

CREATION IN AFRICAN THOUGHT

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African theologians have stressed that the *substratum* upon which all future Christian theologizing in Africa must be built is African Traditional Religion. So the question of African conceptions of nature is certainly an appropriate one. By far the largest portion of African theological discourse relevant to ecology thus far has been on the conceptions of creation and/or "nature" found in ATR. As part of the quest of the 1970s, much was written on nature in ATR during this period. We shall discover that in the 1980s African theologians have paid more attention to explicitly Christian theological reflexion on Christian ecological responsibility. In the pages which follow I shall first present some of the salient aspects of some African conceptions of nature, then move to a survey of the more recent theological responses.

1: Nature and Humanity in African Religions

At the outset, I must point out that when we attempt to ask what African conceptions of "nature" are or were, when we try to extract our modern notion of "nature" from African religions which have not followed the same line of historical and philosophical development, we are asking a question which the African traditions were never designed to answer. The English word "nature" or "environment" has no exact equivalent in African languages. For example, we find that for the Hausa of North-central Nigeria, the term garii is usually translated as town or sky, but signifies the total human and physical environment of the Hausa city state (Richards and Harris, eds, 1975, 106). Garii does not translate "nature", nor does duniya (meaning "the world,") nor any other term in the Hausa language, but there is a rich treasure to learn from in the study of words which one would use to approximate a similar idea.

A further problem for this study is that in the African context there is no single authoritative tradition to refer to as a guide. Each ethnic group (or "tribe") has its own distinct language, culture, and religion, and it is estimated that Nigeria alone has over four-hundred and fifty distinct ethnic groups and languages. It is not possible under these circumstances to make hard generalizations about ATRs. Indeed, the introductory chapters to all of the texts written on ATR all expound at length on the reasons why past definitions have been inadequate, usually stressing the fact that they were too overly-generalized. This leaves us with extreme difficulty in choosing a methodology to tackle this topic. One may attempt the method preferred in anthropology, whereby one focuses upon one ethnic group exclusively, covering it through ethnographic writings devoted exclusively to that group, the advantage being accuracy and depth. However, the uninitiated who reads such a work may come away imagining that he or she now knows how "Africans" view the world, and this would be grossly misleading. The approach I shall attempt here is multifocal: I shall begin with a synthesis of works dealing with ecological practices throughout Africa, examine some cosmogonic myths and give a comparative analysis of a few ethnic groups in West Africa, with special attention to the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, and to some other Nigerian groups.

Africa has suffered from a long history of misunderstanding and oppression at the hands of westerners. In addition to the physical and economic oppression of her peoples which I have chronicled in previous chapters, she has also withstood a succession of differing

mental pictures in regard to the environment, all of which distort or overgeneralize. A recent work on African environments and resources (Lewis and Berry 1988, 13ff.) chronicles some of these distortions. Africa in the early period of contact was often characterized as a place of "limitless" fertile tropical forest. Another, and sharply contrasting image was that of Africa as an endless desert. A third image is that of Africa as the home of exotic wildlife game preserves: many travel films and TV documentaries will show fifty minutes of superb wildlife photography and three minutes of the people in the area, yet today large areas are without any game animals. Another picture of Africa is as an area of insect and waterborne disease. Yet another and more recent picture of Africa is that of Africa as a devastated continent (see de Vos 1975 and Eckholm 1976). Those who espouse this view while recognizing some diversity, yet have portrayed an overall impression of total devastation, citing the Sahelian droughts, continent-wide deforestation, desertification, ubiquitous soil erosion, and the loss of many animal species all as evidence of generally deteriorating environments in Africa.

Throughout the various changes in approach and attitude, one tendency has remained: that of seeing Africa as uniform, and that is the idea which must be rooted out of one's thinking completely before any progress can be made in this area. The notion of uniformity has been applied just as much to the people who inhabit the land as to the land itself. The writings of early missionaries, anthropologists, and colonial officials alike are filled with erroneous generalized applications of one cultural or religious custom or habit from one ethnic group to all Africans. I have mentioned above that Western writers on Africa have labelled African religions in such terms as "primitive", "animism" (Tylor), "paganism", "polytheism", "fetishism", "ancestor worship", "totemism"(Freud), "naturism", and "nature worship" (Fraser, Willoughby). These terms have all been rejected by modern African scholars of religion as inaccurate and pejorative misconceptions invented by Westerners who did not understand Africans and their world view. It is only fair to point out, however, that modern anthropology has also rejected these terms, for the most part, and now uses such terms as "animism" only in a very carefully qualified manner, when used at all.

Finally, the intrusion of the West has already made it difficult to know with certainty when we have identified a genuinely "traditional" concept. Traditions already have been modified, even completely changed in response to outside pressures, and have sometimes been completely obliterated (cf. Norris and Heine 1982, 118-137). Furthermore, there is often intense suspicion about foreigners who poke about in tribal affairs. It is said among the Tiv people that when a person who is not properly initiated into the tribal society inquires into the group's secrets it is mandatory to lie to the person in order to mislead them, even if the person is a member (uninitiated) of the ethnic group! Under these circumstances, only careful observations of what a group actually practices, taken over a long period of time, can yield even the most tentative of conclusions.

2: African Views of Creation

African views of creation are many and varied (see Mbiti 1969, 39-41). Many African myths assume the existence of the world at the beginning and start with the creation of

humanity (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1956, 6). Most of the creation myths say that the creation of heaven preceded that of the earth but there is no normative order for the creation of other things (Mbiti 1969, 40). The idea of a creation *ex nihilo* is reported in at least three African societies, and there may possibly be others, but the idea seems to have been a rare one (Mbiti 1969, 30).

It is common in ATRs to find a high status given to the sun, and to the moon. The Galla people of Ethiopia say that the sun is God's eye, the Balese people of Congo consider the sun to be God's right eye, and the moon his left, while the Ila people of Zambia believe the sun signifies God's eternity (Mbiti 47, 52). For the Hahm people of Central Nigeria, there was an ambiguity about the sun: some would say that the sun is God, and others only that the sun manifests God (Kato 1975, 30-34). This ambiguity is noted among other peoples as well, such as the Ankore (Mbiti 1969, 41), the Ninzam, and others. Despite the ambiguity, modern African scholars reject the term "sun worship" as a generalized descriptive category.

All African societies depend on rain and value it highly. Mbiti reports a few societies which "associate God and rain so closely that the same word, or its cognate, is used for both" (Mbiti 1969, 53). Others personify rain as one of the divinities. Some groups saw rain as God's saliva (Mbiti 41), and others, such as several groups in Nigeria's Plateau State, saw rain as God's urine. Mbiti concludes that in all cases rain is taken as a sign of God's care and providence for humanity and the world. Generally throughout Africa, bodies of water are thought to have major spirits or divinities in them (Mbiti 54).

The term "animism" cannot describe African religions because it implies that its practitioners believe all rocks or trees are inhabited by spirits or spirit, and this is not so. They believe that only certain rocks and trees are inhabited by spirits, and these have special significance for them. Some are believed to be the dwelling place of an ancestor, for example, and such sites must be respected. Animation also extends in some cases to physical objects, such as amulets. Not all African ethnic groups had even these beliefs.

Generally, there is a consensus among scholars of African religion that "pantheism" and "panentheism" are not appropriate terms to use as a description of African religions (Mbiti, 33). Although ATR sees God, or evidence of God in all things, there is, according to Mbiti, an ontological hierarchy in which some things are in a higher mode of being than others. Mbiti reports an ontological hierarchy of God/ spirits/ humans/ animals and plants/ phenomena and objects without biological life (Mbiti 16). So the "life" or "force" that resides in a stone is ontologically lower than that of a plant, and plants' than animals', and animals' than humans'. With this kind of hierarchy, blanket terms like "pantheism" or even "panentheism" are too simplistic in that they fail to take in the subtleties of the ontological hierarchy. Mbiti describes it this way:

...for African peoples, this is a religious universe. Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon: it is filled with religious significance ... God is seen in and behind these [natural] objects and phenomena: they are His creation, they manifest Him, they symbolize His being and presence... The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks to the other, and Africans "see" that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world (Mbiti

1969, 56-57).

There is a sacral quality to the material universe in African thought. It is not "dead".⁽¹⁾ Mbiti adds that in addition to the five categories of beings, there is a:

force, power or energy permeating the whole universe. God is the Source and ultimate controller of this force; but the spirits have access to some of it. A few human beings have the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate and use it, such as the medicine-men, witches, priests and rainmakers, some for the good and others for the ill of their communities (Mbiti, 16).

To be more precise, he adds that this "force" is "approximately what the anthropologists call mana but it has nothing to do with Placide Tempels' 'vital force' concept." (Mbiti 1969, 16 n1).

We should add that very important in the ontological hierarchy is the role of the ancestors, for they are believed to be frequently present in the houses of their children, overseeing their daily activities, for it is they who are most directly concerned about the welfare of their offspring. Their influence on ecological practices is seen in the fact that in some parts of Africa, initial attempts to expand the ancestral plot of farmland or to build houses in a different shape from that of the traditional had been opposed by the ancestors, because the new customs were a departure from the old. This is not the case everywhere, however (Raum 1965).

It is difficult to make any firm statement about the "goodness" of creation in ATRs. On the one hand, the literature often speaks of the African affirmation of the physical world, similar to the ancient Hebraic view, and certainly this is true if one is contrasting it with the contempt for the physical which has been attributed to certain brands of gnostic thought. While the general goodness of life on earth is affirmed in most African traditions, on the other hand, few African creation myths portray God as clearly affirming the goodness of the world in an explicit manner, for example, in direct statements by the creator God. One myth from the Fang people of Gabon does have a declaration of the goodness of creation. Nzame, Mebere and Nkwa form a trinity for the Fang. Beier relates it thus:

Nzame made everything: heaven, earth, sun, moon, stars, animals, plants; everything. When he had finished everything that we see today, he called Mebere and Nkwa and showed them his work. 'This is my work. Is it good?' They replied, 'Yes, you have done well.' (Beier 1966, 18).

Additionally, Ghanaian theologian Kofi Opoku tells us that the Akan of Ghana have a maxim on the goodness of creation, which they put into the mouth of the hawk (sansa): "All that God created is good!" (Opoku 1978, 22). Just as often in African creation myths, however, the world is created as the result of an accident, lending impetus to a fatalistic flavour. Idowu (1962, 21ff.) notes that in the Yoruba story of creation:

The oral traditions say that heaven was very near to the earth, so near that one could stretch up one's hand and touch it...There was a kind of Golden Age, or a Garden-of-Eden period. Then something happened, and

a giddy, frustrating extensive space occurred between heaven and earth...One story is that a greedy person helped himself to too much food from heaven; another that a woman with a dirty hand touched the unsoiled face of heaven...The privilege of free intercourse, of man taking the bounty of heaven as he liked, disappeared (Idowu 1962, 21ff.).

In the creation myth of the Angas people of Plateau State in central Nigeria, reproduced almost in full above in Chapter 2, we found that in the Golden Age, before the ruin of humanity, the hoe pulled itself through the furrows producing food for human beings. Then, one day the woman, seeing the hoe at rest in the hut, took it by the handle and worked with it in the furrows herself. At this the hoe was so offended that it refused ever to produce food for humans in the old way again, and since then humans have had to work for a living (Kangdim 1981, 3-8). We see here that the fall of humanity is due to a caprice, as God gave no command to the man or woman warning them against using the hoe in this manner. The fallen state of humanity seems due to an oversight. One might deduce from this a fatalistic twist to the universe: one never knows whether it will snap back in one's face. Yet in other myths, one does find hints of moral order in the structure of the universe. Opoku relates a myth from the Akan of Ghana (1978, 23-24):

To the Akan, God and men once lived very close together, and men could reach, touch, and feel Him. Then an old woman began to pound her *fufuu* regularly, using a mortar and a long pestle. She hit God every time she pounded *fufuu*, so He moved further and further away from men and went into the skies.

This story is probably the most widespread myth in Africa, and it occurs in many differing versions throughout the continent. In some versions, it seems that God leaves at the first hint of noise coming from his floor; in others the woman is warned to desist, yet she continues. The difference may be an important one, as the omission of any warning could be taken as a more fatalistic interpretation of the universe and its proclivities than the version in which fair warning is given. Fatalism becomes especially evident in terms of ethics and perception of the world as a place of chaos and unpredictable misfortunes, from which one may nonetheless protect oneself by means of magic.

Other creation stories from West Africa provide more promising material for an ecological ethic. The creation myth of the Ewe people of Ghana relates that it was the smoke from men's fires which got in God's eyes, that angered him and made him withdraw higher and higher into the sky as the fires grew more numerous with the increase of human beings on the earth (Donders 1985, 31). Donders has commented that this story could form an excellent basis for an ecological ethic (31).

Another example might lie in a Yoruba myth related by Idowu (1973, 159). He tells us that in a Yoruba myth, the divinities one time petitioned *Olódùmarè* to let them run the creation for a trial period of sixteen years. *Olódùmarè* replied to them: "you better make it sixteen days at first." The rivers began to choke up with mud and leaves and each day things got worse and worse. By the eighth day things were in such a state that the gods petitioned *Olódùmarè* to take back the running of the world, which he was glad to do as his nature was forgiving and compassionate. The story ends with all the divinities singing, dancing and praising the Creator. Similar to other stories which take aim at human pride, though perhaps more humorous, this account seems intended to illustrate

that only the creator God has the wisdom to run creation: not even the gods know how to do it, much less human beings.

African creation stories generally do not state that humanity is made in the "image of God". Neither do they state that humans have "dominion" over the material world in any explicit or clear sense, though a few do, such as the Fang of Gabon (Beier 1966, 19). What generally stands out with some clarity is that humans are at the mercy of a capricious and unpredictable reality, as we saw in the Angas myth above, or as embodied in the Yoruba myth of Eshu, the capricious trickster who is sometimes evil and malevolent, yet sometimes extremely generous and benevolent. Sometimes Eshu is male and sometimes female, but always unpredictable.

"Fatalism" is a word often used to describe African religion. It may be a fair one to use, in that the myths and general orientation of ATRs do seem to communicate a sense of tremendous uncertainty and futility about the human prospect since the end of the "Golden Age", or "the Fall" as Christians style it. Of course "fatalism" per se is found in every culture and it can be a serious impediment to social reforms also in the West, as everywhere. Mbiti has opined that the most serious "cul de sac" in African religion has been this absence of any solution to the human dilemma after the Fall. He says that this may be the "greatest weakness" of ATR, which makes it vulnerable to the advance of the universal religions like Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism (Mbiti 1969, 99). The point Mbiti and others would make is that ATRs are relatively fatalistic and vulnerable, because of this *lacuna*.

The creation myth of the Yoruba does not give humanity any explicitly stated "dominion" over creation, such as one finds in Genesis 1. This is also generally true of most other African creation myths; however, it can be said that the position of humanity vis à vis the created world was generally considered one of ontological superiority. Mbiti tells us that animals, plants and inanimate things: "are in an ontological category inferior to that of man, and cannot, therefore, have the important role of functioning as intermediaries..."(Mbiti 1969, 71). The ethnographical literature from a vast number of African ethnic groups confirms this finding in each case.

The Yoruba, the Hausa, the Ibo, and the scores of ethnic groups of Plateau and Benue States of Nigeria with which I have been associated show a sharply negative reaction against all comparisons of any human to any type of animal, even in jest. To refer to any human as a "monkey" is considered the most serious insult one can make. This could be seen as a reaction stemming from the colonial past, when whites actually referred to Africans in these terms. But there is a great deal of evidence from a wide range of groups that the terms "monkey" and "wild animal" were used traditionally as an insult long before the coming of Western culture (Achebe 1959, 12). The Yoruba as well as many other groups engage in semi-ritualized verbal sparring matches which involve the use of names of animals and body parts of animals in one-upmanship contests which can go on all afternoon. Much has been written in the anthropological literature on the topic of "Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse" (cf. Leach 1964).

Anthropologists have noted that ethnic groups in Africa may organize their lifeworld in terms of polar opposites such as right and left, male and female, heaven and earth, town and "bush" (or wilderness). The literature on the Hausa people, for example, makes reference to the distinction in Hausa thought between those things which are thought to

be of "the bush" (daji) or "the wild" and those things which are thought to be "civilized", containing long lists of Lévi-Straussian polarities (e.g. Darrah, 1985).

Some groups such as the Igbo pay homage to a "mother earth goddess", whereas other groups, such as the Yoruba, do not. Those groups which pay her homage pour out libations to her or offer sacrifices. Certain practices are thought to particularly offend her, for example, having sexual intercourse on the bare ground (I noted this taboo amongst many ethnic groups of Plateau State, as well as the Igbo). In such cases special rites must be performed and fines must be paid to restore her favour. There seem to be a very few groups where the mother earth goddess is so prominent as to receive higher status than all the other divinities. It is interesting to observe that the matrilineal Akan of Ghana understand God as both male and female (Bartle 1983).

To many African peoples trees and forests had special significance. The Ngombe live in very dense forest and refer to God as: "The everlasting One of the forest", "the One who clears the forest", "the One who began the forest", while a number of peoples set aside sacred groves for sacrifices, offerings or prayers (Mbiti 1970, 109). A number of peoples feared the spirits of the forest and of the water (Mbiti 1970, 125). From several parts of Africa come accounts of trees which refused to be moved, even by modern machinery designed for the task. These trees are believed to have magical power.

In Gabon a number of secret societies are prominent, one of which, Mwiri, is a male group concerned for the protection of nature, the maintenance of public places, and the punishment of those who desecrate them (Barrett 1982, 307). There are also examples of traditional "nature preserves" in a number of ATRs, though the exact purpose of such "preserves" may not be precisely parallel to the modern conception. It seems that in the traditional African concept, a piece of land was set aside solely for the chief to use for his hunting expeditions. Here, the result of preservation of wild lands is only coincidental to the intention.

To the Yoruba, as well as to many other African groups, the concept of "buying and selling" land was quite foreign, though it became commonplace after the beginning of the colonial period. Land was not thought to be "owned" by anyone, similar to the ideal of the Hebrew Bible (cf. Lev. 25), and in contradistinction to the Canaanite (and modern Western) conception of land as a saleable commodity.

It is in the examination of agricultural and hunting methods that one is particularly warned against the romanticized picture of the "primitive living in perfect harmony with his environment" approach. Archaeological evidence indicates that even as early as 50,000 B.C.E. Africa suffered an extinction of 30% of its wildlife species, primarily due to human technology: the fire-drive method of catching game animals seems the likeliest explanation (de Vos 1975, 102-103). The practice of burning off crop residue, and burning the bush to clear new land has prevailed in Africa from the time that cultivation first began there, up to the present (Yudelman 1964, 229ff.) It is known that the tropical rain forest formerly extended from Liberia in the west to Cameroon in the eastern part of West Africa. But in the area now contained by Benin Republic and Togo, savannah belt vegetation today extends right down to the Atlantic coast. Historical evidence dating back to the fifth century B.C.E. from the Carthaginian explorer Periplus of Hanno describes, probably in the area now called Sierra Leone, a vast expanse of bush fires during harvest celebrations (Schoffeleers 1971, 271). Sea travellers in 1588 remarked

that the coast of what is modern day Togo and Benin had impenetrable dense forest along its entire length, but by 1722 travellers remarked that the area was lush and green with no trees. Gayibor's careful research concludes that the total deforestation of Benin resulted from a complex of climatic and human factors (1986, 36). Involved in this complex is the grazing of animals and other agricultural practices.

Traditional farming methods often included the cutting down and burning of trees, and use of the wood ash for fertilizer, with no use of manure. Under these conditions, the land was usually useless for agricultural purposes within four years at the very best, and the family would then move on to virgin fields (Yudelman 1964, 229ff.) In West Africa scientists have recently discovered that slash and burn agriculture is causing acid rain to fall on what remains of the rain forest (Morell 1990, 6).

In addition to initial forest clearing, the practice of bush burning is also employed as a method of clearing away crop residue after harvest. Amongst the Yoruba, the time of burning the bush in preparation for the coming planting season is in January. In Northern Nigeria the bush burning season is generally in November and December.

The religious significance of the yearly setting of bush fires has been explored by J.M. Schoffeleers (1971). Schoffeleers' study of bush burning in Malawi concludes that it has several major purposes: burning of residue in their gardens, hunting animals, calling the rains and ultimately for obtaining food. He says:

In two instances, *viz.* those of hunting and rain-calling, the participants explicitly affirmed its religious significance. The whirlwind originating towards the end of the burning was said to be the manifestation of some spirit showing its approval of the undertaking and ensuring its success, and the headmen of Bunda Hill said they expected rain after the burning through the mediation of their ancestral spirits (273).

Schoffeleers goes on to explain that the reason why the ancestral spirits manifest themselves in bush burning and why they are pleased with it is tied up with the other ritual contexts of Chewa society in which fire is used: notably transition rites, and he traces the conceptual matrix to its foundation in the myth of origin, in which fire played a key role (274-275).

We should not conclude that bush burning always has a destructive ecological impact. Some studies indicate that under certain conditions, where the average climate is relatively humid, and where overgrazing does not coincide with burning, then burning the bush actually stimulates and encourages new growth. Here, then, we would find that traditional ecological practices were beneficial. Unfortunately, the percentage of the African continent in which the land is on the borderline between the humidity level wherein bush burning is beneficial and that in which it is harmful is a very large one, and consequently the practice may be one of the major factors contributing to the galloping desertification and famine in the continent.

We have already noted the urbanized nature of Yorubaland. Here, human activity has meant the elimination of larger game animals from the region. Even in the much more sparsely populated regions of Nigeria larger game animals have disappeared. The only area of Nigeria in which elephants are still known to roam freely (apart from game parks) is in the Northeastern tip of the country, on the border with Northern Cameroon. Giraffes

are now extinct in Nigeria, even in the game refuges, where protection from poachers has proved inadequate. The last giraffe sighting in Yankari Game Reserve, Bauchi state was in 1973.

Turning to East Africa, we find today an area noted for its wildlife refuges. But it may not always have been so: one reporter states:

There is strong evidence that East Africa in the nineteenth century was not the wildlife paradise which it is today with approximately one fourth of its land area set aside as national parks and game sanctuaries in Tanzania alone. The nineteenth century [precolonial -ed.] situation was quite different. Whenever man and animals came into conflict over the occupation of land, the animals were inevitably driven out (Kjekshus 1977, 70).

According to Kjekshus, visitors to East Africa in this period reported seeing a large number of huge game pits and brush wood fences three to four miles long for organized game hunting (Kjekshus, 71-2). Contrary to the generally prevailing misconception then current in Europe, game in the nineteenth century was almost impossible to find in the coastal areas and was greatly reduced even in the areas now containing major game sanctuaries (Kjekshus, 72). In this case, the incursion of western culture may actually have brought about the possibility of a conservation ethic which seems to have been previously lacking (Kjekshus, 72).

Some scholars of African religion, such as Kofi Opoku, hold that humanity in African thought is part of nature, is in community with nature, and feels "kinship" with nature. Opoku says friendliness and respect for nature is shown, even though nature is used. He further tells us:

Remaining in harmony with nature also means preserving nature, hence the concept of taboo as a ritual prohibition designed to protect nature is found in African societies. When fishermen do not go fishing on Tuesdays in Ghana because it is the day of rest for the God of the sea on which he must not be disturbed, it may be seen as giving the sea a day of rest to replenish itself. (Opoku 1993, 77-78).

He elaborates further, that a portion of the catch must be given back to the sea, and the fishers believe it to be taboo to withhold that portion from the sea god (78).

Many other examples of similar taboos which had the effect of preserving nature can be cited in other ethnic groups across Africa. However, no matter how many and how valuable and instructive such examples may be, one must be cautious about assigning a motive or ecological harmony to them. One is rightly skeptical of the approach which emphasizes the idea that African religion strove for harmony with nature while so much of traditional lore was directed towards achieving mastery over it. Wendy James' excellent (1988) ethnography devotes an entire chapter to the "Mastery of Nature" amongst the Uduk people of Sudan. The mastery of nature was as important to the survival of Africans as to anyone, and one should not underestimate the value traditional societies gave to this type of knowledge.

Possession by certain spirits within nature should not be confused with harmony or unity with it, as the spirits which possess the devotees of these cults are personal in nature

and do not represent nature as a whole, nor even usually one aspect of it (see Mbiti 1969, 187ff.) Nor should such practices as the use of totems be seen to indicate affinity with the whole of "nature" as such, as at best it expresses a relationship to only one rather small part of it. Furthermore, many ethnic groups in West Africa such as the Yoruba, seem to lack totemic animals completely.

There is an extensive anthropological literature focusing upon "totemism", much of it seeking to understand how it functions within symbol systems. In his noted work on the Nuer of Sudan, Evans-Pritchard (1956, 80) pointed out that Nuer totems are an "odd assortment" in that they are not the animals and objects which are most useful to the Nuer, and those that are valuable are absent from the list of totems. He hesitates to suggest any rationale behind the choosing of totems, but says that the totem animals are respected by all the Nuer: the Nuer are friendly to birds and will not harm them. He proposes that:

Nuer totems tend to be creatures and things which for one reason or other easily evoke the idea of Spirit in any Nuer and are hence suitable symbols for Spirit in relation to lineages...(Evans-Pritchard 1956, 82).

The Yoruba and other groups often speak of "fear" and "awe" with regard to natural phenomena: one reads of the fear associated with sacred groves and the "evil forest". The plays of the Nobel prize winning Yoruba playwright Wole Soyinka and the novels of Chinua Achebe are replete with references to the fear associated with that part of the forest known as "the evil forest" or "the bad bush".

One may see the practice of magic in Africa as a response to a threatening environment, an attempt at mastery in a world so often unpredictable and devastating to humans (we should note that the only African group known to lack witchcraft are the !Kung of the Kalahari desert, formerly called "Bushmen"). In this, magic is not so very different from science, but its "way of seeing" is totally different, and therefore leads to a different methodology. The anthropological literature on magic is vast and I cannot begin to scratch the surface here. Much of it has sought to explain the function of magic practices in African groups as the attempt to attain "mastery over nature" (see James 1988, 41-67). In fact, some scholars, such as Robin Horton, have sought to emphasize the similarities between modern science and magic in African thinking, in so far as they both have a problem-solving rationale which moves from one possible cause of a given problem to another when the first hypothesis is proven false (Horton 1977). The debate which this thesis spawned has proved a rich mine for philosophers who examine the conception of "rationality", and challenges any western ethnocentric notions of the superiority of modern scientific technical rationality. At the same time it cautions us against understanding African groups as striving for "harmony with nature".

South African scholar Nomsa Daniels concludes that African farmers, who were and are famous for their farming success, notably the Hausa of Northern Nigeria in the 19th century and the Dogon of Mali, were successful precisely because they paid careful attention to conservation. But she concludes that their conservation practices were not motivated by religious or aesthetic considerations but by the need to survive on the land which supported them (Daniels 1991, 14). The delicate ecological balance needed to sustain life in a semi-desert environment was carefully worked out over a period of centuries.

In light of the above evidence, it would seem that within the lifeworld of the Yoruba and the other groups under study, fatalistic tendencies and magical influences and forces made humanity's relationship to nature more conflictual than harmonious; though harmony by way of control was understood as a positive good, and harmony with nature because of the need to survive in a difficult environment was often achieved.

Summary

We have seen that the relationship between humanity and the material world is variegated and diverse in Africa. We shall have to resist the temptation to make generalized statements about that relationship, and approach carefully single groups to understand them in their social and ecological context. To the Yoruba, Hausa, and many others, humanity stands in a superior relationship to animals, plants and natural phenomena, while natural forces such as thunder and rivers are understood as ministers of God. In ATR the proper role of humans is as a civilizing influence in contrast to the wildness of the bush. The creation myth of the Ewe people gives us a tantalizing starting point in the search for ecological wisdom, as

our wilful creation of smoke from too many fires threatens the modern world with a tragic loss of intimacy with the source of life itself.

3: African Environment and Theological Ethics Today

As yet there has been little from African theologians on environmental ethics. Though some brief statements in the 1970s criticised the West's destruction of nature (see Idowu 1973), on the whole African theologians echoed the then current emphasis upon acquiring the West's technology, a vital component of the discourse of development at the time. The need for development so much dominated that any environmentalist sentiment was greatly muted. This has begun to change only very recently.

B.C.E. Nwosu's 1972 article was typical of African responses at that time and still largely reflects African opinion today, as the recent (June 1992) United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the "Earth Summit") in Rio de Janeiro has demonstrated. Although not a theologian, Nwosu's work was selected for inclusion in a theological journal, the *Ecumenical Review*, produced by the WCC as part of a dialogue series on development and environment. Nwosu stressed the injustice in the unequal distribution of wealth worldwide, and called for the transfer of technology to Africa on terms Africans can afford. Some of his statements now seem almost prophetic in the light of recent developments. He said:

...unless the developed nations see their future as inextricably linked with that of the developing nations in a rather dramatic way - in a way they fear threatens their very existence - it is unlikely that any suitable form of cooperation which would be beneficial to the two parties will emerge (Nwosu 1972, 297).

This, twenty years later, has become exactly the case, as the desire for development in the third world has levelled rain forests which the industrialized North now recognizes as essential to the health of the planet, and as burgeoning third world demand for refrigeration, styrofoam and the other accouterments of modern culture destroy the ozone layer with CFCs. It has emerged that the future of the "third world" is indeed inextricably linked to that of the "first world." It always was, but the ecological catastrophe now upon us brings it home in a more powerful way.

In the area of population control Nwosu put the case very much as it is still put today. He asked the question (1972, 298) "Who should make the first move to control population? Should it be a person from the Third World who consumes only one tenth as much as a person from one of the advanced nations?" Actually Nwosu understated his case, for one of the statistics proceeding from the aforementioned 1992 UNCED Conference tells us that an average North American couple with two children consumes more energy than an entire village in the Third World. Another way of expressing this statistically is as follows.

Table 3

Country	Calories per person per day	Energy consumption per capita in kg. of oil equivalent per year
Kenya	1,973	98.9
Nigeria	2,039	132.9
Côte D'Ivoire	2,365	172.0
Cameroon	2,161	143.6
Canada	3,447	9,155.0
Iceland	3,352	6,883.7

Source: United Nations.

The average Nigerian eats 2,039 calories per day, while consuming the energy equivalent of 132.9 kilograms of oil. The average Kenyan consumes the energy equivalent of 98.9 kg. of oil per year. The average Canadian eats 3,447 calories per day while consuming the energy equivalent of 9,155 kilograms of oil per year. One can see that the average Kenyan, living in a country which has been often called one of Africa's "success stories" consumes one one-hundredth of the energy consumed by the average Canadian! While differences in climate can justifiably account for certain differences in energy consumption patterns, it hardly excuses such an enormous gap.

It is for this reason that Africans have felt justified in their insistence that calls from the North for better ecological practices and population control in the South should be accompanied by the means to pay for the needed technological changes. Also they believe that the same educational and health care improvements which were the essential precondition to a reduced birth rate in all of the developed countries of the North should be made available to the people of the South before talk of "population control" becomes meaningful.

The discussion of population guidelines proceeds in a vacuum unless it is matched to the discussion of infant mortality figures, as it is known that no society in history has ever voluntarily restricted its fertility rates before improved health facilities brought the infant mortality rate down to a level low enough that parents felt secure concerning the survival of enough of their children to carry on the family name. In Africa today, infant mortality rates have continued to come down gradually in most countries, though not yet to the low levels found in industrialized western countries. The reduced mortality rate, coupled with a sustained high fertility rate, has brought about the burgeoning population "boom" found in most parts of Africa. Social conditions still deny clean drinking water to a large fraction of the African population. The UNCED Conference of 1992 reported that 35,000 children die every day in the world, due to environmental causes. Most of these deaths are due to environmental contaminants in water and air supplies, and the increasing urbanization of the third world means that even there an increasing proportion of these deaths are related to industrial pollution, in addition to the more traditional water contaminants, human and animal waste.

Despite the general feeling that the North has no right to impose population strictures on Africa, family planning has nevertheless become much more accepted in Africa today than it was in 1972, for reasons not directly related to ecology. The reason for the new mood is primarily economic. Most Nigerians in the middle class now wonder how they would be able to afford to educate all of their children if they continue to have the large families idealized by traditional Africa. The Nigerian government in 1988 submitted to the people the first set of population guidelines ever presented in that country. They recommended five children per mother; lower than is considered ideal in traditional Nigeria, but higher than western analysts would have liked. Most commentators concluded that whatever else one might say, the guidelines were at least a start.

In spite of the greater concern for industrial development which has seemed to drown out environmental concerns, grassroots level ecological movements in Africa have been springing up increasingly in the early 1990s. I could cite as an example the "Green Belt Movement" started by Wangari Maathai of Nairobi, who was Kenya's first woman university professor. Also in Kenya, the informal sector of the economy has sparked the mass production of inexpensive solar ovens, which are built very simply from locally available materials and sold at prices the average peasant can afford. In the rural parts of Kenya now, these ovens are very common, as the price and difficulty of obtaining fire wood has increased enough to make solar ovens a viable option for the peasantry. For the same reason a new design of charcoal burning cooker which uses one third the amount of wood compared to the traditional type of iron pot has become very popular.

The informal sector has also been key in promoting the popularity of inexpensive adaptors to photovoltaic solar panels to produce electricity for home use, particularly lighting and small fans. Key in all of these developments has been the role of the informal sector, including the class of roadside mechanics and other self-employed workers such as taxi drivers. One such group is metal workers, who are called in Kenya the "jua kali". They work in the "jua kali", the "hot sun", with no roof over their heads and with only simple metal working tools, yet it is their ingenuity and inventiveness that has spurred the economy of African countries more than the formal sector with its massive, inefficient, and so often disastrous development projects.

In Nigeria, Gbadegesin writes of movements to re-introduce the use of the bicycle as basic transportation at the universities (Gbadegesin 1992). The ecological movements of Africa have one thing in common with each other which distinguishes them from ecological movements in the western world: they are driven by an urgency concerning immediate survival needs which one does not find, for example, in such North American movements as that to protect the Spotted Owl. Nomsa Daniels says (1991, 15): "whereas affluence and waste spurred today's environmentalists in the West, poverty and underdevelopment are spurring environmentalists in Africa." The erosion of soil in Kenya had produced a life-threatening situation for the women of the country, who do most of the agricultural labour. So under the leadership of Wangari Maathai they banded together to plant trees to protect their precious heritage of the soil, upon which their very livelihood directly depends. Increasing poverty in the universities of Nigeria forces a return to the bicycle, which also happens to be one of the most ecologically sound means of transport. The same has happened in Cuba, now forced by the cessation of Soviet aid and oil to rely on the bicycle.

While the current recession in the western world has also forced many people there to look to the bicycle as primary means of transport, the western environmental movements have been relatively slow to link the poverty issue with their ecological agenda. The fact that ecology movements in Africa are survival-driven is bound to shape development of these groups and as their voice becomes heard at the international level it may produce a change in some commonly held attitudes.

1. We may also note here the lack of importance given to literal sight, a point upon which I have elaborated in the chapter above on African Orality. The equation of visibility with empirical reality is not made in African cultures.