

**AKAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIO-CULTURAL BELIEFS AND
ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION: THE ROLE OF TABOOS.**

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CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Viable exploitation of the natural resources is of great benefit to both the present generation as well as the future generations. Time and time again concerns are raised over the rate at which the environment is deteriorating and, as a result, posing a severe threat to the survival of different forms of life on the globe. As environmentalists, scientists, and policy-makers continue with the debate over the causes and solutions to this crisis, the destruction of the environment persists unabated.

The responses to the environmental crisis is complex, and as Gottlieb (2006:6) points out, *local*—confined to a region, a community, even an empire, our plight today is *global*:

of the above assertion, environmental degradation has been of foremost concern to humankind over the centuries. Scientists, environmentalists and concerned individuals at various conferences and discussions, both at the local and the international platforms, have sought to address this problem that threatens the existence of all life-forms of not only the present but also future generations (for example, 1992 Rio Conference on Environment; Beijing Conference for women in 1995). They have become progressively more apprehensive about the problems of land degradation, deforestation and desertification, coastal erosion, pollution of rivers and lagoons, the ozone layer depletion and atmospheric pollution (see Awuah-Nyamekye 2013; Roosbroeck and Amlalo 2006; Park 1997). They believe that there is a pressing need for something to be done to tackle this frightening situation in order to save humanity from destruction.

In spite of efforts to reduce, if not totally eradicate the environmental crisis both at the

Scientists Warning to Humanit (cited in Foster et al. 1997:5), the universe is presently facing nothing less than a global environmental crisis:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring.

Many scholars agree with Gottlieb (2006) on the assertion that the environmental crisis is occurring at the global scale (see for example Grim 2001; Park 1997). In his assessment of the

population growth, agricultural expansion, and resettlement are becoming global issues, and are undeniably damaging and causing numerous effects on the environm (Nguyen, undated manuscript). The effect: deforestation, ozone depletion with its attendant problem of global warming is difficult to quantify.

Ghana, like many other countries has not been spared of the consequences of the environmental crisis.

guarantee conservational justice, regulate activities leading to environmental dilapidation and

contemporary societies? These are critical concerns in this essay. The main subject (in italics above) is deliberated upon by an examination of the following fundamental questions:

- 1.

1.2 The origin of contemporary environmental activism

The history of responses to the ecological crisis cannot be traced to a single source; however, the role of the environmental activism that emerged in the nineteenth century in the United States of America cannot be understated. This activism brought into being various publications and conferences that spoke to the issue of environmental crisis. For instance, in

Silent Spring, attempted to draw attention to the destructive effect of pesticides on human and the environment (Carson 1962). Furthermore, Cahn and Cahn (cited in Awuah-Nyamekye 2013:8) assert that the Earth Day Conference (first organized

s drawn into

The

Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis in 1967 which suggested that Christianity bore an enormous burden of responsibility for environmental dilapidation owing to a theology allegedly

undated: 38).

analysis has not escaped criticism by other scholars for being too simplistic (Moncrief 1970; Attfield, 2010), it is still significant in the present day debate. As

depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Hum

Russia; and the Religion and Ecology group that has been in existence within the American Academy of Religion since 1991.

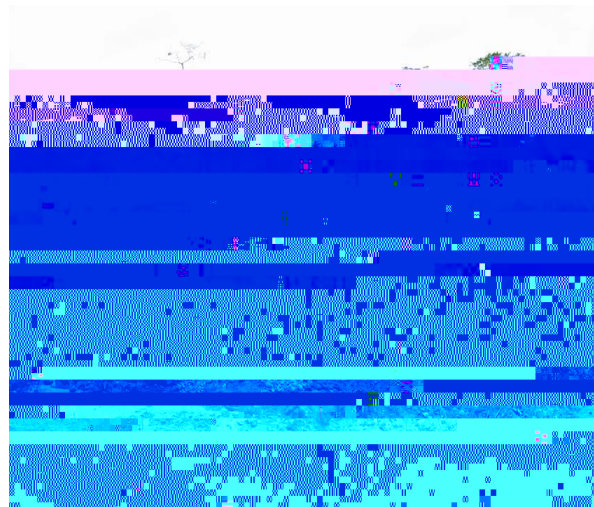
Chris Park in his book, *The Environment: Principles and Application* points out the existence of various theories that have been propounded to explain the causes of and likely solutions to the environmental crisis (Park 1997). While the environmental crisis appears to be physical, and has been attributed to factors such as overpopulation (Ehrlich 1997), and technology (Borgmann 1984); others like Coates (2003), for instance, is of the view that it is caused by the most fundamental assumptions, beliefs and values that inform peoples culture. This suggests that the opinions or worldviews of a people could possibly influence their attitude towards environmental crisis. For this reason, a chapter of this thesis has been dedicated to reviewing the worldviews of the people under study: the Akans.

Coates (2003) alludes to the following four factors as the motivation for the

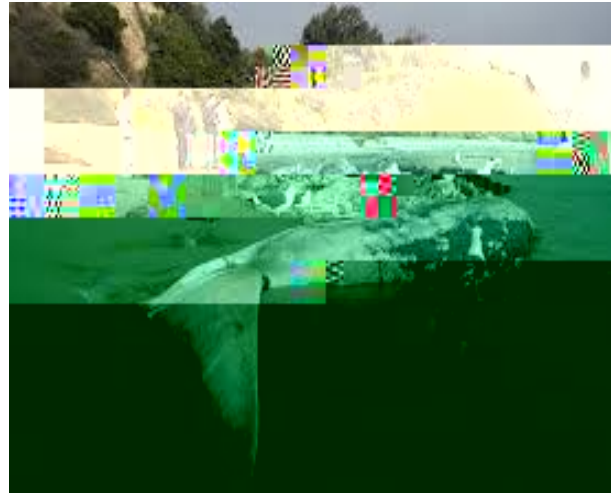
greenhouse gases that cause global

warmth they are the most affected regions with diseases and inland/coastal flooding, as a

1.5 The current environmental situation in Ghana



A heap of refuse, dumped into the Adaw river Pollution of land and rivers from mining activities



Air pollution from burning rubbish

Whale carcass washed ashore as a result of oil spill



CHAPTER TWO: AKAN WORLDVIEW

2.1 Worldview

Ethnologist

of thought, attitudes towards life, conceptions of time, a mental picture of what ought to be a view of self and others (Mandelbaum, 1958: 548). Paul G. Herbert categorizes the content of worldviews into three: cognitive, affective, and evaluate, and refer to abstract ideas, interpersonal structures, and ethical values (Herbert 1989). In the wo views affect how people perceive self, the in - group to which they belong, outsiders, nature around them and the non-huma

Our [indigenous people] worldviews continue to be subverted by the nations that dominate our territories. Yet our [indigenous people] knowledge of the world continues to exist, as well as our ways of living in the world.

2.2 Worldviews and Sustainability

environmentalist alike. However, its usage may carry different meanings. According to the conference on the human environment in 1972, the term is widely

for the benefit of future generations. The final view, Miller (2005) terms *environmental wisdom*, is earth centered and in comparison to the first two, is more environmentally friendly. This

Jenkins (2013) holds a different view about worldviews. In his criticism of ethics of climate change, J

The use of the term *traditional* in the discussion of Akan traditional values creates the impression that *traditional* values are archaic and therefore not relevant in modern societies. Every society in the world is *traditional* in as much as that society maintains and cherishes values and institutions that have been handed by previous generations over to the current generation (Gyekye 1997: 217). This means that the use of the term *modern society* is not always an indication of the rejection of the past.

The meaning of the noun *tradition* has also generated a lot of controversy when used within the discourse on African traditional religions. The noun *tradition* has been defined by
ice transmitted from one generation to another

set of beliefs and values

tradition arguably may be used to refer to the worldviews of the Akan because the Akan have no word in their vocabulary for religion but rather speak of their worldviews (Williamson 1965).

way of looking upon the universe and our relation to it, a general set of assumptions about the meaning of life, about what is important, -Nyamekye (2014)

rational inference f

of remaining as something that exists merely at the theoretical stage, it is demonstrated in real an indigenous cultural pattern is influenced by worldviews which serve as a reservoir of knowledge. They are stored in myths, proverbs and folklores.

In Akan worldview, the world comprises of the supernatural (or the spiritual) and the living (or the physical), with the former having control over the affairs of the latter. For human to enjoy the good things of life (such as fertility, bumper harvest, good health etc.) and avoid all the negative things of life (including sudden deaths, incurable diseases, recurring accidents etc), they have to be able to comprehend the diverse constituents of both the spiritual and the physical aspects of the universe and how to relate to each (Ameh 2013). The Akan generally believe that there are *evil spirits* (Amoah 1998) that can inflict bad luck on humanity, and must therefore seek protection from superior beings higher than themselves. This help, in the view of Amoah (1998), can be found in maintaining a harmonious relationship between humanity, nature and the spirits. This, I submit, partly explain why their being (life form) and thinking are influenced by the supernatural. In this regard, Larbi (2002) posits that:

To the Akan, just like other African peoples, whatever happens to the human being has a religious interpretation. To them, behind the physical is the spiritual; behind the seen is the unseen. Every event here on earth is traceable to a supernatural source in the spirit realm. From the same source, therefore, lies the ultimate succour.

corroborate this view. According to both Gyekye (1995) and Mbiti (1990), the Akan conceptualization of the universe conceives that the universe is unitary. Gyekye (1995) for instance, recounts that the universe is essentially spiritual to the extent that there is continuous interaction between the spirit world and human beings. Any attempt to make a distinction between the spiritual and the physical in the Akan, [and I believe in most African context] is likely to be met with mixed feelings, if not total disappointment. This is because the consciousness of the supernatural permeates all thoughts and actions. Gyekye (1995:69)

what is primarily real is spiritual

dimensions dove-tail each other to the extent that at times and in places one is apparently more

Moreover, several scholars (see for example, Mbiti 1990; Dickson 1965; Pobee 1992) have observed that religion is deeply rooted in all aspects of life of the African, and by extension the Akan. Primary observations of African people reveal that their worldviews are underscored by a common system of religiosity. African societies, Kalu Ugbu (as quoted in Ogiezee 2009:14) remarks

Africans are *notoriously* religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so it is not easy or possible to isolate it [from other aspects of African society and culture.] A study of these religious systems is, therefore a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of traditional and modern life.

Consequently, the Akan worldview, one may argue, is underpinned by its indigenous

human and the spirit entities of their community. It is believed that when left on their own to provide for the spiritual, physical and psycho

pointed out that, the encounter between Akan indigenous religion and culture, and monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam did not lead to a domination of the latter over the former.

Aquah (2011) notes:

Although conversion of Akan indigenous religious adherents to these monotheistic religions was overwhelming in terms of numbers, these converts did not completely abandon or denounce their traditional religious beliefs and practices; they still served as important religious mediation for expressing their new faith. Their conversion to these

religions also play a large part in the cultural understanding and awareness of the people of their communities (Amponsah 2009).

Central to the Akan religious ideas is the strong belief in a community of spirits. These several spirits range from the Supreme Being or creator god (Nana Onyame/Onyankpon),

worldview, the person among other things should have died a peaceful death (*abodweewuo*)⁵, a married person with children, had lived an exemplary life, etc. (Rattray 1954; Opoku 1978). The *abosom* (gods/goddesses) are another central element in Akan indigenous religion. These deities are believed to reside in natural substances such as rivers, trees, mountains, caves and animals.

Awuah-

attitudes towards natural objects, and the relationship between natural object and deities explains why contravening any of the taboos in relation to natural objects is a matter of concern to the

-Nyamekye 2014: 68-67). This may explain why in the Akan society

CHAPTER THREE: AKAN RELIGIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION

3.1 Taboo

tapu”

The concept of taboo has been studied for a long time from different perspectives and disciplinary angles. The term is used by psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and religious scholars alike. Mention can be made of Sigmund Freud, Franz Steiner, and David Spain in the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology respectively.

grave pollution is a religious offence (Douglas 1966:73).

virtue of their religious status and sanctions from the supernatural, become reinforcement of reverence for status. Douglas notes that primitive religions are inspired by fear and at the same time are inextricably confused with defilement and hygiene. By this distinction between
ies, anthropologists relegate the importance of traditional beliefs

Purity and Danger,

Environmental taboos, generally speaking, perform distinctly environmental functions of preserving vegetation and wildlife (Barre et al. 2009), what constitutes such taboos and the sanctions for breaking them may vary from one culture to the other. For example, within the Ghanaian context, taboos vary among tribes. Nevertheless, I think such variations neither taboo is a worldview that exists and functions in different ways based on the basic human nature as well the social and ecological contexts in which cultures exist.

t

feature of taboos: they function to

to life: the spiritual (sacred) and the physical (profane).

the sense as used by Eliade (195

and the

then I argue here that taboos are an expression of interconnectedness of two inseparable dimensions in the African worldview: the visible world and the invisible one. That interconnectedness can also be seen as interdependence whereby the quality of life of the ancestors (living in the invisible world) and of people (living in the visible world) depends on each other's actions.

The immediate point above suggests that the sacred-profane dichotomy created by taboo posits a clear connection between taboos and ancestors. While Parrinder (1969:89) sees ancestors as originators and custodians of taboos, Fisher (1998:108) understanding of this relationship is makes taboo an obligation and not a choice, which in turn validates the punishment for breaking a taboo.

resides in objects such as trees, rivers, rocks and in certain animals as Aye- among the Akan people of Ghana revealed.

3.2 Taboo among the Akans

In African societies, taboo primarily serves the purpose of ritual protection or ritual hygiene. Ayegboyin and Jegede (2009:1) confirm the fact that taboo is embedded in the myths and religions of Africans, and in most African countries and communities, taboos are numerous, associated with different initiations and celebrations such as childbirth, marriage, death, and burial.

In his study of the Akan people, Gyekye (1995) posits that the closest equivalent to taboo in the Akan is *akyiwade*” *musuo* is however reserved for prohibitions against very serious or extraordinary moral evils such as murder, suicide, rape, incest and religious sacrilege. Therefore while all *akyiwade* are taboos, not all taboos are *musuo*. Among Akans, traditional rulers and chief priests are the custodians of taboos. The enforcement process of these taboos is in line with the oath Akans swear to the ancestors. The misuse of oath is the transgression of an ethnic taboo. Taboos then become the traditional commandments through which leaders are protected from social and spiritual ambivalences (Owusu 2006). By this, taboo among the Akans is an obligation and not a choice.

tabooed himself or herself, because he or she has the dangerous threat of luring others into

Taboo among the Akan is faced with the problem of rationale and scientific verifiability in the face of modernity and globalization. As Thody (1997) rightly argues, taboos, unlike laws, are for the most part irrational and hard to defend on practical or humanitarian ground. Christianity and Islam, coupled with modernity, claim that taboos stem from myths that do not correspond to historical chronology, and therefore, belief in the potency of taboo is tantamount to

unimportant or unreasonable taboos may appear to the modern mind in details, embedded in

groves continues to thrive in the Akan society because of the religious underpinning attached to them. It is the belief of the Akan that, such groves are the habitat of the gods, ancestors and other spirit beings. For any sacred grove, there is a reigning deity that oversees and control all forms of vegetation and waters of the grove. Only qualified members (usually priests/priestesses, undertake official rituals on behalf of the entire community (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009). While the above definition seems to suggest that the creation of sacred groves was informed by religious and cultural motives, recent studies among indigenous people (including those of the Akan) have shown that the concept of sacred groves is also underpinned by conservationist motives as well (Sarfo-Mensah 2001, Awuah-Nyamekye 2014). In his study of the Akan people of Berekum, Awuah-Nyamekye (2014:101) observes that, while the histories of most sacred groves had spiritual or religious beginning, the primary motivation is to conserve nature:

environmental issues have a *primarily* conservationist motivation rather than a religious one.

Similarly, internationally acclaimed bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), accepts this view. In 1996, UNESCO found out that:

essential natural resource for humanity. Therefore, the Akans being influenced by their religion

the goddess, and is a taboo for any of the alligators to move out of the grove, as this is said to bring bad omen to the entire community. The ecological significance of the *Osudum* sacred grove is noted in the fact that it provides a habitation for important endangered trees, crocodiles, pythons, butte

(1961:172) notes that when a totem dies, members of the clan show their reverence by, for example, mourning and burying it like human beings. Aside totems associated with the eight Akan clans, several other animals and birds including crocodile, monkey, lion, whale, and owl are considered totems among the Akans. For instance, the taboo on hunting and harming the monkeys of Boabeng-Fiema village has resulted in the famous Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary which serves as a home to over 700 monkeys. Within this sanctuary are diverse types and rare species of monkeys such as the *Colobuspolykomos* (black and white colobus) and *Cercopithecuscampbelli*

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translates into a hunting ban. Researchers time and again refer to this case as an example of a

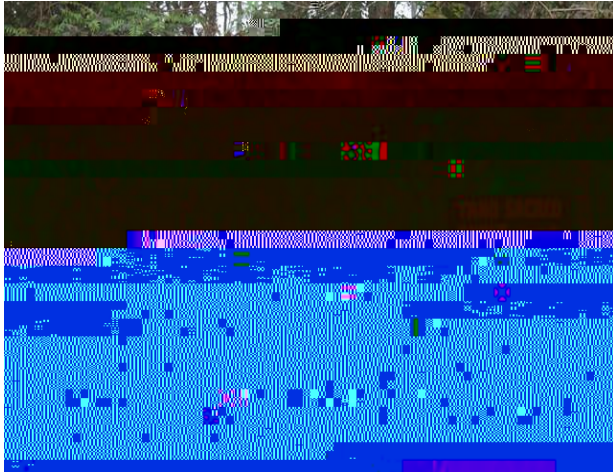
3.6 Conception of land

Land (earth), in the Ghanaian culture is regarded as a gift from *Onyankopon* (God) to their ancestors, and handed down from one generation to the other. The Akan like most other African tribes, believe in land as sacred. The sacredness of the land lies in the fact that it bears the remains of the ancestors in the form of graves. Consequently, land is seen as a divine gift and must be used in such a way that will benefit present and future generations. Agyeman et al (2007:18) puts the general Ghanaian conception of land thus:

relation between clearing the vegetation around the water source and the river drying up. Clearly, this is the traditional Akan way of ensuring a continual flow of water in the river.

The concept of *nsuo abosom* is also very strong among Akan fishing communities. In time past, people feared the river gods and hence adhered strictly to orders and conserved the water bodies better than what exists in modern Ghana. Acheampong (2010) notes that, apart from the general regulati

3.8 Some sacred sites in Ghana



The Tano Sacred Grove



The Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary cemetery



Koraa sacred grove showing the *Koraa* River



Rock formation located at the Tanoboase forest



A tree located in the Pokuase sacred grove, believed to be the abode of the forest god

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION - POLICY QUESTION

The core argument of this essay has been that taboo, as a religio-cultural element of the Akan people of Ghana can help in addressing some of the contemporary ecological problems in Ghana. I have pointed out that environmental degradation has become a pertinent issue in Ghana with

cultures of other people and civilizations all over the world. Consequently, attempts at finding answers to some crises besetting the modern world have totally overlooked religion and other cultural practices of indigenous people.

Underlying the above mentioned perception is the Western view of nature, which attributes exclusively to humans, the ability to master and utilize nature for their own betterment.

science, which is envisaged as a process that yields objective, rational, and positivist data. Hence, decisions consistent with Western scientific knowledge often command acceptance, and meaning is more secure than indigenous knowledge and beliefs (Ali 2003). Conversely,

progress (Dove 1988). This perception may however, not be entirely true. Indigenous knowledge of conservation may not be inferior to modern and scientific methods as some people claim.

While indigenous knowledge and beliefs are transmitted through oral tradition, often by storytelling, they are verified, validated, and revised daily and seasonally through the annual cycle of natural and human activities. Both indigenous knowledge and beliefs, according to Appiah Opoku (2007

lisms, experience, cultural norms,

based and by which it is tested for validity in a setting that is often far removed and isolated from

knowledge/beliefs can learn from each other.

Although indigenous knowledge of conservation is not officially acknowledged in Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and researchers are recognizing the significance of various traditional religious beliefs and culture-based knowledge schemes in dealing with the alarming emerging that a new kind of rapport is needed among indigenous people, national governments and international development agencies. This new relationship is essential in combating

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