

# Salvaging Nature: The Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective

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## Abstract

The way many Ghanaians relate to the environment now is not the best; they just do not care about how to handle the environment in a sustainable way. They have forgotten that life is environment and environment is life due to rapid cultural change, population explosion etc. There is indiscriminate logging, annual bushfires, illegal surface mining, bad farming practices, dumping of human and industrial wastes into our water bodies and the like. It is estimated that over 90 percent of Ghana's high forest has been logged since the late 1940s. The sanitation situation is growing from bad to worst as the records show. All efforts to salvage the situation over the years have failed to yield the needed results. It is for this reason that this paper argues strongly for the inclusion of indigenous Ghanaian religion and culture in this fight, for they have proven to be eco-biased religion and culture due to the environmentally beneficial mechanisms inherent in them. Specifically, the traditional Akan use their conception of land, taboos, totemism, sacred groves and *sasa* to ensure the conservation of nature. Therefore, this paper believe, the time has come for us to forge a common ground in our efforts to find a lasting solution to our environmental problems from both the perspectives of science and that of Indigenous Spiritualities and Culture.

## Keywords

state of environment in Ghana, Akan worldview, Akan and nature salvaging, totems, water bodies, sacred grove, *sasa*

## **1. Introduction**

The rate at which Ghana is experiencing environmental degradation has become a source of worry to all well-meaning Ghanaians. This is evident in the efforts of researchers, individuals, eco-conscious groups,<sup>1</sup> and governments<sup>2</sup> trying to salvage this situation over the years. But these efforts have not achieved the desired results. This failure can partly be attributed to the neglect of two important related areas in our fight against the environmental albatross on our neck. It is religion and culture, and in this paper's context, African Traditional Religion and Culture. It is against this background that this paper argues for the inclusion of Akan Traditional Religion and Culture in Ghana's quest to conserve the environment, for they have the capacity to address some of the environmental problems in Ghana today. The Akan are being used as a case study for they are a group which is well known to me in terms of their worldview, beliefs and practices. Though the Akan are the focus of this paper, other traditional peoples may be cited to advance the discussion.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate and bring to the fore some of the means that Akan indigenous religion and culture have been using to sustain the balance of the eco-system or preservation of the environment. I propose to begin the discussion by first giving a brief overview of the state of the environment in Ghana now, then, the Akan traditional worldview, followed by the Akan traditional ways of salvaging nature, and then the challenges to the Akan traditional ways of salvaging nature and their suggested solutions, before a conclusion is drawn.

## **2. Methodology**

The content of this paper is the result of a research I conducted in some Akan areas in Ghana between January 2006 and August 2008. The research was aimed at soliciting more information on the following areas among the Akan:

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<sup>1</sup>) Friends of the Earth Ghana (FOE), Ghana Association for the Conservation of Nature (GHACON) and others are doing their best to protect the environment.

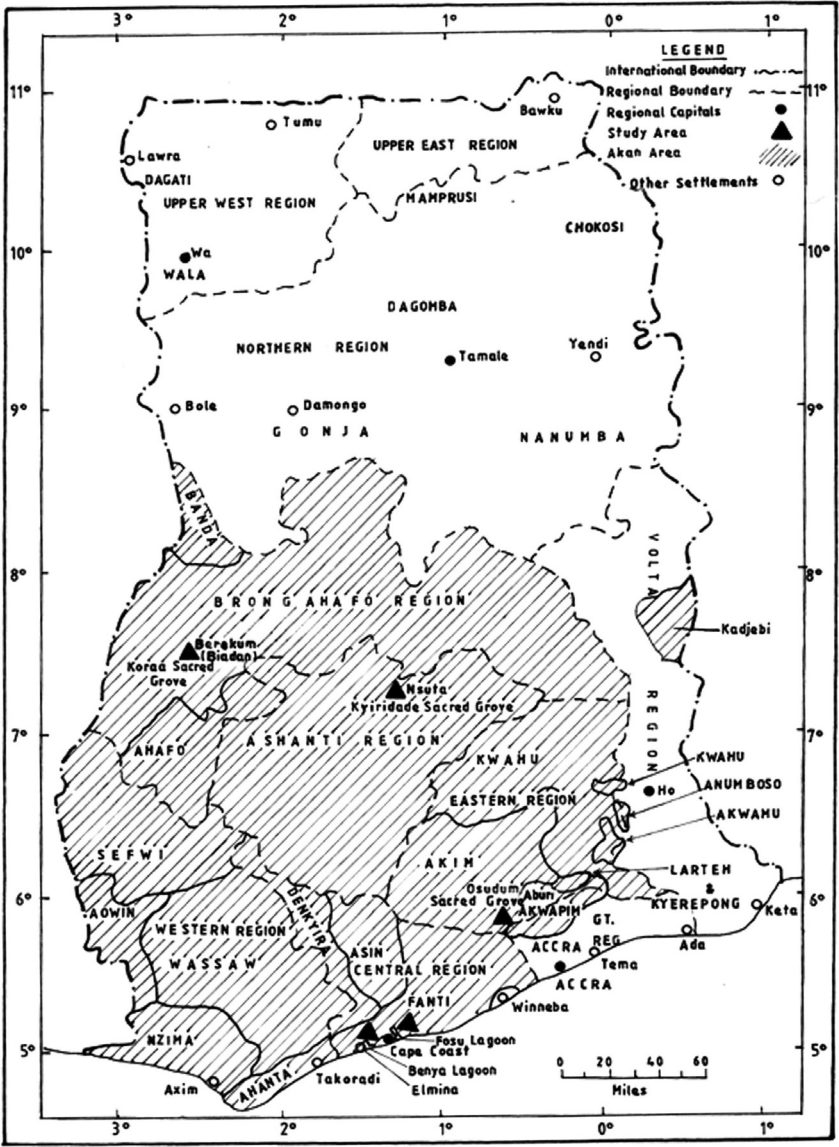
<sup>2</sup>) For instance, the government of Ghana established the Environmental Protection Council (E.P.C.) in 1973. This Council was changed to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1994.

- i) Who are they and what is their worldview?
- ii) The Akan biodiversity conservation model
- iii) The effectiveness of their conservation models today and
- iv) The future of the Akan biodiversity conservation models

The Akan occupy 6 out of the ten administrative regions in Ghana, viz: Brong-Ahafo, Ashanti, Eastern, Central, Western and a small part of the Volta region. This research covered 3 out of the 6 regions in Ghana where the Akan are found. Though the bulk of the data was taken from field-work, extensive use of existing literature (both published and unpublished) in the field was also made. The target group interviewed included chiefs and other traditional rulers, religious officials, foresters, caretakers of sacred groves, herbalists, farmers, hunters, saw millers, chain-saw operators, charcoal producers, wood sellers, miners, stone quarry operators, sand winners, palm wine tapers etc. The selection of the above groups was informed by the fact that they constitute the major stakeholders as far as environmental issues in Ghana are concerned.

### **3. The Akan People**

As stated above, the Akan constitute the largest ethnic group in Ghana. They are mainly found in middle and the southern part of Ghana. According to the 2000 Ghana's Population Census, the Akan constitute 49.1% of the total population of 18,800,000 people. The traditional occupations of the Akan are farming (for those in the inland) and fishing for (those along the coast, and trading, particularly for women (Omenyo 2001:26; Pobee 1979:44). The Akan are culturally homogenous and by and large, matrilineal. That is, they inherit through the mother's line. The only exceptions are the Akwapim of Larteh and Mampong who are patrilineal—inheriting through the father's line (Pobee 1979:44). It is important to note that the Akan are also found in the south-eastern portion of the Republic of Ivory Coast or La Cote d'Ivoire (Warren 1986:7; Odame Beeko, 2005). This is the result of the arbitrary balkanization of the continent during the colonial era.



Source: Author, 2009

Figure 1. Map of Ghana showing Akan Areas

#### **4. Akan Worldview**

By Akan worldview, we mean the Akan traditional people's conception or understanding of themselves and that of the universe and how they should relate to it in order to make life liveable. Akan traditional worldview poses two dimensions to life. These are the spiritual and the physical. The physical consists of the environment and the secular activities that go on in it. The spiritual is the invisible or the immaterial dimension of life. And in the view of the traditional Akan people, the spiritual is made up of personal spirit beings, both human (ancestors) and non-human (gods). There are also impersonal or non-moral forces which manifest themselves in the working of magic, witchcraft and sorcery. All these entities qualify for cultic attention because they are capable of influencing the life of humans either positively or negatively (personal communication with Nana Agyemang Boq December 5, 2006). One significant feature of Akan Traditional Religion is that the spiritual entities involved in this spirituality are arranged in a hierarchical order. The Supreme Being (God) presides over this hierarchy. This is confirmed by Rattray (1923).

In the life and thought of the traditional Akan people and for that matter, other traditional African peoples, the division of the universe into spiritual and physical is for convenience purposes, because the two are paradoxically one entity, for one cannot exist independent of the other. The two must unite permanently to become meaningful. The Akan firmly believe that the world of humans and the world of spirits are not independent worlds, for one has no meaning without the other (Dickson and Elingworth 1969). In other words, in isolation from the spiritual, the physical is useless. This means that the spiritual and the physical are indispensable to each other.

Following from this world view, the Akan feel it is incumbent on them to harmonise the relationship between the spiritual and the physical so that at the end of it all, life becomes spiritual for the realization of total well-being (salvation) which is the ultimate goal of humans. This explains why traditional Akan people and for that matter traditional African peoples, do not divorce their secular lives from their spiritual one. Their religion is seen in the political, social, economic, ethical, medical, and environmental aspects of their lives. Simply stated, in traditional Akan society, 'religion is life and life, religion' (Opoku 1978:1). It is this character of the Akan and other traditional African peoples that makes Mbiti

(1989:1) describe the Africans as “notoriously” religious, while Parrinder (1961:9) sees them as ‘incurably religious’. Writing about the Akan, Williamson (1955:108-109) says one of his students once remarked, ‘in the olden times there were no policemen and no need of them; the gods were the policemen’ and Williamson himself adds that ‘the customs and the traditional ways of life sanctioned by the spirit-ancestors and the gods provided the frame work of the Akan ethics’.

The Akan also attach spiritual dimension to certain entities—land, forest, water bodies, certain animals—hence their attitude towards them reflect their status. That is why prayer, sacrifice and some rituals take place before they make use of them. Example they offer libation prayer before the land is tilled (a common view in the study area).

The above explains why the Akan say that their indigenous conservation knowledge has religious underpinnings. Anyone who misses this fact would not understand the behaviour of the Akan in many respects.

## **5. The state of the environment in Ghana**

According to Wilson Tamakloe (undated) of the Ghana’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), it is estimated that over 90 percent of Ghana’s high forest has been logged since the late 1940s. The rate of deforestation is 5 percent in off-reserves and 2 percent in on-reserves. The off-reserves have been seriously degraded and fragmented to less than 5 percent of the forested area 83,489 km<sup>2</sup>. The current deforestation rate is about 22,000 hectares (ha) per annum. Ghana, therefore, may face future export deficits and there is the likelihood that the country’s forestry sector will die out. For Dorm-Adzobu et al. (1991), it is estimated that only 2.1 million of Ghana’s original 8.1 million hectares of moist forest remain.

The original forest cover was about 36% of Ghana’s landmass, reducing to 23% by 1972; 13.3% in 1990 and 10.2% in 2000 (Ghana News Agency, 2006). Wildlife resources in Ghana have dwindled drastically over the past few decades. This has largely been attributed to the growth in the timber industry and poor enforcement of the country’s wildlife laws. Hunting, for instance, has gone from being a subsistence practice to mainly commercial trade. The estimate of the economic value of bushmeat trade per incident is about \$350 in Ghana (William Oduro et al., undated). Between 1983 and 1984 when the country experienced the most intensive and prolonged

drought in remembered history, the incidence of bushfires has almost become an annual event. Every year, as bushfires sweep through farms, forests, villages, sacred groves and catchment areas, they destroy the environment, life and property worth billions of Cedis. (Opoku-Agyemang 2003). Available data indicate that over the years, in every year close to 30% of the forest area in Ghana is destroyed by bush fire (<http://www.allafrica.com/stories/200605020585>).

Inadequate industrial and domestic wastewater management has resulted in the pollution of most surface water resources in the country. Especially those water bodies in and around urban areas in the country (Tamakloe, undated). Some inland fishermen also use poisonous chemicals such as dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane DDT etc. in their fishing expedition thereby endangering many aquatic lives.

When launching the National Attitudinal Change Initiative Project by Media in Partnership for Development, an NGO, in Accra, Hon. Kwadwo Adjei-Darko, the former Minister of Local Government, Rural Development and Environment said 'the sanitation situation in the country is deteriorating by the day and this might lead to an increase in sanitation related diseases among children and the most vulnerable. It is estimated that an appreciable number of children die annually before the age of five mainly from preventable sanitation-related diseases.' He, therefore, called on all stakeholders to help maintain the environment so that the country could make progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goal on acquiring good sanitation (The Chronicle 2008).

Credence was given to the honorable minister's concerns when a recent survey on sanitation situation in Africa ranked Ghana the 14th out of the 15 countries in West Africa and the 48th out of the 51 countries in Africa with the worst progress in sanitation. Conference on Sanitation held in Durban, South Africa, last February, also indicated that only 10 per cent of Ghanaians had access to improved toilet facilities. This makes open defecation in the country high (Ghana News Agency 2008). The above, to say the least, is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the real environmental situation in Ghana today.

This paper deems it necessary that in order to follow and appreciate the role that the Akan religion and culture play in biodiversity conservation, one needs to be introduced to the Akan view of life and their conception of the world.

## 6. The Akan and their Environment

The Akan worldview has already been established as a theistic one and thus they see the universe and whatever in it as God's creation. They, therefore, believe that a major responsibility lies on them to be good environmental stewards. This responsibility, they are convinced, is a religious one (see Ghana: Akan Cosmology, <http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/akancosmology.html>). This is because the African believes that everything that belongs to the ecosystem and the environment has a strong spiritual meaning for humans (Anane, undated). By this, they mean, accepting personal responsibility towards environmental accountability (Beavis 1994). It also implies responsible management of natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations. This stems from the fact that humankind's physical life depends on the profane universe—the necessities of life: food, air, shelter etc. are derived from the physical universe. For the traditional Akan people, the true meaning of Genesis 1:28: "And God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (KJV), is that human beings are to see themselves not as conquerors of other creatures but as stewards of nature (personal communication with Okomfo Tawia August 3, 2008.). It is this that has informed the Akan, using their religion as the basis, to evolve some environmental code of ethics regarding the use of the environment. Because of the involvement of their religion and the vital role that the environment plays in the life of the Akan, anyone who breaches any of those environmental codes is severely sanctioned.

## 7. Akan Traditional Ways of Salvaging Nature

This section mainly dwells on some specific elements in Akan religion and culture which are used to enhance environmental conservation. Five of such elements are focused on here. These are: the institution of sacred groves, the Akan traditional conception of land (earth) and water bodies, totem and the belief in *sasa*. These strategies are enforced through the institution of taboos.



## 8. Akan Sacred Groves and Nature Conservation

The concept of sacred groves is prominent in the Akan traditional society and in fact, throughout Ghana. There is also evidence to show that the concept or the practice of sacred grove is popular in Africa and Asia (Laird 1999, Chouin 2002, Fomin 2008, Ntiamoah-Baidu 2008). Sacred groves are usually the indigenous reserves that have been strictly protected, and in some cases many centuries ago due to their religious and cultural significance. The groves are usually patches of forests which are so designated by the traditional authorities in the various communities. They are usually connected with the history, culture and religion of the community concerned (Ntiamoah-Baidu 2008). These groves may range in size from a few hectares to quite a sizable stretch of land (Nyamweru and Kimaru, 2008). Sacred groves are differently called among the various Akan groups. The Twi-speaking Akan term for sacred grove is *kwaye yemno* (a forest that no one is allowed to clear, see Ntiamoah-Baidu 2008) and that of the Fante-speaking Akan is *nananommpow* (ancestors' grove).

The Akan attitude towards forests needs special attention in this discussion. Forests are viewed as crucial natural resource for humankind hence the Akan being guided by their religion and culture have instituted certain measures to safeguard their forests in order to ensure their sustainable use. The main means the Akan use to conserve forest is the institution of 'sacred forest/grove'. In Ghana, sacred groves are estimated to constitute the bulk of the 1% of the forest that remains outside existing reserves (Fetzner 2007). It is estimated that there are about 2,000 to 3,200 sacred groves scattered throughout Ghana (Tuffour 1991; Gordon 1992). The groves are protected by local taboos, norms and belief systems in the rural communities. Failure to comply with the taboos and norms could result in ill-luck, diseases, death or social sanctions (Rattray 1959; Dercher 1996). The institution of sacred groves abides in the Akan society because of the religious underpinnings attached to them. Such groves are believed to be the abode of the gods, ancestors and other spirit beings; they may also serve as royal mausoleum for the community (almost all my informants emphasized this belief). Usually all forms of vegetation and water bodies (many a time these water bodies are the reigning deities of the grove) in the grove are under the care of the reigning deity of that grove and thus, people are usually prevented from entering such places. It is usually the accredited

members (usually priests/priestesses, chiefs, family heads etc.) of the community that are permitted to enter the 'sacred groves' to perform the necessary rituals on behalf of the other members of the community.

## 9. The *Koraa* Sacred Grove

The origin of the *Koraa* grove is quite interesting. The elders of Biadan, a village about three kilometers west of Berekum (the traditional capital) which has the custody of the grove told me the name of the grove derived from the local river called *Koraa* (literary known as calabash in Akan) which runs through the grove (forest). According to them, the people's serious attachment to the river and the grove for that matter resulted from the crucial role that the river played in the lives of the founding fathers of Berekum. Oral sources in Berekum say war once broke out between the Berekum and their neighbours, the Dormaa. The sources said, any time that the Dormaa forces got to the bank of river *Koraa*, the river would terribly overflow its banks, thereby making it impossible for the Dormaa army to cross over to launch an attack on them even though the season would not be a rainy season. This saving gesture of the river cemented a close bond between it and the people. The story continued that, at first, the people used to fish in the river but anytime that they ate fish or crabs from the river they would experience stomach troubles. The elders consulted a diviner and the answer was that the river did not want her children (fishes, crabs etc) to be destroyed. This explains why fishing is seriously prohibited in the river *Koraa*. The people now go to the river side on sacred days to watch the fish as they swim beautifully in the stream.

The custodians of the grove are known as *Koraasefo* (literary translated as the descendants of *Koraa*). They attend to the grove on behalf of the chief of Biadan. This explains why whenever someone breaks the rule regarding the conservation of the grove, the person is summoned before Biadhanene (chief of Biadan), who also doubles as the *Akwamuhene* (*Akwamu* chief) of the Berekum traditional Area to face charges. At a spot in the grove, stands a place designated as *asonoyeso* (shrine) where the grove attendants offer prayers, sacrifice, and perform other kinds of rituals on behalf of the local people and on behalf of other worshippers who usually visit the shrine for various purposes. Today, the grove is very popular due its power to help those in need. It is generally believed that the river god is able to solve their problems for them. This is evident on Fridays, its sacred



Source: Author, 2008

*Figure 2.* The picture shows the pieces of cloth clients used in tying animals they brought to the grove to redeem their vows for various reasons



Source: Author, 2008

*Figure 3.* A picture showing the path leading to the Koraa shrine in the grove

day. Many people mostly far away from Berekum make regular visits to the grove to either entrust their protection under the care of the river god or to redeem vows already made to it. Even clients kept coming when I was interviewing the attendants of the grove. It is believed the river deity is capable of 'arresting' thieves and thereby retrieving stolen items for those who go there to ask for help in respect of their stolen items.

Within the groves, apart from the fishes and the crabs are various animals—alligators, antelopes, birds, and various species of butterflies. Trees such as: *onyina* (*Ceiba pentandra*), *odum* (*Chlorophora excelsa*), *Esa* (*Celtis mildbraedii*) *pepaa* (*Margaritaria discoigea*), *Kusia* (*Nauclea diderichii*), *Odi* (*Okoubaka aubrevillei*), *Kyenkyen* (*Antiaris Africana*) *Panpan* (*Albizia adianthifolia*), *Kasapenpen* (*Rauofia vomitovia*), *Sesɛdua* (*Funtumia* sp.), *Fema* (*Microdesmis puberula*), *Nyamedua* or *Sinduro* (*Alstonia gongenis*, *Wawa* (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*) etc. and a lot of rope creepers are found in the grove. Most of these tree species have important medicinal values. (Personal communication with Gyedu Augustine, a forester resident at Biadan October 7, 2008).

Although there is evidence to show that the *Koraa* sacred grove has suffered bush fires some time ago and some kind of encroachment by unscrupulous people, the over all ecological status of the grove is relatively not bad, for what is left, is tenaciously being protected by political and religious authorities in the area though not without occasional confrontations. For instance those who flout the law are summoned before the local chief and are made to provide sheep to pacify the river god.

## 10. Osudum Sacred Grove

Another significant sacred grove that needs attention is the *Osudum* sacred grove at Aburi in the Eastern Region of Ghana. According to the Priestess in charge of the grove, Nana Ntoabea, the grove is named after a river goddess in the grove called *Osudum Ama*. The goddess is believed to be the wife of another river in the area called *Kobi* also known as *Ntoabarima*. One significant role of the grove in the life of the traditional Aburi is that all the important initiation rituals for their priests take place in the grove. It is said that after the necessary rituals the goddess would come out from the water and present to the new priest a pot which contains all the powers that the new priest would need in his or her priesthood responsibilities.

Within the grove is a pond, which has a lot of alligators. These alligators are believed to be children of the god of the sacred grove. It is said that it is a bad omen for any of the alligators to come out of the grove. But if it happens, the animal(s) has/have to be sent back to the pond through some rituals performed by the chief priest. Because the grove is believed to be the abode of their goddess, the only people allowed to enter the *Osudum* grove are the chief priest and her attendants. Every year the chief priest and her attendants have to enter the grove two weeks to the annual *Odwira* Festival of the people of Aburi to perform the necessary rituals. The ecological importance of the *Osudum* sacred grove is seen in the fact that it serves as a habitat for important endangered trees like: *Onyina* (*Ceiba pentandra*), *Wawa* (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*), *Ofram* (*Terminalia superba*), *Kusia* (*Nau-clea diderrichii*) etc. All these trees are classified as endangered species in Ghana now. Crocodiles and pythons are also found in this grove along with different species of birds, butterflies and bees.

## 11. Biodiversity Value of Sacred Groves

The phenomenon of sacred groves is popular among the Akan but it is not that which necessarily adds much to the status and legitimacy of an Akan ruler as it is the case in some African societies, for instance, as among the Cameroon Grassfields (Fomin, 2008), even though their conservation or maintenance is the responsibility of the chief. Legitimacy to a stool lies in being a royal—being connected to the founding fathers of the community concerned through blood and being customarily enstooled.

Even though questions have been raised as whether the nature conservation attributes of sacred groves are deliberate or fortuitous coincidence (Aiah and Guries 2008), it is a bit difficult to give a yes or no answer to this issue. However, when one examines the way religion has permeated the life and thought of the Akan, their total worldview and their general attitude towards sacred groves, one may posit that the conservation attributes inherent in sacred groves cannot be entirely fortuitous coincidence but there is a shred of evidence which point to the contrary, however latently it may be. It is evident from their utterances, practices and general attitudes towards sacred groves that there are other reasons in addition to religion for forest conservation. Religion is used due to their strong attachment to it.

Some studies show that “sacredness does not simply equal conservation” (Nyamweru and Sheridan 2008). In other words, beliefs do not always materialize in the real practice of everyday life. This theory may not wholly be applicable to the Akan of Ghana particularly among the old folk (see Ntiamoah-Baidu 2008), because I gathered from my interaction with informants connected with the *Koraa* Grove, for instance, that the belief in and the presence of the grove and their attitude towards it have ensured the perennial flow of water in the *Koraa* river and this has ensured the continuous water supply in the entire traditional area. They were also emphatic that due to the windbreak that the trees had created, the roofs of their buildings had never been rifted off as it had been the case in other parts of the Berekum area. It is important to note here that there isn't any town or village in Berekum area that sacred grove(s) is/are not found. However small they may be, their ecological implications cannot be glossed over even though ‘large forest reserves generally are preferred for maintaining intact floras and faunas’ (Riitters et al. 2000, Terborgh 1992). The axiom “half a loaf is better than no bread” applies here.

Another dimension of these sacred groves is that apart from serving as shrines, they can as well aid in photosynthesis and its resultant oxygen production. This can also aid in rainfall, which is very essential for human survival. No wonder the importance of the institution of sacred groves in the conservation of biodiversity has long, as Anthwal et al. (2006, 35) have observed, been recognized by researchers like (Kosambi 1962; Gadgil and Vartak 1976; Haridasan and Rao 1985; Khan *et al.* 1997). Not only these eminent scholars, but also, no mean bodies like the IUCN, the world's biggest conservation network and UNESCO accept this view. In its 1996 Sacred Sites—Cultural Integrity, Biological Diversity UNESCO found that:

Sacred groves have served as important reservoirs of biodiversity, preserving unique species of plants, insects, and animals. Sacred and taboo associations attached to particular species of trees, forest groves, mountains, rivers, caves, and temple sites should therefore continue to play an important role in the protection of particular ecosystems by local people...

Dudley et al. (2005) report that the 2000 Bangkok Conference by the WWF and WCPA recognized the indispensability of religious concerns, among other things, for effective biodiversity conservation.

## 12. Conception of Land (Earth) and Nature Conservation

In the Ghanaian culture, land (earth) is conceived as a gift from *Onyame* (God), first to the ancestors and to the subsequent generations and hence must be handled with sanctity. This makes land a divine gift to the social group or communally owned and thus must be used in such a way that posterity will also benefit from this divine love. Opuni Asiamah (2007) puts the general Ghanaian conception of land thus:

Land ownership in Ghana is characterized by religious beliefs and practices. To the northern tribes land is a sacred trust of the ancestors, whose labour won it and preserved it for the use of their descendants; it belongs to them and the belief is general that to sell land is a sacrilege. Among the Ga Mashie, land is considered to be owned by the lagoon gods. To the Akan, land is a supernatural feminine spirit with Thursday as its natal day, which can be helpful if propitiated and harmful if neglected...

Following from the above, one can observe that the importance of the land or the earth (*Asaase*) to the Akan cannot be over emphasized. No wonder it is considered as one of their important deities (Parrinder, 1961:38). The earth is viewed as a goddess and, in the Akan traditional society, the earth is the deity that receives drinks after *Onyame* when libation is being made (Opoku 1978:56). As Asiamah has observed, in the Akan society, a special day has been set aside in honour of the earth goddess every week. This day, however, depends on the Akan community concerned. The Ashanti, one of the dominant Akan groups for instance, believed that the earth goddess came into being on a Thursday, hence the Earth is called *Asaase Yaa* and Thursday is designated as her sacred day. The Fante, however, called her *Asaase Efiua* because they believe the earth goddess came into being on a Friday. This sacred day, apart from its religious significance, can serve as giving resting day not only to human beings, but also the animals, forests, lakes, rivers and all that has something to do with the land.

As a goddess, the earth considers certain things as taboos or hateful. These include: tilling the land on her sacred day, sexual intercourse on the bare land particularly in the bush, when a women delivers in the bush, burying pregnant women without removing the foetus, spilling of blood on it, etc. A breach of any of the above acts is considered as defilement and, in fact, a serious sin against the earth goddess. It is purification that can restore the severed relation or else misfortunes will follow the perpetrator(s)

and in some cases, the entire members of the community may suffer. This may result in strange diseases or poor crop yield etc.

### 13. Water Bodies and Nature Conservation

Traditional Akan people view rivers and other water bodies—sea, lagoons, and lakes etc.—as sacred entities just as it is seen among the Egyptians and other places (Parrinder, 1974:49) and, therefore, strict religious taboos are put in place to regulate the use of such wetlands. For instance, it is a taboo to defecate near a water body particularly a river basin or for a menstruating woman to cross or fetch water from a river (probably this is meant to prevent pollution from the menstrual blood), or to farm close to the source of a river. Perhaps the latter injunction finds its origin in the perceived relation between clearing the vegetation around the water source and the river drying up. Obviously this is the traditional Akan way of ensuring a perennial flow of water in the river. Also fishermen living along the seashore and revering the Sea goddess (*Bosompo*) as a sacred entity, observe the taboo of not fishing on Tuesdays since this day is reserved as her sacred day. Apart from the religious connotation of the day, this act can also be seen as a way of giving the sea a breathing space to replenish its fish. Also, all the lagoons and lakes along the Ghana coast are revered. For instance, fishing in the *Fosu* and *Benya* lagoon of Cape Coast and Elmina respectively is regulated. Usually, prior to the main fishing period (July-September) a ban is placed on fishing in the lagoons. Fishermen in Cape Coast can resume fishing in the *Fosu* lagoon only after the *Fetu* Festival has been performed. Those in Elmina can also fish in *Benya* lagoon after the *Bakatue* (literary, opening of the lagoon) festival. In both cases, rituals are performed during which the chief fishermen cast their nets and the catch that is made indicates that year's catch. These opening rituals are very important to the fishermen in the two important fishing communities in Ghana. This is because it can give an indication of the kind of catch that will be made in the impending season. For instance, if plenty of fish are caught when the chief fishermen cast their fishing nets, it means they will have a bumper catch during the year, but a bad season, if a small amount of fish are caught. All those fishermen who flout the rule are severely punished (personal communication with Nana Kwamena Baidu, former chief fisherman in Elmina, February, 4, 2007). It is also a taboo to use unapproved methods for fishing, for instance,





Source: Author, 2007

*Figure 4.* The above picture shows some of the irresponsible use of wetlands in coastal Ghana today

using poisonous chemicals to catch fish. Fishing is also strictly banned in some rivers in the Akan society for the fish are considered to be the children of the spirit dwelling in the water bodies. One can cite the cases of rivers *Tano* and *Koraa* in the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana. All these are there to ensure the natural quality of water bodies for now and the future generations. As stated in the state of the environment in Ghana now, the people's attitude towards wetlands is deteriorating at a faster rate as the picture above indicates.

#### **14. Totems and Nature Conservation**

A totem is usually an object such as an animal or plant that is believed to have a special (usually) sacred relationship with an individual, a tribe, a clan, a family or a group of people. Several theories or hypotheses have been propounded by scholars to explain the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> It has already been made known that the Akan world view is a religious one. For instance, even in their clan system, which is a social institution, is made religious through the concept of totem. The Akan tribe is sub-divided into 8 clans

<sup>3</sup> For details on some of the theories see, John Ferguson McLennan, *The Worship of Animals and Plants*, 1869, 1870; Sir James George Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, 1910, Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo in 1912-13 etc.*

with each clan having its special totem.<sup>4</sup> The table below shows the 8 clans of the Akan and their corresponding totems:<sup>5</sup>

CLAN	TOTEM VERNACULAR NAME	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	SYMBOLIC QUALITY
Oyoko	<i>Akroma</i>	Falcon/Hawk	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	Patience
Bretuo	<i>Qsebo</i>	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	Aggressiveness
Asona	<i>Kwaakwaadabi</i>	Pied crow	<i>Corvus albu</i>	Wisdom
Asenie	<i>Apan</i>	Bat	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>	Diplomacy
Aduana	<i>Okraman</i>	Dog	<i>Canis domestica</i>	Skill
Ekuona	<i>Ekoo</i>	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>	Uprightness
Asakyiri	<i>Opete</i>	Vulture	<i>Neophron monochus</i>	Cleanliness
Agona	<i>ako (awidie)</i>	Parrot	<i>Psittacosis erithacus</i>	Eloquence

The Akan word for totem is *akyeneboa*, which literally means ‘an animal that one leans upon or relies on for spiritual inspiration’.<sup>6</sup> Myths exist in all the 8 clans on the Akanland to explain how each clan came to be associated with its totem. But there is always the belief that their totem played a crucial role in the survival of the ancestors of the clan involved. For this reason, among the Akan, the totem object is always revered and it is a taboo to kill, eat or destroy a totem in any way but must be protected at all cost. For instance, when a totem dies, members of the clan or tribe it represents, show their reverence by, for example, mourning and burying it as it is done in the case of a human being (Parrinder 1961:172). Also, most of the animal totems among the Akan have a symbolic quality which the head and the clan members are expected to adopt or emulate. For instance, the people of Asankare, whose totem is the *akyemfena* (kite), can be used to explain this point well. The people say:

Once, very long ago, a king was sitting in state when out of the blue, this kite swooped down like lightning and picked a chicken right in the royal presence. This daring and courageous impunity was construed as exceptional courage

<sup>4</sup> This was confirmed by all the people interviewed in the study area

<sup>5</sup> See Conservation International—Ghana, *Handbook of Totems in Ghana: Traditional Mechanism for Biodiversity Conservation*, Accra: Innolink, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Conservation International—Ghana, 2.

which must be forever imitated for progress and continued survival of the clan (Oti, 2005)

Another common feature among the Akan is that each stool or traditional jurisdiction has its own totem. For instance, among the Ashanti, the biggest Akan tribe in Ghana, there are as many as twenty one traditional areas or paramountcies and each of these traditional areas has its own totem. It is also interesting to note that all these traditional areas have more than one totem. For instance, in the *Kokofu* traditional area alone, one could count as many as seven different totems—black kite, pied crow, grey parrot, buffalo, dog, vulture and lion. In the Tachimian traditional area, a prominent paramountcy among the Bono tribe, the bat and the mudfish from the river *Tano*, are their main totems, whilst the people of the Wenchi Traditional Area have the python, a lion and the tree *owea* (hyrax) as their totems.<sup>7</sup> Even though a totem of ethnic group A may not be the case for group B, generally one may say the concept can in a way ensure environmental conservation especially in the area of flora and fauna because they are obliged to protect them at all cost.

## 15. Belief in *Sasa* and Nature Conservation

*Sasa*<sup>8</sup> is a special spirit that the Akan believe resides in some trees and animals. In the Akan traditional milieu, there is a strong belief that certain trees—*odum* (*Chlorophora excelsa*), *tweneboa* (*Entan drophragma*), *onyina* (*Ceiba pentandra*), mahogany, etc. cannot be felled without some kind of rituals preceding it due to strong spirits believed to be residing in them. A special mention is made of *tweneboa* (cedar), a special specie of tree which is used in making the *fontomfrom* drum of the Akan (Warren, 1973:60; Rattray, 1959:5, 271). This is also true of some animals. For instance, no Akan *obofoo* (hunter) will kill an elephant or a *tromo* (buffalo), without going through some kind of purificatory rituals. These animals are believed to possess a special kind of spirit known as *sasa* in Akan language. Therefore, any hunter who kills such animals must purify himself lest he will be haunted by the *sasa* residing in it. This can take the form of facing a series

<sup>7</sup> For more details on the Akan totems, see Conservation International Ghana, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For some information on *sasa* see pages 1-8 and P. 271 of Rattray's *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, printed in 1927, reprinted in 1954 and 1959.

of misfortune, madness, strange diseases or even death (Obobo Nketia, personal communication, August 10, 2007). This belief in *sasa* makes the destruction of these kinds of animals and trees a bit difficult and hence in a way ensures their conservation. It is in this light that Anane admonishes thus:

Perhaps what modern conservationists, policy makers and researchers, particularly in the West, must do is to go back and learn from traditional religion and culture that managed to live alongside the rivers and forests and use them sustainably. (...) Religion, undoubtedly, is indispensable to modern-day conservation and environmental protection efforts... (undated).

## **16. Akan Indigenous Lifeways' Encounter with Colonization and Christianity**

One may at this juncture ask if indeed Akan religion is environmentally friendly as the above narration indicates, why then this sudden deplorable nature of the Akan (Ghana) environment. The answer is not far fetched as the following discussion will show.

Until the advent of colonization and Christianity, the system of government known and practised was chieftaincy, a system of governance or political arrangement under which the leader is known as a chief. The chief is viewed as the source of all traditional authority because he is regarded as representing the founding fathers of the state (See Yanka, 1995: 95). In view of this, the appointment or selection of a traditional ruler (king, chief, clan head etc.) involves religion. Divination, a religious practice, always precedes the election and installation of a chief. The election of a chief is done by consulting the priest who divines to seek the approval of the ancestors of community concerned (Personal communication with Nana Adu Gyamfi Kumanini, a traditional ruler 12 November 2008). Even after the installation, in the view of the traditional Akan, the safest means by which a chief can protect himself, his people and state is through religion (divination). This means religion becomes more crucial in a chief's day-to-day administration of the community (personal communication with Nana Adjei Ampofo, a traditional ruler, 12 November 2008). In fact, among the Akan, a chief loses his/her legitimacy to power if he/she relents on his/her religious duties (all chiefs interviewed emphasized this view).

The system of government in Ghana at the pre-colonial era could be described as theocratic in a way and African Traditional Religion was the state religion. This undoubtedly tells one that the legal basis of authority for the traditional Akan leader is religion. From the above, one may say that in the traditional Akan society it is unthinkable to talk about separating religion from the state because political leadership is intrinsically fused with spiritual leadership.

There seemed to have been little problems during this era since no one dared to challenge the authority of the chief, for doing so was tantamount to challenging the ancestors. The laws, customs, taboos and other code of ethics in traditional Ghanaian societies have divine backing since they are believed to have been sanctioned by the gods and ancestors. Therefore, they invoke divine sanctions on anyone who disobeys them. There is compliance even when one is in solitude due to this firm belief of the people. This means the environmental laws endured due to the strong religious attachments.

In the Akan society, one of the key responsibilities of a chief is to ensure that his subjects' activities are that which enable every generation to ensure its survival and enables generations to hand over the survival potential to the future generation as directed by religion (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2007). Anything short of this is failure on the part of a chief and thus faces the wrath of the spirit beings particularly the ancestors. This stems from the Akan worldview that life is supreme and anything that ensures life becomes everyone's religious duty. This explains why the chiefs and elders of the Akan do not take kindly to any action that tends to destroy the environment. This also accounts for why it is not uncommon to see religion playing an active role in the Akan's quest to ensure environmental conservation.

The above constitutes the summary of what was obtained in the Akan society before western colonial powers with their appendage—Christianity—came to the scene. Things took a different dimension when the colonial masters gained ground in the affairs of Ghanaians. Thereafter, all legislations passed by the colonial administrators were influenced by Christian principles. Christianity, so to speak, wielded much influence in Ghana at that time since the colonial policies strengthened the missionary endeavours. From 1878 to 1910 (Ghana was then called Gold Coast), the governors introduced a series of laws called *Native Jurisdiction Ordinances*. A

common feature of these laws was that the indigenous rulers (chiefs) were granted only limited powers to preside over cases (F.K. Buah, 1998: 221). The implication of this reduction of the powers of the chiefs was that the hold of African Traditional Religion on the indigenous people was gradually being reduced since the chiefs were the embodiment or the custodians of the indigenous religion. No wonder at this time, much legislation was passed to outlaw some of the African religious beliefs and practices. The result of this encounter was the gradual replacement of traditional system of government with the western liberal democracy with its Christianity biases and thus weakening the authority of the chief (Parrinder, 1961: 188). The direct consequence of this is that taboos, totems, the institution of sacred groves and others, which thrive on traditional religion and culture, have been removed and the traditional sacred sites are now at the mercy of people (personal communication with Nana Akyea a traditional priest, 2 March 2008). And as Sheridan (2008: 9-41) puts it: "...sacred groves became increasingly marginalized institutions, and therefore accessible for resource exploitation. Axes and chainsaws replaced sacrifices and initiation ceremonies."

Also, unlike sometime ago when traditional religion was the sole religion in the country, Ghana is now engulfed by plural value systems some of which are theistic and some non-theistic. This has resulted in a steady abandonment of traditional religion and culture by particularly, the youth in the Akanland and, in fact, throughout Ghana for other philosophies of life and faiths particularly the Christian faith. The indigenous religion is only strong among the older Akan just as (Nyamweru and Kimaru, 2008) have noted about the Kaya people of coastal Kenya. This situation is what Crane (1965:1) calls, according to Assimeng (1989:68), "‘alienation’—the process of *deracination*, of the undermining of traditional authority, traditional community and traditional sanctions, and of *depersonalization* that often takes place as result of the encounter of a modern, industrialized, urbanized society with the traditional village society".

Some time ago, very prominent shrines like: *Kukuo*, *Diamono*, *Apomasu*, *Tigare*, *Mframa* where traditional religion took centre stage, are now completely wiped out from the study area either for the lack of priests/priestesses to attend to these gods or worshippers to assist the priests/priestesses in worship. Three of the traditional priests I interacted with informed me that for several years they had not been able to perform their deities' annual festivals simply because their children who were supposed to assist them

during worship had become Christians. The hold of western culture and Christianity on Ghana is very strong. Therefore, the use of the gods as police to enforce compliance as it used to be, may not work today. Because many of the youth who had received western education and are mostly Christians disregard the traditional leaders and especially the power of the gods and the ancestors with impunity. Traditional Religion, which forms the basis of traditional society, has been shaken to its very foundation. As a result, the sacred groves which hitherto could not be entered by ordinary people are now entered and in some cases logged by timber contractors. Instances could be cited of *Mfansi* and the *Mangina* sacred groves in the Brong-Ahafo region and the *Eyesam* grove in the Central region of Ghana. It is pertinent to note here that the destruction of sacred groves in Africa started long time ago as Sheridan (2008) reports Chevalier to have remarked about the status of sacred groves in French West Africa as early as 1933: "since our contact the primitive has abandoned his creed, and the sacred groves are disappearing."

Until the emergence of Christianity in Ghana, traditional religion played a central role in the people's entire life. Soon after its arrival, Christianity began to attack African culture and belief systems. Some of the major targets of the missionary assault included ancestral worship, divination, rites of passage procedures and ceremonies of marriage. In fact, '...the attitude of the missionary towards Akan religion and social customs was destructive... the Christian congregation came into existence in conscious opposition to the ancestral ways of life and thought of the rest of the community' (Smith 1966: 86). Juhe-Beaulaton (2008) expresses similar concerns about the Benin and Togo people of West Africa. In attacking these beliefs and practices, the missionaries were not striking at anything but the very roots of the Africans' culture. Christians refuse obedience to the chief on several grounds (Parrinder, 1961: 188). The effects of Christianity on African Traditional Religion and Culture have aptly been expressed by Nukunya (1986:87) thus:

In order to understand the effects of Christianity on African culture, it is necessary to realise that traditional institutions never existed or functioned separately like discrete entities but dovetailed into one another. Religion for instance never operated independently of the kinship structure and the social control and vice versa. Any impingement on the religious beliefs, practices and organisations was, therefore, bound to affect not only that aspect of social life but also other elements of it.

It should be noted that this paper is not suggesting that western education and Christianity are insensitive to nature conservation for it is on record that western education introduced scientific ways of conserving the natural resources in Ghana and also portions of the Bible are environmentally friendly. Also and particularly, the benefits derived from western education are enormous to the Akan. For example, through western education, some Ghanaians have risen to top positions in the UN. Alex Quayson Sackey was once the President of the UN General Assembly and recently Kofi Annan was the UN Secretary General for two consecutive terms. The nationalists, through whose efforts Ghana gained her independence, were the products of western education. Even most of them attended missionary schools. The contention of this paper is about the destruction of the indigenous institutions that form the basis of nature conservation through the way the Christians behaved towards such institutions. Due to their attitude towards traditional religion and chieftaincy, some of the beneficiaries, particularly the youth, feel that they have now gained a new form of freedom and through that euphoria, abuse the supposed freedom that they have gained. For instance, some youth resort to burning down shrines and in some cases show gross disrespect to rules instituted by their respective traditional authorities because they have been told such injunctions are primitive and unchristian.

### **17. Other Challenges to the Akan Biodiversity Conservation Strategy**

Some time ago, during the dry season a *gong gong* would be beaten banning the taking of fire to the bush, but today people flout this injunction with impunity and go to the extent of intentionally setting bush fires as a means of hunting for game. Because of this, many important sacred groves have been lost. The famous *Oboabena* sacred forest at Nwineso No. 2 in the Atwima-Kwawoma District in the Ashanti region was lost through bushfire (Personal communication with Kusi-Appiah Agyemang a traditionalist, 10 August, 2008). What we see and hear in Ghana today is what Assimeng (1989:75) calls 'tradition of change'. Yes, dynamism is important in any society, but one should not lose sight of the fact that any society that loses its core cultural values definitely loses its identity. And it is this change with no regard to our traditional core values that has translated into the wanton destruction of the environment and its attendant effects



that we see throughout Ghana today—poor climatic conditions, the unreliable rainfall pattern, destruction of important medicinal plants and flora and fauna as a whole. This rejection and replacement of traditional practices under the influence of western culture and the advent of modern industry (Anthwal, Sharma and Sharma 2006: 35), is an unfortunate one because foreign knowledge does not necessary mean modern technology but includes also indigenous practices developed and applied under similar conditions elsewhere (World Bank, 2007).

The policy-makers in Ghana cannot absolve themselves from this situation because there is little governmental support for funding field research on indigenous knowledge. It appears policy-makers in Ghana have fallen victim to the religious pressures in the country being led by the Christian faith. For instance, in 1982, the then government of Ghana, The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), granted air time on the national radio station to the *Afrikania* Mission, a newly formed revivalist movement within African Traditional Religion led by *Osofo Okomfo* Damua, an ex-Catholic Priest to broadcast their worship live to the nation. This drew a strong protest from the Christians and members of other faiths describing the government as anti-God. The pressure was so strong that the government had to rescind its decision. Just this month (October 2008), a former Minister in the previous government was attacked through the radio phone-in-calls throughout the country for invoking the curses of *Antoa Nyamaa*, a powerful local deity to declare the innocence of his party in a case against them. The attack on African Traditional Religion and Culture led by Christians in the country may be one of the reasons why the policy-makers of this country have removed 'Cultural Studies', which lays emphasis on traditional religion and culture from the curricula of the basic schools in the country. The effects of this are beginning to show. I once asked my level 400 students of the University Cape Coast who were Akan, to mention their various clans and their corresponding totems. Many of them did not even know their clans let alone their totems.

Another great challenge to the use of traditional conservation models is the reality of population explosion and its resultant tremendous social and economic pressures. The groves located near settlements most especially those in the urban areas are disappearing at a faster rate. These pressures at times force the traditional authorities to agree to cede part of the groves for settlement purposes. The *Kyiridade* Sacred Grove at Nsuta in the *Sēkyere*

District of Ashanti region suffered this fate (Personal communication with Nana Osei Agyemang, a traditional ruler June 28, 2008). This explains why today we only see small pockets of isolated forest canopies in the sacred groves (Kingdon, 1989). The water bodies have not been spared of this onslaught. There are many areas in the study area where houses have been built even in the river channels. One can cite the *Subin* river in Kumasi as a case. Also, channels of many rivers and lagoons and ponds have become refuse dumps. This explains the frequent floods that we experience in the urban areas of Ghana today.

### 18. The Way Forward

No country, particularly developing ones like Ghana, can be successful in her sustainable development efforts if she neglects her indigenous knowledge base in her policy decisions. This is because 'in the emerging global knowledge economy a country's ability to build and mobilize knowledge capital is equally essential for sustainable development as the availability of physical and financial capital' (World Bank, 1997). Also 'the basic component of any country's knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge. It encompasses the skills, experiences and insights of people, applied to maintain or improve their livelihood' (World Bank, 1997). Pandey (undated), reports Posey (1983b and Schultes, 1974) as having confirmed the role of religion and culture in environmental conservation thus: "that belief systems of every culture establish a relationship between its people and the environment. Several species of trees have long been protected by the followers of all the major religions of the world".

Research has shown that the role of religion in biodiversity cannot be over emphasized. For instance, (Tucker and Grim (1997) as cited in Pandey, undated) offer a compelling argument on the role of religion and culture in environmental management.

It is to be noted that in spite of the influence of social change and the inroads of impinging faiths in Ghana, the traces of the effectiveness of using traditional religion and culture to ensure nature conservation especially in the rural communities cannot be overemphasized. For instance, Nana Adu-Gyamfi, the chief of Biadan, told me during an interview with him that some time ago some people encroached on the *Koraa* sacred grove. He said his chief priest informed him during oracular consultation

that the river deity had been defiled by that encroachment and that she was going to act decisively. Nana hinted that those concerned had to quickly stop their activities and arranged to pacify the offended river deity with the view of avoiding the wrath of the river deity. Also, according to Appiah-Opoku (2007), Dyasi (1985) conducted a research among certain fishermen in some parts the of Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana, and found out that some of the fishermen were using the pesticide dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) in their fishing expedition with the view to increasing fish catch. He said it was the invocation of indigenous beliefs and taboos that effectively reduced the incidence of pesticide fishing in the area.

Fortunately, today, “the religious environmental movement is blooming in depth, diversity and impact particularly outside Africa. Most faith groups are actively pursuing environmental goals, and thousands of individuals motivated by faith are addressing environmental concerns, often through personal behavior or secular groups”.<sup>9</sup> This should be a pointer to the policy-makers, policy implementers, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like: Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Animals, and in fact all the eco-biased groups in Ghana to take a cue from this healthy development and put their energies together and help the traditional authorities—custodians of indigenous religions in Ghana—and particularly researchers in this field, to help preserve the environment. It must, however, be stressed here that much will depend on the efforts that the government will put in by way of financially supporting research on indigenous knowledge.

Another possible way to let people, particularly the youth, know and appreciate the indigenous conservation methods is to channel it through the curricula of schools in the country. And one effective way to do this is to invite traditional people who are knowledgeable or experts in indigenous conservation knowledge to the school to give talks either directly to the students or by way of workshops to sensitize the teachers on this special knowledge for them to impart to the students.

It has been noted earlier that even the few sacred groves left are being threatened by economic pressure, wanton bushfires and disregard for indigenous religion. These challenges should be a matter of concern to all well-meaning Ghanaians. This means there is the urgent need to preserve

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<sup>9</sup>) Article on-line [http://www.religionlink.org/tip\\_071112.php](http://www.religionlink.org/tip_071112.php) Last Accessed 19-09-08]

and properly manage the existing sacred groves. Even some of the sites could be developed into eco-tourists destination to improve the lives of the local people even though Dudley et al (2005:122), caution us on this venture since in the end, the local people may not enjoy the desired benefits. This paper, therefore, recommends some sort of partnership between the government and the local authorities who are the custodians of these groves. This can be done by way of the governmental support, specifically, by giving legal backing (to be strictly enforced) to the traditional authorities to protect the few sacred groves that are left as has been done with the famous Boaben-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary<sup>10</sup> (even an inventory of very important species in the groves could be taken to ensure their protection against over exploitation) and if possible, salvage the destroyed ones throughout the country. This move is important because proceedings of various UNESCO and MAB Conferences have shown that “when a purely Western scientific approach with its secular, material, and reductionistic worldview is applied to sacred places it may disrupt the associated culture and religion, generate resentment and conflict, and even lead to the degradation of the place” (Sponsel and Casgrande, 2008). Also anthropologists and others have established that “Western science, technology, and government have no monopoly on environmental conservation” (Sponsel and Casgrande, 2008). Hence, the need for the blending of both the modern and the indigenous ways of biodiversity conservation. This also implies the need for our policy-makers to reconsider the removal of Cultural Studies from the basic school curriculum. This will enable the youth to appreciate the role our culture and religion can play in our environmental conservation efforts.

It is important to note that all our efforts to conserve the environment will be a mirage if as a nation we fail to put structures in place to ensure food and shelter security and check population explosion, for it will be very difficult to prevent people from entering our forest reserves and sacred

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<sup>10</sup> This grove is one of the widely studied sacred groves in Ghana, located in the Nkoranza District of Brong-Ahafo. It is believed to be richer than any other Ghanaian forest in terms of diverse types and rare species of monkeys like the Black and White Colobus and Mona monkeys (Anane, undated). It is estimated that there are about 160 black-and-white Colobus and 350 Lowe's Mona monkeys, according to the Game Wardens, but most of the villagers interviewed, think the Mona and Colobus monkeys number about 1,000 and 600 respectively (Appiah-Opoku 2007). The sanctuary is also rich in trees; of about 125 known species, they include such rare ones as *Pericopsis Elata* (Anane undated).

groves to farm to feed themselves or the to cut timber for housing or to defecate in the open if the appropriate facilities are unavailable.

## 19. Conclusion

The discussion thus far has shown that the current state of the environment is not the best due to careless attitudes of some Ghanaians of today. It has also been clear from the discussion that indigenous Akan religion and culture are inherent with beliefs and practices that serve as effective tools for protecting and conserving nature. This is evident in the religiously inspired mechanisms designed to conserve nature—taboos, their conception of land, water bodies, sacred groves, totems, *Sasa* and the Akan general attitude towards nature. It has also come out clearly from the discussions that the Akan worldview is that which promotes a harmonious relationship among human beings, nature and God, and it is this that keeps the environmental stewardship light burning in the traditional Akan people in spite of challenges of today.

This paper has shown that nature conservation that is inspired through religion was to a large extent effective in the past but today, the potency of the traditional belief has declined due to modern factors and the inroads those foreign religions, particularly Christianity, has made in recent years. The real issue now is how to make the traditional ways of nature conservation appealing to the crop of Ghanaians of today. This, in this paper's view, should serve as an incentive to policy-makers to encourage serious research to increase our knowledge on how religion and culture were used in the past to ensure environmental conservation. This, it is believed, will enable us to identify more of those that can be used now to complement the modern means of conserving the environment than the present science-only based conservation models.

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