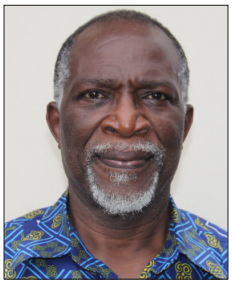

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Article

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African Theocology: A Theocentric Paradigm for Creation Care in the African Church

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The theologies underscoring Western missionary work in Africa during the colonial period encouraged the domination of creation and overrode theologies of care and concern for the natural order. Further, the proffered dominion theology that discouraged African Indigenous religious ecological conceptions was undergirded by a mechanistic worldview foreign to African understandings of creation. Thus, one challenge to effective cooperation in addressing ecological problems in Africa is that Western Christian creation care approaches perpetuate this mismatch. Consequently, this article argues that African theocology, which integrates Christian theology of nature with insights from both African Indigenous practices and the ecological sciences, may be a preferable alternative paradigm for developing creation care culture in Africa. It explains creation care culture as the life-long transformation of our moral consciousness and instinctual actions to improve our relationships with God, ourselves, other-than-human creatures, and the environment. This article analyzes the role that eco-cultural practices, particularly birthing and funerary rites in Ghana, play in this approach. Specifically, it shows their implicit potency to prime and orient people in ways that promote the development of personal character and church cultures that embody Christian creation care.

Key words: African theocology, creation care, eco-culture, eco-church, theocentric paradigm

Despite climate skepticism and denial still lingering in some Christian circles,[1] there is broad scientific consensus that a global eco-crisis threatens the flourishing of earthly life, that the crisis is anthropogenic, and that its alleviation requires effective human remediation on a global scale.[2] There are a number of manifestations of this crisis in Africa:

- deforestation, in which the land is cleared mainly for artisanal mining and cacao trees, one of the continent's largest cash crops;
- air pollution, accounting for over 300,000 deaths annually;
- water pollution, caused by factors that include illegal artisanal mining in some countries, with the related deaths of 115 people per hour;
- biodiversity loss, resulting from economic and population growth pressures; the continent accounts for 8 of the 36 biodiversity hotspots globally; and
- oil spillage, such as the estimated 240,000 barrels of crude oil spilled annually in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, poisoning agriculture, waterways, and the atmosphere with hazardous chemicals.[3]

Because effective solutions to these problems require broad support and concerned action, there is "a growing consensus that religions may also play a significant role" alongside the ecological and conservation

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sciences in global remediation efforts, in that religious ecology "in the past sustained individuals and cultures in the face of internal and external ecological threats,"[4] especially in Africa south of the Sahara.[5] Theocology is a proposed African religious framework for practicing conservation. It is a holistic method for studying and practicing creation care. It considers both scientific and religious ecologies, the ethical practices they enjoin, and their limitations. It proffers a distinctly African perspective on the theology of nature.[6]

This article proposes that African theocology could provide insights that Christians in Africa and elsewhere may use to engage ecological science, and thus develop holistic approaches to creation care. The proposal seeks to address a need within African churches and, in so doing, address an established problem in missiology—namely, how to adapt the gospel in cultures with very different worldviews than Western Christianity. Ever since missionary times, African Christians have suffered a dilemma: how can they draw from, and at the same time integrate their culturally embedded primal religious consciousness with Christian faith and conservation sciences in ways that promote ecological action? This dilemma has taken on new importance in recent years. With "the demographic shift in the global Christian population" to the global South, new cross-cultural questions are raised that "require a reformulation of Christian faith and practice"—as has always been the case throughout mission and church history.[7]

Primal Spiritual Consciousness as Preparation for African Christian Theologies

The translation and generation of African and global knowledge is crucial to support effective responses to ecological change, both in Africa and worldwide. It also makes Christianity, not a Western, but a world religion.[8] However, efforts to better understand and mitigate ecological change in the global South have had limited success, as Christians have been disproportionately rooted in theoretical frameworks which originated in the global North. African Christians have been and continue to be influenced by ideas transmitted by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western Christian missionaries whose religious ecologies were rooted in dominion theology. This was a theology based on the Enlightenment: its mechanistic and Western scientific worldviews dichotomized the spiritual and the physical. Furthermore, as Western Christianity was skeptical of Indigenous ideas, it despised any continuity of primal eco-spirituality with Christianity. As Research Professor of Mission at Boston University Jonathan J. Bonk observed in 2008,

> Only now are Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox missiologists starting to realize that strategies for saving the world have been framed within a theological cocoon that prevented them from adequately understanding the result of their civilization's notions of progress, development, and the social material destiny of humankind.[9]

In other words, Western missionaries considered their own theologies of creation and progress, although lacking continuity with practical primal religious consciousness, to be either exclusively correct or at least superior to non-Western Indigenous ideas. Thus, in their efforts to save non-Westerners and provide them with human development, these Christian missionaries downplayed and de-emphasized local religious ecological conceptions and practices. The result has been a "flattening" of Christianity in Africa into a Western form instead of the universal world religion it is supposed to be,[10] specifically in the form of eco-deculturation. Many Africans converted to Christianity are taught to abandon cultural practices that care for the natural world. The impact of this flattening persists to various degrees in the African church.

Yet, Indigenous eco-cultural knowledge can prime African Christians to care for creation as Christians. It can serve as foundational knowledge that motivates and prepares the mind for engaging more effectively with both biblical creation care theology and conservation science. In African Christian theologies, primal spirituality is a *praeparatio evangelica* that enhances cognitive and practical conversion and moral commitment to biblical and scientific conservation principles. It provides an affinity, a positive *déjà vu* (sense of familiarity), and an instinct to combine Christian moral eco-actions with similar religious impulses as learned from the primal sources.

"Primal" in African theologies is neither "tribal" and "primitive," nor "visceral" and "Indigenous," to a specific cultural or geopolitical people as understood in the West. Rather, "primal" describes spirituality, which is divinely originated, fundamental, and anterior to (or the substratum of) all historically developed religious experiences. It is foundational to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and others; therefore, "primal" is universal in character although it manifests in different forms within cultures.[11] Though resilient,

primal—like any other religious consciousness—can comfortably succumb to other prevalent worldviews and sociocultural philosophies. Thus, primal spirituality has been largely but inadvertently lost in Western cultures due to Enlightenment and mechanistic worldviews.[12] Hence, Western missionaries debunked it as unworthy of theological reflection, "under the prevailing European value-setting for the Christian faith."[13] Primal spirituality is being threatened by the prevailing socio-economic factors and needs in some parts of Africa today. Historically, primal spirituality has been a field prepared for planting the gospel in most primal cultures. Kwame Bediako explains it as describing "the major religious substratum for the idiom and existential experience of [all religions] in African life,"[14] including both mission-established and African Indigenous or African Initiated Christianity (AIC).

African Primal Spiritual Consciousness and Christian Creation Care

This article asserts that primal spirituality provides convertible cultural continuity—not discontinuity—to the Christian faith, especially in the form of theocentric eco-ethics, which global Christianity may leverage to motivate care for creation. Pope Francis recognized this in his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si': On the Care of Our Common Home*, in which he expressed confidence that we (Christians today) can "build our common home" if we are motivated and educated, and approach global eco-crisis locally with our traditional (primal) ecological understandings first.[15] Similarly, in a 2017 study at Sokpoe in Ghana, Harry L.K. Agbanu, an environmental ethicist at the University of Ghana, Legon, opined that educating the African student in scientific ecology can be enhanced by building on the foundations of their primal African eco-spirituality.[16] Re-awakening the primal eco-spiritual consciousness as a universal experience or sense of "as if I already have some idea" in Christians everywhere, may be foundational for a better cognitive and practical appreciation of conservation sciences.

In the pre-Christian primal culture and spirituality of Africans, ecosystems historically have been sustained by environmental taboos and rituals that serve as major impulsive eco-ethical tools. African theocology, as an emerging theology of nature, integrates these insights with the ecological and conservation sciences in creation care. It proposes leveraging on the strengths of African primal religious eco-practices by refracting them through the prism of the gospel, and converting them to Christ by keeping the Christian creation care values and ethics implicit in them. In this way, the conversion process retains the *meanings and purposes* of primal eco-thoughts and principles as African contextual equivalents of Western Christian and scientific perspectives, while at the same time, the primal *objects of faith* and *symbols* are converted to the Christian way. For instance, whereas the primal motivation for creation care is the *fear of eco-deities and taboos*, which is very strong in Africa but not in the West, conversion to Christ encourages retaining that strong innate religious eco-ethics. Only now the motivation is founded on the biblical injunction to *love the Christian Trinitarian God* of creation and *love creation* itself as our *neighbor* (Matt. 22:37–39).

The cultural foundation of primal eco-spiritual instincts serves as *praeparatio evangelica* to enhance Christian discipleship for a theocentric creation care. Similarly, just as the birthday of a Greek god Mithra was converted and is celebrated freely by Christians as the birthday of Jesus Christ, so eco-taboos that prohibit working the land, harvesting forest wood, or fishing in water bodies on a local deity's "sacred day" can be converted to biblical Sabbath regulations of Yahweh. Why? Both are essentially the equivalent creation care principle: *rest,* a religious injunction (Lev. 25:1–7) that, in conservation science, provides an opportunity for self-rejuvenation and regrowth in nature.

African theocology, therefore, considers the conversion of primal eco-spirituality to be a significant resource for Christian creation care. In fact, primal eco-spirituality can potentially serve as a corrective to Western Christian eco-theologies that do not present biblical Sabbath rest laws as reflective of God's intentions for us to cultivate a propensity toward ecological care. For example, African primal sacred-day taboos for rest encode an attitude of awe and respect for God in ways that provide an ethical instinct to prevent human efforts to overharvest the resources within creation. Both African and world Christianity can take advantage of this natural tendency since primal spirituality is supposed to be universal; even the West can re-awaken their responsibility to care for the environment despite centuries of ignoring it. With African theocology, Christians may develop a God-in-Christ-centered fear as an instinctual impulse toward the development of ecologically minded cultures. According to Andrew Walls, the eco-culture so developed will be a

> [m]oral renewal [that] follows inner transformation: people will adhere to God from their hearts (Jer. 31:31–34). [And this change] will herald

> universal renewal, in which the flora and fauna and the whole environment are enriched and violence [to all creation] will be unknown (Isa. 11:6–9).[17]

Ecological culture is largely the missing link between action and inaction, even when we know what to do scientifically. Here too, however, African theocology can underpin the development of ecological cultures.

African Theocology as a Theology of Nature in African Perspective

To reiterate, African theocology, like Western eco-theology, is an emerging theological discipline, following the mid-twentieth-century trend toward global religious approaches to studying ecology.[18] Christian Danz observes,

> With the onset of the ecological crisis or climate change, the doctrine of creation has again become the focus of theological attention [in the late 20th century]. Theology has taken up these discussions under headings such as "deep ecology," "deep incarnation," and "ecotheology." These discussions have been accompanied by a complete reconstruction of the traditional dogmatic doctrine.[19]

In the late twentieth century, global eco-crisis called for reconstructing appropriate and responsive theologies. In 2015, Pope Francis suggested that such theology should necessarily stem out of and have continuity with our primal eco-spirituality.[20]

> For theological consciousness presupposes religious tradition, and tradition requires memory, and memory is integral to identity: without memory we have no past, and if we have no past, then we lose our identity.[21]

African theocology seeks to uniquely reawaken the identity and memory of past primal but convertible religious eco-ethical systems in ways that empower Christians to see the God who created through Christ in the power of his Holy Spirit, being ever immanent in his creation as Emmanuel (Matt. 1:23). A sense of God the Emmanuel's immanence in creation can commit the Christian to a theocentric creation care just as the primal enchantment of nature was highly successful in the acceptance of a deity-centered moral ecology. African theocology integrates the study of the Triune God as creator, the relationships between God and creation, and the role of humanity in the relationships, from the holistic worldviews and eco-cultural self-understandings of Africans, which may inspire theocentric impulses to care for creation. Western Enlightenment-influenced eco-theology that does not emphasize immanence of spiritual forces in creation lacks, or, at least, does not overtly inspire a Christian understanding of enchantment (God's immanence in creation). So for Africans, Western Enlightenment does not naturally induce theocentric creation care, even though God as creator, along with similar biblical eco-themes, may be implied in it.

Reconstruction of African theocology was inspired from my study of Zimbabwean Earthkeepers' environmentalism in the late twentieth century.[22] To remedy the heavy deforestation during their political war for independence, both African Initiated Christians (AICs) and primal religionists in Zimbabwe—influenced by Marthinus L. Daneel, an African-nurtured Western missionary—embarked on integrated religious and scientific afforestation (forest establishment) projects.[23] These projects included both local know-how and the teaching of basic principles of forest conservation science, such as identifying and selecting purposeful forest-type flora species, sowing and nursing seedlings, and transplanting with appropriate spacing and nurturing young forest trees. Primal religious ecologies which viewed nature as enchanted provided participants with self-motivation and commitment to the afforestation project. Important elements included their fear of the Triune God (Supreme Being), respect for ancestors, sense of kinship with nature, and *ubuntu*[24] (sense of community) to ensure the good life of all. They also gained knowledge of basic forestry science.[25]

The religious rituals of Christians included holding "tree planting Eucharist" on the days of community tree planting that involved thanking God for the values of trees and confession of ecological sins of deforestation. The sermons at these services valued the earth as God's property and convinced Christians to care for it, with incarnational theologies: Jesus's humanity implies earthiness; his divinity is shown as an African Ancestor par excellence whose call for creation care must be obeyed. The liturgy emphasized adhering to converted ecological taboos as God's eco-regulations.

This Zimbabwean-integrated eco-practice is an example of the unique potential of African theocology to motivate interfaith religious ecological research and global eco-crisis remediation efforts that integrate conservation science and community cohesion in caring for creation. Specifically, the interfaith collaboration was in *ubuntu* spirit of "we are one" with similar primal eco-spirituality and in a common eco-crisis despite differences in practicing faith; it was, therefore, not what Westerners call "syncretism."

In addition to the Zimbabwean case, there were others from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Ghana. In these West African cultures, environmentally sustainable artisanal gold mining, for example, had greatly depended on adhering to religious insights, rituals, and eco-taboos for many centuries. Without ground-scanning gold-detecting technology and tools, but by respecting eco-taboos, they sometimes are able to determine sites for prospecting and to prevent possible site degradations. Is it difficult to infer that implicit in their religious mineralogy is a rudimental science (knowledge) of gold detection?

In 2017, African theocology was conceived after students of ecological science in a Ghanaian Christian university saw the subject merely as scientific and resisted any religious calls to act ecologically. At the same time, some Western-mission-influenced "deculturated Christian"[26] youth in Sokpoe asked for permission to build development projects in the hitherto indigenously preserved sacred forests. They employed Western missional eco-theologies by arguing that faith and discipleship in Christ overcome African forest-deities whose forest-taboos are mere superstitions that hinder socio-economic development.

These experiences spurred research into what motivates or demotivates creation care in the three main religious traditions of Africa—the primal, Islamic, and Christian—and compared these traditions with the Sokpoe-Eʋe in Ghana as a practical case study. Although not "a strictly comparative study of the ecologies of these religious traditions," their research sought to "[retrieve] and [re-evaluate] religious worldviews, religious practices of creation care, and religious priming for harmonious ecological relationships" in Africa.[27] The findings indicated that the primal religious Sokpoe-Eʋe (like the Zimbabwean, Burkinabe, Cameroonian, and many others in Africa) understand that *xexeme* (the cosmos or creation) was the act of *Mawu Sogbolisa* (the Supreme Being) with the help of *trɔ̃wo* (subaltern deities). *Mawu* himself is uncreated and lives in *dzifo* (residence high above) *xexeme*. But in daily life experience, *Mawu* acts through the eco-deities (together with ancestors in some cases) in the eco-community to sustain ecological harmony.

Kwame Bediako asserts that for primal cosmologies "the supreme Being appears alienated from earthly phenomena but is the sustainer of the universe,"[28] perhaps through Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the "minor divinities."[29] This implies that, generally, both the primal and Christian sub-Sahelian African, such as the Sokpoe-Eʋe, hold a theistic belief in a divine origin of creation.[30] However, for the primal religious traditions, this divine origin and continuing presence of spiritual entities "confer[s] a sacred shroud over the created beings and the social order."[31] This view of sacredness underpins the primal eco-community's enchantment (not deifying) of nature, fear of the creator spirits, and obedience to their conservational taboos as eco-ethical tools that effectively regulate attitudes and behaviors in the environment. So, the effective ecological ethics of African Christians can be based on their reawakened primal worldviews, which have affinity, and hence possible continuity with, biblical holistic and precarious worldviews (Eph. 6:12). Christian eco-ethics can then be derived from and in continuity with primal enchantment of creation, when converted to a biblical sense of the immanence of the Triune Creator God among, within, and sustaining his creation (Exod. 29:46; John 14:17). In this way, African Christians can obey the Christianized eco-taboos prayerfully, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31), as demonstrating their love for God and his creation (John 14:15).

African theocology explores the "divine-human-earth relations"[32] implied in theologies of nature, and not the "earth-human-divine relations" as implicit in the nomenclature of Western "eco-theology." The inversion of eco-theology to theo-ecology emphasizes to the African religious, including primalists, Christians and Muslims, that a theocentric worldview, derived from primal religious consciousness, necessarily underpins the study and practice of ecological and conservation sciences. It allows the Christian to practice conservation science, first by acknowledging the earth as a big ecosystem created by, belonging to, and sustained by God; and second, by ensuring that conservation science and technology are applied within the ambits of biblical and converted local eco-ethics to glorify God.

How Theocology Is a Unique Paradigm for Christian Creation Care

An example of practicing African theocology can be found in agriculture. Genetically modified (GM) crops can help resolve food insecurity in environmentally devastated communities. But GM crops introduced into Africa use one-time-only (terminator technology) seeds, also called "suicide seeds"; they prevent the farmers from producing their own seed for planting the next crop. The result is injustice and food insecurity as African farmers are made perpetually dependent on Western GM crops. Further, with time, local species may become—in fact, are becoming—extinct due to

GM science. African theocology will expect a Christian agricultural scientist to apply GM science with a moral conscience inspired by the Holy Spirit, considering the long-term negative effects on communities rather than just the immediate scientific and economic gains. African Christian agriculturists should be aware of *ubuntu* (sustaining community) welfare and cohesion; and also aware that God (and Jesus, our African Ancestor par excellence) will not be happy with whoever does whatever to disturb the welfare of the ecological community, especially food security.

At Sokpoe in southern Ghana, seasonal bans on clam-harvesting in the Volta River from November to February coincide with the natural breeding season of clams, allowing time for the self-replenishment of clam populations. These primal African religious ecological taboos are not grounded in Christian theology. But for converted primal Africans, their meaning and purpose stand out, suggesting that African eco-taboos that regulate time for accessing ecological goods are consistent with both biblical Sabbath laws and conservation science: that is, the theology and scientific principle of *rest* for natural regrowth. Christians and scientists can then obey these converted taboos primarily because God, as the creator and provider of natural resources, instituted them to maximize eco-services output for the mutual benefit of all creation. In Semitic eco-culture, this theological principle is enshrined in Sabbath eco-laws; for the African, it is enshrined in eco-taboos attributed to eco-deities. Therefore, rather than being condemned, primal religious eco-taboos can be seen as a preparation for what Kwame Bediako calls "conversion of culture": in this case, ecological culture, the turning of the primal religious ecological impulsions for care and practices, to Christ[33] (*impulsion* here and following in the sense of an "instinctual essential moral habit/principle").

The distinctive difference that African theocology advocates is converting the impulsion, formerly ascribed to an eco-deity, to the Triune God. So, for Christians, the faith object to be feared or reverenced must be Jesus Christ, the Son of the Creator God and our ancestor, through and for whom all things were created, in the power of the Holy Spirit (Col. 1:16). As I have argued earlier, the lack of moral impulsion in Western Christian eco-theology, transmitted to Africa, has contributed to the inability of both African and Western Christians to be proactive in caring for creation. It is not uncommon to note that Christians and scientists, whether Western or African, may know the ecological need and understand what they can do to remedy it while still being unable to take necessary ecological actions. Why? Because moral impulsion is either absent or not strong enough.

So, the African ecological concepts and practices are not superstitions to be rejected as un-Christian and unscientific, but signposts which call for caution and scientific study, and which otherwise can be looked on as opportunities for Christians to care for creation God's way. Through such a judicious engagement with African local knowledge and practices, the African church can contribute more effectively to global efforts toward building a Christian creation care culture. In this, African theocology can be a paradigm for the African Christian context and beyond.

A paradigm is "a conceptual or methodological model underlying the theories and practices of a science or discipline at a particular time; [hence] a generally accepted world view."[34] In this sense, African theocology is paradigmatic, because it conceives and postulates a holistic method for studying and practicing creation care, from the knowledge of both scientific and Christian religious ecological ethics and practices, and their limitations. As a paradigm, African theocology's unique characteristics are that, first, unlike Western eco-theology, it insists on Christian research and practice of conservation science that *begins* by acknowledging God as the creator, owner, and sustainer of the earth, in accordance with biblical and African primal worldviews. Second, it encourages applying conservation science and technology within the ambits of biblical and converted primal eco-ethics to ensure not only appropriateness of the technoscience, but also Christian impulsion and commitment to theocentric creation care, to the glory of God. Third, it promotes socio-ecological transformation by relying on African *ubuntu*—socio-cultural self-understanding as eco-communal beings—to forge concerted interfaith efforts in responding to common ecological concerns in plural-religious eco-communities.

In short, African theocology is a model that teaches the sharing of common practical experiences, concepts, and cultural tolerance on common problems of ecocrisis from the perspective of religious and scientific ecologies and ecological ethics.[35] It has the potential of building creation care culture in the African and global church.

African Christian Creation Care Culture and Its Development

African Christian creation care culture envisioned by this article involves a life-long change or transformation for a better creation care habit. In this context,

creation care is a call to action for human beings, particularly in the religious traditions (primal religionists, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, etc.), to rethink and reinvigorate our inner predisposition to take actions, individually and corporately, to sustain harmony with our environment. Patrick Curry describes this call as a "reawakening of something very old" that we have forgotten from our intuitive experience.[36] In other words, creation care is and ought to be what Emmanuel Katongole, citing Pope Francis, refers to as "ecology of daily life."[37] He explains it as our attempt

> to shape our environment to express our identity: in our rooms, our homes, our workplaces, and our neighborhood [by taking] those simple daily gestures which break the logic of violence, exploitation, and selfishness.[38]

According to Bediako, daily ways of life that define and identify a "substantial social grouping of people" in an environment, with history and traditions, constitute their culture.[39] Daily actions to shape our environment are therefore expressions of our cultural identity not just as individuals but, more importantly, as an eco-community. This suggests that creation care is a cultural ecology: "treasures of humanity" (the positive habits of a social group) transmitted "dynamically into the present."[40] It is "something very old" in a people, a culture, but it needs "reawakening." Since creation care is cultural, it should not be difficult to build a robust Christian creation care culture—the Christian moral character or instinct for daily sustaining the integrity of the earth.

Bediako avers that culture, as a subset of worldview, begins internally from the mind.[41] Hence, creation care culture will imply epistemologically that we first rethink our relationships with God and his created earthly environment. In other words, the way of life of a people in their environment is essentially an outward exhibition of their inner perception or knowledge of environmental phenomena, and a consequential response to them as part of the natural way of things. Humans are relational beings in an interconnected environment. "We are part of nature, so the social and the environmental belong together."[42] An epistemic or inner disposition of being, which determines an outer way of relational life in and with the environment, can be described as moral ecological character or simply, eco-character.[43] In this sense, creation care culture is the moral eco-character that can prompt instinctual actions for the sustenance of balanced and sustainable ecological relationships in our common *'oikos*, earthly home. It is the changed heart—reflecting the character of God—that can motivate us to be the new *imago Dei* in Christ, and so naturally be proactive in addressing anthropogenic environmental injustices and perturbations.

African Christian eco-character may align with, but is distinct from, Western ecological virtue ethics, which is more an intellectual or theoretical category. This article has argued that the distinctiveness of African Christian eco-character is that it drinks from the wells of African primal traditions—a reawakening and conversion of the historically transmitted and experienced holistic worldviews, especially the strong primal sense of interconnectedness with nature—to produce a theistic impulsion and empowerment for a creation care culture.

Some Ways of Building African Christian Creation Care Culture

A pressing question for the African Christian, in which African Christians in science might take the lead in asking, is, how do African worldviews and cultural self-understandings of the Christian practice of creation care relate? In other words, how may we build a Christian creation care culture from an African perspective? From the preceding arguments, it is not difficult to conclude that the process for building creation care culture in the African church cannot be based on Western epistemologies rather than on African Indigenous cultural frameworks. The latter can helpfully model a God-fearing instinct, when converted in the light of Christ. Bediako suggests how the conversion can be done: it is to use the scriptures as the hermeneutic of the African primal religious ecological ideas, beliefs, impulsions, and practices. In his view, this involves refracting primal episteme through the prism of the gospel.[44]

That means a critical assessment, both biblically and theologically, of the African Indigenous knowledge and practices. The aim is to point out possible ways to reflect how Christ (the second Adam) could approach creation care and, as a result, inform the new way of life of the African followers of the second Adam—the regenerated African humanity, an identified people called the African church. In fact, the process often discovers that the primal African religious eco-ethos, in many ways, has affinity with the scriptural views on moral creation care. Two primal eco-cultural practices that may be converted to build Christian eco-culture are birthing and funerary rites.

As observed earlier, Pope Francis believes that building a creation care culture or eco-character in the church

should necessarily include a continuous Christian eco-culture education, beginning with primal knowledge.[45] Proverbs 22:6 teaches that such Christian eco-cultural education needs to start in childhood; only then will Christians keep it throughout life as they grow. Research among the Sokpoe-Eʋe in the Volta Region of Ghana indicates how fulfilling this scriptural injunction is provided for in their primal religious birthing rites.

The birthing rite entails rituals (symbols and prayers) to orient, first, the child's community of care (family, neighbors, the religious) to view the baby in a particular ecological way and raise it to think of itself in that same way, growing up in the eco-community. But they are believed to also influence the baby itself by inducing a cultural sense for good health, belongingness to, and dependence on the ecosystem for livelihood. Consequently, the baby begins to be oriented toward harmonious ecological relationships with both human and other-than-human creation in the eco-community. Converted to Christ, these rites may provide significant impulse for Christians to care for the environment.

The rituals initiating a neonate include, among others, postpartum *amenɔɖiɖi* (placenta burial) on the first day, neonatal *ɖiɖɛxɔmenɔnɔ* (maternal detention) for eight days, and perinatal *viɖeɖeɖego* (child outdooring), eight days postpartum. The neonatal *ɖiɖɛxɔmenɔnɔ* rite detains mother and baby in a clean and warm *ɖiɖɛxɔme* (maternity ward) at home for the first eight days postpartum. The mother could go out, but only when necessary, and ideally not very frequently in the first three days and should always keep the baby close to herself for body touch. Family members provide any needed support during the maternity detention.

Primal religious explanations suggest that *ɖiɖɛxɔmenɔnɔ* buys time to get the baby acclimatized and fortified against evil forces that may inflict ill-health before its exposure to *xexeme,* the open physical world. Science, however, may see it as ensuring filial bonding and acquiring natural immunization. The filial bonding is an emotional connection between mother and child and believed to work in a feedback mechanism. Baby's skin-to-skin body touch with mother and pleasant touches in breast suckling stimulate secretion of oxytocin and prolactin from maternal posterior pituitary for milk let down and evacuation of uterine congestion. Thus, reproductive and psychological sciences affirm the meaning and purpose of a religious ritual that establishes a sense of care between mother and baby. In addition, the insistence on closeness of mother to baby in *ɖiɖɛxɔme* within the first three days postpartum has immunological implications. Breastfeeding during the first 24 to 72 hours postpartum is critical for accessing colostrum immunoglobulins. The resultant natural immunities acquired, then, may be what Indigenes describe as religious fortification against evil forces of ill-health feared in the *xexeme*, the environment outside the uterus.

For the Sokpoe-Eʋe, the orientation provided by these rites prepares the child to develop caring relations with both human and other-than-human creation. The fortification provided by the rites primes the growing child to develop ecological relations that prevent environmental ill health caused by physical and spiritual pollutions. The spiritual pollutions are the wrath of God and eco-deities offended with improper human ecological conducts such as disobeying eco-taboos. Therefore, when converted, African theocology expects the birthing rite to prayerfully reassure that Jesus's protection against evil environmental forces and the need to remain healthy in relationship to the environment should motivate development of habits of environmental care.

The postnatal *amenɔɖiɖi* ritual involves burying the placenta and umbilical cord of the baby under a tree, or planting a tree seedling on the burial ground, in or near the family compound. It is accompanied with prayers for the baby to take pride that *kokloxɔ mekpea ŋu na koklo o* (the fowl is never ashamed of its coop). The significance of this rite is seen in its grounding or rooting the baby in its future land of inheritance. It orients the baby to learn to respect the land with a pleasant sense of belongingness, and take care of and provide for itself from trees and other crops on the land.[46] Ideally, the Christian baby must grow to care for this land and its florae and, by logical extent, fauna, because the Bible enjoins us to live by developing the land in ways that caringly sustain it, mindful that it will receive our mortal remains in the end (Gen. 2:15, 3:19). Similarly, placing of baby on bare ground to wet it with urine or with water sprinkled from roof eaves during *viɖeɖeɖego* (child outdooring) symbolizes a formal introduction to and priming of the baby to be aware of the earth and its climatic conditions outside the uterine environment.[47] It affirms to the Christian baby the importance of hydrologic science and the conditions of the earthly world, of which God is the source and explanation (Job 38:25–29). By extension, the baby is to please God by caring for the earth.

The meanings and purposes of these symbolic inducing, priming, and orientation birthing rituals resonate

with David Bookless's argument that we are not able to intuitively feel oriented to care for the earth as our home unless we are "grounded and rooted in our ecosystem or we become uprooted and displaced."[48] He explains that our relational God made us relational beings tied to the earth by our dusty origins. As scripture says, "dust thou art and into dust shall thou return" (Gen. 3:19b). Russ Parker asserts that a strong and most basic need of humanity is "to belong in the place or on the land where we can connect, be rooted and grow."[49] Theocologically, the Sokpoe birthing rites vividly enact creation care culture building. They believably ground the child as an earthly creature and orientate it toward valuing and developing healthy relationships with God, people, and the natural environment it has entered.[50] Ideally, this could be a theocentric reasoning for the Christian child and scientist to be morally proactive in caring for creation until death.

Creation care impetus is found also in enacting the concepts of death, particularly in funerary rites. The Sokpoe-Eʋe funerary rites convey a message for the living to develop eco-ethical relationships with all creation in the ecological community during earthly life before death. This is vividly symbolized with *hlɔtsilele* (clan bath) of a corpse laid in state. This ritual enacts the African primal religious cyclical concept of time,[51] which views death as mere transition from *kodzogbe* or "gecosphere" (earthly abode of the living living) into *avlime* or "teresphere" (the abode of ancestors or living dead).[52] The Sokpoe-Eʋe believe that their *ancestors* would readily identify and welcome only deceased clan members who had no contamination from unacceptable social and ecological relationships in the environment prior to their demise. Otherwise, the *luvɔ* (soul) may remain wandering painfully until it may by chance be reincarnated for self-correction. Since clan leaders are not sure of the eco-moral status of their beloved deceased, the practice of *hlɔtsilele* for all deceased members of the clan then serves as a gracious cleansing of possible contamination with socio-ecological pollutions that may hinder ancestral acceptance in *avlime.*[53]

Theocologically, converting the meaning and purpose of *hlɔtsilele* may inspire the African Christian to develop the moral character required for living and relating well, in and with creation before death. The pointer to Christian faith here is the understanding that we shall transit one day from earthly life to a heavenly home (Phil. 3:20). Only those whose sinful character (including ecological sinfulness) on Earth is washed clean by the Lord Jesus, our Ancestor par excellence, shall be welcomed into the heavenly home and welcomed happily (Rev. 11:18b, 22:14–15).

David H. Roper contributed a devotional homily to *Our Daily Bread* on May 14, 2023. The topic was "Taken in." Although not necessarily a theological discourse, his points implied the biblical and Christian truth in Rev. 22:14–15. He cites Robert Frost who described a home as "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."[54] Basing his discourse on Psalm 49:20 and John 14:3, Roper implies that a Christian's moral conduct on Earth should aim at a choice for heaven as our eternal home. Then "Jesus, [my Ancestor par excellence] who gave to God the price of my life," will "welcome me into His Father's house with open arms," that is, as a familial and social obligation as much as in a loving relationship.

For the African Christian, then, ecological sin, like all other sins not cleansed by the Lord Jesus, may disqualify one being welcomed to the heavenly home by Jesus, our Ancestor par excellence. It points then to seeking genuine conversion, water baptism, and Holy Spirit sanctification through confession of all sins. Above all, it is a significant impulsion for endeavoring to overcome sinful temptations, including temptations to act unharmoniously in relationships with and in the environment while living on Earth.

These rituals in birthing and funerary rites, however, have the potential to instill eco-care culture better and faster, especially in Christian children, if they are constantly practiced in the eco-community. Children need not be taught to care for creation as much as to "catch" caring for creation instinctively from their parents and elders. They must be taught biblical meanings and purposes of the rites: how some of these, such as the rites for filial bonding and natural immunization acquisition, are affirmed by science. But better still, Christian parents and the eco-community at large need to manifest the ecological implications of the birthing and funerary rites in a lifestyle that is an example for children to emulate. Churches that nurture children with integrated biblical and scientific insights of converted primal ecological rites to promote creation care will have to be, or aim at being, eco-churches.

The Eco-Church as an Atmosphere and Means of Building Creation Care Culture

Moral ecological character is a quality of life. It comprises inherent attributes or patterns of thinking that determine a person's consistent outward habits and behavior in and with the environment. It results from inborn genetic traits modified by environmental factors,

including formal and informal education.[55] Of these, while formal education may be helpful, moral character formation primarily occurs informally. Acquiring moral eco-character requires that the innate predispositions or orientations that underpin a person's ecological behaviors are consistently infused with ideas, beliefs, and values that are normative to an eco-community.[56] Hence, the meaning, purpose, and eco-actions implied in the birthing and funerary rites need to be translated into regular ecological practices in the Christian eco-community. These rites will allow for moral ecological character development to be more caught than taught, especially in an eco-church.

An eco-church for building creation care character needs to aim at continuous eco-cultural education for both church leaders and members. Specifically, the theological formation of eco-church leadership needs to include intensely practical courses on African Christian creation care, such as those being promoted at Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture (ACI) in Akuapem-Akropong, Ghana. Such courses reflect that, as Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo argues, "Africa's environmental problems require environmentally responsible leadership at all levels of society, including our households, and families."[57] So, the goal of such pastoral training is "not simply to impart information or simply develop skills, but to form a unique lifestyle that ensures appreciation and conservation of God's creation, as requirements for sustainable development."[58] Further, eco-church members need to experience what Pope Francis, as cited by Katongole, calls "ecological conversion." He means that in an eco-church the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ should become evident in our relationship with the world around us,[59] whether Christians or scientists.

An eco-church encourages Christian creation care actions even at individual and family levels as a Christian witness. Since 2020, my wife and I decided to and have now developed the habit of separating plastic waste at home, and keeping empty water sachets (pouches) on hand until the next dust bin (trash) collection. It was initially a challenge since we were, like many other Ghanaians, not used to the practice; most Ghanaians, including Christians, know that Zoomlion, a sanitation company, is responsible for that job. But the concepts of African theocology motivated our Christian moral commitment, and we added our little contribution to the national sanitation effort. Now we donate the bags of sorted empty plastic water sachets and bottles to a church member who sells them to recycling companies for a small income. But our local church becoming an eco-church may take some time since human character transformation is slow. Start small.

To start small, the Rev. Lawrence Kumi has initiated steps for his Revival Outreach Church International in Accra, Ghana, to become an eco-church. He is an engineer, pastor, and 2023 graduate of ACI's Certificate in African Christian Creation Care Studies. The knowledge gained and moral passion induced by the program led him to introduce a practical plastic waste recycling, through forming creation care clubs in his church. His approach, like the Zimbabwean Earthkeepers, involves eco-sin confession prayers and homilies to inspire commitment to the project. The liturgy leverages their primal religious ecological consciousness as impulsion to care for the environment to the glory of God and for the good of the eco-community. Rev. Kumi hopes that with time, Revival Outreach Church will be an eco-church where he and the clubs will be able to gradually develop an African Christian creation care culture.

In April 2023, a partnership between ACI, A Rocha, Ghana (a Christian creation care NGO), African Challenge Book Enterprise, and World Vision embarked on a project to develop a national creation care framework based on concepts of African theocology. Its objective was to provide some guidelines for churches interested in becoming eco-churches to offer Christian education that may motivate their members to be proactive in developing a creation care culture in their community. The outlined eco-actions for eco-churches includes planting and maintaining lawns, flowers, and trees on church premises and members' homes to beautify and prevent erosion; keeping proper environmental hygiene and sanitation habits; obeying changing eco-regulations (including the converted primal religious eco-taboos); properly disposing plastic and e-waste; and always using energy-saving lighting systems.

Farmers in eco-churches should be taught to align agriculture science and farming practices with God's perspective on human relationships with the environment. Thus, composting, mulching, intercropping, limiting mono-cropping, and appropriately limiting use of inorganic chemicals need to be taught and promoted. Eco-church members involved in fisheries, mining engineering, and socio-economic development projects engaging land, water bodies, atmosphere, and forests need to respect the eco-taboos of the cultural area as God's eco-regulations. Particularly, respecting "rest" for water bodies, land, and animals not only reflects God's universal eco-ethics, but refusal may also lead to degradation of creation and may incur God's wrath

(Rev. 11:18). In all cases, African theocology encourages each Christian to start creation care small, as love for God and his creation. Such is a theocentric care for creation.

Conclusion

I have argued that the African church must care for creation because we are in ecological and missiological Kairos moments (times of opportunity) which demand that we act. From an African perspective, the church can contribute to a global Christian ecological mission by leveraging converted primal eco-taboos and rituals to build a creation care culture. Such a theocentric creation care culture involves a life-long transformation of Christians' moral consciousness and instinctual actions (character) to improve our relationships with God, ourselves, other-than-human creatures, and the environment. In this, primal religious ecologies should be retrieved, re-evaluated, and re-interpreted in the light of the gospel. In addition, the converted ecologies may be integrated with conservation sciences for a holistic approach to practicing Christian creation care. However, all this requires churches to continually teach and practice creation care in ways that encourage emulation. The Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture is one agency in Ghana promulgating African theocology through holistic Christian higher education and grassroots community projects. Although very young, the ACI is promoting Christian creation care lifestyles at some homes, creation care clubs, and churches.

Notes

[1]Bernard Daley Zaleha and Andrew Szasz, "Why Conservative Christians Don't Believe in Climate Change," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71, no. 5 (2015): 19, https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340215599789.

[2]Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Polity Press, 2011), 201.

[3]Lei Nguyen, "5 Biggest Environmental Issues in Africa," published February 25, 2024, Earth.org, accessed October 16, 2024, https://earth.org/environmental-issues-in-africa/.

[4]Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "Series Foreword," in *Islam and Ecology*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Harvard University Press, 2003), xx.

[5]Allison M. Howell, "African Spirituality and Christian Ministry: 'Discerning the Signs of the Times' in Our Environment and Community," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 20, no. 1 (June 2017): 12.

[6]Ruben Alvarado, *A Theology of Nature* (WorldBridge Publishing, 2020), https://www.amazon.com/Theology-Nature-Ruben-lvarado/dp/907666059X.

[7]Emmanuel Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology: Doing Theology at Bethany," *Mission Studies* 39 (2022): 165, https://www.academia.edu/88409732/Mission_as_Integral_Ecology_Doing_Theology_at_Bethany.

[8]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 165.

[9]Jonathan J. Bonk, "Mission and the Groaning of Creation," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, no. 4 (October 2008): 170, https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Mission+and+the+groaning+of+creation.-a0186861485.

[10]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 165.

[11]H.W. Turner, "The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study," in *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. V. Hayes (Australian Association for World Religions, 1977), 27–37.

[12]Gillian Mary Bediako, "Primal Religion as the Substructure of Christianity—Theological and Phenomenological Perspectives," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 11, no. 2 (December 2008): editorial.

[13]Kwame Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century," *ThemeLio*s 20, no.1 (October 1994): 15.

[14]Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 83–84.

[15]Pope Francis, Encyclical letter, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015).

[16]Ebenezer Yaw Blasu, *African Theocology: Studies in African Religious Creation Care* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 236.

[17]Andrew Finlay Walls, "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 3, https://www.scribd.com/document/725716936/Converts-or-Proselytes-WallsA-2004.

[18]Blasu, *African Theocology*, 6.

[19]Christian Danz, "Theology of Nature: Reflections on the Dogmatic Doctrine of Creation," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 3 (July 2021): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6720.

[20]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

[21]Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century," 15.

[22]Blasu, *African Theocology*, 7; and Marthinus L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Holistic Interfaith Mission* (Orbis Books, 2001), 106.

[23]Daneel, *African Earthkeepers,* 106.

[24]This is a Bantu term, yet its philosophy of communalism—oneness of humanity—so that even distant relations are still relatives to be cared for, cuts across many African cultures in varied forms, levels of intensity, and expressions.

[25]Daneel, *African Earthkeepers,* 106.

[26]Blasu, *African Theocology,* 232.

[27]Blasu, *African Theocology,* 6.

[28]Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Editions Clé and Regnum Africa, 2004), 22.

[29]Ogbu U. Kalu, "'The Sacred Egg': Worldview, Ecology and Development in West Africa," in *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology*, ed. John A. Grim (Harvard University Press, 2001), 234.

[30]It is significant to establish the fact that, linguistically, to the African religious, there is only one Supreme Being, the same transcendent and Creator God that Jews and Christians refer to as Jehovah, although not necessarily conceived theologically as triune. Because of this view, missionaries had no choice but to use the various Indigenous names for translating the biblical God in the various cultures. That transcendency seems more emphatic in the

informal or grassroots theology and, hence, the conception of God in Africa is depicted in the Indigenous names. For example, in Ghana, the Eʋe call him *Mawu*—He who nothing is beyond or greater than; the Akan say *Onyame*—He beyond whom nothing satisfies. This conception does not change when converted to Christ, because it is primal, the substratum upon which Christian doctrine of God is built. The African, as a Christian, then enriches their natural and basic conception of God's transcendence with the Trinitarian doctrine but does not replace it. God is a Trinity, but the Trinity is essentially a transcendent Supreme Being, a conception that necessarily helps the African's faith, trust, and reliance on God for salvation in a world viewed as holistic but precarious. Hence, both the Christian and primal religionist call the Transcendent with the same name, e.g., *Mawu*. In the daily life experience of the African Christian, they don't consciously go about distinguishing God as the transcendent Supreme Being of Christians different from God conceived by a primal religionist. Rather, the Christian distinguishes God from deities, which primal religionists uphold, in addition to calling themselves "children" of God.

[31]Kalu, "'The Sacred Egg,'" 234; and Ebenezer Yaw Blasu, "Evolution Worldview and Creation Care in the African Society," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 22, no. 2 (December 2019): 22.

[32]Tucker and Grim, "Series Foreword," in *Islam and Ecology*, ed. Foltz et al., xxiv.

[33]Kwame Bediako, "Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 4, no. 1 (June 2001): 2.

[34]*Oxford English Dictionary*, "paradigm (n.), sense 4," accessed March 31, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1152286518.

[35]Blasu, "Evolution Worldview and Creation Care," 22.

[36]Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*, 12.

[37]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 167.

[38]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 167.

[39]Kwame Bediako, "Gospel and Culture: Some Insights for Our Time from the Experience of the Earliest Church," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 2, no. 2 (December 1999): 8.

[40]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 167.

[41]Bediako, "Gospel and Culture," 8.

[42]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 167.

[43]Blasu, *African Theocology*, 74.

[44]Bediako, "Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture and Tradition," 6.

[45]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

[46]Ebenezer Yaw Blasu, "Religious Cosmology and Ecology: Traditional Birthing Rites of the Sokpoe-Eʋe as Priming for Creation Care," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 20, no. 1 (June 2017): 32.

[47]Blasu, "Religious Cosmology and Ecology,"34.

[48]David Bookless, *Planetwise: Dare to Care for God's World* (InterVarsity Press, 2008), 50.

[49]Russ Parker, *Healing Wounded History* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001).

[50]Ebenezer Yaw Blasu, "Engaging Culture with Scripture: Toward an African Christian Ecological Liturgy for the Outdooring Rite of the Sokpoe-Eʋe," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 21, no. 1 (June 2018): 33–41.

[51]Blasu, *African Theocology*, 233.

[52]Blasu, *African Theocology*, 211.

[53]Blasu, *African Theocology*, 211.

[54]David H. Roper, "Taken in," in *Our Daily Bread*, annual edition (Our Daily Bread Ministries, 2023), 141.

[55]Ebenezer Yaw Blasu and Jonathan E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Challenges with Building Christian Academy in 21st Century Africa: Dilemma of Promoting Discipline Character in Christian Tertiary Institutions in Ghana," *Asian Journal of Education and e-Learning* 1, no. 3 (August 2013): 150, https://docslib.org/doc/2422848/challenges-with-building-christian-academy-in-21st-century-africa-dilemma-of-promoting-discipline-character-in-christian-tertiary-institutions-in-ghana#google_vignette.

[56]Blasu and Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "Challenges with Building Christian Academy in 21st Century Africa," 150.

[57]Ben-Willie K. Golo, "The Deficit of Environmental Leadership in Africa and Its Implication for Theological Education in the 21st Century," *OGUAA Journal of Religion & Human Values* 3 (October 2014): 25.

[58]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 170.

[59]Katongole, "Mission as Integral Ecology," 170.