Indigenous Cosmological Paradigms for Popularizing Ecological Ethics in the Ethiopian Context

Joachim Gregor Persoon

DOI: 10.4000/books.cfee.461
Publisher: Centre français des études éthiopiennes
Place of publication: Addis-Abeba
Year of publication: 2016
Published on OpenEdition Books: 28 July 2016
Serie: Corne de l’Afrique contemporaine / Contemporary Horn of Africa
Electronic ISBN: 9782821873001

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 21 December 2020. It is the result of an OCR (optical character recognition) scanning.
An editorial in a recent edition of *Addis Standard* with the bold title “Behind the Smokescreen...” stated that: “Aside from the much repeated boisterous “Ethiopia Rising” narrative, the government should [...] use its excessive access to media networks to inform citizens on looming droughts and mobilize support to help those suffering from them” (Editorial Staff, 2015: 8). The ecological discourse in Ethiopia has become part of the “Ethiopia Rising” narrative. Newspaper headlines proudly announce: “Electric Power Groundbreaking Agreement to Buy Geothermal Energy” (Abdi, 2015a: 9), “Rural Electrification Increases Contributions to Green Economy” (Abdi, 2015b: 10), and “On Green Energy, Ethiopia Leaves U.S. in the Dust” (Cole, 2015: 30). The last article asserted that: “On the issues of green energy and climate change, Ethiopia has announced initiatives that put the United States to shame” (Cole, 2015: 30).

However, behind the robustly positive “Ethiopia Rising” narrative of commitment to “Green Development”, the question remains what impact this is having on the general public not only the elite but also at grass roots level. The Goethe Institute in Addis Ababa organized an exhibition entitled “Examples to Follow: Expeditions in Aesthetics and Sustainability” (4-24 May, 2012); more recently a group of Ethiopian artists mounted a green exhibition at the National Museum. Such exhibitions seek to make a link between aesthetics and ecology, and to reach a wider public with an ecological message. They are admirable initiatives, which cause people to think and reflect. However, their public impact is limited.

Meanwhile, ecological awareness requires a long-term view, involving investment in the future. It entails an ascetic willingness to give up short-term time financial gratification for the future benefit of the planet and mankind as a whole. Such a message is difficult to “sell” in the context of developing countries, where
technological development is just beginning to impact the lives of the mass population. Rapid economic development is prioritized and everything that could be an impediment ignored. Ecological discourse inevitably becomes a fashion or luxury, associated with the urban elite. Ordinary countryside dwellers resent curbs on their ability to exploit the natural environment, and associate ecological discourse with foreign alien narratives. This creates a huge gap between the official governmental ‘Green Development’ discourse associated with the “Ethiopia Rising” narrative and the reality of life in the industrial suburbs and rural areas of Ethiopia.

Currently climate change is exacerbating an ongoing process of ecological degradation, which has ravaged much of Ethiopia. Lack of forests leads to erosion and inhibits cloud cover, thus further aggravating climatic conditions and producing an ongoing vicious circle. Ethiopia has already lost aspects of natural resources retained elsewhere in Africa. Merulli Pai, Professor of Wildlife Conservation at Arba Minch University, commented that: “The large predators have become extinct in Ethiopia and many of the large herbivores” (M. Pai, pers. comm., 2015) thus diminishing the wildlife tourist potential of the country (others claim that a few lions and other predators survive). On 9 August, 2010, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General, launched a High-level Panel on Global Sustainability (GSP) stating: “Increasing strains and crises […] point to reaching, and increasingly overstepping, planetary boundaries […] [we] continue to deal with individual symptoms rather than the causes and their interrelationships” (Folke & Gunderson, 2010). He emphasized the need for a paradigm shift which addresses root causes. An Environmental Risks and Opportunities (ERO) Summit in Djibouti (2-4 May 2015) called for “extensive Climate Change Resilience and Adaptation – trimming dialogues to specific regional situations and needs” (Capital – Editor, 2014: 26).

There are attempts at intervention, but they are not really achieving the desired results: “Despite decades of research and development projects, concerned with mitigating the consequences of land degradation and soil erosion, these two negative forms of local environmental change continue to pose major challenges to African agriculture and livestock producers... the maintenance of a viable life is no longer a function of meeting socio-economic needs, but maintaining a sustainable environment that can generate both continuity and schism... [Meanwhile] there is a grim realization that beyond global environmental problem areas there are always victims who suffer the most. [This means that] at a larger synthesis, the consequences of climate change in the developing countries are more serious than we have ever thought and its consequences on other environmental problems such as food security, desertification, wetland disappearance and biodiversity loss, among others should not be underestimated.... of particular relevance is the negative consequences of global environmental change for the local environments as well as the social political and environmental change they produce,” (Salih, 2001: 6 &11.).

Cosmological ideas have determined how people relate to and respect the environment. They have constituted a store of indigenous knowledge including sanctions related to moral and religious codes, producing a frame of reference guiding society and individuals in their relations to each other and the world around them. Rapid industrialization, secularization and globalization have undermined and marginalized them. "With the passage of time the environment which had been considered sacred and alive in the remote past was no longer viewed as such. As a result of surplus
production, perceptions and attitudes of people towards the environment gradually changed, economic advantages became more and more important than environmental considerations. When environmental considerations were pushed to the background, human beings stopped being friendly towards the environment... [Meanwhile] a society’s environment is made up of natural processes (e.g. air, water, and land) biological processes (animal and plant life) and socio-cultural processes (economy beliefs, values and attitudes) (Axen, Tesfay Mulugeta.& Wolde Mulu, 1995: 4 & 6). It is precisely the aspect of beliefs, values and attitudes which is often ignored in the ecological/climate change discourse but in this article constitutes the focus of attention.

Researchers note that the positive or negative feedback from the human system directly determines the success or failure of projects: “The ecologist’s worldview, when combined with a profound respect for human society and human institutions, can be used to find ways to achieve harmony between humans and the environment, and provides examples to inspire others” (Zheng & Wang, 2014: 35). Yet Ethiopia remains dominated by deeply religious and traditional sentiments even among the youth. Thus cosmological ideas and indigenous philosophies could constitute the most natural way of undergirding an ecological discourse which ordinary Ethiopians could “make their own” and genuinely “own”.

Scholars write that: “During the course of African history, complex economic and technological developments have unleashed unprecedented social and environmental transformation. A generally accepted conclusion is that environmental alienation has contributed to the distortion of local ecosystems and economies, thus denying local communities the right to eke out their living from a productive and healthy environment. The problem is not the often-neglected local dimension of environmental change, but one of impaired society-environmental relations that have simultaneously had an impact on ecosystem and economic sustainability. However, familiar concerns with the non-sustainability of top-down policies imposed on local environmental managers have not gone away. Despite at least three decades of popular participation in local resource management, global conventions and national pledges have not been matched by practice and words are still louder than actions... Furthermore, the global environmental ethics that have generated tens of thousands of conferences, conventions, treaties, laws and socio-economic instruments are yet to be translated into workable local level environmental interventions,” (Salih, 2001: 1&2). In other words, local community involvement in the ecological/climate change discourse is essential, but not facilitated by current policies.

In the introduction to his recent encyclical on the environment Laudato Si', mi' Signore – “Praise be to You, my Lord”, Pope Francis quotes from the beautiful canticle of Saint Francis of Assisi which reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us (Francis, 2015: 1).

As noted above, protecting the biosphere could benefit from a certain attitude of “asceticism” i.e. putting the long-term good of mankind above short term economic benefits. Economic progress is largely founded on nature’s capacity for production but rarely on resilience and renewal. Dynamic and complex social-ecological systems require strategies that build resilience rather than attempt to exert control for optimal production and short-term gain. “Mustering social innovation and ingenuity for social-
ecological transformations away from destructive pathways to sustainable ones creates exciting opportunities for societal development in tune with the biosphere. The renaissance reconnecting human actors to the biosphere links with the realization that social-ecological systems are dynamic, connected in complex webs of interactions subject to gradual and abrupt changes” (Folke & Gunderson, 2012: 55).

Instead of force, a genuine Ethiopian ecological discourse requires ground-roots mobilization. Inspiration can be gained from “life ways […] indigenous traditions of alternative visions and possibilities that exist among peoples who have imagined themselves more intimately into their worlds” (Grim, 2001: lvi). “Religion is a sine qua non of culture […] [and] nothing can match the paradoxical – both restraining and empowering – potential of religious narratives and their endurance. Re-thinking globalization [means] tackling the inevitable ‘revenge of the sacred in the secular culture.’ Forging positive globalization is a complex task which involves not just rethinking […] environmental policies, but enabling [coherent] master narratives” (Witoszek, 2006: 280). Saint John Paul II called for “a global ecological conversion”, noting that little effort had been made to “safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology”. His successor Pope Benedict XVI continued that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves” (Francis, 2015: 13).

There results a search to locate the possibility of a renewed relationship between the enlightenment concept of reason and the “others” of reason, including faith. “Key ideas like Derrida’s deconstruction, Levinas’s the ‘Saying and the Said’, and Irigaray’s new ontology point theology towards a critique of autonomy and the search for a yet-to-be-glimpsed new relationship with non-human nature” (Reader, 2004: 221).

Ethiopian philosophers such as Massay Kebede emphasize the importance of engaging enlightenment concepts with indigenous thought; religion, as part of culture, mediates between man and his environment to ensure its security (Milton, 1996: 33). Spirituality potentially restores relationship and responsibility. “Environmental ethicists may alert indigenous people to the long-range effects of environmental degradation, although dominant western paradigms isolate humans from nature, exacerbating ecological problems” (Workneh Kelbesa, 2003:63). One answer is to adopt the notion of ethnoscapes: Understanding globalization requires the elaboration of a socio-cultural concept of space and place, recognizing how “religious traditions have long regarded the land itself as a subject with autonomous power and intrinsic value. All religions [express] a foundational code stating that life is a gift that has been given in a cosmic space and in local environments” (Bergman, 2007: 332).

An Ethiopian writer on ecological issues states: “The government must involve all development activities, [which should be] generated by the beneficiaries themselves. By bringing ourselves together let us bequeath to our children, our children’s children and so on nature’s rich legacy, not the bitter lament of poverty and destitution” (Tedla Shibru, 2005: 29).

The current Federal Government policy of Ethiopia reflects such ideas, the EPE of 1997 emphasizing the involvement of local communities and indicating the relevance of decentralization of power and collaboration between sectorial interests (FDRE, 1997: 17). Under such circumstances it is particularly important to create an “enabling
environment” by mobilizing and motivating the public so that they engage in interlinked and common actions.

Yet, the ability to intervene effectively at local level is hampered by ongoing circumstances: “Although, global trends are legitimate areas of enquiry, the obsession with global environmental change has not been matched with equal interest in local environmental change and its consequences on society. Global environmental governance and institutions are still dominated by global economic powers that have found it increasingly difficult to deal with the multitude and varieties of local realities unleashed by global environmental change... hence problem avoidance and the relegation to oblivion of the more problematic parts (local) of the global equation have become common practice. Understandably local communities cannot put their faith in environmental policies and plans imposed on them by global or national institutions that often deprive them of access and control over their local environment, compliance with local norms is more important and more pervasive than compliance with state policies and state norms and values. The gulf between the two tells a story of a mounting tension between state illegitimacy and local self-assertion. [At the same time] duality can easily be transformed into hostility and conflict, without local acceptance, national environmental policies are doomed to failure. The concern for good governance in politics has also not been matched with an equally pressing need for good local governance and institutions capable of carrying out some of the local implementations of global and national environmental policies. [Thus] local communities' institutions and resources management systems [can be regarded as] vehicles for internalizing empowerment, participation and accountability ethos in society,” (Salih, 2001:12.)

**Ecology and Indigenous Religious Thinking in Ethiopia**

Traditional religious texts and cultural practices constitute an untapped and disregarded resource for ecological thinking. Despite efforts to involve religious authorities in reforestation campaigns, no attempt has been made to systematically and holistically use indigenous thought to promote i.e. indigenous eco-theologies, or indigenous ecological ethics systems. ... While Ethiopia suffers from critical environmental degradation, “social mechanisms, which negotiate the interests of different groups with the demands [concerning] ecological challenges are critically lacking. Environmental programs will never succeed as long as they are implemented in the context of a structure which the peasants do not experience as their own” (Pausewang, 2002: 9). We need to “recognize the global need to empower, strengthen and build the capacity of indigenous peoples and local communities to equip them with the necessary knowledge they require to meaningfully advocate for their own cause” (WSSD Secretariat, 2008: 29). How can the vision of sustainable development be made attractive? Perhaps “the current, religious revival in non-European countries is a possible ally of positive globalization, [providing] the solid ground [for] reclaiming the humanist project” (Witoszek, 2006: 268).

The Ethiopian Churches are engaged in practical ecological projects, yet has given little attention to developing an indigenous ecological theology. Relations with nature figure prominently in the monastic spirituality at the heart of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; monastic rules prescribe respect for nature and the protection of all living beings
within church or monastery precincts. In contrast, modernizing technological society creates an organized, compressed, no longer God-given, rational human construction: “The marginalisation of spatiality in western constructions of nature and reality ultimately feeds into Leibniz’ well-known polarization of time over space that dominates Western world views. Consequently understanding indigenous cosmologies moves the theme of space, place and surrounding from the margins to the centre of Eco-Theological studies” (Bergman, 2007: 326). Traditionally Ethiopians emphasize space. Sacred buildings were often hidden in the womb of the earth (like the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela), being built on or into features of the natural environment (Pankhurst, 1972: 17). An important text known as Dirsane Uriel describes the visit of the Holy Family to Ethiopia, and how the Archangel Uriel caught in a chalice of light the blood of Christ and sprinkled it out over the land of Ethiopia, which became the rist-gult (the landed property) of Our Lady (Gebre-Selassie Tesfa 1985: 34). Waldebb monastery and other holy places were established along the itinerary of the Holy Family. Locations are known according to their tabots (arks of the covenant), which are “planted” and grow organically in the landscape. “Sacred architecture holds the clue to understanding a culture from the inside, assisting in finding the third path, open to nature, culture and the spirit’s life-giving artifacts” (Bergman, 2007: 345) see also Taddesse Tamrat 1984: 196 &197.

Traditional land distribution (rist/gult) was integrated with obligations associated with the continual round of worship and celebration of festivals; divine worship sanctified the cosmic order, bringing fertility and prosperity (Taddesse Tamrat 1984: 197). Dirsane Uriel is recited in churches on the 22nd of every month, and the Archangel Uriel has cosmic significance being associated with the powers of the earth and ecology. The Book of Enoch, preserved in its entirety only in the Ethiopian Apocrypha, features two special themes: the cosmic struggle between good and evil (angels and demons), and the concept of covenant (Murray, 1992: 36). Ethiopians stretch the tenets of their Christianity to include the experience of the surrounding physical world in a particularly “African” manner, filling the space around them with spirits and relating to the environment and country in terms of their concepts of sin and God’s covenant of mercy.

Orthodox Christians relate to the natural world in a holistic manner, favoring respect and veneration of nature. Both the story of creation and the descent of the Ethiopians from the chosen people of God define and give a sense of stability to the country. Use of the environment is regulated by restrictions about observing holy days, holy grounds and venerated sites (Tsehai Berhanu, 1994: 155). Church grounds within a certain radius are considered holy; even wood or leaves are not cut. The huge grounds of churches and monasteries afford shelter to wild animals and rare monkeys, due to the inherent holiness of the grounds. The spread of churches has thus imposed a symbolism similar to that of the Axum Maryam-Tsion on the whole country. Ethiopia herself is literally considered holy, an environment to be protected, and tabots constitute important symbols of social life and activity. Interrelation between the physical environment and God’s symbolic presence is reflected in attitudes towards severe climatic conditions. Environmental difficulties are perceived as God’s punishment, egziota – rainmaking – is an affirmation of the physical inter-relatedness between spirituality, environment and God.
Ethiopians are proud of their divinely instituted cultural traditions. Ethiopia preserved a unique, unadulterated and pure African culture, accepting the *hige libuna* – intuitive law or fear of God in the heart (Acts 28:2b) (Dejaney, 1998: 21). We can see in “Ethiopia an exciting example of non-Hellenized Semitic Christianity as well as the manifestation of the peculiar Jewish genius of religious assimilation without degradation, characteristic of the Hebrew Bible” (Heinrich 1991: 179). The Eastern Fathers and ascetics, despite the influence of Hellenic dualism, stayed faithful to the biblical view of the human being as a unity which God radically transcends and can entirely transfigure. An abiding task of the Eastern Orthodox tradition is maintaining the patristic doctrine of deification (*theosis*), an overarching principle permeating all of Eastern theology and spirituality (Karkkainen, 2001: 45).

### Monastic Spirituality (Asceticism) and Ecology

Orthodox monasticism is the central institution of the Church, and has consolidated its hold on administrative power. Youth groups, Sunday Schools and vesper preaching programs have popularized monastic spirituality among the laity. Each monastery in Ethiopia has a *kidan* or covenant, mentioned in its deeds of establishment, documenting the special promise given by Christ to its founding saint. Often this includes some tangible proof of sanctity, such as the statement that bodies buried in the holy spot will not decompose (Abune Melketsedek monastery, Northern Shoa). Another common physical proof of sanctity is the presence of healing springs. Churches and monasteries create a sacred topography, making their sacred power accessible to the faithful. Pilgrimage became enormously popular despite repression under Communism; tens of thousands attend the most important pilgrimage festivities such as that at Kulubi Gabriel monastery. The covenant or *kidan* constituted the legitimation or symbolic form maintaining power structures, allowing them to persist and reproduce inter-generationally. Constituting a kind of pact entered into between God and the saint at the completion of his martyrdom or monastic exploits, it expresses divine assistance both in heaven and on earth to those who have made offerings, observed the saint’s day, prepared feasts and gone on pilgrimage. The *kidan* was a divine land grant on which the clergy based their claims to spiritual leadership and the economic support of the local population (Taddesse Tamrat, 1984: 196).

Ethiopian monasticism is characterized by a type of “liminality”, which is associated with nature. The concept of monastic “desert” means something different from the preferred habitat of the temperate highlands; it could be gorges, mountain tops, border areas or disease-ridden lake islands (Bakker, 1990: 44). The decisive factor for Ethiopian monastic topography is the search for the sacred, the River Giyon (Nile) and highland Ethiopia are the primordial landscape, comparable only to the heavenly Jerusalem. Monasteries and churches are part of the sacred landscape, places where the action of a saint or believers’ visions enabled the ‘discovery’ of some aspect of the divine, sealed by a covenant and a source of grace to visitors and inhabitants. Like Irish monks, Ethiopian holy men sought out places where heaven met earth, so that they might inhabit them and draw out their spiritual aura. Consequently, holy places were integrated into the natural milieu. Whereas Greek or Russian monasteries became cities in the desert, Ethiopian monks chose rather to preserve the nature of the wilderness in which they dwelled (Persoon & Jezek, 2014: 44).
In certain monasteries such as Waldebba and Zuqwala we have detailed accounts of the struggles endured by the monks to maintain the traditional rule of the monastery and protect the natural environment against intruders. In the case of Waldebba this concerned especially soldiers who during the Communist period wanted to hunt the wild animals and disturb the natural life in other ways. Waldebba is considered “a virgin land for virgins”, and consequently no effort was spared to prevent its violation. The monks fasted, prayed and carried sacred books in procession during intercessory prayers. In the case of Zuqwala it was a case of the families of the former laborers of the monastery demanding increased rights, and disregarding the rules maintaining the fragile ecological balance on the holy mountain. The monks struggled for years to have the rules re-instated and thus to protect both the sanctity of the site and its environmental equilibrium (Persoon, 2005: 209).

Immersion in nature was represented by the strong troglodyte tradition in Ethiopia. Numerous pious monks lived in caves, often the sites of miracles. Abuna Habta Maryam (in the gorge beyond Dabra Libanos) is a recent example of a prominent cave monastery. Monastic layout was normally determined by the natural topography of the site and the location of its sacred features. Indigenous materials integrated monasteries into the local topography. The boundaries of Ethiopian monasteries were marked by natural features having ritual significance, such as large rocks, piles of stones or trees. Monastic phenomenology articulates an essential search for unity motivating the religious conscience, reminiscent of the concept of non-duality in Advaita Vedanta (Ganguly, 1995: 2). “Euro-linear values seek to predict and control, in contrast Afro-circular views seek to interpret and understand” (Asante, 1987: 18).

In the Orthodox Church matter is not only sanctified, but is used as a means for man’s salvation. The monk’s path of asceticism and repentance helps contemporary man to transfigure the creation within and around him with an understanding of the Eucharistic use of the world, inspired by the divine liturgy and the life of the saints and to reconciliation of man with the environment (Theoxeni, 1998:71). The circle is an important form in Ethiopian cosmology, reflecting traditional Church architecture and the arrangement of certain monasteries. It reminds us of the monastery’s vocation described in founding charters as being a second paradise, the place where the alienation which came with sin is overcome. It suggests the recurring cycle of the liturgical year, with its emphasis on conversion - *metanoia*, and resurrection, (*metanoia* means *conversion*) the basis of an ecological way of living. The voluntary poverty of the monks in Mahbere Selassie (Persoon, 1997), and their willingness to practice literally a rule forbidding private property, are a sign of embracing asceticism, and calling the wider population to repentance. Likewise, the degradation of the earth reveals a moral dimension, the result of man’s sinfulness, our human collective sinfulness. It calls for a response through the challenge to practice voluntary self-divestiture, recalling the great saints and ascetics of early Christianity. This could be described as the need for an eco-asceticism, voluntary self-denial, freeing oneself from the technologies that destroy God’s good earth.

Conclusion

At a time of widespread religious adherence among the youth of Ethiopia, religious resources need to be harnessed to further ecological aims. The Ethiopian faithful of
different persuasions should be mobilized to save their country from an ecological doomsday. Change can be brought forward with a twin strategy, creating new alliances on all the different levels of civil society, and by engaging in different economic projects. The monastic spirituality at the heart of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is inherently ecological, and has unused potential for the development of indigenous ecological ethics. The ancient practice of pilgrimage could be understood as a ritual encounter with the natural world, and could be used for stimulating ecological awareness. Ethiopian Orthodox youth movements and para-church organizations constitute a network which could be utilized for disseminating ecologically friendly ideas.

Meanwhile, at an official level, “climate change research has been suffocated by scientific polemic about its eminence or remote possibility [but] the key answer to this question is to go back to basics in a genuine search for methodologies capable of recognizing the unity of the social and natural world” (Salih, 2001: 216). There has been progress but not without inherent shortcomings. “The post 1991-period has also brought about changes in institutional mechanisms. The most important development is the establishment of the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) as a Federal Agency. [However] it remains to be seen whether legal instruments without socio-economic incentives, institutional integration and a genuine people’s participation, will satisfy the requirement for sustainable development,” (Salih & Shibru Tedla, 1999: 39). Environmental and climate change discourse in Ethiopia obviously needs to be reformulated to be effective at local level where it can have the most impact. It needs to reconnect with indigenous ideologies and ways of thinking, and in this respect cosmologies, theologies and above all spirituality have a remarkable potential which we cannot afford to disregard. This facilitates engaging with traditional civil society, and thus bridging the gap between official institutions and the wider public, especially the youth who are important for influencing future generations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABDI B., 2015b, Environment Protection Ministry, AUU Establish Environmental Climate Services Institute, Fortune, 16 (700), 21.7.2015, 9.


GANGULY Arun, 1995, Vedanta Philosophy for the Unity of Mankind, New Delhi, Ashram Press.


READER Jeremy., 2004, Deconstructing Autonomy: Towards a New Identity, Ecotheology, 9 (2), 221-244.


TSEHAI BERHANU, 1994, Ecology and Ethiopian Orthodox Theology, in Derek HALLMAN (ed.), *Eco- Theology Voices from North and South*, Orbis Books, 155-171.


INDEX

**Mots-clés**: écologie, religion, christianisme éthiopien, environnement, monachisme

**Keywords**: ecology, religion, Ethiopian Christianity, environment, monasticism

AUTHOR

JOACHIM GREGOR PERSOON

Associate Professor, Ale School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University. Formerly Lecturer, Holy Trinity Theological College, Addis Ababa