the trees with sufficient food for proper growth.
 Love the trees and keep their roots,
 For they are our friends.

¹² See M. L. Daneel, "African Independent Churches face the Challenge of Environmental Ethics" in Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.), *This Sacred Earth: Religion Nature, Environment* (New York and London, Routledge, 1996), 572-585.

¹³ Daneel, in *Ecotheology*, 258.

Like the bread and wine, the sprinkling of water and soil are symbolic of a renewed relationship in Christ. They represent healing and a re-commitment to faithful earthkeeping. Another excerpt from the liturgy states:

Look at the stagnant water,
 where all the trees were felled.
 Without trees the water-holes mourn,
 Without trees, the gullies form.
 For the tree-roots to hold the soil - are gone!

There were forests
 abundance of rain
 But in our ignorance and greed
 We left the land naked.
 Like a person in shame
 Our country is shy
 in its nakedness.

Our planting of trees today
 is a sign of harmony
 between us and creation.
 We are reconciled with the earth
 through the body and blood of Jesus
 which brings peace.
 He who came to save
 All creation.

The service also includes sermons related to earthkeeping, as well as song and dance to praise the Creator and encourage church members to be faithful earthkeepers. Speaking of the contribution AIC's in Zimbabwe are making in the field of applied environmental ethics, Daneel asserts:

They are not in the first place producing environmental literature, but they are proclaiming a widening message of salvation which encompasses all of creation, and in their services of worship they are dancing out a new rhythm which, in its footwork, spells hope for the ravaged earth. They have not worked out their new ethic on paper, but they are 'clothing the earth' (*Kufukidza nyika*) with new trees to cover its human-induced nakedness. In so doing they have introduced a new ministry of compassion; they live an earthkeeper's ethic.¹⁴

The Baptist mission of Kenya has come to see the rapid disappearance of indigenous trees and forests as an opportunity for churches to develop a tree planting culture across Kenya and to bring a Christian perspective to bear on environmental concerns in East Africa. The emergence of the ecological crisis in a region of the world where Christianity has grown by leaps and bounds as a contraction that confronts those who claim to follow Christ, meaning they cherish Christ as the author of our salvation but easily forget that Christ is also the author of creation (John 1:3, Col. 1:16). The crisis is nothing less than an insult to the

¹⁴ Daneel, in *Ecotheology*, 248.

magnificent Creator God whom we claim to love. In the words of Paul, the whole creation groans under the burden of sinful humankind, it longs to be freed from its bondage to decay and injustice (Romans 8:19-22). It requires humble repentance for the careless treatment and destruction of a magnificent creation.

As part of the long-term solution to the crisis, the Baptist church started Brackenhurst Environmental Program (BEP)¹⁵ whose mission is to pursue a God-centered response to the environmental crisis in Africa which brings glory to the Creator, advances the cause of Christ, and leads to a transformation of the people and the land that sustains them. BEP is a form of Christ-exalting ministry that motivates all kinds of mission agencies to embrace the crisis. Among the initiatives of BEP is a Church-wide Easter week tree-planting campaign which is geared towards honouring and commemorating Christ's work on the cross.¹⁶ Below we take a brief look at how tree-planting activities fit into the theme of Easter and why a tree-planting message tied to Easter would make sense to an African.

The primary focus of tree-planting efforts following Easter revolves around the tree as one special part of God's creation. The Bible frequently mentions trees with the opening story of creation introducing God as the first farmer and the forester. There were two trees in the Garden of Eden that have challenged the entire course of the human race- the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. The same two "trees" continue to challenge us. One tree serves as a source of and symbol of life while the other is a symbol of good and evil. The conflict between life and death symbolized by the tree makes sense to the vast majority of Africans who are farmers, fishermen, or pastoralists. For millions of families in rural Africa, trees mean life: food (i.e. mangoes, oranges), housing¹⁷, fuel, shade, medicines¹⁸ and vital income. But they are also aware of how without trees life becomes a bitter struggle against poverty, hunger and starvation.¹⁹ As it is often said, when a tree goes the soil is

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¹⁶ Among the varied of ways through which BEP is responding to the environmental crisis are the three-day "International Conference on God and Creation: Rediscovering the Biblical Mandate for Environmental and Agricultural Stewardship," which was co-sponsored by Food for the Hungry International in January 2003. This event was designed to reach African pastors, church leaders, farmers, missionaries, and other leaders with a message of environmental stewardship based on the Word of God. For three days, over 230 delegates and 16 speakers from the U.S. and Africa attended the conference, representing churches, missions, government, and numerous NGOs. For more details on the activities of BEP see A Ministry for Care of Creation Inc. www.careofcreation.org.

¹⁷ Trees provide critical habitat for hundreds of species of birds, animals, butterflies, and insects.

¹⁸ Some trees have a legitimate medicinal value. A few examples include *Acacia seyae* for headache/colds/fevers; *Caesalpinia Volkensii* for malaria and pneumonia; *Canthium Keniense* for liver problems; *Dombeya burgessuae* for diarrhoea and chest complaints.

¹⁹ Some farmers have stated their belief that the loss of native plants, birds, and insects has led to increased crop damage because certain pests can now proliferate unchecked. A few examples of endangered birds in Kenya include the African Crowned

exposed to erosion, and when the soil goes crops decline and the people too. A proverb now gaining popularity in Kenya goes like this, “Without trees there is no rain, without rain there is no water. Without water our crops die, and without crops we die.” Tree foods are a life-line when other crops fail, and income from trees pays for food. Therefore, tree planting is the best form of bringing back life, repairing the barren landscape, transforming lives of people by growing them out of poverty, and escaping starvation.²⁰ More trees mean harvest after harvest of vital resources. More trees also mean more productive land and so more food. Extra money earned from tree products can pay for healthcare, schooling and food, enabling families to thrive rather than strive.

In the minds of Africans whose belief system associate evil spirits with trees²¹, it would not be hard for them to understand the tree of good and evil as a sign of, or a metaphor for the alienation and confusion in creation caused by human sin. This may help to advance the link between deforestation and the ecological crisis.²² In order to portray a tree positively, one may better understand it as a symbol of God’s wisdom and design, used to hold all things in creation together. This idea is implied in Jose Pepz M. Cunanan’s statement, “Ecological disasters occur in cycles, and with the breakdown of one system the others are likewise affected.”²³ It is widely acknowledged in the ecological debate that deforestation leads to loss of forest cover, soil erosion, desertification; more frequent and severe droughts, floods, the drying of springs, and diminished flow of water in streams and rivers. This, in turn, is contributing to declining productivity from agricultural and pastoral lands. This brings to our mind the value of trees as highlighted in the famous quote by Martin Luther, “In the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every tree is far more glorious than gold and silver. . . . God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds

Eagle, found primarily in closed canopy forests where large trees exist providing proper nesting conditions; the Taita Thrush, and endemic bird found only in the small forests of Taita Hills; and the Amani Sunbird, found only in East African coastal forests.

²⁰ During times of starvation, people escape death by eating leaves, seeds, nuts, and fruits from trees (i.e. baobab).

²¹ The existence and presence of evil in creation is common among African societies. Speaking of Ethiopian context, Teshai Berhane-Selassie illustrates how this belief, (common among African societies), helped to conserve the environment: “A few spirits live in highland areas, occupying the tops or branches of evergreen trees. Indigenous trees which are considered to be the abode of malign spirits are called *adbar* (which refer metaphorically to an important person or location. The spirit inhabitants must be acknowledged, and respect for the *adbar* trees, some of which are said to be hundreds of years old, is an extreme expression of this attitude. People of all religions offer sacrifices and hold rituals under them.” See “Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology” in *Ecotheology*, 161.

²² K. C. Abraham observes, “Poverty is also a source of ecological degradation, and the alleviation of poverty by the poor through their struggle for justice is an ecological concern. We cannot separate the two concerns. Unless the poor have alternative source of food and basic needs like fuel, they too will wantonly destroy whatever natural environment is around them” (See “A Theological Response to the Ecological Crisis” in D. Hallman (ed.), *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (WCC Publications, Geneva and Orbis, Maryknoll, 1994), 69).

²³ Cited by Abraham, in “*Ecotheology*, 19-20.

and stars.”²⁴ Without trees, the mandate for the fruitfulness of all creation in Genesis 1:20-22 becomes impossible: “And God said, ‘Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky’ ... God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on earth.’”

For a Christological basis of tree-planting in relation to the theme of Easter, the Bible frequently mentions the tree of life and the water of life in connection to God’s gift of eternal life (i.e. Rev. 2:4-7 *the tree of life* in the paradise of God; Rev. 21:1-6, *the spring of the water of life* in the Holy City, the New Jerusalem; Rev. 22:1-2 *the water of life and the tree of life*; Rev. 22:14 *tree of life*; 22:17 *water of life*; Rev. 22:19 *tree of life*). In light of these texts, the tree points God’s people to the paradise that awaits them when Christ returns. As believers the promise of a redeemed creation is a delightful part of the great hope that we should hold on to with confidence. One day we will live together with God and creation in paradise as envisioned in Isaiah 11. Too, a tree points us back to the creation account in Genesis 1-2, where God set humankind in the garden of paradise to take care of it (Gen. 2:15). This was humankind’s original work and God’s intention was for humankind to live in harmony with him and with his creation. But humankind’s sinful rebellion destroyed the harmonious relationship between humankind and God. Since humankind had dominion over the creation, their sinfulness also led to a broken relationship with the creation. Sin led to both physical and spiritual death and humankind was denied access to the tree of life (Gen. 3:22-24). John saw in his vision that when the kingdom of God was established, the destroyers of the earth would be destroyed (Rev. 11:18). From an ecological perspective, we can see throughout the Bible that God intends for our relationship with his creation. We also see the link that has now been acknowledge between a tree, water and life.

The cross, like the tree, is an invitation to celebrate the new life we have in Christ. The cross of Christ (made from a tree) is like a tree of life because it is at the cross where the story of redemption and new life begins. The cross could be described as the Tree of Redemption because Christ died on a tree to save us from sin and to bring us eternal life. Ecologically though, setting the cross within the context of Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22 may symbolize tree planting as a source of life for people today and into the future. The death of Christ was a demonstration of God’s love for us (John 3:16), and so tree planting could be initiated on farms of neighbours and nonbelievers to demonstrate Christian love and to open up opportunities to share Christ or the biblical message of caring for creation. Tree planting could also be a demonstration of Christ-like concern for children (Mt. 19:14) as a means of building a more hopeful future for successive generations.²⁵

In conclusion, by caring for God’s creation we bring him glory, we show respect for what he has made, we demonstrate love to our neighbour and a sincere concern for the poor, and we point people to the paradise that awaits us when Christ returns.

²⁴ See *Martin Luther Quotes - BrainyQuote*
www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/martin_luther.html

²⁵ The team for the care of creation has also developed a training manual on how the church and community leaders can work together to restore the land. The manual focuses the theological basis for human responsibility before God to care and protect natural resources: Dan Fountain (ed.), *Let us Restore Our Land* (Kijabe, Kenya: Today in Africa, 2007).

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