


Towards a hermeneutics of sustainability in Africa: Engaging indigenous knowledge in dialogue with Christianity

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Today there are a number of ecological hermeneutics, such as the Exeter project (UK), the Earth Bible project (Australia), the anti-ecological readings and the eco-feminist readings. Whilst these trends provide Christianity with valuable ecological insights, they tend to be more global than specific. The Exeter project claims even to search for the 'universal' eco-meaning of the scriptures. Thus, every community should learn from them and try to develop its ecological hermeneutical framework, which can sustainably address its contextual issues. This article explores whether elements of traditional Africa can be transformed into a valuable hermeneutical framework of ecological sustainability for Christianity in Africa. African traditional societies were built upon a threefold worldview, namely (1) the sacredness of all life (*moral or spiritual dimension of nature*), (2) the *pre-eminence of the community over individual interests* and (3) the *cosmological dimension of the chieftaincy (governance)*. In the process of the Christianisation of Africa, this framework by which African people make sense of the world became so impaired that the Africans ceased to understand their world through their own cultural systems. With a proper re-configuration in dialogue with a sound biblical *green* theology, this triad can be turned into an effective hermeneutical vehicle of African churches' engagement for a sustainable life in Africa.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article explores whether elements of traditional Africa can be transformed into a valuable hermeneutical framework of ecological sustainability for Christianity in Africa. It draws on ecological hermeneutics that exist in the theological disciplines. It involves the disciplines of biblical exegesis and ecological hermeneutics, African hermeneutics and insights from sustainability theories.

Keywords: sustainability; African ecological hermeneutics; traditional Africa; African cosmology; indigenous knowledge; African Christianity.

Introduction

The Brundtland report (1987) 'Our common future' defines sustainability as a 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland 1987:43). Long before, Qohelet talked about the future of the earth in this way: 'one generation goes and another comes, but the earth remains forever' (Qoh 1:3). The question is not about whether the earth will remain, but *what kind of earth* are we willing to transmit to the next generation. In other words, how healthy will the earth be when we transmit it to future generations?

The Brundtland report shaped the biodiversity declaration of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and led to the creation of the Commission on Sustainable Development. This concern for sustainable development had an impact upon the eight Millennium Development Goals, which have been now extended to 17 goals as 'Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030'. The 17 SDGs are interwoven in the sense that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, cultural, economic and ecological sustainability.

As almost never before, religious actors were associated in the process and were invited to provide their *unique* contributions towards the big five Ps (people, planet, peace, prosperity and partnership). According to the famous article of Lynn White, the present conquest of nature is rooted in the religious anthropocentric view of Christianity. For him, 'more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one' (White 1967:1206).

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

Indeed, religious communities and churches in particular have the potential of offering an ecological ethics of life, which can provide moral and spiritual grounding as well as critical values for reaching ecological sustainability. However, the Christianisation of Africa was intermingled with the colonisation process, and this continues impairing the hermeneutical ability of African churches. John Mbiti called it 'theological impotence' or 'carbon-copies theology' consisting of the inability to embed theology in the African cultural and contextual realities (Mbiti 1972:57).

In this way, one needs to de-construct bias of recent history of the church in Africa and current eco-hermeneutical trends before constructing a framework within which churches can fruitfully contribute to ecological sustainability in Africa.

African Christianity as victim of its history

Christianity entered Africa since the apostolic period but was eroded in the north by the arrival of Islam. The second introduction of Christianity can be dated from 1450 when Christianity was kind of an appendage of the colonial powers (Portuguese) in the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The greatest success was achieved in the Congo. The third period began in the second half of the 18th century and continued through much of the 19th and 20th centuries. But the approach was largely tainted by the colonial projects and the missionaries' tendency to condemn anything African as dark, bad and of less value (Ositelu 2002:31).

Churches played a great role in facilitating the commodification of African resources, land, people and cultural worldviews. King Leopold of Belgium instructed the missionaries in the Congo to teach the gospel that facilitates the alienation of the indigenous people, their culture and their land (Von Lüpke 2013):

Reverends, Fathers and Dear Compatriots: The task that is given to fulfil is very delicate and requires much tact. You will go certainly to evangelize, but your evangelization must inspire above all Belgium interests. Your principal objective in our mission in the Congo is never to teach the niggers to know God, this they know already. They speak and submit to a Mungu, one Nzambi...they know that to kill, to sleep with someone else's wife, to lie and to insult is bad...you are not going to teach them what they know already. Your essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrials, which means you will go to interpret the gospel in the way it will be the best to protect your interests in that part of the world...you have to keep watch on disinteresting our savages from the richness. (p. 1)

In this way, Christian religion was presented as the conqueror of the so-called African *paganism* and its *primitive* practices (Tempels 1959:19). In the central Africa, for instance, the methods of converting the natives to Christianity were simply 'a didactic strategy for domestication of minds and a social engineering aimed at the production of "new" beings' (Mudimbe 1994:128). The expression 'new beings' is based on the notion of domestication, which is normally used in the

process of training animals to become submissive (Stenger 2001:82–83).

Therefore, despite their great influence in African societies, churches are still hindered by what White (1967:1206) called the spirit of 'Westernization' demonising African indigenous knowledge, its taboos, wisdom and beliefs (animism) that previously sustained order, harmony and bio-cultural life in Africa. Paul Ricoeur believed that only a few cultures could have been able to resist the affront of the Western and Christian worldview 'qui exige souvent l'abandon pur et simple de tout un passé culturel'¹ (Ricoeur 1961:445).

Through preaching and education, churches contributed to crumbling African traditional values, and thus impairing the hermeneutic ability of Africans, especially the youth. Biased school education was the main reason for the indigenous pastors and people of my church, the Baptist Church in Central Africa (CBCA), to part from the missionaries in 1959, requesting better education for the youth. To the missions in the Congo, King Leopold II instructed (Von Lüpke 2013):

Your action will be directed essentially to the younger ones, for they won't revolt when the recommendation of the priest is contradictory to their parent's teachings. The children have to learn to obey what the missionary recommends, who is the father of their soul. You must singularly insist on their total submission and obedience, avoid developing the spirit in the schools, **teach students to read and not to reason.** (p. 2)

The bold highlights in this citation are mine, showing how the project aimed at uprooting critical thinking and hermeneutical ability. In the process, the Bible, the land (natural resources) and Africans (people and their culture) were all robbed of their true essence. The Bible was stripped of its value and became a tool to facilitate the commodification of nature. Non-human beings (nature) were reduced to lifeless *thing*, which can be owned, manipulated and exploited at all cost (Sindima 1990:139). Africans (humans) were reduced to mere *tenants* of their own land, unleashing a crisis of cultural identity.

This utilitarian view seriously damaged not only the message of the Bible, but also the land and human relationship to nature. In the process, humans have been elevated to the top of creation in a never-ending war of dominion over one another and over the earth (Maluleke 2020:14). Churches preached that forests, rivers and animals are mere *objects* made for human pleasure and needs. Locals were required to stop believing that flora, fauna, rivers, places and mountains were living subjects belonging to their family. This trivialised the whole traditional mode of life and its cosmological framework (Mudimbe 1988:17). The converted locals and their converters were then ready to multiply, fill and subdue the earth together with having dominion over every living being that moves upon the earth (Gn 1:28).

¹Translation: 'Which often requires the total abandonment of an entire cultural heritage'.

Thus, more than 60 years after colonialism, SSA has remained what King Leopold of Belgium said about the Congo, 'un gâteau magnifique africain' (magnificent cake), an *object* of exploitation of mercenaries and corrupt leaders (Maluleke 2020:8). In 2015, Africa was termed 'bio-capacity deficit' where the footprint is greater than the capacity of ecosystems to produce useful biological materials and absorb human waste (World Wild Fund 2015:18). Exploitation of resources is driven forward by the never-ending *acquired* mentality for profits and limitless growth, threatening ecological sustainability (Andersen 2020:1). For this reason, Africa needs to de-construct and re-imagine its approach for growth and development.

The question is how Africa can reconcile or integrate the sustainability of its ecological systems with rapid development. The answer would be a re-imagination of the approach to development integrating insights from African indigenous knowledge in all sectors of the society (churches, politics, etc.). According to Paul Ricoeur, the survival of a community depends on an unending and constant hermeneutical renewal in which people re-affirm themselves in their cosmology at the same time as they learn from others (Ricoeur 1961:452).

Hermeneutical considerations

Hermeneutics is never static, but dynamic, changing in relation to various cultural worldviews and contextual realities. If a hermeneutical framework is unrelated to a given context, it is unlikely to infuse genuine transformation of the society. Hermeneutics is a matter of meaning creation. As for the Bible to address contemporary issues, David Clines argued that 'in principle ... meaning does not reside in texts but that readers create meaning when they read texts' (Clines 1995:17).

However, Fox (1994:175) warned that this does not mean that a text has 'an infinite number of meanings' but an 'indefinite number of meanings'. Along with the indeterminacy of the meaning of the text, Alter (1990) observed:

If the text were only openness, we could say whatever we wanted about it, and we would end up, tediously, talking only about ourselves, as certain contemporary critics are inclined to do. If the text were only defined and definable structure, every work of literature would soon reach a saturation point in the readings it could sustain. (p. 237)

Therefore, a radical indeterminism or relativism identifying meaning with the reader's response would also be stuck with anachronism, consisting of reading the Bible as if it was primarily written to address today's issues. Uncertainties and ambiguities because of the gulf between contemporary reader and the text in time, language or social-historical setting constitute a problem of communication. In this way, Gadamer (2004:305) argued that interpreting a text should involve dealing with the tension between the horizons of the text and the horizons of the reader.

The word 'horizon' refers to 'perspective' or 'worldview'. For Gadamer, hermeneutics should consist of the fusion of the perspective of the text with that of the reader. In other words, meaning can only be constructed by first reconstructing the voice of the text and then by relating this to the voice of the contemporary reader. In Gadamer's conception, the horizons remain distinct from one another: Gadamer speaks of the *fusion of horizons* and not simply the formation of one horizon (Gadamer 2004:305).

This is what Kato fustigated about assimilating African religions with biblical theology and producing a kind of syncretism. Both horizons must remain distinct from one another. For Kato, African theologians need to formulate theological concepts in the language of each African cultural milieu, but theology itself in its essence must be left alone (Kato 1985:12). The hermeneutic task would consist not in a naïve assimilation of African and biblical horizons but maintaining alive the tension between them in order to create the meaning.

African churches would contribute to the sustainability by promoting hermeneutics that keep alive the dialogue between biblical texts and insights from African indigenous knowledge. Let us review first existing ecological hermeneutics and the need for developing proper African eco-hermeneutical frameworks.

Existing ecological hermeneutics

A detailed analysis of prevailing ecological hermeneutics can be found in an article, which was published in 2019 (Kavusa 2019). I am giving here the key insights of the major existing trends of eco-hermeneutics in which scholars operate now.

Apologetic reading or reading of recovery

This hermeneutics is also called as a 'strategy of recovery' (Watson 1992:81) that tries to find the green side of the Bible. The reading of recovery tries to rescue the Bible from the charge that biblical texts endorse a utilitarian view of nature as alleged by White (1967). Its supporters affirm that biblical texts are not the one posing the problem; it is the later interpreters, who have obscured the original meaning of the scriptures (Horrell, Hunt & Southgate 2008:221). The problem of this reading strategy is that it tries only to demonstrate the green side of the Bible at all costs. We find here the works of the Green Bible, which is printed in green biblical texts, which in their view support creation care and *Green Discipleship*.

The Earth Bible project

This is a complete opposite reading, advocating for a radical resistance against and rejection of the so-called 'grey texts', texts deemed ecologically harmful (ex. Gn 1:26–28). The interpreter 'reads the text not as steward over creation, but as a kin, a relative and member within the earth community, sharing with it benefits and problems' (The Earth Bible Team

2000:34). The project makes use of a threefold hermeneutics of suspicion, identification and retrieval coupled with six eco-justice principles (The Earth Bible Team 2000:38–53) by which the ecological validity of the text is evaluated. The insights of the six eco-justice principles cohere with African worldview. However, the radical resistance claim against the so-called ‘grey texts’ is incompatible with African Christianity, where no single *iota* of the Bible can be questioned.

Eco-feminist approach

Ecological feminism is a kind of convergence of ecology and feminism into a new social theory and political movement (Plumwood 1993:39). The expression eco-feminism was created by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to provide ‘an ethical framework, which takes seriously links between the rule of men over women and the oppression of nature’ (Waren 1995:172). Its supporters argue that women and nature are both victim of the patriarchal conception of the world (Fowler 1995:124).

Radical eco-feminists affirm the need to deconstruct, resist and replace the creation traditions of the Bible by another cosmology that is more eco-friendly. Rosemary Ruether (1992:115) showed that all the spheres of the church are concerned with the ecological reformation because a society that is mainly based on the traditions that value the dominion of men over women and nature cannot be sustainable. Women and nature can only be free following a radical deconstruction of the patriarchal view of the world.

Resisting ecological reading of the Bible

The fundamentalist scholars alleged that the words such as ‘friends of Earth, stewardship or planetary awareness belong to the New Age movement,² which is itself a disguise of satanic influence’ (Cumbey 1983:167). The American Southern Baptist Church (SBC) affirmed that stewardship concerns might drive Christians from God worship towards a kind of neo-pagan worship of nature (creation) (Zaleha & Szasz 2015:20). The fear is that environmentalism can drive towards the worship of the creature rather than the Creator (Rm 1:25). The 2006 Convention of the SBC clearly declared:

Some in our culture have completely rejected God the Father in favor of deifying ‘Mother Earth’, made environmentalism into a neo-pagan religion, and elevated animal and plant life to the place of equal—or greater—value with human life. (p. 1)

The Convention opposed ‘solutions based on questionable science, which bar access to natural resources and unnecessarily restrict economic development, resulting in less economic opportunity for our poorest citizens’ (Southern Baptist Convention 2006). There is a belief that what is called climate changes are simply the signs that the Lord is coming soon, and should not distract Christians from the Great Commission, namely ‘to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ

²The New Age movement prevailed in the 20th century and uses a mixture of esoteric traditions, practices and beliefs as basis for a new world (Groothuis 1988:18).

to people of every tribe, tongue and nation before he returns’ (Southern Baptist Convention 2006:1). In this way, anti-environmentalism developed six biblical eschatological principles showing how working to save the earth implies acting against God’s plan (Horrell 2010:18).

The Exeter project

The Exeter project uses a kind of revisionist reading, which tries neither to defend (reading of recovery) nor to resist (reading of resistance) the biblical and Christian traditions, but to ‘re-claim’ their ecological potential (Santmire 2000:10). Its supporters define it as a kind of ecological reformation of the theological reflection in dialogue with global issues (Horrell 2009). The hermeneutics would need to interact not only with global issues but also with the threefold African ontology. They claim to re-discover the ‘universal’ eco-fullness of the scriptures.

Existing African eco-theological initiatives

African scholars adopted either a reading of recovery, a resisting tendency of the Earth Bible project, a revisionist hermeneutics or even an ecological crisis denial approach. In his famous eco-theological article, the South African scholar Loader (1987) argued:

[I]t is wrong to blame biblical faith for this [ecological crisis], and in this sense, White’s indictment is wrong (...): neither Christian faith itself nor biblical faith, but the interpretations and emphases of modern Christianity, are to blame. (p. 9)

Therefore, in their over-eagerness to find something positive in the Bible about nature, many African eco-theologians have resorted to sort of cherry-picking, wishful-thinking and to what natural scientists may call story-telling (Van Dyk 2017:835). Hence, texts such as Deuteronomy 20:19, which apparently prohibits the destruction of forests during war, are understood as inducing a careful treatment of nature. However, the purpose of Deuteronomy is not concerned mainly with nature, but human beings. In this way, the text is not exempt from anthropocentric footprints.

Habel’s detailed ecological hermeneutics fascinated many African eco-theologians (Masenya 2001). His geo-centric approach reads the text only from the perspectives of the earth, and resists texts which are deemed ecologically violent. However, Van Dyk is very critical about this geo-centric hermeneutics. He called it a kind of neo-paganism trying to give voice to the earth and its inhabitants as if they are endowed with spirits (Van Dyk 2017:835). However, the word ‘neo-paganism’ is debatable as it has more dogmatic assumptions than hermeneutical.

The African scholars have been over-simplistic in their attempts to make the Bible fit in with African realities. Ademiluka, for instance, argued that the priestly traditions of Leviticus about clean and/or unclean animals anticipate contemporary sanitation measures against outbreaks of

communicable diseases (Ademiluka 2009:529). In his own words, Ademiluka (2009) wrote:

These regulations [of *Lev 11–15*] contain aspects mandating proper care of the *environment* in order to prevent *infection* and the spread of existing disease. Although the primary aim was ritual cleanness, the concern for environmental *hygiene* makes an ecological interpretation of the text possible. (p. 525) [my bold]

To my knowledge, the words environment, infection and hygiene are modern terms used in medical or natural sciences. Whilst Ademiluka's insights would be of great relevance for people of our times, it is not however obviously clear how the priestly author would have anticipated current ecological issues. Meyer, another African scholar, raised many concerns about Ademiluka's article accusing it of presuming the meaning of a text before reading it. For him, such a reading posture would 'end up seeing things in the text that we want (and need) to see, but things which are not really there' (Meyer 2011:144).

Therefore, Van Heerden suggested a text-centric approach. This South African scholar advised addressing the so-acclaimed anthropocentrism of the Bible, not by turning to interpretative constructs, but to the Bible itself (Van Heerden 2017:129). For him, the act of reading must involve threefold interaction with the text: '(1) a problem situation brings the reader to consult the Bible; (2) the reader experiences the text itself as problematic; (3) the text itself gives a response to a problem situation' (Van Heerden 2014:563). He observed that readers limit themselves to the first two, and that is why they end up with defending or resisting the Bible.

Still, the approach is text-oriented and offers no clues on how the cultural worldview of the contemporary reader could help him to interact with the text. In this way, Masenya proposed another way of doing eco-theology in Africa. Informed by her northern Sotho worldview of motherhood, Masenya investigated whether the Israelite and African worldviews about procreation can be empowering for African women. In what she coined as an 'ecobosadi' (womanhood; -sadi=wife) as opposed to Western eco-feminist approaches, Masenya reads Psalm 127:3–5 and explains how 'African Mothers' and 'Mother Earth' both endure a 'common abuse from the male drive for reproduction' (Masenya 2001:122).

Although it is not clear how women and nature both suffer male power, her approach tried to exploit the horizons or cosmology of the text and that of the current reader in order to infuse transformation of the male audience regarding African women and nature. In fact, in every discipline, we arrive at truth by an interaction or conversation of horizons (Dienstag 2021:6). An ecological hermeneutics of sustainability would be fruitful by way of interaction between insights of the Bible and the cosmology of Africans.

Towards an ecological hermeneutics of sustainability in Africa

Based on the insights provided by a number of scholars (Dickson 1984; Jahn 1961; Kagame 1985; Kato 1985; Katongole 2011; Masenya 2001; Mbiti 1985; Mudimbe 1988, 1994; Sindima 1990; Stenger 2001; Sundermeier 1998), this article identified a threefold framework that would summarise African worldviews. African traditional societies believed in (1) *the sacredness of all life (the moral dimension of nature)*, (2) *the pre-eminence of the community over individual interests* and (3) *the cosmological dimension of chieftaincy (governance)*.

With a proper re-configuration, this framework can act as a hermeneutical vehicle for the commitment of the church for sustainability in Africa. This framework lines with 'de-growth' theories criticising the pursuit of growth at all costs. *De-growth* is not about regression, but envisioning development that includes ethical, cultural, social and ecological sustainability in the process (Akbulut et al. 2019:2). Instead of just copy-pasting foreign modes of limitless growth, Africa and African churches need to envision a hermeneutic that promotes the values and sustainability of the continent.

Regaining the sense of sacredness of all life

Africans perceived all life as sacred, physical life included. The dichotomy between sacred and natural (physical) was non-existent. In this way, nature had a moral dimension involving love, fears and sense of something mysterious. However, influenced by the Cartesian philosophy, Christianity taught a gospel that divided existence into sacred and physical, with the *physical* as having less value (Pöntinen 2013:158).

The result was the total de-sacralisation of nature and related moral responsibility (taboos, for instance). Pastor Emmanuel Anim of the Pentecostal church of Ghana described the ecological tragedy of his village that resulted from this dichotomist teaching (Werner 2019):

The village in the North of Ghana where I grew up, was located close to a forest and a river. In the forest from ancient times onwards the ancestors live, therefore it was sacred. In the river there lived the spirit of the water, therefore it was sacred as well. Then people of my village became Christians. Now, according to the new Christian worldview, there were no ancestors any more in the forest and also there were no spirits any more in the river. The taboos were disintegrating and disappearing. Instead, the people started to make use and exploit both the forest and the water of the river for their own purposes. Today next to this village there is no forest left anymore and the river is now a cesspool. Who has done a major mistake here? And for what reason?³ (p. 52)

The key question raised in this narrative certainly is the moral factor of the crisis. Missionaries came with the Cartesian philosophy, which distinguishes between 'the

3. Pastor Emmanuel Anim of the Church of Pentecost Ghana, Accra, story transmitted orally.

entities of *res cogitans* (thinking substances) and *res extensa* (dimensional substances), or between spirit and matter' (Pöntinen 2013:157). It resulted in the sharp affirmation of individualism detaching humans from the rest, treating them as only objects of exploitation with no ethical value.

This may help us to understand why anthropocene climate change points in the direction not merely of a physical crisis but towards a deeper cultural, moral, ethical and spiritual failure. In other words, the problem has to be addressed through moral *re-education* of the society and not merely by providing further *scientific* evidence of the crisis. It is not simply an issue of agreeing with a certain statement issued by a summit either (South African Council of Churches 2009:39).

Therefore, as far as moral re-imagination of human–nature relationships is concerned, the ecological reformation of Christianity in society may be crucial. Religion promises not only meaning, but also deliverance, healing and comprehensive well-being. Here comes the need of including in the process insights from African cultural systems that resisted secularisation of a technocratic society, but tightly stayed bound to their typical vision of a world where humans and nature are bound together.

In interaction with the horizon of Hosea 4:1–3, for instance, the moral dimension of the natural order can be sustained in the liturgy, sermons, songs and life of churches in Africa. Hosea 4:1–3 shows how humans and non-human beings are interlocked in a *mystical relation* where the moral failure of Israel (humans) causes *severe wounds* in the entire Earth community (Hayes 2002:47). The verb אבל which means 'to dry' (Baumann 1997:44) is translated here as 'to mourn', whilst the passive form אֶמְלֵל of the verb מלל [to loose fertility] is translated as 'to languish'. Contrary to the criticism of Van Dyk qualifying strategies of voicing the earth as new-paganism (Van Dyk 2017:835), Hosea shows that the earth does have a voice.

Drought seems to be the physical background of the moral meaning of אבל as 'to mourn' when paired with human subjects (Hillers 1971:124). Anthropogenic drought is read as 'to mourn' in the sense of 'being naked', which implies a shameful condition of the earth (Hs 2:12–14). Hosea 4 describes a kind of *trauma* in the natural world. Trauma victims experience the sense of shame, devastation, defeat and helplessness (Schiraldi 2009:394). For Hosea 2:12–14, 'the external signs of the earth's pollution is to wither, a state of joylessness or mourning: the land becomes like a desert, naked and unable to support life' (Kavusa 2016:495).

All of human failures (lying, stealing or murder) associated with the verb פָּרַץ [breaking barriers] in the text give the impression of a society of mercenaries. In this way, verse 3 implies 'the undoing or reversal of all creation' (Jeremias 1983:62). Contrary to Amos 2 where God plagued the earth, the removal of all forms of life upon the surface of the earth

results from human failures: אָרֶץ becomes again a formless void as in Genesis 1:2.

Hosea 4 translates moral and holistic dimension of life on the planet. Just as Hosea 4, the division sacred–secular is foreign in traditional Africa. Failure to realise this led the missionaries to establish a Christianity on the African soil in which development meant the complete disregard for traditional African cultural systems (Tosam 2019:172). In traditional Africa, development meant convivial models where development projects were carried out as daily activities integrated in culture and moral worldview (Mbiti 1985:219).

The traditional African attitude towards nature was that of 'live and let live', 'be and let be', which favoured sustainability. Locals viewed all living beings as interconnected *forces* (Jahn 1961:100). Humans do not protect nature for their sake, but for the survival of all (humans, nature and supernatural). In this way, the health of the environment is integrally linked to the health of humans, animals, plants, the spiritual realm and the whole ecosystem that provides protective covering for these beings (Tosam 2019:178).

Therefore, despite the marginalisation of African cultures, some of these values have endured. An illustration is a 100-year-old tree close to the Kibilizi Hospital in Rwanda, named by the locals as the 'tree of healing' (*igiti cy'umukiza*), having experienced that when a sick person sits under the tree, he or she gets healed (Nsanzimana 2020). It is possible that because of this belief doctors, although Christians, have kept and maintained the tree close to the hospital. Such trees in the traditional Rwanda were believed to be *the places where a person can encounter the invisible*. Locals identify themselves with this tree; it is the tree of the community.

In conjunction with African worldview of the moral dimension of the natural order and the teaching of Hosea 4, the church can make people understand how every action dealing with fellow humans and non-human beings should be imbued with a sense of moral responsibility. Religious beliefs can offer the mystic motivation and enthusiasm for earth-keeping initiatives that no secular body can muster on such a wide scale.

Community or conviviality versus individualism

It is estimated that African population is likely to double by 2050 (World Wild Fund 2015:19). This evokes the need to prioritise 'community'. John Mbiti's expression 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' [*I am because we are*] epitomises African worldview of the community or convivial living. But, African ecological ethics extends the community beyond anthropocentric (livings and departed⁴) domain by including non-human beings (animals, plants, places, rivers) and the unborn into the moral universe (Tosam 2019:177). Alexis Kagame defined African community in terms of four

4. The dead still belong to the human sphere. For the Batswana, for instance, the *Badimo* (ancestor's spirits) are believed to exist physically (human-like), even though their physical existence differs from the livings. In other words, they live in a human like way in the village community of the departed (Pöntinen 2013:158).

interrelated existences: these are MUntu – plural BAntu (human being); KIntu – plural BIntu (non-human being: fauna, flora, mineral, etc.); HAntu (place, time) and KUntu (means, method, approach, relationship) (Kagame 1985:106). Ntu is what MUntu, KIntu, HAntu and KUntu equally *are* as forces. The root *NTU* in the word KUntu (means, method, relation), for instance, implies that even the *way* humans (BAntu) interact with other beings (BIntu, HAntu) must be informed by a vision of nature not as an ‘object’ but as *force* and *subject*.

This recalls my early experience as a 5-year old. I was suffering of an unknown sickness, which threatened my life after having unsuccessfully used conventional medicine. Relatives suggested my father to consult the traditional healer (*musaki*) of the Nande people of the Congo. After too much hesitation, my father agreed to try the experience to save my life. However, as the idea was in conflict with his Christian faith, he delegated the responsibility to my sister. My sister took me early in the morning to the healer’s abode in the forest. When the traditional healer spotted the forest tree that had the *force* (Ntu) to cure my sickness, he was amazingly joyful and talked to the tree as a ‘brother’ and *subject* in my mother tongue, Kinande. His conversation with the tree can be translated as follows:

‘We come to ask for your help. One of your *brothers* is sick. He is dying. From our ancestors, we have learned that the evil that threatens his life can be healed through your generosity. We need to take a tiny part of you. Please, do not refuse. We are counting on your generosity. Your brother will be healed of it. Joy and peace will reign again.’ (M. Kivatsi, pers. comm., 21 April 2021)

The *Musaki* cut off a piece of the tree he needed and made the remedy. Before giving the remedy to drink, he said:

[C]reation is full of remedies for our life. The remedy that you will soon take comes from *our forest*. By taking it, you will regain your strength. May the ancestors grant our wishes! Let them listen to us. (M. Kivatsi, pers. comm., 21 April 2021)

After a few days of treatment, I recovered.

In this way, many African languages do not traditionally use the verb to ‘have’, but ‘to be’ when speaking about land or nature ownership. The Banyarwanda say ‘Ndi n’ubuthaka’ [I am with the land] instead of ‘mfite ubuthaka’. The same can be found in other African languages. The Chichewa people of Malawi say ‘Ndili ndi Nthaka’ [I am with the land]. The Tswana (Botswana and South Africa) say ‘Ke na le lefatshe’ [I am with the land] just as one would speak to another human being in terms of ‘ke na le wena’ [I am with you]. This ontological view implies that humans and nature stand ‘side by side in a relationship of interdependence from and equality with one another’ (Maluleke 2020:20).

Theologically speaking, human beings have a kind of ministerial function within a kind of cosmic community, which is Creation. In the hymn of praise of Psalm 148:1–14, the Psalmist summons all creatures, calling them ‘all his

hosts’ (v.2). This expression echoes Genesis 1:31 where the expression ‘all the hosts’ is used to name the created beings as being part of an interconnected community, the created order. The enlisted beings (angels, sun, moon, stars and skies, waters, etc.) are 22, the equivalent of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which gives an impression of fullness and totality. In a sense, the believer (human being) is ‘a choir leader’, leading all the created beings towards God, inviting them to sing an ‘alleluia’ of praise for the Creator (John Paul II 2001:1). This will bring us to look at the world, not as a domain of unlimited conquest, but a kind of ‘cosmic community’ in which we are interconnected and for which we are ethically responsible.

That is why taboos were instituted in African societies to set limits to human actions and attitudes for the well-being of the whole. Cultural anthropologists of Rwanda observed that, apart from the moral aspect of taboo (*umiziro* in Kinyarwanda), clans totemised certain animals or plants to save them from extinction (Kimenyi 2021). Although animals and plants are regarded as members of the community, totemised fauna or flora enjoyed more consideration.⁵ In this way, biodiversity blooms in places where totems prevail.

A clear example is the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary in Ghana, which is a home for more than 700 monkeys (Boamah 2015:41). The sanctuary evolved from a taboo that monkeys are children of gods or totem as they mysteriously protected the king of the region in war (Appiah-Opoku 2007:88). The management of the sanctuary mixes insights from indigenous beliefs and those of modern world. When a monkey dies, for instance, it is buried in order to appease the monkey’s soul that might interfere in the affairs of the livings. Villagers believe that if a monkey dies, something terrible will happen to the entire village or something horrible could strike the offender (Appiah-Opoku 2007:91). It is curious to notice that villagers do not instantly think of the offender going to jail or being fined, but the fear of a metaphysical sanction. The mentality is so strong that it ensures the integrity of the sanctuary, and favours the blossoming of other forms of biodiversity within and around the sanctuary.

In fact, the missionary preaching that Christians are not bound by traditional beliefs and taboo led people to kill monkeys for food. Traditional leaders urged the government to forbid the increasing monkey hunting. The government issued a law in 1975 prohibiting the killing of monkey within five kilometres around the village. However, the focus on indigenous belief revealed to be more effective and sustainable strategy that reduced the killing in the area. In a study, 76% of respondents claimed that they are Christians but they still respect the status of monkeys as sacred (Appiah-Opoku 2007:93). A real member of community is required to perpetuate the taboo.

In this way, it is the community that defines the person as a person, as being a *person* means the *savoir-vivre* abiding by

⁵The totem thinking is still alive in modern Africa as evidenced by the choice of ‘animals’ names for sport teams and national emblems.

the cosmological rules of the community (Tempels 1959:30). Contrary to Western definitions of a person **only** in terms of rationality, being a person is not viewed as acquired *de facto*, but is attained through *participation* in the life of the community. As a deliberate antithesis to Descartes' existentialist statement 'Cogito ergo sum' [I think, therefore I am], in Africa it is rather 'Participo ergo sum' [I participate, therefore I am] (Taylor 1963:50).

By losing this spirit of community participation, people engage in a number of individualistic and greedy behaviours, which seriously endanger the life of people and other earth-members. Instead of being a choir leader as in Psalm 148, Africans have set themselves as 'mercenaries' unconnected to their land, their past (ancestors) and future generations. The land is increasingly becoming barren as a result of non-conventional agrarian technics used by mercenaries only to have more profits. This is likely to make famine-related conflicts endemic to Africa because, as the Tshokwe people of the Congo say, 'Hadi kudia, milonga yakufwa' [where there is food, conflicts decline]. That is why Sindima believes that if the vision of interconnectedness of all life infuses the structures and actions of governments and churches, it would transform the process in which socio-political, economic, agricultural and ecological decisions are made (Sindima 1989:539).

Cosmological function of chieftaincy (good governance)

The blossoming of the land depended on how efficient was the mediation of the chief. In this way, the chief mediated the roles of the rainmakers, healers of the land, priests of earth spirits, whilst consolidating the ancestors and domesticating the forces of nature (Packard 1981:30). African chiefs performed also periodic rituals to cleanse the land of pollution caused by unruly forces of the bush. Finally, with judicial and political power, the chief helped regulate social relations amongst his subjects and prevented actions that violated communal value.

In doing so, actions that may disrupt cosmic balance are restricted, conflicts resolved, poverty is reduced and resource sustainability is maintained (Sundermeier 1998:26). In ancient Egypt, wherever kings promoted justice in the socio-political spheres, the act promoted social integration and cosmic order (Schmid 1984:106). In this worldview, the distributive justice, good governance and ecological balance (sustainability) are interconnected as part of one comprehensive cosmic order. Therefore, the blooming or waning of the land is directly bound with a waxing or failing chieftaincy.

In this way, 1 Timothy 2:1–2 asked churches to make petitions and prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for the rulers 'so that we may lead tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity'. Prayers must express a concern for the whole society, and mostly for those in power to influence life because the decisions they make have cosmological implications: they may advance or impede sustainable

development. In the context of the book, praying for or doing ministry in favour of emperors like Nero, proconsuls like Gallio, governors like Pilate, kings like Herod was somehow a great challenge for the church. However, Paul insists that the church should minister political leaders because good governance and strong institutions are a key to foster sustainable life.

That is why the traditional African king was seen as emanated from God to ensure sustainability upon the land. In Rwanda, for instance, he was considered the custodian of fertility for humans, animals and the land (Gatwa, pers. comm., April 2021). He did this in collaboration with the traditional advisers, who were appointed based on their wisdom and intelligence, and their ability to find solutions to the most complex problems in the community (Molo, pers. comm., April 2021). Hence, the chief was forbidden to engage in actions or treaties, which were likely to bring curse in the community. The king (governance) should ensure the survival of his community and the sustainability of natural resources (Munyansaga, pers. comm., April 2021).

In this way, Deuteronomy 17:14 recommends ample wisdom in the appointment or election of leaders: they must be God-chosen and brothers (not foreigners) in order for them to be accountable *vis-à-vis* their brothers. In the traditions of the Nande of the East of DR Congo, for instance, the chief went through a number of tests to assess if he has the approval of the livings and the departed. Through the ritual called *eriyavighale*, the proposed chief together with a woman (*mumbo*) had to pass the whole night in a specific pit (*vighala*). If they come alive from the hole, it was the sign of legitimacy (Kibatsi, pers. comm., April 2021).

The problem of African political leadership is the illegitimacy of many political leaders, who got power either by putsch or by biased democratic elections. Thus, most of them do not see themselves as accountable and act as mercenaries. In traditional Africa and in Deuteronomy 17:16–20, legitimate leaders are expected to abide by their cosmological role for the sustainability of the people and natural resources.

Resourcing themselves in the traditional conception of the African chieftaincy and the biblical conception of kingship (Dt 17:14–20), churches can amply make political leaders responsible for ecological sustainability. The church should play their prophetic role from the beginning of political elections in order to make sure the country is being provided with accountable leaders who will work for sustainable development.

Conclusion

These three aspects of a cosmological framework combined with a sound biblical theology, will help the church to contextualise her approach for ecological sustainability in Africa. Taboos, proverbs and myths inducing this threefold worldview need to be exploited, re-defined and reconfigured to act as a vehicle of Christian approach to sustainability.

In Africa, common belief (traditional knowledge) is more significant for sustainability than written policies, scholarly theories and ecological statements.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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