

A Religious Response to Environmental Flippancies in Akan Communities in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Environmental destruction in Ghana appeared to be the hottest of the political issues in the run-up to the 2024 General Elections. The study sought to unravel the possible factors militating against Ghana's efforts in the fight against environmental destruction. It also postulates certain intentional and coordinated activities that the religious bodies in Ghana can undertake in contributing to salvaging the ecological crisis. Using the qualitative method, and a purposive sampling technique, some players in the environmental economy such as individuals, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and government officials were interviewed. In addition, for first-hand information, efforts were made to visit some Akan communities to observe how the people behave toward their environment. This paper argues that the ecological narrative in Akan communities has changed chiefly because of social conflicts, engineered by factors such as the basic needs of humans, politicization, desacralization, materialism, economics, "development," culture, chieftaincy, international relations, tenancy, religion, civil action and many more. However, Akan religious people to whom this paper has pointed fingers as part of the problem, have what it takes to contribute to salvaging the environmental crisis in Ghana. The paper recommends that religious bodies engage in the intensification of ecological conversation and building ecological congregations by employing eco-pedagogy and making investments in environmental protection ventures in Ghana.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the Akan most popular patriotic songs, composed by Ephraim Amu, *Yen ara asaase ni, Eyɛ abɔ den den de ma yen, Mogya a nananom hwie gu nya de to hɔ ma yen, Aduru me ne wo nso so, Sɛ yɛbɛyɛ bi atoa so...* This is our own land, it is precious to us. Blood did our forefathers shed to obtain it for us. It is our turn to continue." This folksong draws the attention of Akans to the need to take care of the land, bequeathed to them by their forebears.¹ The world's ecosystem is programmed in such a way that both humans and non-human creatures depend on one another. Humans draw on environmental resources and leave environmental waste to be used by other non-human members of the community.² There is no doubt

¹ Philip Laryea, *Ephraim Amu: Nationalist, Poet, and Theologian 1899-1995* (Akropong: Regnum Africa, 2012), 201.

² Andrew Dobson, "Environmental Citizenship: Towards Sustainable Development," *Sustainable Development* 15, no. 5 (September 19, 2007): 276–85, 281. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.344>.

to the fact that this interdependence between humankind and the environment has inherent mutual benefits for all the community members in the ecosystem.

Over and over again, concerns have been raised globally concerning the spate of environmental destruction. The fact cannot be denied that the destruction of the environment poses a severe threat to the existence of different species of living things across the globe. As Gottlieb points out, “earlier ecological problems were local –confined to a region, a community, even an empire, humans’ plight today is global: there simply is no escape from it on this planet.”³ Ghana’s ecological experience has not been better. Awuah-Nyamekye decries, “The way Ghanaians relate to the environment nowadays, is not the best; they just do not care about how to handle the environment in a sustainable way. They have forgotten that life is environment and environment is life.”⁴ That is, there is a strong interrelationship between them.

The sanitation situation in Ghana is growing from bad to worse as the records show.⁵ In 2015, Ghana was ranked by the World Health Organization (WHO) as one of the dirtiest countries on Earth, second in open defecation.⁶ According to the World Bank Group report on climate risk, Ghana was tagged as one of the highly vulnerable nations in terms of climate change and variability, posing a threat to future growth and development.⁷ The recent global environmental performance rankings according to the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2022, puts Ghana on 170th out of the 180 nations assessed and 45th out of 46 nations in sub-Saharan Africa, scoring only 27.7%.⁸ Though, this performance appreciated slightly in that of 2024 report, where Ghana was ranked 145th on the global stage, scoring 36.9 and 29th in sub-Saharan Africa⁹, the environmental situation in real time, is very scaring. The slight improvement in 2024 EPI of the country, could partly be because of the nationwide tree planting programme, embarked upon by the government in the past two years, which coincidentally fell within the assessment of the biodiversity loss indicator. Yet, without any qualms of doubt, this is a clear picture that Ghana, like many other nations across the globe, is experiencing an environmental crisis.¹⁰

The scholarly writings, research publications, government interventions, enactment of environmental bye-laws by some traditional leaders, and sometimes, environmentally oriented religio-social actions of some religious bodies in Ghana, indicate that to some extent, some efforts have been made to salvage Ghana’s ecological crisis. Almost all the political regimes in Ghana in the 4th Republic, have attempted to combat environmental indiscipline through the Metropolitan/Municipal and District Assemblies. Interventions such as the provision of waste bins, National Sanitation Day (communal cleaning on the 1st Saturday of every month), sensitization adverts on sanitation in the print and audio/visual media, and many other interventions have not yielded much. Recently, the president of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, in his inaugural speech decried the unsanitary conditions in Ghana and promised to wage a war against land degradation, littering, and all forms of environmental destruction. This he sought to achieve through the establishment of sanitation courts to try sanitation cases, “Operation Vanguard” against *galamsey*, Sanitation Task Force, reintroduction of Sanitary Inspectors, and many other interventions. However, these efforts have not achieved the desired results. The failure can partly be attributed to the neglect of two important related areas in the fight against the environmental albatross on the neck of Ghanaians. It is religion and culture.¹¹ In light of this argument, this paper attempts a religious response to the ecological problems in Ghana. The paper seeks to reveal that the Akan religious community and culture upholds the conservation of the environment and frowns on its destruction. By “religious” response, the paper has in mind the Akan traditional religion, Christianity, Islam, and other faith groups.

³ Roger S. Gottlieb, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195178722.001.0001>.

⁴ Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, “Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 13, no. 3 (2009): 251–82, 251.

⁵ Awuah-Nyamekye, “Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective,” 251.

⁶ Paul Appiah-Sekyere and Joseph Oppong, “Responding to the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of Humanist Ethics,” 2018.

⁷ The World Bank Group, *Climate Risk Profile: Ghana* (Washington DC, USA: World Bank Group Publications, 2021), 5.

⁸ Martin J. Wolf et al., “Environmental Performance Index (EPI) Results” (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy, 2022).

⁹ Wolf et al., “2024 Environmental Performance Index,” epi.yale.edu.

¹⁰ Appiah-Sekyere and Oppong, “Responding to the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of Humanist Ethics,” 10.

¹¹ Awuah-Nyamekye, “Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective,” 252.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section sketches the Akan communities of the past and their adherence to environmental norms for eco-system preservation. Section two maps the negative attitudes of contemporary Akan people towards the environment. Mention shall be made of the church's contribution towards the menace. The last section shall focus on the response of the religious bodies in saving the situation.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed was qualitative and the approach was phenomenological. The sampling technique was purposive. Efforts were made to visit areas of environmental destruction and individuals, both "ordinary" people, traditional leaders, religious leaders and government officials who are tasked to protect the environment were interviewed. Personal observations were undertaken to ascertain the way modern Akans behave toward their environment.

For first-hand information, the researchers, through purposive sampling technique, endeavoured to interview stakeholders such as five chiefs who doubled as farmers, two officers from Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), one Oncologist from Okomfo Anokye Teaching Hospital, Kumasi, three church leaders and two experts in Akan culture and history. With the help of a tape recorder, the data from the interview were transcribed, sorted and analyzed thematically. The researchers went around selected communities in the Akan area in Ghana to ascertain how Akan people behave toward their environment. These study areas include Ampabame in the Bantama Sub-metro, Dakodwom in the Nhyiaeso Sub-metro, Old Tafo in the Old Tafo Municipal Assembly, Magazine in the Suame Sub-metro, Apagya in the Afigya Kwabre South District, Abira in the Afigya Kwabre West, Tetrem in the Afigya Kwabre North District Assembly, Adwumakase-Kese in the Afigya Kwabre South District Assembly, Kejetia in the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly.

Ampabame and Dakodwom were selected principally because of the presence of historical wetlands that have been woefully encroached upon in these areas. In addition to the presence of wetlands, Ampabame was chosen because it happens to be one of the oldest Akan communities in the Asante Kingdom. Old Tafo is a municipality in the Ashanti Region. It is also paramount in the Asante Kingdom. Suame Magazine and Kejetia on the other hand were chosen due to their economic nature and unsanitary conditions in those communities. Apagya, Abira, and Tetrem were selected with the notion that they could provide an ecological picture of a modern countryside that would show parallels or contrasts to that of the modern urban Akan communities. Finally, Adwumakase-kese, which happens to be the hometown of one of the researchers, was considered chiefly because the "Subri Forest," which is located in the town, is historically known to be one of the sacred forests in the Asante Kingdom that provided indigenous medicine for the Asante warriors,¹² has been woefully exploited in recent years. Since the researcher was aware of the healthy and rich ecological nature of the forest some thirty years earlier and having observed the recent exploitations and destructions going on in a forest that used to be considered sacred, the town was included in this study to find a deepened understanding in the Akan Ecological Knowledge systems (IEKs). The data was analysed thematically. Secondary sources were consulted to provide further information on the facts.

It was also essential for "Manhyia Palace," the traditional court of the Asante king, which could be described as the home of the Akan culture and language to be engaged. Two personalities known for their expertise in Akan culture and history were interviewed. One was a history professor, who happened to be the director of history and culture at the Manhyia Palace, and the other, was an Egyptologist, in charge of language and culture at the Manhyia Palace.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Traditional Akan Community and the Environment

Akan communities, known to consist of the living, and dead ancestors, the unborn members, and the non-human environment, built on mutual respect and a sense of relatedness, have changed drastically over

¹² Nana Amoah, the *Ankcebeahene*, "Homeguard Chief" of Adwumakase-kjse and a farmer, interviewed by the researchers on July 10, 2020.

time.¹³ Sarpong affirms that it is a firmly held belief that the ancestors for instance are keenly interested in the living and form one family with them. The Akan family, therefore, comprises the unborn, the living, and the dead.¹⁴ The departed members reside in the groves, rocks, water bodies, and so on. Hence the natural environment is the abode of divinity. This is attested by Opuni-Frimpong that the ancestors are the symbol of unity among the dead, living and the unborn, and they determine the pattern of lifestyle the living community adopts.¹⁵ The indigenous worldview is that *asase som nnipa bo* (literally “the earth is valued by humans”) hence, the land is regarded as a *bosom*, “goddess.” However, this value system has been lost on the Akans of today.

According to Adu-Gyamfi, the Akan tribe is the largest tribe in Ghana and confirms that their belief systems created taboos that regulated human activities. By so doing, the environment was conserved and humans drew numerous benefits from it. Thus, environmental conservation is not a novel phenomenon in traditional societies.¹⁶ Awuah-Nyamekye posits that the Akan worldview about the environment is theistic and regards all components as created by God. Humans also have the mandate to ensure that they become good custodians of the environment.¹⁷ All cases of environmental abuse deserve punishment which comes in various forms.¹⁸

Traditional Akan communities put into place beliefs and practices to preserve the environment and so enjoyed the quality of life. Taboos were enacted to prevent citizens from destroying the environment. As Adu-Gyamfi notes, “Traditional authorities used taboos for the regulation of the ethical use of the environment in view of its resources for the ecology and sustainable development.”¹⁹ He further explains that the regulations included taboos on clearing sacred forests or bushes, felling of forbidden timber species, hunting of animals or fishing during forbidden seasons and sacred days, eating of totem and sacred animals or fish, washing clothes in streams and fetching water with silverware.²⁰ Adu-Gyamfi argues that “behind the facade of the well-known personal or mystical explanation, there are profound scientific or rational explanations with notable implications for biodiversity.”²¹ He details how the traditional beliefs and practices were used to conserve the land, forests, water bodies and game.²² This is affirmed by Twumasi-Ankrah that many of the Akan taboos have ecological and scientific ramifications. The ancestors had in mind these ecologic-scientific motives which led to instituting environmental taboos in their indigenous communities. They were well aware of the ubiquitous nature of religion among the Akan people and, as a result, capitalized on religion to achieve the needed corporate enforcement of the taboos meant to protect and preserve the environment.²³

Another Akan environmental conservation principle is the use of proverbs and wise sayings. Akan philosophical outlook on the earth generated proverbs and wise sayings that were ecologically germane. Ecological proverbs and wise sayings are central to the Akan environmental education. The use of proverbs by the Akans establishes that they believe in the promotion of sustainability and balance in the co-existence of humans, animals and plants in one cosmic sphere.²⁴ However, the reality is that Akan modern communities face new ecological and socio-economic problems. Thus, their indigenous ecological worldviews have been ambushed by human needs and survival.

¹³ Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspectives of Akan Leadership Formation on Ghanaian Christian Leadership Development* (Accra: SonLife Press, 2012), 42.

¹⁴ Kwasi P. Sarpong, *Peoples Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelisation* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2002), 101.

¹⁵ Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspectives of Akan Leadership Formation on Ghanaian Christian Leadership Development*, 43.

¹⁶ Yaw Adu-Gyamfi, “Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment,” *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 107, no. 1 (2011): 145–55.

¹⁷ Awuah-Nyamekye, “Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective,” 258.

¹⁸ S. Asiedu-Amoako, “Towards Earth Keeping: An Indigenous Perspective,” *ASJ International Journal of Religions and Traditions (IJRT)* 1, no. 1 (January 2014): 1–8, 2.

¹⁹ Adu-Gyamfi, “Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment,” 147.

²⁰ Adu-Gyamfi, “Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment,” 147.

²¹ Adu-Gyamfi, “Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment,” 147.

²² Adu-Gyamfi, “Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment,” 147–150.

²³ Emmanuel Twumasi-Ankrah, “Akan Worldview on Human-Earth Relations for Environmental Conservation in Ghana,” *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies* Vol. 11, No. 6(2023): 73. <https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2023/v11/i6/HS2306-028>.

²⁴ Patricia G Asamoah, Confidence G Sanka, And Francesca Amadie Kessie, “An Ecocritical Analysis of Akan Proverbs in Death on Trial by Appiah-Agyei,” *ERATS* 5, no. 3 (2019): 106–17, 110.

Environmental Flippancies in Contemporary Akan Communities

Akan Christians' Involvement in Environmental Destruction in Akan Communities

It would not be out of place for one to assert that Akan Christians contribute to environmental frivolities in Ghana. This assertion is avowed by one minister of the Methodist Church-Ghana, who ministered in the Ampabame community that “some Christians have contributed terribly in creating a filthy environment and are engaged in the destruction of lands in the community.”²⁵ This is confirmed by data collected during informal and unannounced visits to meetings and mass gatherings of Christians in some Akan communities in Ghana. In all the twenty (20) Christian meetings visited it was observed that participants litter during and after church meetings. It must be stated that in all the church gatherings visited, organizers had provided some form of litter bins, and yet, church faithful littered the meeting places. In addition, some churches have acquired wetlands and have erected chapels. In a visit to the Ampabame community in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, it was observed that some assemblies of the Pentecostal strand have their chapel buildings erected in wetlands. This abnormality has caused the erstwhile *Apunpunasej* River to be reduced to a rill, or at best, a gully. Flooding has therefore become an annual disaster in these areas and the adjoining communities. It was also observed that some of these churches had laid their sewage pipes into the water bodies nearby.

There are diverse reasons why Christians in Akan communities get involved in the destruction of the environment by acquiring and using wetlands for the construction of chapel buildings which is in violation of God's creation and community norms. In an interview with a pastor of one of the Pentecostal churches located at Ampabame, he disclosed that churches have acquired and constructed chapel buildings on wetlands because such facilities are affordable.²⁶ He conceded the assertion of the study that churches ought to be blamed for some of the environmental crises in Akan communities. In his own words,

I do admit in the sense that most of the churches in Ampabame are built along the river banks. Churches are not supposed to be built around water bodies but because land in such areas is affordable, we turn to purchase them without recourse to the sanitation menace of the communities. In effect, the nearby river overflows its banks all the time, causing flooding during rainy seasons, and creating pathetic scenes on the premises of these churches. So I admit we are the cause of our environmental problems because we could have purchased land elsewhere.²⁷

However, one would contend that churches that acquire wetlands for church chapel buildings, rather spend much more to reclaim and maintain the said lands. This makes the argument of the price of land as the basis for the acquisition of nature reserves such as wetlands for the construction of chapel buildings by churches quite suspicious. The religious market could be the main driving force for the acquisition and use of wetlands for the construction of chapel buildings by some churches in Ghana. Contemporary Christian denominations unlike those in the 15th century, prefer citing their temples at the heart of cities and towns, in order to attract prospective members. Proximity to major road networks is a factor in churches' decision to cite their buildings in certain parts of the cities and towns. The scarce nature of land in the prime areas of towns such as Ampabame and Nhyiaeso would compel churches to look for lands on the outskirts of the towns, yet because of the religious market factor alluded to, some churches target wetlands and nature reserves in the cities and maneuver to acquire them from the city and traditional authorities to put up church facilities.

These Akan Christians have obviously not come to terms with or have grossly ignored the Christian theology and the Akan worldviews underpinning human relationship with the environment. Hence, their involvement in environmental destruction. Christians from Akan background are not expected to be involved in environmental destruction because both their Akan worldview and Christian theological perspectives hold strongly against any human attempts toward environmental obliteration.

²⁵ In a personal communication with a minister in the Methodist Church-Ghana at Ampabame, October 26, 2023, at the church premises.

²⁶ A personal interactions with a leading pastor at Ampabame, October 26, 2023, at the church premises.

²⁷ An interview with a pastor at Ampabame on October 26, 2023.

The Ashanti Regional Director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Mr. Samuel Oteng, in an interview contended that “any religious group or individuals that destroy the environment can be described as having a false religion.”²⁸ This is an indictment of the church, her biblical and doctrinal teachings, and her God.

Other Environmental Destruction Syndicates in Akan Communities

It is instructive to state that even though Christians form the majority in Akan communities, people from other faith groups, including Muslims are also involved in environmental destruction, creating an ecological mess in the communities. The kinds of people involved in the abuse of the earth are like a cartel of large loiters and looters.²⁹ All manner of persons and groups are involved in the crisis of environmental destruction in Ghana. For instance, wetlands at Dakodwom in Nhyiaeso, along the Patase-Ahodwo road, which used to be known as a nature reserve have been sold for the construction of fuel stations and other business activities. Heavy machines were busily filling the natural reserve with sand and stones at the time of the visit. City authorities and traditional authorities have authorized for such wanton destruction of a natural reserve to go on.

Oteng confirmed his awareness of encroachment on nature reserves at several places in the region, including the one at Dakodwom, and hinted that a committee comprising members from EPA, Lands Commission, Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly (KMA) and Otumfour's Secretariat has been constituted to address the problem.³⁰ This is an exercise that can be considered reactionary since the private developers were seen filling the wetland at Dakodwom with speed. Likewise, the Adwumakase-Kese forest has been seriously depleted through lumbering and building constructions, led by the late chief of the town³¹; and the Subiri River which used to serve the community as their main source of drinking water, was hard to be traced at the time of filing this report.

Waste collectors, especially, the non-regularized private ones, also contribute to the littering menace in Ghana. The study observed that in many cities in Ghana, the streets and highways get littered with domestic waste of plastic bottles and polythene bags, as a result of carelessness on the part of waste collectors, especially those who use tricycles, locally known as *aboboyaa*, for domestic waste collections. Some of these tricycle riders do not cover the waste collected in the bucket of the tricycle. As a result, while on their way to dumping sites, some of the plastic bags and papers get blown away by the wind and eventually litter the streets. Some also leave heaps of waste in the middle of the streets and highways when their tricycles develop mechanical faults or are involved in accidents. The question is are the religious institutions and authorities not expected to keep the political authorities and the ordinary members of the Akan community in check?

Apostasy of Akan Religion Adherents or Impotency of the gods and the Ancestors?

The Akan gods who are believed to exercise spiritual oversight on sacred entities such as the earth, groves, rivers, forests, and mountains, seem to have lost their potency.³² Likewise, the ancestors who are believed to be the custodians of these sacred entities and are part and parcel of the community and are concerned about the daily happenings of the living, seem not to be concerned anymore.³³ If the gods and the ancestors of the Akan are still powerful and are not acting as *Deus Otiosus*,³⁴ and if the worshippers and followers of African Traditional Religion (ATR) still believe in the taboos enacted against activities such as environmental abuse, one would wonder why the traditional priests and the traditional authorities would sit aloof for such wanton destruction to go on in Akan communities.

²⁸ Samuel Oteng, the Ashanti Regional Director of Environmental Protection Agency, interviewed, March 24, 2023 in Kumasi.

²⁹ This refers to groups and persons who are involved in environmental exploitation and destruction on a large scale. They seem to constitute highly organized bodies in terms of financial resources who have unbroken sophisticated networks in all social strata of the society. They go about looking for uninhabited spaces in communities to take advantage of such places and secure them with their heavy financial resources and political networks without recourse to the safety and health conditions of members of the community.

³⁰ Oteng, A personal communication.

³¹ Nana Amoah the *Ankcebeahene* (Home-guard) of Adwumakase-kese.

³² Peter K. Sarpong, *Peoples Differ, An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelization* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2013), 101.

³³ K. Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspectives of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development*. (Ghana: SonLife Press, 2012), 42.

³⁴ *Deus Otiosus* is a god who is far removed from his people and may not be concerned with the daily happenings of his people. Such a god, would need and rely on intermediaries to establish and maintain his relationship with the worshippers.

The reasons are not far-fetched. One would opine that the actual case is that some of the chiefs and traditional authorities themselves are the very people leading the destruction of these sacred entities. The fact that members of the Akan communities, both from the traditional and Christian groups get involved in violating their own community norms and taboos and sacred texts concerning environmental protection and conservation, could connote the case of apostasy on the part of the members of ATR and Christianity. It also suggests that there might be something wrong with the tenets of these two religions that are predominant among Akan in Ghana. Thus, they do not have or have lost the potency of salvaging the ecological crisis in Ghana.

One thing is clear –the natural environment is considered a revelation of God, termed in Christian theology as General Revelation.³⁵ Likewise, to the African, the Supreme Being manifests himself in nature, hence the natural environment is an embodiment of the sacred. This implies that “since the hierophany manifests itself in nature, it stands to reason that without nature, there is no sacred and without the sacred some natural elements would not come into being.”³⁶ The idea here is that in religion, the efficacy of the vital power of the sacred and the spirit at a place is usually dependent on the continual reverence accorded to it by the clients. So, the fact of the growing trend of desecralization of the Akan environment might have rendered the gods, spirits, and ancestors powerless or caused disaffection in them and have eventually become far removed from the community of the living. It could also be that the gods and the tutelary entities are preparing to show their teeth in no time at all. Nature herself, is capable of punishing humans for all the wrongs they do to her by bringing flooding, earthquakes, landslides, rainstorms, excessive heat, drought, diseases, and many other natural disasters.

The Possible Causes of Environmental Flippancies in Ghana

Political Ecology in Ghana

The factors and the actors involved in environmental destruction and exploitation in Ghana are complex. Recently, a section of Ghanaians was shocked to hear that the Government of Ghana had ordered that mining of bauxite was going to commence in the Atewa Forest Reserve³⁷ in the Eastern Region, one of the only two unintended evergreen forests in Ghana.³⁸ This announcement came at a time when the same government had declared war against *galamsey*, “illegal mining” operators, for destroying forests and river bodies in Ghana, an action that can be described as burning the candle at both ends. The source of the power of these actors of environmental exploitation which enables them to determine what, how, and where of nature to be conserved, is what Purwins describes as “political ecology.”³⁹

The issue of earth-keeping, environmental protection and conservation of portions of the earth’s resources in Ghana is characterized by conflicts, engineered by factors such as basic needs of humans, politicization, economics, “development,” culture, chieftaincy, international relations, tenancy, religion, civil action and many more. This explains why earth-keeping ideas among societies across the world are fast changing. The forces of “development,” commodification and politicization towards ecology determine the nature of the relationship that exists between humans and the natural environment in modern societies. The ecological narrative in Akan communities has changed chiefly because of these factors. The self-lie to wanting to “develop,” which appears to be understood to become successful if only it starts with destruction, seems deceptive as the years go by. The more the actors of modern “development” with an economic mind, attempt to undertake their so-called “development” activities, the more the environment is destroyed. As they move with speed to execute their “development” agenda,

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015).

³⁶ James N Amanze, “African Approaches to the Protection and Conservation of the Environment: The Role of African Traditional Religions,” *Religion and Development* 2, no. 3 (2024): 445–62, 460.

³⁷ At 232 square kilometers, the Atewa Forest Reserve in Ghana’s Eastern Region is home to rare flora and fauna including two butterfly species not found anywhere else in the world – *Mylothris atewa* and *Anthene helpsi* – and a rediscovered West African White-naped Managbey monkey classified as ‘endangered’ on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The reserve is also the source of three major rivers that serve five million people including residents of Accra, the capital. Local residents and environmental campaigners fear the ecosystem would be irreversibly decimated if plans for a multi-billion dollar deal with the Chinese Development Bank to mine bauxite in the forest goes on. (See Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, “A \$10 billion China Deal to Mine bauxite in Ghana is Facing fierce Environmental Pushback”, *QUARTZ AFRICA*, June 5, 2018, accessed on March 16, 2022).

³⁸ Sebastian Purwins, “Bauxite Mining at Atewa Forest Reserve, Ghana: A Political Ecology of a Conservation-Exploitation Conflict,” *GeoJournal* 87, no. 2 (2022): 1085–97, 1085.

³⁹ Purwins, “Bauxite Mining at Atewa Forest Reserve, Ghana: A Political Ecology of a Conservation-Exploitation Conflict,” 1085.

having their minds plagued with economics but not development in its right sense, the destruction of the earth increases with speed. The faster, the destruction of the earth, the faster the suffering of humans. A clear example is what is observed at Dakodwom, in the Nhyiaeso Constituency, where a nature reserve, along the Patase-Ahodwo road has been given to private developers for the building of a fuel station and other commercial ventures.⁴⁰

Oteng further acknowledged that before any development in areas such as nature reserves commences, there is the need for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), after which an environmental permit may be issued to the developer.⁴¹ He added that such a development would require a demonstration of drawings of serious engineering before a permit may be issued so that the nature reserve would still be preserved, and that the life of humans, flora and fauna are not endangered.⁴² However, he refused to confirm or deny whether or not the ongoing “development” projects on Dakodwom wetland have passed the EIA and have received permits from EPA, except that he relied on the fact that such cases and similar ones within the region had been referred to the newly constituted inter-agencies committee. Meanwhile, the researcher, having visited the site three times, could not recognize any engineering work that could be likened to what the EPA director described, except heaps and heaps of sand and stones which were being hurled into the wetland. The question is, should the committee succeed in stopping the projects, would they be able to undo the harm that has been caused to the life in and around the Dakodwom wetland?

The motivation for exploiting the Adwumakase-Kese sacred forest (Subri Forest) likewise, was based on the same “development” impulse, where the late chief himself led the depletion of the forest by felling down important trees with the notion of using them for construction of market sheds and a new chief’s palace.⁴³ Political ecology is one of the greatest causes of ecological crisis in Ghana, where some people have sources of power to at one time declare a place as a nature reserve or sacred and another time, declare it desacralized. The crucial question is, who benefits the most? And who suffers the most?

Human needs underpin commodification. However, an unreasonable drive to trade in everything and trade out everything may lead to an eventual commodification of one another and everyone. As has been noted in this study, human life is tightly bound around the environment, and there is an uncompromising interdependence between humankind and nature.

Partisan government officials, city authorities, and metropolitan and municipal authorities, for political gains and interest in votes during elections, modify the nature of the natural environment of Ghana by circumventing bye-laws and regulations, governing nature reserves such as wetlands, sacred groves, sacred forests, rivers, mountains etcetera, and give out such facilities to party financiers and bigwigs who show interest in those places. Though, in an interview with Oteng, he cited ignorance and intention as the two main factors for environmental destruction in the region,⁴⁴ the causes are multifaceted, and politics seems to be top.

The devastation currently going on in the environment, especially in Ghana can be linked to the adoption of the “Western” outlook on certain important issues.⁴⁵ According to Kalu, this development has led to governments placing more emphasis on economic growth which has led to the exploitation of natural reserves by mining and logging companies.⁴⁶ One would not be wrong to assert that land, in Ghana, has been reduced to nothing more than a tradable commodity, creating enmity and social instabilities and strange diseases.

Politics is a major factor in environmental destruction in Ghana, especially in the area of the destruction of forests and water bodies. The Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo’s led government, having

⁴⁰ The researcher visited the site on January 10, and on March 18, 2024. The exploitation is very devastating. A big petro station had already been built and was in operation and just beside it, another developer was on site with heavy machineries filling the remaining portion of the wetland with speed.

⁴¹ Oteng, personal communication with the researcher, 2023.

⁴² Oteng, personal communication with the researcher, 2023.

⁴³ A personal conversation with Nana Amoah, the *Ankcebeahene* “Home-guard Chief” of Adwumakase-kese. The researcher after that visited the depleted forest on Saturday, July 10, 2020.

⁴⁴ Oteng, interacted with the researcher, 2023.

⁴⁵ Roosbroeck P. and Amlalo D., “Country Environmental Profile of Ghana,” 2006.

⁴⁶ U. O. Kalu, “The Sacred Egg: Worldview, Ecology and Development in West Africa,” in *Indigenous Tradition and Ecology*, ed. John A. Grim (United States: Harvard University Press, 2001), 225–48, 226.

sworn to deal with the issue of *galamsey*, “illegal mining,” which was ravaging Ghana’s forests and water bodies in the run-up to the 2016 General Elections, established sanitation courts across the regions in the country, created Ministry for Environment and Science as well as Ministry for Sanitation, inaugurated “Operation Vanguard” and subsequently, “Operation GalamStop,” a temporary ban was placed on small scale mining, engaged in rigorous training and licensing of small scale miners. All these interventions were part of initiatives to salvage Ghana’s environmental crisis as soon as he was sworn in as the President.

Hope started showing up among Ghanaians when the major water bodies in the country began to change from being turbid to being clear. But things took a different turn after the General Elections in 2020 when the ruling government lost several parliamentary seats and presidential votes. The government’s electoral losses were blamed on her strong stance to fight *galamsey*. This was due to the fact that the ban on small-scale mining and the stringent measures put in place for the acquisition of mining licenses by the Minerals’ Commission of Ghana had rendered scores of miners and associated business people jobless. As a result, the main opposition party capitalized on the economic situation in the mining communities and exploited the issue in their political campaigns. Thus, disgruntled miners and those associated with the mining economy voted against the ruling government in defiance of her stance against *galamsey*.

The political narratives coming from some of the bigwigs of the party in government lend credence to the speculations that Ghana’s environmental crisis has worsened since 2021 after the last election because the government backed down her tools for fighting *galamsey*. For instance, prosecution of court cases involving illegal mining has slowed, the various task forces against *galamsey* have ceased to operate, several mining licenses have been issued to people, pollution of water bodies and destruction of forest reserves have increased. The blame game going on between the ruling government and the main opposition party regarding who is the worst culprit when it comes to environmental devastations through illegal mining, and that between the chiefs and government, point out only one thing: bad faith.

This has led to a nationwide outburst of displeasure toward the environmental posture of the government. In the run-up to the last elections (2024), the opposition party once again started exploiting the environmental crisis to fuel its campaign. The ruling government, on the other hand, having taken a cue from the experiences of the previous election, decided to remain indifferent to the call to clamp down on the activities of *galamsey* in order to salvage the environment. Some highly participated demonstrations were organized in the capital city of Ghana by pressure groups, labour unions, civil society organizations and some religious leaders. The arrest and incarceration of some of the protestors for alleged misconduct during the protests sparked fierce tensions and miss-feelings in the country.

It is instructive to state that now that the environmental crisis in Ghana has been politicized, the hope for environmental rescue, could lie too far. Now that political leaders from the two main parties as well as traditional leaders accuse one another of being involved in environmental destruction through irresponsible mining activities, who will and or can fight it? The populace, especially the teeming youth in Ghana would only be used by one or another of these strong political entities for their political and economic exploitations and the nation would bleed unabatedly.

Environmental Destruction Concealed in Religious Rituals

The factors and institutions that directly or indirectly contribute to the destruction of the Akan environment and Ghana as a whole are checkered. However, one could postulate that materialism, economics, westernization, globalization, “prosperity,” “development,” and politics, could be the underlying factors that are fueling the ecological crisis in Ghana, especially among the Akan. These factors have created philosophically internal conflicts within the worshippers of the two religions in terms of their ecological beliefs against the ecological praxis within the modern socio-economic milieu of religious individuals and groups. As a result, though the Akan Christian tenets would not encourage environmental abuse, neither would the Akan indigenous ecological knowledge systems, yet, the perpetrators do not only destroy the earth in defiance but also do it with a religious concealment.

Prayer is one of the key concepts of religion. Traditional Akans are expected to pray before making use of sacred entities such as the earth, water bodies, forests, and mountains.⁴⁷ Thus, an Akan, at the instance of encroaching on a nature reserve, would offer prayers to the gods and the ancestors.⁴⁸ The essence of making libation (prayer) to the gods and the ancestors at a time when one is about to desecrate and destroy sacred entities such as forests groves, rivers, and wetlands, is inconceivable. In fact, one's attempt to pray to a god who has been violated by the same worshipper could only be described as a cosmetic ritual. This can be described as an attempt to implicate the gods and the ancestors for being involved in sanctioning a violation of community norms, beliefs and values. Are the gods to blame? Perhaps, the Akan traditional gods are only interested in receiving drinks and the blood of sheep to satisfy their greedy appetites without recourse to the life and conditions of the living, the unborn, and departed members of the community.

The Pentecostal/Charismatic churches which are the worst offenders of acquisition and use of wetlands for chapel buildings as this study has shown, are also the most praying churches in Ghana. If the dwelling place of God is desecrated for putting up a human temple for Him (God) and dumping human excreta into the rivers nearby, the LORD may not accept their prayers and deliver them. The Pentateuch section of the Christian Old Testament affirms this strongly:

³³You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. ³⁴You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel (Num 35:33-34).

¹²You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. ¹³And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. ¹⁴Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you (Deut 23:12-14).

The nucleus of the injunction, as seen in the two texts above, is land/earth pollution. The narrator indicates that the LORD considers pollution as a form of land defilement. In the context of these texts and in the wider context of the Old Testament, aside from the shedding of innocent blood which pollutes the land, unsanitary conditions such as indiscriminate disposal of human and domestic waste are considered pollutants in God's dwellings. The Tabernacle, the Temple, which was built later, and the various camps in the wilderness, were considered God's dwellings because the Divine Tent was always seen together with the human tents (Num 35:34); it was pitched at the centre of the camp with the numerous human tents erected around it. Thus the people of God were enjoined to stay away from all forms of pollutions in the community in which the LORD happened to be a member. It appears that sanitation was so crucial an issue that it was given a theological shade, that their very survival in the midst of their enemies depended on it, and whether or not they would experience the LORD's presence and help, was also contingent on good sanitation practices (Deut 23:14).

This sanitation theology in the Old Testament seems to have been lost on some Christians in Ghana. Christians have ecological concepts, developed from the context of the Bible, which do not encourage exploitation and environmental destruction; but conscientize the devotees about the need to protect, care for and conserve the environment. However, the findings of this study show the opposite. Many Christians in the study areas in Akan communities seem to have neglected their Christian principles, enshrined in their scriptures, which could arouse their consciousness towards the environment. Likewise, their Akan cultural background, characterized by indigenous ecological knowledge systems (IEKs), has clearly been ignored. This has rather led them to shirk their Christian and customary responsibilities for environmental protection.

⁴⁷ Awuah-Nyamekye, "Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective," 256.

⁴⁸ Samuel B. Adubofour, *Akan Cosmology in Contemporary Perspective: A Research Booklet in African Traditional Religion* (Kumasi, Ghana: Christian Service University College, 2001), 6.

Environmental Discipline in Ghana

In an interview with Patricia Appiagyei, the honourable Member of Parliament for Asokwa Constituency in Ashanti Region, she decried that one of the major problems in that constituency is sanitation even though the District Sanitation Court⁴⁹ in the region is in that constituency.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, in Greater Accra, the situation seems to be different. In 2019 in Accra, two persons were sentenced to ten (10) months in prison for dumping refuse indiscriminately at Tudu, a suburb in Accra, an act that contravenes the provisions in the Public Health Act, 2012 (851) and the Accra Metropolitan Assembly's Bye-laws 2017.⁵¹ The then mayor of Accra, Henry Quartey, in an attempt to tackle the littering menace in the metropolis, introduced what he called, "Operation Clean Your Frontage," where community members were expected to clean the front yard of their houses. This could be replicated in other regions and municipalities across Ghana, especially, Akan communities in Ashanti Region. As has been alluded to earlier, in 2017/2018, the government of Ghana, in fulfilment of its promise to deal with environmental destruction in Ghana, started arresting illegal mining operators but prosecution of many of such cases has slackened, allegedly due to politics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has shown the need for religious bodies to respond seriously to the environmental degradation in the Akan communities and Ghana as a whole. The following recommendations would help the religious bodies to respond positively in performing their roles to save the environment.

Teaching and Education

As advocated for by scholars about the need for a religious response to help salvage the ecological crisis in Ghana,⁵² this paper strongly avows that the religious bodies in Ghana incorporate in their scriptural and doctrinal teachings, the issues of human-earth relations and use such occasions to hammer on environmental value, eco-justice, conservation, protection, cleanliness and sanitation. This is what Misiaszek refers to as "Ecopedagogy," which aims at educating people in building their ecological views through environmental mitigation.⁵³ One would therefore avow that ecological education from religious bodies must be directed at forming attitudes and behaviours for sustainable community development. The education in question includes religious education in which religious and spiritual values about the environment and the universe are taught continually and continuously.⁵⁴ Misiaszek argues that ecopedagogies' focus on teaching to critically read and re-read the politics of environmentally violent actions and socio-environmental connections as inherent responsibilities as citizens of the world and Earth is essential for transformative actions by these citizens.⁵⁵ The Church for instance needs to integrate her liturgy with ecology by using the liturgical symbols, signs and gestures used in the liturgical celebrations, especially during the Eucharist to help create awareness among the people that the Liturgy appreciates nature.⁵⁶ The text of the Christian Bible may not be rewritten but portions may be re-read and the church's traditions must be reinterpreted to highlight the fact that humans and the environment are

⁴⁹ Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly (KMA), "KMA Inaugurates Sanitation Court", <http://kma.gov.gh/kma/?kma=inaugurates-sanitation-court&page=5510>, Accessed on January 19, 2022.

⁵⁰ Patricia Appiagyei, in an Interview on Kingdom 100.1 FM on Wednesday, January 19, 2022, monitored by the researcher at 8:40am.

⁵¹ Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), "2 Jailed, 8 Fined GHC 3,840 for Sanitation Offences", <https://ama.gov.gh/news/details.php?n=cDY5cDlzMTlwOTM5MDM2OW40MTcyNzAzN3EwNXE1ODg3NTByMjcYNg>, July 16, 2019, Accessed on January 19, 2022.

⁵² Francis Appiah-Kubi and Gregory Aabaa, "African Traditional Worldview: Indigenous Resource For Re-Thinking Global Faith And Eco-Cultic Spirituality," *HORIZONS* 13, no. 2 (2019):170; Kojo Okyere, "Bible, Ecology and Sustainable Development: A Reading of Genesis 1: 1-2: 4a," *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no. 2 (2011): 81–96, 92; Adu-Gyamfi, "Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Ecosystem Conservation: Response of the Church: Church and Environment"; Awuah-Nyamekye, "Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective," 43.

⁵³ Greg W. Misiaszek, *Educating the Global Environmental Citizen: Understanding Ecopedagogy in Local and Global Contexts*. (New York: USA: Routledge, 2018), 14.

⁵⁴ Posman Pangihutan and Demy Jura, "Ecotheology and Analysis of Christian Education in Overcoming Ecological Problems," *International Journal of Science and Society* 5, no. 1 (2022): 18, 14.

⁵⁵ Misiaszek, *Educating the Global Environmental Citizen: Understanding Ecopedagogy in Local and Global Contexts*, 14.

⁵⁶ Colman Fabian Kimaryo, "Refocusing the Transformative Role of the Eucharist as a Means for Eco-Praxis" (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2016), 7.

kinsmen; and therefore, humans need to assume a positive and responsible relationship with the earth. This view is affirmed by Conradie who envisages that,

Through the liturgy, worshippers may slowly learn to see the world in a new light, in the light of the Light of the world. They may begin to see the world around them through God's eyes, as God's beloved creation. They may realise that this messed-up world and the messed-up lives in and around them are nevertheless beloved, so much so that for God it is even worth dying for. They may learn to see the invisible, an intuition deeply embedded in Hebrew, Greek and African sensibilities. They may begin to see the earth in the light of "heaven," in terms of what the world may become and in a hidden way already is.⁵⁷

Christian doctrine teaches that first, Christ is the Light of the world (Jn. 8:12) and second, his followers, subsequently become the Light of the world (Mat. 5:14-16). Light as used in context, is a metaphor for the role of Christ and his church. That is, he and his church are the source of salvation, redemption, healing, newness, and restoration of the sinful and devastated world. "Being bright means having a positive impact on others."⁵⁸ It drums home an eschatological and existential view of salvation which is not limited to humans but includes the non-human creation. It underscores the fact that from the biblical and historical perspectives, Christians are enjoined to make here like heaven before they can make it to heaven.

Building ecological congregations in the various religious centres is another crucial step to contribute to salvaging nature in Ghana. This implies the need to incorporate and or intensify ecological conversations on the various religious spaces in the country. Religious bodies should embark on educating their members on waste categorization. This will reduce littering and indiscriminate waste disposal in the communities. Obviously, sensitized religio-ecological congregations would transform their communities with ecological knowledge and actions. This will be effective across the nation because a greater number (over 90%) of the citizens of Ghana are members of various religious bodies who congregate at least once every week. Deliberate and effective religio-ecological conversations could lead to the formation of environmental clubs, friends of rivers and water bodies, and forest guards and may also become a platform for nurturing and the emergence of environmental scholars and researchers, eco-poets, eco-musicians, eco-dramatists, eco-historians, eco-politicians, and eco-theologians.

As part of her role in awareness creation, it is recommended for the Church to establish an anniversary for the Earth (Earth Day) on the Christian calendar. Inasmuch as the creation of environmental awareness is important, it is suggested that it should go hand in hand with the development of positive concerns for maintaining the quality of life.⁵⁹ They are also encouraged to collaborate with one another to embark on regular clean-up exercises in the communities where their churches are located, to ensure that such exercises are effectively done to benefit the communities.

Advocacy

The various church councils and religious and traditional associations can play a significant role in the area of advocacy to help curb the environmental menace in Ghana. Ecumenical collaborations toward addressing Ghana's ecological crisis could be an effective undertaking in mounting pressure on the political and traditional authorities as well as ordinary citizens about the need to care for the environment.⁶⁰ As a policy, the religious bodies for instance can influence government policies on environmental protection by presenting communiqués on eco-justice and environmental care –taking the debate from partisan activism. In addition, as a binding policy and part of the bylaws, members of the various religious bodies could pledge to desist from acquiring wetlands for buildings as well as play the role of environmental guards in their communities.

⁵⁷ Ernst M Conradie, "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology: Revisiting the Current Debate," *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 119, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.

⁵⁸ Pangihutan and Jura, "Ecotheology and Analysis of Christian Education in Overcoming Ecological Problems," 22.

⁵⁹ J. E. Otiende, W. P. Ezaza, and Boisvert R., *An Introduction to Environmental Education* (Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press, 1991), 21.

⁶⁰ Conradie, "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology," 10.

Among other things, real action from the church and other religious bodies in Ghana is needed in the areas of investing in composting and recycling as well as tree planting industries in the communities they operate.⁶¹ This can be achieved in partnership with government agencies and private individuals and organizations.

CONCLUSION

Ecological crisis is real, not only in Ghana but also on the global plane. In Ghana, Government efforts have yielded little in that direction due to socio-economic growth and other factors. Several scholars in the recent past have proposed that there is a likelihood for religion to possess the capacity to contribute to salvage the environmental crisis in Ghana. There is therefore the need for a theological response from the point of view of Christians to solving these problems. The discussion has revealed that the Akan have in the past adopted good conservational principles for the environment. Akans are not against development but they lean toward sustainable development. Their conservation principles constitute their perspective on development. By this, Akans ensure that impeccable coherence is created in the eco-system. However, this Akan concept of community and development has changed drastically over time. The cherished indigenous knowledge held by the Akan regarding the spiritual value of the environment is now far-fetched in their socio-ecological praxis. Things have gone so bad that even some Akan Christians, Muslims and traditionalists are involved in environmental destruction due to religious market, apostasy and desacralization. The forces of development, commodification and political ecology have become the actual driving catalysts that determine the kind of relationship that exists between humans and the natural environment in modern Akan communities. The paper has argued that the religious bodies, being the voice of the voiceless, which includes the earth, and the conscience of society, need to get involved in seeking justice for the earth. Making use of their scriptural ecological knowledge to intensify ecological conversations and build ecological congregations which could lead to strong religious advocacy against environmental destruction and deliberately channeling some of their resources into environmental protection investments are some of the propositions this paper makes for the religious bodies in Ghana to consider.

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⁶¹ Pangihutan and Jura, "Ecotheology and Analysis of Christian Education in Overcoming Ecological Problems," 23.

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