



**Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social  
Sciences**

**School of Religion and Theology**

**Masters Degree Dissertation**

**Creation as a Dwelling Place of God: A Critical Analysis of an  
African Biocentric Theology in the works of Gabriel M.  
Setiloane**

**2010**

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**Creation as a Dwelling Place of God: A Critical Analysis of an  
African Biocentric Theology in the works of Gabriel M. Setiloane**

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**(Dip. Biblical Studies, BTh, BTh. Honours)**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters  
of Theology (African Theology) in the School of Religion and Theology at the  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg**

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**26<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that.....

“Creation as a Dwelling Place of God: A Critical Analysis of an African Biocentric Theology in the works of Gabriel M. Setiloane”, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been clearly indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Chammah J. Kaunda  
Pietermaritzburg  
November 2010

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Prof. Isabel A. Phiri

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank God for giving me the opportunity and making it possible for me to dedicate a significant time to further my studies. It has been a wonderful journey and I am grateful.

To Mutale Mulenga-Kaunda, my wife, companion and a witness to my life; because I would not have even managed to finish this study without your companionship, love, support and shared interests and vision for a better, feasible and relevant African Christianity.

To Pearl and Sam Roux, Caroline and Vivien Wilson and Eastwood Baptist Church; your kindness, and generosity made this research work possible.

Appreciation is also conveyed to Dr. Detlev Tonsing, Dr. Sarojini Nadar and all members of staff at the School of Religion and Theology (SORAT) for inspiration and encouragement.

To Prof. Isabel A. Phiri: your dedication as a mentor, guidance, personal supervision, and critical insights through this entire process has been extraordinary. I am becoming a better African theologian, researcher and future lecturer because of your efforts. I am especially grateful to you for giving me a place where I could stand, inspiring me to work hard and explore my potential. Thank you.

Indeed, it is a myth that a dissertation is written and accomplished by one individual. I am grateful to many people whose help, support and dedication to explore new ways of doing African theology have shaped my perception. I am grateful to many others who have graced my life with their friendship. I acknowledge the School of Religion and Theology, Pietermaritzburg, for granting me the Wittenberg Nürnberger scholarship which was an award that made the completion of this work possible.

## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to....

My precious daughter, Malumbo Mulenga-Kaunda, for showing us that, at the age of just four, you have tremendous potential to become a hard worker and you will achieve far beyond my academic achievements; and to all upcoming Zambian theologians to always forge ahead in their studies.

## **ABSTRACT**

The study argues that for the African church to become responsive to the changing circumstances with regard to the African ecological crisis, there is a need to reconstruct those aspects of Christianity that are non-functional in an African Christian context. Drawing insights from both Gabriel Setiloane's thoughts on African Biocentric theology and the myths of origin among the Yoruba, the Chewa and the Boshongo people, the study argues that in African cosmology, there is a clear interconnectedness that does not allow for complete independence of one another as is the case in the western world-view.

In this regard, the study argues that these African myths of origin are not only feasible but are a more plausible theological response to the contemporary understanding of the universe emerging from scientific explanation of the development of life on earth than the Judaeo-Christian myth of origin (Setiloane 1986:15). In African thought, as envisaged by Setiloane and the three myths of origin, cosmic harmony and balance depend on the integrity of each being for the sake of all other creation. This means that every action that does not affirm life in the cosmos has an effect not only on other creation but on humanity as well.

Thus, the study proposes that for African Christian ecological theology to be effective in the context of Africa, first, it must embrace a unified approach to the cosmos and all things because both the physical and spiritual share the same community and the Creator. Thus, there will be equality between humans and nonhuman nature. Second, it must rediscover the Holy Spirit in the African concept of Vital Force and God must be seen as dwelling in the cosmos through the Holy Spirit. This view will re-sacralise the material universe on account that it will be seen as the holy of holies, a dwelling place of God.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCING THE STUDY

### 1.0. Introduction

It is rare that a day passes by without hearing about new ecological<sup>1</sup> deprivation in Africa. Each day we read in the newspapers and hear reports on television about the horror of the ecological crisis that is ever-growing to critical and terrifying proportions. Among the current issues is desertification, topsoil erosion, water and air pollution, destruction of the rain forest, extinction of species, and toxic waste, oil leaks into the oceans leading to the destruction of aquatic life and so on.

In seeking ways to handle the apparent ecological nemesis in Africa, there is an urgent need to reclaim the wisdom and philosophy which helped African people to preserve their ecology before the coming of Christianity. This study argues that, for Christianity to become responsive to the context of the African ecological crisis, it must seek to integrate these philosophies and wisdom that African people used to protect their ecology. These philosophies and wisdom were enshrined in African primal religions and cultures<sup>2</sup> (Phiri 1996:161; Daneel 1991:101). Both African and Western scholars are unanimous in the fact that African people lived in a symbiotic and interdependent relationship with nonhuman nature. Thus, this study is an attempt to show how African Christians could respond to Africa's current ecological crisis by drawing on resources from African primal religions and cultures. In other words, it shows how African myths of origin<sup>3</sup> could be utilised in

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<sup>1</sup> The term ecology has to do with the relations, interaction, and dialogue of all creation among themselves and all that exists. All existence is sustained within the web of an all-inclusive vital-community. In its common use ecology is the study of the earthly home/habitat/*oikos*, which is made up of beings in permanent relation to one another (Rakoczy 2004: 301).

<sup>2</sup> African scholars have argued that one cannot talk of African primal religion and culture in their singular because of the diversity found in the African people. It is observed that despite diversity, there are many similarities as well that make it possible to talk of African cultures in the singular (Phiri 1997b: 13). Yet, in this study, the terms are used in plural form to recognize the diversity in African primal religions and cultures.

<sup>3</sup>This study uses the phrase 'African myths of origin' instead of creation myths. This is because not all African ethnic groups have the creation myths but the majority of them have a myth of origin.

formulating an African Christian ecological theology that focuses on creation<sup>4</sup> as a dwelling place of God. Therefore, among other things, in this chapter I will outline the background and identification of the research question, preliminary literature study and the location of the research, the research problem and objectives, theoretical framework, methodology and research design, and the structure of the dissertation.

### **1.1. Background to Study and Identification of research question**

The background and motivation for this study partly arose from the warnings that the ecological experts are sounding over an impending humanitarian disaster in Africa, emerging from the depletion of natural resources. This led me to the realisation that the need for African theology to respond to the ecological crisis is a matter of urgency. Apparently, Western scholars have brought African cultures into question and have implicated them in their discourses about Africa's ecological crisis. For instance, Lloyd Timberlake (1985:18), author of *Africa in Crisis*, asserts that, Africa "has overdrawn its environmental accounts," and the result for much of the continent has been ecological "bankruptcy". He especially points to the seemingly growing conflict between population pressure and the sustainable capacity of the landscape. The destruction of forests, firewood crisis, and nutritional depletion are some of the manifestations of ecological degradation. Furthermore, the United Nations conference on desertification (quoted by James McCann 1999:58) stated that "Africans are reaping the whirlwind of their past actions". The United Nations' main concern pointed to the issues of overpopulation and human activities which include over-cultivation, overgrazing, deforestation, and any other inappropriate land use and human management of eco-systems as the cause of the African ecological crisis. McCann confirms that many Western people are accusing Africans for the present ecological crisis. The only major problem with this view is that it does not take into account the role colonialism and Christianity could have played in the current African ecological crisis. Although it is argued that Africans themselves have caused an ecological crisis, it is important to understand that the missionaries have had a significant influence on African personal attitudes toward nonhuman nature. The missionaries challenged African primal religions and cultures, which were the only mechanism for African people to preserve their nature. Yet, at the heart of

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<sup>4</sup>Creation and nature (all beings both human and nonhuman as a whole) are used interchangeably in this study. In short, nature is construed as creation.

these accusations is found a perception that African cultures are ecologically bankrupt. The main proponents of the argument that African cultures are ‘ecologically bankrupt’ are Francois Falloux and Lee Talbot (1993). Falloux and Talbot have argued that “alongside the social values praised by the northern experts there exist factors which are also part of African culture that cause barriers and break downs and have caused the current environmental crisis affecting most of the sub-Saharan continent” (:232). They conclude that the evidence of growing ecological degradation indicates the “prevalence of anti-environmental factors in African culture” (:232). They believe that these anti-ecological factors in African cultures are evidenced firstly in the absence of any control over population growth. Secondly, in the African’s limited capacity to plan for the future, often reinforced by a lack of interest in doing so (:232). The majority of Western scholars think that African people do not plan for the future on account that they are preoccupied with the past (Daneel 1991:104). While it is true that the African traditional world-view places more emphasis on the significant events in the past, yet, what is more accurate is that they maintain both their past and future through their present experiences. For African people, the present is the unifying factor of both the past and the future. There is no future for an African, there is only the present. Thus, by protecting the present, the future is preserved. In this sense, Africans are bound to plan for their future (Mugambi 1987:23).

African theology has pointed to the African primal religions and cultures as one of the major raw materials or sources for contextualising Christian theology in Africa. Thus, Ezra Chitando (2009:39) could argue that “African theology must provide insights into the appropriation of African cultures” in the contemporary ecological crisis. Yet, very few proponents of African theology have given suggestions to show how the discourse remains sustainable in the face of the ecological crisis. Setiloane (1986:60) differs from Chitando by asserting that the reason the European missionaries found African ecology intact a century ago was because of an indigenous cosmological world-view. He argues further that the African primal world-view was embedded in African myths of origin, which shaped the Africans’ ecological outlook.

Accordingly, the best way to deal with this ambivalent situation is by examining ancient components of African cultures that have not been completely adulterated by either Christianity (at least in its Western form) or Islam (Ott 2000:274; Oduyoye 1995:6).

Secondly, through the myths of origin, the African indigenous world-view was represented (Idowu 1973:84). Thirdly, the myths of origin make a wonderful tool for analysis because all African cultures have a sort of mythology of origin (Mbiti 1969:90; Kanyike 2004:19). Fourthly, Gabriel Setiloane (1995:59; 1986:4-6) himself used the myths of origin to formulate his Biocentric theology. Besides, by Christianity challenging indigenous belief systems and promoting the diffusion of new ideas and modes of life, it sidelined the African myths of origin which only promoted communion in cosmological relationships (Irele 2010: 2). Hence, the question to which I attempt to respond is formulated as follows: *What resources has Gabriel Setiloane seen in the African myths of origin, which could be utilised in order to construct an African Christian ecological theology that focuses on creation (human and nonhuman) as God's dwelling place?*

## **1.2. Preliminary literature study and the location of the research**

The literature review is divided as follows: literature that is exclusively on Gabriel Setiloane's works, literature on theory and methodology and literature written on ecology from an African perspective.

### **1.2.1. Literature review on Gabriel Setiloane's works**

The study will critically analyse Gabriel Setiloane's Biocentric theology because there has not been to date any written work on the thoughts of Setiloane on ecology. In addition, I have chosen Setiloane because of the fact that he is the only one who has drawn the theology of ecology from the African myths of origin. In his book, *African Theology*, Setiloane (1986) argues that it is African theology that takes the African Christians to the roots of the problems that we are facing in Africa today. Reflecting on the myth of origin among the Sotho-Tswana, Setiloane concluded that the myths of origin in Africa have the potential to give African people a positive response to the ecological challenge we are facing today. Through these myths, God is revealed more vividly as the origin of all things in Africa. Setiloane has taken a similar perspective in his other works (1976, 1995). Yet, Setiloane limited Biocentric theology to the Sotho-Tswana myth of origin. He argued that the African myths of origin point the African people back to the common source and the origin of everything: that is God. But he did not give examples of such myths. Hence, a critical study of different African myths of origin is important to ascertain whether what Setiloane is saying is also true with other African myths of origin.

### **1.2.2. Literature review on theory and methodology**

The focus of this study is on African theology as it relates to African Christianity. Within African theology there are different strands, as follows: oral theology, written theology and symbolic theology. These strands can further be broken into various streams. For example, written theology has been broken down into the stream of cultural theology, black theology, African women's theologies, liberation theology, postcolonial theology, and reconstruction theology. The study utilised the stream of cultural theology which falls under the strand of written theology (Phiri 2008/9:114). From this perspective, African theology seeks to integrate African cultures and thought patterns within the African Christian tradition. Although the definitions of African theology differ from one author to the other depending on their objectives, one thing is clear, it is a theology done within the context of African cultures, which reacts against Western modernist impositions of theological views on African Christians (Phiri 2008/2009; Nyamiti 1994). Within this framework, the study used translatability theory proposed by Kwame Bediako (1995) in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. By using this theory, good elements of African myths of origin are translated into Christianity. Thus, cultural theology is a supportive concept within translatability theory, which aims at expressing the Christian faith within the African cultures. In this premise and in combination with Setiloane's works on ecology drawn from the Sotho-Tswana myth of origin, three more African myths of origin from the Boshongo people of Democratic Republic of Congo (Bantu cluster of Central Africa) (Leach 1956: 145-146); the Yoruba people of Nigeria (West Africa) (Lugira 1999) and the Chewa people of Malawi (Central Africa) (Va Breugel 2001) were drawn, examined and compared. The three myths were drawn on order to ascertain the extent to which the African myths of origin were ecologically sensitive. These three ethnic groups are chosen because of their diverging contexts in terms of the language, culture and region within an African context.

### **1.2.3. Literature written on ecology from an African perspective**

The written works on ecology in Africa have focused on communalism and wholeness, but have not looked specifically at the relationships between God and creation and humanity and nonhumans from a mythical perspective. In his PhD thesis (1994) *Towards an Ecological, Christian Theology of Creation in an African Context*, Joseph Mante acknowledges that there are resources in African traditional thought that could be utilised in order to fight the current

ecological crisis. However, in formulating what he calls “Ecological, Christian theology”, he uses the ecological thoughts of Jurgen Moltmann in combination with the African Protestant world-view. Mante does not mention the place of the myths of origin in African ecological preservation. Harvey Sindima (1990) in his article, “Community of life” is more critical in his approach to Africa’s ecological crisis as he argues that the way forward in dealing with this calamity in Africa is by reclaiming African cosmological apprehension of life and community, which opposes the mechanistic world-view that has so dominated Christianity in Western society since the beginning of enlightenment. He argues that it is the mechanistic world-view, imported to Africa through Christianity and imperialism, which has been largely responsible for much of the African ecological crises and which has led us in many ways to the contemporary global crises (Setiloane 1986; Daneel 1991; Mazrui 1986). Like Sindima, Cyprian Alokwu (2009), in his PhD thesis, *The Anglican Church, Environment and Poverty*, proposes a “Nigerian indigenous *oikothology*” as a way forward in fighting poverty and preserving the environment in Africa. He argues that African cultures are not ecologically bankrupt, rather they are ecologically rich. Alokwu (:309) affirms that the indigenous African world-view was responsible for the profound communion that Africans had with nonhuman nature before the coming of Christianity. Although Alokwu alludes to the myths of origin as part of African cosmology, he limits his “indigenous *oikothology*” to the Nigerian proverbs and African cosmology in general. Categorically, Marthinus Daneel (1991) in his article, “Liberation of Creation,” pleads for African ecological theology. He (:102) observes that African religion and ecology were integrally related. Hence, he (:100) contends that if Christianity in Africa is aiming at becoming a liberating force for nature, there is a need to draw from this wisdom and seek the “intuition” that formed the basis for African ecological ethic. For Daneel (:100), it is in these areas that African primal religions could make their “greatest contribution” as the source of African theology. Yet, Daneel limits his “liberation of creation” motif to the African Initiated churches and traditional mediums. He mentions the effect of cosmological relationships on the ecology but did not build his theology of liberation for creation from the myths, which provided the basis for the African ecological sensitivity.

In the above literature reviewed so far, none of the authors has given sufficient attention to the African myths of origin. In actual fact, it is the myths that gave the answer to the African philosophical questions such as: where did the universe come from? What is the place of

humanity in the eco-system? Who is responsible for creation? (Idowu 1973:84). In short, it is the myths of origin that dealt with the organization of the universe in relation to the place of humanity in the eco-system. Actually, African people understood all cosmological relationships in the light of their myths of origin. These relationships include the relationship of God to creation and the relationship of human beings to nonhuman nature. In the light of the literature reviewed in this section, one can see the gap in the research that focuses on the myths of origin and African Christian ecological theology.

### **1.3. The research problem and Objectives**

Therefore, the key question for this study is restated as follows:

*What resources has Gabriel Setiloane seen in the African myths of origin, which could be utilised in order to construct 'an African Christian ecological theology' that focuses on creation (human and nonhuman) as God's dwelling place?*

In attempting to answer the above key question, in the study I have addressed the following sub-questions: First, how true is it that Christian theology has failed to help African Christians to preserve their ecology? Second, how do the myths of origin in the work of Gabriel Setiloane explicate the relationships between God and the whole of creation and between human beings and nonhuman nature? Third, what resources can we draw from the African myths of origin and from Gabriel Setiloane's thoughts on ecology in order to formulate an African Christian ecological theology? This leads to the objectives of the study which are as follows:

The first is to find out whether or not Christian theology has failed to help African Christians preserve their ecology. The second is to assess how the African myths of origin in the work of Gabriel Setiloane explicate the relationships between God and the whole of creation and between human beings and nonhuman nature. The third is to analyse some African myths of origin and Gabriel Setiloane's thoughts on ecology as resources in formulating 'an African Christian ecological theology'. The fourth is to formulate an African Christian ecological theology.

### **1.4. Theoretical Framework**

The study is informed by an **African theological** framework as articulated in chapter two. Within the African theological framework, I applied the theory of **translatibility** proposed



by Kwame Bediako (1995); for details see chapter two. Hence, **Cultural theology** becomes an important informative concept within this theory and the study. Principally, the myths of origin were a core component of African cultures. These mythologies can only be dealt with in the light of cultural theology. Therefore, the theory of translatability helped me in retrieving some valuable aspects of African myths of origin, analysing them and reformulating them into “an African Christian ecological theology”.

In critiquing the Western missionaries’ contribution on the current African ecological crisis, the study also appealed to the postmodernist framework. The **Postmodernist framework** moves away from a dual view of reality, to a view of reality of the universe where there is no contrast between spirit and matter (Herholdt 1998:227). This is in line with the African primal view of reality where there was no contrast between the visible and the invisible. Such is the theoretical framework that is used in formulating ‘an African Christian ecological theology.’

## **1.5. Methodology and Research Design**

The study is a historical and systematic analysis of the myths of origin as identified in the literature review. Its method is non-empirical and drew data from already existing sources. This involved collecting written information as found in published and unpublished materials such as journals, books and internet resources. Basically, this study is primarily a literature study that involved an extensive literature search on the subject of Gabriel Setiloane’s theological understanding of myths as it involves his Biocentric theology and also drew from other sources on myths that can inform ‘an African Christian ecological theology.’ The study was done in the library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, other theological libraries within Pietermaritzburg and internet sources. The aspects of my theological method, which fall under data collection, are inculturation and reconstruction. The two chosen methodologies of African theology are discussed as follows:

### **1.5.1. Inculturation**

Aylward Shorter (1988:11) defines inculturation as an ongoing creative and dynamic dialogue between Christian faith and cultures. In inculturation, African cultures and Christian faith meet in order to produce ‘inculturated theology (an African Christian ecological

theology’).’ This method is called ‘creative assimilation’, which begins with the host culture and reinterprets those aspects that could enrich Christianity in order to make Christianity establish its roots in African cultures. Anscar Chupungco (1992:29) reassures us that, “this does not cause mutual extinction but signifies an interior transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and rooting of Christianity” into the culture. Building on this, the formula for this process is as follows: African cultures plus Christian faith is equal to new African Christian theological expression (an African Christian ecological theology). In short, the contact between African cultures and Christian faith grants mutual enrichment on these interacting parts. This means that African cultures are no longer just African cultures but a ‘new African Christian theological expression’. And likewise, Christian faith is no longer just Christian faith but a ‘new African Christian theological expression’. However, Chupungco (1992:30) highlights that “because of the dynamic transculturation”, African culture does not become Christian faith or Christian faith become African culture. Yet, at the point of intersection (or meeting) both undergo transformation, but in the process they do not lose their uniqueness or identity (Chupungco 1992:30). In other words, both African cultures and Christian faith will affect each other in the process of assimilation to produce ‘an African Christian ecological theology’ that will be lived and expressed in an African world-view, specifically in the area of communion of all creation. In Justin Ukpong’s (1994: 65) view, there can be no doubt that the change, which occurs in the process of inculturation, affects both African cultures and the Christian faith at the intersection. Through this process, African Christians will integrate this understanding which will result in a deep relationship between the people and nature. Consequently, the resultant product of this interaction is ‘African Christian ecological theology’.

### **1.5.2. Reconstruction**

Reconstruction means reorganising certain aspects of Christianity in order to make it more responsive to changed circumstances, in this regard to Africa’s ecological challenges (Mugambi 1995:12). While inculturation seeks to translate Christianity so that it reflects an African ethos, the methodology of reconstruction goes further to rebuild what Western expression of Christianity destroyed in African Christianity. Thus, reconstruction theology is utilised as a strategy for action that would deal not only with the legacy of Western

missionaries,<sup>5</sup> but also the impact it had on African cultures (Chitando 2009:104). The method of reconstruction is significant to this study as it focuses on the issue of rebuilding after destruction (:105). During the modernist missionary era, African cultures were ‘demonised as paganism’, but in the postmodernist era, African Christians have seen the need for Christianity in Africa to be informed by and to draw on resources from African cultures. This calls for the method of reconstruction, especially in the area of ecological crisis where African cultures have been implicated. In this study, the methodology of reconstruction took off from the inculturation methodology and built a new African Christian consciousness that looks to the future with hope while taking into consideration all resources at the disposal from the African cultures in the African myths of origin (Mugambi 2003:30). Operating within a postmodernist framework, this methodology attempted to respond constructively to the need for renewal and transformation of the African church by drawing resources from African myths of origin (Mugambi 1995:17). Through this method the study suggested ‘an African Christian ecological theology’ that focuses on creation as the dwelling place of God.

## **1.6. Structure of the Dissertation and Conclusion**

Thus far, in this chapter I have introduced the study by focusing on the problem statement, objectives and methodology. In chapter two I will expound the relevance of African theology in the context of the ecological crisis in Africa in relation to the African myths of origin. In chapter three I will explore the genesis of the contemporary African ecological crisis. In the fourth chapter I will expound systematically on the thinking of Setiloane. I will expose only those aspects of his thoughts that pertain to the relationship of God to creation and humanity and nonhuman nature. In chapter five I will use comparative analysis for the three mythological stories, and draws on those aspects that are relevant to how the myths of origin explicate the three cosmological relationships: God, humanity and the world. In chapter six I will focus on constructing an African Christian ecological theology. I will compare and pull resources together from the three myths of origin and Setiloane’s contribution which points to some of the revisions necessary for this kind of theology. I will then share my own reflections on such theology. The study concludes with chapter seven, in which I will reinstate my

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<sup>5</sup> The European missionaries have occasioned a discontinuity between African culture and Christianity. Africans were forced to adopt western forms of life, because their cultures were considered backward and unchristian.

findings, objectives and proposes recommendations for practical actions to be taken by African Christians.

Having set out the perimeters and clarified the problem which my study seeks to solve, and the procedure to follow, I am now armed to begin to deal with the relevance of African theology in the context of the ecological crisis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICA'S ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

“If we are to develop a realistic, praxis-oriented Christian ethic aimed at the liberation of nature/creation, we have to probe the wisdom of Africa, and seek the intuition that has lain at the roots of earthkeeping in African traditional religion and philosophy all along” (Daneel 1991:100).

#### 2.0. Introduction

In the previous chapter it was noted that the study of Setiloane's African Biocentric theology in the context of the ecological crisis will be examined within the framework of African theology. The next question is which aspect/strand of African theology is appropriate. Tinyiko Maluleke (1997b:39) has observed that there has been remarkable literature written on African theology since the mid 1950s. Maluleke (:39) clarifies that these works have focused on the recovery of African identity through restoration of respect for African cultures. It has been maintained that Christianity in Africa must engage in meaningful dialogue with indigenous cultures. Yet, African theologians in their theology of inculturation have not sufficiently addressed the issue of ecology in reference to the myths of origin. Currently, there has been a call for African theology to respond to the ecological crisis with urgency. Therefore, African theology must provide insights on how African myths of origin could be utilized as a resource in the current situation of ecological crisis.

Therefore, in this chapter I will examine the relevance of African theology in the context of the contemporary African ecological crisis. I will argue that African theology has enough resources in African primal religions and cultures that could be drawn upon in order to construct an African Christian ecological theology. In this chapter I will define African theology, systematically outline and show the theological strands for African theology and shows the relevance of African theology in the face of the ecological crisis. As I deal with the above issues, the aim is to expound on the theoretical framework of the study which was briefly outlined in the previous chapter.

## 2.1. Background to African Theology

As this chapter focuses on the relevance of African theology in the face of the ecological crisis, it is necessary to define briefly African theology. Ezra Chitando (2009:40) observes that there has been a concern by African theologians about the foreignness of Christianity that African people have inherited from Western missionaries. This type of Christianity tends to be artificial and does not speak to the contextual needs of African Christians. It was, therefore, significant that African Christians have a theology – a theology that takes into account the importance of the African context. This theology needed to be rooted in African practices and customs. In advocating a theology of this nature, I share the opinion of J. K. Agbeti as quoted by Peter Mpangi (2004:26):

It seems to me that it is not religion or Christianity *per se* that people tend to oppose in Africa but the foreignness of the Christian approach to evangelism and vital national issues. It is the imposition of Western culture in the garb of the Gospel that people react against. It is the interpretation of the Bible by the standard of the Western social and cultural yardstick, without reference to the indigenous African spiritual heritage and social norms.

African people have continued to receive the gospel in its foreignness without taking into account African practices, symbols and languages. This has left many unanswered questions, for in African churches the gospel that is preached has tended to be largely within the limitation of Western Christianity. It is clear that African Christians have continued to struggle inwardly between their commitment to Christianity and their commitment to their cultures. Both African theologians and lay African Christians have complained of this alienation from Christianity that missionaries presented to the African people. Desmond Tutu (1987:37-38) calls this tension that Christianity and African cultures have created in the minds of the majority of Africans as a “form of religious schizophrenia”. He observes that though African Christians are “compelled to pay lip-service” to the gospel presented by the Western missionaries, a greater number of them, which is not publicly acknowledged because of shame, still hold firmly to African customs and practices. John Parratt (1995:14) outlines this alienation in the follow manner:

There was a widespread feeling of alienation from Western theology, a conviction that the Christian faith, as it had been presented, lacked immediacy and relevance to the African situation and that it has failed to take African traditions seriously. Consequently, the need to integrate the traditional worldview into Christian theology became an emerging theme.

In actual fact, African theology is based on the conviction that the indigenous cultures and religious past of African people are crucial factors in the development of genuine African Christian identity (Bediako 1995). Therefore, this background calls for a relevant theology that could speak to the current issues that African people are being confronted with in their daily lives.

## **2.2. Definition of African Theology**

The term African theology has attracted heated debates both at the terminological and the definitional levels. Mpangi (2004:31) observes that the majority of theologians feel that the phrase ‘African theology’ entails a regress to ‘paganism.’ One of the greatest proponents of this view is Philip Turner (quoted by Mpangi 2004:31) who believes that “it does not seem to help much to speak of ‘African theology’. The term is viewed with suspicion because the interest in traditional (sic) religions associated with it calls up in the minds of many a return to paganism”. Turner’s language expresses the prejudices that the modern Western missionaries brought with them against African religions and cultures. I feel that theologians should avoid despising African religions and cultures and avoid using derogatory terms such as ‘paganism’.

Some African theologians such as Zablon Nthamburi (1991:3) and Jesse Mugambi (1989:9) have argued that in strict terms, African theology is the theology of the African primal religions. This means it is a theology that comes from the experiences and reflections of African people on their existence and their beliefs and practices. Mugambi (1989:9) is of the opinion that African theology as a term refers to the ‘discourse’ which Africans conducted among themselves before the arrival of both Christianity and the Islamic faith. It is quite clear that the expression “African theology” is ambiguous and misleading. According to Agbeti (quoted by Mpangi 2004:32), African theology is the expression of African experiences of God. It validates God’s revelation to the African people before the coming of Christianity. Agbeti further argues that African theology must be distinguished from Christian theology because the former focuses on African experiences of their God and the latter focuses on Christian experiences of Jesus Christ. Thus, for him, African theology as such does not bear a specific focus on Christian faith. The easiest way to clarify this confusion is rather to refer to ‘African theologies’ because this signifies the various and distinctive contextual theologies which are intended for the people in Africa and those who identify themselves with

Africanism (Mpangi 2004:33). Thus, I may speak of different kinds of African theologies such as African women's theologies, African Hindu theology, African Islamic theology, etc. (Kato 1975:54; Mpangi 2004:33). Besides, since African theology does not carry a specific reference to Christianity, it is significant to specify the kind of theology one is discussing. Therefore, in this study, the phrase 'African theology' specifically refers to African Christian theology.

Within the context of African Christian theology, the most elaborate and clear definition of African theology, has been given by John Mbiti (1998:144). In his article, "African Theology," he argues that:

African theology is the articulation of the Christian faith by African Christians: both theologians and lay people. Christians ask themselves what their faith means and try to explain or simply live it within the context of their history, culture and contemporary issues.

My understanding is that definitions which other scholars have given of African theology are narrow and focus more specifically on the discourse of God and all that is related to him/her in relation to the African people. For instance, Gabriel Setiloane (1986:50) defines African theology in a stricter and narrow sense as "an attempt to verbalise African reflection about Divinity from the perspective of African grassroots, background and culture" which is in line with the definition of Agbeti, whereas Mbiti's definition is broad and it encompasses the understandings and expressions of Christian faith in accordance with African needs and mentality. In this way, African theology is a theology of liberation from Western theological oppression, colonialism and human exploitation. The purpose of this theology is to make the gospel and Christianity meaningful in the life and thought patterns of African people (Kurewa 1995:36; Nthamburi 1991:4). Thus, it should reflect on the concrete experiences of African people for it to be truly African.

Therefore, African theologians formulated a theology of liberation that is deeply rooted in African cultures, which begins with the experiences of the African people themselves. However, African male theologians in their desire to root Christianity in African cultures "adopted an innocent reading of culture" (Chitando 2009:54) and sidelined women in their theologies of inculturation (Phiri 1997a: 18, 1997b: 69; Njoroge 1997: 80). Chitando echoed what Tinyiko Maluleke (1997a: 22, italics as given) had earlier observed that while African



male theologians have “argued for the *validity* of African Christianities and the *legitimacy* of African” cultures, it is African women theologians who are charting new ways of thinking, that uphold that one can be critical to certain aspects of their cultures, yet, remain truly African. Thus, African theology is an attempt by the members of the African Christian community to offer solutions to Africa’s contemporary challenges by drawing insights from African religions and cultures, yet remain critical of both the Christian faith and African cultures. It is on this understanding that this study is broadly framed. This brings us to the areas which are considered as the strands and basic sources which constitute the foundation on which African theology is based. Whilst in the previous chapter these theological strands of African theology were outlined, it is the aim of the following section to elaborate on each of them in order to help us understand where the theory of translatability and cultural theology, which are the concerns of this study, are allocated.

### **2.3. Theological Strands for African Theology**

John Mbiti (1998:146-149) identifies three areas of African theology: oral theology, symbolic theology and written theology. These strands can merge with or give way to each other.

#### **2.3.1. Oral Theology**

Oral theology can also be called the masses theology. This means it is largely produced by the masses through their daily activities and experiences with God. It is articulated through songs, sermons, prayers, conversations, Bible studies, in dreams, testimonies etc. Mbiti (1998:147) observes that oral theology translates very well into African oral cultures, which, because of its long historical tradition, is still meaningful and in some places practical. This theology is produced in any place, at anytime, by anyone and it is meant for anyone available at that time. Mbiti (:147) identifies that oral theology is limited in a sense because it is localized and reaches a small audience at any given moment. Furthermore, because it is done casually by anyone, it is cannot be easily documented and put under academic scrutiny. For me, the question should not be whether it can be scrutinised academically but whether it is transforming the lives of those involved in articulating it. This is because theology is not just an academic discipline but a life transforming experience or a lifestyle. Myths of origin have been part of oral theology for a long time; it is only recently that they have been put into written form.

### **2.3.2. Symbolic Theology**

This theology is expressed through artistic works, drama, symbols, rituals, colours, forms of worship, dress, church decorations etc (Thiel and Helf quoted by Mbiti 1998:148). Currently, African Christians have started cultivating their own symbolism in addition to the symbolism that came with Western Christianity. Mbiti (:148) observes that symbolic theology is most often practiced in the African Initiated Churches. I believe that symbolic theology is very significant for the African church in the sense that the majority of its members are rural dwellers and are not educated, but can see and reflect on visual representation. Moreover, African people are symbolic by nature; besides their oral tradition, they taught their children through symbols. Ott (2000:164,273, 290,547,554) has shown that some of the myths of origin have been preserved through paintings and carvings.

### **2.3.3. Written Theology**

According to Mbiti (1998:148), this theology is for the privileged few who have had considerable education and are able to articulate their ideas through Western tools of reading and writing theology. These theologians are academicians and are few in comparison to the vast number of Christians in Africa. The foreign languages they use in writing theology enable them to reach wider audiences beyond their national borders and continent. Unfortunately, written theology is removed from the masses of African Christians. Thus, these academic theologians have a responsibility on their shoulders, firstly to empower the rural African churches with basic tools of reading and writing to enable them to have access to written theology, and secondly, African theologians should be making an effort to articulate their theological ideas in their vernacular languages. This study is located within written theology that has reflected on both oral and symbolic theology.

Mbiti (1998:148-154) has broken down written theology into further strands as follows: Cultural Theology, Black Theology, Liberation Theology, African Women's Theologies and Postcolonial Theology. Maluleke (1997a: 17-23) has expanded the list to include: Theologies of the AICs, African Charismatic/Evangelical Theologies, and Translation Theologies. A detailed discussion of these strands, have been done by Mbiti (1998) and Maluleke (1997b), who have also critically analysed each strand. The focus of this study is on the theology of translatability as it connects with cultural theology as the principle theory on which the study is based.

### **2.3.3.1. Theory of Translatability**

Kwame Bediako (1995:122) argues that what enables Christianity to establish its roots in any particular culture is that it is susceptible to cultural translation. Due to this fact, Bediako holds that Africans cannot continue to regard Christianity as a foreign religion on the African continent. He (:109) further argues that the theory of translatability signifies the relevance of Christianity and its accessibility to every individual in any culture within which the Gospel is transmitted and assimilated. In actual fact, translatability does not just mean translating Christianity in other cultures, but it also allows African Christians to translate the valuable elements of African primal religions and cultures and integrate them into African Christianity. In other words, translation can start either with the elements of a particular culture and the experiences of the people, translated into Christianity or vice versa. In this case, indigenous assimilation becomes a continuation of the people's experiences. The theory of translatability is used in this study in retrieving some aspects of African myths of origin, analysing them and reformulating them into an African Christian ecological theology. Hence, the strand of cultural theology is an important informative concept within this study.

### **2.3.3.2. Cultural Theology**

Cultural theology emerged from the conviction that African cultures and religious heritage are crucial to the formulation of African Christian identity. Cultural theology is developed as a theology of liberation from Western "dominance and imported theologies" (Daneel 1991:100). The proponents of cultural theology argue that Christianity has failed to meet the real needs of African Christians because it has been presented in Western thought forms and idioms (Parratt 1987:143). It is argued that African cultures are a valuable resource for the growth and authentication of Christianity in Africa. In actual fact, in cultural theology, reclaiming African heritage is critical, because the missionaries had dismissed it as 'heathen or pagan cultures'. Thus, African cultural theology seeks to relate the Christian faith directly to African cultures.

Several African theologians have put their finger quite persistently on wider varieties of sources from which cultural theology draws. These are the sources: rites of passage, riddles, poetry, **myths**, proverbs, songs, dreams, traditional prayers, art, invocations, incantations, poems, dances, sacred objects, songs etc. (Pobee 1987:26; Nthamburi 1991: 26-27). John Pobee sees the urgent need to collect these sources for they reveal the wisdom and

philosophy of African people. Nthamburi (1991:27) agrees with Pobee but argues that these sources give cultural theology a foundation on which African theological framework can be developed. While African male theologians have adopted an idealistic approach to these sources of cultural theology, African women theologians through experience know that not everything in African cultures is life affirming. Thus, women theologians have adopted a more critical approach towards cultures (Phiri 1997a, 1997b; Maluleke 1997a; Njoroge 1997, Chitando 2009). Nyambura Njoroge (1997:81, *italic added*) reveals that:

Women are concerned that uncritical cultural retrieval and glorification of African religions and cultures will continue to erode women's dignity and wholeness. Women also call for *critical study and examination* of how myths, proverbs, folktales and symbols operate in the socialisation of women working to preserve the norms of the community.

This study draws insights for the African Christian ecological theology from some African myths of origin as a source of African cultural theology.

#### **2.3.3.2.1. African myths of origin**

All human cultures have myths, stories which explain the origin of the world and human beings (Parrinder 1976:29; Setiloane 1986:15). The modern use of the concept of myth, as a widely held but false belief, is different from the way the term myth is applied in an African religious context. In an African religious situation, the term myth is used in a neutral sense as to the truth or falsity of a story embedded in a myth. Edwin Smith (1950:7) defines a myth as a religious story explaining how the universe and human beings came to be in their present form. However, calling it a story does not entail its credibility or falsity. Therefore, it is not necessary to call a myth merely a story about the universe, Supreme Being, human beings and so on, but to see it as the unfolding of all the historical events of a particular religious community. For, example, the Passover ritual in Judaism serves as a historical event and so functions as a myth (Hooke 1963:11). According to African theologians, African myths of origin try to explain the "sacred" "origin of things" including people on earth, and abound in Africa (Lugira 1999:22; Setiloane 1986:15). John Parratt (1995:114) stresses that the "myth is central, for it is the basic method of representing the divine. Denial of myth results in the desacralization of the universe and the loss of the sense of God's immanence". As a matter of fact, African myths of origin try to answer questions about the origin of the universe, because African people do not suppose that life came from nothing. Thus, the myths are prehistoric

cultural attempt at trying to give an explanation to the most difficult questions that people posed about the universe and everything in it. According to Bolaji Idowu (1973: 84), myths are a medium through which certain facts or basic truths about human experiences in their encounter with the universe and with regard to their relationship to other creation are mediated. This means that through the myths, African people tried to give answers to such questions about origins and meaning and purposes. Idowu (1973:84; see also Oduyoye 1995:19) further argues that the answers are clothed in stories which serve as a necessary tool for preservation and subsequent handover from one generation to another. Hermann Baumann (quoted by Smith 1950:6) argues that a myth is the clear presentation of the outlook of a people living in communities. “It is their objective and permanent philosophy of life.”

While there is no possibility of refuting a myth, on the one hand, it cannot also be considered as a “canon law”, but as a source in the search for meaningful community (Oduyoye 1995:21). On the other hand, Oduyoye (:21) is also aware that a myth conditions the way people think, act and live their daily lives. In short, the myth informs social activities, shapes people’s lives and attitudes and gives expression to their fears. A critical look at the explanation above reveals some common thread about the myths. First, there is a universal revelation of God who is addressed by different names according to the experiences of the people in their particular cultures. Second, the myths tell of cosmological relationships such as the relationship between God and creation in general, God and humanity, humanity and nonhuman nature.

#### **2.3.3.2.2. The Nature of African Myths of Origin**

It is important to note that in Africa, myths are believed to contain past events which people hold unanimously to be true. That is why the majority of African myths are transmitted on an oral level and in others forms such as symbols or rituals. Kevin Maxwell (1983:81) observes that African people believe that myths have evolved from a past full of events. Hence, in their rituals they evoke some of the basic values that are enshrined in these myths. For example, the rite of passage for the agricultural cycle, for the founding of a village, for the succession and burial of chiefs, etc.; all these will symbolically represent those typical features of their myths, selectively appropriated for the function. African myths of origin, therefore, contain history, which perpetually shapes the myths and vice versa. Ray Benjamin (1976:28) argues that “mythical symbols and rituals are instrumental in the African past, because they say what

reality is and shape the world to conform to this reality”. This in itself shows that myths contain certain elements that could be the true representation of African historical events. Benjamin (:17) further clarifies that:

it is important to see how African myth-history as a whole gives meaning to the world, how the sacred and the true events of the past serve to represent and explain the world as it ultimately is, and how some events may serve as ritual archetypes for the renewal of the natural and human order.

Thus, a myth does not exist in a vacuum. It is a sharpener that shapes the history of the people in their community. It was, therefore, a mistake for the Western missionaries to have sidelined and condemned the African myths of origin as ‘heathenism’ because in doing so, they did not only tear the fabric of African cultures but also destroyed the very essence of people’s identity. It is through the myths that African people preserved their history, interacted with their present, and maintained their future and cultures. It is clear, therefore, that the myths deal with issues of identity because they reveal the past experiences of people. Basically, it is the past that forms human identity. I think that myths are, therefore, a practical explanation of the longings and hopes of human life, rather than a theoretical explanation of it.

In actual fact, it is the history of the people that shapes their future. This means that all actions and the lifestyle of the people in a particular community are inspired and conditioned by the world-view enshrined in their myth of origin. For instance, according to African myths of origin there was a time when God, humanity and animals lived in harmony and in dialogue with one another. In fact, African myths of origin do not represent human as a special species but as one species in the universe inhabited by numerous species which have intrinsic value in and for themselves as creatures loved by God (McFague 1993:165). The African myths of origin were a cohesive factor that held the community together and contributed to social solidarity, group identity and harmony between humanity and nonhuman nature. Therefore, without them, it is just a matter of time that the African social orders that the myths of origin justified/defended are in danger of collapsing or disintegrating. Actually, they have already started fragmenting, manifesting in such issues as the ecological crisis. Thus, one may ask how relevant is African theology in the context of the contemporary ecological crisis? To this I now turn.

## **2.4. The Relevance of African Theology in the Face of the Ecological Crisis**

Augustine Musopole (1994:62) argues that a relevant African theology is the discovery of theological meaning in African religions and cultures. Like Musopole, Daneel (1991:100) affirms that African cultures and religions should not simply be seen “as a background to the contextualised interpretation of Christian message,” but an ecological force with very specific implications for the construction of an African Christian ecological theology. Gabriel Setiloane (1986:14-15) is aware of the fact that it is African theology that takes African Christians to the roots of the ecological crisis that the continent of Africa is facing today. Setiloane further argues that African theology, because of its rich heritage in African primal religions and cultures, has the potential to give African people a positive response to the contemporary ecological challenge. Thus, what makes African theology relevant in the context of the ecological crisis is the availability of such resources from African myths of origin. In these lie the African wisdom and philosophy that the African foremothers and fathers utilised in living in solidarity and harmony with God and all of creation. Therefore, I think that African theology, through utilising resources from African religions and cultures, can help African Christians to formulate an African Christian ecological theology.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined the relevance of African theology in the context of the African contemporary ecological crisis. I stressed that the majority of works so far written on African theology have focused on the recovery of an African identity through the restoration of respect for African cultures. I further argue that African theology is relevant in the context of the ecological crisis because of the resources at its disposal from African primal religions and cultures. These resources could be drawn upon in order to construct African Christian ecological theology. In the next chapter I investigate whether Christianity has helped African Christians to preserve their ecology, which is the first objective of this study as shown in chapter one.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND AFRICAN ECOLOGY

“How we think about the world affects the way we live in it. In particular, our understanding of nature -- our cosmology -- affects the way we understand ourselves, the way we relate to other people, and, of course, the way we relate to the earth and other forms of life” (Sindima 1990:137).

#### 3.0. Introduction

In the last chapter I established the theoretical framework under which the study proposes to construct an African Christian ecological theology. I argued that African theology, because of its access to African primal religions and cultures, has the potential to respond to the contemporary ecological crisis.

In chapter I want to find out whether Christianity has helped African Christians to preserve their ecology, I will investigate the root cause of the African ecological crisis. Thus, the contemporary ecological crisis in Africa can best be understood in its historical context of religious change. African people have been influenced by the Western view of reality through education, technology, westernization, urbanization, religion etc. This wholesale importation of uncensored Western lifestyle has had a negative effect on the African cultural value systems. Along with this religious change, has come an ecological crisis about which no one seems to know what to do or where to start to resolve it.

In the first section of this chapter I will start by investigating the ecological situation in Africa before the coming of the Western missionaries. Whilst I portray the past African society as a whole, I stress those features that bear directly on the relationship of the people to their ecology. I emphasise those African beliefs and customs which lay at the heart of ecological preservation. In the second section I deal with the impact of Western missionaries on the African world-view that has contributed to the ecological crisis today. My interest in this section is to understand the stereotypes which the Western missionaries held about African people. I will also indicate significant influence that Western missionaries have had in Africa that is rapidly altering Africa's ecological life.



### **3.1. African Primal World-view**

Scholars are unanimous in the fact that African people had no sharp distinction between God and creation and no sharp separation between human beings and nature (Mugambi 1995; Mbiti 1969; Taylor 1963, etc.). This means that for African people, nature and the unseen were inseparably involved in one another in a total community. The spiritual element was always a part of life, indeed the larger part. It emanated from the understanding that the material world is firmly connected to the spiritual world and spirituality is the tie that binds human beings to the world of nature and God (Taylor 1963:72). In the African cosmological world-view, there is a connection between the living and the living dead, between God and creation, human and nature (Daneel 1991:102-103). In actual fact, the physical and the spiritual worlds are constantly interacting to such an extent that some African traditionalists may not even be able to tell when they are operating in the spiritual world or in the physical world. The myths of origin narrate the activities of God as the Creator of the universe and all that is in it, who in the beginning established its principles and dynamics. Kevin Maxwell (1983:77) affirms that as much as African myths of origin tell about past events, they are also “the constitutive substratum of present reality”.

Therefore, without a radical separation between God and creation, religion was not interpreted in a different category of thought or experience. God was perceived as the centre of religion and was believed to be all-pervasive in whom both human beings and nature participated in a seamless web of relationships or interaction (Setiloane 1986:15). This means that human beings, nature and the spiritual world were inseparably involved in one another in a total community or in a unified whole. In short, the African concept of human and nature was “cosmically holistic” (Maxwell 1983:77) or a “rapport of forces” (Tempels 1959:103), an organization of diverse relationships that made up the whole. Essentially, for African people, “the cosmological, zoological, botanical, anthropological, geological and spiritual worlds are not artificially separated zones, but a symbolic whole” (Labrecque 1931:18-20). Jesse Mugambi (1987:25) clarifies that all Africans believe that nothing can go well in life if the vital relationships are not maintained between the people and the powers that are perceived in nature. These include God, fellow human beings, ancestors, and all of creation. If any of these relationships are broken, they must be restored before the situation can normalise. This shows that there was an essential harmony between non-humans and humans. One could not exist without the other. Everything was interrelated and interconnected with

one another in the web of life. Daneel (1991:103) agrees with Mugambi and adds that these relationships have a direct impact on the ecology. Though Placide Tempels (1959:97) is right in affirming that “vital force” is the fundamental concept of African religions and philosophy, he did not fully understand how the “vital force” is understood by Africans themselves. In Tempels’ explanation of the concept of “vital force”, he argues that African people “dominate” nature because they believe that nature was “created only for the assistance of the higher created being, human”. This is a projection of Tempels’ Western thoughts and beliefs, on the actual African situation, which is different to the way Africans themselves understood their relationship to nature. Tempels seems to have missed the fact that Africans were concerned with maintaining cosmic balance of forces in both society and nature and saw these two spheres as inextricably connected.

Harold Turner has suggested the six-feature framework for understanding the primal religions as genuine religions, rather than just a way a particular people organized their societies (quoted by Bediako 1995:93). I summarise the Turner six-feature as follows: First, there is a sense of kinship with nature, in which nature has its “own existence and a place in the universe” in symbiotic relationship with all interacting forces. Because of this interaction, human beings and nonhuman nature can enter into a totemic spiritual relationship which results in “respect and reverence and without exploitation” (:94). For Turner, ecological preservation in the African world-view is “a profoundly religious attitude” of humanity’s place in the natural world. This is important because people’s understanding of their place in the world has a direct effect on the way they treat nonhuman nature. In the second feature, Turner reveals that there is a deep awareness that people are limited, weak and sinful and stand in need of spiritual power. In Africa, people are aware that through vital interaction of forces, they can manipulate the spiritual forces for their benefit (Tempels 1959:97; Anderson 1991:56). These forces cannot exist without the other. It is admitted that human beings are but creatures that long for their Creator. God is thought of as the causative agent, and the sustainer of these resultant forces. The third feature, complementary to the second, is that there is a conviction that human beings are not alone in the universe, for there are spiritual forces at work which are more powerful than people. In fact, people are constantly aware of the presence of these forces, some are good and others are evil. The fourth feature builds on the third, which is a belief that people can enter into covenants with the “spiritual world and so share in its powers and blessings and receive protection from evil forces” (quoted by

Bediako 1995:94). The fifth feature is an extension of the fourth, in that there is a deep conviction that explains the significant place of ancestors. In the African world-view, the living dead and living human beings continue to participate in life as interactive forces. Ancestors have a special place in African understanding of reality because they act as mediators between God and the living human beings. The ancestors were believed to inhabit certain places that were considered sacred places (Setiloane 1976:83). The sixth feature unifies the other five features; that is, there is a conviction that humanity lives “in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and spiritual” (quoted by Bediako 1995:95). Kwame Bediako (1995:96) concludes that whilst Turner affirms the six-feature framework of understanding the primal religions, it seems that it is the sixth and final feature that conveys the primal conception of the universe “as a cosmically unified system, essentially spiritual”. Indeed, I agree with Bediako (:95) that the sixth feature “provides the real key to the entire structure”. I believe that it is because of this enchanted or mystical African understanding of the universe as a unified whole that earned them various names like ‘superstitious,’ ‘totemistic,’ ‘animistic,’ ‘nature worshipers,’ ‘nature religion’ etc. Yet, at the core of this world-view was a holistic and inclusive participation of both unseen and seen entities in the common life, which resulted in solidarity and harmony in cosmological relationships. Mazrui (1986:60) has stated that nature was maintained through the African understanding that everything that God created was sacred. Therefore, human beings exercised the same reverence for trees and mountains as they did for animals and performed some rituals before and after chopping down a tree, as before and after hunting (Setiloane 1995:60). This explains why the Western missionaries and colonisers found African nature still intact, the jungle, wildlife and the undeveloped wild terrains (:60). Having shown the holistic nature of the African world-view, therefore, T. O. Beidelman (1982:31) is right in arguing that, had the Western missionaries understood well the African world-view, they might have been able to shape African society for the better.

### **3.2. The Impact of the Western World-view on the African Concept of Ecology**

First, it is important to note that the world-view of Western missionaries who came to Africa was influenced by modernity and scientific revolution that was characterised by the universal claim of reason and instrumental rationality, the differentiation of spheres of life-experience into private and public, the sacred and the secular (Hunter 1994:16). James Hunter (:17)

further observes that at this time, the European scientific revolution was a belief that it was important to achieve mastery over nature through practical application of rational control for the benefit of humanity. Easlea (quoted by Ruether 1993:19) observes that “the scientific revolution at first moved in a different direction, exorcising the demonic powers from nature in order to reclaim it as an icon of divine reason manifest in natural law”. However, during modernity, the view of nature changed to “a strict dualism of transcendent intellect and dead matter” (:19). In other words, with the influence of Isaac Newton’s mathematical laws of physics, nature was secularized and perceived as matter in motion that could be manipulated by scientists and reconstructed to advance the wealth and power of Europeans (Ruether 1993:20). Lynn White (1974:4) blames the Christian evolution in the middle ages, which produced scientific and technological advances, which also enabled the exploitation of nature. Renaissance thinking concerning absolute human power combined with the quest for scientific knowledge reinforced human ascendancy and led the notion of mastery over nature (Gillmor 1996:262). In this cosmological world-view that influenced the Western missionaries, nature had no intrinsic value in and for itself but was seen as mechanical and valued on the basis of its benefit to humanity. Hence, concern and care for nature did not enter everyday living. The moral conduct in a mechanistic society was often guided by self-interest, and often there was no agreement on what is moral. Mechanistic society undermines the ties that bind persons and their communities to one another and to the cosmos (Sindima 1990: 138). The Christian dream of immortal blessedness, freed from finite limits, was translated into scientific technological terms (Ruether 1993:20). This is the same world-view that the Western missionaries who worked in Africa imposed on the African people.

Second, the Western missionaries came to African with the notion of the cultural superiority of Western society (Hastings 1976: 38). They believed that African cultures were inferior to their culture. Africans were seen as intellectually and morally low in the scale of humanity (Beidelman 1992:128). Beidelman (:133) observes that Western missionaries considered African customs and beliefs the antitheses of Christianity. The majority of missionaries described African religions as ‘fetishism,’ ‘superstition,’ ‘nature worship,’ ‘animism’ etc. All these characteristics are Western preconceived notions about African people that were intended to create the impression that Africans worshipped wrong objects from nature. Thus, there is no doubt that Western missionaries believed it was necessary for the primal African image to be destroyed in respect and favour of the European way of life, so that they could

find it easy to colonise, rule, civilise and exploit African people (P'Bitek 1971:40, 54). Without even bothering to understand African religions and cultures, the missionaries disapproved of all the traditional religious beliefs and required African converts to Christianity to renounce and denounce such notions publicly (Beidelman 1992:137). The missionaries did not realise that by destroying African religions and cultures, they destroyed not only the identity of African people, but also the core that gave coherence and meaning to the social fabric. What the missionaries did not understand was the fact that ecological preservation in African was firmly linked to African religious beliefs. The missionaries introduced a sharp distinction between the secular and spiritual, between God and nature and between humanity and nature (Mazrui 1986:52). Fowler (1995:29) affirms that the missionaries believed that the affairs of everyday life, including politics were secular affairs which should not be linked with religious affairs which were, in principle, a private matter for the individual. This in itself had negative implications on the African world-view that viewed both spiritual and physical realities as the same. To go back to the main point, it is clear that the missionaries perceived African people and their cultures as inferior to Western culture. Consequently, they totally disregarded African cultures and their historical experiences in which the wisdom and philosophy of ecological preservation had lain for centuries (Daneel 1991:101). This is not to say that African cultures were perfect and did not need any transformation, no! Every human culture has its own evils that need transformation. However, the damage the Western missionaries did to the balance of primal societies by wholesale condemnation of the whole religious and social organization has precipitated both the human and ecological crisis (Bujo 1992:39). Indisputably, the invasion of the Western missionaries' power and their culture was both pervasive and brutal on the African continent.

Third, Western missionaries' world-view was shaped by colonialism which was the application of science into technological control over nature. There are many definitions of the term colonialism but in this study I define it as a forceful occupation and subjugation of one nation by another. Jesse Mugambi (2004:17) strongly cautions that it would be a distortion of historical facts for anyone to disassociate the Western missionaries from the process of the colonisation of Africa. Both Western missionaries and secular powers had a common agenda to politically subjugate African people and this was seen as a legitimate and a righteous endeavour. The Western missionaries saw colonisation of Africa "as a God-given calling for the uplifting of African people" (Fowler 1995:7). The explorers paved the way and

the Western missionaries followed and established mission stations which later became their centres of enforcing Western lifestyle and customs on African people, as well as points of contact with the colonial administrators with whom they worked for to civilise African people (Mugambi 2004:17). For instance, the Portuguese Mission of the Catholic Church in Mozambique obliged their missionaries to support Portuguese colonial administrators virtually in every respect. They had instructions to have the Portuguese flag raised at the centre all the time and to use and teach the African people their language. In actual fact, when it was difficult for them to extend their mission work to Malawi because of other rival mission societies, the Portuguese missionaries in Mozambique appealed to their government to colonise part of Malawi in order for them to evangelise the area without competition (Klaus *et al.* 2007:211). In this sense, they were instrumental in setting the scene which would meet the colonists when they started arriving in Africa. In actual fact, the majority of the missionaries and the colonial administrators shared a common vision of civilising the 'dark' continent of Africa. It is also clear that the majority of missionaries confused the gospel with civilisation in the sense that their support of colonialism was motivated by their unempirical conclusion that African people needed Western civilisation. Fowler (1995:34) observes that the missionaries believed that Western civilization was founded on the gospel. Yet, this was just an assumption because the civilisation that was brought to Africa was the product of a secular faith in the autonomous human reason rather than Christian faith. Probably, some missionaries lacked the understanding that there was a difference between the gospel and civilization; that is why they worked with the colonial administrators in order to civilise the 'dark continent'. Mirbt (quoted by de Vries 1978:75) noticed that there was such a close relationship between the Western missionaries and the colonial administrators that for certain periods it was difficult to see whether the idea of missions took priority or colonising plans actually formed the driving force. Western historians do not all agree on what the relationship was between Christian missionary activity and colonialism. However, evidence suggests that while many missionaries opposed the harsher aspects of colonialism, they supported the colonization of African countries (Mugambi 2004: 17; Fowler 1995:7).

Fourth, it is rightly argued that imperial conquests are meaningless without an economic subjugation of the people. Ali Mazrui (1986:60) argues that the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe was a time of industrialization. Industry in Europe required raw materials to be manufactured into marketable products. As a result, Europeans sought both a source of raw materials as well as

a market for manufactured goods in Africa. Mazrui (:60) concludes that this economic motivation played a large part in the colonization of Africa. For instance, Europeans exploited timber in Africa that was used for shipbuilding, to fuel steam engines in industry and transportation, and to make railroad sleepers. Therefore, African forests were cleared for the railways, which in turn enabled timber exploitation in deeper areas. Cleared areas were converted to agricultural land for revenue. Ecologically, deforestation resulted in soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, desertification etc.

Teresia Hinga (2006:177) argues that as a result of colonial policies, African people were displaced from their ancestral lands and the state gained control over resources. They introduced coffee which was notable for having erosion rates nearly twice as high as subsistence plots. Fertile land was cleared and replaced with a persistent monoculture, unsuitable for nearly all plant and animal inhabitants of the previous forest. Mineral mining in Africa was lucrative for Europe. A major effect of colonialism was the progressive incorporation of Africa into the world of the capitalist system, within which Africa functioned as a source of raw material for Western industrial production (Fowler 1995:43). This resulted in the total reorganization of African economic life and the imposition of taxation forced the majority of African people into wage and migration labour in urban areas which led to a rural exodus. This harsh situation involved separation from families, leaving women and children unsupported in rural areas. It is against this background of disaggregation of African societies and destabilization of life that the impact of the Western missionaries has to be considered, for this has been the most important major factor in the process of the westernization of Africa.

Lastly, missionary education was used as a tool to render Africans subservient to colonial rule and Western culture. Education was partly contained in “the various catechisms that new converts had to memorize and assimilate” (Musopole 1994:108). Musopole (:108) further laments that unfortunately to convert did not just mean giving one’s life to Jesus but also to accept the lordship of the Western cultural world-view. Mugambi (2003:85) agrees with Musopole and argues that the colonial administrators expected the missionaries to turn the colonized Africans into obedient subjects or docile citizens. In return, the colonizers gave grants to the missionaries for educational, health and other projects that could soothe African people in their oppression by the colonial states. Mugambi (:85) further reveals that if African

people protested against the state, it was the duty of the missionaries to cool the agitation through preaching and the classroom. Therefore, through education, missionaries were inculcating Western values and helping African people to assimilate a Western lifestyle. Through education, the African primal beliefs and customs were challenged and condemned as ‘paganism’. There is no African culture that has not been adulterated by its contact with Western culture. The fact that the majority of missionaries rendered their special service to Western imperialism by legitimising it and accustoming African people to accept colonial exploitation, indirectly or directly, they have contributed to contemporary Africa’s ecological destruction.

The missionaries agreed with the colonial administrators because they shared the same world-view that separated religion from the secular and cultural superiority. In the context of all this it becomes important for this study to look at the implications this has had on the African ecology and spirituality.

### **3.3. Implications for African Ecology**

Having come to Africa with a Western world-view as described above, it was inevitable that the missionaries condemned the African practices and beliefs which were at the heart of African ecological preservation. Once the African cultures were abandoned, the African Christians were left with no defence mechanism against exploitation of nonhuman nature. And through the theologies that the missionaries taught them, they were convinced that they were more special than the rest of creation. The African primal understanding of nature as sacred determined African wisdom of ecological management. Yet, when the missionaries condemned this as ‘nature worship’, African attitudes to their ecology was re-socialised to a mechanical understanding of nature as the servant of humanity, valued only for its human utilisation. Nature was now perceived as created for human benefit. This resulted in over-exploitation of nature, which has resulted in the common problem of ecological destruction and ecological imbalance. Furthermore, by the missionaries’ concentration on individual salvation in another future world and eschatology in which the present world will be destroyed, they instilled an attitude in Africans of turning their back on matters perceived to be of this present natural and sinful world. In actual fact, cosmic sensitivity was a cultural shock and alien to the missionaries, who desired to know about the union of God and humanity not with nature. The African belief in God as a force that permeated everything was



condemned as ‘nature worship’. For them it was only human beings who were created in the image of God and therefore, only human beings could be significant in God’s eyes. For the missionaries, only people were the object of God’s concern (Wilders 1982:1). In this way, there was a gradual shift in African sensibility from a God centred world-view to anthropocentric. When salvation was interpreted in eschatological terms rather than in its present reality, African concern for ecology for its own sake was underplayed; future expectations became more important than present realities. Worse still, salvation became an individual and private matter and not a communal and public matter. Therefore, the introduction of this world-view has had distorting effects on the African understanding of community, in the sense that it sets humanity apart from nature and nature is perceived as ‘the other’. Consequently, missionaries can be seen to have contributed a great deal to the contemporary African ecological crisis.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter my aim was to establish whether Christianity has helped African Christians preserve their ecology. I have shown that traditional African society did not separate God from creation and no sharp separation existed between human beings and nature. In fact, nature and the unseen were inseparably involved in one another in total community. I argued that the Western world-view has had a distorting influence on the African concept of ecology. First, the world-view of Western missionaries who came to Africa was influenced by modernity and the scientific revolution that was characterised by the universal claim of reason and instrumental rationality, and the differentiation of spheres of life-experience. Second, Western missionaries came to Africa with the notion of the cultural superiority of Western society. Third, the Western missionaries’ world-view was shaped by colonialism which was the application of science into technological control over nonhuman nature. Fourth, I highlighted that imperial conquests in Africa were characterised by economic subjugation of the conquered people. Lastly, missionary education was used as a tool to render Africans subservient to colonial rule and Western culture. In the light of this, I argued that the missionaries have contributed to the contemporary African ecological crisis because they did not give African Christians a mechanism to preserve their ecology. In the next chapter, I begin discussing the heart of my study. How does Gabriel Setiloane explicate the relationships between God and the whole of creation and between human beings and nonhuman nature?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF GABRIEL SETILOANE'S AFRICAN BIOCENTRIC ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

“African conceptions of being show a ‘belief in a potency locked up in the objects and beings’ or an Energy, a Force which is immanent in all things” (Setiloane 1986:24).

#### 4.0. Introduction

In the preceding chapter I noted that the reason ecology was intact in Africa before the arrival of Western missionaries was because of the African understanding of community as inclusive of nonhuman nature. I highlighted that missionaries believed that African people and their cultures were inferior to the European people and their culture. Hence, the majority of missionaries did not integrate African cultures in the gospel they proclaimed to African people. The conclusion I drew from this was that this attitude had a negative impact on the African concept of ecology. In this regard it significant to examine Gabriel Setiloane's thoughts on African ecological theology based on Sotho-Tswana myths of origin to draw some clues that can inform an African Christian ecological theology. Therefore, my specific focus in this chapter is to assess how Gabriel Setiloane understands, from the Sotho-Tswana's myth of origin, the cosmological relationships between God and the whole of creation and between human beings and nonhuman nature. In this chapter I will expose and analyse certain of Setiloane's selected works within his theological context.

#### 4.1. Significance of Gabriel Setiloane

The late Gabriel Molehe Setiloane was a Methodist minister and a Professor of African theology at the University of Cape Town. Setiloane had wide ecumenical and international experience. He served as a secretary of the Youth Commission in the All Africa Conference of Churches. Besides, he also lectured at Selly Oak College, Birmingham as William Patson Visiting Lecturer. Setiloane did his Doctorate Degree at the University of Bristol. Perhaps, one of his greatest contributions to African theological scholarship was his involvement in establishing and heading the Departments of Theology and Religious Studies at the Universities of Botswana and Swaziland (African-American Lectionary 2008). He later became the Superintendent Minister of the Methodist Church of South Africa at Kroonstad,

his home town. Setiloane retired in 1990, yet he continued to lecture at overseas universities and Symposia. In 1997, he was elected as a member of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) as a representative for religious matters. In 1998, Setiloane received an honorary Doctorate Degree from the university of Fort Hare in recognition of his contribution to academic circles (Setiloane 1986).

Although Setiloane has not written extensively compared to other African scholars like John Mbiti, his contribution in the field of African theological scholarship is of immense significance. Gabriel Setiloane's writing focused on the liberation of African primal religions and cultures from Western theological oppression. His preliminary book, developed from his PhD thesis, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*, deals with the missionaries' misunderstanding of African cultures in the concept of *Modimo* (God) and the effects it had on the Sotho-Tswana world-view and the African world-view in general. The missionaries made African cultures appear to have nothing to offer to the deepening of Christian faith in the African soul. Setiloane (1976:3) argues that the current predicament of Christianity in Africa is due to the fact that the missionaries did not draw from African cultures as a source for establishing Christianity in Africa. From this, it is clear that Setiloane struggled with the issue of the suitability of Western Christianity, which has been presented and mediated through Western idioms and thought patterns to contemporary African experiences. Reflecting on this problem made him realise that African religions and cultures are rich in values which are not only in agreement with Christianity but can also enrich African Christianity.

The balance, Setiloane maintained, between Christian faith and African cultures are significant. While taking seriously African religions and cultures and being critical of Western Christianity, Setiloane held firmly to Christianity as if he had been "bewitched" and he could not "shake off the Christian witchcraft" which had captured him (Setiloane 1979:64). In short, he attempted to take seriously both Christianity and African cultures as partners that could enrich one another. As indicated previously, there is up to now no theologian or scholar who has written about Setiloane's theology. Needless to say, this is not a comprehensive exposition and analysis of his thoughts. Rather, given the limited scope of this study, the focus in what follows is specifically on those aspects of Setiloane's theology which concern the construction of an African Christian ecological theology.

## 4.2. Setiloane and the African Understanding of the Origin of Life

Gabriel Setiloane has developed his theological thoughts in all his works around the myth of origin among his people, the Sotho-Tswana of Southern Africa. Setiloane (1998a: 66-67; 1995:59; 1976:33-34; 1975:29-30) narrates that according to the Sotho-Tswana mythology, “the first people came out of a hole in the ground. They came out men with their women and children and animals, cattle, goats and dogs”. The fact that such holes in the ground, out of which the first people and animals came, are found all over Southern and Central Africa, from the Orange River to the country of Makololo, is clear testimony that the myth is indigenous and widespread (Setiloane 1975:30; 1976:33; Hodgson 1982:18).

Setiloane further explains that the first people and animals came out of the hole through the enablement of *Modimo* (God) and by *Modimo's* one legged agent called *Loowe* who led them out of this hole. It is argued that the footprints were engraved on the rock as it was still soft when they came out. The footprint of *Loowe* is different from the rest as it is the only one that points back to the cave, proof that he returned back into the hole “and left the people and animals to multiply and replenish the earth” (Setiloane 1975:30; 1976:34). Setiloane (1975:30-31) highlights that the significance of this myth lies in the three features which are unique from those traditionally held beliefs in Christianity. First, it challenges “the idea of creation in time,” though the myth clearly shows that *Modimo* is “the one who cause to be” or “the source of being” (1975:30; 1976:81). Thus, this cannot be classified as a story of creation, not even of creation of human beings. Second, human beings and animals are not seen as beginning at a particular time in history. For Setiloane (1975: 31), human beings and animals had always pre-physically existed in *Modimo*. I therefore argue that this is important because Christianity through history has perceived matter as evil (possessed by demons) that human beings must seek to escape from in order to become holy (Ruether 1993:19). Contrary to this view, traditional African society perceived matter as a stage of meeting with God - something through which God reveals him/herself to the people (Idowu 1969:19). Setiloane (1986:55) argues that the myth of ‘the hole in the ground’ seems to confirm what Western scientific observation has arrived at by another route. Thus, the myth answers the scientific question when human beings separated from the animals to become persons and that is at the point of human consciousness, when people became aware of themselves. For Setiloane (:55), this could be placed at the point of emergence from the hole in the ground, when people began to live distinctive lives from animals. This conclusion seems reasonable,

especially as Africa has been confirmed as the cradle of human evolution. The third feature is even more remarkable because the myth says nothing about the human individual coming to be, but takes it for granted that humanity comes into visible existence in a company with husbands, wives, children and animals of all kinds (Setiloane 1975:31; 1976:34). The fact that Modimo sent people into a community with other things, seems to suggest that living in a community is the original intention of God for creation. Drawing from the above myth, the question is: how does Setiloane understand the three cosmological relationships of God, humanity and creation?

### **4.3. Setiloane's Understanding of the Three Cosmological Relationships**

Setiloane understands the three cosmological relationships as follows:

#### **4.3.1. Setiloane's Understanding of Modimo (God)**

To begin with, Setiloane has argued that *Modimo* was never conceived of as a 'person', but was described as *sole* (thing or monster). *Modimo* is a noun of the second class in the Sotho-Tswana language. This class of nouns includes those elements that are intangible or have no plural form; if given a plural prefix it changes their meaning completely (Setiloane 1986:34; 1976:77; 1978:411).<sup>6</sup> Thus, throughout this section, the pronoun "IT" will be used with reference to *Modimo*. This is concurrent with how Gabriel Setiloane and the Sotho-Tswana people understood and experienced *Modimo*.

Setiloane (1975:29) writes that the early missionaries among the Sotho-Tswana, such as Robert Moffat and Eugene Casalis, complained that the people had no idea of creation. Specifically, they discovered that there was no concept of creation in time like in the biblical creation story of Genesis 1-2. The Sotho-Tswana "have a word in their language signifying: having always been - to exist in an incomprehensive manner" (Setiloane 1975:29; 1976:80). By this very word the Sotho-Tswana explain the existence of the universe. Setiloane (1975:29) explains that this was because the myth of "the hole in the ground" does not reveal the approximate time human beings and animals existed under the earth, where not only ancestors, but God makes IT's dwelling. Since there is no story of creation, Setiloane (1976:81) believes that this could mean only one thing - that *Modimo* is the one who eternally

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<sup>6</sup> This class includes elements such as smoke, fire, wind, moon, lightening, mist and all elemental objects which cannot be described by epithets of personal class because of their mysteriousness or intangibility like Modimo 'ITself' (Setiloane 1976:77).

generates both Godself and IT's manifestations. *Modimo* is the source, evolving the universe and all that is in it in an unrecorded time. In this sense, the Sotho-Tswana believe that *Modimo* is the beginning and the cause of humans, animals and the world coming into existence (1986:37; 1976:81). In addition, IT is the stream of life which flows into the indeterminate future and is ever returning to its source (1976:81).

Drawing insights from Edwin Smith's *African Ideas of God* and Placide Tempels' *Buntu Philosophy*, Setiloane (1998b: 80; 1995:62) argues that these two drew their attention to the African understanding of God as a "Power", "A Force Vitale", or "A Presence" in the universe. This all permeating Force is present as life in all creation. Making an observation from philosophy, Setiloane (:62) affirms that approaching this concept from Platonic metaphysics, one can see that *Modimo* is "an immaterial force that animates the universe." Moreover, Setiloane sees science and African theology as complementary rather than opponents. He believes that the contemporary atomic scientific theories are in agreement with the African understanding of *Modimo* as the all pervasive Energy in the universe. For instance, contemporary science has unlocked the force, power, and energy out of inanimate matter (1995:62). This means that it is impossible for creation to exist without this Vital Energy permeating it. Hence, the Sotho-Tswana identified or recognised *Modimo* in all things. *Modimo* was also thought of as the Force within which the communal life of creation flourishes. Setiloane, quoting Mulago (1986:25), argues that God is the Force Itself, giving existence, power of survival and increase to creation. Clearly, *Modimo* in African understanding is as exclaimed by Carlyle (quoted by Setiloane 1986:25), "Force! Force! Force! Everywhere Force!" The Force penetrates through human beings, animals and all things. *Modimo* was a driving Force in all things, animate and inanimate and dwelt in everything, inanimate and animate. There is nothing too inferior for the habitation of *Modimo*. Setiloane (1995:63) argues that this is "not pantheism", but probably "animism". Setiloane's understanding of "animism" is not in the way Western scholars have understood it in terms of everything having its own personal soul, but in the sense that everything was inhabited by *Modimo*. Thus, Setiloane could argue that even "animism" was not a well suited term to apply to African understanding of the all-immanence presence of God in creation. He therefore suggested that a more suited term could be "panentheism" (the presence of God in the totality of life), an understanding that God is in creation and above creation. Therefore, God in Africa relates to creation by being immanent present in them. Clearly, Setiloane's

Biocentric theology is developed on an understanding that God is that principle of life present in everything, everywhere, at all times. I therefore argue that it is this awareness of God as an all-immanent Energy in everything that made the Sotho-Tswana people perceive creation as sacred, something that must be respected.

#### **4.3.2. Setiloane's Understanding of Humanity**

Setiloane is interested in humanity, not just for its sake, but as a centre of interaction. The myth of the 'hole in the ground', suggests that human beings, at the very point of consciousness, realised that there is a "Power, Force or Presence which is the Source, is presumed even before the people became really human" (Setiloane 1986:56). The cause of the universe has always been known to be beyond humanity. Setiloane (:56) believes that immediately humanity came from the cave, three things seem to fall upon them, "consciousness of self, consciousness of the community of human beings and animals, and consciousness of Divinity as the cause of being". Therefore, community is a gift for African people that came with consciousness. This means that humanity can be understood only as being in community. In actual fact, there is a sense of wholeness of the person in Africa which is manifested in the African attitude to the totality of life. It is the community that makes it possible for the African experience of *Ubuntu*. Actually, Setiloane shows that to be human is to be relation seeking, and to be relating to vital forces in the universe. It is to have the ability to relate and long for a relationship with the community. Setiloane stresses that African understanding of humanity is contrary to the Western understanding of an individual as a self-sufficient, self-directing, self-determining, closed unit etc. Setiloane (1975:31) argues that in Africa, humanity is conceived as if it were "a magnet, creating with other creatures a complex field". He (:31) holds that "within this magnetism, any movement affects the magnetisation of all". The effect could either be good or bad depending on the action itself. This magnetism or centre of attraction is perceived as "potency locked up in objects and beings or energy, a force which is immanent in all things" (Setiloane 1986:24). This force is intangible and all pervasive, it is ever-present in the universe and flows through everything but it is stronger in human beings. Thus, for Setiloane (:24), a "human person is a force or energy that is Modimo-Divinity". In other words, every human person is endowed with divine energy which is the principle of life. Care must be taken here not to confuse humanity as forces with God as the Cosmic Force that animates all existence. Yet, human beings are only vital forces because of the presence of this Cosmic Force in them. For

Africans there is a clear distinction and essential difference between different forces in the universe but there is only one Source Force, where all forces emanate. Thus, for Setiloane (:24), a person is something divine, sacred, weird, holy, possessing all the qualities of God (Modimo). The life force in humanity is called “*Seriti*” in the Sotho-Tswana language, which is translated as “dignity or personality”. According to Setiloane’s Biocentric theology, life force is not neutral; its very existence seems to be deliberately planned to promote cosmological relationships between God and creation and humanity and other creation. Therefore, Setiloane (1986: 26) is right in affirming that the essence of being is “participation” in which human beings are always interlocked with one another and with other creation. This means that human beings are not only vital forces, but vital forces in participation with other vital forces which include all other creation. For Setiloane (1975:31-32), it is in this understanding that one finds the Africans’ deep respect for humanity. There is some quality of divinity in humanity which calls for respect and integrity of humanity. Yet, as will be shown in the next section, Setiloane is also aware that the quality of divinity is not just something that is found in humanity but in all of God’s creation.

Therefore, when this myth is applied to the power relations between men and women among the Sotho-Tswanas, it does not support the hierarchy in these relationships. The myth depicts women not only as equals of men but as vital forces who share directly with God in a personal way, the secrets and mysteries of generating life forces. Even the Hebrew understanding that God created man as the pinnacle of creation and the woman from the rib of the man (Gen 1-2) is also foreign to the world-view of the Sotho-Tswana people.

### **4.3.3. Setiloane’s Understanding of Nonhuman Nature**

Drawing from ‘the hole in the ground myth’, Setiloane argues that African community cannot be understood without understanding the interrelatedness of human beings and other creation. He stresses that the myth is significant because it teaches us that the first appearance of people was as a group, a company or community of people and animals. Thus, the most cherished principle is sharing life together in the community, which is inclusive rather than exclusive. Setiloane (1986:24) is of the idea that animals, trees, hills, lakes, mountains and all of creation have *seriti* (the vital force, or energy). Just like human beings, all creation perceived physically emit force like electrons in a live electric wire. Just as I observed above, the principle of life in nonhuman nature is also calculated to promote a relationship with



other forces in the universe. Actually, just as was observed above in the myth, Setiloane (1995:60) assumes the physical pre-existence of humans and animals under the group that came from the cave. Hence, in the traditional Sotho-Tswana world-view, human beings have always been regarded as one with animals, sharing life with all other creation in the wholeness of community. Setiloane (1995:59) notes that those who came from “the hole in the ground” found the natural sphere, the trees, grass, mountains, rivers, etc already on earth. This is why they instantly bestowed on them “a primacy worth”. Setiloane (:59) adds that people believe that these natural phenomena came first and will still be here when people and animals are no longer. Therefore, humans exercise the same respect for the trees, and hills as they do for other humans and animals. Everything that came from God is sacred and must be regarded as such. God lives in them just as he lives in human beings and animals. Setiloane (:60) further observes that the majority of African rituals, totems and taboos were intended to recognise the sacredness of creation. According to Setiloane’s Biocentric theology, human beings relate to nature by personifying it; this underscores the fact that human beings participate in a vital-web-of-life with nonhuman nature and are not outside or above nature, but a family unit with equal rights to live. Thus, I can conclude that for Setiloane, the unifying factor of the three cosmological relationships is God in relation with humanity and other creation.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have highlighted that Setiloane’s Biocentric theology is a theology of ‘life’ that is ever-present in God, humanity and all creation. This life finds its origin in *Modimo* and it is ‘the life’ of relationships, which interlock all vital forces in the universe. The three cosmological relationships are intimately connected with one another in the web of life. In this sense, *Modimo* is the all embracing Energy (or Vital Force) that brings coherence and vital union in these three cosmological relationships. What Setiloane has not mentioned is whether God can exist without human beings and nonhuman nature without being conscious about God. Can one therefore ask whether Gabriel Setiloane’s explanation of the three cosmological relationships is validated by other African myths of origin? How can one ascertain Setiloane’s conclusion? To answer these questions, in the following chapter I analyse the three more myths of origin from the Yoruba (Nigeria), the Chewa (Malawi) and the Boshongo (Congo, DRC) in order to understand how the three cosmological relationships of God, Humanity and nonhuman nature are explicated.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE AFRICAN MYTHS OF ORIGIN AND THE COSMOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS

#### 5.0. Introduction

In the previous chapter I assessed Gabriel Setiloane's understanding of the three cosmological relationships of God, humanity and nonhuman nature. I argued in the chapter that for Setiloane, the unifying factor of the three cosmological relationships is God, who is seen as the life that is present equally in all things giving them the sacral quality that deserves respect and reverence.

My intention in this chapter is to ascertain whether Setiloane's explanation of the three cosmological relationships from the Sotho-Tswana myth of origin is also found in the majority of African myths of origin. Thus, in the chapter I examine the three myths of origin from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, the Chewa people of Malawi and the Boshongo people of Democratic Republic of Congo. As I stated in the introduction of the whole study, myths of origin remain one of the ancient components of African cultures that have not been completely adulterated by either Christianity or Islam and through them the African indigenous world-view is represented (For an extensive description of these myths please see appendix 1 on pages 77-79).

From the onset, I must point out that there are variations in the majority of the contemporary African myths of origin. However, the central elements have been retained in almost all the myths of origin. Affirmably, the African mythologies were the basis upon which African explanation of the interconnectedness of the three cosmological relationships of God, humanity and nonhuman nature were based. What follows is a comparative analysis of how the three myths of origin from the Yoruba, the Chewa and the Boshongo, explicate these cosmological relationships. My main aim is to come up with clues for constructing an African Christian ecological theology.

## 5.1. The Three Myths' Explication of God

The three myths of origin I am dealing with are all contend that the universe was created by a more Powerful Being, who is seen as the beginning and the end of all things. These mythologies are explicit that humanity and nonhuman nature did not always exist. They are replete with the viewpoint that all existing reality, both humanity and nonhuman nature, evolved from God and, hence, have no independent existence apart from God. God is revealed as the Source and the Ground of all life and existence. For instance, the Yoruba and the Chewa myths of origin speak of the Supreme Being, the owner of the sky, living in heaven. There was nothing below, only a waterless and lifeless marsh (Lugira 1999:23; Breugel 2001:34). The Boshongo mythology is also in agreement with the above, but in this mythology, the Creator, *Bumba* (God), was alone in the beginning and there was nothing except water in the dark (Leach 1956:145). Unlike the Chewa myth where *Chiuta* (God) seems to have created everything alone, in the Yoruba and the Boshongo mythologies, God had helpers who themselves evolved from God. For instance, *Olódùmarè* ordered *Orishà-Nla*, the Great God, to go and create the earth. The Yoruba mythology contends that in an incomprehensible time, “*Olódùmarè* (God) was only ‘Ashe,’ ‘the Creative Force Itself’. This means that *Olódùmarè* is all-encompassing, that he/she is gender neutral. One day ‘Ashe’ began to think. And when thinking began ‘Ashe’ became *Olódùmarè*. As *Olódùmarè* thought, he/she thought ‘matter,’ and so ‘matter’ came into being. And the ‘matter’ is called *Olorun*, “the centre of everything” (Untangle Incorporated 1995-2002). Thus, *Olorun* could also be understood, in the language of Setiloane, as the force or energy immanent in all existing reality. This also suggests that *Orishà-Nla* and all other divinities came from this same ‘Creative Force’. Thus, Robert Hood (1989:75) could argue that *Olódùmarè* is not just the author of life, but the life principle in all things, and thus the “owner of life (Elemii)”.

Thus, these three mythologies seem to have been intended to illustrate the point that God is Life and the ultimate source of all Life. For instance, in Yoruba mythology the first people were formed from the earth by *Orishà-Nla*, but who could not give them life; only *Olódùmarè*, the Supreme Being, could give them life. Thus, God is life, which is the essence of being and the principle that animates all beings and without which nothing that exists could have existed. This is what explains the solidarity of human beings and nonhuman nature. Breugel (2001:38) affirms that, according to Chewa mythology, *Chiuta* is the principle of life from which the first ancestors received their life, which they also pass to their

descendents. Therefore, disruption in any of these relationships automatically disrupts the flow of energy to its termination. Thus, Chewa mythology, like the majority of African mythologies, speaks of a fundamental cosmic dislocation, set in motion by human beings, that adversely brings to an end the peaceful harmony between God, human beings, and animals and the whole of creation. This suggests that *Chiuta* was that vital link in these relationships. As long as *Chiuta* (life was not interrupted) was present in the community, there was no death, but the moments *Chiuta* (life interrupted) left, death enters the world of the Chewa people. Thus, by human beings interrupting the flow of *Chiuta* through the invention of fire, it brought not only physical death, but interrupted the vital interaction of the three cosmological relationships. This affirms that God is the only one who contains life in its totality.

The Boshongo mythology explains how *Bumba* experienced stomach cramps. He proceeded to spew forth the sun, moon, and the stars which brightened up the water-covered and darkened earth. The heat from the sun evaporated the primordial waters. *Bumba* began to vomit again, bringing out from his stomach nine animals and many people at once. These creatures themselves evolved and multiplied into every living thing on earth. On one hand, someone may argue that how can God's vomit be of value, since vomit is generally perceived as disgusting and valueless? On the other hand, one ought to ask, does God perceive it as vomit? According to the Boshongo mythology, the answer is no! Certainly, *Bumba* perceived what came from his/her mouth as perfect and holy. In other words, unlike human vomit, everything that comes from God is of essence and great value. In actual fact, the significance of this mythology and the other two mythologies lies in their depiction of God's creative efforts, which bears a striking resemblance to the modern scientific theory of evolution. God is not depicted as "wholly other God" who is different and not involved with creation, but is presented as immanent in creation, sharing with them essence and being. Thus, Setiloane is right that human beings and nonhuman nature are not just God's beautiful creation but the extension of God's being. Yet, care must be taken not to equate God with the process of evolution, but as the cause of the process and ultimately the end process. In this sense, Edward Kanyike (2004:24) is right that, long before Darwin, African people stated the theory of evolution through their mythologies. It seems, therefore, that these mythologies describe more the process of self generation rather than creation as in the biblical tradition. The nine creatures in the Boshongo mythology are the ancestors of all living things. Besides, *Bumba* is

depicted in the myth not just as the Creator but as “the First Ancestor” from whom came also the biological relatedness of animals and human beings (Leach 1956:146).

It is significant here to point out that the myths also explain the scientific theory of universal common descent. In other words, all existing reality descended from the common genetic source (God). The theory states that all existing species are genetic descendants of one original species or communal gene pool (Dawkins 1996:241). The Boshongo is even more significant here because *Bumba* is depicted as a vomiting God, which means all existing reality shares the *Bumba's* essence. This also takes us back to Setiloane's argument that creation (humanity and nonhuman nature) is something divine (1986:24). Thus, all creation discharges divine-energy which is calculated for maintaining cosmic relationships. Moreover, both the Yoruba and Boshongo mythologies depict God as the essence or life itself, present in all things, even in the air (Bockie 1993:135). This is the Power that African people acknowledge to sustain all of life, the ultimate Power behind the actions of the ancestors and other spiritual beings. In the same line, Martin Ott (2000:349) observes that *Chiuta* in the Chewa myth of origin is *Mulungu*, a name used by more than forty ethnic groups in East and Central Africa. Ott (:349) adds that *Mulungu*, according to anthropologists, is a term used for God in reference to *Chiuta* as the universal Force, a mysterious Vital Energy which is present in all things. This is the Force that generates life and is represented by the cloud-symbol. Thus, Ott (:349) concludes that “it is in God that the flow of life has its origin. What is suggested is that human beings, the land, the chief, the living dead (ancestors), the celestial powers (clouds, rain) and God are interrelated” and interconnected or interlocked in a web, like a chain, to allow the flow of life in all things like electrons in an electric live wire.

The coherence of the above three mythologies, including the Sotho-Tswana one is upheld by a sensible, “well defined system of symbolic storylines whose themes directly mirror the best modern scientific theories of how the universe might have actually come to exist” (Lerner 2008:2). From these myths one can see that both humanity and nonhuman nature acquired sacral meaning through being created by God. Thus, these mythologies are the basis on which the African cosmological understanding of the vital interlink, which alone gives a deep knowledge of God's intention when *Chiuta* brought people and animals from heaven in the rain (Chewa), or when *Modimo* enabled human beings and animals “to emerge from the hole in the ground” (Sotho-Tswana), or when the agent of *Olódùmarè* moulded human and

animals from “the magical ashes” that *Olódùmarè* once was (Yoruba), or when *Bumba* vomited (evolved) the universe out and all that is in it (Boshongo). It is clear from these four myths that all social life is actualised in the community. Therefore, the vital community is based on African praxis and commitment to life as the myths helped them to understand reality. The myths above do not depict creation from nothing, but from God-self. In actual fact, God is not depicted as external, a separate ‘Being’ ruling over the universe like in monarchical theologies, which is the dominant model in the Jewish and Christian religions and is so widely accepted (McFague 1993: 90-91). In the three mythologies, God is perceived as involved in the entire process of evolution and is the activity of all existing reality. I therefore argue that this understanding of God dispels the myth that the majority of Western scholars have held about the African God as absent (deism) in the real lives of African people.

According to these three mythologies, God is ever-present as the “Life and Activity” in both animate and inanimate things (Uka 1991:43). Thus, the three cosmological relationships could be considered as a unity; distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred whole. In short, the universe is a unified whole and cannot be conceived apart from God who is its very existence. This leads me to the next issue on the agenda.

## **5.2. The Three Myths’ Explication of Humanity**

To begin with, the three mythologies show that in African thought, it was not one person that was created at first but a company of people. In the Yoruba myth, it is pointed out that after the earth was created, *Orishà-Nla* was instructed by *Olódùmarè* to fashion human forms from the earth. However, *Orishà-Nla* could not give them life. It is *Olódùmarè* who bestowed essence and being in them. It is *Olódùmarè* who activated life in them. In fact, being moulded from earth is also significant because it “emphasizes human materiality and connectedness to the earth and everything found in it” (Musopole 1994:67). Thus, there is coherence and interdependence in the way human beings relate to both God and nonhuman nature. Second, it also shows that human beings have a unified relationship with both nonhuman nature as matter and with God as creatures endowed with the spiritual principle of life. In the Boshongo mythologies, like the Yoruba mythology, *Bumba* vomited forth nine animals and last of all a community of human beings at once. In both the Yoruba and the Boshongo mythologies, human beings are depicted as evolving only at the end of the process of

creation. Whereas, in Chewa mythology, the human pair and all animals seemed to have pre-existed physically in heaven where they are depicted coming down with God in the rain. The process of development is seen here in the fact that humanity does not say anything about its life in heaven. It seems that at the moment they are brought to earth accompanied by God, is the instant when humanity becomes conscious (aware) of itself. Thus, it is at this moment that human beings possibly developed from the hominoids (primate animals). This is observed by Setiloane from the Sotho-Tswana mythology where he noted that humanity became self-conscious at the moment of emerging from the hole in the ground when they separated from the other animals in the process of evolution. In actual fact, Chewa mythology, like Sotho-Tswana mythology, shows that humanity pre-existed physically and become conscious of God at the moment they came to the earth. Yet, in the Sotho-Tswana myth, *Loowe* (Modimo's agent) escorted the people and animals to come out of the cave and went back, whereas, in the Chewa myth, *Chiuta* accompanies the creation and lived with them on earth until humanity discovered fire that drove *Chiuta* away (Breugel 2001:34).

It is also clear from these three mythologies that at the moment of evolving, all human beings are depicted as equal, in some instances, even looking alike. In addition, primordial communal harmony is perceived as the essence of all existence. Thus, the contemporary inequalities between women and men in the majority of African societies were not part of God's original plan. Accordingly, God, women, men and nonhuman nature are depicted as communicating and living in one community as a family. Thus, God seems to have designed the community as the place where both human beings and nonhuman nature could be nurtured and flourish. Consequently, these mythologies do not declare that human beings are made in the 'image of God', but are content that they share in God-divinity. The myths also do not implicitly or explicitly state that human beings have 'dominion' or are 'stewards' of God's creation, such as is written in Genesis 1 and 2, but show that there is a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between human beings and nonhuman nature. In these myths, one can observe that "humanity is not an independent reality but rather a participant with other ontological realities in the life of the cosmos" (Musopole 1994:69).

Yet these mythologies also show that humanity is significant in the three cosmological relationships. For instance, Chewa mythology reveals that it was human beings who occasioned a fundamental cosmic dislocation that affected the three cosmological

relationships. Accidentally, human beings had discovered fire by rubbing two sticks together. The bush was set alight forcing *Chiuta* and the animals to flee for their lives. *Chiuta* withdrew to the sky and pronounced that henceforth people would die in order to join *Chiuta* in heaven (Musopole 1994:71). It becomes clear that cosmic harmony was characterised by the state of human beings in the cosmos; by maintaining this harmony, human beings would have remained true to themselves. This means that human beings are at the centre of the interaction, in the sense that their actions affect the vital relationships, either positively or negatively. Yet, human beings are depicted as creatures that evolved from God, for during human creation, it was *Olódùmarè* who gave them life. It seems that at the beginning, the spiritual and the physical worlds feed upon each to form a whole. This in itself rejects the idea of African people being “anthropocentric”, in the sense that everything exists for the sake of humanity as was understood by some African theologians such as Mbiti (1969:48), Musopole (1994:142) etc. A critical look at the three mythologies reveals that the meaning of human beings, being at the centre of the interaction of all creation means that human beings have a responsibility in the universe as the most intelligent life force, to harmonise and consciously accept their place in the universe as part of creation. In addition, they have the intellectual ability to care and protect the other members of the ecological community. Therefore, the primary duty of humanity is to maintain the “vital circuit, to give it an ever wider and intenser “magnetic field,” to remain” ever-connected with the main Source of life (Mulago 1969:143). The significance of these three mythologies, therefore, is that both human beings and nonhuman nature are created and sustained by the very presence of God in them and all are related to one another.

### **5.3. The Three Myths’ Explication of Nonhuman Nature**

In the previous section, it was observed that the three myths of origin show humanity as part of creation which was created by God. In fact, the three mythologies do not talk of any village, houses, or field, nor do they make any distinction between spiritual and physical. It is only when primordial harmony is lost that a line seems to have been drawn between habitants (Kanyike 2004:41). This section explores the relationships of nonhuman nature to God and humanity.

First, the Yoruba mythology depicts animals, such as the chameleon, the pigeon, and the hen as involved in the creation of the earth. It further reveals that these animals were trustworthy.



This is observed in the fact that *Olódùmarè* sent the chameleon to inspect the way *Orishà-Nla* had created the earth and to see whether it was solid and if it was true that the work had been completed. The chameleon reported at first that, “the earth is wide, but it is not dry enough”. The second time the chameleon reported that “the land was both wide and dry”. Moreover, animals are also depicted as warning humanity from starting a fire (The Chewa myth) and others giving good reports to God on the progress of the work of creation on earth (Yoruba myth). Thus, there is partnership between human beings and nonhuman nature.

Second, according to the three myths of origin, nonhuman nature and human beings are genealogically related. They share a common Ancestral Source (God). By the fact that human beings and nonhuman nature share a common descent, nonhuman nature is depicted in the myths as part of the family and was treated as such. The Boshongo mythology is significant here because it reveals that by the fact that both humanity and animals were vomited, they share the same God’s essence (God-divinity) as was explained in the previous chapter. It follows therefore that both human beings and nonhuman nature share in the divinity or essence of God. Furthermore, in the Yoruba myth, certain animals (pigeon, hen, spider and chameleon) are depicted to have pre-existed physically in heaven long before the creation of the earth. In this sense, these animals are linked to both human origins as well as to the origin of the world. The Chewa myth does not state when animals and human beings evolved, but what is clear is that both human beings and animals emerge on earth at the same time. It seems that these mythologies are suggesting that animals were the first to have evolved from God. Hence, they are depicting human beings and nonhuman nature as close relatives (kith and kin). In actual fact, in the beginning, God, humanity and nonhuman nature (animals) lived together in harmony and happiness (the Chewa myth). Thus, according to these mythologies, nonhuman nature is not a thing to abuse; it is the close relative of humanity. There is clear unity and equality in these three cosmological relationships which suggest that nonhuman nature is an ally, a close relative with whom one can dialogue and seek wisdom from. An indication of this is that the material world is not an impersonal reality; it is filled with activities, divine-energy or life. The Chewa mythology highlights that after humanity invented fire, there was confusion in the camp and *Chiuta* did not know what to do, but “the spider spun a thread lifting *Chiuta* up on high”, and thus *Chiuta* was rescued. What could be observed here is that animals, even in the midst of chaos, are still concerned about their relationship with God. Instinctively, from the start animals knew right from wrong.

Surprisingly, while some animals ran away from human beings to hide in the forest, others still ran back to human beings for the sake of maintaining a relationship with humanity. Thus, a relationship was the essence of the community. It seems that in the primordial vital community, both humans and nonhuman nature participated as vital forces in the universe. In God's original plan, the community is never a community unless the dignity of all members is affirmed and their rights to life acknowledged. This leads us to the implications of the three mythologies' explication of the three cosmological relationships in the African world-view.

#### **5.4. The Link Between Belief and Actions in the Preservation of Ecology**

Observed from these mythologies, it is clear that African primal religion is a religion of life. Accordingly, for the majority of African people, saving one's self is saving the entire creation. The implications are that human beings are part of creation and its destruction would lead to the destruction of humanity. Thus, a community in the African sense is incomplete with nonhuman nature. In fact, there were no such things as endangered species in Africa before contact with the Western world. I therefore argue that the majority of African people from their myths knew that it was not right for human beings to manipulate and exploit nonhuman nature because it did not belong to them. Here I look briefly at the four implications of the African understanding of the three cosmological relationships.

First, the majority of African people re-enacted their mythology in rituals. In short, in the majority of African society, a ritual is not an isolated event but a re-enactment of a myth in the people's present reality. The context of African myths of origin is in the ritual. Thus, living people participate in the vital relationships by a ritual repetition of the myth (Maxwell 1983:81). The intention is to sanctify life. Thus, the majority of rituals are not a periodic occurrence limited to special sacred times and sacred places. Practically, every daily activity is ritualized and everything can serve as a symbol of the Supreme Being (Kaplan 1983:122). For instance, ordinary activities such as hunting game, pounding grain, leaving a village, cutting trees, eating, and even what is being eaten are believed to be endowed with sacred meaning. There is a total interdependence and participation of all vital forces in each African community to such an extent that if part is removed the other remaining parts cannot function anymore. This world-view is based on acknowledgment that all life is sacred and it demands perpetual sanctification in order to promote solidarity and harmony in the community.

Second, the majority of totems were used as a special way of identifying a clan with an animal or mineral, natural phenomena, or a plant (Labrecque 1931: 24). The majority of totemic animals are taken from the animals in the myths or origin. Through these totems, the majority of African people sought the original harmony that was destroyed. Thus, the majority of African societies are divided into clans which are organized around a totem. The totemic names which have been adopted, reference the mythic-historic actions, which increases the people's participation in the vital life through identification with other creation. Craig Palmer *et al.* (2008:719) observe that a totem is a cultural mechanism aimed at building and sustaining social relationships among people themselves and other creation. Through adoption of a totem, the majority of African people were affirming life and recognizing that people belong together with all of creation (Nyajeka 1996:138). It also indicated the people's interrelatedness and solidarity with the whole of creation, in which a part represents the whole. Practically, the majority of African clans have taboos and restrictions towards their particular totem. They believe that if a totemic animal, fish or plant etc. is killed, misfortunes would befall the community.

Third, African taboos represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community towards other forms of life forces, the ancestors, nonhuman spirits and the Supreme Being (Bourdillon 1990:217). The majority of African taboos controlled overgrazing or the over-exploitation of forests, over fishing, extinction of certain animals and plants, over hunting and the killing of animals which play an important ecological role in nature (Kanyike 2004:41-42). Many other examples of similar taboos which had the effect of preserving nonhuman nature can be cited in other ethnic groups across Africa. The motivation for abiding by the normative principles are provided and reinforced by religious sanctions from the ancestors or directly from the Supreme Being. The majority of African taboos were motivated by African understanding of the three cosmological relationships from their myths of origin that helped to recognise that life is precious, which must be protected at all cost. Thus, violating any of these taboos would incur the wrath of the ancestors, who are the regulators of morality. Therefore, taboos acted as a mechanism for vital protection.

Fourth, sacred places, shrines and objects promoted respect for nonhuman nature. These places were centres of intercommunion and a point of contact between the physical and the spiritual dimensions of the world. This world-view was motivated by African understanding of their relationship with God and nonhuman nature as explicated from the myths of origin. Sacred groves in the majority of African societies are referred to by various names such as shrines, ancestral forest, burial grounds, etc. were relatively uninterrupted forests preserved by rural communities because of their religious, spiritual, historical, or cultural values (Amoah 2007:39-40; Yaa Ntiamoa-Baidu 2008:313). In the past, such areas were given strict protection, enshrined in the concept of taboo that was based on strong traditional beliefs, with access restricted to only a specific group of people for cultural ceremonies and religious rites. The responsibility for protection was vested in the entire community. These places were preserved by elderly women of those particular villages. In these sacred places, people were not allowed to cut trees or even enter without the permission of the village head person. For the majority of African people, vital participation demands respect for life. In short, one cannot protect life without respecting it.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

As explained in the introduction of this chapter, my purpose in this chapter was to analyse the three myths of origin from the Yoruba, the Chewa and the Boshongo in order to ascertain Setiloane's explanation of the three cosmological relationships from the myth of origin among the Sotho-Tswana. Through the process, I hoped that clues will be drawn that could be used in the construction of African Christian ecological theology. I discovered that, like Setiloane, the three mythologies affirm that human beings and nonhuman nature share in the God-divinity. In addition, like Setiloane, the three myths suggest that human beings cannot exist outside the whole in which the three cosmological relationships are interlocked within each other. In these three relationships, human beings are at the centre of interaction in the sense that their actions have either a positive or negative effect on them.

Having analysed the myths of origin among the Yoruba, the Chewa and the Boshongo and ascertained Gabriel Setiloane's thoughts on ecology as resources in formulating African Christian ecological theology that focuses on creation as the dwelling place of God, I am now geared to construct such a theology.

## CHAPTER SIX

### TOWARDS AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

“Through his Spirit God himself is present in his creation. The whole creation is a fabric woven and shot through by the efficacies of the Spirit.” (Moltmann 1985:38)

#### 6.0. Introduction

In chapter two I highlighted why African theology is relevant in the context of the ecological crisis. Similarly, in chapter three I argued that when the Western missionaries came, they condemned and sidelined African myths of origin, which were the only mechanism that African people had for preserving their ecology. In the quest for an African Christian ecological theology, I followed two distinct threads. In the first thread I assessed how the Sotho-Tswana myth of origin in the work of Gabriel Setiloane (chapter four) explicates the relationships between God and the whole of creation and between human beings and nonhuman nature. Whilst the second thread in which (chapter five) I intended to ascertain Setiloane’s thoughts on African Biocentric ecological theology, I assessed the three myths of origin among the Yoruba, the Chewa and the Boshongo. Attempting to join these two threads involves drawing some clues from both Gabriel Setiloane’s thoughts on African Biocentric theology and the three myths of origin examined as resources to formulate an African Christian ecological theology which focuses on creation as God’s dwelling place.

In this chapter I argue that African Christianity will be adequate for both the African context and the ecological crisis only if it goes beyond the dualism of a spiritual and physical view of the universe. ‘Dualism’ is the understanding of things as essentially divided into two distinct opposing properties. In this view, the spirit and matter essentially exist independently of each other. Thus, to overcome this dichotomy, African Christian ecological theology must reinterpret the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the African concept of the universal Vital Force/Energy.

#### 6.1. Beyond the Dualism of the Physical and Spiritual World

The first proposition for the construction of an African Christian ecological theology is for African Christianity to embrace a unified world-view of the universe. This claim is supported

by both Gabriel Setiloane and the three myths of origin examined in this study. The three myths of origin reject physical-spiritual dichotomy, because both the physical and spiritual share the same community and the Creator. In the rejection of traditional Western spiritual-physical dualism, Setiloane and the three myths of origin rightly affirm the interconnectedness of human beings to the physical world. Western missionaries introduced a dual understanding of the universe, that is the spiritual and the physical. According to this world-view, the physical world is totally depraved and controlled by the power of sin (Rakoczy 2004:309). The African world-view does not accommodate this view of reality which dichotomises the physical and spiritual, God and the cosmos, natural and supernatural, human beings and nonhuman beings etc. According to Setiloane and the three mythologies, God is the activity in the lawfulness and physicality of this world. In short, both the physical and spiritual dimensions feed upon each other to form a whole. Thus, all African theologians are in agreement that the primal African world-view is mono-sectional. In other words, both the physical and spiritual reality is interpenetrated by God who is all in all. This means that when a person dies, he/she does not go to some celestial place, but rather continues to exist in this world only with a changed physical mode of existence to a spiritual one (Mugambi 1989:51). Affirmably, *Modimo/Chiuta/Olódùmarè/Bumba* does not exist in another reality for Setiloane and the myths of origin examined in this study, God permeates both the physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

Jesse Mugambi (1987:52) highlights two problems of dual understanding of the universe in contemporary African society. First, the majority of African people are rural dwellers and have little or no contact with innovations from the Western world. Second, the young generation of Africans has been exposed to modern scientific understanding of the universe which is more in agreement with the African mono-sectional view of the universe. Essentially, this means that a mono-sectional understanding of the universe is still pervasive in the majority of African societies. Thus, it does not make sense, according to the majority of African perceptions of the universe and scientific explanations of it, to dichotomise it. I therefore argue that for African Christian ecological theology to be effective, there is a need to embrace a unified understanding of the universe. In this sense, since there will be no sharp dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical, there will also be no isolation of the universe from God. This means that the universe will be seen in God and God both dwelling and exceeding it at the same time.

The second proposition for constructing an African Christian ecological theology arises from the first proposition and that is it must persuasively articulate a holistic anthropology. This claim is also supported by the four myths of origin examined in this study. Setiloane (1978:409) strongly asserts that just as Africans understand the physical-spiritual world as inseparable realities of the same dimension, neither is there a separation between the soul and the body in a person. There is an intimate connection between how the majority of Africans see themselves and how they see the world of which they know they are part. The majority of Africans' understanding of personality focuses on the interrelationships of particulars within the universe. It is a view which tries to reach a more comprehensive, all-embracing, totalistic view of reality without neglecting the unique place of a person in the holism of reality. Tempels (1969:55) and Mercy Oduyoye (1979:111) are in agreement that the majority of Africans' view of people is that there is no division of soul and body. This in itself rejects the typical Western dualism that links the body and soul with the domination of both women and nonhuman nature (Rakoczy 2004:307). In the African holistic understanding of humanity lies the fundamental difference with the traditional Western system, where a person is thought of as both the body and the spirit. Indeed, according to African thought, a person is an integrated whole, and not just the sum total of the parts. This means that dividing a person into clearly defined categories such as body and soul or mind is not just foreign to the majority of African thought but improbable by contemporary scientific explanation of reality. The vital force in humanity is not to be understood as an invisible, incorporeal entity that exists alone; it must be understood as the whole person. In the sense that the matter/body and the vital force have merged together into a unity in which the vital force has subordinated the body/matter under its dynamism (Masolo 1995:48). It is at the core of this understanding that one finds the majority of African acceptance of their belonging with the natural world. Hence, an African Christian ecological theology must overcome dualistic understanding of human beings and integrate a holistic anthropology, one which does not allow for the domination of both women and nonhuman nature. This is important because it will help African Christians to affirm and embrace their belonging or place with nonhuman nature of which they are a part.

A third proposition that emerges from this inquiry is that an African Christian ecological theology must acknowledge that the 'human-nature' relationship is that of 'relatives'. Thus, there is a need to conceive the 'human-nature' relationship in a coherent and interdependent

manner, originating/evolving from a single sacred source or having the same Proto-Ancestor. The four myths of origin tell of a single sacred beginning of all reality. In this sense, the four myths of origin underline both the oneness and uniqueness of all creation. This means that the 'human-nature' relationship is a unified whole of intimately related and interdependent members of the same family. Sindima (1990:142) affirms that humanity and nonhuman nature "are one, woven by creation into one texture of fabric life or web characterized by an interdependence of all creatures". The four myths of origin show that both humanity and nonhuman nature evolved/emerged from the 'One Vital Source', bearing the God's essence or the divine-nature. Douglas Theobald (2004:2) insightfully argues that:

In evolutionary theory it is taken as axiomatic that an original self-replicating life form existed in the distant past, regardless of its origin. All scientific theories have their respective, specific explanatory domains; no scientific theory proposes to explain everything. For instance, quantum mechanics does not claim to explain the ultimate origin of particles and energy, even though nothing in that theory could work without particles and energy. Neither does Newton's theory of universal gravitation nor the general theory of relativity attempt to explain the origin of matter or gravity, even though both theories would be meaningless without the *a priori* existence of gravity and matter. Similarly, universal common descent is restricted to the biological patterns found in the Earth's biota; it does not attempt to explain the ultimate origin of life.

I have quoted Theobald at considerable length because here he shows that even science affirms the fact that there is a common descent of all things. Yet, unlike the scientific explanation of the origin of life, the point of departure for Setiloane and the four myths of origin examined is the recognition that the 'Ultimate origin of life is God'. As I have observed in chapter five, the four myths of origin do not deny the organic origin of all things but go beyond to affirm that all things began in God and ultimately shares God's essence or essence. Thus, there is a radical interrelatedness and critical interdependence of all creation in African cosmology.

In Judaeo-Christianity there is a concept of the image of God which is restricted to human beings. An African reinterpretation of this concept is equivalent to the God's essence in all creation. In this sense the image of God will be understood as an inclusive concept, which is present in both humanity and nonhuman nature. This means that everything bears the essence of God, which must be respected. In the Old Testament, the patriarchs were commanded not



to kill any human being because they are made in the image of God (Gen 9:6). The dignity of a human being lies in the fact that they bear the image of God. In African Christianity these concepts will be applied to all creation. Nonhuman nature will be understood as having intrinsic value in and for itself as creation that bears the essence of God. Taylor (1963:72) affirms that “fundamentally all things share the same nature and the same interaction one upon another...for all are one, and all are here, all are now”. This is important because an African Christian ecological theology should affirm the fact that humanity and nonhuman nature bear the essence of God (the image of God). Thus, the dignity of one is the dignity of the whole community. This calls for living in solidarity with one another in an extensive circle of kith and kin. I must emphasise that each creature is inhabited by the principle of life to enable it to fulfil its purpose on earth that is intimately connected to all other life forces. Therefore, for an African Christian ecological theology to become relevant and effective to the contemporary African ecological situation, it must affirm the coherence and interdependence of humanity and nonhuman nature. This leads to the question of creation as the dwelling place of God.

## **6.2. The Holy Spirit and African Primal Concept of Vital Force**

This section is the second level in constructing an African Christian ecological theology. It reinterprets the African primal concept of “Vital Force/Energy” as set out by Placide Tempels and developed by Alexis Kagame, Vincent Mulago and Gabriel Setiloane and vividly observed in the three myths of origin as the basis for constructing this kind of theology.

To begin with, a relevant African Christian ecological theology ought to be based on reinterpreting the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the African primal concept of Vital Force/Energy. While the majority of African scholars affirm that the majority of African people have a basic conception of “vital force”, nevertheless, they are critical of the concept at varying degrees. For instance, Mbiti (1969:16) does not see the universal Force as the vital presence of God in the natural spheres but as an approximation of what the anthropologists have called *mana*, an impersonal force in the universe. It must be clarified that Mbiti is writing at the time when there was not enough evidence to determine what this Force was, currently, there is enough evidence validating that the Force in the universe is what Tempels’ referred to as the Force of Life (Setiloane 1995; 1976; Uka 1991; Parratt 1987). In fact, this is the Force acknowledged by the majority of Africans as the sustainer of all of life, perceived

as the ultimate power behind the actions of the ancestors and other spiritual beings. Although Jesse Mugambi (1987:22-23) rejects the concept of the 'vital force' as Tempels' projection of his Western perceptions on African ontology, nevertheless, he admits that African people perceive the Force or the Presence of God in the universe, and acknowledge this perception. Sindima (1995: xvi) agrees with Mugambi and argues that the fundamental principle of African cosmology is based on "the fullness of life". In his critics against Tempels' 'vital force', he argues that this concept suggests a connection to the magical and primitive theory of epistemology, which characterized some of the European anthropologists during the nineteenth century who wrote about Africans from a derogatory perspective. Thus, Sindima (: xvi) proposes a model of transformation for Africa based on "hermeneutics of life". However, Sindima does not show how his concept of "the fullness of life" differs from Tempels' 'vital force', especially if life as he perceives it has an energetic process. I therefore argue that Sindima like Kagame (1956), elaborates and extends within their ethnic groups what Tempels (1998:429) implied in the term 'vital force'. Indeed, according to the majority of African people the life force that pervades every creature is unitary and cannot be distinguished from God him/herself who possesses the fullness of life in him/herself. Thus, the concept of life is not autonomous, its fundamental source is God and the fullness of life in the community entails the fullness of God in both human beings and nonhuman nature.

Accordingly, Setiloane argues that there is energy in all things that ever-flow from its source and ever-return. Human beings and nonhuman nature are forces because they receive existence and being from the causal Vital Force, which is like an energy field. The Boshongo and the Chewa mythologies also affirm that God is the Energy present in all reality. Yet, Africans never interpreted this universal Vital Force as the Holy Spirit but in general terms as God. John Parratt (1995:103; 1987:7) and Allan Anderson (1991:60) have cautiously given a suggestion that "perhaps" the concept of Vital Force/Energy, which is found in the majority of African societies, may be conceived as parallel to the actions of the Holy Spirit in the world. Speaking of the Hebrew word for the Holy Spirit, Heron Alasdiar (1983:7) affirms that, "*ruach* is used to speak of God as present and active in the world...". Jurgen Moltmann (1992:274) agrees with Alasdiar and says that the Energy and Vital Force goes back to the Hebrew concept of *ruach*. Evidently, this is the Holy Spirit, which all creation receives from God as the principle of life and, according to the four myths of origin, all creation have in

common with God. This Vital Force gives being and life, reconciling and harmonizing a person with self, God, other human beings and nonhuman nature.

In the same line of thought, traditionally, the early Christians called the Holy Spirit the Giver of life (Pannenberg 1993:14). Unfortunately, the Western missionaries who came to Africa interpreted the Holy Spirit in a restrictive sense as a purely soteriological expression referring to the regenerated life of a Christian (Pannenberg 1993:14; Anderson 1991:63). According to Setiloane and the three myths of origin examined, this 'Life Force' is not restricted to the Christian life of faith; it refers to the 'energy' present in all things or the breath of life that animates all existing reality. Without the Life Force, nothing that exists would have existed. The Vital Force is not to be identified with the mind, or its manifestation through the mind; rather it must be understood as a metaphysical (spiritual) Force that enables all existing reality to participate in the vital relationships. Human vital force has no existence of its own; it can lose its strength if the individual does not continue to participate in 'the source Vital Force.' This makes sense when connected with the Christian proclamation of a new life and future hope of a perfect life that will no more subject to death because there will be a perpetual participation in the Ultimate Vital Force. In the meantime, for African Christianity to be responsive to the contemporary ecological crisis, the African concept of Vital Force/Energy must be reinterpreted as the Holy Spirit who gives life, the mover of the cosmos and the root of all creation. It is the Holy Spirit who infuses into all things life, sharing with them essence and being. In this sense, African Christians will perceive the Holy Spirit as working in and present in this world, driving it to its fulfilment. This means that an African Christian ecological theology will affirm the fact that the all-pervading presence of the Holy Spirit endows the universe with a sacramental nature (Oduyoye 1997:2). In other words, African Christians will conceive the universe as sacred by the fact that it is the dwelling place of God through the Holy Spirit. In the sense the Vital Force in each creature is the presence of God and is inseparable from the divine Giver from whom both this Vital Force originates and relates to the world through this Vital Force.

Thus, the second proposition in constructing an African Christian ecological theology stems from the first and that is through the Vital Force, God is in creation and creation is in God. Moltmann (1985:13) argues that there is no longer need for traditional distinction between God and the natural world. Thus, Moltmann (:13) calls for the recognition of the presence of

God in the world and the presence of the world in God. However, this does not mean that God will be equated to the world or the world be perceived as God. Shockingly, Moltmann's perspective is so close to the primal African philosophy and understanding of the relationship between God and the cosmos. Setiloane and the three mythologies examined show that God is that Energy present in each creature and in fellowship with creation. God is not only the originator or creator of all things but the fullness of life in the world that penetrates every creature. In short, God penetrates the whole of creation and God's being is manifested through creation, so that God dwells in all things, "but God's being is more than, and not exhausted or subsumed within creation" (Cooper 2006:27). There is mutual interpenetration between God and the all creation. In this regard, Simon Maimela (1984: 181) concludes that "God is so present in all creatures that they are indissolubly related to their Creator from whom they receive life daily" through the Vital Force. Moltmann (1995:208) confirms that "through the Holy Spirit, God is present and active in all creation weaving the pattern of relationship with the community of creation". Thus, Setiloane (1986:42; 1995:63) is right in his suggestion that African 'animism' must be understood as 'panentheism', the presence of God in all creation and the presence of all creation in the being of God, yet God remains above and independent of all his/her creation. In other words, God is immanent through transcendent, so as to effect and preserve the universe (Maimela 1984:181). In this way, the attribute of God's transcendence is balanced with that of his immanence (Mbiti 1970: 12). According to the majority of African conceptualisation of God, the two attributes of God are complementary and one cannot be complete without the other, in this sense "God is far" and creation cannot be equated to him/her, "but is also near and" reveals him/herself to humanity (:12). In this same way, Martin Luther (quoted by Keding 1992-1994: 39) on the presence of God in the sacraments, argues that God is so small that he/she has to be present in essence in a smallest creature like ant in this world and yet, God is so big that that cannot contained by the universe. This is what makes God mysterious and beyond human comprehension.

Some African theologians such as Mbiti (1969), Idowu (1973:134), Musopole (1994), etc. have rejected classifying African primal religions as 'animism' as inappropriate, based on Western misunderstanding of African primal religions. This study argues that, if 'animism' is a belief that human beings live in a unified universe and the Spirit of God permeates all creation (immanence) both animate and inanimate, in this sense Africans are animists (African panentheism). Yet, if 'animism' means every animal and object has its own

“personal soul” as was defined by the Western missionaries (Dunlap 1946:51; Anderson 1991:12), then African religions cannot be categorised as ‘animism’. Nevertheless, one thing is clear - the majority of African people recognised God in all things. This is neither ‘pantheism’ nor ‘animism’ in the way the Western missionaries understood these terms, because Africans never equated creation with God nor did they believe that each animal and object had its ‘own personal soul’. Creation was seen as the dwelling place of God, ancestors and sometimes divinities. Above all, God was seen present in creation in a direct and unmediated way. This is contrary to Daneel (1991:113) and many other Western theologians who have emphasised the remoteness (deism) of God in Africa. Daneel (:113) ignorantly argues that the African God “was not the same as the overriding, pervasive presence of the biblical God”. Yet, the empirical evidence on the ground shows that it was the African God and not the Judaeo-Christian God, who was believed to be all-immanent in creation (Mbiti 1969, 1970; Setiloane 1995, 1986; Hodgson 1982). For this reason, the majority of Western missionaries characterised African primal religions as ‘nature worship’ because of their deep respect for creation, which they believed was not just revealing God but was the very home of its Creator. Therefore, an African Christian ecological theology will require a new kind of thinking that takes seriously the African understanding of the God-creation relationship as that of God dwelling immanently in creation. In other words, God created all things to be ‘the home’ where God could dwell through the Holy Spirit.

The third proposition for constructing an African Christian ecological theology is the rediscovering of Christology as ‘the coming home of God’ to dwell in his/her creation as a response to the African quest for the restoration of original cosmic harmony. The Chewa mythology does not supply a solution for the restoration of cosmic harmony that was lost as a result of humanity’s disobedience and lack of consideration for the vital cosmic relationships. Mbiti (quoted by Musopole 1994:73) highlights the failure of African mythologies to provide a way to restore cosmic harmony. Setiloane and the Chewa mythology show that sin is the disruption of cosmic communal harmony which God intended for all creation. It is thinking that humanity is the sole reason God created all things. Thus, sin is the reason for cosmic disharmony and communal dislocation. The majority of African people know from experience that cosmic communal disharmony reduces the strength of life force not only in human beings but in all creation and consequently, leads to its physical termination (death). This means that cosmic harmony is the reason for salvation.

Borrowing Bénézet Bujo's (1999:75) classification of Jesus as the Proto-Ancestor, one can argue that it is the one who is depicted as *Chiuta* (God) in the Chewa mythology living in the community with the first creation. Bujo (:75) further highlights that Jesus is thus, the "Proto-life force, bearer in a transcendent form of the primitive "vital union" and "vital force"." This is affirmed in the New Testament, where Jesus is seen not only as the life Giver, but as 'the Life' itself, reviving the vital forces in the universe (John 1:14). Thus, one can argue that the same *Chiuta* who withdrew from 'the fallen world' as a result of human sin, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, came back to be part of this world, to make his dwelling not just among creation but within all creation (John 1:14). Jesus is the centre of attraction, drawing all creation to himself (John 12:32), and through his death on the cross and resurrection, 'resacralising' all things in the way that African ancestors could not do. This re-sacralisation of creation is the goal of the absolute commitment of Jesus to restore the original cosmic-vital-community-harmony. Therefore, an African Christian ecological theology should be based on holistic soteriology that encompasses all of creation. The Christian doctrine of salvation must be rediscovered in the African quest for cosmic harmony.

The fourth claim advanced here is that an African Christian ecological theology will affirm creation as "the holy of holies". In the Old Testament, the Hebrew people had a special place in the tabernacle where they believed God dwelt, called the "holy of holies" (Exodus 25:23-30). Just like Africans perceive nonhuman nature as a tabernacle of God, for the Hebrew people it was the "holy of holies" where mysterious glory, the invisible God was revealed. It must be clarified that the place was made holy by the fact that the holy God dwelt there. Although in the majority of African societies everything is perceived as holy, it is clear that there are some places, animals, objects etc., as mentioned in chapter five, where the presence of God is believed to be found in high concentration. Clearly, this shows that if God dwells in a place, it becomes equally a place of sanctity or holiness. Both Setiloane and the myths of origin examined affirm the sacredness of all creation on the basis that it is the dwelling place of God. This is also evidence of the greatness of God, that God places equal value upon all creation as he/she dwells in them equally. I therefore argue that the sacramental view of the universe speaks of the immanent presence of God in the totality of the universe. Thus, for Setiloane and the four myths of origin examined, creation is sacred in the sense that it manifests the spiritual presence of God. Observably, while each African ethnic group has its

own sacred sites and places, sacred animals and trees, the majority of Africans recognise creation as indwelled with the Vital Force (Holy Spirit). It is the holy of holies. Accordingly, creation should be treated with reverence and respect, for through respect for both humanity and nonhuman nature the one who dwells in them is respected. This means that the mission of God in which the church participates must include the liberation of nonhuman nature. The motto should be that no one is free unless all are free. Therefore, an African Christian ecological theology must affirm the sacramental nature of all creation and treat it as such.

The fifth proposition in constructing an African Christian ecological theology is by reinterpreting the Christian concept of *oikos* (household of God) in the African concept of an inclusive vital community. According to W.E Vine (1966:228; 237), the word *oikos* does not just mean the family of God but also signifies the “dwelling place of God” (Acts 15:16; 1 Cor 1:16; 2 Tim 4:19). Both Setiloane and the four mythologies depict the community in Africa as a binding knot of the three cosmological relationships. Without the community it is impossible to maintain these relationships. According to the four myths of origin, the community is a sacred phenomenon begun by God, protected by divinities and governed by the ancestors. The community has been in existence as long as creation has existed. There is no creature (human beings and nonhuman beings) that can flourish apart from the community of belonging. The original intention of God was to create a community of equals, where life could be understood in its singularity. Thus, in Africans’ primal world-view, life was understood as a fabric of the framework of the totality of a vital community. Setiloane (1998b: 79) highlights that “the success of life is found in the ability to maintain a healthy relationship with *all*”. Thus, the health of the community life manifests in elements of the community such as love, equality, charity, forgiveness, respect, good fellowship and concern for one another. The motto is ‘our life and not my life’. The earth story of Jesus suggests that the reason Jesus came back home was to restore an inclusive community, where all are included, especially the needy and the outcast (McFague 1993:164). Jesus did not reject anyone; he embraced women, the poor, the outcast, the oppressed etc. In actual fact, African people did not have a problem in understanding the sacredness of Jesus as representing God because, whilst the vital force was present in every human being, it was also believed that the vital force was found in concerted measures in certain human beings like the diviners. This explains why Setiloane has identified Jesus as the Diviner and the fact that Africans had no problem in accepting Jesus as having some aspects of God in him.

Accordingly, one can see that the inclusive love of Jesus and the desire to restore an inclusive vital community was the initial intention of God in the African mythologies. Thus, Jesus, as the Proto-Ancestor, came to help human beings to realise that they are nature itself seeking fullness in the actuality of the present life. Thus, an African Christian ecological theology should emphasize the life-together in an inclusive community as a Christian norm for the purpose of creating possibilities for achieving cosmic harmony. In this way, a Christian inclusive community will become the bond that will tie all life forces together for the common good. I submit that the concept of inclusive community suggests that God dwells both in each individual creature and as well as corporately in all creation in the community of life. Thus, an African Christian ecological theology must understand an inclusive vital community as the household of God (*oikos*), both the dwelling place and the family of God.

### **6.3. Conclusion**

In this chapter I focused on constructing an African Christian ecological theology, which involved drawing some clues from Setiloane's thoughts on African Biocentric theology and African myths of origin, and creatively integrating them into African Christianity. I then suggested that an African Christian ecological theology will be adequate to both the African context and the ecological crisis only if it goes beyond the dualism of a spiritual and physical view of the universe. Furthermore, African Christianity must capitalise on the African belief that Life (Vital Force) is present everywhere in the universe; it is pervasive in both the animate and inanimate. This Vital Force must be reinterpreted as the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Holy Spirit will become the point of departure for understanding creation as the dwelling place of God and Christology as the coming home of God. I now move on to the final chapter to conclude the study.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 7.0. Introduction

In this concluding chapter, my task is to make some general conclusions based on the findings of the whole study. This is what will enable me to make recommendations for some plan of action which may assist African Christians to engage in tackling the current ecological crisis. Through examining the African myths of origin which the Western missionaries sidelined, I generally expected that the study, structured in an African theological framework, would provide some insights into the appropriation of African cultures in the contemporary ecological crisis. Hence, the question I attempted to respond to was formulated as follows: *What resources has Gabriel Setiloane seen in the African myths of origin, which could be utilised in order to construct an African Christian ecological theology that focuses on creation (human and nonhuman) as God's dwelling place?*

In this chapter, I provide a summary of the conclusions drawn from the research findings from chapters two through six and I provide some suggested practical recommendations for integrating the African world-view into the African church for the purpose of preserving nature.

#### 7.1. Conclusions Drawn in the Study

In this study I attempted to show how African Christians can respond to Africa's current ecological crisis by drawing on resources from African primal religions and cultures. I highlighted that African myths of origin could be utilised as a resource in constructing an African Christian ecological theology that focuses on creation as the dwelling place of God.

In the introductory chapter I outlined, among other things, the background information to the study, the literature study and location of the research, the research problem and objectives, theoretical framework, methodology and research design, and a brief structure to the study. This was followed by chapter two in which I examined the relevance of African theology in the context of the contemporary African ecological crisis. I stressed that the majority of works so far written on African theology have focused on recovery of African identity

through restoration of respect for African cultures. In the chapter I argued that African theology is relevant in the context of the ecological crisis because of the resources at its disposal from African primal religions and cultures. Some of these resources were drawn upon in order to construct African Christian ecological theology.

In chapter three I argued that the Western world-view has had a distortive influence on the African concept of ecology through the following means: First, the world-view of Western missionaries who came to Africa was influenced by modernity and the scientific revolution that was characterised by the universal claim of reason and instrumental rationality, and the differentiation of spheres of life-experience. Second, the Western missionaries came to Africa with the notion of the cultural superiority of Western society. Third, the Western missionaries' world-view was shaped by colonialism which was the application of science into technological control over nonhuman nature. Fourth, I noted that imperial conquests in Africa were characterised by economic subjugation of the conquered people. Lastly, missionary education was used as a tool to render African people subservient to colonial rule and Western culture. In the light of this, I argued that missionaries have contributed to the contemporary African ecological crisis because they did not give African Christians a mechanism of preserving their ecology.

In chapter four I highlighted Setiloane's Biocentric theology, a theology of 'life' that is ever-present in God, humanity and all creation. This life finds its origin in *Modimo* and it is 'the life' of relationships, which interlocks all vital forces in the universe. In this sense, *Modimo* is the all embracing Energy (or Vital Force) that brings coherence and vital union in these three cosmological relationships. In chapter five, I observed from the three myths of origin examined, that God is seen as the source of the Vital Force that links the three cosmological relationships to each other, within a symbiotic structure in which vital participation is the essence of a community. I affirmed that the three myths of origin examined affirmed Setiloane's explanation of the three cosmological relationships. Thus, in chapter six I focused on constructing an African Christian ecological theology which involved translating certain concepts from Setiloane's thoughts on African Biocentric theology and African myths of origin from the Yoruba, the Chewa and the Boshongo and creatively integrating them into African Christianity. In the chapter I suggested that an African Christian ecological theology will be adequate for both the African context and the ecological crisis only if it goes beyond

the dualism of a spiritual and physical view of the universe. Furthermore, I reinterpreted the African concept of Vital Force as the Holy Spirit. Thus, I argued that the Holy Spirit is the point of departure for understanding creation as the dwelling place of God and Christology as the coming home of God.

## **7.2. Recommendations**

The following few recommendations, may prove to be helpful guides to help African Christians embark on reducing and tackling the ever-growing and frightening ecological crisis on the continent. First, for the African Christians to become effective in their response to the ecological crisis, the churches should adopt a part of nonhuman nature, such as an animal, plant, or natural phenomena that will serve as identification (totem) of each local church/congregation with nonhuman nature. The Bible is filled with symbols of nonhuman nature which are meant to convey the attributes of God and the way human beings are intended to live. The church should be concerned that if any part of nonhuman nature becomes extinct, future generations of Christians will have difficulty in understanding the message that God tried to convey through those aspects of nonhuman nature. Thus, a concern for ecology should help the local churches in Africa to select a part of nonhuman nature as a totem (symbol) of the church. For instance, there are churches that are called ‘River of life’; this refers in the first place to Jesus, but can also be taken literally as a deliberate quest for protection of rivers, lakes, springs etc. from being polluted. Whilst they are aware of the preservation of all of nature and considering that there are many denominations in Africa, each denomination could focus on one aspect of nature as their totem. Such symbols could be used deliberately as a way of raising awareness in the local church for the need to preserve those aspects of nonhuman nature. Thus, the church can lobby their governments for the preservation of these particular aspects of nonhuman nature. Moreover, the church also could raise funds for this specific totem to see to it that it is preserved. In fact, the church members could be educated on this specific totem and just as it was in traditional African cultures, declare it illegal to kill or hurt the church’s totem. In this way, the totem would be representing a bond of unity with the rest of nonhuman nature. This can help the church to spearhead projects such as breeding of animals, tree planting programmes, soil erosion control and condemning all forms of animal poaching, and industrial water and air pollution.

Second, the church building must be conceived in the way Africans understood the “shrine”. African shrines were understood to be places of communication between the visible and the invisible world through the media of nonhuman nature. It must be clarified that even the shrine that was at home was also a place of communion. Yet, the focus here is on the one that was built in the forest for communal purposes. Thus, the majority of African shrines, if not all, were built in the middle of a forest. They acted as a vital communal unification. The focal point was usually an altar where offerings were placed. It was a place of meeting with God, where all members of an inclusive vital community interacted and dialogued. If African Christians can perceive the church building as a shrine, then it will require that they build the church in the midst of nonhuman nature. These could be called eco-churches. It will require those who have their own buildings to start planting indigenous trees and flowers around their church buildings. In this way the church will be a shrine that connects the spiritual and the physical, a place of meeting with God by all members of an inclusive community of life.

Third, in chapter five, I noted that beliefs in the myths of origin were accompanied by action. Thus, African Christians must find ways and means of integrating and applying African myths of origin in their daily activities, especially as they relate to ecological preservation. This means that in all church gatherings or meetings, just as there was a ritual re-enactment of the myth, Christians must start with confession of ecological sins, which must also be included in all the liturgies. In fact, every church must have a specific Sunday worship in each month that will be dedicated specifically to planting trees and raising funds (offerings and tithes) for preservation of animal species. Besides, sacraments must be understood as reminders of God’s concern for the poor, the women, nonhuman nature etc. Finally, Sunday school, women’s meetings (mother unions), men’s fellowships, youth meetings and other church activities must include reflections on God in creation.

### **7.3. Conclusion**

The study has achieved its objective by providing the evidence that the four African myths of origin chosen for this study were ecologically sensitive. I have recapped my findings from chapters two through six, the heart of the study and I have provided a few practical suggestions as guidelines to foster a way forward for the African Christians in integrating and tackling the current ecological crisis on the continent.

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## Appendix 1

### 1.1. The Yoruba Mythology (Untangle Incorporated 1995-2002; Lugira 1999:23-24)

In the beginning there was only Ashe, the creative force itself. One day Ashe began to think. And when thinking began Ashe became Olódùmarè. As Olódùmarè thought, he thought matter, and so matter became to be. And the matter is called Olorun, the Adobe (clay) at the centre of everything. But matter became a she as Olódùmarè is he, this is because, thinking causes a reaction in the opposite direction, a male thinking generates a female and the female thinking produces male. The name of the thinking creating matter in Olorun is Nana Baruku, the Grandmother of all the divinities...

The world was watery, formless chaos that was neither sea nor land, but a marshy waste. Above it in the sky, lived the Supreme Being, Olódùmarè, attended by other gods, including Orishà-Nla, called the Great God. One day, Olódùmarè, the Owner of the Sky and the Supreme Being, called the chief of the divinities, the Great God Orishà-Nla, to come to him and ordered him to make the world. Handing Orishà-Nla a snail shell full of the earth magic, a pigeon, and a five-toed hen to accomplish this task.

The Great God slid down to the marshy waste on one of the spider-web bridges. He tossed the dirt from the shell onto a small section of the watery earth. Then he set the pigeon and the hen down on top of the dirt, where they began to scratch and scratch. Soon they had spread the dirt over a large portion of the marsh and had created solid ground.

When Orishà-Nla returned to reported to the Supreme Being on his work, Olódùmarè sent Chameleon to inspect the earth and see if it was really solid and true. Slowly and carefully, Chameleon descended the silky spider-web bridge. Then he slowly walked over the solid ground and rolled his eyes around, taking in everything. His colour slowly changed from blue like the sky to the brown of the land. Then he reported to Olorun, "The earth is wide, but it is not dry enough."

"Go down again," Olódùmarè said, "and see if the land is both wide and dry." Slowly Chameleon descended the spider-web bridge and walked over the land a second time. This time he reported that the land was both wide and dry. Olódùmarè named the land Ifé, which means "wide" and later added the word Ilé, which means "house." This would be the house from which all other houses would originate. The city of Ilé-Ifé, the sacred city of the Yoruba, still stands today.

It took four days to create the earth, and on the fifth day the Great God was to be worshiped as its creator. But Olódùmarè was not finished. Orishà-Nla was sent back to the earth to plant trees, including the first oil palm. Olódùmarè made the rain fall from heaven to water the seeds, which grew into a great forest. In heaven, Olódùmarè began to make the first people.

They were fashioned from the earth by Orishà-Nla, but only Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being, could give them life.

### **1.2. The Chewa Mythology (Breugel 2001:34-35; Ott 2000:287-289)**

In the beginning there was Chiuta-God and the earth. Chiuta lived above in the sky and below him was the earth, waterless and without life.

One day, clouds began to cover the sky; lightning flared and peals of thunder were heard. Then the sky opened and from it Chiuta-God, the first human pair and all the animals descended in a shower of rain. They alighted on a flat-topped hill by the name of Kaphiri-Ntiwa, in the mountains of Dzala-Nyama.

After their descent the soft surface hardened and turned into rock. On this rock the imprints of their feet as well as the spoor of many animals can still be seen. There can be seen two pairs of human feet; the man's larger than the woman's. There are also imprints of a hoe, a winnowing basket, and a mortar. Plants and trees grew up, yielding abundant food. God, men and animals lived together in happiness and peace.

One day, man accidentally invented fire by playing with two twirling sticks, one soft, and the other hard. They warned him to stop, but he did not want to listen. In the end the grass was set alight, and there was great confusion. Among the animals, the dog and goat fled to man for safety; but the elephant, the lion and their companions ran away, full of rage against man. The chameleon escaped by climbing a tree. He called out to God to follow him, but Chiuta-God replied that he was too old to climb. In the end the spider spun a thread lifting him up on high. Thus God was driven from the earth by the wickedness of man. As he ascended, he pronounced that henceforth, man must die and join him in the sky.

### **1.3. The Boshongo Mythology (Leach 1956: 145-146)**

In the beginning, in the dark, there was nothing but water. And Bumba-God was alone. One day Bumba was in terrible pain. He retched and strained and vomited up the sun. After that light spread over everything. The heat of the sun dried up the water until the black edges of the world began to show. Black sandbanks and reefs could be seen. But there were no living things.

Bumba vomited up the moon and then the stars, and after that the night had its light also. Still Bumba was in pain. He strained again and nine living creatures came forth; the leopard named Koy Bumba, and Pongo Bumba the crested eagle, the crocodile, Ganda Bumba, and one little fish named Yo; next, old Kono Bumba, the tortoise, and Tsetse, the lightning swift, deadly, beautiful like the leopard, then the white heron, Nyanyi Bumba, also one beetle, and one goat named Budi and last of all came forth men. There were many men, but only one was white like Bumba. His name was Loko Yima.

The creatures themselves then created all the creatures. The heron created all the birds of the air except the kite. He did not make the kite. The crocodile made serpents and the iguana. The goat produced every beast with horns. Yo, the small fish, brought forth all the fish or all the seas and waters. The beetle created all insects. Then the serpents in their turn made grasshoppers, and the iguana made the creatures without horns.

Then the three sons of Bumba said they would finish the world. The first, Nyonye Ngana, made the white ants; but he was not equal to the task, and died of it. The ants, however, thankful for life and being, went searching for black earth in the depths of the world and covered the barren sands to bury and honour their creator. Chonganda, the second son, brought forth a marvellous living plant from which all the trees and grasses and flowers and plants in the world have sprung. The third son, Chedi Bumba, wanted something different, but for all his trying made only the bird called the kite.

Of all the creatures, Tsetse, lightning, was the only trouble-maker. She stirred up so much trouble that Bumba chased her into the sky. Then mankind was without fire until Bumba showed the people how to draw fire out of trees. "There is fire in every tree," he told them, and showed them how to make the fire drill and liberate it. Sometimes today Tsetse still leaps down and strikes the earth and causes damage.

When at last the work of creation was finished, Bumba walked through the peaceful villages and said to the people, "Behold these wonders. They belong to you." Thus from Bumba, the Creator, the First Ancestor, came forth all the wonders that we see and hold and use, and all the brotherhood of beasts and man.

#### **1.4. The Sotho-Tswana Mythology (Setiloane 1998a:66)**

The first people came out of the hole in the ground. They came out together, men, with their wives and children and their animals: cattle, sheep, goats and dogs. They came from underneath the earth where, in the 'big abyss' which nothing can fill (*Mosima o o sa tlang*), they had always been living under the direction and the sovereignty of *Modimo*. These people who emerged from the bowels of the earth did so under the direction of *Modimo*. They were led out of the hole by an agent of *Modimo* called *Loowe*. In comparison with them, this agent of *Modimo* was a giant. Even more striking was the fact that *Loowe* was a single-sided person, as if had been sawn through the middle, with one arm, one foot and one eye. After *Loowe* had led the people to the surface of the earth, he returned back into the *Mosima* to continue his abode there with *Modimo* and the other habitants.