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Re-reading African Creation Stories An Imperative for the Creation of Environmental Consciousness

Nicholas Ibeawuchi MBOGU, CMF

1. Introduction

In Africa, especially among the Ibos of Southern Nigeria, a parable is the oil with which speeches are eaten. In the same vein, life is understood as a parable laden with meanings, full of interpretations. To understand nature's mysteries is a wisdom open to a few, it means understanding ones world and place in nature. Hence understanding humanity's relation to his world and the God-human relation is a mystery laden with interpretations. In Africa, these mysteries are hidden in the myths. The African world is a world of myths and each reality has a myth associated with its origin. God, the author of the universe is seen as the origin and sustainer of existence. This concept has been expressed in different myths of origins. Thus this article explores the 'African myths of origins (divine parables) as an imperative towards creating environmental consciousness. It begins with a brief guideline that should accompany any discussion into the relationship between nature and humanity in African religions.

2. Nature and Humanity in African Religions

At the outset it must be pointed 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 it signifies the total human and physical environment

of the Hausa city state.¹⁴⁰ *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 African Traditional Religions. Indeed, the introductory chapters to all of the texts written on African Traditional Religion 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. 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 here is multifocal: We 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 South-western Nigeria, and to some other Nigerian groups.

Africa has suffered from a long history of misunderstanding and oppression. In addition to the physical and economic oppression of her peoples, Africa has also withstood a succession of differing mental pictures in regard to the environments, all of which distort

¹⁴⁰ Richards, P. and Nicholas Harris (eds.), *African Environment: Problems and Perspectives*, London: International African Institute, 1975, p106.

or over generalize. Lewis and Berry in their work *African environments and Resources*¹⁴¹ 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 diseases. Yet another and more recent picture of Africa is that of Africa as a devastated continent. 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 could 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

¹⁴¹ Lewis L. A. and L. Berry, *African Environments and Resources*, Boston: Unwin and Hyman, 1988, p13ff.

misconceptions invented by Westerners who did not understand Africans and their world view.¹⁴² 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.¹⁴³ Furthermore, there is often intense suspicion about foreigners who investigate into 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, even if the person is a member (uninitiated) of the ethnic group. Under these circumstances, only careful observations of what a group actually practices over a long period of time can yield even the most tentative of conclusions.

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. In African Traditional Religion 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 many of our natural environments are either threatened by fires set indiscriminately or as farming techniques, disappearance of our natural environments as "modernism" reaches African villages and towns even as the modern world (Europe and America) are suffering a tragic loss of intimacy with the source of life itself, mother earth and its natural

¹⁴² Oliver Alozie Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion and Culture*, vol.1, Snaap Press, Enugu-Nigeria 1991, pp64-65.

¹⁴³ Norris, E. G. and P. Heine, "Geneological Manipulations and Social Identity in Sansanne, Northern Togo" in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (45) 1982, 118-137

beauty. This is our target; the creation of environmental consciousness in our people.

3. The Creation myths and the African Worldview

In the whole of Africa, creation is the most widely acknowledged work of God. This concept is expressed in so many myths of 'origins,' and through many sayings, such as, that God created all things. It is also expressed through giving God names that designate Him as Creator (or Moulder, or Maker) and through addressing Him in prayer and invocations as the Creator. Examples abound of how African people understand the creative activity of God.

The Ibo people give God such names as: *Chukwu Okike*, *Chi-na-eke*, *Olisa-kpuru-uwa*, meaning Creator, Originator, Hewer, Carver, inventor, Architect, and it is firmly believed that it was God alone who created the world. The universe is seen as having its architectural origin and form from God, who is pictured as the Artist-in-Chief. Of the four most known names of God among the Ibos, *Chi-na-eke*, (God who creates) is the nearest in the mouths of the people. He is constantly invoked in almost every circumstance of life. At times one hears the name: *Uzu-na-akpu-nwa* (the porter who moulds life). The picture here is taken from the human act of slicing or splitting wood with an axe. So God creates as a carver, a porter and therefore, supplies the details and adds distinctiveness and character. These two names of God are complementary.

The metaphor of the porter is then commonly used to describe God's creative activity, and of this we find many examples, for instance, the second account of creation in the book of Genesis. Believing that God shapes children in the mother's womb and no other, we hear such sayings as: *Chi-na-enye-nwa*, *Chi-nyere m*, etc. Many African people hold that there was nothing before God created the world. This means that God created out of nothing, in the original act of creation, though now he may use existing materials to continue his creative activity. This concept of

creation *ex nihilo* is also reported among the Neur, Banyarwand and Shona peoples.

The ancient Tiv of Nigeria, who are famed for their woodwork, think of God as the carpenter who “carves” the world giving it different forms and shapes. When the Lunda people speak of God as “father creator”, they place him on a parental level: He fathered all things, and exercises His fatherly care over them. God, the Creator, is believed to be outside and beyond the universe (transcendent). At the same time, since he is the sustainer and upholder of life, he is very close to the universe. Definitely a careful research into these various cultures may yield the same result.

It is believed that God not only created the material universe but also established laws of nature and human customs. The Ashanti of Ghana believe that God created things in order of fashion and made an orderly and harmonious world where every one could perform his or her own duties. The Yorubas of Nigeria think of God as “Author of day and night” and regard each as his offspring. God not only continues to create physically, He also ordains the destiny of his creatures, especially that of human beings. Among the Yorubas before a person comes into this world he stands before God to choose, receive or have his destiny fixed by God. They also hold that when God creates a person, He fixes how long the individual would live.

African views of creation are many and varied.¹⁴⁴ According to Evans-Pritchard, many African myths assume the existence of the world at the beginning and start with the creation of humanity.¹⁴⁵ The Vugusu, for example, tell that God created first the heavenly universe with the sun, moon, stars and clouds; then He created the earth, followed by the creation of man (both husband and wife) and finally plants and animals and other earthly creatures. In the

¹⁴⁴ Mbiti, J., *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd Edition 1990), London: Heinemann Educational Ltd., 1969, pp39-41.

¹⁴⁵ Evans-Pritchard, *Neur Religion*, London: Clarendon Press, 1956, p6.



Akan tradition, creation took place in this order: first the sky, then the earth, rivers, waters, plants, man and animals. Many peoples like the lozi, Mende and others hold that God ended His work of creation with the creation of man. Generally it is explained that the creation of heaven preceded that of the earth, but we do not find any special order in the creation of minor things.¹⁴⁶

The earth is full of created things. Some people regard it as a living being and some call it "mother", "the earth goddess" or "the divinity earth" and is revered as such. In some places in Iboland, there are "Ala shrines." It is abominable to desecrate the earth. Sacrifices are made for appeasement when its sanctity has been violated. This violation may include the unwanton destruction of certain trees considered as sacred by the community, the poisoning of drinking water, etc. It is common in African Traditional Religions 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.¹⁴⁷ For the Hahm people of Central Nigeria, there is an ambiguity about the sun: some would say that the sun is God, and others say only that the sun manifests God.¹⁴⁸ This ambiguity is noted among other peoples as well, such as the Ankore,¹⁴⁹ 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. John S. Mbiti believes that a few societies "associate God and rain so closely that the same word, or its cognate, is used for both."¹⁵⁰ Others personify rain as one of the divinities. Some groups see

¹⁴⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p40.

¹⁴⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p47, 52.

¹⁴⁸ Kato H. Byang, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, Kisumu-Kenya: Evangelical Publishing House, 1975, pp30-34.

¹⁴⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p47.

¹⁵⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p69.

rain as God's saliva,¹⁵¹ and others, such as several groups in Nigeria's Plateau State, see 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.¹⁵²

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.¹⁵³ Although African Traditional Religions see 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. Accordingly, there is an ontological hierarchy of God/ spirits/ humans/ animals and plants/ phenomena and objects without biological life.¹⁵⁴ 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 world¹⁵⁵....For African

¹⁵¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p41.

¹⁵² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p54.

¹⁵³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p33.

¹⁵⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p16.

¹⁵⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp56-57.

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.¹⁵⁶

There is a sacral quality to the material universe in African thought. It is not "dead". Hence, 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.¹⁵⁷ To be more precise, J. Mbiti adds that this "force" is "approximately what the anthropologists call mana but it has nothing to do with Placide Tempels' 'vital force' concept."

It is difficult to make any firm statement about the "goodness" of creation in African Traditional Religions. 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, a Ghanaian theologian Kofi Opoku

¹⁵⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, pp56-57.

¹⁵⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p16.

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."¹⁵⁸ Just as often in African creation myths, however, the world is created as the result of an accident, lending impetus to a fatalistic flavour. In the same vein Bolaji Idowu 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... 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.¹⁵⁹

Underlined here is the ethical implication of not paying attention to the stewardship role of the human being in creation. 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 continued. 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, which angered God 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.¹⁶⁰ Donders believes that this story could form an excellent basis for an ecological ethic.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Opoku Kofi, Asare, *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra Ghana: FEP International Private Limited, 1978, p22.

¹⁵⁹ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, London: Longmans Publishers, 1962, p21.

¹⁶⁰ Donders, Joseph G., *Non-Bourgeois Theology*, New York: Orbis/Maryknoll publication, 1984, p31.

¹⁶¹ Donders, *Non Bourgeois Theology*, p31.

Another example might lie in a Yoruba myth related by Idowu.¹⁶² He tells us that in a Yoruba myth, the divinities one time petitioned *Olódùmarè* to let them run 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.¹⁶³ 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. The creation myth of the Yoruba does not give humanity any explicitly stated "dominion" over creation, such as one finds in Gen 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..."¹⁶⁴ The ethnographical literature from a vast

¹⁶² Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, London: SCM Press, 1973, p159.

¹⁶³ Uli Biere, *Origin of Life and Death*, p19.

¹⁶⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and philosophy*, p71.

number of African ethnic groups confirms this finding in each case.

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 is in a "kinship" relationship 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."¹⁶⁵

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.¹⁶⁶ 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.

4. Implications for Environmental Consciousness and Theological Reflection Today

African creation myths are rich and religious in their orientation. They reveal more than we can ordinary think of them. They require some re-reading and interpretation to unveil the rich theology that natural wisdom has bestowed on the African. They

¹⁶⁵ Opoku Kofi Asare, "African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage" in Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds.), *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essay in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993, pp62-83, esp. pp77-78.

¹⁶⁶ Opoku, "African Traditional Religion", p78.

require:

4.1 *A metaphoric interpretative model of the creation myths*

Following what we have said about African cosmogony, there is no doubt that this consciousness of God as the author and sustainer of all that exists has some practical implication for theology in Africa and in the wider universe. Clearly, the relation between God and creation should be interpreted from a metaphorical perspective. Sallie McFague's model is very helpful here. McFague sees the whole world as the body of God.¹⁶⁷ She does not assume that creation gives us a direct description of God, but employs an as-if model of theologizing.¹⁶⁸ The description of the world as the body of God describes the immanence of God in terms of his identification with the cosmos. The African cosmogonies are panentheistic, that is, the view of the God-world relationship in which all things have their origin in God and nothing exists outside God, though this does not mean that God is reduced to things.¹⁶⁹ God has an empathetic, intimate and sympathetic knowledge of the world which implies that the action of God in the world is similarly interior and caring.¹⁷⁰

McFague's model is very important because it awakens us to a new consciousness of sacramental approach. It is the basis of a revived sacramentalism, that is, the perception of the divine as visible, as present, palpably present in our world.¹⁷¹ This also challenges theology to rethink in favour of ecology. In this regard, sin takes a new dimension. It becomes the refusal to nurture creation. According to McFague, "to sin is not to refuse loyalty to the Lord but to refuse to take responsibility for nurturing, loving, befriending the body and all its parts."¹⁷² The beauty of the world and its ability to sustain the vast multitude of species it supports is

¹⁶⁷ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, p69.

¹⁶⁸ McFague, *Models of God*, p70.

¹⁶⁹ McFague, *Models of God*, p72.

¹⁷⁰ McFague, *Models of God*, p73.

¹⁷¹ McFague, *Models of God*, p77.

¹⁷² McFague, *Models of God*, p77.

not there for the taking. Rather, the world is a body that must be carefully tended, that must be nurtured, protected, guided, loved and befriended both as valuable in itself for like us, it is an expression of God and as necessary to the continuation of life.¹⁷³

Surely, what has emerged out of our discussion is closely associated with our images of God. The challenge facing Eco-theologians is whether we depart from an antithetical model or whether we use a hermeneutical model to interpret the presence of God in creation. We could isolate God from creation in order to safeguard his transcendence. But this nonetheless runs the risk of selling out creation and delivering it to evil powers. The alternative would be to argue for God and creation. This does not solve the problem either. The challenge for theology is to rethink the notion, God in creation, without necessarily falling prey to pantheism. For Moltmann, the challenge is for theology to rediscover God in creation.¹⁷⁴ In other words, our ecological consciousness leads automatically to radically altering the notion "God and creation" to "God in Creation."

4.2 *Dominium terrae or Cura terrae?*

In his book *Schöpfung: Schöpfungstheologie angesichts der Herausforderungen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Link reveals how the commission in Genesis 1:28 to subdue the earth has been misunderstood (*Dominium terrae*).¹⁷⁵ This has led to the exploitation of the earth. According to Link, Genesis 1:28 was not written to promote technological progress and scientific advancement. Humankind was created to represent God in creation and to nurture it. Whenever dominion is separated from our responsibility to God, exploitation and destructive power emerge.¹⁷⁶ Certainly, creation is our home to be enjoyed, not to scrap-yard for our technological inquisitiveness. Walter

¹⁷³ McFague, *Models of God*, p77.

¹⁷⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1993, ppxi-xii.

¹⁷⁵ Link C., *Schöpfung: Schöpfungstheologie angesichts der Herausforderungen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Gütersloh 1991, p391.

¹⁷⁶ Link, *Schöpfung*, p397.

Brueggemann lends his weight in support of the notion of creation as a well-structured network of integrated relations.¹⁷⁷ According to him the messages of the psalms of creation reflect orientation and indicate that the cosmos is an ordered entity. These psalms are in various ways expressions of creation faith. They affirm that the world is a well-ordered, reliable, life-giving system, because God ordered it that way and continues to preside effectively over the process. Creation is not a chaotic mass, but an image and sign. Gilkey describes God's creation as a sign of his glory.¹⁷⁸ In our context, image is taken to mean a sign, symbol or sacrament of the divine, disclosing through itself the divine glory. In other words, nature manifests or reveals certain unmistakable signs of the divine, namely, power, life, order and redemptive unity bestowed on it by God.

Dealing with creation myths in African requires some understanding in theology. The notion of God in creation should be interpreted hermeneutically and pneumatologically, not ontologically. This makes for the difference between pantheism and panentheism. In panentheism, creation becomes a metaphor for the *shalom*, which is an intrinsic part of God's involvement in creation. Creation is used as a metaphor for home, and therefore challenges humans to husbandry of the earth. Caring and preserving the earth becomes the main objective husbandry. According to Moltmann, "...human mastery over the earth is intended to resemble the cultivating and productive work of the gardener. Nothing is said about predatory exploitation."¹⁷⁹ The notion of creation as the body of God lays the foundation for an ecological theology. The earth (land as well) is regarded in terms of a sacramental understanding. Life is seen as a symbol of God's presence and glory. Caring for the earth becomes a doxology when seen from the perspective of the sanctification of the earth. The playful nurturing and abundant enjoyment of creation is God's intention in creating.

¹⁷⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984, p26.

¹⁷⁸ Gilkey Lang, "Nature as the image of God: Signs of the sacred" in *Theology Today* 51, 1 (1994) 127-141.

¹⁷⁹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p30.

4.3 *Care for the Environment as an invitation to holistic spirituality*

Our obvious attempts to curb the ecological crisis by formulating a new understanding of our environment, presupposes a rejection of the reductionistic approach of classical theology and physics. In contrast to the reductionistic approach, which isolates parts from the whole and thinks in terms of fractions and particles, our new ecological thinking reasons in terms of system thinking. The most important feature of the science of ecology is its fundamental assumption about the natural world. The ecological view is that living creatures in any given environment are interdependent and have to be understood as a whole.¹⁸⁰

Here two options are opened for consideration in an attempt to combat the ecological crisis. First, “technocentrism,” which means managing the crisis by technical means, thus obtaining efficient control. Second, “ecocentrism”, this approach operates with sensitivity and respect for all forms of life on earth. The latter leads to what Osborn has called a “green spirituality.”¹⁸¹ This in itself represents the philosophy of the interconnectedness of the ecosystems. This ecological spirituality is indicative of hope for a better earth, reflecting on the relationship between God's immanence and the interconnectedness of all forms of life in the cosmos. An important question here is whether our holistic and ecological thinking represents the scriptural creation narrative.

The African creation myths which we are trying to unveil are not aware of the so-called green theology or spirituality. We are reading the myths from the perspective of the humans of the Old Testament who were enjoying creation in the presence of God. We recognize fully that “the Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all its peoples” (Ps. 24). Since as humans we have

¹⁸⁰ See Osborn Langdon, *Guardians of creation: Nature in Theology and the Christian life*, Leicester: Appolos Press, 1993, p13.

¹⁸¹ Langdon, *Guardians of Creation*, p46.

inherited the earth, we should accept ownership.¹⁸² Obedience to God's intentions should lead to a nurturing attitude. "The Land will yield its fruits, and you will have your fill and live there in safety" (Lev 25:18-19). A holistic ecological consciousness should lead us to the conclusion that the management of the earth is both an art and a culture. To a certain level, Africa has been shielded from the environmental disasters besieging continental Europe and the Americas. However, skills and technology of all kinds may be admirable, but the tyrannical or greedy use of human power over nature is a failure to imbibe the culture and art of management of the earth and a failure also to recognize God's intention in creation.

The African creation myths call for a new orientation: a green economics which embraces a lot of many Old Testament principles concerning economic life, such as the need to restrain the accumulation of wealth, to achieve justice through a "bias to the poor" in public policy, and to focus upon *stewardship* rather than ownership. The dynamics of the myths of creation avoids a mechanistic interpretation of God and attempts to move towards a more sympathetic understanding of God's involvement in creation. Surely, our practical theological approach to creation theology, hinged on the notion of "God in Creation", is related to the dynamics of a practical theological aesthetics. Rudolf Bohren has in his book *Dass Gott Schön Werde: Praktische Theologie als Theologische Ästhetik*¹⁸³ proclaimed God beautiful. When people discover unity with nature and meaning in creation, it arouses amazement and wonder. Art could be seen as culture's attempt to restore order in creation. Through art man cooperates with God, in an attempt to care for creation. Caring includes an ecological nurturing of creation. Caring for creation is not only an ethical issue, but also includes aesthetics. Care and enjoyment go hand in hand when not only the interconnectedness of creation is

¹⁸² Clare Palmer, "Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics" in Jan Ball, Margaret Goodall et al (eds.), *The Earth Beneath: A Critical Guide to Green Theology*, London: SPCK Press, 1992, pp77-84.

¹⁸³ Bohren, Rudolf, *Dass Gott Schön Werde: Praktische Theologie als theologische Ästhetik*, München: Kaiser Verlag, 1975.

discovered, but also the interconnectedness with our natural environment. Because our future is at stake if only wanton exploitation and destruction of the natural environment is allowed, but it is a moral imperative to preserve the future for ourselves and future generations.¹⁸⁴

4.4 *Restoring the Spiritual/Ethical Value of Land*

The issue of land has remained a political question, be it between Israel and Palestine, between the Modakeke and Ife people, or among the Itsekiris and Urohbos, between the Jos indigenes and the Hausa Fulanis. The land redistribution policy/politics of the president Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe or that of the South African government under Mandela or Mbeki governments points to the necessity of land both for the economic survival of the people and the assurance of a homeland. It is likely that our conventional Christianity has always to talk about Yahweh and neglected land. On the other hand secular humanism wants to talk always of Land and not Yahweh.

If we really want to restore environmental consciousness among our people, the first thing to realize is that land in the Old Testament is immediately connected to the preservation of life and the notion of *shalom*. Land issue was never separated from the familial paradigm. The reason for this was that the preservation of life aimed to prevent exploitation and poverty. The issue of peace or *shalom* was not an abstract reality to the biblical authors but a spiritual reality. *Shalom* corresponds to the quality of life. To restore *shalom* means to preserve life by apportioning land.¹⁸⁵ Land was a place for peaceful living and as exposition of human dignity.

The prophetic tradition's principles of *shalom* and hospitality have been maintained (see the story of Naboth's garden in 1 Kings

¹⁸⁴ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp38-39 (trans. from German edition: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilization*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979).

¹⁸⁵ See Janzen W., *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, p42.

21). God sent his prophet when he saw that life has been violated, when inheritance/land has been alienated and when hospitality has been replaced by egoistic concern for self.¹⁸⁶ The Naboth's episode explains the prophet's preoccupation with economic exploitation as an illustration of what the preservation of life and the promotion of peace entail.

Territory/land constituted a decisive theological principle. Land as a political, social, economic and national entity was embedded in Israel's self understanding and their national territory as part of creation, the earth, a historical gift of God to the chosen people. Land was therefore an epitome for "*Lebensraum*," a space for human living, governed by the principles of justice, hospitality and integrity. The theological principle we are envisaging here is one that is tied with some ethical dimensions: namely, the principle of inheritance, (land as a gift of God) and hospitality (sharing in order to prevent poverty) corresponds with the deeper meaning of shalom. Land was a metaphor for a spirituality which reflects the quality of the relationship with things (economic relationships) as well as with people (social relationship). The land issue was always connected to the presence of God. Things and therefore the environment as well as the earth, should be stewarded, human beings should be cared for, that is, the healing through qualitative relationships determined by peace and hospitality.

Land was a sort of spiritual thermometer. It was an indication of the spiritual temperature in the economic sphere, revealing the quality of the relationship with God as well as the social shape of life. Economic exploitation was a moral evil which should be condemned on the basis of our common humanity and an ethic of stewardship.¹⁸⁷ It was the belief that God owns the land and therefore demands accountability in the use of it from his tenants.¹⁸⁸ The environmental degradation of land due to dumping

¹⁸⁶ Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, p156.

¹⁸⁷ Wright, C. J. H, *Living as the people of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983, p57.

¹⁸⁸ Wright, *Living as the people of God*, p59.

of chemical waste, destruction of aquatic life due to oil spillage or pollution is all moral attacks on life.

A spirituality of land connects well with the African view of land. In African cultures, land is a spiritual space and place. It belongs to the spiritual realm and the transcendent reality of the ancestors. Land is also a relational factor, binding families and communities. Land has a sacred character, constituting a centre for the way of life and the basis for a God-given self-respect and creativity. Separated and deprived of one's land, war and instability are at hand. Surely, the issue of environmental theology opens up a new horizon towards the understanding of our environmental needs. The land issue creates sensitivity for being lost, displaced, homeless, dislocated and poor. Within this ambient one sees the broad issues that the environment can explore: the management and exploitation of natural resources and its equitable distribution and also a new understanding and hermeneutics of belongingness and sharing. We all belong to the land and therefore have a moral obligation towards the preservation of our environments as worthy stewards of our God given gift, the land.

5. Conclusion

The issue of the environmental concern seem to be a forgotten one both among our governments and the citizens of the great nation called, Nigeria. The degree of environment degradations indicate the lack of environmental consciousness: oil spillage in the Niger Delta areas, many erosion sites in and across the Nigerian Federation, the desert encroachment in the northern part of the country, and the disappearance of forests in the country. The early 1970s appear to have been an age of environmental consciousness fine-tuned by the tree-planting campaign of the Murtala Muhammed led military government. At that time too in Imo state of Nigeria, the Mbakwe civilian administration, having been challenged by the Ndi-Egoro erosion disaster, encouraged the people to plant trees with the slogan, "if you cut down a tree, plant four." This was to bring to the awareness of the people how

important healthy vegetation is for a healthy environment. This campaign was not continued by successive governments both at the Federal and State levels. The present ecological concerns in the country oil spillage in the Niger Delta areas due to oil exploration, the complete disappearance of aquatic life in these areas, the crisis that has accompanied this over exploitation of the earth and its resources, the formation of different militant groups fighting the oil companies working in the area all point to one thing, that human failure to steward and respect the land can lead to various levels of crisis, be it economic, political or social. In spite of the greater concern for industrial development which has seemed to drown out environmental concerns, grassroot level ecological movements in Africa have been springing up increasingly in the early 1990s. The "Green Belt Movement" started by the Noble Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai of Nairobi Kenya remains a visible example of how we can save the environment, future generations and ourselves through tree planting and thus restoring life. This is one aspect to which a theological re-reading of the African cosmogonies can help in restoring the ecological balance between humanity and the environment.