

Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana

Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana:
The Role of African Traditional Religion
and Culture with special reference
to the Berekum Traditional Area

By

Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To

My wife, Joyce, all my children and my beloved mother,
Maame Mercy

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FOREWORD

BRON TAYLOR

What role if any do religious perceptions and practices play in human relations with the rest of the living world? If religions are or can be a significant variable, how does their influence change over time—as for example, when different people with different religions encounter one another? And how are religious people and their environment-related behaviors changed—if they are—when they encounter those who are deeply informed by evolutionary and ecological understandings, including scientists and activists who promote the conservation of Earth’s biological diversity? To what extent, if any, do environmental changes, including those precipitated by human activities, and alarm about such changes, change religions? Does environmental change make religious (and other) people more or less likely to promote behavioral changes that protect the diversity and resilience of the environmental systems upon which all life depends? If human beings are biocultural creatures (which is certainly my view), who are shaped by and shape their habitats in a long, ongoing, process of reciprocal production, then the above questions are critically important, at least if, and when, religion plays a significant role.

Since the mid-19th century certain perceptions about the role of religion in environmental behavior have become widespread. The most common view has been that the Abrahamic religions, and especially Christianity because of its greater global influence than Judaism and Islam in the economic development of the world, harbors anthropocentric attitudes, which in turn yields environmentally destructive behaviors. Often accompanying this view is a perception that religions originating in Asia are more environmentally friendly, especially Buddhism and Daoism. Even more common is a belief that the Earth’s surviving indigenous traditions know better than the world’s expansionist, agricultural civilizations, how to live harmoniously in their environments. In recent decades some scholars have contended that, whatever their environment-related flaws might have been, the world’s religions are becoming more environmentally friendly.

Unfortunately, many of the above perceptions and claims are based on thin evidence, or an unduly charitable approach to the traditions discussed, which is sometimes rooted in an apologetic motivation on the part of the writer to case their own favorite tradition in a positive light. Understandable hopes can also lead observers to downplay, ignore, or fail to notice factors in a tradition that hinder environmental concern and action. Fortunately, hard-headed, on the ground, and empirically oriented research that seeks to uncover the role of the religion variable in environment-related behavior has been increasing. Fortunately, Dr. Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye has taken this approach in his fascinating, ethnographic study of the role of religious beliefs and perspectives in both environmental decline and conservation in Ghana.

While focusing especially traditional religious and cultural beliefs of the indigenous Berekum people (one of the Bono people within the larger Akan ethnic group) in Ghana, Awuah-Nyamekye provides a nuanced, judicious, and complicated analysis. He provides compelling evidence that this indigenous tradition has had a number of important cultural elements that enjoin environmental conservation (even if the conservation impulse is not 'environmental' in a contemporary sense of self-consciously trying to ensure the continuance of all species and ecosystem types). He also contends that these practices have been promoted and enforced by religious authorities and ideas, while acknowledging there are dimensions to these traditions that work contrariwise, or are focused on protecting some but not all species and ecosystem types. He looks forthrightly at the way colonial economic and religious forces have eroded both traditional African religions and lifeways with negative impacts on the regions cultural and biological diversity. But he does not do this in a social science bubble: to his credit he does not shy away from acknowledging the negative ecological and social consequences of dramatically increasing human populations in the regions (and Africa more generally), or the role that political corruption plays in negative ecological and social trends. In short, he does not look at in a simplistic or unidirectional way any of the variables to which he attends. He importantly notes, for example, that the native traditions infuse and at least modestly influence the colonial ones, even while in general retreating in the face of the relative power of their social carriers; and he notes that western scientific and ecological ideas, and conservationist ethics, are exercising their own influences, and that moreover, through a growing appreciation for what is today called traditional ecological knowledge, western scientists are increasingly open to learning from indigenous knowledge and spiritual systems.

Put simply, Awuah-Nyamekye is a keen observer of the processes of hybridity that results when people with differing histories, epistemologies, and spiritualities, encounter one another, especially when they take seriously the beliefs and perceptions of others. I expect it would be fair to say that Awuah-Nyamekye can do this in part because he is himself a byproduct of just such hybridity, as a person from the region he is studying who is intimately acquainted with the peoples and practices there (with unusual access to a wide range of interlocutors), but who earned a Ph.D. at an elite Western university and has been engaged with critical, religion and nature scholars.

As one whose own work is also ethnographic and historical, I know first-hand what a privilege it is to interview people in depth about their perceptions and practices, about what they care about most and why. Reading this book gave me a similar feeling: what a privilege it is to hear the voices of Awuah-Nyamekye and his interlocutors from his homeland. If there is a pathway toward a sustainable future, a way past our fraught histories that have been all too often characterized by the exploitation of one group of people by another, or one part of nature by some group of people, it will involve genuine, honest, encounter, debate, and salutary, mutual, change. It will demand that people with differing epistemological premises take seriously what others claim to know. I will result in new hybrids between the best what people have learned in different times and places.

Despite how challenging the current situation is in Ghana, in Africa, and really, everywhere on Earth, the encounter and hybridity that is unfolding, and which is a part of what Awuah-Nyamekye has documented, is a good sign. I think *Managing the Environmental Crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with special reference to the Berekum Traditional Area* is an important contribution to this ferment. It should not to be taken as the last word by any means but rather, carefully considered as a part of an authentic, global, unfolding, cross-cultural, and high-stakes encounter among very different peoples, which, at its best, aims at learning how we might live and let live with our own, and other kind, on the only place in space where we know life exists.

~ Bron Taylor, author of *Dark Green Religion: Nature Religion and the Planetary Future*, and editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, and the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*.
www.brontaylor.com

INTRODUCTION

Day-in-day-out we hear of concerns being raised across the world about the rate at which our environment is being destroyed and, thus, posing a serious threat to the very existence of different forms of life on earth. As policy-makers, scientists, economists and environmentalists keep on debating the causes and remedies of this crisis, the destruction of the environment continues unabated. This book examines the connection between traditional religio-cultural beliefs and practices as well as environmental problems in Ghana. The book adopts Berekum Traditional Area¹ as a case study. Its primary aim is to assess the nature and the level of the environmental crisis in Ghana, and to explore the possibility of combing indigenous and Western scientific methods to address the current environmental problems in Ghana. Extensive literature (Mbiti, 1991; Menzie 2006; Ntiamoah-Baidu 1991;Nwosu, 2010, Sarfo-Mensah, 2001) exist on the subject matter—‘religion and environment/ecology’—which mention that indigenous religions are environmentally friendly or assist indigenous peoples to live in harmony with their environment. However, how these religions assist the adherents to adopt friendly attitude towards nature and how ecological knowledge is generated and transmitted among indigenous peoples are either not examined or are tangentially examined in the existing literature. I find this as a gap. This book aims at filling this gap for, it examines in details how Indigenous African Religion assists its adherents to adopt a friendly attitude towards the environment as well as how traditional ecological knowledge is generated and transmitted among the people of the selected area. Herein lies the uniqueness of this book. This book will be useful to the academics and students in the field of: Religious Studies, Religion and environment/ecology, environmental ethics, indigenous knowledge and those in environmental humanities in general, African studies and policy makers.

¹ In Ghana the term ‘traditional area’ is used to delineate an area where the members of the community are generally homogeneous, or share the same culture, and are under the leadership of an *Ɔmanhene* (Paramount Chief), see clarification of terms section (p.29) for more details.

Background of the book

This book explores the connection between traditional religio-cultural practices and the ecological problems of Ghana. In my previous research (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2009a, 2009b) with some communities among the traditional Akan people² of Ghana, I observed that many of these people's religio-cultural practices have ecological underpinnings. This contrasts with the findings of other scholars such as Alley (1998, 2000, 2002), who argue that in spite of the 'cultic' attention paid to River Ganges as the goddess *Gange Ma*, it is nonetheless dangerously polluted by the Indian population. Tomalin (2002) argues that 'whilst many religio-cultural traditions do have a strong connection with the natural world, elements of the natural world may be considered as sacred without any explicit consciousness about the relevance of this to an environmental crisis' (Tomalin, 2002: 15). For Taringa, the influence of indigenous people's worldviews on human-nature relationships 'are primarily relationships with spirits and not necessarily ecological relationships with nature' (Taringa, 2006: 196). Valid as the above views are, I argue that they may not fully apply to all indigenous societies as I understand societies each society to be unique and heterogeneous.

Based on my field observations and findings, I argue that some of the Ghanaian people's religio-cultural practices can be harnessed to deal with their environmental problems. I must, however, point out that this book is not prescribing a complete retreat into pre-colonial Ghanaian attitudes and practices as this will be anachronistic and also as there is historical evidence to show that an attempt to return to the pre-colonial African heritage that manifested itself in the philosophy of *Negritude*³ did not appeal to the masses in the 1960s, when even the atmosphere was highly charged against colonial domination (see Dikirr, 2005). *Negritude* did not

² Those Akan people of Ghana who remain more or less attached to the customs and traditions of their forebears despite the influence of modernity (see the clarification of terms section for more details).

³ The major motivating force for the Negritude Movement was, according to Mafeje, a protest against 'the disillusionment and resentment of the dehumanizing oppression of colonial domination and suppression of the black people' (see Mafeje 1992). Negritude was championed by African leaders and scholars such as Leopold Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah among others. 'According to Ali Mazrui [2003], the concept of negritude, the celebration of African identity and uniqueness, was invented in Paris by the Martinique poet and philosopher, Aime Cesaire. However, its most famous proponent in Africa according to Mazrui was the founder-president of independent Senegal, Leopold Senghor' (cited in Dikirr, 2005:118).

appeal much to the masses due perhaps to the fact that its proponents could not explain in clear terms to the people what it was meant for, or perhaps the people thought it was not the right response to their needs at the time. In contemporary Ghana, the combination of Western and Christian influence, together with the effects of globalisation (particularly global capitalism) make such a transition even more untenable. I am also conscious of Dikirr's (2005: 45) argument that 'in today's Africa, a discourse that is wholly predicated on the people's past heritage, especially their alleged spiritual and closeness to the land, will be of little value'. I, however, do not wholly agree with Dikirr though as it will be shown in the ensuing discussions. Rather, the main objective of this book is to bring to the fore what the indigenous ecological practices of Ghanaian people involve, and to examine the extent to which these indigenous ecological methods can complement or blend with Western scientific means of conserving the environment for the benefit of the people in the study area in particular, as well as in Ghana more generally.

Though this book has its main focus on African Traditional Religion, the inroads (influences) of other religions currently operating in Berekum area—most notably Christianity—cannot be ignored. Therefore, the extent to which other religions have affected the indigenous Berekum people's ecological practices are also explored. Moreover, as there is evidence of hybridity—the fusing of indigenous and other religious beliefs and practices—in the study area and the extent to which hybridity has impacted on indigenous ecological practices with religious underpinnings is also discussed.

The existence of such hybridity seems to corroborate ter Haar and Ellis's (2004) contention that 'religious worldviews do not necessarily diminish with formal education' (2004: 51), and that 'plural religious allegiance is common, with individuals frequenting several religious communities at once or practising rituals regarded by the West as belonging to different or competing systems of belief, such as Christianity and Islam, or Christianity and Traditional Religion' (ibid.: 5). And according to Aylward Shorter (1975: 7), 'the African Christian repudiates remarkably little of his former non-Christian outlook' (cited in Gathogo, 2007: 249). From my interviews, I observed that the most obvious motivation for the people in this study area to blend these worldviews in their practices is what I shall refer to as the 'braces and belt approach to issues'. That is, they do not want to risk adopting the wrong position, and so they tackle the relevant issues by adopting both positions at the same time. Then, if one source fails them, the other is still there as a backup. An important effect of this hybridity is that it may serve as a platform or a

starting point for the integration of modern or Western scientific and indigenous methods for addressing contemporary ecological problems. The point here is that since many Berekum Christians accommodate some aspects of the indigenous religion, it is likely that they will not oppose the integration of some of the indigenous ecological practices, which have indigenous religious underpinnings into the modern (scientific) means. Hybridity is discussed in some detail in Chapter Six.

Current environmental situation in Ghana

Those with some knowledge about the state of the environment in the pre-colonial Gold Coast (now Ghana) will appreciate the importance of this book. Ghana is experiencing indiscriminate logging. Miller (2004) reports that the sustainable yield of forest utilisation in Ghana has been exceeded, which has led to environmental degradation (cited in Barre et al. 2008: 27). Ghana experiences annual bushfires, and this is compounded by illegal surface mining, poor farming practices, and the dumping of human and industrial waste into bodies of water. Current records estimate that over 90% of Ghana's high forest has been logged since the late 1940s (Tamakloe, 2008), and the rate of deforestation is 5% per annum outside of reserves (Tamakloe, 2008). The above, indeed, is one of the key motivations for this book.

The first state of Ghana's Environment Report was launched in 2004, which emphasised that:

The weather is becoming warmer with rainfall patterns fluctuating over the last 40 years, with gradual decreases in rainfall distribution in all parts of the country. ...climatic variability held consequences for land use patterns especially in agricultural areas as well as the increasing rate of deforestation (Ghana News Agency [GNA], 2004).

Launching the report, Ms Christine Churcher, the then Minister of Environment and Science, said that 'the environmental impact of land degradation included reduced crop yield, reduced quantity of vegetative cover and reduced resilience of land to climatic variability' (GNA, 2004). The 130-page report dealt with issues such as atmospheric quality, land use and land cover, fresh water, forestry, the coastal and marine environment, bio-diversity, energy and human settlement (GNA, 2004). The startling revelation of the report was that 'the original forest cover was about 36% of the country's landmass, reducing to 23 % by 1972, 13.3% in 1990 and 10.2 % 2000' (GNA, 2004).

'It has been assessed that about 30% of the forest areas are destroyed by fire each year and only about 20% of the forest zone is currently covered by forest that has not burnt regularly.' (Agyarko, 2001). Intentional fires, started to reduce the ferocity of late dry season vegetation fires near the forest-savannah boundary have had a negative influence on forest regeneration, and hunters who fail to extinguish campfires are a major source of unintentional fires (see Agyarko, 2001). It is estimated that more than one million cubic metres of exportable timber have been lost to fire over the past decade (The New Legon Observer, 2008: 3; see also Agyarko, 2001). There is the Provisional National Defence Council (P.D.N.C.) Law 229 in place to check bushfires, but this law does not have enough 'bite' to deal with bushfire offenders as many bushfire offenders mostly go unpunished. Moreover, the District Environmental Management Sub-Committees (DEMC)—the main environmental bodies within the various Assemblies⁴ in Ghana—is weak, partly due to under-resourcing.

It is thus no surprise that the original forest cover, which was estimated to comprise approximately 36% of the country's land-mass, was rapidly reduced to 10.2% of land cover by 2000—that is to 2.1million hectares of Ghana's original 8.1million hectares of moist forest (Dorm-Adzobu et al., 1991). Moreover, it has been estimated that environmental degradation's cost to the economy of Ghana is 10% of its annual GDP (\$1.2 billion of its \$12 billion GDP), while water and air pollution, deforestation and desertification also continue to take their toll (GNA, 2007).

The World Bank's Water and Sanitation Programme (WBSP) reported that Ghana's economy loses \$90 million annually (GHC420 million—1.6 % of GDP) through poor sanitation (GNA, 2012). The GNA report further that a survey carried out in 2008 on sanitation in Africa ranked Ghana 14th out of the 15 countries in West Africa and 48th out of the then 52 (now 53) countries on the continent in terms of sanitation, with the worst progress in the development of sanitation (GNA, 2008).

Various governments of Ghana have made several attempts to salvage this situation, but the desired results are yet to be achieved. As I have earlier on noted, my preliminary studies among some traditional Akan people of Ghana identified that these people's indigenous ecological knowledge, which is underpinned by their religion and culture, could be of help for dealing with some of the environmental problems of today. As I have earlier on noted, my preliminary studies among some traditional

⁴ Ghana has been zoned into ten administrative regions. Depending on the population size, the regions are also divided into Districts, Municipalities and Metropolitans.

Akan people of Ghana identified that these people's indigenous ecological knowledge, which is underpinned by their religion and culture, could be of help for dealing with some of the environmental problems of today. This is because they have developed mechanisms that inspire them to live lifestyles that promote conservation of biodiversity. Such mechanisms include reverence for various bodies of water and areas of land (including the protection of sacred groves) and the belief in *sasa* (the belief that some plants and animals have powerful spirits that need to be propitiated and treated with caution to avoid negative consequences), and these mechanisms are mediated by the institution of chieftaincy. This suggests that their worldviews could play a major role in improving their ecological practices.

In Ghana, however, conservation policies often neglect the indigenous people's ecological knowledge or worldviews. A clear evidence of this is that an important document like *National Biodiversity Strategy* for Ghana was completely silent on the indigenous people's knowledge in this matter (Ministry of Environment and Science, 2002). Not only Ghanaian policy-makers, but also many of the World Bank's interventions on sustainable development for Africa (such as the World Bank's Environment Strategy (WBES) for Africa, and the Environmental Initiative of the New Partnership for African Development) do not factor religion into their schemes. Although the Brundtland Report did recognise the potential for indigenous knowledge to play a role in sustainable development, this recognition was still 'framed within the dominant Western agenda' (McGregor, 2004). The reason for this may be due to the perception that there is no scientific basis for indigenous conservatory methods (Auwah-Nyamekye, 2009a: 30). Or it may be due to what Tomalin (2009: 2) views as being 'grounded in the modernist assumption that religion will disappear once societies "develop" and become more like the West.' Attuquayefio and Fobil (2005) were emphatic that many of the environmental conservation initiatives in developing countries (particularly in Africa) have not been effective because of the tendency to overlook the essential link between traditional and scientific ways of conserving the environment. Also, as Boersema and Reijnders (2009: 4) have argued, when it comes to solving environmental problems—which are ultimately social problems—science and scientists' capabilities become limited. This, according to Boersema and Reijnders, is a matter that relies most importantly on funding, political will and the cooperation of stakeholders.

I have already noted that in view of the environmental problems in Ghana, religion and culture could play a major role in the process of

environmental conservation among the Akan. This is because the traditional Akan and, for that matter, traditional Ghanaians, believe that they have a deep responsibility to act as good environmental stewards, accepting personal responsibility for environmental accountability (Beavis, 1994). This also implies responsible management of natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations. Therefore, I argue that Ghana's indigenous religions and cultures are potential resources, which, if well considered, could complement the government's efforts to deal with Ghana's contemporary environmental problems. Moreover, the abandonment and modification of theories of secularisation due to the 'resurgence of religion' and the increased public interest in environmental issues (see Tomalin, 2009: 2; Haynes, 2007: 1) makes this book important. It is against this background that I have decided to use Berekum Traditional Area as a case study to investigate in detailed how indigenous religion and culture could be used to address some of the environmental problems of Ghana.

Summary

In this introductory section, I have outlined the subject matter of the book—religion and the environment. The background or the motivation for the book has been clearly spelt out, and have in addition, presented an overview of the current environmental situation in Ghana to set the basis of the book.

I have also listed some of the indigenous conservation strategies (to be discussed in detailed in chapter 5). I have furthermore pointed out that conservation policies in Ghana often neglect the indigenous people's ecological knowledge or worldviews.

Besides, I have argued that Ghana's indigenous religions and cultures are potential resources, which, if well considered, could complement the government's efforts to deal with Ghana's contemporary environmental problems.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: MODERN/RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to outline the trajectory of the ‘modern’ environmental activism and how religion came into the picture-religious environmentalism. I also present a conceptual analysis of the central themes or terms—*African Traditional Religion, environmental crisis and culture*—that feature prominently in the discussion.

The genesis of modern environmental activism

In order to place the discussion in historical context, I will briefly trace the emergence of modern environmental or activism. Scientists, environmentalists and concerned people have become increasingly apprehensive about the ‘problems of resource depletion in combination with population growth and world hunger, problems of climate change, the extinction of species, the unsafe storage of nuclear waste, acidification, ozone layer depletion, dehydration, the pollution of air, water and soil and natural degradation’ (Postma, 2006:4). They feel that there is an urgent need for something to be done to address this alarming situation in order to save the world from destruction.

The history of responses to the environmental crisis is complex, but I must point out that environmental activism in the U.S.A—whose origins date back to the nineteenth century—played a major role in it. This activism resulted in the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, which sought to draw attention to the damaging impact of pesticides on humans and the environment (Dunlap and Mertig, 1991: 1-3). Moreover, Cahn and Cahn (1990) claim that the Earth Day Conference organised in 1990 by the US Environmental Movement ‘...united more people concerned about a single cause than any other global event in history’ (Cahn and Cahn, 1990: 17, quoted in Dunlap and Mertig, 1991: 1). The publication of Lynn White’s

The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis in 1967 – which sought to blame Christianity for the world's environmental crisis– indeed, drew religion into the environmental debate.

Although White's thesis has been questioned by others for being overly simplistic (Johnson and Butigan, 1984; Harrison, 1999; Johnson, 2000; Attfeld 1983, 2010), it is still relevant to today's debate. As confirmed by Leslie *et al.* (2007), for instance, that White's 'analysis generated a major controversy that continues and stimulated the growth of the fields of environmental ethics and ecotheology'. Even White himself recognised that religion has a role to play in the solution to the environmental crisis (Leslie, 2007). Indeed, he went even further, to state that 'what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion' (Lynn White, 1967: 1204). White's publication is significant, for what started as a debate has now metamorphosed into an important sub-field—religion and the environment—in the academic disciplines of religious studies, theology, ethics, and the sociology of religion, among others.

I argue that all the above forms of environmental activism no doubt influenced the creation of environmentally-based international treaties or conventions such as The Ramsar Wetlands Convention 1971; The World Heritage Convention 1972; The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) 1973; The Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) 1974; The Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982; The International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness the Response and Co-operation (OPRC) 1990; as well as international conferences, such as the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, the Assisi Conference of the International World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 1986, and The Brundtland Commission in 1987. These culminated in the famous 'Earth Summit' (UN Conference on Environment and Development) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992.

These global activities have resulted in a rise in environmental consciousness, as evidenced in many publications¹ and conferences,² as well as a rise in the interest concerning the relationship between religion and the environment. This is seen in organisations such as the Alliance for

¹ See for instance: Hays (1987), Cooper and Palmer (1998), McNeely (1999), Dodds (2000), Ellen, Parks and Bicker (2003), Menzies (2006), Burley, Helen and Haslam (2008), Ntiamoa-Baidu (1995, 2008), Tucker and Grim (2000) and Attfeld (2010). Religions of the World and Ecology series edited.

² Including the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg (2002) and the Biodiversity Conference, Nagoya, Japan (2010).

Religion and Conservation (ARC) based in Manchester, UK (founded in 1995); Forum on Religion and Ecology which was announced at the United Nations in 1998 and was embedded in Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies in 2006, now Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. An important contribution to the debate came from the "Religions of the World and Ecology Conference Series", which took place at the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at Harvard Divinity School and covered a period of over three years (1996-1998). The papers presented by more than 800 experts-- scholars, religious leaders and environmentalists-- were edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim and published in a series under the titled: World Religions and Ecology Series.

Different theories have been propounded to explain the causes of and the possible solutions to the environmental crisis (Attfeld, 2010). Park (2007: 5), for instance, contends that 'whilst the environmental problems seem to be physical, their causes and remedies can be found in the "people's attitude, values and expectations"'. This implies that the perceptions or worldviews of a people may influence their behaviour towards environmental issues. Hence, a chapter of this book has been devoted to examining the worldviews of the people being studied in this book.

Park (2007) cites the realisation of the following three ideas as triggers for the contemporary interest in environmental issues: (a) the fact that 'most human activities affect the environment in one way or another, usually for worst', (b) the realisation that 'the environment is our basic life-support system. It provides the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the land we live on', and (c) the fact that 'many parts of the environment have been badly damaged by over-use or unwise use [of it]' (Park 2007: 5).

The nexus between religion and the environment

The idea that the connection between religion and environment deserves critical study has been pointed out in the *Religions of the World and Ecology series*. This was a series of conferences hosted at the Centre for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at Harvard Divinity School. These conferences covered over three years (1996-1998). The papers presented by more than 800 experts-- scholars, religious leaders and environmentalists-- were edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim and published in series under the title: World Religions and Ecology Series.

Sequel to the environmental debate and activism was the rise in the interest of the relationship between religion and the environment, which many commentators refer to as the emergence of religious environmentalism and religious environmentalist discourse. Gottlieb (2009) for instance, sees religious environmentalism as a ‘diverse, vibrant, global movement’ of ideas and activism that “roots the general environmental message in a spiritual framework’ (2009:17, 215, 231). The discourse has resulted in a body of literature examining the relationship between religion and the environment that emerged within the context of the West, but is now largely globalised.

Initially, what was happening elsewhere in the world, including Africa, received little attention within this discourse, even though the poorest countries bear the brunt of climate change and its attendant effects. Tomalin (2009: 36) quotes Patz *et al.* (2005) as predicting that:

Although the world’s poorest countries produce less greenhouse gases than the wealthier nations, it is within these regions that dramatic rise in diseases and malnutrition, as a result of climate change, are likely to have a devastating impact: “the regions with the greatest burden of climate – sensitive diseases are also the regions with the lowest capacity to adapt to new risks (Patz et al. 2005: 315).

The issues of religious environmentalism in the poorest countries of the world—especially those in Africa, south of the Sahara – should have received much more attention from the developed world from the start. As Tomalin (2009: 36) rightly points out, ‘in Britain, for instance, environmental concerns are rarely survival issues, whereas in India [and in Africa too], environmental problems (such as the contamination of water supplies in urban centres or effects of rural deforestation on farming practices) are also direct life and death issues’. However, as has been noted, the debate now has a global dimension, and the role of indigenous religions in environmental conservation has been drawn into it. It is possible that scholars—particularly those from Africa, most of whom are Western trained—are responsible for extending the environmental debate to Africa. The story of religious environmentalism will not be complete if the key role played by the Assisi meeting of 1986 is not mentioned.

The Assisi Declarations

The celebration of the 25th anniversary of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Assisi, Italy in 1986 also recognised the relationship between religion and the environment. The WWF emphasised the idea that

each religious tradition has something positive to offer its adherents in their quest to resolve the environmental problems confronting them. Therefore, under the auspices of its President, HRH Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, the WWF and (as part of the celebrations) leading members from five major world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam—were invited to declare how their various faiths help them to care for nature. This event is today known as the ‘Assisi Declarations’,³ and is very important within the field of religious environmentalism, because interest in the field gathered momentum from this time onwards, with the declarations leading to the creation of a network of faith groups working on ecological and developmental issues. By 1995, Baha’i, Daoism, Jainism and Sikhism had also made their declarations on nature conservation, and in the same year a new NGO called the ‘Alliance of Religions and Conservation’ (ARC), which aimed to support the growth of the network, was established (Wolfensohn, 2003).

One thing that is fundamental to the declarations that were made is that they depict the histories of the world religions as defining the place of humans in nature, including how they should act toward nature. This may be why Leslie et al. (2007) claim that ‘whatever religious people consider to be sacred or spiritual is more likely to be revered, protected and conserved’ (Leslie et al., 2007; see Hagan, 1999; Nsiah, 2009).

Although indigenous peoples (including Africans) were not at the Assisi meeting, some studies argue that they have been living in harmony with nature since time immemorial (see Mbiti, 1991: 44). The following statement from one of my key informants, which became evident throughout my interviews reflects the traditional Berekum people’s understanding of nature:

In God’s creation there are things that can be used (destroyed) and other that cannot be used, so the destruction of such things constitutes a sin. Even those that can be used have the right time for their use. Anything short of this is considered as a sin in our tradition. This is to ensure that we make sustainable use of natural resources (Akumfi Ameyaw, personal communication, 7 November 2011).

Park (2007: 4) says ‘since the 1970s, scientists have been writing about what they term the “environmental crisis” and more recently this debate has evolved. This study represents the author’s contribution to this debate

³ For the actual declarations see

<http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/THE%20ASSISI%20DECLARATIONS.pdf>

from the Ghanaian perspective, utilising the Berekum Traditional Area as a case study.

Conceptual analysis of terms

In order to assist readers in developing a clear understanding of the arguments in this book, it is prudent to first clarify some of the terms that will feature prominently in course of the discussions. These terms include: tradition, Berekum Traditional Area, Indigenous, Traditional/ Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, Traditional African Religion, Culture, and Environmental crisis.

Tradition (Traditional)

I use 'tradition' to refer to the long-established patterns of behaviour that have been handed down from generation to generation in Berekum society. These long-established patterns of behaviour are known as *amanmre* in the Akan language. To say 'handed down from generation to generation' does not necessarily mean that this tradition is monolithic, and there is in fact, clear evidence of contemporary manifestations in Berekum people's way of life, resulting from the impact of colonialism and their contact with other groups of people. In fact, there is an element of dynamism in this society, with components of continuity and discontinuity. For instance, human sacrifice is no longer practised in Berekum society, and fewer people are still living in thatch houses as there were in recent history. Also a considerable number of people are now able to read and write and enjoy many modern social amenities, such as electricity, piped water, and modern methods of health care.

Berekum Traditional Area

To refer to the Berekum society as 'traditional' means, to borrow Opoku's (1978) words, that Berekum society 'is undergirded by a fundamentally indigenous value system and that it has its own pattern, with its own historical inheritance from the past' (Opoku, 1978: 9). Therefore, when an area is described as 'traditional' in Ghana, this is used to express the idea that the people of that area share a common heritage that is bequeathed to them by their forebears. In the traditional Ghanaian political system, when an area is described as 'traditional', it means that the place is *autonomous*. That is, it qualifies as an *ɔman* (state), with its own leader, known as a *ɔmanhene* (a paramount chief).

Indigenous

Although there is some debate over the scope of the term ‘indigenous’, my use of it here stems from its etymological sense – that is, from its Latin origin – *indigena* (native). Therefore, in this book ‘indigenous’ refers to those people whose forebears founded settlements where they still remain today. In other words, indigenous people are those that can lay legitimate claim to the land they are occupying today through their ancestry. In this way, one may also refer to indigenous people as ‘traditional’ people. For this reason, the two terms are used interchangeably in this book (adapted from Awuah-Nyamekye and Sarfo-Mensah, 2011).

Traditional/Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

Traditional or Indigenous Knowledge, particularly in relation to Indigenous people and the environment has become a subject of research in recent time. However, some scholars see the term Traditional or Indigenous, as ambiguous (see Berkes, 2008: 3). This, thus, makes the application of the term (Traditional or Indigenous) to ecological knowledge more problematic. In view of this there is no universally accepted definition of what we refer to now as ‘Traditional’ or ‘Indigenous’ Ecological Knowledge. Menzies(2006) cites Bombay (1996) quoting Jameson Brant, a Mohawk as having described Indigenous knowledge as ‘A body of information about the interconnected elements of natural environment which traditional Indigenous people have been taught, from generation to generation, respect and give thanks for’ (cited in Menzies, 2006:.6). Berkes (2008) and Menzies, (2006) have discussed in some details some of the definitions and attributes of Traditional Knowledge. Menzies for instance, observes that Traditional Ecological Knowledge is a term ‘used to describe the knowledge and beliefs that Indigenous people hold of their environments that is handed through the generation (Menzies, (2006: 6). In this book, the terms Traditional or Indigenous Ecological Knowledge refers to the knowledge that local people have built over the years about their environment–particularly in relation to the local flora, fauna and other natural phenomena–and the means designed (with some having religious underpinnings) to interact with these natural elements in a sustainable way.

Traditional African Religion

Many of the earlier writers who briefly visited Africa thought that Africans had no religion. This may be due to the fact that they were expecting to see priests in charge of the worship of the Supreme Being (God), places of worship dedicated specifically to the worship of God (such as temples, cathedrals, or mosques) and some sort of written scriptures (such as the Bible, Quran, or the Bhagavad Gita). As they did not see any of these things, they presumed there is no organised public religion in Africa. But later, writers such as Parrinder, Rattray, who actually had the opportunity to stay longer and study the people, realised that indigenous Africans did have a religion. Rattray for instance, had the opportunity to spend a number of years with the Asantes of Ghana. He made the following remarks about African Traditional Religion in general and in particular the Asantes of Ghana:

I sometimes like to think, had these people been left to work out their own salvation, perhaps someday an African Messiah would have arisen and swept their pantheons clean of the fetish (suman). West Africa might then have become the cradle of a new creed which acknowledged One Great Spirit, Who, being One, nevertheless manifested Himself in everything around Him and taught men to hear His voice in the flow of His waters and in the sound of His winds in the trees (Rattray, 1959, P. iii).

Although this comment suggests that Rattray perceived African people's religion in polytheistic terms, the point is that he did see that African people do have religion. Parrinder, however, had a better understanding of the African traditional religion. He remarked that:

It is probably true to say that African religion has been more misunderstood, and has suffered more at the hands of the early writers, than any part of African life. Unhappily old misconceptions linger with us still (Parrinder, 1974, p. 13).

The above observation is appealing and the impression I gathered through my readings prior to my training in the Department of Religion and Human Values at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana was that the spirituality of indigenous African peoples could not be referred to as *religion* in the strictest sense of the word. However, my studies on the spirituality of the African peoples led me to realise that the spirituality of its indigenous peoples can be referred to as a religion, because a close analysis of the belief systems of these peoples indicates that they had most

of the elements that most of the Western scholars refer to as religious. One particular book that shaped and deepened my understanding of African religion was *African Traditional Religion* (1974 [1951, 1962]), which was written by Parrinder—a non-African. His book is one of the expositions on African Traditional Religion that paved the way for the recognition and acceptance of African Traditional Religion as a religion in its own right. Rejecting the obnoxious terminologies used by some of the earlier Western writers to denote the spirituality of Africans, Parrinder argued:

It is evident that fetish is a most ambiguous word [for African religion] and the time has come for all serious writers and speakers to abandon it completely and finally (Parrinder 1974: 16).

However, my research and experience show that even today, there are writers (including some Africans) who continue to see African religion as a false religion and use early European terminology to describe it. However, whatever such authors say about the spirituality of the Africans, there is enough evidence for African spirituality to be justifiably referred to as religion. Therefore, for the purposes of this book, African Traditional Religion will be understood as the religion of the people of the indigenous Berekum people, with all its current manifestations, in contrast to other religions such as Christianity and Islam

Scholars on African religion generally agree on what this religion involves, as the above survey shows, but disagree when it comes to the matter of whether it should be understood in the singular or in the plural. After struggling to debunk inaccurate and pejorative terminologies such as paganism, fetishism, ancestral worship, witchcraft, animism and others that were used by early Western writers (especially anthropologists), African scholars (theologians, anthropologists and sociologists) are now confronted with the difficulty of categorising and naming African religion.

There is a longstanding debate over whether Africans have a single religion or a plurality of religions. In the words of Ejizu (not dated), this may sound rather elementary, but the truth is that the issue of the precise name and nature of the spirituality of the indigenous Africans remains unsettled (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987: 19). Ejizu intimates that this debate has engaged scholars and been the focus of publications and conferences for a considerable period of time. The school of thought led by Idowu (1973: 103) argues that it is correct to talk about ‘African Traditional Religion’ in the singular form, whilst that led by Mbiti insists that it is deceptive to speak of the spirituality of the African in singular terms. For him, ‘we speak of African religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system’