

Religion and Conservation in Ghana

by Mike Anane

It is an undeniable fact that until recently our conception of knowledge was bound by the philosophy and methods of Western science: few people recognized that there are myriad sciences embedded in cultures of other peoples and civilizations throughout the world. Accordingly, attempts at finding solutions to some problems afflicting the modern world have totally ignored religion and other cultural practices of indigenous people.

Environmental degradation, for instance, has become a topical issue with everyone realizing that the earth is gradually losing its capacity to sustain life. Evidence abounds of the steady deterioration of the earth as manifested in atmospheric changes, air and water pollution, loss of species, use of pesticides and the tearing down of rainforests, declining soil fertility and burgeoning population.

Various attempts continue to be made scientifically, politically, geographically and economically to contain the alarming environmental crises. Here again, the issue of culture, particularly traditional religious practices, generally seems to have been ignored as having a role to play in conservation.

In Ghana, the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), which provides a coherent framework for interventions deemed necessary to turn the environment and development efforts into more environmentally sustainable programmes and practices, regrettably does not highlight the potential of religion in this endeavour. Interestingly, UNCED's Agenda 21 also tucks away religion under the broad theme of traditional knowledge, culture and indigenous people with the argument that traditional knowledge is related to the entire culture of a people, including its identity, spiritual and religious beliefs. This tendency unfortunately relegates the immense potential of religion as a key to natural resource management and sustainable development to the background because these terminologies do not take into account Western or orthodox religions. I have no doubt that they may also have a deep spiritual relationship with the earth and deep respect for it.

It is indeed a pity that the world missed a golden opportunity at UNCED to include religious groups as part of the nine officially agreed Major Groups. This would have allowed the bringing together of experts on both Western and traditional religion. They would have provided their perspectives and experiences to help find ways of supporting each other in their quest for solutions to what often seems intractable local and global environmental problems.

However, it is gratifying that in Ghana today, some NGOs and scholars are recognizing the importance of various traditional religious beliefs or culture-based knowledge systems in addressing alarming problems of environment and development. Indeed consensus seems to be emerging that a new type of relationship or contract is needed among indigenous people, national governments and international development agencies. The old "top-down" or paternalistic forms of development can no longer be enough in the face of environmental catastrophe. In this bid, some Ghanaian NGOs have already launched conservation projects with traditional religion playing indispensable roles.

NGOs and Religion

Recognizing how traditional or customary social institutions are promoting biodiversity, conservation, and sustainable development, Friends of the Earth Ghana (FoE) launched the first project to conserve some sacred groves in the country as part of its biodiversity programme. These fetish or sacred groves are patches of forest ranging from 0.5 to 1500 hectares and may consist of only a few trees, stones or rivers serving a variety of purposes such as burial grounds for some royal families or habitats of traditional gods or fetishes.

Together with the local community, the FoE is already working to conserve the Guako grove on the outskirts of Accra, the capital of Ghana. In its rescue bid, FoE has embarked on education campaigns to make people aware of the need to conserve the grove. A nursery for restocking the grove with more trees has been established, and planting is in progress.

In another area, a group of forest department workers in the Ashanti region decided to start an NGO to help communities protect sacred groves, after having come across many of them in the course of their regular survey work. Today, their NGO;the Ghana Association for the Conservation of Nature (Ghacon);not only has foresters as members but chiefs, community leaders, hunters, farmers, university lecturers, and women's groups in some of the remote parts of the country.

Ghacon says most of the untouched forest cover of the Ashanti region is made up of sacred groves, with a few forest reserves protected by government. Vast stretches of surrounding forests have been torn down by farming activities and logging. Ghacon therefore decided to conduct a nationwide survey of forest cover designated as sacred groves and to join hands with the communities to protect them.

This help would be in the form of advising them on the construction of firebelts to protect the groves from being burned down by rampant bush fires from nearby farms during the dry season. To support Ghacon's activities, organizations such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the GTZ, a German technical assistance programme, have contributed significant funds to encourage the protection of sacred groves.

Established centuries ago, many of these indigenous areas protected by customary laws still exist and are considered to be abodes of the gods. In most cases, royalty from a particular village was buried there and the area protected out of respect for the dead.

In other cases, rivers and streams are treated as sacred and their catchment area and surrounding forests protected in the belief that the river god lives in the forest. Logging, cultivation, or entry on certain days by women during their menstrual cycle is forbidden.

In certain parts of Ghana, forests are also venerated because they house a variety of wild animals considered sacred, or totems. One example is the belief in a common ancestry with the leopard, which is the symbol of the Akan people. The forest in which these animals are found is sacred; killing this species is therefore not allowed. The benefits for conservation are clear.

Sacred Groves and Conservation

That sacred groves contribute greatly towards conservation of biodiversity cannot be overemphasized. Originally, these sacred groves were based on religious and cultural beliefs, but

they have since made significant contributions to the protection of wildlife and other biological resources. For example, the Boaben-Fiema monkey sanctuary, located within the moist forest deciduous zone, is richer than any other Ghanaian forest in terms of diverse types and rare species of monkeys like the Black and White Colobus and Mona monkeys. These species are considered sacred by the people of Boaban and Fiema villages. Here, the unharmed "children of the gods" have for hundreds of years come into the villages daily to eat and play. The sanctuary is also rich in trees; of about 125 known species, they include such rare ones as *Pericopsis Elata*, which is listed in Appendix II of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

The Malshegu sacred grove in northern Ghana is another of the few remaining examples of non-riverine, closed canopy forest in the savanna. According to oral history, the Malshegu ancestors settled here in the early 18th century but did not find any peace. They finally succeeded in warding off the marauding gangs of Arab slave raiders who were tormenting them. They attributed this success to the spiritual support of a boulder under a baobab tree. To give this oracle a peaceful and shady home from where it could constantly oversee the village and the inhabitants, the land surrounding the baobab tree was demarcated and labelled by the priest as fetish land. All forms of land use like farming and grazing were forbidden in the grove. Now measuring 0.8 hectares, the Malshegu grove is an isolated pocket of forest and stands in sharp contrast to its surroundings, which are highly degraded. It now serves as a refuge for numerous indigenous animal species and seeds. Protection of the grove is the responsibility of the community, which firmly believes that the Kpalevorgu deity ensures fertility, protection, good rainfall and a bumper agriculture harvest. It is a lush open canopy forest in a degraded open savannah.

Over 80% of sacred groves in Ghana serve as watersheds for catchment areas where they protect sources of drinking water. So far about 1.5% of Ghana's land is covered by some 2000 fetish groves and indeed, most taboos and beliefs surrounding many of these groves are conservationist in nature and approach.

For example, the Asuo Akosua stream in the Ashanti region is believed to be inhabited by a beautiful woman goddess, a deity which is accordingly worshipped by the people with the water source of the stream carefully protected. Farming activities are not allowed in this area, nor is clothes washing or other types of pollution.

These sacred groves are protected, conserved and maintained through a combination of taboos, prohibitions, beliefs and restrictions. Special members of the community organize periodic rituals, ancestral worship sessions and other customary rites. In almost all cases burning, fuelwood gathering and tree felling are forbidden. These traditional religious beliefs and practices have not merely resulted in the preservation of sacred groves but also promoted conservation of vegetation, which in turn promotes biodiversity and an ecological balance. The luxuriant green abundance of trees of different species and thick undergrowth in some parts of Ghana are living examples of what religion can do for conservation.

Lessons from the Past

Environmental conservation is not a recent phenomenon in indigenous African communities. Past generations knew about environmental degradation and the need for preservation. This found expression in traditional religious practices simply because the African believes that everything that belongs to the ecosystem and the environment has a strong spiritual meaning for humans. Indeed the African's attitude to nature is deeply rooted in the belief that all things were created by the

supreme being for a harmonious continuity, and as such there must be a relationship of mutual obligations between all created things.

For instance, natural phenomena were seen as possessing spiritual power and the natural force that supplies food seen as superior and accorded respect and veneration. Certain trees, for instance, could not be felled because they were considered as Nyame Dua (God's trees) and are therefore sacred and endowed with healing powers. Indiscriminate tree felling experienced today was unheard of in the days when these traditional religious practices ensured the preservation of forests.

Land in African societies was also seen as a goddess, Asaase Yaa, by the Akans in Ghana. On Thursdays and Fridays, one could not farm the land; this regulated man's impact on the land and thus secured its fertility. Land in these traditional societies belong to clans and not to the individuals, and because the clan consisted of both the living, the dead and even the unborn, it enhanced the idea of sharing and caring for nature.

Generally, rivers and seas were also seen as abodes of the gods. As divinities, certain human activities that marred their beauty were considered taboo; therefore, pollution, industrial and human waste could not be discharged into these water bodies lest the culprits were punished by the Abosomfo, or gods.

Sadly, much as the awareness of the indispensable role of religion in conservation and environmental protection has dawned lately, the good intentions of some NGOs and researchers to help revive these religious practices and conserve the existing groves and other sacred practices have been viewed with suspicion by certain indigenous communities, who may see them as attempts to deprive them of their age-old traditional practices and replace them with Western concepts. To many local people, the current Western buzzwords of "community empowerment" smack of outside interference, and they have justifiably resisted any attempts at empowerment.

Many conferences on sustainable development, including UNCED, have also persistently failed and even refused to acknowledge the role of religion in conservation and environmental protection, thus alienating indigenous people from the fight to save the environment. For many policy makers, it's business as usual as the "top-down" approach to projects is tenaciously maintained.

The Western Impact

Before the advent of colonization and of Christianity and Islam, the African lived in harmony with nature. With the arrival of the white man, land that was collectively owned and managed by Africans was balkanized for individual ownership, with new and exotic crops introduced to feed the colonialist. Chemicals were poured into soils and rivers, virgin forests that had been preserved for their sacredness were raped by the colonial masters and the trees that were felled exported abroad.

Until recently, traditional religious practices were seen by our colonial masters as a hindrance to development. Missionaries who trooped to Africa alongside the colonial masters discouraged traditional practices such as the worshipping of rivers, mountains, and trees, which they described as idolatry and heathen.

Nevertheless, colonialism also had its good sides. The preservationist style of management of Africa's wildlife had its origins during the colonial period. Despite the economic interest in Africa, many Europeans viewed it as a "Garden of Eden," which provided them with the opportunity to

experience the "wild and natural environment" that no longer existed in Europe. This resulted in a desire to maintain and preserve the wild and natural in Africa.

Accordingly, the first international conservation treaty, the Convention for the Preservation of Animals, was signed in London in 1900 and became the basis for colonial wildlife legislation in Anglophone Africa. Land was subsequently demarcated for national parks and game reserves, to protect large animal species and their habitat. This concern over the future of wildlife in Africa facilitated the creation of conservation organizations like the Wildlife Leadership Foundation and the World Wide Fund for Nature, which have continued to support African environmental organizations.

On attainment of independence, new African governments continued to maintain and expand the protected area systems; some legislation introduced during colonization still exists. Indeed the continuing government support for the preservationist attitude in many African countries today is a colonial legacy. A case in point is the Aburi Botanical Gardens near Accra. Established in 1875 by the British colonial government as a sanatorium for convalescent colonial officers, it became the first leading botanical museum by 1890 and still enjoys immense support from past and present Ghanaian governments.

Here again the paradox of colonialism is clear. In most cases, colonial decisions were taken without consideration of traditional land use systems and without the consent of local communities whose livelihoods were at stake. Instead these communities were seen as a threat to wildlife and forests. So the colonial authorities prevented any human interference and the local communities were deprived of access to pastures, farming land and fisheries and wildlife, resources upon which they depended for their livelihood. Even hunting rights were denied to the indigenous people.

Not only was land first nationalized in colonial times, but the colonialists, in their desperation to protect wildlife in Africa, overlooked its traditional role in African culture, which is oriented towards contributing to survival and tied up with totems, taboos and customs.

A critical look would reveal that some of these places are managed by a council of elders who decide how the surrounding forest may be used, which trees to cut and why, and so on. Sadly, as the elders die off the ancient traditions regarding the sacred groves are also dying. The younger generation seem not to care so much for customs and traditions, preferring to join the rural-urban exodus in search of white-collar jobs.

Conclusion

Christianity, science, poverty, Western education; none has succeeded in debunking the African belief in traditional religion. Most Western-educated Africans and Westerners flock to shrines in Africa whenever confronted with serious financial and social problems.

Clearly, traditional practices reveal that African societies were aware in the past of the need to protect their environment. This is shrouded in religious beliefs, partly because religion permeates virtually all aspects of African life. This awareness led to an environmental ethic, which implied using the spiritual world to protect the environment. Perhaps what modern conservationists, policy makers and researchers, particularly in the West, must do is go back and learn from a traditional religion and culture that managed to live alongside the rivers and forests and use them sustainably. Myth is indeed more potent than history; these indigenous people, who have lived harmoniously with nature, need to be encouraged to take charge of their own destinies. For ultimately, real progress lies in

enabling the weak and the marginalized to become the producers of their bounty and welfare, not the beneficiaries of aid and recipients of charity.

Religion, undoubtedly, is indispensable to modern-day conservation and environmental protection efforts. The Western world, which has long left its traditions behind and adopted lifestyles that have turned its environment into one big sewer, should go back and revive its ancient religious traditions that compare favourably with what prevails in Africa. This indeed is the true path to environmentally sound and sustainable development.