

**RELIGION AND NATURE IN AKAN CULTURE:
A CASE STUDY OF OKYEMAN ENVIRONMENT
FOUNDATION**

By

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Abstract

Akan relationship with nature as expressed by Jefferson and Skinner (1974) enjoins the living to view nature as sacred and in effect prevent it from wanton destruction. This is because humans have a relationship with nature and must in return treasure it. This relationship shaped people's perception and attitude towards nature through the adherence to taboos associated with nature as well as the recognition of the place of non-human members of the community. This was meant to consolidate the sacred relationship between humans and nature. However, with Ghana's adoption of 'Western' perspectives of development which perceives humanity as superior and in charge of creation as well as its perception of Akan animistic tendencies as 'primitive,' 'superstitious' and 'fetish' has led to the destruction of nature. Ghana's environment continually faces gradual degradation because of the neglect of the role of the Akan indigenous religion in the preservation of nature because of the perception that the adoption of the animistic tenets of Akan Indigenous religion in Ghana's environmental policy constitutes a retrogression. The continuous neglect of religion and the over-reliance on legislation as a means of preventing environmental degradation will worsen the environment situation. It is therefore appropriate that contemporary conservation methods take cognizance of Indigenous religion.

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CHAPTER ONE:

THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

1.1 Introduction

The environmental crisis around the globe is the concern for many people. The planet is suffering the extinction of species, pollution overload and resource depletion (Grim and Tucker 2001, xv). According to the Global 2000 report: “Once such global environmental problems are in motion, they are difficult to reverse.” Peter Raven (quoted in Grim and Tucker 2001, xvi), the director of the Missouri Botanical Garden wrote in a paper captioned “we are killing the world:”

The world that provides our evolutionary and ecological context is in serious trouble, trouble of a kind that demands our urgent attention. By formulating adequate plans for dealing with these large scale problems, we will be laying the foundation for peace and prosperity in the future; by ignoring them, drifting passively while attending to what may seem more urgent, personal priorities, we are courting disaster.

Raven’s assertion and the Global 2000 report reveal an ecological crisis which must be given the much needed attention.

Ghana has not escaped the global environmental crisis. Land degradation, coastal erosion, pollution of rivers and lagoons, deforestation and desertification constitute the major environmental concerns in Ghana (Roosbroeck and Amlalo 2006, 19-22). Together with Kalu (2001), Roosbroeck and Amlalo (2006) have identified one cause of environmental destruction in Ghana as the result of Ghana’s adoption of the ‘Western’ perspectives of development “defined in terms of gross national product and domestic product” (Kalu 2001, 226). This perspective places economic growth high on government’s development

agenda and has led to the destruction of the environment by mining companies and timber industries. This economic paradigm is rooted in ‘Western’ perspectives of development which perceives humanity as superior and in charge of creation has the potential of destroying nature (Ojomo 2011, 106).

Ghana has used several approaches to solving the environmental problems. The approaches have ranged from policy directions, conferences on climate and the formulation of various legal statutes. However, the impact of these approaches to solving the environmental problems has been minimal and sometimes elusive because of the demands of Ghana’s economic development. The current state of the environment in Ghana raises the question of whether it is appropriate to consider indigenous religion as an important player in its environmental policy.

I agree with Kalu (2001: 226), a contemporary scholar who argues for a paradigm shift towards the holistic development process which recognizes religion as a major player in development especially in the area of the environment. This is because in my opinion, religion has the capability of shaping peoples attitude towards nature and must be considered as a factor in environmental policy. Leopold (1966, 219) argues that human beings should change their attitude towards non- human members of the community. He said “humans should change their role as conquerors of the land and respect their fellow members, and also have respect for the community as such becoming plain members and citizens of it.

It is worthwhile exploring at a theoretical level, the function of religion as regards the natural environment. In this context, Grim (2001, xii) states:

Religious world views are *all-encompassing* because, they fully absorb the natural world within them. They provide human beings both a view of the whole and at the same time a penetrating image of the whole and at the same time a penetrating image of their own ironic position as the beings of the cosmos who possess the capacity of symbolic thought: the part that contains the whole- or at least a picture of the whole- within itself.

Considering the environment through the symbolic lens of religion may not only strengthen the relationship between humans and non-humans (plants and animals), but may also strengthen the existing relationship among members of the community who share the same beliefs about nature. Religious symbols have often served as a form of cultural identity among the Akan. Furthermore, it has helped in identity construction among individuals and clans as well as conveying the power of kings and royal ancestors (Lumor 2009).

Despite the ability of religion to be used to affect the environment positively and to strengthen existing human relation, one cannot escape the dark side of religion. It is widely known that religion has been a force behind several ethnic and religious conflicts in the world. It has also promoted racial and social injustice as well as promoted gender inequalities. Religious conflicts destroy human resources that form the basis of any development program. Ver Beek (quoted in Graveling 2008) identifies three reasons why religion has been neglected in the development agenda of modern societies. Firstly, there is the “fear of imposing or appearing to impose an outsider’s perspective.”(Ver Beek 2000, 39). Secondly, there is the tendency for a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane and lastly, the fear that religion could compound religious conflicts or incite one. However,

the Ghanaian situation appears complex. Although Ghanaians are highly religious, its slow pace in economic development has been attributed to Ghana's over reliance on religion (GNA 2010). Assimeng, a professor of Sociology argues that Ghana has failed to progress economically because Ghanaians have taken religion too far. He argues further that "in a country where there is too much religion, economic activity goes down" (GNA 2010). Assimeng's criticism may be one of the reasons why religion does not have a place in government's development agenda.

Nevertheless, it is equally important that one uses resources within the Akan religious tradition to promote positive environmental ethics. This is because at both the theoretical and practical fundamental levels, there is a consensus on the important role played by nature in indigenous African religions, a role that is different from the western religions of Christianity and Islam, and which deserves careful attention. Among the Akan tribe of Ghana, "man is not created alone. He is created to be in relation" (Awolawu 1972, 108-118). This statement implies that the relationship between humans and earth is fundamental to the understanding of all other relationship. Furthermore, the spiritual world manifests itself in natural phenomena such as rocks, trees and animals (Fontein (2006, 15). Again, in the case of death of a 'totem', a clan or tribe that particular totem represents organizes a funeral for it as if it were a human being. The funeral is meant to revere the totem (Parrinder 1961, 172). These positive environmental ideas have the capability of preserving nature and must be considered in government's environmental policy.

1.2 Aims

The thesis explore how the Akan indigenous tradition perceives, values and engages the non-human natural environment in modern Ghana; and in so doing it engages and critiques ‘Western’ scholarship on the topic, particularly in terms of how ‘Western’ scholars have perceived such relationships as ‘primitive.’ Evolutionary theory and the Darwinian contexts brought about the negative use of the term ‘primitive’ (Geertz 2009, 26). These contexts also affected the writings of Tylor (1871) and Frazer (1910) who thought by studying ‘primitive’ societies they could gain insight into the history of human evolution. ‘Primitive’ societies were therefore perceived as ‘less developed’ than their European counterparts. Furthermore, the Victorian period, which was obsessed with change, contributed to the description of ‘primitive societies’ as lacking ingenuity (Bowler 1990, 14). In effect, societies and individuals that did not meet the progress criteria set by the Victorians were sidelined. This thesis deconstructs the derogatory use of terms such as ‘primitive,’ ‘traditional’ and ‘fetish’ and argues that the Akan indigenous ideas about nature should not be considered in a negative light but should be considered relevant in contemporary Ghanaian society. The relevance of the Akan indigenous ideas about nature will be discussed using the *Okyehene* Environment Foundation as a case study. The Foundation was launched in 2001 by the former Minister of Science and Technology, Prof. Dominic Fobih (G NA 2001). One of the foundation’s objectives is to reduce the impact of mining activities on the environment (Hanson Ebenezer 2000). The *Okyeman* Environment Foundation demonstrates the conscious effort by the chief to combine both Indigenous and modern methods of preserving nature. (“Foreign Missions Tour Project Sites,” The Kings Journal’s Blog, Nov 18. <http://kingsjournal.wordpress.com/category/a-king-in-the-making/>).

1.3 The Environment of Ghana

Ghana's total land size is 238,533km² with an exclusive Economic Zone of 110,000 km² of sea, which forms the territorial area of Ghana. Ghana experiences two major seasons, namely the rainy season and the dry season which comes with a harmattan, a dry and dusty wind. Wilson Tamakloe (quoted in Awuah-Nyamekye 2009) identifies six vegetation zones in Ghana. These are the Savannah (Sudan, Guinea and coastal), Forest-Savannah transitional Zone, the Semi-Deciduous Forest Zone, and the Rain Forest. The vegetation zones are habitats of different animal species including migratory birds. Some of these animals serve as tourist attraction. (Wilson quoted in Awuah-Nyamekye 2009). There are also several rivers, lakes and lagoons that are evenly distributed. The longest and largest river is the Volta river-1600km. Other rivers include the Pra River, the Tano River, The Offin River and the Birim River. Ghana's environment has developed several problems. Below is a summary of the various environmental problems in Ghana and their respective causes (Roosbroeck and Amlalo 2006, 15).

Table 1. Environmental problems in Ghana

Source: Adapted from the Sea of GPRS, 2003 and Sustainable Development indicators for Ghana

NATURE OF CONCERN	CAUSES	EFFECTS	INDICATORS
Land Degradation	Traditional farming methods, bushfires, clearing of watersheds, sand and stone winning, harvesting of firewood	Loss of top soil, loss of biodiversity, loss of medicinal plants, siltation of rivers, salination of rivers	Area affected by erosion, area affected by Stalination, area of land contaminated, area of water logging

Coastal erosion	Rising sea level, sand wining on beaches, harbor construction	Erosion of coast, loss of spawning ground	% land loss to erosion, number of sand wining sites on beach
Pollution of water bodies	Mining activities, indiscriminate waste disposal, farming along riverbanks, indiscriminate defecation, pollution by manufacturing industries	Damage to aquatic life, poor water quality, poor water quality, toxic water sources	Increase BOD in rivers,% loss in aquatic life,% faecal coliform in rivers, use of agricultural pesticide, number of industries discharging into water bodies
Deforestation	Timber exploitation, fuel wood extraction, shifting cultivation, bushfires	Loss of biodiversity, drying of streams, soil erosion	% Loss of fauna, flora % Loss of forest land/year, number of bushfires/year, annual allowable cut
Poor waste management	Human activities, mining activities, industrial activities, mining activities	Increased soil toxicity, poor water quality, visual intrusion, increase in disease, emerging diseases	Volume of types of waste, no waste treatment plants
Risk from chemical use	Use of chemicals in fishing, use of chemicals in hunting, agrochemical/pesticides use, industrial use of chemicals, spillage from mining activities	Polluted water bodies, polluted air, increase crop toxicity, death related to toxicity	Increase pesticides use, level of pesticides in crops, increase in pesticide related disease, chemical poisoning
Indoor air pollution	Use of charcoal and fuel wood, use of insecticides, use of mosquito coils, cigarettes smoking	Poor air quality, increase chest problems, increase in coughs	Emission on CO ₂ , respiratory infections, expenditure on air pollution
Outdoor air pollution	Vehicular pollution, Industrial pollution, dust from road construction, release of methane, stench from waste	Health problems increase, poor air quality, loss of flora and fauna	Emission of Carbon iv oxide, emission of nitrogen oxide, emission of sulphur oxide air quality

Desertification	Climatic change, deforestation, poor farming practices, drying of local streams	Loss of livelihood, erosion, loss of vegetation cover, Biodiversity loss	Increase in vegetation loss, decrease in food production, loss of soil moisture
Large scale development	Mining activities, factories near rivers, building on water ways	Loss of arable land, waste generation, flooding in cities, biodiversity loss	Pollution level of air and water, loss of aquatic life, hoses flooded annually

The Government of Ghana has initiated and implemented a lot of strategies to solve the problems of environmental degradation. These include the establishment of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Environment to provide direction. Other strategies include the setting up of the Environmental Protection agency to advise and enforce environmental laws. Others include the implementation of the National Environmental Policy and the National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP). There has also been the implementation of Environmental education strategy to create awareness on environmental issues (Roosbroeck and Amlalo 2006, 17-18).

This state of Ghana’s environment requires immediate attention if Ghana is to achieve the status as middle ranked developed nation. This vision can be achieved if environmental protection and successful human development are interdependent (EPA 2011). Therefore, a concerted approach towards the preservation of environment must recognise religion. The Akan indigenous culture is animistic and has the potential to preserve and conserve nature. Their animistic tendency is captured in the words of Danquah (1968, 120). He states:

“We do not hold in trust for the present and the future generations all the natural resources on which our welfare and continuance of the community depend, but are also accountable to the ancestors ...”

This religious injunction imposed on the Akan by the ancestors and the fear of retribution against the destruction of the environment provides a good environment ethic which must be given the much needed attention. This vision is helpful in formulating a general environmental ethic that is contextually appropriate to the Ghanaian society. The Akan environmental ethic if adopted can reduce land degradation, deforestation and pollution of water bodies which has been identified in table 1 as one of the main causes of environmental problems in Ghana. This environmental ethic which takes cognisance of the intricate relationship between the Akan and the spirit beings (Supreme Being, gods, and ancestors) underlines the Akan regard for non-human members of the community. This relationship to be discussed in the preceding chapter will offer an understanding of the Akan environmental ethic.

1.4 The Akan Indigenous Tradition

The Akan occupy about six of the ten regions of Ghana namely: Eastern Region, Ashanti, Central, Western, Brong-Ahafo, and some part of the Volta Region. They are the largest ethnic group in Ghana. This ethnic group consists of tribes such as Agona, Ahafo, Ahanta, Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Aowin, Asante, Assin, Fante, and Kwahu etc. The 2000 population census reports that the Akan constitute 49.1% of the total population of 18,800,000. They are mainly found in the southern and middle part of Ghana. However, some minority Akan population is found in Ivory Coast. The traditional occupation of the Akan are farming and fishing. However, Omenyo (2001, 26) explains that as a result of movement of people from one region to another in search for jobs, some Akan may be found in the northern regions of Ghana engaged in different occupations other than farming and fishing. Traditionally, the Akan are matrilineal, that is they inherit from the mother's side. However, according to Pobee (1979, 44), the only exception to this form of inheritance is the Akuapem of Larteh and Mampong. Although the Akwapim's are

Akan, they inherit from the father side. In considering the Akan as participants in the fight against environment degradation, it is important we consider their worldviews, beliefs and practices, which according to Awuah- Nyamekye (2009, 252) is very important towards a successful conservation and preservation of nature.

1.4.1 Belief Systems among the Akan

As far as the Akan are concerned, occurrences in the life of human beings have spiritual dimensions and their interpretation is of utmost importance to every tribe. They believe that behind the visible is the invisible, and nothing occurs by chance. This means that the spiritual beings decide on what happens in the physical realm. In the view of Douglas (2005, 163),

Traditional African society remains a culture guided by religious norms: The first thing to realize is the close bond that exists between religion and social life. The African religions impregnate the whole life of the community. They are the beginning and the end of everything. Reduced to essentials, their world view, their vision of the world, is a unifying factor, because it does not imply any clear-cut difference between the profane and sacred, between matter and spirit. In its view the living and the dead, the visible cosmos and the invisible world merely constitute one and the same universe, and the antinomies of good and evil, life and death, which spring from antagonisms inherent in existing beings do not vitiate the unity of this world-vision.

Pobee (1992, 62) also “describes the Ghanaian as “homo religiosus” because he has a religious ontology and epistemology.” He adds: “In Ghana, to be is to be religious.” Opoku (1978:11) observes that the “traditional religion” has been beneficial because it has acted as a *cement* to

hold the various societies together thus providing adequate stability. The spiritual elements are believed to be hierarchical. Although Asare Opoku (1978) and Parrinder (1949) disagree on the hierarchical arrangements of the spirit powers, most scholars, notably Rattray (1927) and Williamson (1965), agree that the spirit powers are hierarchical. Parrinder (1949, 16) arranges the spirit powers in the following hierarchical order: The Supreme God (*nyame*), the deities (*abosom*), ancestral spirits (*nananom nsamanfo*) and the lower spirit powers (amulets and talisman) which is worn around the waist, *asuman*, a power believed to be obtained from small forest beings (*mmoatia*) with feet facing backwards, witches and wizards and the use of magic.) My discussion of the features of the spirit powers will follow Parrinder's hierarchical arrangement.

1.4.1.1 The Supreme Being

The Akan regard the Supreme Being as the one who brought the world into existence and in recognition of this; he is given attributes such as the creator (*oboadee*) and owner of the world (*asaase wura*). He is believed to be active in the lives of mankind. Opoku recalls an Akan myth about the creative powers of the Supreme God. According to Opoku (1978, 21f), the Akan have a myth about how God created the world. In the myth, *Odomankoma* the creator first created the sky which is followed by the creation of the earth, rivers and plants in that order. Finally, he created man and animals. The animals used the plants as food and subsequently served as food for man. Subsequently to that, man also needed some kind of protection in his environment and to satisfy the quest for protection, created the spirits of the waters, forests and rocks thus the Akan believe that everything was created in order devoid of confusion and again, everything was created for a purpose. God is regarded as the highest among the pantheon of spirits and as such must be approached directly without any intermediary. Rattray (1923, 139-42) claimed, he found

onyame dua in almost every compound of an Ashanti village he visited. It is a three forked branch set upright in the ground with a bowl resting on it. This served as an altar for the Supreme Being (*Onyame*).

1.4.1.2 Lesser gods

The Akan believe in deities called (*abosom*) as personified spirits. The *abosom* are believed to be the children of God and they have their respective jobs assigned to them by God and it is being monitored by the assignor. The deities are believed to inhabit natural objects like water (*nsuobosom*) rocks and caves (*bosombuo*) house (*fiabosom*). Each of these divinities have their area of competence such as agriculture, morality and fertility, wealth (Omenyo 2006, 27). Some of these gods specialize in healing people who are barren or those suffering from impotence. Others are good at combating the negative influence of witches on individuals or on the entire community. Nana Kunde and Nana Tigare are good at exposing the nefarious activities of witches and wizards (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2006). The gods are normally associated with natural objects such as rain, mountains, and as such are offered wine, rum, goats, fowls as sacrifice for the general well being of the community (Wilks 1988, 444). Furthermore, the gods are “means to an end and not an end in themselves” because they were created by God to fulfil specific functions (Opoku 1978, 54). The gods are believed to have powers and they are placed above human beings. In his book “West African Traditional Religion” Opoku (1979, 156) argues that the gods abhor actions which upset the harmony of the community or ruin family life and are believed to administer punishment to those who infringe upon the moral code.

1.4.1.3 The Ancestors

The Akan tribes have a very special place for the “ancestor spirit” and as such, the ancestors occupy a very unique position in the realm of spirits. “Ancestor spirits” are the spirits of the dead who have departed from the land of the living and are believed to be in the land of the dead known in Akan as *asamando*. According to Parrinder (1962, 58) “the departed are not so far away and are believed to be watching over their families like a “cloud of witnesses.” There are certain qualities that one must assume while he or she was alive before being called an ancestor after his or her death. The person must have led a life worthy of emulation, have had children, died a natural death at a good “ripe age” and must have been given a proper burial and funeral rites (Opoku 1978, 36). It is however not clear whether all or some of these qualities must be assumed. Again, the meaning of natural death can be contested as philosophical meanings can be read into that but African communities have a way of determining and honouring its people with ancestorship. Danquah (1963) in his view on the roles of ancestors among the Akan said, “they act as friends at the court to intervene between man and the Supreme Being and to get prayers and petitions answered more quickly and effectively.” The implication is that ancestors serve as intermediaries between God and man, petitioning on mans behalf when he does something wrong. Libation, a special communicating tool is used when people are communicating to God through the ancestors. The special reverence given to ancestors has led to the misconception that ancestors are worshipped but they are not worshipped because they are not the ultimate spiritual power in the hierarchy. The ancestors always watch the behaviour of family members and they punish those who are evil with diseases and reward those who do good (Opoku 1978, 52).

1.4.1.4 Lower Spirit Powers

The Akan believe in lower spirit powers often called *asuman*. *Asuman* may take the form of amulets, talisman or beads which may be worn around the waist, neck or the wrist (Omenyo 2006, 28). Some other lower spirit powers include *sasabonsam*, which literally means “evil spirit.” *Sasabonsam* is believed to be associated with witches and he lives on trees such as the *Odum* tree (Opoku 1978, 72f). Among the Akan, it is the belief in these spirit powers that give them vitality, hope and eventually make their life meaningful (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009, 3). The influence of religion permeates both the social and political spheres. In the Akan tradition, the institution of chieftancy is a pivot around which the performance of religious obligations revolves. A chief therefore occupy a central position in the Akan cultural setting and his role as a caretaker of his tradition’s natural resources and as a mediator in the tradition’s cosmic relationship with nature must be discussed for a better understanding of the Akan religious obligations towards nature.

1.4.2 The Role of the Chief

The Chieftancy continues to be one of the enduring institutions in Ghana. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana, article 270 clause 2, protects the institution from executive and legislative interference. Article 277 of the Constitution of Ghana defines a chief as “a person who hailing from appropriate family and lineage, has been validly nominated, elected or selected and enstooled, enskinned or installed as a chief or queen mother in accordance with relevant customary law usage” (Odotei and Awedoba 2006, 17f). Among the Akan, a chief is a traditional leader. The notion of leadership among the Akan is based on the idea that chiefs are custodians of sacred institutions. The sacred institutions give such leaders the legitimacy to rule. Therefore, a chief

must necessarily derive his legitimacy to rule from sacred institutions such as his royal family and the National House of Chiefs (Dawson 1947, 66). The Akan chieftancy institution is based on kinship system. In this system, the queen mother, in consultation with the family head, nominates a candidate to be crowned as a chief. The chief serves as a visible representative of the ancestors based on the blood relationship between the chief and the ancestors of the clan (Yankah 1995, 95). The rituals of enstoolment also give a chief the opportunity to be the physical legal representative of the ancestors (Busia 1951, 38). This implies that the chief must report the outcome of any legal proceedings to the ancestors who in turn reward or punish parties in dispute. Chiefs are sacred and must be protected by taboos (Brempong 2006, 213). Busia (1968, 26-27) states:

From the moment that the chief is enstooled, his position becomes sacred. This is emphasized by taboos. He may not strike, or be strike by any one lest the ancestors bring misfortune upon the tribe. He may never walk bare footed, lest he stumble. If he does stumble, the expected calamity has to be averted with a sacrifice. His buttocks may not touch the ground. That again would bring misfortune. All these taboos remind the chief and everybody else that he occupies a sacred position. He is the occupant of the stool of the ancestors (*ote nananom akonwa so*). For this reason he is treated with the greatest veneration.

The authority of the chief to enforce taboos and be protected by taboos is one of the numerous factors that explain the chief's role as a custodian of land. According to Osman (2006, 530), chiefs were custodians of land in pre-colonial Ghana. Danquah (1968, 120) corroborates Osman's assertion.

...Thus in our culture, we do not hold in trust for the present and future generations all the natural resources on which our welfare and continuance of the community depend, but also are accountable to the ancestors for the proper management of the resources.

The chief has therefore been mandated by the ancestors to take proper care of natural resources particularly land, rivers. His role is therefore important for a successful preservation of the environment. His role therefore explains the role of Akan chiefs in contemporary Ghanaian society in instituting taboos to protect the environment. Furthermore, the belief in the spirit powers underlines the relationship that the Akan have with the environment. The social significance of the Akan indigenous tradition which forms the basis of their relationship with nature has often been misunderstood by people outside the culture. Clark (1930, 431-471) criticized anthropologists in general on their account of 'primitive religion'. She argued that anthropologists' accounts fail to explain the sociological dimension of their belief systems. In other words, how their belief systems affect the social, economic and political organization. In effect, she suggests that the religious beliefs should be estimated in functional terms. Another reason for the misrepresentation of Akan cultural practices has often been as a result of the neglect of the uniqueness of the Akan cultural context. Kraft (1979, 300) argues that understanding the cultural context of a particular tradition leads to a successful understanding of the behavior of the people in that culture. He captures this in the following words:

There is always a difference between reality and human culturally conditioned understandings (models) of that reality. We assume that there is a reality "out there" but it is the mental constructs (models) of that reality inside our heads that are real to us....Human beings, on the other hand, are always bound by cultural,

subcultural (including disciplinary), and psychological conditioning to perceive and interpret what they see of reality in ways appropriate to these conditions.

Akan beliefs and practices aimed at preserving nature must therefore not be taken at its face value but must be understood within the context of the Akan culture. The understanding of the animistic tendencies of the Akan will be better understood if we trace the genealogy of how religions in Africa have been described by 'Western' anthropologists in order to deconstruct the negative images and typologies.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 A GENEALOGY OF RELIGION IN AFRICA

As a student from Ghana, I need not be told that scholarly writings about African indigenous traditions have not been accurate and have been fraught with many inadequacies. Many of the inadequacies were as a result of the influence of the political and intellectual climate at the time. According to Pritchard (1965, 6), anthropologists who wrote about indigenous people did not live among the people they studied, and therefore relied on European explorers, missionaries and administrators for information. Their data was obviously not reliable and was therefore distorted because they used other people's inadequate materials about Africa. Samuel Baker (1867, 231) captures some of this ethnographic distortion in his address to the Ethnological Society in London in 1866 about the Northern Nilotes:

Without any exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world.

Furthermore, the inability of the missionaries to speak and understand properly the language of the natives influenced their writings negatively. Although missionaries tried to speak the language, they sometimes missed the actual meaning of the words they used and understood it differently. Hocart (1914, 46) gives examples of these misnomers. He states that:

When the missionary speaks of God as *ndina*, he means that all other gods are non-existent. The native understands that he is the only effective, reliable god; the others may be effective at times, but are not to be depended upon. This is but

one example of how the teacher may mean one thing and his pupil understands another. Generally, the two parties continue blissfully ignorant of the misunderstanding. There is no remedy for it, except in the missionary acquiring a thorough knowledge of native customs and beliefs.

Pritchard (1965,8) argues that not only has the wrong interpretation of words by missionaries and European travellers made theories about indigenous religions biased, but also the selective nature of information has made theories about indigenous religion very narrow. He reiterated that missionaries recorded information that caught their attention. For example, they were interested in ‘magic,’ ‘barbaric religious rites’, ‘superstitious beliefs’ (Pritchard 1965, 8). Their choices led to the neglect of other important empirical data such as hunting and fishing, collecting and gathering of roots, fashioning of tools and weapons. These activities were important to the ‘primitive’ man and his intention in the performance of these activities could easily be discerned. The selective acts were reflected in titles of books that described the ‘primitive’ man. Crawley (1927, 134-35) records this in his book, *The Mystic Rose*, describing the ‘primitive’ man in the following words.

The Amaxosa drink the gall of an ox to make themselves fierce. The notorious Mantuana drank the gall of thirty chiefs, believing it would render him strong. Many peoples, for instance the Yorubas, believe that the ‘blood is the life.’ The new Caledonians eat slain enemies to acquire courage and strength. The flesh of a slain enemy is eaten in Timorlaut to cure impotence. The people of Halmahera drink the blood of slain enemies in order to become brave. In Amboina, warriors drink the blood of enemies they have killed to acquire their courage. The people of Celbes drink the blood of enemies to make them strong.

The natives of the Dieri and neighbouring tribes will eat a man and drink his blood in order to acquire his strength; the fat is rubbed on sick people.

Crawley's description of the 'primitive' man painted a picture of cannibals who perpetrated evil. 'Primitive' man was therefore seen as inhuman who could be compared to animals in the wild. Cox argues quite differently from Pritchard and others. According to Cox (2007, 195), non-western religions were described in a derogatory sense because they were seen as part of a historical continuum of human progress. Cox argued that when the 'world religion' paradigm was imposed on the multi-faceted indigenous traditions, non-western religions were forced to become what they not, and their particular identity became ideologically colonized and absorbed into western civilization's religion. Cox illustrates this ideological imposition through his summation of Tomoko Masuzawa's and Jonathon Smith's critique: "this is an ideology of domination and exploitation- a socially constructed false consciousness that is rooted in and thereby has divinely sanctioned the history of western Imperialism over the rest of the world" (Cox 2007, 195f).

It was within the context of the use of inadequate ethnographic data, combined with social-Darwinian and the evolutionary theoretical contexts that the term 'primitive' was used in the negative sense. These contexts influenced the way certain tribes were perceived (Geertz 2009, 26). During Darwin's time, a lot of scientific discoveries were witnessed in Europe. For instance, Baron Cuvier in 1801 announced his discovery of twenty three species of animals that had gone extinct. By the end of the 18th century, James Hutton also discovered a historic geology (Olupona 2004, 46). These discoveries brought to people the desire to progress in life. Furthermore, the new science ushered in a new relationship to nature, and that 'primitive' people still existed in an old relationship to nature. In addition to the desire to invent new things, the

Victorian period which was “the product of an age obsessed with change desperately hoping that history itself might supply the reassurance that could no longer be derived from ancient beliefs” became a contributing factor that led to the despise of tribal societies as ‘primitive’(Bowler 1989, 3). ‘Primitive’ people were therefore conceived first, as people who lacked the ability to invent and discover scientifically. Furthermore, societies and individuals who did not meet the criteria set by the Victorians were sidelined. Bowler (1989, 14) sums up the effect of progressionism in the following words:

A ruthless attitude towards the future was characteristic not so much of Darwin’s theory of branching evolution, but of the Victorians’ wider faith in their own superiority. “Lower races” were stagnant failures, relics of earlier episodes in the history of mankind’s ascent, with nothing further to contribute towards the march of progress. Darwin became a convenient symbol of this more ruthless attitude to failure, but his theory was in some respects only an aberrant product of the progressionism that was the true source of social Darwinism.

The arrangement and ordering of ‘primitive’ cultures in evolutionary sequences, affected the writings of anthropologist like Tylor (1871), Frazer (1910) and Durkheim (1915) who thought that by studying archaic traditions, they could understand and interpret human progress (Custance 1960, 5). Kardiner (1948, 58) states that:

The study of ‘primitive man’ held out high hopes that it would supply valuable information about man’s cultural evolution...The great names of Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Lucien Levi-Bruhl, and Emile Durkheim were associated with these early efforts. They were determined to show cultural evolution by

demonstrating that archaic, simple forms of thought and social organization changed into more complex and integrated forms... For these evolutionists were not studying the adaptation of primitive man to his environment. They hopped, skipped, and jumped from one culture to another, picked what they wanted from each, and fitted it into their master plan.

The second meaning of the term 'primitive' was used by anthropologists in contrast to the term, modern. Thus, much of theoretical literatures were clothed in evolutionary dichotomies: primitive vs. civilized, oral vs. literate, pre-industrial vs. industrial (Olupona 2004, 51). What this meant was that anthropologists made attempt to divide humanity into two fundamental types namely the 'primitive' and the modern. Levi-Bruhl perpetuated such a dichotomy. The dichotomy manifests itself in his criticism of his contemporaries. Levi-Bruhl (1947, 17-18) states:

The attitude of the mind of the primitive is very different [to that of the modern scientific, Europe]. The nature of the milieu in which he lives presents itself to him in a quite different way. Object and beings are all involved in a net work of mystical participations and exclusions. It is these which constitute its texture and order. It is then these which immediately impose themselves on his attention and which alone retain it. If a phenomenon interests him, if he is not content to perceive it, so to speak, passively without reaction, he will think at once, as a sort of mental reflex, of an occult and invisible power of which the phenomenon is a manifestation.

Although, Levi-Bruhl's critique was defended by Pritchard (1965, 80-82) as objective, Levi-Bruhl's dichotomy between 'primitives' and modern European people contributed to the perception that 'primitive' men had 'pre-logical' modes of thought because their views about the universe are incompatible with scientific views (Levi-Bruhl 1947, 17-18). Lastly, 'primitive' men were considered as inferior to the Biblical Adam. This was the period when many people assumed that the Bible was true. The Biblical Adam was therefore viewed as more intelligent than any other human being thus making the appearance of 'primitive' people who produced arrow heads a manifestation of relics of man under condemnation (Herbert 1955, 15f). The effect of this assumption was that any kind of progress apart from the Christian influence was not accepted and considered inferior.

Apart from the fact that 'primitive' people were considered inferior, Africa was also regarded as a "Dark continent" whose people can only conceptualize the Devil and not the Christian God (Idowu 1973, 87). Although this was an extreme view, more measured scholars still held negative views of African religion that were influenced by their own normative theological suppositions. For instance, Leo Frobenius (1913, xii) argues for the non-existence of any organized religion in Africa at the time of the Christian invasion. He states:

Before the introduction of genuine faith and high standards of culture by the Arabs, the natives had neither political organization nor strictly speaking any religion...Therefore, in examining the pre-Muhammadan conditions of Negro races, to confine ourselves to the description of their crude fetishism, their brutal and often cannibal customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols and their squalid homes.

By using a normative theological standard as a basis for determining a genuine religion, Frobenius reinforces Bouquet's hierarchical arrangements of spiritual beings. Bouquet calls the Christian God, a "high god" or "Supreme God." The adjectives qualifying the Christian God, places the 'primitive' God below that of the Christian God. He argues that: "Such a High God hardly differs from the Supreme Being of the 18th Century Deists and it is absurd to equate him with the Deity of the Lord's Prayer (Bouquet 1933, 106).

Another derogatory term worth clarifying is the term 'traditional.' According to Awolawu (1976, 1), foreign investigators defined the religion of the African as 'traditional,' a definition that portrayed the religion as static and not subject to change. This perception has been challenged mainly by African scholars. Awolawu (1976, 1) deconstructs the 'Western' notion of the term 'traditional' by re-defining the term 'traditional' as applied in Africa. He states:

As indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practised by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a "fossil" religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practised by living men and women.

Opoku (1978, 9) also argues that, "to call the religion 'traditional' is not to refer to it as something of the past; it is only to indicate that it is undergirded by a fundamentally indigenous value system and that it has its own pattern, with its own historical inheritance and tradition from the past. Gyekye (1997, 217) in his view argue that societies that are called modern also recognizes some "traditions" as relevant and not obstacles to their development.

The tendency to view nature religions in a derogatory sense intensified as occidental culture placed value on reason and many thinkers became less religious(Taylor 2010,5). Words such as ‘nature worship’ and ‘fetishism’ took the center stage in the debate between those who consider nature religions to be regressive and dangerous and those who see nature religions as ecologically beneficent (Taylor 2010, 5). “Fetishism” according to Parrinder (1954, 15), was first used by the Portuguese who were the first to trade along the western and equatorial coast of West Africa. When they landed on the coast, they saw Africans wearing charms and amulets and they called them “fetico.” This definition of the religion of the African has obviously been made subservient to the Christian God. The effect of these perceptions about ‘primitive’ societies is that their activities were not taken seriously but were studied for the sake of curiosity.

In order to investigate the possible value of indigenous traditions regarding the natural environment, it is important first of all to deconstruct the negative images that have been created by anthropologists about the religion of the indigenous people. The efforts at deconstructing the negative images have been started by scholars such as Rattray and Hsu. Hsu (1964, 174) states:

The most troublesome meaning of the term primitive is that connected with various shades of inferiority. Sometimes we can unquestionably determine that some items or usages of a culture are more inferior or less inferior to others in the same culture or in other cultures. In this sense, we can describe hand-pushed carts as more primitive than horse carts and horse carts as more primitive than automobiles... But the primitiveness of other single items is by no means easy to settle. For example, is the custom of sending children to boarding school or to summer camp more or less primitive than that of continuous parental supervision of the children at home? Is a totalitarian system of government more

or less primitive than tribal rule or benevolent despotism? Is a religious system based upon monotheism with a history of heresy persecution, witch hunting, and holy crusades more or less primitive than another with Laizzez-fare attitude towards different creeds and ritual practices? Is the custom of taking good care of aged parents at home more primitive than that of leaving them to themselves or in institutions?

Hsu opens up the debate concerning the use of the term 'primitive'. Although he agrees in principle to the use of the term 'primitive' when objects are being compared; he disapproves the use of the term if its usage undermines human race. Rattray (1923, 24ff) also corrects the wrong use of term 'fetish.' He said:

Fetishes may form part of an emblem of god, but fetish and god are in themselves distinct, and are so regarded by the Ashanti; the main power, or the most important spirit in a god comes directly or indirectly from Nyame, the supreme God, where as the power or spirit in a fetish comes from plants or trees, and sometimes directly or indirectly from fairies, forest monsters, witches, or from some sort of unholy contact with death; a god is the god of the many, the family clan, or the nation. A fetish is generally personal to its owner.

Rattray's clarification of the use of the term 'fetish' reinforces the Akan relationship to nature. To the Akan, fetishes are sacred objects in nature, and are evidence of the interpenetration of the spiritual and the material realms. The *Onyamedua* (*Alstonia boonei*) tree for instance, served as a symbol of the Akan dependence on God. The tree which grew in shrines and palaces had pot containing water places in its forked branch. The water was used to bless the inmates of the

palace or the house where the tree is located (Opoku 1978, 33). This relationship is what anthropologists regarded as evidence of the 'primitive' mind, in contrast to the modern view in which science and religion occupied completely distinct realms.

Now, the genealogy of religion in Africa in this chapter has exposed the prejudice with which 'Western' anthropologists perceived the culture of the African. The maligning of the religion of the African by anthropologists brought about the neglect of the positive contribution animists made towards the preservation of nature. Instead, anthropologists found faults with their practices and beliefs. The indigenous practices of the African were seen either as 'superstitious,' 'primitive' or 'fetish.' To Harvey (2006, 9), many anthropologists interpreted animism as a sign of 'primitive' stupidity and not a rational universal error. Notwithstanding, I agree with Harvey (2006, xiii) that scholars can maintain terms such as 'animism' but should be used in the positive sense. Thus among the Akan indigenous culture, their ideas about nature should not be seen in a negative light. The question that ought to be asked is how can the Akan indigenous ideas about nature help preserve Ghana's environment from further degradation. The Akan Indigenous ideas about nature are relevant towards the preservation of nature and must be incorporated into the government's environmental policy. In view of this, the next chapter will attempt to explore the Akan Indigenous ideas about nature.

CHAPTER THREE: AKAN RELIGIOUS VIEW OF NATURE

3.1 Okyehene Environment Foundation

The Okyehene Environment Foundation represents a foundation that makes the Akan indigenous view of nature relevant in modern Ghana. The foundation was founded by Okyehene Ammoatia Ofori Panin, the paramount king of the Akyem Abuakwa state in the year 2001. The Akyem Abuakwa an Akan state, is the largest of the three states which constitute the Okyeman kingdom namely Bosome and Kotoku. People who claim to have ancestry with Akyem heritage are called Akyemfo. The Akyem king is called Okyehene and he resides at Ofori panin fie, the royal palace of the Okyehene (Bamfo 2000, 155-157). The Okyehene Ammoatia Ofori Panin, the 35th king of Akyem Abuakwa, upon his ascension to the throne on the 4th of October 1999, continued from where his predecessor Nana Sir Ofori Attah 1 left off. The late Okyehene was interested in the conservation and preservation of the environment. In 1920, Nana Sir Ofori Attah 1, passed by- laws to protect rivers from pollution. He also initiated actions to protect forests and mining towns around his area of jurisdiction from degradation. During his time, Nana Sir Ofori Attah encouraged tree planting and reforestation (Gyamea 2001). Similarly, Ammoatia Ofori Panin founded his Environment foundation in the year 2001 to manage environment concerns in Akyem Abuakwa area. The foundation is meant to address the following issues.

1. Promote, cultivate, sponsor, develop, aid and advance the public interest in and appreciation of environmental and natural preservation and protection.

2. Sponsor and assist organizations involved in environment, ecology and the sustainable use of natural resources.
3. Sponsor lectures, symposia and workshops and disseminate/publish information about the environment and natural resources.
4. Do other things necessary, desirable or useful to accomplish the foundations goals on its own or in concert with other organizations and individuals having similar purposes.
5. Sponsor and assist individuals in the study of the environment, ecology and the sustainable use of natural resource preservation, education and planning (quoted in Gyamea, 2001).

Okyehene argues that the establishment of his environment foundation is necessary because of the respect for the ancestors. He said:

This is necessarily and rightfully because of our great appellation Kwaebibrem- the Dark Forest. This historical appellation is fast eroding inherit due to the depletion of our forest resources. Our rivers and water bodies are drying up or being polluted. Chain saw operators and even legal logging activities are becoming a problem...It is our intention to stop or minimize these problems (quoted in Gyamea, 2001).

The two main instruments for achieving the objectives of the environment foundation are through the enforcement of taboos associated with the great Kwaebibrem, the Dark Forest and the use of modern methods such as eco-tourism, partnering local and international Organizations

that are interested in the preservation and conservation of the environment etc. As a representative of the ancestors, the Okyehene is mandated to protect the environment through the performance of traditional rituals associated with the environment. Within this context, the Okyehene argues that-“The world is nothing if we do not take care of God’s property the Environment. The water, the trees and animals all have life to be protected. When we protect these, we are protecting our own lives. Every little contribution you make matters” (quoted in Global Media Alliance 2010). In order to understand the religious role of the Okyehene in the preservation of the environment, it is important that we have a clear idea of the Akan religious belief about nature.

3.1.1 The Place of the Earth Spirit (*Asaase Yaa*)

The earth occupies a central place in the way the Akan preserve the natural environment. Jefferson and skinner (1974, 27) argue that “for most Africans, land is more than a source of wealth; it is sacred. It gives people life and so people believe they have been entrusted with land and must in return treasure it.” Awolawu (1972, 101-118) also state that “man is not created alone. He is created to be in relation.” These statements imply that the relationship between man and Earth is therefore fundamental to the understanding of all other relationships. This is because to Parrinder (1961,39), the Akan believe that human beings emerged from the bowels of the earth and at the same time, trees and other animals make use of the earth (land) in different ways.

The earth is considered a deity and is called *Asaase Yaa* among the Ashantis and *Asaase Afua* among the Fantes. The names reflect the days on which the earth deity was born. The Ashantis’ believe the earth deity was born on Thursday. In effect, Thursday is held sacred for *mother earth*. Williamson (1965, 89) notes that, on this day, there are no farming activities. This is because, the

prohibited day is a day in which the ancestors who are believed to be the custodians of the land need time to rest and to communicate with other spirits on the land such as the spirits that live in trees and the souls of trees. Anyone who breaks this taboo will receive some retribution from the ancestors and the spirits powers that live in trees. Contrary to the view that the earth is a deity, Busia (1951, 41-42) however disagree with Williamson's assertion that, *mother earth* is a deity. Busia argues that, *mother earth* cannot be considered as a deity because, she is not consulted through divination, as is done for other deities. Nevertheless, the belief that the earth is inhabited by spirits is still popular among the Akan and it is the fear of these spirits that prevents the tilling of the land on sacred days. Taboos associated with *mother earth* therefore prevent the deliberate destruction of land that is essential for plant growth.

3.1.2 Fear of spirits residing in trees

Among the Akan, it is taboo to cut some tree species without appropriate rituals. Rattray (1927, 3) observed during his field work among the Ashantis that, trees such as the Iroko and Mahogany had souls, and the trees were also abodes for spirit powers. Parrinder (1961, 54) confirms Rattray's observation in his anthropological study among the Akan (Ashantis). Parrinder however adds that, spirits that inhabit trees are responsible for making the Akan people fertile. Rattary (1927, 3) observes a priest called Adinkra, offer sacrifice to a spirit dwelling in a tree. The priest declared: "I do not ever give offering to the *sunsum* (soul) of the Akata." (Ashanti name of the tree.) It can be deduced from the priest's sacrifice that, the Ashantis fear spirits that inhabit in trees more than the souls of trees. People who cut spirit inhabited trees are made infertile. The fear of infertility and retributions from spirits powers that reside in trees prevents people from destroying trees thus preserving such tree species. This way of relating to the environment was criticized as by western scholars as superstition. However, in the words of

Boaten (1998, 5), “these beliefs implied knowledge that human beings are caretakers of nature, whose very existence depended on what Opoku (1978) called “cosmic harmony with nature.”

3.1.3 Totemism

The Akan cosmic harmony with nature extends to animals and this harmony has been described by anthropologists as a totemic relationship. According to Frazer (1910:3) the term totemism is derived from an Ojibway word totem, and has been used by scholars to describe the way Africans relate to animals. Anthropologists’ description of this cosmic relationship has been varied and diverse. For example as a theoretical construct, McLennan (1869-1870) in his fortnightly review articles called “The Worship of Animals and Plants,” postulated a formula for totemism. He defined totemism as *fetishism* plus *exogamy*. Several years after McLennan, the notion of totemism has gone through a lot of intellectual development. Frazer (1910, 3), one of the earliest scholars who researched into this phenomenon defines totemism as “a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether relation.” He observes that, the relationship between man and his totem is symbiotic. The totem protects the man and the man respects the totem by not killing it if it is an animal and, not cutting it if it is a plant. Frazer classifies totems into three namely, (1) the clan totem which is common to the whole clan and is transmitted by inheritance from generation to generation; (2) The sex totem, common to either all the males or all the females of a tribe, to the exclusion in either case of the other sex; (3) the individual totem which belongs to an individual and is not passed on to his descendants. Frazer’s four volume discussions on totemism attracted criticisms from his contemporaries. Goldenweiser (1910, 184-190) criticized Frazer’s classification of totemism: organization into clans, attribution of animals and plants to the clans as names or emblems, and the belief in the

relationship between clans and animals. Goldenweiser used specific examples from the River Indians who had totems but no clans; the Iroquois who had clans called after animals but had no totems to buttress his point. Lowie (1920) argues that Frazer's definition of totemism: "the socialization of emotional values" is too general. Lowie also uses examples from the natives of Buin who have a quasi- religious attitude towards their totem and the Kariera of Western Australia who are subject to no *tabu* to buttress his point. He concludes: "I am not convinced that all the acumen and erudition lavished upon the subject has established the reality of the totemic phenomenon." Recent anthropological studies on the subject *totemism* have produced a definition which appears to be agreed by most scholars. This definition is expressed in the sixth Edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* which is a collective work published by the Royal Anthropological Institute:

In the widest sense of the term, we may speak of totemism if :(1) the tribe or group...consists of groups (totem- groups) comprising the whole population, each of these groups has a certain relationship to a class of object (totem), animate or inanimate;(2) the relations between the social groups and the objects are of the same general kind; and (3) a member of these totemic groups cannot(except under special circumstances, such as adoption) change his membership.

These developments indicate the complex nature of the phenomenon totemism. The term must therefore be used in specific contexts and all attempts must be made to avoid an over generalization of the term.

The cosmic harmony with animals among the Akan has been described by some Ghanaian scholars as a totemic relationship. In the Akan culture, totemism refers to the sacred relationship

that clans and tribes have with animals or plants. Okyeame Ampadu- Agyei (2003) who made a presentation at a conference on *bush meat* in Ghana argues that many wild-life species are regarded as totems by many tribes in Ghana because of their historical and socio- cultural significance. Quarcoopome (1978) in his view, indicate that, animals are chosen as totems based on the qualities of the animals that a particular clan wants to emulate. According to Conservation International-Ghana (2003, 2) the Akan name for totem is ‘Akyeneboa’ which literary means “an animal that one leans upon or relies on for spiritual inspiration.” According to Conservation International-Ghana, it is a taboo to kill a totem and every attempt must be done to prevent such animals from dying. Parrinder (1961, 172) notes that, in the case of death of a *totem*, a clan or tribe that particular totem represents, organize a funeral for it as if it were a human being. The funeral is meant to revere the totem. The table below shows the eight clans of the Akan and their respective totem as depicted by Conservation International-Ghana

Clan	Totem Vernacular Name	English Name	Scientific Name	Symbolic Name
<i>Oyoko</i>	<i>Akroma</i>	Falcon	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	patience
<i>Bretuo</i>	<i>Osebo</i>	Leopard\Hawk	<i>Panther pardus</i>	Aggressiveness
<i>Asona</i>	<i>Kwaakwaadabi</i>	Pied crow	<i>Corvus Albu</i>	Wisdom
<i>Asenie</i>	<i>Apan</i>	Bat	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>	Diplomacy
<i>Aduana</i>	<i>Okraman</i>	Dog	<i>Canis domestica</i>	Skill
<i>Ekuna</i>	<i>Ekoo</i>	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>	Uprightness
<i>Asakyiri</i>	<i>Opete</i>	Vulture	<i>Neophron Monochus</i>	Cleanliness

<i>Agona</i>	<i>Ako(awidie)</i>	Parrot	<i>Psittacosis</i> <i>erithacus</i>	Eloquence
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The notion of totemism among the Akan helps in the preservation of animals from getting extinct because, sickness or death will befall any person who deliberately kills or destroys a totem.

Pictures of linguists and family staffs of some Akan clans with their respective totems





d.



e.

Source: Akan Linguist's and Family Staff

http://www.africawithin.com/akan/akan_linguist.htm (accessed June 29, 2011)

a.....Agona Abusua Poma

b.....Asokore/Adonten/Ekuona

c.....Asona Abusua Poma

d.....Aduana Abusua poma

e.....Bretuo Abusua Poma

3.1.4 Sacred Groves

The notion of sacred grove is prevalent among the Akan of Ghana. Large tracts of land which have been left uncultivated for a long time are turned into sacred groves. They become sacred because they serve as the habitat of the ancestors and the gods. Awuah-Nyamekye (2009, 259) defines sacred groves as “indigenous reserves that have been strictly protected, and in some cases many centuries ago due to their religious and cultural significance.” Dyasi (1985, 100)

notes that, some parts of the grove are reserved for the burial of chiefs while other parts serve as *holy* grounds for ancestors. Sacred groves have different names according to the tribe concerned. According to Awuah-Nyamekye (2009, 259), the Twi-speaking Akan call it *Kwaye yenno* and the Fantes, *nananommpow*. Tuffour (1991) reports that there are about 2,000 to 3000 sacred groves in Ghana. The groves are protected by taboos and people are not supposed to enter it or cut trees from them. The groves can however be entered during festivals such as the *Adae* Festival. Libations are poured and other rituals are performed to remember the ancestors and to invite them to be present at the festival. According to Rattray (1959) one's failure to adhere to taboos associated with sacred groves lead to ill luck and sometimes death. The notions of sacred groves serve as a useful method of preserving forests and animals that inhabit in the forests. Amoako Attah (1998, 20) confirms this in his anthropological research on sacred groves in Ghana. According to him, the fear surrounding the *Anweam* sacred grove, a 2000 hectare forest in the Eastern Region, has provided refuge from hunters who hunt for games. Furthermore, the *Anweam* grove has provided sustenance for several tree species.

3.1.5 Taboos associated with water bodies

The Indigenous Akan culture respect water bodies-rivers, sea, lagoons and lakes as sacred. For instance, the worship of Tano, a river god is prominent among the Akan (Opoku 1978, 64). Strict taboos are therefore instituted to protect the water bodies from pollution. For instance, it is a taboo to defecate near water bodies or for a menstruating woman to fetch water from a river (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009, 226). This is because of the belief that the gods or goddesses of such water bodies must not be defiled. This is the main reason why taboos associated with water bodies are invoked by 'fetish' priests and priestesses, the recognized interpreters of the gods' wishes (Dyasi 1985, 99). It is also a taboo to use poisonous chemicals to fish in some rivers such

as the *Koraa* and the *Tano* Rivers. This is because the fishes are regarded as the children of the river deity and must not be killed (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009, 267). This taboo ensures the quality of water for the inhabitants who reside near the rivers. Taboos associated with land, water bodies and the cutting of trees demonstrates how the symbolic function of Akan culture regulates human interactions with the environment.

In his foundation, Ammoatia Ofori Panin enforces taboos associated with sacred groves, water bodies, and forests. The enforcement of these taboos by Ammoatia Ofori Panin is in line with an oath he swears to the ancestors at the beginning of office taking. According to Brempong (2006, 220),

The oath swearing is indeed a seal of approval, assuring the state that as a leader, all taboos in the community would be observed. The misuse of the oath is the transgression of an ethnic taboo. Taboos then become the traditional commandments through which leaders are protected from social and spiritual ambivalences.

The enforcement and adherence to taboos among the Akan is therefore an obligation and not a choice. There is a popular belief among scholars that modernity constitutes a threat to indigenous traditions because it alters the authenticity of such traditions (Olupona 2004, 5). This is true to some extent because urbanization and the movement of people from rural areas to urban centers leads to cultural adulteration as rural people lose their cultural identity to modernity in the cities because of employment (Olupona 2004, 5). One would therefore expect that sacred groves in the Akyem traditional area will be eroded by modernity because of urbanization. However, the influence of modernity has been positive and has rather aided the consolidation of the

‘traditional’ value system in the Akyem Traditional Area. In *Okyehene’s* foundation, sacred groves serve as an eco –tourism. In the October 2001, there was an eco-fest. The tour groups included the Ghana Wild Life Department, the Ministry of Tourism, Environmental journalist and the Forest Commission. Places visited included the Atewa Range Forest Reserve in Akyem Abuakwa which covers 123,000 hectares of land. The Foundation has prevented any human activity that has the potential of degrading the reserve (Addy 2001). Within the context of the Foundation, I believe modernity rather becomes a vehicle for promoting indigenous cultural values and is not considered a threat.

Aside the enforcement of taboos and the organization of eco-tourism, the Foundation have linked up with both local and international organizations that are environmentally friendly. Apart from local organizations such as the department of wild life, the forest commission and others mentioned above, the Foundation has also collaborated with the District Assemblies (local government system) who have offered a helping hand to the Environment Protection Brigades established by *Okyehene*. The establishment of the Environment Protection Brigade offers the protection of the environment through direct participation of communities. By the year 2001, the Foundation had registered 140 communities in the Akyem Abuakwa traditional area who had established brigades. Each brigade employs the volunteer services of about twenty members comprising both men and women. Each member must not be less than the statutory age of eighteen years. The establishment of the brigade offers an opportunity for brigadiers to develop a friendlier attitude towards nature. This has the tendency to affect their children and other relatives. Furthermore, Ammoatia Ofori Panin has instituted the *Okyeman* environment week. The environment week is held every year to coincide with the world environment day on June 5. The main objective of the celebration of the environment week is to create awareness and

maintain the agenda for the week. During the week, Ammoatia Ofori Panin visits eight towns to campaign on a chosen theme. Awards are given to the environment town of the week, environment town's chief and the environment school of the year (The Kings Journal's Blog 2009). *Okyehene* has also collaborated with international organizations that are sympathetic to the preservation and conservation of the environment. His environment Foundation is working closely with the Ghana chapter of Captain Planet Foundation. The Chairman of the International Chapter of the Captain Planet Foundation, Laura Turner Seydel seeks to work with the Okyehene Environment Foundation towards a successful conservation of the environment. The objective of the Captain Planet Foundation is to encourage innovative programs that empower the youth to work collectively and individually to solve environmental problems in their communities (quoted in Global Media Alliance 2010). Although this collaboration is a laudable idea, the differences in the cultural contexts between Ammoatia Ofori Panin and Laura could be a challenging factor in their collaborative efforts. Nevertheless, their shared principle to nurture the youth to be environmentally friendly is good and must be supported.

The discussion of the *Okyehene* Environment Foundation in this chapter demonstrates how 'traditional' religious practices can have a positive environmental function in a modern context. To do so it is necessary to overcome the notion that African religious ideas are 'primitive' and 'superstitious.' The conscious effort by Ammoatia Ofori Panin to combine both 'traditional' and modern methods of preserving the environment leads to one conclusion. The conclusion is that in Ghana, Akan indigenous ideas about nature is still relevant and has the ability to protect nature from degradation. The relevance of sacred groves and the various taboos associated with nature has been applauded by Mr. Joshua Awuku-Ampaw of the Green Earth Organization. He said:

"We believe that when traditional authorities embrace environmental conservation, the task of

rejuvenating the environment would be half won” (quoted in Gyamea 2001).

3.2 Challenges and Concerns

The Okyehene Environment Foundation has attracted a lot of local and international recognition (Gyamea 2001). Notwithstanding, the Foundation faces a lot of challenges and concerns. These challenges arise as a result of the religious method involved in the preservation of nature. The first challenge is the effect of the infiltration of Christianity and Islam into the Ghanaian society. Christianity increased from 52.6% of population in 1970 to 75.6% in 1998/1999. However, in the year 2000, the population of Christians reduced to 69% of the total population but was still enough to beat other religions particularly traditional religion. Charismatic/ Pentecostal Christianity constitute the highest percentage among Christians in Ghana (Omenyo 2002, 34). The following statistics show the percentage of Christian denominations in Ghana (Omenyo 2002, 35).

Pentecostal/Charismatic.....	24%
Catholics.....	15.3%
Protestants.....	18.6%
Other Christians	11%

The implication of the heavy presence of Charismatic/ Pentecostal Christians in Ghana poses a threat to the Foundation. The Charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity view ‘traditional’ practices as idol worshipping and are not prepared to compromise. An anthropological research by Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro 2010, 7-11) reveals the influence of Christianity on ‘traditional’ ritual practices of nature among some selected Akan speaking villages and towns. In their research,

Sarfo- Mensah and Oduro) argue that as a result Christian and Islamic beliefs, there has been a gradual disregard of the 'tumi' of 'abosom.' 'Tumi' is the power possessed by the gods (abosom) to deal with people who refuse to adhere to taboos associated with nature. Their research reveals further that although taboos associated with nature exist, 'suro' the fear and reverence that was usually attached to nature has gradually eroded. The gradual decline of 'tumi and suro' is because of the perception that the gods and other spirit beings including 'mmoatia' and 'sasabonsam' do no longer live in the forest (Ntiamoah- Baidoo 1995, quoted in Mensah and Oduro 2010, 7-11). Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro recalls a conversation with an elderly woman concerning the effect of Christianity and Islam on 'traditional' religion. She said:

When the majority of us belonged to the traditional religions, there was plenty of rainfall, there were no crop failures and little was heard of devastating bush and wild land fires. Now that most of us has become Muslims and Christians, and do not believe in the traditional religious practices, we faced drought and bush fires. God suddenly seems to have abandoned us (Kyeame Donkor pers. Comm. Quoted in Mensah and Oduro 2010, 11).

The Christian notion of the sacred continues to affect people's attitude towards nature. Szerszynski (2005, 18f) argues that the breach of the immanent sacral order, the withdrawal of nature's divinity and the monotheistic sacred which dichotomizes between human beings and nature has the potential of derailing the effort of Okyehene towards the preservation of nature. Another area of great concern is the issue of Human Rights that arises out of the implementation and the forceful implementation of taboos associated with nature. As have been stated earlier, the traditional role of the chief as custodian of natural resources cannot be compromised (Arhin 1985 quoted in Aryee 2007, 2). Chapter 22 of the 1992 Constitution which gives the legal backing of

chiefs to enforce traditional laws infringes upon people's fundamental human right to freedom of worship. Contra Chapter 22 of the 1992 Constitution, the General Assembly of the United Nation proclaimed on the 25th of November 1981 the "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief."

Article 1/1 of the Declaration reads:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually, or in community with others or in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching (UNHCR 1997-2002).

Subsequently, Chapter 5 Article 26 (1) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana states that:

"Every person is entitled to enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the provisions of this constitution."

Chapter 26(2) states:

"All customary practices which dehumanise or are injurious to the physical and mental well-being of a person are prohibited."

The constitutional mandate of chiefs to enforce traditional laws and the rights of citizens to profess a tradition of their choice creates a conflict. Conflict normally arises between Christians and Traditionalists. Precedence of clashes between traditionalists and Christians in Ghana raises concerns over the future of the Environment Foundation. There have been clashes between charismatic/Pentecostal churches over the imposition of a ban on drumming and the use of

musical instrument during the ban on drumming and noise making by Ga Traditional leaders (Dickson 2003, 3). The tension between Christians and traditionalists underlines the constitutional conflict in Articles 26 and Chapter 22 of the 1992 Constitution. This constitutional conflict may be an impediment towards the successful implementation of the Foundations objectives because it raises human right issues. However, despite the tendency of tension between customary laws and Human Right Laws, a comprise will be an effective way of reaping the benefits of the Environment Foundation.

Conclusion

The thesis has so far discussed the environmental problems facing the world and Ghana at large. The environmental problems: land degradation, pollution of water bodies as a result of mining activities and desertification will continue to pose a threat to Ghanaians in as much as the ‘western’ perspective of development continue to be the only dominant development plan for the nation. The vision of Ghana becoming a middle income nation by the year 2020 will also be under threat if the problems of the environment are not dealt with swiftly. This is because the nation cannot get the best out of its human resources who are lacking good drinking water and whose lives are under threat as a result of contaminated air. The solution to the environmental problems requires a concerted effort aimed at augmenting the already existing legal statutes and sensitization programs being run by the Environmental Protection Agency of Ghana whose core mandate is to ensure that Ghanaians are eco-friendly.

The concerted effort at protecting the environment from further degradation requires serious attention to the role of the Akan Indigenous knowledge in environmental protection. This is because according to (Amoako-Attah 1998, 20), about 2000 hectares of land has been preserved as a result of the Akan notion of sacred groves in the Eastern region. This positive impact of the Akan indigenous religion on the environment should not be allowed to go waste.

Despite this positive environmental ethic, the Akan cultural ideas about the environment has often not been taken seriously especially in the modern context. Akan animistic ideas have been regarded by scholars as ‘superstitious’ ‘fetish’ and ‘primitive’ and as a result, its importance not recognised in the modern context. The presence of charismatic churches in Ghana continues to offer negative criticisms to indigenous Akan ritual practices as evil practices. Charismatic renewal groups in churches offer deliverance services to people perceived to be “traditionalists.”

Such deliverance services are aimed at exorcising the perceived evil spirits in them in order to pave way for the Holy Spirit baptism (Omenyo 2006, 253-260). In the past, religion and modernity were perceived to be at different wave length with religion perceived to be a threat to modernity because it is too “frozen” and needed to be thawed (Habermas 1992, 77-111). Modernity was also perceived as a threat to religion (Berger 1997, 71-78). Although Berger’s assertion has been contested by scholars such as Lee (quoted in Olupona 2004, 5), the influence of modernity on religion in Ghana cannot be underestimated. Prof Assimeng’s attribution of Ghana’s poor economic condition to the over reliance of religion is a pointer to the fact that the recognition of religion particularly indigenous Akan religion in the development agenda of Ghana has been perceived as a retrogression other than progression.

Notwithstanding Assimeng’s criticisms and the how ‘traditional’ practices have been perceived by the elites in the Ghanaian society, the recognition of the traditional customary laws in Ghana’s constitution is an admission of the importance of the traditional customary practices in Ghana’s socio-economic development. The respect for the ancestors and the gods has been part of the Ghanaian culture and has proved resilient in the face of modernity. It is therefore appropriate that customary laws that commands that people respect nature as a member of the community must be appropriated in order to save the environment from further degradation. Traditional rituals associated with nature must therefore not be viewed as ‘superstition’ and ‘fetish’ but must be regarded as an obligation towards ‘other’ members of the community.

It is within this context that the Okyehene’s Environment Foundation must be accepted as an innovative way of protecting the environment in the face modernity. His approach to the preservation of the environment offers Ghanaians a hybrid of both the traditional and modern methods of preserving nature and must be given the chance. This is because since the inception

of the foundation in 2001, the Okyehene Environment Foundation has proved useful in preserving nature in Ghana (quoted in Gyamea 2001). Furthermore, the support of both local and international non-governmental organizations is an indication of the public recognition and acceptance of the Okyeman Environment Foundation in Ghana (The Kings Journal's Blog 2009, Gyamea 2001).

Despite the acceptance of the Foundation's environmental ethic by local and international people, one cannot lose sight of the Human Right issues that arises with the enforcement of taboos associated with sacred groves, land and water bodies. The right to the freedom of religion gives people the legal mandate to frown upon these taboos. However, allowing people to abuse taboos associated with nature will derail the traditional powers of chiefs who are constitutionally mandated to enforce customary laws in their respective traditional area and in effect further degradation of the environment. Although the Human Right issues reveal the complexities involved in accommodating religion in developmental agenda of modern societies like Ghana, the Foundation will serve as a test case of how Indigenous religion can be accommodated by modernity within the context of secularization theories that predicted the demise of religion in the face of modernity.

In the face of these complexities involved in accommodating religion in Ghana especially in the area of the preservation of nature, the position of chiefs should rather be put to good use especially in the preservation of nature. Asantehene Osei Tutu II captures the positive contributions that Ghanaian chiefs have made towards preserving nature. He said:

Our predecessors engaged in inter-tribal wars, fighting for conquest over territories and people. Today, the war should be vigorous and intensive against

dehumanization, poverty, marginalization, ignorance and disease. ... Chieftaincy must be used to propel economic development through proper lands administration, through facilitating investments in our communities, and through codification and customs and traditions making it impossible for imposters to get enstooled and creating unnecessary situations for litigation (Osei Tutu II 2002 quoted in Aryee 2007).

The loss of lives during the struggle for conquest of lands and the protection of lands from external aggressors supports Danquah's view that the Akan are accountable to the ancestors for the proper management of natural resources (Danquah 1968, 120). It is as a result of the religious mandate of chiefs and the importance of nature to the lives of the current and future generations that the Okyehene's Foundation must be embraced as a laudable idea and given the much needed attention because nature (land, water and forest) is life and that any attempt at degrading it other than preserving it puts human life in jeopardy. Vague constitutional provisions that have the tendency to derail the foundation's efforts must be fashioned out in order that the life of Ghanaians can be protected through environmentally friendly attitude.

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