

**AN ETHNO-CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF ECOLOGY: THE
CONSTRUCT AND MAPPING OF AN AFRICAN
RESACRALISATION PARADIGM**

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Abstract

The desecralisation of nature entrenched by the scientific enterprise, and the self-alienating forces of modernity have led to the destruction of nature, and the endangerment of the distinctiveness in African fauna, and animal population. These radical changes in African ecology and the harsh economic realities on the African continent have profoundly impacted the African ecological crisis which has further led to the terrifying and dehumanizing conditions of the African communities. Similarly, the ill-thought policies of government in their quest to modernize Africa, and to mimetically turn them into "civilized colonies of western democratic ethos" have exacerbated further the present ecological crisis of the African continent. Unfortunately, this civilizing agenda merely mimicked modernity and continually poses a serious threat to the ecological distinctiveness of the African continent. Engaging this problem of desecralisation, the paper adopts an ethno-philosophical methodology as a tool of intellectual enquiry with particular interests on the construct and appropriation of ecology in traditional African religious thoughts. Through this investigation, the paper advocates for the critical adoption of the resacralisation paradigm in context of the many ecological challenges of modern Africa.

Keywords: Ethnophilosophy, African Christian ecology, resacralisation, scientific enterprise, education, and nature.

Introduction

All across contemporary Africa, nature is experiencing a direct reversal of the sacred treatment accorded to it by the past African society.¹ Everywhere on the continent, rivers are polluted, with disposable sachet of pure water, leather and rubber items, industrial waste, domestic garbage and other indissoluble materials littering the rivers,

¹ See Mathew Kipchumba Birgen. "Towards A Christian Ecological Theology from an African Christian Perspective," *Shahidi Hub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1-14. Retrieved from <https://shahidihub.org/shahidihub/index.php/ijtrs/article/view/24>

making these rivers undrinkable and often a health menace to the people, yet ironically some of these same rivers were worshiped and revered by the past generation of Africans as gods or abode of gods that one could not imagine what sought of factors are now responsible for the sudden change in Africans from being the preservers of nature to being now the destroyer of nature.² In some traditional African society, even fishing indiscriminately in river was forbidden, while in other African societies fishing in specified rivers was totally prohibited, while still in other African societies fishing in rivers was done seasonally, thus preserving the fishes and other living organism in these rivers.³ The belief that the river were abode of the gods in harmony to the primal beliefs of the African traditional religion helped toward the preservation of nature because nature was feared, hallowed and worshiped.⁴ The case for the annual fishing tradition of some African societies could be seen in the annual Argungu festival in Sokoto state in northern Nigeria, while the belief that the river inhabits the gods could be seen in the modern day Osun festival in Osun state in western Nigeria.

Similarly, many African forests were in the past treated as sacred abodes of the gods and thus many African forests were preserved out of reverence for the said deity. Contrary to this understanding, these same forests had gradually being depleted through indiscriminate deforestation, which had rendered many former African jungles or forest into semi-desert areas, thus hastening the threat of desertification. The lost of these forests is not just the mere lost of the different species of trees, but the destruction of distinctive African flora and fauna and the gradually lost of the mystical affinity and awe that many generations of African had felt in their daily contact with nature. The exploitative and indiscriminate activities of deforestation in the absence of alternative energy for those who use the woods for cooking and other domestic chores and the many lumbering industries who cut down trees without a corresponding replacement render the African landscape and ecosystem different from what it use to be in the time

² For the uninhabitable nature of the African continent on the political, economic and ecological dimensions see Mazrui, *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis (The Reith Lectures)*. (London: Heinemann, 1980).

³ See Sussy Gumo, *et al.* "Communicating African Spirituality through Ecology: Challenges and Prospects for the 21st Century," *Religions* 3, no. 2 (2012): 523-543. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3020523>.

⁴ See Jean Maley, "A Catastrophic Destruction of African Forests about 2,500 Years Ago Still Exerts a Major Influences on Present Vegetation Formations," *IDS Bulletin* 33, no 1 (2002): 13-130.

past.⁵

Similar violence to nature is also seen in many African contemporary hunting expeditions, whereby hunting expeditions are undertaking to hunt down animal indiscriminately without the general traditional African understanding of hunting. In most of traditional African society wide scale hunting expedition is restricted to specified seasons. Though the intricacies of modern preservation of nature is not then known, yet by such practice the traditional African societies sought to preserve and conserve nature in a way that do not degenerate to the extinction of various animal species. In some traditional African society, some animal were treated as exclusive properties of the gods or associated with the royal clan or the tribe as a whole, thus the killing of such species of animal was tabooed. This practice in designating animal as exclusive property of the gods, royal clan or tribe helped to the preservation of such species of animal, which without such societal restriction would have made such species of animal to become by now extinct.

Similar attitudes to animal were extended to mountains, hills and other aspect of nature. For instance, most of African mountains were regarded as the abode of the gods that cutting down trees in those mountains or even climbing those mountains was clearly prohibited. In some African societies, visiting the tops of those mountains was celebrated annually with celebration and festivity in honor of the god concerned.⁶It is unfortunate that such a reverence for nature that is revealed in African worship of nature had become suddenly disappeared in most of the African cities and rural areas. Passing through some of the African cities one had to close his nose because of the stink of defecation, dirt and littered rubbish. Most rivers had become dumping grounds for toxic waste and other ecological hazardous substances from the modern industries. It seemed by such violence to nature that African are gradually undergoing a paradigmatic shift from their primeval worship of nature to the

⁵On the general problems of natural resources degradation in Africa and its attendants ecological implication see Benjamin O. Okaba, "Resource Degradation in Africa," *Journal of Globalisation and International Studies* 1, no.1 (July-December 2003): 12-20, O. Olorode, "Imperialism, Neocolonialism and the Extractive Industries in Nigeria," *Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis of the Nigerian State*, eds. Olorode, O. et al (Lagos: CDHR, 1998), on resource depletion and its ecological impact on the global scene see C. Norman, "Material Shortage Ahead?" *Nature* 253 (1974): 674., G.J.S. Govett and M.H. Govett, "Mineral Resource Supplies and the Limits of Economic Growth." *Earth-Science Reviews* 8 (1972): 275-290, Batisse, M. "Global Prospects for Natural Resources." *Nature and Resources* 10 (1974): 2-7.

⁶For the discussion of African god's relationship to nature and the evidence of nature gods in Africa as was the characteristic of ancient Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome see Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publisher, 1976), 43-54.

contemporary abuse and bastardization of it. The paper seeks to evaluate this paradigmatic drift from the primeval treatment of nature by African to the contemporary abuse of nature. It seeks to delineate the factors responsible for such a shift and postulates a model that will return Africans back to such a reverence for nature in the primeval category, but the paper rejected the deification of nature as evidenced in the traditional African religion and instead advocated the sacredness of nature in the category of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, the paper is divided into two major parts. The first part sought to establish the cause of the paradigmatic shift in African treatment of nature in the category of the deification and worship of nature. This part of the paper argued that the terrible shift in African deification of nature to the bastardization of nature was made possible through the dual influence of Christianity and Western education. The paper maintained in the second part that the two states of African deification of nature in the past and its bastardization in the present are extremes, which need to be rejected and thus postulated a rediscovery of the sacredness of nature in the category of the Judeo-Christian faith. This re-sacralisation of nature is antithetical to the deification of nature in the past African traditional society and the desacralisation of nature in the present African society through the influence of the western education and Christianity.

The Ethno-Philosophy of Nature in African Primal Worldview

In the general study of nature in the primal societies, John B. Taylor had rightly observed that religion in the primal society is a religion of nature. The study of Taylor significantly established the thesis that in the primal society the connection to nature is not just in the mere category of daily religious endeavors, but significantly primal societies saw themselves as fully in relationship with nature and thus, respected this relationship as all other relationship within the community.⁷ In a similar study, Harold Turner investigated the Primal Religions of the world and among other features of the primal worldview; he postulated the paramount respect accorded to nature in the primal thinking. According to Turner, in the primal religion kinship to nature is stressed, with "people as children of the Earth, brothers to plants and animals."⁸ Speaking particularly of the African understanding of nature, Kwesi Dickson acknowledging the intimate relationship of Africans and nature aptly described it as "the fellow-feeling" of oneness

⁷See John B. Taylor, ed. *Primal World Views* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1976).

⁸See Harold W. Turner, "Survey Article-The Study of the New Religious Movements of Africa, 1968-1975," *Journal of Religion and Religions* 6 (Spring 1976).

with nature. Further, Dickson observed that this understanding of nature is a:

...very important dimension of African religion, one which has been the source of much misunderstanding. That is, the fellow-feeling that the African has with nature, which has led sometimes to the description of African religion as 'nature' religion. This fellow-feeling is of course much less in evidence in the urban areas of Africa than in the rural. In the cities evidence of pollution is not difficult to find...Generally speaking, however, the environment has a special meaning for the African; he loves the environment, he fears it, and he senses something mysterious about it. The elements, plants and animals, the land and all that is within and on it-these play a vital role in the African's apprehension of reality.⁹

However, this persuasion of African feeling of oneness with nature is not to presuppose that the African primal society conceived themselves in pantheistic category with nature. Though, Africans in the primal society perceived themselves to form some mystical alliance with nature yet they conceived themselves as maintaining distinctive identities from nature. Significantly, instead of a pantheistic theological persuasion, Africans saw mystery in nature that warrants their continuous adoration, reverence and worship. However, such worship or veneration of nature as earlier observed stemmed from their intuitive realization of the close connection of the African deities with nature.

Similarly, observing the intimate interaction of Africans with nature, John Mbiti divided spirits in African understanding into two broad realms, namely nature spirits and human spirits. In the quest of systematization, Mbiti further divided these nature spirits into the nature spirits of the sky and the nature spirits of the earth respectively. According to Mbiti, the nature spirits associated with objects and nature in the sky includes the sun, the moon, stars, falling stars, rainbows, rain, storms, wind, thunder and lightening. Concerning this category of spirits, Mbiti revealed, "People say or believe either that such objects and forces are themselves the spirits, or that there are spirits occupying and controlling them."¹⁰ Regarding the second class of nature spirits, that is, those associated to the earth, Mbiti noted that "Just as there are spirits associated with nature the things and forces of the sky, so there are those associated with things and forces of the earth."¹¹ This class of

⁹ Dickson, Kwesi A. *Theology in Africa*, 48.

¹⁰ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

nature's spirits include spirits of the earth, hills, mountains, rocks, and boulders, trees and forests, metals, water in various form such as lakes, ponds, rivers, waterfalls and rapids, lagoons and river banks, different animal and insects, certain diseases etc.¹² Speaking generally of nature spirits within African ethnophilosophy, Mbiti observed,

Nature spirits are those, which people associate specifically with natural objects and forces. Some are thought to have been created by God initially as spirits; other are said to have been human of the distant past. The spirits propagate among themselves, and their population is on the increase. Nature spirits are largely the personifications of natural objects and forces. This means that people give 'personal' characteristics to these objects and forces of the universe, regarding them as if they were living, intelligent beings of the invisible world.¹³

According to Mbiti, the African personified nature, and thus by such a process of conceptualization conferred indirectly on nature sacredness. This understanding by Mbiti presupposes that Nature in itself is not sacred but its treatment as a living personal entity in the African primal worldview is the product of African cultural creation. While Mbiti's thesis is well stated, however it raises some serious epistemological questions, such as, did the African know or understood nature as a living being in the actual or was this understanding just in the mere category of cognitive personification of nature as suggested by Mbiti? For Mbiti, the latter proposition is true and in lined with this understanding further observed,

As scientific knowledge increases the people's understanding of these forces and objects of the universe, they will gradually give up the idea of nature spirits. But religion came long before science, and it will be a long time before rural communities are convinced by the spread of scientific ideas that there are no spirits behind the powers and forces of nature. Science looks on these phenomena as governed by natural laws; but religion may continue to think of them as ruled by spirits.¹⁴

As subsequent part of this work will show, it is this displacement of the African worldview with its reverence and worship of nature and the replacement of such with the western scientific worldview that is partly responsible for the ecological crisis currently experienced by the African continent. However, in concluding the African understanding of nature needs some few remarks is in place. Before the advent of the missionary activities, Africans as other primeval society saw the world in primal

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 66.

¹⁴ Ibid., 67.

category. Nature was primarily deified, with all the different aspect of nature seen as the manifestation of deity.¹⁵ The deification of nature became the natural inclination of Africans since the gods were closely related with some aspect of nature. The worship of nature was seen as the extension of the worship of the deities whose abodes are conceived to be in the realm of nature. In primal assumption, the realm of nature became synonymous with some African deities and divinities since by primeval thinking nature was a habitation of spirits or gods. Consequently, for the Africans nature became the true temples that housed the gods and since the gods are hallowed and feared, thus equally their abodes such as rivers, forest, mountains and other aspect of nature were similarly hallowed and feared. Nature was truly conceived as the dwelling places or temples of the African gods and it is plausible that this primal understanding that the various aspects of nature are the temples of the deity must have been responsible for failure of African to build great religious edifices as temple in honor of their deities. It is interesting that despite the acknowledged religiousness of African yet there are no gigantic temples as fashionable places of worship as practiced in Asia and other part of the world. But instead, except with the presence of shrines dotting the African landscapes, the African generally conceived nature as the abode of their gods and thus in lined with this understanding many trees, rivers and mountains became object of worship and reverence because they were understood to shelter the gods in line with the primal worldview.

The Major Causes of African Ecological Problems

The causes of the African ecological problem are traceable to two conceptual frameworks that provided the theoretical and philosophical justification for the subsequent ecological crisis that characterized many African communities. These frameworks lie in the activities of the early

¹⁵ The African post-colonial discourse had generally neglected the salient relationship between African divinities and nature. This development stemmed from the craze in the post-colonial context to systematized African traditional religion in the category of monotheism. Thus, E.B. Idowu and John Mbiti sought to idealize the African religious heritage against the Western charge that African traditional religion lacks a coherent paradigm and hence by such deficiencies the African traditional religion was labeled primitive. However, the emphases on such illusive quest of unity and systematizing amidst the multiplicities of African traditional forms had unintentionally caused the neglects and marginalization of traditional African religious forms particularly the relationship between African deities and nature. For the post-colonial discourse on the unity or systematization of African diverse religious heritage see Idowu, *Oòdúmare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa," *International Review of Mission* 59, no. 236 (October 1970), Mbiti' *African Religions & Philosophy*. For the criticism of such unifying paradigm of the theological tension between the unity of African divinity and its multiplicity see Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 1995).

missionary and the influence of Western education.¹⁶ From the understanding of nature in the primal African worldview as explained in the foregoing discourse, the coming of the early missionary brought about a radical conceptual shift from this primal worldview of the African in relationship with nature to a theocentric category as taught by many Christian missionary organizations in Africa.¹⁷ Unfortunately, while the early missionary repudiated the primal worldview of African concerning nature, which they aptly labeled idolatrous, yet the early missionaries failed to transpose the African society from its primal emphases to a theocentric conception of man's relationship to nature. Sadly, while many missionaries condemned the African worship of trees, rivers and mountains as idolatrous and thus focused their attention to God, yet the demonization and rejection of the African gods that were perceived to inhabit nature naturally degenerated to the rejection of nature which in the mind of the converts were closely associated with the former gods since they served as the abodes of the gods. The early missionary as often criticized stress discontinuity of the African way of thinking particularly the primal categories of the African traditional religion.¹⁸

Thus, in many places in Africa, the rejection of the former African gods who were conceived in pre-Christian thinking to inhabit nature was seen as also the rejection of nature inclusive. This early missionary emphases on discontinuity with the African past manifested itself not only in the rejection of nature which was closely associated with the displaced African gods, but also in rejection of music, dances and other

¹⁶ On the global scene, the influence of science and technology and the anthropocentric disposition of Christianity have been blamed for global ecological disaster. For the criticism of Christianity as the basis for the ecological crisis see Lynn L. White, White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science Magazine* 155, 10 March 1967 and the evangelical response to such criticism by Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1969).

¹⁷ On the relationship between the Christians doctrine on ecological disaster particularly the doctrine of eschatology see Frank S. Frick, "Ecology, Agriculture and Patterns of Settlement," in *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 67–93.

¹⁸ While it is speculative to label the early missionaries as entirely non-friendly to nature, yet the non-involvement of most of our contemporary Christian westerner at the grassroots particularly of the evangelical and fundamentalist background revealed that their forbears were if not entirely hostile were in many ways passive about the Christian attitude to nature because it is interesting to note that the early missionaries to Africa who were of the protestant tradition share some close conceptual theological affinity with the contemporary evangelicals or fundamentalist at the grassroots. On the slow participation of the latter on present ecological issues see A. Greeley, "Religion and Attitudes Toward the Environment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32 (March 1993): 19, J. L. Guth. et al., "Faith and the Environment: Religious Beliefs and Attitudes on Environmental Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (May 1995):364 and L. Eckberg and T. J. Blocker, "Varieties of Religious Involvement and Environmental Concerns: Testing the Lynn White Thesis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (December 1989): 509.

cultural categories that were associated with the former gods. Gradually, these rejection and discontinuity in the psyche of Africans between their new faith and the African past forced them in an open hostility to nature. The passage of time crystallized the assumption that the African gods, which are now understood as demons as well as their abode in nature, are thus evil and in need of exorcism or deliverance. It is this colossal failure in the demonization of the African past, particularly in the omission to clearly separate the African gods and nature in the mind of most Africans that is partly responsible for the consistently bastardization of nature in all its ramification.¹⁹

Simultaneously, a serious collaborator to the African ecological crisis, which helped to further shifted the already stated African attitudes of worship of nature to that of devastation is the influence of western education. Western education with its purely scientific approach denied totally the possibility of spirits inhabiting nature. While early missionary activities in Africa made allowance for the beliefs of spirits or satanic emissaries in nature, the scientific western mindset totally rejected this worldview and categorized it as primitive, pre-modern and superstitious. The desacralisation of nature through the instrumentality of western education helped to erode the generally feeling of mystery, divinity and godhood that was closely associated to nature in the African mind. The rejection of the primal worldview and the replacement of such with a western scientific mindset deteriorate the lingering respect that most African had for nature after the onslaught of the activities of the early Christian missionaries in Africa. The scientific worldview with its anthropocentric emphases particularly in the human reason to investigate nature robbed nature in the eyes of many Africans of its worshiped mystery and tabulated in empirical fashion some of the culturally perceived mysteries in nature.

Thus, instead of the African creation legends, the western educational curriculum explored the evolution of species in coherent scientific fashion, the physical features such as mountains were explained as the product of volcanic eruption, the constituent of the riverbed analyzed, the mystery of thunder explained in the category of charging electrons and not the fiery anger of the god Sango, the metallic iron explained rationally without reference to Ogun, the purported Yoruba god of Iron, causes of famine explained and not the slightest reference to the gods,

¹⁹ For works on the global scene that similarly indicted Christianity for the ecological disaster see P. R. Ehrlich, *How to be a Survivor*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1971 and I. L. McHarg, *Design With Nature* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday/Natural History, 1971).

good farming tools and farming techniques were seen as the reason for bumper harvest and not the activities of African gods, causes of rain, wind and storm were explained in rational categories and many other aspects of nature were reduced to mere scientific inferences and explanations, such as the formation of the eclipse and rainbow. With such highly scientific agenda, the western education demystified nature and revealed the deficiencies of the primal worldview, but however as the study would soon show this scientific explanation of nature by western education indirectly created a culture of violence to nature since nature was robbed of its attributed sacredness in the primal worldview.

The Western education's curriculum nurtured a scientific heritage that clearly articulates the dominance of man to rule, investigate, control or manipulate nature in carrying out of experimentation and other empirical task that denied nature of its once preconceived sacredness as the habitation of spirits and the African gods in the category of primal thinking. Prior to its presence in western education, this scientific education and its desacralisation emphases have its root partially in the Greek civilization. However, this scientific thought pattern received maturation in the medieval, renaissance and notably in the Enlightenment period. In the latter period a total campaign against the sacredness of nature was launched, it is this disrespect for nature that the Romantic poets of the 18th century sought to address. Rejecting the traditional Christian affirmation of the sacredness of nature, the enlightenment period instead propagated a crusade of the desacralization of nature. While the radical rejection of the traditional stereotyped understanding of nature was beneficiary because it brought about scientific progress, the advancement of human civilization and the explosion of scientific knowledge on nature, yet the cost of such scientific worldview of desacralisation was enormous, considering the havoc such understanding engendered in the treatment of nature. Compounding further such an ill treatment of nature were scientific theories such as the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin. Darwin's theory of evolution displaced God from the realm of creation and nature, thus removing the conceived sacredness of creation. Darwin postulated that nature was basically the product of mere chance since the human race and other higher organism in nature gradually evolved from lower living organism through many generations of natural biological processes. With such rejection of the sacredness of nature and the corresponding replacement with the scientific proposition of chance, nature in general western thinking came to mean nothing more than mere physical variables that should be exploited for scientific and

humanistic ends. This non-sacred scientific worldview became dominant and indirectly became the moral justification for the pollution and abuse of the European society as she transpose from the agrarian society into an industrial modern society.²⁰ Underscoring this same thesis, Dickson observed,

The Western world has had a long history of attempts to control nature by first probing its secrets, and then making it serve man's purposes; since nature is often encountered as being hostile Western man has seen his survival as depending upon nature being brought under man's control. In our time man's indifference and downright thoughtlessness has resulted in near-crisis environmental situations, especially in the West: excessive hunting of certain animal species; the use of defoliating agents; the pollution of rivers, sometimes through the clandestine disposal of harmful chemical wastes-these and other examples of the Western attitude to nature have been very much in evidence, and have been the subject of much discussion in recent years. Even though there are groups in the West, which are busily inculcating an ecological awareness with a view to reversing these destructive trends, it is nevertheless true that the predominant attitude in the West is one of exploiting nature.²¹

It is this radical paradigmatic shift in the conception of nature in western thought particularly in the scientific rejection of the sacredness of nature that came to be categorized as western education. It is also this western education, with its faulty worldview that is directly inimical to nature that came to Africa via the colonialists and the missionaries. The rejection of the African primal relationship to nature by the missionary and the subsequent replacement of such vacuum by a semi-form of western education contributed to the present ecological crisis since many African came to terms with Christianity and western education an sought to use it as a new paradigm in relating to nature. The

²⁰ For the rejection of the understanding that Christianity should be blamed for the ecological disaster, but the enlightenment thinkers see Richard A. Young, *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994). For other serious evangelical works on this theme see Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Take Care of the Earth*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), J. K. Sheldon, *Rediscovery of Creation: A Bibliographic Study of the Church's Response to the Environmental Crisis* (Metuchen, NJ: American Theological Library Association/Scarecrow, 1992), F. Van Dyke, "Planetary Economies and Ecologies: The Christian World View and Recent Literature," *Perspectives On Science and Christian Faith* 40 (June 1988): 66. F. Van Dyke, "Beyond Sand County: A Biblical Perspective on Environmental Ethics," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 37 (March 1985): 40.

²¹ Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 48.

unfortunate story is that most Africans carry within their psyche a distorted worldview that is neither primal, nor scientific or Christian. Thus, the confusion from this fusion of worldviews naturally resulted to distorted view of nature that accounts for such bastardization of the fauna and flora of the African continent. It is also this background that engenders the passive acceptance of the ecological abuses of the transnational companies, who were motivated by the western worldview which was primarily dominated by scientific attitude to nature into the conquest and invasion of traditionally restricted African rivers, forest, mountains and hills in quest of mineral deposits.

Exacerbating this ecological disaster were the economic factors such as the unavailability of social amenities in the post-colonial context. Thus, absence of light or other form of energy forced many into the indiscriminate acts of falling trees as an alternative form of energy. Similarly, the unavailability of clean water forced many Africans into the pollution of the few rivers that are nearby many of the African city. Also, the absence of sanitary conditions and disposable sewage system contributed in the degradation of the ecosystem since there are only few available sanitary facilities to take care of the increasing urban population that characterized many of African urban settlements. Worsen still the ecological disaster in Africa is the insensitive disposition of most African government towards ecological crisis.²² Most African government connived with the transnational companies by keeping quiet to the many ecological abuses of the operation of these multi-millionaire companies in Africa. It is an open secret that these said companies often have no proper sewage disposer nor facilities to dump their toxic wastes, thus their indiscriminate activities endanger the health of the people and destroys the environment.²³ But even African governments that are conscious of the ecological crisis in Africa there crusade is not short of mere slogan since most of them have no

²² On the need for a proper political environmental policies in relationship to Christian activities to address the ecological problem see J. A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), and Fred Van Dyke, "Bridging the Gap: Christian Environmental Stewardship & Public Environmental Policy," *Trinity Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 139-172.

²³ For the ecological problem and controversies associated with the multinational companies in Africa and other part of the world see Festus Iyayi, "Ecological Debts: Problems and Controversies," *Journal of Globalisation and International Studies* 1, no.1 (July-December 2003): 130-148, Victor T. Jike, "Globalisation and Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta of Nigeria," *Journal of Globalisation and International Studies* 1, no.1 (July-December 2003): 52-59, and I. Okonta And Douglas O., *Where Vultures Feast: 40 Years of Shell in the Niger Delta* (Benin: ERA, 2001).

clearly defined ecological agenda and goal that is aimed towards the conservation, preservation and restoration of destroyed ecosystem.²⁴

The African Ethnophilosophy and the Resacralisation Paradigm

The dual impact of western education with its desacralisation agenda and the early missionary demonization of the primal worldview of the Africans resulted by and large to the conception of nature in non-sacred category. This resultant distorted worldview that is neither primal, nor Christian or scientific engendered the culture that seemed hostile to nature among many Africans who formerly had worshiped nature in primal persuasion. Thus, at the heart of the contemporary ecological crisis in Africa is the crisscrossing of three incompatible worldviews, namely the displaced primal worldview with its agenda of worshiping of nature, the scientific worldview with its agenda of non sacredness of nature and the ill-communicated Christian worldview with its demonization of nature because of its close relationship with primal assumptions in the heart of their African converts, which subsequently the early missionaries labeled as animistic, fetish and totemic. For the understanding of the fourth paradigm to curb the present African ecological crisis the understanding of the deficiencies of these three paradigms must be emphasized.

Firstly, a total resuscitation of the primal paradigm that formerly dominated the pre-colonial Africa with its agenda of deification is not feasible in the contemporary context. Two reasons account for the unrealistic quest for the romantic idealism of the African past in the category of primal culture with its message of nature deification. The first of the reasons is the monotheistic nature of the African context. - The African context had undergone serious radical religious changes particularly in the coming of the monotheistic faiths and with their rejection of the African polytheistic traditional religion that undergirds primal assumptions and worldview. Africans virtually profess religious affiliation and loyalty to either Christianity or Islam. Though there are scattered over Africa many bastion of African traditional religionist who are self-proclaimed animist yet the stigmatization of the African traditional religion is on the increase, thus making many African particularly those with formal western education to disassociate themselves from this traditional religion. However, this monotheistic

²⁴ For example of how evangelical Christian could go about the task of influencing government towards purposeful environmental policies see Fred Van Dyke, "Bridging the Gap: Christian Environmental Stewardship and Public Environmental Policy," *Trinity Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 139-172.

disposition is often deceptive since many African even among the educated and elites still promote the traditional African religion in clandestine manner. Politicians during election and African leaders generally at critical moment had in many cases patronized the African traditional religion. However, the point of the paper is that a massive embrace of the primal worldview on which the African idea of the deification of nature is based is not possible due to the religious complexities of the African context because many in the present African society do not see river, forest or hill as deity or habitation of deity, thus the impossibility of reaching such primal conclusion now in the contemporary context that seemed to suggest that such worldview is outmoded. Though, this is not to say that many African did not still believe superstitiously that the rivers, mountains or forest are inhabited with demons or evil spirits, yet they assumed such worldview highly influenced by the category of the monotheistic faith of Islam and Christianity.

Lastly, the deification of nature as in African pre-colonial Africa is problematic in the present context because it goes contrary to the conception of reason and logic. While the deification of nature to the state of godhood made man answerable to nature and thus many help to forestall the possibility of abuse yet the subjection of mankind goes contrary to the inherent and instinctive understanding in man and had been attested in history that mankind is somehow the peak of nature. Even though such presupposition as to man supremacy over nature in classical Christian thinking and the conclusion of scientific evolution theory that man is at the top of the evolution had let to serious abuses of nature yet the acceptance of the godhood of nature is not only deceptive but also ridiculous. Thus, the quest by the New Age movement to propagate the godhood of creation is at best misdirected and absurd since it footed the care of creation or nature on wrong premises. Most importantly, in the light of the Judeo-Christian tradition such a deification of nature is a subversion and sabotage of the initial divine intention that seemed to suggest that such a worship of nature is not just idolatry, but the brutal indictment of the dignity and respect accorded to man as the image of God and the apex of God's creation.

Problematic of the New Age ecological agenda also is their unrealistic pantheistic romantization of nature in the category of godhood, which is naively founded on faulty ethical grounds. Alex MacDonald rightly observed that if the New Age pantheistic idealism with the understanding that "All is one and all is God," there are two serious theological problems raised by such erroneous thinking pattern and

thus making itself an ineffective model for the solving of the present ecological crisis.²⁵ Firstly, according to MacDonald such thinking that man is indistinguishable from nature as romanticized by New Agers follows that man has no moral right to interfere in nature even for the purportedly good reasons. Secondly, if as suggested by the New Age movement in the phrase “all is one” is followed to its logically end, then there is ultimately no basis for distinction between good and evil, and cruel and non-cruel action became one and the same. Without such distinction the model lacked the ethical basis by which some actions are determined as ecological friendly and other actions defined as ecological harmful. This faulty syllogism of the New Age movement failed as the crave to reconstruct the primal worldview of the traditional African religion in the category of the deification of nature because they ran contrary to reason and significantly are incompatible with the monotheistic nature of the African context, particularly in the light of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The second worldview to be investigated is the scientific desacralisation of nature, which as observed earlier, contributed in the bastardization of nature because it demystified nature and thus exposed nature to abuses. This model is significant because it had provided the framework for all the scientific advancement and achievement since it neutralized the fear of nature, which represses the scientific instincts for research and exploration. However, despite its merits the scientific worldview with its desacralisation agenda subject nature to the scrutiny of man, making nature in this understanding an object which could be manipulated, harnessed and managed for the advantage of man and the detriment of the ecosystem. By such thinking especially as articulated in the evolution theory Darwin and other Enlightenment thinkers, nature seemed not to have any higher or divine purpose than to fulfill the whims and caprice of man. Thus, the exploitation of nature became the creed of the civilized human society until in recent modern times, when the vividness of the ecological disaster jolted many of the western folk back to nature consciousness. With such shortcoming in the scientific worldview that engendered desacralisation of nature, it seemed inappropriate to advocate such model to curb ecological crisis in Africa since in the first place the scientific worldview largely contributed towards the problems of ecological crisis understudy because it sought to displaced the primal worldview and it tendencies that put limitation on the explorative spirit of science.

²⁵ Alex Macdonald, *Creation in Crisis? Green Concerns and Christianity* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1992), 75.

Thus, divided between the two extremes of the deification of nature as seen in the traditional African worldview, and the desacralisation of nature as encouraged by the scientific world, the paper suggested another worldview that has its root in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the sacralisation of nature. Thus, since the paper assumed that such a worldview is now lost, it proposed the re-sacralisation of nature in the category of the Judeo-Christian form.²⁶

In the Old Testament, God spoke to the Israelites on the sacredness of nature.²⁷ The Psalmist was quick to observe that “The Heavens declare the glory of God” (19:1). This is significant because the glory of God was closely associated with the temple. The text seemed to suggest that God’s glory, which denotes His presence, is evident in nature. This understanding in the Old Testament is similar to the primitive African society understanding of the deities, whereby nature is seen as the abode of spirits or deity. However, the difference is that God as the Old Testament conceived Him, did not even dwell in temple but for Him, but rather is omnipresence, with “Heaven as His throne and the earth as His footstool.” The association of God with nature is not in the primal understanding of indwelling nature, which degenerates to the error of nature deification, but rather is that of ownership as made clear in Psalms 50:10-12 that “for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.” In the same way text such as Psalms 24:1 affirmed similar proposition that “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;” and the latter part of Job (38-41) with its intimate relationship between God and nature presupposed that nature is owned, created and sustained by God, thus bearing God’s eternal trademark.

In this understanding, nature is the property of God just as many African believed in primal category that nature was owned by gods or spirits because the gods were believed to occupy it. Thus, in this perspective nature ceases to be nobody’s property, but instead God’s property and hence divine and sacred. To this persuasion of the sacredness of nature comes the Biblical proposition that nature as God’s property was delegated to man and thus the direct implication that

²⁶ On the implication of the Judeo-Christian understanding of salvation and its implication for ecology see Ron Elson. *Bent World* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 115-162.

²⁷ On ecology in ancient Israel see Frank S. Frick, “Ecology, Agriculture and Patterns of Settlement,” *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 67–93.

man's faithful stewardship to nature is undeniably imperative (Psalms 115:16; 8: 1-9). Thus, nature is sacred because God created, owned and lavishly provided for its daily sustenance. On the other hand, He gave man as steward to watch over this great edifice called nature to work and daily maintained it. Whatever one makes of the divine injunction of Genesis 1:26 to man, one clear understanding of the text is that man should rule the earth in his capacity as a creature made in the image and likeness of God. This presupposes that since God nature did not revealed itself in wanton destruction of what He created but in the preservation of such, thus it follows that man authority to rule the earth must be seen to be in harmony to his depiction as God's image bearer. Thus, the exercise of man's authority over creation should not be seen in the category of abuse, but should be in line with providential nature of God as caretaker and sustainer of nature.²⁸

In the New Testament the sacredness of nature was further maintained. Even though in Pauline theology nature was regarded as imperfect at the present time because of the fall (Romans 8:19-23), yet Paul elevated nature in his theology to the pedestal of sacredness. Paul revealed that nature is the scripture of those people particularly the Gentile world who did not have the revealed scriptures. For Paul, nature is scriptures because it revealed to the Gentile world "that which may be known of God" or "His eternal power and divine nature" (Romans 1:19, 20).²⁹ Thus nature with its beauty, charm, designs and other external features become according to Paul the verses and chapters that revealed the invisible God, thus humanity has no excuse for any form of rebellion against God. This Pauline understanding of nature as scriptures is similar and the extension of the Old Testament understanding of nature in which nature is depicted as showing forth the glory of God (Psalms 19:1).³⁰ Thus, in both Testaments, the sacredness of nature is

²⁸ For a Biblical theology of Ecology see Erickson, "Biblical Theology of Ecology" *The Earth is the Lord's: Christians and the Environment*, eds. Richard D. Land and Louis A. Moore (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology. Ecology and Justice Series* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), J. Sittler Jr., "A Theology for Earth," *The Christian Scholar* 37 (September 1954) and J. Sittler Jr., *The Ecology of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961).

²⁹ Interestingly, this is the only place in the entire New Testament where *θειότης* was used, which means divinity or divine nature as translated by the New International Version (NIV). The word presupposed that nature reveals the divine nature or divinity of God, thus inferring sacredness to nature. However, it should be noted that while God's divine nature is made known in nature, yet His full deity or godhood is only revealed in Christ (Col. 2:9). See F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 80.

³⁰ For a distinctive analysis of Calvinistic theology of ecology see Robert H Nelson, "Environmental Calvinism: The Judeo-Christian Roots of Ecotheology," *Taking the Environment Seriously*, eds. R. E. Meiners and B. Yandle; Lanham (MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 233–55.

maintained, making nature the silent evangelist or the still pointer that direct humanity to the existence of a loving and compassionate God.

This sacredness attributed to nature has been upheld in classical Christian reflection whereby nature had been often portrayed as providing an alternative way of salvation for those who never known or heard of Christ before their death.³¹ The understanding of nature in this capacity in classical thinking has been labeled General revelation³² because nature as the written scriptures offer those who have never heard of Christ some general revelation of God, which is assumed to be helpful towards salvation since they do not have the opportunity of knowing or hearing of Christ.³³ However, the written revelation has been known in classical Christian reflection as the special revelation because it revealed the specific revelation of Jesus Christ that in the Bible that is needful for one's salvation. Interestingly, the sacredness of nature was maintained as nature is seen as the physical embodiment of divine revelation. It was this lofty place of divineness and sacredness that was accorded to nature that the renaissance and enlightenment thinkers came to generally critique, question and challenge.

Regretfully, the renaissance and enlightenment thinkers successfully postulated the scientific proposition that presupposed that nature is devoid of any sacredness. Thus, they detached nature from its close

³¹ For the various debates associated with this understanding of general revelation see Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1934), Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), F. E. D. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 133, Bruce A. Demarest and Richard J. Harpel, "Don Richardson's "Redemptive Analogies and the Biblical Idea of Revelation," *Bibliotheca sacra* 146, no. 583 (July 1989): 330-340.

Evert D. Osburn, "Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (1989): 367-72, Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), Tite Tienou, "Eternity in Their Hearts?" *Through No Fault of Their Own?* eds. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1991), 209-27, and J. I. Packer, "'Good Pagans' and God's Kingdom," *Christianity Today*, January 17, 1986, 22-25.

³² For a theological review of Karl Barth's understanding of natural theology or General revelation see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 163-170.

³³ For evangelicals who opposes this view see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), Ronald J. Blue, "Untold Billions: Are They Really Lost?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (July-September, 1991): 338-349; Oswald J. Sanders, *How Lost Are the Heathen?* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1983), 360-369, Robert H. Gundry, "Salvation according to Scripture: No Middle Ground," *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1977, 16, Harry M. Orlinsky, "Nationalism, Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel," *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May*, eds. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 206-236 & Robertson J. McQuilkin, "The Narrow Way," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 127-134.

association with God and instead subjected it to human scientific and rationalistic scrutiny using the empirical parameters. The divorce between nature and God as conducted by the rationalistic thinkers of the western society was pitiful, but more pitiful was the gulf between God and nature which was further widened by the liberal theological thinking who even went so far as to question the existence of God altogether. In the midst of such endless debates and clouded by the many theological challenges in defense of the existence God and other Christian and Biblical forms, orthodox Christianity did little to articulate a careful thought out Biblical theology of nature until in modern times when the abuses of nature was attributed to Christianity because of its anthropocentric emphases.³⁴ However, as generally argued in this paper, it is the lost of the sacredness of nature as stipulated in the Judeo-Christian traditions by the western society that should be largely seen as responsible for the different abuses of nature in the contemporary modern time. Thus, in a way making the desacralisation worldview of science culpable, but also culpable was Christianity as articulated in Africa with the demonization of the African past particularly the critique and denouncement of the primal worldview, which saw nature and the African gods as one indistinguishable entity, thus the rejection of one was invariably the rejection of the other. Though, it should be noted that the deification of nature as practiced in primitive African society robbed Africans of scientific investigation since the primal worldview in which they held had the negative tendencies of mystifying nature and thus robbing African of scientific advancement. On the other hand, the desacralisation of nature as engendered by the scientific western worldview while helpful because of its positive tendencies towards human progress and scientific advancement, yet the worldview promoted a worldview that duly eroded the sacredness of nature, thus exposing nature to subsequent exploitation.

The paper in the light of the highlighted flaws of the foregoing antecedents, postulates a return to the Judeo-Christian tradition which celebrated the sacredness of nature without making it as an object of worship as suggested by the African primal worldview or the modern New Age movement, nor denied the sacredness of nature as articulated by the purely scientific worldview of desacralisation, which had

³⁴ For works that see Christianity as a needed partner towards the corrections of the ecological ills instead of the cause of the ecological problem see P. R. Ehrlich, *How to be a Survivor* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), I. L. McHarg, *Design With Nature* (New Jersey: Doubleday/Natural History, 1971), C. Sagan, "Guest Comment: Preserving and Cherishing the Earth—An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion," *American Journal of Physics* 58 (July 1990): 615.

invariably made nature an object of exploitation. Thus, the contemporary modern society must reject the extremes tendencies of the worldviews that advocates the deification of nature on one hand and the desacralisation of nature on the other hand. We must reject the idolatrous inferences that modern advocates of deification of nature includes as the solution to the ecological disaster whether as expressed in the New Age movement or by African pseudo-ecological crusaders who had romanticized the African past in a untenable bid to return Africans to an undiluted primal worldview. Similarly, we must also reject the scientific desacralisation paradigm, which robbed nature of any purpose and intents, thus reducing it to a mere object to be subsequently abuse.

However, a resacralisation of nature in the category of the Judeo-Christian faith has the merits of doing away with extremities of these highlighted worldviews. It precludes the tendencies to deify or worship nature in the category of the primal worldview, while still maintaining the thesis that nature is sacred and thus the implied imperative of human stewardship. Similarly, it eliminates the tendencies of the scientific worldview to remove the sacredness from nature by the empirical emphases of science. The resacralisation paradigm returned the sacredness to nature without degenerating to the idolatry of animism and the materialism of the scientific worldview.³⁵

Conclusion

Human beings, despite their indebtedness to nature had in all their endeavors treated nature very badly. We had returned consciously to nature evil for all the goods that nature through the providence of God had showered on us. The stark reality of the ill treatment of nature by human society is more graphic and very well pronounced on the continent of Africa. Unfortunately, before our very eyes are gradually the disappearance of distinctive African flora, the beautiful landscapes, exotic habitants, thick jungles and nature as preserved in Africa through the passages of many generations. From the rural areas to urban settlements, the rain forest to savannah regions, the African mountains to riverine areas are lasting scars telling in graphics the sordid tales that nature had not fared well in the hands of the human race. The bastardization of the ecosystem had resulted inevitably in the displacement of species, health hazards and unkempt environment that

³⁵ For another analysis of the African traditional religions as paradigm towards curbing the ecological crisis of the contemporary Industrial age see Emefie Ikenga Metuh, "Attitudes to Nature in African Religions: Paradigm for Care in the Industrial Age," *Bulletin of African Religion and Culture (B. A. R. C)* 3, no.2 (April, 1991): 1-28.

makes one to question the sanity of the modern African civilization. Rubbishes scattered on our urban streets, dirt blocking the sucker ways, rivers and pools becoming dustbin, sachet of pure water and toxic wastes from multinational factories made the African environment virtually poisonous, unhygienic and uninhabitable.

The environmental hazards arising from the disproportionate and uncompassionate destruction of the African ecology had resulted in the emerging of the phenomenon of global warming, which invariably had affected directly the African climatic changes. The climatic changes that is currently taking place on the continent had the potential of influencing the habitants of many microorganism, plants and animal, causing displacement or extinction of those microorganism, plant or animal who lacks the survival instincts. The boomerang or effects of such destruction of the ecology on man himself while obvious cannot be readily quantified now, particularly since the slow effects of such abuses of the environment would only become glaring in the future. However, even now the health effects of the bastardization of the ecology had very well been noted. Also, the effects on soil fertility and destruction of organism in water could just by mere common sense be known. A simple deduction will be that the disappearance of soil fertility and absence of water organism would send farmers and fishermen out of business. It is the stark reality of this unhealthy development that is witnessed in the Niger Delta area, who because of the water pollution and the subsequent dying of fishes are virtually left unemployed due to the environmental hazardous oil activities of shell and other oil companies in the region. The companies flaring of gas, oil spillage, indiscriminate construction of canals and waster dumping had made the Niger-Delta area an ecological disaster because these said activities had destroyed arable farmland, extinction of economic crops and the bastardization of fishing waters, which had been the traditional occupation of the region. In the light of these antecedents, the paper had assumed that among other factors, two dominant factors should be blamed for the worldview that occasioned such present ecological development in Africa, namely the scientific desacralization worldview and the early missionary pseudo-christian worldview. The paper rejected these two worldviews and advocated a third paradigm which is in harmony to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also in harmony to the essential elements of the sacratization of nature as articulated in the primal African society. The paper assumed that the present ecological disaster is virtually the product of worldview and thus for the ecological imbalance to be corrected a need for a new worldview becomes inevitable. Thus, the ethno-philosophy of resacralization

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corrects and remedies the excesses and deficiencies of the two dominant worldviews in the contemporary African society.