

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL WORLDVIEW: INDIGENOUS RESOURCE FOR RE- THINKING GLOBAL FAITH AND ECO- CULTIC SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

Africa possesses certain bodies of organized wisdom informed by their indigenous worldview that serve as a pool of resources for theologizing and advancing their spirituality in relation to the natural environment. Such indigenous resources which serve to re-think African theology and spirituality are embedded in African's 'ecocentric' values and practices. The African traditional worldview provides strong religious basis for eco-cultic spirituality that must not be obviated in tackling the menace of the current *oikocide* confronting humanity and the Church. This article demonstrates how African Traditional worldview, through its immense indigenous resources contributes to the catholic eco-theology. The paper argues that the African cultural resources and

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traditions are significant in eco-theology and contributing to the development of African theology. The first section of the paper articulates global faith as a justificatory framework which allows us to listen to the African voice in the universal dialogue concerning spirituality and the care of the environment. While the second section focuses on the cosmovision of indigenous resources for re-theologizing in Africa, the third section discusses African spirituality with emphasis on the eco-cultic practices theologically conducive to environmental or ecological sustainability. We conclude by articulating an evolving global catholic ecological spirituality through African conservation techniques as a formidable effort in tackling the global ecological crisis.

Keywords: *Asaase Yaa* (the Earth goddess), Cosmovision, Cruciformity, Eco-cultic Spirituality, Global Faith, Indigenous Resources, Land Ethic, Pluriversality, Sacred Groves, Traditional Worldview, Taboo, Totemism

Introduction

A true global Catholic spirituality demonstrates a serious concern for environmental sanity.¹ The question of what can be said to be global or catholic necessarily evokes the categories of inclusivity, universality, totality and wholeness. It is unthinkable to run an inclusive system that excludes. Whatever is inclusive lacks the capacity to exclude, among other things, culture, race, spirituality, tradition and the environment. Hence, situating environmental concerns within the purview of Catholicism or a Catholic spirituality that is essentially global is not unwarranted.

Furthermore, the spirituality of a faith that is essentially Catholic must be amenable to the polyphony of voices around the globe: voices that attempt to contribute from the repertoire of indigenous and spiritual resources their own quota to addressing issues of global concern such as the ecological crisis. This is precisely where we locate the African voice in this discussion. It is to the rich ethos and praxis of traditional African societies embedded in their spirituality that we turn for their irreplaceable voice in the global dialogue concerning the environment.

1. Global Faith

Global faith, as we construe it in this paper, has nothing to do with 'oneness' of faith or even uniformity of faith. Global faith, to use an imagery popular in Africa, is like a baobab tree with so many branches on which not just one species of bird perch but different

¹Cf. Salah M. Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spirituality of Ecology*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007.

birds domicile on it. In other words, Global faith, descriptively, is an explicatory linguistic framework which captures the presence of the multi-faith expressions of the different faith agencies which collectively constitute the global faith community. Used in this manner, global faith is a semiotic construct or a linguistic symbol which stands for the diverse forms of creedal expressions according to the numerous faith communities round the world. With global faith, we are talking not just of a faith but faiths. Since global faith is a canopy term which captures diversity, plurality, inclusivity and universality, an image that readily comes to mind is the *crucis* (the cross). Global faith is a cruciform faith. How does cruciformity help in articulating the concept of Global faith?

2. Global Faith as a Cruciform Faith

To understand how cruciformity helps in articulating the concept of global faith, a definition of global faith is necessary. A definition of global faith can take place at two levels: first, at a normative level and second, at a descriptive level. At the normative level, global faith is a belief in divine revelation that is deep in its depth as to reach down from the heavens to the earth and wide in extent as to reach from the east to the west of the globe. This is the level of Catholic particularity instantiated by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church as a normative expression of global faith does not exclude indigenous cultures of the peoples to whom the faith is communicated;² else it ceases to be global. At a descriptive level, global faith, as a canopy term embraces all faith forms in their widest diversity from north to south and east to west of the globe. With these definitions and categorizations, we can understand how cruciformity informs the concept of global faith. It is a cruciform faith that is vertical in connecting the heights of the heavens with the depths of the earth; and a faith simultaneously horizontal in extending the hands of universal brotherhood/sisterhood so wide as to cover even the margins of the east and the west of the globe in its inclusive outreach.³ Taking inspiration from the form of the cross⁴ (cruciform), we tap into the powerful image of the cross as a soteriological emblem of universal salvation for all peoples of every race and confession. Global faith in its cruciformity, therefore, relates with the

²Cf. Cyril Orji, "Using 'Foundation' as Inculturation Hermeneutic in a World Church: Did Rahner Validate Lonergan?" *The Heythrop Journal* 54 (2013) 293-294.

³Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1966, 2009, 83.

⁴Not necessarily the paschal dimension of the cross but the form of the figure of the cross manifested by its shape.

transcendent while embracing any faith that has a relation with transcendence and this includes the faith expressions of African traditional societies.

In addition to being universal in its all-embracing sense, it is also pluriversal in its inclusive outreach. The presence of the plurality of faiths⁵ captured by the essence of global faith makes it possible to locate Traditional African Religious ethos, cultic praxis and spirituality within this pluriversality of faith. In this sense, global faith allows us to listen to the voice of other faith traditions available in the world. Therefore, the pluriversal quality of global faith provides a justificatory leeway to bringing into the discussion the voice of the African faith as a co-participant with the Christian faith in common dialogue concerning the environment.

3. The Cosmivision of Traditional African Religion: Ontology, Cosmology and Psychological Interaction

It is essential to grasp an idea of the cosmivision (worldview) of African Traditional Religion. All African societies are guided by a certain understanding of the world in which they live, their relationship with the creator and all natural and super-natural phenomena.⁶ This basic understanding is what informs the worldview of African societies from which conceptual primitives are derived and constitute the guiding principles of their social organisation, religion, culture and spirituality.⁷

To avoid an over generalization,⁸ it is pertinent to point out that Africa is not a monolithic or homogeneous entity. Cultural pluralism and diversity characterize the African continent.⁹ According to Peter Knox, 'Africa' is not a univocal term as the name means different things to different people.¹⁰ Therefore, the designation 'African worldview' could be biting so much into the cake. Each society has its

⁵ Robert Schreiter, "The Anonymous Christian and Christology," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1978) 2.

⁶Cf. M. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987; A.B. Chima, *Communication, Culture and Community*, Nairobi: Pauline Press, 1999, 35.

⁷C.H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, New York: Orbis Books, 2000, 21.

⁸Joel Carpenter, "Preface," in Lamin Sanneh and Joel Carpenter, ed., *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West and the World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, ix.

⁹Cf. Ana Lucia and Yolanda Aixela, "Cultural Diversity in Africa: Colonial Legacy and Construction of Alternatives," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 22, 1 & 2 (2013) 1-5.

¹⁰Cf. Peter Knox, "Theology, Ecology, and Africa: No Longer Strange Bedfellows," in Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: The Second African Synod*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011, 159.

own way of social and cultural organization based on their worldview. We can, thus, talk of 'African worldviews.' That notwithstanding, there is a sense in which we can still talk of African worldview without necessarily implying that the entirety of Africa sees the world as monolithic and homogeneous. Dumisani Thadebe opines that while it is true that cultural pluralism in Africa implies cultural variations, it is also true that there are certain elements that cut across the continent which are upheld and cherished by all African societies.¹¹ J.E. Daniels identifies the common elements of African perception of reality that can be found in all the divergent African societies. He identifies interconnectedness and interdependence of all things, oneness of mind, body and spirit, communal ideology, collective identity as opposed to individual identity; consanguineous family structure; and spirituality.¹² We proceed to talk of *African worldview* and such cognate terms as *African spirituality* without being oblivious of the haecceity of each African society. We shall proceed to articulate an African religious worldview in terms of their cosmology, ontology, biocentric axiology and the psychical interaction of forces.

4. African Cosmology, Ontology and Psychical Interaction

The typical African view of reality or the world is radically unlike western conceptions of ontology. Against the dualisms pervasive in western metaphysical or cosmological thoughts, Africans' view of reality is that of ontological holism,¹³ the view that reality is a whole.¹⁴ Most cosmologies in Africa are premised on an ontology that partitions the universe into what we shall call 'planes of being.' There is a bi-onto categorization of the world, the visible and the invisible world,¹⁵ yet as Joram Tarusarira rightly notes: "It is one world indivisible with one sphere touching on the other."¹⁶ The universe is

¹¹Cf. Dumisani Thadebe, "The African Worldview as the Basis of Practice in the Helping Professions," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 44, 3 (2008) 237.

¹²J.E. Daniels, "Africentric Social Work Practice," *International Social Work Journal* 44 (2001) 301.

¹³Cf. Edwin Etieyibo, "Ubuntu and the Environment," in Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, New York: Springer Nature, 2017, 636.

¹⁴Cf. Ayuya Caroline et al., "African Worldview: An Integrated Psychological Perspective," *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)* 2, 5 (May 2015) 56.

¹⁵Cf. Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*, Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, 52.

¹⁶Joram Tarusarira, "African Religion, Climate Change and Knowledge Systems," *The Ecumenical Review* 69, 3 (October 2017) 400.

inhabited by an onto-triadic calibration of being: the living, the living-dead and the unborn.¹⁷ All these form a single community of beings.

The spiritual world is considered to be inhabited by the Supreme Being (God), the ancestors and nature gods or spirits while the material or the visible world houses human beings, animals, plants and inanimate beings.¹⁸ Africans believe that the ancestors and spirits, though of a spiritual existence, also reside in trees, rivers, mountains and animals.¹⁹ The activities of these forces could bring blessings to communities especially if humans live harmoniously with them. On the other hand, in the event that they are ill-treated due to how humans relate with them and nature, the society could suffer untold hardships.²⁰ In other words, for the African, reality forms a closed system, with the spheres of life capable of mutual influence on each other.²¹ The African does not conceive of the physical world without the spiritual world, neither does she/he conceive of the spiritual world apart from the physical world.

Africans do conceive of *being* in a hierarchical structure. Abiola Irele points this out clearly when he writes that, "The interrelation of forces is ordained in a felt hierarchy running down from God, the supreme incarnation of vital force, through man (the dead or ancestors, the living community of humans), to the animal and the inanimate world."²² God is at the apex of the hierarchy of being. For the African, God's necessity is derived from the contingency of other beings. God cannot but exist. The reality of God is an ontological givenness. He is the creator of the universe. The Akans of Ghana refer to him as *Ɔbadɛ* (The Creator). Beneath the Supreme Being are the

¹⁷ Cf. Mogebe B. Ramose, "The Philosophy of *Ubuntu* and *Ubuntu* as a Philosophy," in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, ed., *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2003, 278.

¹⁸ Cf. Sivave Mashingaidze, "Cosmivision and African Conservation Philosophy: Indigenous Knowledge System Perspective," *Environmental Economics* 7, 4 (2016) 27.

¹⁹ Cf. Francis Etim, "African Metaphysics," *Journal of Asian Scientific Research* 3, 1 (2013) 13. See also John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, 1969, 79.

²⁰ Cf. Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, Harare: Mond Books, 1999, 97-99.

²¹ Cf. Lesiba J. Teffo and A.P.J. Roux, "Metaphysical Thinking in Africa," in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, ed., *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*, Johannesburg: International Thomson Publishing Southern Africa, 1998, 138.

²² Abiola Irele, "Introduction," in Paulin Hountondji, ed., *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, trans. by Henri Evans and Jonathan Rée, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, 16.

lesser gods who are plenipotentary envoys of God. The lesser gods act as mediators between God and humans and are also offered occasional veneration and sacrifice. Then follows the ancestors, the living dead. These are the spirits of the dead who continue to live on in the communities and act as guardians and protectors of the living though their form of existence remains on the spiritual plane with a disembodied existence. Africans generally also believe in the existence of a plethora of spirits. These spirits are of two categories, the benevolent and the malevolent. The intervention of the benevolent spirits in human affairs brings about fortunes while the malevolent spirits cause misfortunes such as illness, drought and even death.

Although Africans maintain a spiritual and physical world, the duo are, nevertheless, in a constant flux of interaction,²³ a kind of 'cosmological *koinonia*.'²⁴ There is no discontinuity between the material and the spiritual world. African cosmivision is one characterised by a 'pulsating life of interacting essences, of forces.'²⁵ Edwin Etieyibo describes this interaction between the spiritual and the physical and interaction among beings of the physical world as 'psychophysical harmony.'²⁶ Africans believe that all living beings, either in the spiritual or physical world are imbued with a certain active force. Placid Tempels called such a force among the Bantu people, 'vital force.'²⁷ The presence of these forces in beings such as deities, spirits, humans, trees, mountains, etc. is the point of confluence between the Spiritual and the Physical. As Ramose Mogobe notes, it is the active forces that make it "possible and real to communicate with the dead, departed, desensitized and formless invisible beings. If we do not hold such beings to exist, then it is nonsense to claim that we can communicate with non-existent beings."²⁸ African cosmivision, as indigenous resource for

²³Cf. A.A. Berinyuu, *Pastoral Care to the Sick in Africa*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988, 5.

²⁴J. McDonnell, "Challenging the Euro-Western Epistemological Dominance of Development through African Cosmivision," in *Emerging Perspectives on 'African Development*, George J. Sefa Dei and Paul Banahene Adjei, ed., New York: Peter Lang, 2014, 98-116.

²⁵Irele, "Introduction," 16.

²⁶ Edwin Etieyibo, "Psychophysical Harmony in an African Context," in *Symposium on the Metabolism of the Social Brain*, October 25-26, Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2014.

²⁷Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Trans. A. Rubbens and Colin King, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959, 35.

²⁸Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 68.

theologizing, provides a wide platform for unbroken interaction among the hierarchy of beings in a cosmological union.

5. African Spirituality

African Spirituality can be defined as the cultic expressions of the African's openness to the divine. These cultic expressions as a way of affirming Africans' connectedness with the divine are captured in their rituals and belief systems and their devotional practices such as offering of sacrifices, libations and taboo systems. For Africans, spirituality is not just what they do, it is what they are. The African woman or man looks up at the sky and sees God, they look at the tree and they find a spirit, they look down at the land and see a goddess. The African lives in a universe of the divine and spirits, physical though their immediate environment may be. As Daniel Nwachukwu correctly observes, "Africans are deeply spiritual,"²⁹ hence, they easily tend to establish a mystical relationship with natural phenomena.

We have earlier on stressed that for Africans, the spheres of the spiritual and material constitute a cosmological whole. None is conceived without presupposing the other. Peter Paris argues that "Africans cannot conceive of human life apart from its relationship to invisible spirits... hence, it is unthinkable for Africans to think of humanity apart from its connectedness with that larger world perspective."³⁰ Similarly, it is unthinkable for the African to conceive of spirituality without its relationship with the activities of other life forms. At the very roots of African spirituality is the Africans' belief in the sacredness of the whole of reality or the cosmos.³¹ The sacredness of the cosmos is due to the pervasiveness of spirits residing in nature and nature itself being a medium of the Supreme Being's manifestation of himself.³² The universe is not merely a cosmological space, it is a religious space because they encounter the sacred in it. This explains why the typical African is highly religious. For this reason, it is religion that shapes the spirituality of the African peoples.³³

²⁹D.N. Nwachukwu, "Rituals and Symbols in the Healing of Infertility in Africa," in E. Lartey et al., ed., *The Church and Healing. Echoes from Africa*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994, 81.

³⁰Peter Paris, "The Spirituality of African Peoples," *Journal of Black Theology in S. A.* 7, 2 (November 1993) 115.

³¹See Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "The Dimensions of African Cosmology," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 2, 2 (July-December, 2013) 552.

³²Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion*, London: Epworth, 1969, 16ff.

³³Cf. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 256.

African spirituality is characterized by a deep sense of devotion to God. Most African societies have special altars dedicated to the worship of God. For instance, in Akan traditional homes, an altar in the form of a tree (*Nyamedua* or *God's Tree*) or fork stick with a pot held by the fork branches is erected in the middle of the compound or in front of the house. Occasionally, libation is offered to *Onyankopon* (*God*) at the base of the tree (altar) to worship him and ask for his protection. Ancestor veneration is also a popular part of African Spirituality. The ancestors, unlike God, are not worshipped, they are venerated. No special shrines or altars are required for their veneration. Their names are simply invoked at family gatherings, in times of danger, when working or carrying out any other activity. Invoking their names is an invitation to solicit their blessings. Consequently there is intrinsically a spiritual bond between the dead and the living and the ancestors.

The Shrines require no buildings and often are in groves, rocks, caves, hills, mountains, and under certain trees. Such places are highly respected by people and in some societies no bird, animals or human being may be killed if it or he or she runs to such a place for safety. All these are material expressions of a deep sense of the divine and spirituality which constitute indigenous resources for re-thinking about the global faith and eco-theology.

6. African Eco-Cultic Spirituality

Africans do understand that maintaining a harmonious balance in the cosmos is all the more germane in enjoying an ecological serene environment. One of such ways of maintaining the harmonious balance in nature is how Africans have come to understand their relationship with the environment. According to some western paradigms of thought, reality seems to be something out there. The Austrian analytic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein conceived of reality as something out there to be pictured with words.³⁴ Such conceptions of reality risk separating humans from the rest of nature and placing them in the unfortunate state of splendid isolation from what is. Contrary to this kind of conception about reality or nature is Africans' understanding of the environment in which they see themselves as part of the environment. Fainos Mangena captures this very well in saying that African subjectivity finds its expression in its "association with

³⁴L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by Mir Shams al-Din Adib Soltani, Tehran: Amir Kabir Pub., 2007.

non-human animals,"³⁵ that is, the entire eco system. Ghanaians, particularly, have always looked at the environment as a very important and inseparable part of the human community. For them, the environment is important to the well-being of the individual and the community at large.

There is a sense of human beings' close relationship with nature. Humanity, animals and plants have their own existence and place in the universe as unique and independent parts of a whole³⁶ yet each is never conceived apart from the whole. For Africans, humans are intricately bound with nature, for what affects the environment also affects humans. All African societies understand that humans have a dialogic relationship with the environment. Michael Eze has characterised the nature of this dialogic relationship as '*eco-humanitatis*'³⁷ while Godfrey Tangwa, expressing a similar view describes the relationship between humans and the environment as '*eco-bio-communitarianism*.'³⁸ It is interesting to remark that Africans already had and lived the ideals of the "Land Ethic." As mentioned earlier, nature or the environment is sacred. Due to this understanding, the environment (trees, animals, mountains, water bodies, etc.) is revered and treated with so much respect and awe.

Among the Akans of Ghana, the land is given an anthropomorphic feature of femaleness and is addressed with a feminine human name, *Yaa* (a female born on a Thursday) hence it is properly referred to as *Asaase Yaa* (the Earth goddess). Furthermore, for us Africans, the environment is not created to fuel our insatiable consumerist behaviour. Exploitative use of the environment is prohibited through the institution of customary laws and traditional practices such as the taboo system. For the African, the environment is not a pool of resources to plunge, it is the locus of sacramentality. The environment is not a world out there to be mastered with a militaristic domineering force, it is a community of life to be nurtured. Africans do not commodify the environment. The African understands that it is not right to take from the environment what is

³⁵ Fainos Mangena, "Discerning Moral Status in the African Environment," *Phronimon* 14, 2 (2013) 30.

³⁶ Cf. Amaechi Udefi, "Philosophy, Mythology and an African Cosmological System" *Global Journal of Human Social Science* 12, 10 (2012) 62.

³⁷ Michael O. Eze, "Humanitatis Eco – Eco-Humanism: An African Environmental Theory," in Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, 629.

³⁸ Godfrey B. Tangwa, "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics," in *A Companion to African Philosophy: Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu, Oxford: Blackwell. 2004, 389.

more than what one needs. That is why in most communities in Ghana, fishing in rivers and the sea and farming are prohibited on certain days during the week. For instance, in my community of residence, Ejisu-Besease in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, no fishing is carried out in the river on Tuesday. This is to ensure that people do not take from the river more than what they need. Segun Ogungbemi argues that the ethics of 'not taking more than you need' is an ethical code in traditional African Societies.³⁹ This has been engrained in the indigenous societies strengthened by a system of spirituality that instills fear in the hearts of adherents should they attempt to abuse the environment.

Also most African societies view the environment through the lens of a biocentric axiology which places inherent value in the environment and all that it contains, a value that is independent of humans. This, however, should be differentiated from the biocentric egalitarianism of deep ecology.⁴⁰ While biocentric egalitarianism proposes the unnegotiable equality of value of all life forms, African biocentrism proposes the intrinsic value or worth of all life forms. The cosmological arrangement of reality in the African indigenous thought system is one which respects the character of the hierarchy of beings but equally asserts that hierarchy does not in any way render some beings worthless.

In all, the environment is not just a physical reality but also a sacred reality and a resource of spiritual treasure worthy of veneration. Our manner of spirituality enables us to hear the unspoken words of the environment in which we live and to adjust our attitude when nature begins to groan. We understand that the environment is not just for the present and the living, it is equally for the dead and also the unborn. Thus, intergenerational solidarity and protracted humanism shape our view of the environment.

Having seen what the environment means to Africans, we can now discuss how Africans through elements of their spiritual traditions and sagacity, have maintained the harmony of the eco-system.

7. Indigenous Cultural Resources and Eco-Cultic Practices

This section delves into some selected indigenous cultural practices and belief systems of the African peoples which, in addition to

³⁹Cf. Segun Ogungbemi, "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," in Louis J. Pojman, ed., *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, 2nd edition, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997, 330-337.

⁴⁰Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*, Albany State: University of New York Press, 1995, 91-94.

having a strong religious and social significance, were also eco-friendly and these we term eco-cultic practices. The religious tenets, in the indigenous African mindset were not meant, *ab initio*, to promote ecological concerns. However, their religious practices equally had an ecological outlook. Some of these eco-cultic practices are seen in the practice of keeping sacred groves, the taboo systems and also their mythologies and songs.

7.1. Sacred Groves

The very idea of sacred forests or sacred groves is woven into the religious experience of most African cultures. Some also refer to it as ancestral forests because of the common understanding that the sacred forests are the 'homes' of the spirits of the dead. Yaa Ntiamao Baidu *et al* define sacred forest as "clusters of forest vegetation that honour a deity, provide sanctuary for spirits, remind present generations of ancestors or protect a sanctified place from exploitation. They are treated as sacred by virtue of their location, cultural meaning and history."⁴¹ For the African, the dead are not dead; they live on but as spiritual beings. As spiritual beings, they reside as ancestors in the forests, sometimes, in water bodies such as lakes, rivers, etc. They could also reside on mountains. Birago Diop captures this in a poem titled "Souffles." In that poem, he draws our attention to the reality that the elements of nature are the homes of the departed family members and that for the African, the dead are not dead for they are not under the earth; they are in the forests, in waters and on the hills.⁴²

It is also common in many rural African communities to find small patches of forests set aside as sacred and accorded strict protection under customary laws.⁴³ Reasons for keeping sacred groves vary: ranging from forests which constitute the royal burial grounds and forests along the banks of major rivers supplying water to a village community, to forests with historical significance in the culture of a group of people, or patches of forest that support totem species. The

⁴¹Cf. Yaa Ntiamao-Baidu, et al., "Recognising the Contribution of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation," A Paper Presented at the World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa, September, 2003. Unpublished.

⁴²Birago Diop, "Souffles," translated by Anne Atik in Drachler, ed., *African Heritage*, New York, Routledge, 1963, 95. The original poem in French language can be found in, Ziad Elmarsafy, "Adapting Sufism to Video Art," *Journal of Comparative Poetics* 28 (2008) 142.

⁴³Cf. Samuel Asiedu-Amoako et al., "Environmental Degradation: A Challenge to Traditional Leadership at Akyem Abuakwa in the Eastern Region of Ghana," *American Journal of Indigenous Studies* 1, 1 (2016) 7.

Boabeng-Fiema Monkey sanctuary in Ghana, provides an example of a sacred grove that has not only been protected by customary law, but also by modern legislature under District Council by-laws and is managed as a wildlife sanctuary. The grove is considered sacred because it supports populations of different species of monkeys which are revered and strictly protected as sons of the gods of the people of Boabeng and Fiema villages.⁴⁴ In places designated as sacred in most African rural communities, farming, hunting, bush burning, etc. are prohibited in such places. Some communities even refer to their sacred forests as evil forest. As an evil forest, human beings are prohibited from living in there or even carrying out any activity there because of the presence of malicious spirits.⁴⁵ In any case, they surely provide a certain eco-sagacity that is merely masked by religious underpinnings and spirituality.

The practice of keeping sacred forests or groves wears an ecological toga that one cannot but begin to find in these cultic practices an organised ecological wisdom which aid the preservation of the environment. Part of the sagacity associated with the eco-cultic practice of sacred forest is the fact that, for the African, “the natural environment is not necessarily regarded as an object of exploitation and manipulation. The fundamental lesson to be learnt here is that the Africans’ strength of spiritual values for the creation and maintenance of a particular sacred space or spaces is a very powerful force for nature conservation.

7.2. Totemism

Another traditional resource, ecologically important and conducive to the elaboration African Theology is the practice of totemism. Totemism is the belief system which holds that some spirits reside in some animals and plants and so are to be revered. Often times, such animals or plants are deified. This is a common religious belief in Africa. The totemic animals and plants and birds are connected to clans or families. Such families see in their totems the immanence of their spiritual guides among them. As such, members of that family are forbidden to kill (in the case of animals and birds) or cut down for whatever (in the case of plants). For instance, the *Benyine* clan, which is part of the *Dagaaba* ethnic group in the Upper West Region of Northern Ghana have as totems the porcupine, the hedgehog, and the dove. Everyone is forbidden to either kill or eat any of these animals.

⁴⁴Cf., D.K. Akowuah et al., “The Children of the Gods,” *Journal of Ghana Wildlife Society* 1 (February 1975) 12-22.

⁴⁵Cf. B. Davidson, “The Motives of Mau Mau,” *London Review of Books*, 24 February 1994, 12.

According to their belief, any kinsman who flouted this taboo strangely suffered untold hardships including incurable sicknesses and untimely death. Also, the people of Techiman in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana have the mudfish and the bat as their totems and several other examples abound. Such long practices in Ghana have led to the preservation of millions of these animals who even come very close to our homes without fear of being harmed. It is very interesting to note that in most cases, the principal reason for the choice of an animal, reptile or bird for a totem stems from the fact that the particular creature is believed to have saved the clan in the past or that a clan models itself after an essential attribute of it, e.g. bravery, courage, speed, wisdom, etc. Totemism is simply a way of life and a source of family pride that gives an indelible lesson on traditional wildlife conservation. Our ancestors were very much attuned to conservation of wildlife species. The keeping of totems has proven to be one of the major traditional conservation tools which have helped to conserve many wildlife species up to date.

7.3. Taboos

Closely associated with African totemism is the system of taboos, some of which are equally ecologically friendly. Here, we strictly restrict ourselves to environmental taboos intended by traditional authorities for the ethical use of the environment. Munamoto Chemhuru & Dennis Masaka define taboos as "'avoidance rules' that forbid members of the human community from performing certain actions, such as eating some kinds of food, walking on or visiting some sites that are regarded as sacred, cruelty to nonhuman animals, and using nature's resources in an unsustainable manner."⁴⁶ Some of these environmental taboos can be gleaned from our different cultures. For instance, among the Akans of Ghana, it is a taboo to clear any part of the sacred forest; it is a taboo to go fishing or hunting or farming on some specific days which are termed sacred days; it is a taboo to eat certain kinds of animals or cut certain kinds of tree, etc. Often times, the Akans would argue that violation of any of these taboos could incur the severe wrath of the gods including the goddess of the earth, *Asaase Yaa*.⁴⁷ Although it is true that the basic motif for such taboos was to avoid the anger of the gods and ancestors, it is also true that traditional African peasants knew that cutting all or most of the available forests will not only deprive the future generations of rare plants and animals, it would also affect the

⁴⁶Munamoto Chemhuru & Dennis Masaka, "Taboos as Sources of Shona People's Environmental Ethics," *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 12, 7 (2010) 123.

⁴⁷Cf. Asiedu-Amoako et al., "Environmental Degradation," 7.

delicate balance between plants and animals as well as humans and their needs for food, medicine, space, clean water, and clean air.

8. Indigenous Resources and Global Catholic Ecological Spirituality

In the preceding sections, we have seen that some of the traditional cultural resources such as the keeping of sacred forests, veneration of trees and mountains and totemism, including taboos, are ecologically amicable. We must however admit that the fundamental spiritual and theological underpinning of these practices and beliefs of traditional Africans are greatly unlike the Christian theological explicatory model for earth care. Therefore, theology, cast in the matrix of a global context particularly African theology in its inculturation dimension, can reinterpret the African eco-cultic spiritual practices in the light of the Christian gospel that is global in its universal and pluriversal outlook. In this way, African theology shall be tabling its own solution on the round table of the global dialogue concerning our common home which Pope Francis is calling all and sundry to be involved.⁴⁸ For this reason, a reinterpretation and a re-theologizing of these African eco-cultic spiritual systems and beliefs would be useful. The project of a global catholic ecological spirituality should be able to arrive at a new understanding of the indigenous eco-cultic practices of Africans through reinterpreting and re-theologising the motives for these practices.

For instance, most African societies keep sacred forests because they believe that the spirits of the ancestors dwell there. For some communities, these forests are homes to malicious spirits. Hence, they refer to the sacred forest as 'evil forests.' In addition, for these traditional communities, the 'evil forests,' so called, also serve a punitive purpose. It was a place of exile to which notorious deviants who had committed a sacrilege were banished, and left to wander in the forest to die. It also served as a place of slaughter in some cultures, especially, for twins and albinos, who were thought to be signs of a curse or an abomination. Evidence of the existence of evil forests for such murderous reasons among the Yoruba of Nigeria can be found in Ola Rotimi's classical play, *The Gods are not to Blame*.⁴⁹ Thus, we see in this that the religious motives for 'forest reserve' in some traditional communities still stand in need of evangelisation. Although the act of forest keeping in itself is good and ecologically appreciable, the African people may be made to see a new reason for

⁴⁸Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si* (May 24, 2015), ## 13 and 14.

⁴⁹See Ola Rotimi, *The Gods are not to Blame*, Ife: University Press PLC., 1971.

keeping sacred grooves. This is where theology and spirituality within a global catholic context must come in.

In the garbs of a global catholic ecological spirituality, there is no harm in encouraging indigenous communities in Africa to retain the name and practice of keeping 'sacred forests.' However, the forest is sacred not because the spirits of ancestors dwell there. The spirits of the ancestors are in the hands of the Supreme Being, that is, God, from whom they came. The forest is sacred precisely because God manifests Himself in these forests and indeed the whole of nature.⁵⁰ The sacred forests, therefore, become what I call 'sacramental catchment points.' The forest becomes the sacrament of God's creative power. All creation speaks a divine language that proclaims the fear and the veneration of God.

Furthermore, Africans have over the years preserved their natural environment through taboos. Although taboos, especially ecological taboos, are primarily ethical codes of right relationship with all the levels of being in the cosmos, fundamentally, taboos have a spiritual orientation. For instance, the taboos prohibiting farming activities on the land on certain days during the week are justified, especially among the Akans of Ghana, by the reason that the goddess of the earth is venerated on those days or that the goddess of the earth (*Asaase Yaa*) takes her rest on that specific day. In my estimation, such ecological taboos practiced all over the world would be helpful to engendering a culture of respect for the land. However, the reason for such a culture of respect for the land would not be tenable to other people across the African borders until we fashion out a new spirituality for such a culture of respect for the land. Therefore, to facilitate the project of a global catholic ecological spirituality that is in tune with African conservation techniques, we need a new spirituality for earth care that can have global adherence and that is the '*spirituality of rest*.' The spirituality of rest respects the natural rhythm of the land to 'till' and 'still' so that intermittent interjection of days of 'no tilling' reduces the spate of human activities on a particular piece of land allowing the land to garner rest for a renewed productivity.

However, the biblical view of the Sabbath and jubilee includes rest for the earth and for the creatures. Unfortunately, the spirituality of rest in our time has been heavily conceived in anthropocentric terms. For instance, while Pope Francis articulated a spirituality of rest in

⁵⁰Pope Francis, *Laudato si*, ## 85 and 87.

Laudato si,⁵¹ the 'rest' so conceived is painted with the colours of anthropocentrism. He sees rest as contemplative rest,⁵² something which only humans do. Rest, for Pope Francis, prevents human labour from degenerating into mere activism.⁵³ Ultimately, it is humans who rest so that the environment can also rest. Although he does not deny the need for rest for non-human creation, it is certainly not looked at from the earth perspective but from an anthropocentric perspective. However, Africans' practice of earth care shows that a spirituality of rest viewed from the earth perspective is necessary for maintaining the integrity of nature for ecological balance and harmony. A global catholic ecological spirituality must yield to a global and multi-perspectival viewership of ecological spirituality, from the perspectives of both human and non-human creation.

9. Conclusion

We have articulated a concept of global faith that has ears for the polyphony of voices from indigenous communities across the globe, with emphasis on Africa, on an issue of global concern, the ecological crisis. Indeed Africa harbours an immortal sagacity in their indigenous traditional and spiritual systems that have augured well for ecological sanity. The eco-cultic spirituality of Africans has contributed in no small measure to maintaining ecological harmony and bio-diversity in many parts of Africa. Today, inspired by a global approach within the context of global faith or global Catholicism to seek holistic solutions to issues of global concern, we have every reason to turn to the spiritual wisdom of Africa. We saw the various indigenous resources used to preserve balance and harmony in nature through the very articulation of their cosmology (ontological holism), a 'land ethic,' the cultic practices of totemism, taboo system and the keeping of sacred groves or sacred forests. The project of a global catholic ecological spirituality would be to adopt these indigenous eco-cultic practices and find new spiritual and theological basis for holding onto them to make them globally relevant.

⁵¹Pope Francis, *Laudato si*, # 237.

⁵²Pope Francis, *Laudato si*, # 237.

⁵³Pope Francis, *Laudato si*, # 237.