

Environmental Moral Degeneration and Regeneration: Towards¹⁰⁵ Setswana Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics

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Abstract

The paper explores Setswana and biblical moral teachings on the environment as well as their functions in the preservation of the Earth. It will also look at how contemporary profit-oriented relationships with the Earth constitute moral degeneration. Lastly, the paper will discuss how some Setswana perspective on the environment can constitute Earth friendly ways of reading the Bible for the revitalization of the Earth community as a whole. This paper demonstrated that in reading the Biblical narrative of Genesis 8:20, 9:17 God was not making a covenant only with men but rather God was making a covenant with the Earth using Noah as a representative of the whole creation. Consequently, Setswana Ecological biblical hermeneutics used in this paper offers an Earth friendly perspective of reading the Bible.

Key words: *Environmental degradation, Globalization, Setswana ecological knowledge, Environmental ethics, Setswana biblical hermeneutics.*

Introduction

Botswana national anthem's starts as follows: "*Fatshe leno la rona, ke mpho ya Modimo, ke boswa jwa borraetsho...*" which translates to, "Our land is a gift from God, an inheritance from our forbearers." Undergirding this statement is the recognition by the founders of Botswana that their land is a gift from the deity *Modimo* (God). Therefore, the song encapsulates a theology of the environment and summons all Batswana to understand and recognize that God is the giver of the land. Recognizing the land as a sacred gift has implications for both the land and its recipients. In this paper, we assume that by singing the national anthem, "Botswana is a sacred gift from God", we recognize that the land must remain sacred, and that this must be attested to by our ways of living and using the land. Though this is the case, there has been serious instances of environmental degradation to the extent that Batswana have been called upon to take care of their environment. The question is, have Batswana forgotten or ignored the anthem's exhortation to protect the environment?

¹⁰⁵ Setswana is here used to refer to traditional norms and ways of life of the people of Botswana

Having grown up in the beautiful Okavango and Maun, one of the authors recalls the great rivers such as Thamalakane River, which runs across the town, and divides it into two; and the water reeds that beautify the riverbank after which Maun was named. Maun now remains a shadow of its former days. The water from the Thamalakane river, which they used for daily sustenance, is no longer drinkable because it is polluted by the members of the community. This eco- injustice is conspicuously vocalized by Musa Dube (2015:230), who explains that humanity has failed to recognize that in the creation narrative, people are depicted as the children of the earth. Dube (2015:230) writes, “The human beings are told to keep the Earth Community just as good as God created it. Nonetheless, today’s audience cannot watch the biblical drama of creation as an innocent spectator because the Earth is facing an environmental crisis from human exploitation”.

This paper argues that at the core of human moral degradation is the failure to recognize the sanctity of the Earth. In Botswana, citizens have increasingly become detached from the values of environmental ethics that are embedded in Setswana traditions and customs resulting in environmental degradation. One of the causes of environmental degradation is the failure of humanity to remember the Earth as the core member of our community. This paper will therefore utilize Setswana ecological traditions to propose a Setswana ecological Biblical Hermeneutics in reading Genesis 8: 20-9-17.

Definition of Environmental Degradation

Swati Tiyagi, Neelam Girga and Rajan Paudel (2014:1491) point out that environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of natural resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystem and the extinction of wildlife. They continue to state that environmental degradation may be defined as any change or disturbance to the environment perceived to be deleterious or undesirable (2014:1491). At the core of environmental degradation, is failure to recognize the environmental value, resulting in the now observable behavior of using nature primarily for human benefit, consumption and endless quest for accumulation of profits.

There are close to three phases of environmental degradation awareness that have developed and unfolded over the past 58 years on the global stage (Conradie 2005). The first phase raised concerns about the chemicals used in agriculture setting in the US and Britain (Oosthoek & Grill 2005). Rachael Carson’s the *Silent Spring* (1962) addresses this issue. Consequently,

DDT was banned in Britain and other countries in the middle of 1960s (Oosthoek & Grill 2005). The second phase raised a concern about population growth and economic development in the late 1960s. Several publications such as *Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich, *Unsafe at any Speed* by Ralph Nader, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution* by Carolyn Merchant addressed this aspect. The third phase came in the late 1980s when scientists realized signs of humanity's global impact on the environment. The first and second of these signs were the thinning of the Ozone layer and global warming respectively (Oosthoek & Grill 2005).

Human behavior is the main cause of environmental degradation. Conradie argues that when human species lose their sense of right and wrong, they do not only affect their society but the environment as well, making the Earth an unpleasant place to reside in (2005:183). Gabriel Setiloane (1985:40) notes that in the Sotho Tswana worldview, "*Motho* is part of Nature and Nature is *Motho's* companion from the beginning. Nature is not therefore an object for human exploitation, for like humanity, it came from the same Source." In this theological understanding, human beings do not possess supreme power or rights over nature, since they come from the same source and are interconnected. This worldview does not only bring the interconnectedness between the people and the environment, but also underlines the need for a relationship of liberating interdependence.

Globalization and Industrialization

The causes of the environmental degradation have been debated for decades now. The following factors have been identified as the main causes or contributors to environmental degradation: technological developments, rapidly increasing human population, dramatic increases in resource and energy consumption, the emergence and development of the capitalist world economy and, utilitarian attitudes towards the environment (Belal, Cooper & Khan 2015:44). At the center of these causes is Humanity's rapaciousness in the context of globalization. According to Eisenhardt (2002:88) globalization entails an interrelationship between countries, companies and individuals. It refers to the neoliberal economic policy that underlines the generation of profit across boundaries to the point where ethics are subjugated to profit making; and people and environmental welfare are sacrificed for profit (Belal, Cooper & Khan 2015:44). The key players in globalization are multinational corporations which seek

to maximize profit, without long-term commitment to their workers, communities and the environment.

Human beings think, imagine and invent in order to develop their surroundings. Scholars have argued that humanity's thinking capacity and reasoning are what distinguish them from their environment.¹⁰⁶ Amid Frouel writes,

They create systems and devices and develop technologies that are more and more complex, that are quicker and quicker, and that are more and more ingenious. For several years, the process of modernism has been accelerating, seemingly impeded by nothing (YR, pg)

These developments affect lives such as religion and how we view the environment. However developments mining, chemical industries and forms of transport that release pollutants into the atmosphere, among many others, fail to take into account the significance of the environment within the community structure. Such developments cause Ozone depletion, destruction of trees and plants and also temper with animal movements.

The degradation is partly because humanity has not fully grasped the sacrament of the environment, although this has begun to change in the last two decades. The sacrament of the environment is crucial in that it changes people's perspective from viewing the environment as mechanical. John Chryssavgis (2006:93) argues that since humanity has failed to see the sacrament of creation, they therefore arrogantly subject everything to their individualistic desires. Developments that do not consider these aspects end up lacking the sensitivity or disturbing the established relationship between humanity and nature.

At the heart of environmental degeneration is human being's contemporary attitude of using the natural resources for gain and profit rather than coming up with strategies of preserving nature. This attitude develops a buyer and seller mentality which implies that human beings use natural resources without realizing that they will be depleted. Consequently, this mentality puts too much burden on the environment given that consumerism is central to the economy of the country. According to Sally Mcfague (2013:8), "the "culture of consumerism" is not just a form of life that we can accept or reject; it has now become the air we breathe. This is the

“nature” of “culture”—culture becomes nature, it becomes “natural.” The reorientation of profit-making attitude towards natural resources is necessary for environmental regeneration. If human beings do not change their attitude in the way they view and use natural resources, environmental degradation will neither be avoided nor reduced.

Setswana Perspective on the Environment

The global environmental crisis has shown the shortcomings of the scientific approach developed from the western economic paradigm in solving environmental challenges (Bernard 2001:33, Masondo 2014:115). It is important therefore to revisit indigenous knowledge systems in preserving the environment (Bernard 2001:33; Chanda 1996:65). Penny Bernard (2001:33) argues that the colonization of African countries has led many cultures to jettison their indigenous ecological knowledge thereby causing an environmental crisis hitherto unknown. Indigenous ecological knowledge is different from book learning because it is primarily rooted in the accumulation of personal experiences of preserving the environment (Straus 1962). In Botswana traditional dancing is not mere entertainment significant in the community, especially in relation to agricultural rites. It is in this area that Batswana show how important nature is to their livelihood. Ndigililo Gaosidiwe (2018) points out that dances are sometimes performed in rain making ceremonies. In Mapoka village, *Maele* dance is performed by women in September to ask the ancestors for rain. Another dance, which is primarily associated with the environment, is *Ndazula* (Gaosidiwe 2018) which is usually performed to thank the ancestors for a good harvest. Ceremonies like the ones mentioned above are important because it is in the pouring of rains, ploughing the ground and harvesting that the consciousness and value of the Earth are heightened. If the environment is not kind to the Sotho- Tswana people, they will appease it through rituals such as rain-making dances and sacrificing of sacred animals, kept specifically for these ritual (Masondo 2008:85).

In Botswana people observe agricultural rites such as *letsema* (start of the ploughing season), *Molomo* (the tasting of the first fruits), *dikgafela* (thanksgiving festival for rain after harvest) (Nkomazana 2010:123). Moses Maruping argues that, “Dikgafela is a traditional harvest festival, it is meant to appease the skies or ancestors (*badimo*) to release the rains, well in time before the looming ploughing season beckons.” In this celebration the women prepare beer would be given to the chief who would take a sip and pour it on the ground. Performing this act has various interpretations, one of which is that the chief recognizes the covenant with the Earth. in this ritual, the Chief acknowledges the interconnectedness between the human beings

and the Earth and God's generosity in giving human beings land, their greatest source of livelihood. The second interpretation is that the chief venerates the ancestors who have given them rain; and for which they deserve the first fruit from their land. The dances that accompany the celebrations, with their thumping on the ground, form part of human supplication and reaffirming the link between the human and spiritual world. After all it is in the land that the dead, who form part of the world of ancestors, are buried.

Seasonal observance is one of the indigenous ecological knowledge. Bongani Gumbo points out that people who lived in the Okavango Delta were aware of the dangers of environmental degradation and therefore avoided it by diversifying their fishing and hunting strategies. Thus the riverine people of Okavango Delta in north western Botswana had strict fishing and hunting seasons, to allow for the natural replenishing of resources (Gumbo 2014:90-91). Therefore, the indigenous ecological knowledge in the delta was instrumental in preserving it from an environmental crisis (Tlou 1972:147-159). Similarly, Kgari-Masona points out that "Depletion of fur animals was prevented by prohibiting their hunting during summer when they were breeding in the Sotho-Tswana culture" (2014:132).

Indigenous farmers in Botswana can predict how the next season will turn out by observing movement in the solar system such as those of the moon and the sun. For example Olaotswe Kgosikoma, Witness Mojeremane and Barbra Harvie(2012:27) state that indigenous farmers are so accustomed to their environment that they can notice changes in vegetation as a response to climatic changes and therefore predict and prepare for possible environmental degradation. Mythic animals provided foster a strong attachment to the conservation of the environment. Maserole Kgari Mosondo argues that these animals need to be decolonized for they provide a historical narrative of Sotho-Tswana culture and what it means to be human. It is in mythic animal narratives that the identities of the tribes are depicted and show their value and identity (*seriti*). Willoughby (1909:263) notes that animals in the myths hold "an African in awe of unseen powers, and cast their halo around the sanctity of tribal morality". Interwoven in this mythic animal narrative are the moral values which hold the fabric of the society together. This means that when these narratives are lost then society degenerates, and so is the environment because of the interconnectedness between human species and the environment. Masondo (2014:125) writes:

Mythic animals deal primarily with the origin of people and certain social and institutions that account for real-life situations and explain the basic conditions of

human life as perceived by their authors. They humanise people by giving them identity and animalize humanity by drawing them back to their roots; their history of origin-environment.”

Jacob Olupona (2006: 261) points out that the environment and nature are intertwined in African culture to an extent that beliefs and the cosmological concepts are derived from them. This is to say that the environment and nature in African cosmology play a huge role in establishing the laws and norms of the society. Growing up in the Okavango, Molato recalls this intertwined relation between the animal and humanity being depicted by some of the narratives of Setswana culture. For example, there was one big ox his grandfather called “father”. This ox was not to be hit, let alone slaughtered. According to the grandfather the ox “*Ke motheo wa lesaka*”, meaning that it was the foundation of the kraal and if it dies, all the cattle would disappear. The rituals of the family were performed upon this ox and in tempering with it, one tempered with the livelihood of the family and the foundation that held the fabric of the family together. This narrative highlights one of the interconnection and interdependence of human beings and environmental ethics that are exhibited in local culture. At the center of this cosmology is an understanding that the environment is the core member of our community. Therefore, environmental degradation comes as a result of human beings failing to observe environmental ethics, which are depicted in our cultural beliefs, traditions and norms. This narrative also confirms that the belief structure and norms are derived from other members of the community, and in this context it is the animal world. Therefore, the ritualistic performances, which form the fabric of the society, have no reference outside of the environment (2006:259). G Mogapi and D. Timile (2011:114) have observed that there is a relationship between animals, plants and human beings in Botswana and that certain animals are totems with which ethnic groups are identified. For example, Duiker (*Phuti*) is a totem for the Bangwato and Hyaena (*Phiri*) for Bakgalagadi. Each and every ethnic group mostly introduces itself to strangers using their totem rather than their usual names and these interrelations, connect the fabric of the earth community in local cosmology.

The above examples show that our Setswana cosmology does not hold humanity to be superior to other members of the Earth communities. Rather equal humanity and other Earth communities are intertwined as exemplified by the animal being given a human identity and vice visa. Consequently, Condradie (2004:127) asserts that the Earth consciousness movement

has awakened humanity to realize that they are not in control of the ecosystem and that all forms of life are interconnected.

Setswana Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics

David Horell (2014:139) notes,

Biblical studies has always been shaped by, responsive to, and enmeshed in issues and priorities in the contemporary context, even when it operates in a primarily historical or archaeological mode and does not acknowledge such contemporary influences on the questions and approaches it pursues.

One of the contemporary issues, which Biblical studies has engaged in is environmental crisis. The call was raised by Lynn White Jr (1967) through his classic article “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.” In this article, Lynn White Jr blamed some other Biblical texts such as Genesis for contributing to environmental degradation. This resulted in Earth Bible International Project which started in Australia. This project’s main aim as noted by Steven Rockefeller (2001:516) was to i) Develop ecojustice principles appropriate for an eco- justice hermeneutics (modes for interpretation) for understanding the Bible and for promoting justice and healing for the Earth; ii) Publish these interpretations as contributions to current debates on ecology, eco-ethics and ecotheology and iii) Provide a responsible forum within which the suppressed voice of Earth and the Earth community can be heard.

Lisa Sideris (2006:446) argues that “That Eco theologians have scrutinized their own traditions in search of ethical resources that can be mined for environmental content.” This paper seeks to develop a Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics aid environmental preservation. This is because other eco-justice hermeneutics formulated by other scholars are inadequate in addressing and to analyze Setswana cosmological traditions. Setswana ecological Biblical hermeneutics is ideological that is, is a reader-oriented interpretation that takes the reader’s context as the starting point. In this context the Setswana worldview is the starting point in responding to the environmental crisis in Botswana. As Norman Habel (2000:25) writes, “The earth crisis challenges us to read the Bible afresh and ask whether the biblical text itself, its interpreters or both have contributed to this crisis.” These ecological biblical hermeneutics follows the ecojustice principles of intrinsic worth, interconnectedness, voice, purpose, mutual custodianship and resistance that have been developed in the Earth Bible.

The proposed Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics borrows concepts from Setswana indigenous ecological knowledge in its approach to and interpretation of biblical texts. The concept of covenant, which is derived from *dikgafela* ceremonies where the Chief pours beer on the ground as an acknowledgment of the relationship with God, will be employed in the interpretation of biblical texts. The other concept is that of *Motho* (person). Gabriel Setiloane argues that the concept of *Motho* in Sotho-Tswana cosmology is associated with nature and that to be identified with nature gives one Seriti (identity or honour) in the society. Therefore embedded within these concepts is the idea of interconnectedness and liberating interdependence between human being and all other members of the Earth communities.

Genesis 8: 20-9-17: A Reading from a Setswana Ecological Framework

In this section we apply the Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics to the so-called “Noahic covenant” in Genesis 8:20-9:17. Exegetical questions, which are crucial to this discussion, are, i) Is this covenant only between Noah and God? ii) What is God’s promise concerning the Earth and iii) does this covenant advocate for environmental degradation?

In Genesis 8:20-21 Noah builds an ark and offers a sacrifice which God accepts with the following covenantal obligations: “I will never curse the ground because of human beings.” Noah makes the covenant not because he is superior to the Earth, but on account of God’s response to the ground which is used here for the Earth. The covenant is therefore made between God and the Earth especially in Chapter 9:13: “I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth.”

Reading this text from the Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics, reveals that this text advocates for environment preservation. The narrative demonstrates that in this covenant, humankind is part and parcel of nature hence the word Earth is used to incorporate both living things and nature at large. It advocates for the interconnectedness and liberating interdependence between human species, the animal world and the Earth as demonstrated in the Setswana cosmology. The text therefore offers an Earth-friendly reading the biblical text since it is closer to the Setswana worldview. Moreover, for human beings to act immorally against the environment is to act immorally against themselves since they are part and parcel of the environment. The ecological ethics provided in Setswana ecological traditions raise awareness in individuals to be aware of nature and live in harmony with it. As Sally Mcfague notes,

environmental degradation executed by human beings on the environment is both a spiritual thing and an ethical problem (2013:18).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that at the core of environmental degradation, is the humanity's failure to realize that they are not the central figure in God's creation, but rather they are part of the creation community. Failure to understand this has led to environmental crisis and injustice. The paper began with a definition of environmental degradation and demonstrated the importance of other members of the Earth and the value, they add to this web of relationships. While developments are important to society, the paper showed that there are certain developments, which are not sensitive to the fact that humanity cannot exist outside nature, neither is it above or independent of other members of the creation community. Lastly, the paper proposed a Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutic, which is derived from Setswana worldview. The proposed Setswana ecological hermeneutic offers us an earth-friendly way of reading the Bible, as demonstrated by the reading of Genesis 8:20-9:17.

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