

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

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the relationship between traditional religio-cultural beliefs and practices and environmental crisis in Ghana using the Akan Traditional Society as a case study. The main aim is to evaluate the nature of the environmental problems in Ghana, and to assess the role of taboos in addressing the contemporary environmental crisis in Ghana.

This essay will argue that indigenous religious beliefs and traditional cultural values such as taboos, undoubtedly, are indispensable to modern-day conservation and environmental protection efforts. It will show that traditional practices disclose that African societies were conscious of the need to protect their environment in the past. This is enfolded in religious beliefs, partly because religion permeates nearly all aspects of African life.

Finally, this essay points out that the current environmental conservation policies in Ghana do not factor in indigenous religious practices. As a result, I argue that policy makers, modern conservationists and researchers must go back and learn from a traditional religion and culture that managed to live in harmony with the rivers, animals and forests and use them sustainably.

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CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

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

The responses to the environmental crisis is complex, and as Gottlieb (2006:6) points out, while “earlier ecological problems were *local*—confined to a region, a community, even an empire, our plight today is *global*: there simply is no escape from it on this planet.” In the light of the above assertion, environmental degradation has been of foremost concern to humankind over the centuries. Scientists, environmentalists and concerned individuals at various conferences and discussions, both at the local and the international platforms, have sought to address this problem that threatens the existence of all life-forms of not only the present but also future generations (for example, 1992 Rio Conference on Environment; Beijing Conference for women in 1995). They have become progressively more apprehensive about the problems of land degradation, deforestation and desertification, coastal erosion, pollution of rivers and lagoons, the ozone layer depletion and atmospheric pollution (see Awuah-Nyamekye 2013; Roosbroeck and Amlalo 2006; Park 1997). They believe that there is a pressing need for something to be done to tackle this frightening situation in order to save humanity from destruction.

In spite of efforts to reduce, if not totally eradicate the environmental crisis both at the local and international levels, the problem still persists (Rapport et al. 2009; Park et al. 2008).

According to “The World Scientists Warning to Humanity,” (cited in Foster et al. 1997:5), the universe is presently facing nothing less than a global environmental crisis:

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

Many scholars agree with Gottlieb (2006) on the assertion that the environmental crisis is occurring at the global scale (see for example Grim 2001; Park 1997). In his assessment of the current global environmental status, Nguyen Thi Lan Chi alluded to the fact that “human population growth, agricultural expansion, and resettlement are becoming global issues, and are undeniably damaging and causing numerous effects on the environment/earth” (Nguyen, undated manuscript). The effect: deforestation, ozone depletion with its attendant problem of global warming is difficult to quantify.

Ghana, like many other countries has not been spared of the consequences of the environmental crisis. In spite of the various interventions by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) over the last 40 years, the country is still faced with grave and complex environmental challenges. Roosbroeck and Amlalo (2006), identify land degradation, deforestation and desertification, coastal erosion and pollution of rivers and lagoons as what forms the primary environmental concerns in Ghana. The cause of this environmental devastation, Roosbroeck and Amlalo (2006) noted, is as a result of Ghana’s adoption of the “Western” perspectives of development. This perspective, according to Kalu (2001), places economic growth high on government’s development agenda and has led to the destruction of the environment by mining companies and timber industries. According to Tamakloe (cited in Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013:8), records estimate that over 90% of Ghana’s high forest has been logged since the late 1940s and the rate of deforestation is 5% per annum outside of reserves.

Those with some knowledge about the state of the environment in pre - colonial Gold Coast (present day Ghana) will agree with me that the current environmental situation in Ghana is more alarming. According to the 2012 Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology's report on National Assessment of Sustainable Development Goals and Targets for RIO+20 Conference, the impact of climate change is being observed in extreme events such as floods, drought and high maximum temperature in many parts of the country. Land and soil degradation have been significant in the country. This is as a result of overexploitation of agricultural, timber and mineral resources. Moreover, other factors such as increasing application of chemicals, use of inappropriate equipment and technologies, and commercial mono-specific plantations cannot be under emphasized. Deforestation is a major problem in Ghana. According to the report, an estimation of 33.7% of the forest cover of Ghana was lost between 1990 and 2010. Together, deforestation and land/soil loss have led to loss of significant biodiversity. Ghana is naturally blessed with abundant freshwater resources and its coastal zone supports a variety of habitats and resources, comprising mangroves, rocky shores, sandy beaches, coastal wetlands among others. These do not only contribute to the livelihood of coastal communities, but also contribute to national economies through tourism, fishing, and oil and mineral mining. Regrettably these water bodies are being polluted as a result of poor waste management, agricultural and industrial discharges.

With the widespread public concern about the destruction of the natural environment, the depletion of natural resources, and pollution of the environment, there has emerged several environmental movements and activists aside governmental agencies in finding solution to the environmental crisis in Ghana. Various governments in different regimes of Ghana have made several efforts to save this situation, but the desired outcomes are yet to be realized. All-inclusive and consolidated ecological management and regulation are essential for most countries in Africa (including Ghana) for ecologically sustainable development. Such regulation would help

guarantee conservational justice, regulate activities leading to environmental dilapidation and convict offenders of environmental bylaws. Earlier works on conservation considered indigenous religions to be a hindrance to development. However, contemporary writings champion the role of indigenous religions in nature conservation. Although many ecologists and experts on sustainable development are right about the casual link between indigenous religious worldviews and ecological conservation, they leave the reader pondering how such worldviews are applied to attain ecological conservation.

The main aim of this essay is to better understand the nature and importance of indigenous conservation practices, with the specific objective of presenting indigenous religion's voice in environmental protection in the case of Ghana's Akan traditional religio-cultural worldviews. Drawing on the scholarly works done in Ghana and other parts of Africa, this essay builds on and fill the gaps in those that have been made in Ghana. With earlier motivation from works on subjects and opinions surrounding religio-cultural values and the universal rise of the role of religion in environmental crisis, this essay sought to examine the relationship existing between religio-cultural beliefs/practices and environmental conservation in Ghana. Certain religious beliefs and practices may be viewed as effective ways of preserving the environment and may be comparable to "modern" approaches to environmental conservation. However, such beliefs and practices are not fully embraced in contemporary Ghanaian societies. Based on available literature on the relationship between religio-cultural beliefs/practices and environmental conservation in Ghana, this essay will examine *the role of "taboos" in environmental preservation*, using the Akan people of Ghana as a case study. Do taboos represent the best explanation for Akan people's successful ecological practices that enhance environmental sustainability? Why is indigenous religion not given the needed recognition in environmental conservation policies despite the critical role it plays in the life of the traditional Ghanaian society? Are religio-cultural beliefs and practices "primitive" and no longer relevant to

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

1. What is the role of worldviews and indigenous religion of the Akan people in their conservation of nature?
2. What are the main indigenous nature conservation practices known to the Akan people of Ghana?
3. To what degree can taboos be used to address the rising environmental problems in Ghana today?

This essay deliberates on existing literature in the study area, available published materials, relevant and trusted material from the internet and libraries by a review and use of social science perspective with the basic aim of examining the role of taboos in environmental conservation in Ghana. A thematic analysis in which ideas are organized into main themes and subthemes is employed. The essay comprises four main chapters. Chapter one (1) assesses a general introduction by examining the global environmental crisis, defining the key research questions, exploring the origin of modern environmental activism, and the relationship between religion and the environment. It further makes an effort to place the study into its context. Chapter two (2) is devoted to examining the worldview of the Akan people of Ghana. Chapter three (3) presents Akan religio-cultural practices and how it preserves the environment. Specifically, the role of taboo in this traditional ways of preservation is examined in this chapter. The conclusion in chapter four (4) looks at the current government policies governing environmental conservation in Ghana. Much emphasis is placed on the discussion of the possible reasons for the absence of indigenous religious beliefs and cultural practices in Ghana's national environmental conservation policies.

1.2 The origin of contemporary environmental activism

The history of responses to the ecological crisis cannot be traced to a single source; however, the role of the environmental activism that emerged in the nineteenth century in the United States of America cannot be understated. This activism brought into being various publications and conferences that spoke to the issue of environmental crisis. For instance, in 1962, Rachael Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, attempted to draw attention to the destructive effect of pesticides on human and the environment (Carson 1962). Furthermore, Cahn and Cahn (cited in Awuah-Nyamekye 2013:8) assert that the Earth Day Conference (first organized internationally in 1990) by the US Environmental Movement "united more people concerned about a single cause than any other global event in history." However, religion was drawn into the growing debate over environmental crisis with the publication of Lynn White's essay, *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis* in 1967 – which suggested that Christianity bore an enormous burden of responsibility for environmental dilapidation owing to a theology allegedly unfriendly towards the natural order. By this theology, "the human race came to see itself as having dominion over nature and thus a license to violate the natural order" (Livingstone, undated: 38).

Even though White's analysis has not escaped criticism by other scholars for being too simplistic (Moncrief 1970; Attfield, 2010), it is still significant in the present day debate. As confirmed by Minter and Manning (2005:166-167) for instance, White's "themes not only form the conceptual backbone of White's essay, they also constitute a good part of the current intellectual scene in environmental studies more generally, [and]...provide us with a unique and historically influential vantage point from which to explore a set of critical foundational questions in environmental thought and practice." Even White himself acknowledges the place of religion in environmental crisis and succinctly avows 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” (White 1967:1204). Lynn White’s publication is relevant, for what begun as a discourse has now developed into an important sub-field — religion and ecology — in academic fields of study, including religious studies, sociology of religion, religious ethics, theology, etc.

I contend that the above forms of environmental activism in one way or the other inspired the formation of environmentally based worldwide conventions or treaties such as The Convention on the Prevention of Dumping of Wastes and other Matter (London Convention) 1972; International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response, and Co-Operation (OPRC) 1990; Convention on the Ban on the Import into Africa and the Control of Transboundary Movement and Management of Hazardous Waste within Africa (Bamako Convention) 1991; as well as international conferences, such as the Assisi Conference of the International World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 1986, and United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.

These international actions have led to a rise in environmental awareness, as evidenced in countless publications¹ and forums,² as well as rise in the interest regarding the connection between religion and the environment. This is seen in associations such as the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (founded in 2006, by Bron R.Taylor); The European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment which was announced in 2003 by a group of researchers in 24 universities and other institutions in 11 countries in Europe and

¹ See for instance: Miller (2003), Daneel (2001), Gottlieb (2001), Sideris (2003) and Taylor (2001). The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology edited.

² Including the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2012); World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg (2002) and General Assembly Special Session on the Environment, New York (1997).

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

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

Coates (2003) alludes to the following four factors as the motivation for the contemporary concern in ecological issues: (a) the fact that “the scale of destruction and the volume of industrial, agricultural and domestic effluent being released are beyond the self-healing and self-regenerating capacities of Earth”; (b) the realization that most human activities are destructive because “[they] are eliminating the resources and ecosystems upon which our social structures depend”; (c) the challenge that many people, if not most, are of the view that “the Earth is not sacred, individual well - being is distinct from community, and consumption takes precedence over sustainability”; and (d) the “recognition that the well - being of each person, and of humans more generally, can only be achieved in the context of the well - being of all things, of Earth in abundant creativity” (Coates 2003).

1.3 The link between religion and the environment

According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, the “ecology of religion” (a term used by Jacob Olupona to refer to the study of religion and the environment), is “the investigation of the relationship between religion and nature conducted through the disciplines of religious studies,

history of religion, and anthropology of religion” (Gottlieb 2006:260). The proposal for a critical study of the relationship between religion and environment has been brought to the fore through various publications and forums. Among such significant publications and forums include: Religions of the World and Ecology Conference Series (a conference that saw over 800 scholars and experts present papers, and published in a series under the title: World Religions and Ecology Series); *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2006) edited by Roger Gottlieb; and Whitney Bauman’s *Religion and Ecology: Developing a planetary ethic* (2014) which calls attention to the historical and ecological influences shaping the human understanding of nature, religion, humanity and identity.

The rise in the interest of the relationship between religion and the environment, which many writers refer to as “the emergence of religious environmentalism and religious environmentalist discourse” (Awuah-Nyamekye 2014:11) may be read as a sequel to the environmental debate and activism. Tomalin (2009:179) for instance, sees religious environmentalism as a “modern movement” that “represents a creative and innovative tendency, which aims to find support for contemporary environmentalist thinking within religious and cultural context.” This discourse, according to Tomalin (2009:11) “not only tends to rely upon a particular understanding of nature (as valuable in itself) but also upon a certain *type* of ‘expressive religiosity’ that is both modern/postmodern and emerged within western contexts.” However, at present, the body of literature exploring the relationship between religion and the environment is not confined to the context of the West, but is widely globalised.

At first, those outside the Western world, including Africa, received less attention within this discourse, notwithstanding the fact that the impoverished nations are the most affected in the global environmental crisis (see for example, 2014 World Bank Report on Climate Change; The British Climate Change Vulnerability Index (CCVI) 2011). In a study by the World Health Organization (WHO), Patz et al (2005:315) for instance, point out that, while the poorest regions

have “some of the lowest per capita emissions of the greenhouse gases that cause global warming”, they are the most affected regions with diseases and inland/coastal flooding, as a result of climate change: “the regions with the greatest burden of climate-sensitive diseases are also the regions with the lowest capacity to adapt to the new risks.”

The developed world from the start should have shown much interest in the poorest nations – in particular those in Africa – with regards to the issues of religious environmentalism. As pointed out in the September 2012 issue of the UNU-WIDER newsletter, developing nations compared to developed ones are “much more vulnerable to the effects of climate change due to their low capacity to adapt and their disproportionate dependency on natural resources for welfare” (UNU-WIDER, 2012). Similarly, Roberts and Parks (2006) argue that developing countries [including African countries] “actually suffer ‘a double injustice’: environmental degradation and climate change will impinge on the poor countries hardest, but at the same time, they are required to be ‘part of the solution’ by cutting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at the expense of their economic development.” Nonetheless, as has been pointed out earlier, the discourse has now received global attention, and the role of indigenous religions in environmental dialogue has been drawn into it.

1.5 The current environmental situation in Ghana



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



Air pollution from burning rubbish



Whale carcass washed ashore as a result of oil spill



Bush fires causing havoc to Ghana's green forests

CHAPTER TWO: AKAN WORLDVIEW

2.1 Worldview

Examining a people's worldview is, according to Chalk (2006: 32), "a way of delineating the philosophical elements involved in the way people view their version of reality." And to Chalk, it is important because "worldview determines beliefs; beliefs determine behavior, [and] behavior is chosen based on anticipated consequences" (32). Explaining what a worldview entails, Dewitt (2004: 2) notes that it "refers to a system of beliefs that are interconnected in something like the way the piece of a jigsaw puzzle are interconnected. That is, a worldview is not merely a collection of separate, independent, unrelated beliefs, but is instead an intertwined, interrelated, interconnected system of beliefs." Miller (2001: 38) sees a worldview as "a set of assumptions held consciously or unconsciously in faith about the basic makeup of the world and how the world works." That is to say, a worldview refers to the "set of basic assumptions that a group of people have developed for explaining reality and their place and purpose in this world" (Mkhize 2004: 25). These worldviews do not only "explain reality" and people's "place and purpose in life", but have effects on their values, attitudes, opinions as well as their thoughts, appraisals and behaviours. The individual cannot be separated from their environment or their history, as these values and behaviours are situated in their cultural context (Mkhize, 2004). Like Mkhize, Kraft (1999:385) sees a connection between worldviews and culture. Kraft for instance, says:

Worldview, the deep level of culture, is the culturally structured set of assumptions (including values and commitments/allegiances) underlying how people perceive and respond to reality. Worldview is not separate from culture. It is included in culture as the deepest level presuppositions upon which people base their lives.

Ethnologist Edward Sapir view worldviews as “the unconscious patterning of behaviour in society...the way a people characteristically look outward on the universe. They are patterns of thought, attitudes towards life, conceptions of time, a mental picture of what ought to be a people’s understanding of their relationship to unseen things and to the order of things, and their view of self and others” (Mandelbaum, 1958: 548). Paul G. Herbert categorizes the content of worldviews into three: cognitive, affective, and evaluate, and refer to abstract ideas, interpersonal structures, and ethical values (Herbert 1989). In the words of Marguerite Kraft, “worldviews affect how people perceive self, the in - group to which they belong, outsiders, nature around them and the non-human world...and makes it possible for people to feel comfortable in their environment...World view is a picture of what is and ought to be, and it provides the motivation for behaviour and gives meaning to the environment” (Grim 2001: 230).

Flowing from the above, one could observe that worldview forms the basis for a people’s conduct. However, an important feature of worldviews worthy of mention is their vulnerability to change. Hart’s (2010) research among the indigenous people in North America confirms this. In his study among the Cree people in north central Turtle Island, Hart observed that worldviews are “susceptible to change”. Factors such as increased knowledge, new experiences, and contact with other cultures can influence a people’s worldview. The question worth asking is whether one can talk of a “unique worldview” regardless of its susceptibility to change? Hart’s (2010) research on Indigenous worldviews partly gives a clue to the above question. Hart observes that Eurocentric thoughts have dominated the world to the extent that “worldviews that differ from Eurocentric thought are relegated to the periphery, if they are acknowledged at all.” This, he believes, is a major consequence of colonization. Notwithstanding, Hart (2010:11) is of the view that one can still talk of a single worldview despite foreign influences:

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

Although Hart's research was done among indigenous people in North America, it can be a model for generalization for other indigenous people, including those of Africa. For instance, most African tribes who have come in contact with "foreign elements" — Western education, Western religions, etc. — may have been influenced in one way or the other. By extension, Ghana's experience with colonialism, with its attendant effects of Western education and Western religions (which are underpinned by Western worldviews), without doubt, may have had influence on the worldviews of indigenous tribes (including the Akan, the case for this study). This suggests that the worldview of such tribes, prior to their encounter with colonialism would not have been exactly as it is today. If this holds, can we still talk of a unique Akan worldview despite influence from factors such as Western education and religions? And will the influences of Western worldview on the Akan worldview have implications for the management of their ecological issues?³

A critical reflection on the above conceptions of worldviews indicates that it is something that is notionally constructed, but instead of remaining as something that exists simply at the theoretical stage, it is expressed through a people's culture. In line with this, I see Kraft's (1999) view above on what worldview is, as the most suitable working definition when discussing the worldview of the Akan people of Ghana. This is because the Akan people have an unwritten beliefs and practices (worldview) that were passed on from their ancestors to the present generation. Most importantly, this worldview is manifested through informing choices and actions via their culture, and the two (culture and worldview) are seen as inseparable.

³I will reflect on these questions in the subsequent paragraphs.

2.2 Worldviews and Sustainability

The word “sustainability” is used by economists, politicians, industrialists, and environmentalist alike. However, its usage may carry different meanings. According to the United Nation’s sponsored conference on the human environment in 1972, the term is widely used to mean “... to ensure development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” To achieve this:

- renewable resources must be consumed at a rate no greater than they can be generated;
- non-renewable resources must be used no faster than renewable can be put in place as substitutes, and;
- pollution wastes must be emitted at a rate within the assimilative capacity of the natural systems that absorb, recycle and render them harmless.

In an ecological worldview, the term “sustainability” is used in this essay to mean ensuring a healthy natural environment – clean water, air and land as well as the protection of animal species. Worldview, as a mental lens through which people perceive the world plays an important role in this regard.

George Tyler Miller (2005) classifies the different relationships between humans and the earth according to the underlying worldviews that inform them. The first, *planetary management*, is human centered and states that humans are the most important and dominant species and that the earth should be managed according to human needs. This worldview places the continued survival of all other forms of creation, such as plants and animals in the hands of humans. An environmental worldview in this sense focuses solely on how humans can benefit from the existence of other aspects of the earth. This worldview, while serving short - term economic needs, is likely to lead to a long - term environmental degradation. The second worldview, Miller (2005) points out is the *environmental stewardship*. Embedded in this worldview is that, humans have the responsibility towards preserving the resources of the earth

for the benefit of future generations. The final view, Miller (2005) terms *environmental wisdom*, is earth centered and in comparison to the first two, is more environmentally friendly. This worldview holds that human beings are part of and totally dependent on nature and that nature exists for all species. According to this worldview, the earth's resources are inadequate and should not be wasted. Consequently, the success of humanity is dependent on educating ourselves (humanity) on how nature sustains itself and incorporating such lessons from nature into the ways we think and act.

Some scholars (including Orr 2004; Reitan 1998) have argued that a simple change in public policy, an environmental education that emphasizes the dangers of contemporary practices and the importance of caring for the earth, and modest social changes such as a growing commitment to recycling are not enough to create a solution to the contemporary environmental crisis. Rather, there is the need to change how people think about their relationship with nature, and thus the need for a change in one's worldview. Among those who hold the view for a change in one's worldview include Leopold Aldo, Arne Naess, Fritjof Capra and Thomas Berry. For instance, Leopold (1949) recommends the adoption of a "land ethic" which "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of land - community to just plain member and citizen of it." For Leopold, the "community" should be extended to involve non-human elements such as soils, waters, plants, and animals. Both Arne Naess and Thomas Berry seem to express a need to develop a precedent that seeks to develop a mutually enhancing and useful human-earth relationship. As Berry notes, "to be viable, the human community must move from its present anthropocentric norm to a geocentric norm of reality and value" (Berry 1987: 8). Similarly, Deep ecologist Arne Naess calls on humanity to question their basic assumptions about nature and their relationship to nature. According to Naess (1988), to live sustainably in the natural world, human beings must move away from "anthropocentric" worldview of nature, to a more ecocentric view which gives value to all parts of the ecosphere.

Jenkins (2013) holds a different view about worldviews. In his criticism of ethics of climate change, Jenkins (2013:1) submits that the ethics of climate change “is more complicated than applying received norms to novel objects.” His main argument is that the traditional understanding of the work of Christian social ethics as putting Christian worldviews into practice is no longer sufficient. With problems of size and complexity, ethical theories must be shaped in response to necessary actions rather than shaping actions based on a foundational worldview (4 - 7). The practical importance of religious beliefs and cultural worldviews are, according to Jenkins, sometimes overestimated. To him, worldview matters only “in the ways that particular communities use them to support possibilities of response” (6).

Despite Jenkins’s criticism, it is worth examining the relationship between a people’s worldview and their natural environment. This is particularly crucial in the case of the Akan people, as their worldview (a set of assumptions that they hold about the universe) forms the basis of their conduct as well as informs their understanding and interpretation of the nature and scope of reality. Thus, there exists an important connection between people’s outlook on the world and their conduct, one so strong that how people view the world — their worldview — will essentially determine what they do.

2.3 Problems of Categories

The study of religion within the modern university presents several challenges. One challenge worthy of focus: the difficulty surrounding the definition of “religion”. The word religion is an elusive concept, thus difficult to define. This is complicated by the fact that it deals with abstract objects that cannot be confirmed empirically. As a concept, it is huge and complex, and as such must be approached from a multidimensional viewpoint. As a consequence of the complexity of this concept, it is not surprising that there is no definite definition for the term “religion”. It is one thing to the psychologist, another to the anthropologist, another to the historian, and another to the religious scholar. Aside the difficulty with a definite definition of

“religion”, those features agreed upon by scholars as what makes a religion have always emerged in a Western context. This Western bias certainly affects the definition and methodology employed in the study of other religions such as that of the African, because they do not fall into the Western category of what a religion is.

Consequently, terminologies that have often been used to describe the *religion* of Africans (and for that matter the Akan) have often been wrought in prejudice. According to Dzobo (2006), African traditional religion attracted names like paganism, spiritism, polytheism and fetishism. Paganism comes from the Latin word *paganus* meaning rural dwellers. Spiritism was meant to mean the belief in numerous spirits, whilst polytheism was meant to mean the worship of many gods as against monotheism which is the worship of one God. Harvey captures in his book, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, the older meaning of the term *animism*. (Harvey 2006: xi) states that Animism:

refers to a putative concern with knowing what is alive and what makes a being alive. It alleges a “belief in spirits” or non – empirical beings, and /or confusion about life and death among some indigenous people, young children or all religious people. Sometimes it is a party to the assertion of confusion between persons and objects, or between humans and other non-human beings. It may also be part of a theory about the religions and/ or the nature of religion itself.

Harvey’s exposure reveals the ignorance with which some scholars wrote about Africans. It is therefore important that some terminologies that have often been used to describe the African culture are clarified. The term *religion* is problematic when used to describe the social world of indigenous societies like the Akan. The term was used as a categorical imperative to distinguish between *us* and *them*. Within this context, *African Traditional Religion* was described using derogatory terms such as *paganism*, *spiritism*, *polytheism* and *fetishism* (Opoku 1978: 2). The term was filled with Christian informed essence, distilled by the emerging science of comparative religion and was used to distinguish between properly religious European *homo urbanus* from the uncivilized “savage” (McCutcheon 2000: 8).

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

The meaning of the noun *tradition* has also generated a lot of controversy when used within the discourse on African traditional religions. The noun *tradition* has been defined by British Philosopher H.B Acton as “a belief or practice transmitted from one generation to another and accepted as authoritative or deferred to, without argument” (Acton 1952: 2). Samuel Fleishacker also defines tradition as “a set of customs passed down over the generations, and a set of beliefs and values endorsing those customs” (Fleishacker 1994: 45). The term thus suggests that, one cannot detach him/herself from ideas or customs labeled as “tradition” or observe these acts objectively. The use of such “derogatory” and “misleading” terms in describing the religion of the African makes it difficult and problematic in discussions about African Traditional Religion.

Nevertheless, ATR arguably is a religion comparable to other world religions, and discourse involving it can be considered credible. ATR, and for that matter Akan Indigenous Religion, I argue, encompasses all African beliefs and practices that are considered religious but neither Christian nor Islamic. ATR is therefore a religion that has been with Africans for several ages, and with which they have lived their lives and solved their existential problems from time immemorial. I agree with Awolalu (1979:26) that ATR “is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it.” Having made these clarifications, I argue here that, within the Akan tradition, the term *indigenous*

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

2.4 Traditional Worldview of the Akan people

2.4.1 The Akan

Ghana is made up of a lot of tribes, notably the Akan, the Ewe, Guan, etc. The Akan, who are the subject of my discussion in this thesis, are the largest ethnic group. They occupy about six out of the ten regions of Ghana namely: Ashanti, Eastern, Central, Western, Brong-Ahafo, and some part of the Volta Regions. This ethnic group consists of tribes such as Agona, Ahafo, Ahanta, Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Aowin, Asante, Assin, Fante, and Kwahu (<http://www.twi.bb/akan>). The 2010 population census reports that, the Akan constitute about 53% of the total population of 24,658,823. They are mainly found in the southern and middle part of Ghana. However, some minority Akan population is found in La Cote D'Ivoire. The traditional occupation of the Akan are farming and fishing. However, as a result of movement of people from one region to another in search for jobs, some Akans may be found in the northern regions of Ghana engaged in different occupations other than farming and fishing (Omenyo 2001). Traditionally, the Akan are matrilineal, that is they inherit from the mother side. The only exception to this form of inheritance is the Akuapem of Larteh and Mampong. Though the Akwapim's are Akan, they inherit from the father side (Pobee 1979: 44). The implication of the matrilineal inheritance is that nephews inherit the properties of their uncles (mother's brothers) after their death. However, with the passing into law the Interstate Succession Law, PNDC Law 111, such system of inheritance has been abolished.

2.4.2 Akan worldview

According to Awuah-Nyamekye (2014: 60), the worldview of the Akan people is "the sum up of their core ideas about the universe and their role within it". This understanding, I think, mirrors Allan's (1985) view (as cited in Chalk 2006:45) that "a worldview is a general

way of looking upon the universe and our relation to it, a general set of assumptions about the meaning of life, about what is important, and about how things work”. Awuah-Nyamekye (2014) further notes that, the worldview of the Akan people is “the product of systematic reflections on phenomena and experiences that their forebears have bequeathed to them”. Accordingly, a rational inference from the above is that, the Akan people’s worldview is conjectural, but instead of remaining as something that exists merely at the theoretical stage, it is demonstrated in real life through the people’s culture. As Kalu (2001:228) rightly point out, the Akan indigenous cultural pattern is influenced by worldviews which serve as a reservoir of knowledge. They are stored in myths, proverbs and folklores.

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

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

The above excerpt implies that in the Akan traditional society, the supernatural (spiritual) plays a significant role in their daily lives. Gyekye (1995) and Mbiti’s (1990) study of the Akan people

corroborate this view. According to both Gyekye (1995) and Mbiti (1990), the Akan conceptualization of the universe conceives that the universe is unitary. Gyekye (1995) for instance, recounts that the universe is essentially spiritual to the extent that there is continuous interaction between the spirit world and human beings. Any attempt to make a distinction between the spiritual and the physical in the Akan, [and I believe in most African context] is likely to be met with mixed feelings, if not total disappointment. This is because the consciousness of the supernatural permeates all thoughts and actions. Gyekye (1995:69) identifies with this when he accentuated that “*what is primarily real is spiritual.*” In Mbiti’s opinion, the spiritual and the physical are “two dimensions of one and the same universe. These dimensions dove-tail each other to the extent that at times and in places one is apparently more real than, but not exclusively of, the other” (Mbiti 1990: 203).

Moreover, several scholars (see for example, Mbiti 1990; Dickson 1965; Pobee 1992) have observed that religion is deeply rooted in all aspects of life of the African, and by extension the Akan. Primary observations of African people reveal that their worldviews are underscored by a common system of religiosity. African societies, Kalu Ugbu (as quoted in Ogiezee 2009:14) remarks, “[are] couched in religious, numinous terms: creation was the act of a Supreme Being utilizing the services of subaltern gods.” Accordingly, (Mbiti 1990: 1).observes:

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

Consequently, the Akan worldview, one may argue, is underpinned by its indigenous religion. Elorm-Donkor’s (2012:3-4) study on the African worldview confirms this assertion. He reveals:

In the traditional Akan community almost every communal event is connected with religion...[and] wellbeing in life is guaranteed by a congenial moral relationship between

human and the spirit entities of their community. It is believed that when left on their own to provide for the spiritual, physical and psycho-social resources that they need for mastering their environment [including managing environmental problems], humans are found to be limited and inadequate. Therefore there is constant need for a moral relationship that is both interdependent and interconnected.

Owing to the fact that the Akan worldview is underpinned by its indigenous religion, all aspects of creation are accorded respect. According to Awuah-Nyamekye (2014:62), within Akan societies, while all aspects of the universe are seen as God's creation, and must be protected, elements of creation that serve as sources of sustenance for human life – trees, animals and rivers are given more attention. Similarly, Daneel (2001) and Ranger (1988) (as cited in Taringa 2006:191-192) relate the environmental friendliness of indigenous religion in the African worldview. They opine:

“...Traditional African ecology...is inseparably linked with traditional religion. Environmental protection is sanctioned by the creator God and the ancestors of the land” (Daneel 2001).

“African religious ideas were very much ideas about relationships, whether with other living people, or with spirits of the dead, or with animals, or with cleared land, or with the bush” (Ranger 1988).

As I have pointed out earlier, the introduction of Western education and religions (which are underpinned by Western worldviews) in Ghana may have had effect on the worldviews of the Akan people of Ghana. Suggesting that the Akan worldview prior to their encounter with colonialism would not have been exactly as it is today, thereby affirming Hart's (2010) observation about worldview's “susceptibility to change.” Nevertheless, one can still talk of a unique Akan worldview. This is because; the core constituents of the traditional Akan worldview (including, the belief in the Supreme Being, cults associated with various divinities, nature spirits, rituals, ancestral spirits, a belief in magic, and the fear of witchcraft)⁴ still remain intact and continue to influence behavior. Moreover, some studies among the Akan people have

⁴More will be said on this in the subsequent discussions.

pointed out that, the encounter between Akan indigenous religion and culture, and monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam did not lead to a domination of the latter over the former. Aquah (2011) notes:

Although conversion of Akan indigenous religious adherents to these monotheistic religions was overwhelming in terms of numbers, these converts did not completely abandon or denounce their traditional religious beliefs and practices; they still served as important religious mediation for expressing their new faith. Their conversion to these monotheistic religions amounted to adding onto their old religion the relevant religious elements found in the new religions which served their present need in life.

Similarly, (Shorter 1975: 7) has contended that African Christian does away with “remarkably little of his former non-Christian outlook.” Furthermore, I argue here that, the influences of Western worldview on the Akan’s worldview have implications for the management of their ecological issues. This is because people’s worldviews influences how they understand and evaluate things. As France (1997) (cited in Hart 2010:1) rightly points out, “our worldviews affect our belief systems, decision making, assumptions, and modes of problem solving.”

As I have already pointed out in the preceding discussions, the Akan worldview is underpinned by its indigenous religion. And I agree with Awuah-Nyamekye (2014) that the Akan people have a “religious worldview”, just as Douglas (2015: 42) rightly points out that, “religion permeate every aspect of [the African’s] life and shape how they perceive themselves and the world.” This makes it very important to throw more light on some aspects of the religion of the Akan people.

The Akan Indigenous Religion (AIR) comes under the bigger umbrella of the African Traditional Religions (ATR). African Traditional Religions, also referred to as African Indigenous Religions or African Ethnic Religions, is a term referring to a diversity of religions indigenous to the continent of Africa. Similar to ethnic religions in other parts of the world, African religious traditions are defined mainly along community lines. These traditional African

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

Central to the Akan religious ideas is the strong belief in a community of spirits. These several spirits range from the Supreme Being or creator god (Nana Onyame/Onyankpon), gods/goddesses (Abosom), and the earth deity (Asaase Yaa) to the ancestral spirits (Nananom Nsamfo). *Onyankopon* refers to the supremacy of God. He is seen as the creator of the universe. This belief in Onyankopon as the creator can be argued to have ecological ramification as it suggest that all creation (including trees, animals and rivers) was created by Onyankpon, and humanity as stewards have the responsibility to protect and conserve the environment or nature. Agyarko (2013) recapitulates the influence of the Akan concept of God (Onyankopon/Onyame) and its implications on the people's attitude towards creation thus:

All human and non-human relations are affected by the belief that we all belong together in God. Onyame is immediately present to each creature through their sunsum (spirit). This view of the immediacy of God to creatures has consequences for the way the Akan, at least theoretically, value and treats one another and other creatures. *Onyame nti* (because of God or for the sake of God), one acts or refrains from acting against another person or non-human forms of life.

AsaaseYaa, the earth goddess, is next to Onyankopon and is responsible for fertility. In some sense, AsaaseYaa is also the “custodian of morality and social decorum, the traditional ethical code” (Okorocho 1987:52). There are hosts of gods/goddesses (*abosom*) aside AsaaseYaa. These gods/goddesses are believed to be the children of God. Within the Akan religious circle, some of the well-known gods/goddesses are associated with mountains, forests, lakes, rivers and rocks. Next to AsaaseYaa is the *Nananom Nsamanfo* (ancestral spirits), literally described as the “living dead”. Though they are the departed members of the community, they are still considered to be living, as they are still believed to influence the lives of the living. Not every dead person is considered an ancestor in the Akan society. For one to qualify as an ancestor in the Akan

worldview, the person among other things should have died a peaceful death (*abodweewuo*)⁵, a married person with children, had lived an exemplary life, etc. (Rattray 1954; Opoku 1978). The *abosom* (gods/goddesses) are another central element in Akan indigenous religion. These deities are believed to reside in natural substances such as rivers, trees, mountains, caves and animals. Awuah-Nyamekye's study of the Akan people of Berekum brought out that "all the deities in Berekum have particular animals or trees as taboos. These beliefs influence Berekum people's attitudes towards natural objects, and the relationship between natural object and deities explains why contravening any of the taboos in relation to natural objects is a matter of concern to the entire community" (Awuah-Nyamekye 2014: 68-67). This may explain why in the Akan society most taboos are taken seriously, as they are believed to have been imposed by traditional rulers and priests on behalf of the people and in the general interest of the community. Unlike ordinary wrongs, taboos are taken more seriously and the *mmusu* (serious sin) type of taboos may require blood sacrifices for the pacification and forgiveness of the gods and ancestors, who might, according to the traditional belief, otherwise visit their wrath on the living in the form of epidemics, drought and infertility. While all the spirits play an important role in the Akan society, the Akan highly regards the Supreme Being and the ancestral spirits far above the *abosom* (gods/goddesses).

Religion, to the Akan, is generally perceived as a tool for survival and for enhancing life in its broad sense (Amoah 1998). To be religious in the Akan worldview entails active participation in rituals such as sacrificing, praying, and seeking esoteric knowledge from spirits as well as maintaining a good relationship with fellow human beings. Moreover, it involves soliciting the assistance of numerous spirits to overcome social problems and evil powers believed to exist in the world. More importantly, being religious is maintaining the harmony not only between fellow human being, but also nature (including the environment) and the spirits.

⁵Characteristics of a good death include age, status, and accomplishments.

The foregoing discussion has centered on the worldview of the Akan people. The Akan people's worldview, it has been argued, encompass a set of basic ideas and assumptions that they have developed for explaining reality and their place and purpose in this world. These ideas and assumptions are expressed through their culture. It was pointed out that worldview guides the behaviour and way of life of the Akan people, and helps them to live in harmony with their natural environment. Moreover, it also came to light that the worldview of the Akan people is underpinned by their indigenous religion.

CHAPTER THREE: AKAN RELIGIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION

3.1 Taboo

Taboo is, etymologically speaking, a derivation of the Polynesian term “*tapu*” which means “forbidden” (Blakemore and Shelia 2001). It is comparable to the *Sacer* in the Latin, *Kadesh* in the Hebrew, *Nso* in the Igbo language of Nigeria and *Mmusu* in the indigenous Akan language of Ghana (Osei, 2006). According to Omobola (2013), within its historical context, taboo was a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance, and objectivity for protecting the sanctity of their shrines and the wellbeing of their worshipping communities. The term is also applicable to any sort of social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, places, actions, events, and people especially, but not exclusively, for religious reasons and the well-being of the society. Taboo may therefore be applied in two senses. The narrower sense represents the cultic or purely religious usage, while the broader sense represents its usage in socio-economic and political contexts. Therefore a cultic or religious taboo represents a subset of taboos, but does not represent taboos as a whole. For the same reason, religion is useful, but not a necessary condition for the existence and existential application of taboo (Osei, 2006). Part of the problem in any discussion of taboo is the variety of definitions and uses of the word. However, the term typically refers to prohibitions placed upon particular people, objects or deeds, and is used in the noun form. Nonetheless, “taboo” may also be used in the “predicative and adjectival sense” to refer to “persons, places, things, or conditions invested with a mysterious attribute *and* the prohibitions arising from the same attribute” (Levine 1986:995).

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

An ongoing debate in the world today has centered on the relevance of traditional cultural values and their role in solving emerging contemporary problems. In Ghana for instance, the role of taboo in solving the contemporary environmental crisis is an ongoing debate. Some people are of the conservationist stance, and reckon that traditional beliefs and practices played a significant and positive role in traditional societies and continue to exercise its influence on the modern society as well. The impact they exercise, however, appears to have lessen in comparison with traditional societies due to factors such as western scientism and modernity - western hegemonic tendencies that have demonized African traditional and cultural values and promoted the idea that they are diabolic, savage and regressive. This school of thought posits that reviving such traditional values will be of benefit to the modern society. On the other hand, there are others who are of the view that traditional beliefs and practices have outlived their usefulness in modern society. Yet, there are the centrist who hold moderate view about the relevance of such traditional values to the contemporary world.

The debate about the relevance of traditional values to societal wellbeing has compelled anthropologists to posit a crucial distinction between “primitive” and “modern” societies, and taboo has played an important role in establishing this distinction. For instance, British anthropologist Mary Douglas’ analysis of the concept of pollution and taboo identified two types of cultures as far as the sanctions attached to taboos on pollution are concerned: “primitive” and “modern”. Douglas (1966) notes that, with “modern” societies, pollution is a matter of aesthetics, hygiene or etiquette, which only becomes grave in so far as it may create social embarrassment. The sanctions are social sanctions, contempt, ostracism, gossip, perhaps even police action.

However, in the “primitive” societies, the effects of pollution are much more wide ranging. A grave pollution is a religious offence (Douglas 1966:73). Taboos in “primitive” societies, by virtue of their religious status and sanctions from the supernatural, become reinforcement of reverence for status. Douglas notes that primitive religions are inspired by fear and at the same time are inextricably confused with defilement and hygiene. By this distinction between “primitive” and “modern” societies, anthropologists relegate the importance of traditional beliefs and practices to the “primitive” society. Thus, “taboo” has little to contribute to modern society since it relates solely to the “primitive” world. Nevertheless, 50 years after *Purity and Danger*, it’s possible to see Akan culture functioning in modern Ghanaian society and so it would be inaccurate to describe it as a “primitive” belief. Rather it is a worldview that coexists in complex ways with modern Ghanaian society. I must stress here that, although, we do not talk of a religion as “primitive” in this contemporary era, ideas and discourse about traditional values such as taboo have often been wrought in prejudice. This is because the use of the term “taboo” apparently dates back to the early colonial era, when it was assumed that it is associated with “primitive” societies. For instance, Sigmund Freud in his psychological evaluation of taboo relates it to “obsession and neurosis”. However, in his Eurocentric approach, his analysis concentrates on “people whom we [‘civilized societies’] still consider more closely related to primitive man than to ourselves” (Freud 1913:1), and on “those tribes which have been described by ethnographers as being the most backward and wretched” (2).

Moreover, one may argue that the association of taboo with “primitive” societies is inaccurate on the basis of its universal nature. Durkheim (1963:70) calls taboos a “phenomenon that is universal.” I must however point out that, this view is not without criticism. Based on the universal nature of taboos, Holden (2000) disagree with anthropologist who assumed sometime ago that taboos are feature of “primitive” society. To Holden, it is a characteristic of any society. However, certain taboos may be prevalent within particular cultures. For instance, while

Environmental taboos, generally speaking, perform distinctly environmental functions of preserving vegetation and wildlife (Barre et al. 2009), what constitutes such taboos and the sanctions for breaking them may vary from one culture to the other. For example, within the Ghanaian context, taboos vary among tribes. Nevertheless, I think such variations neither discredit the universal nature of taboos nor reduce it to the status of a “primitive” belief. Rather, taboo is a worldview that exists and functions in different ways based on the basic human nature as well the social and ecological contexts in which cultures exist.

In spite of marginalizing the supposed “savages” in his Eurocentric approach to taboo, I think Freud’s (1913) narrative highlights a significant feature of taboos: they function to distinguish between the “sacred” and the “profane” entities in a culture. Freud notes that, “the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean” (30). Emile Durkheim (1982:129) advances this idea of “sacred” and “profane” and observes that religion exists when the sacred is distinguished from the profane:

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to *sacred things*, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.

In Durkheim’s view, the “sacred” refers to things set apart by humans as requiring special religious treatment. It is believed to transcend everyday existence; it is extra-ordinary potentially dangerous, awe-inspiring, and fear inducing. On the other hand, the “profane” is the realm of routine experience. The attitudes and behavior towards it are charged with negative emotions and hedged about by strong taboos. Certainly, within an African context, what Durkheim terms “sacred” and “profane” is on equal level of experience, so closely blend together and far from being cut off from one another. Nevertheless, the dichotomy of profane and sacred proposed by Durkheimian sociology of religion is relevant to the African context, especially, to the Akan people of Ghana as it underscores their worldview of the two dimensions

to life: the spiritual (sacred) and the physical (profane). If “sacred” and “profane” are applied in the sense as used by Eliade (1959) to represent the “spiritual” and the “physical” respectively, then I argue here that taboos are an expression of interconnectedness of two inseparable dimensions in the African worldview: the visible world and the invisible one. That interconnectedness can also be seen as interdependence whereby the quality of life of the ancestors (living in the invisible world) and of people (living in the visible world) depends on each other's actions.

The immediate point above suggests that the sacred-profane dichotomy created by taboo posits a clear connection between taboos and ancestors. While Parrinder (1969:89) sees ancestors as originators and custodians of taboos, Fisher (1998:108) understanding of this relationship is that: “a taboo is an offense against ancestors and Supreme Being”. This claim by Fisher, I think, makes taboo an obligation and not a choice, which in turn validates the punishment for breaking a taboo. A punishment that could come from God, ancestors or spirits (Scanlan 2003). Taboo then, becomes “prohibitions which, when violated, produce automatically in the offender a state of ritual disability...only relieved when the relief is possible, by a ceremony of purification” (Barre et al, 2009:31). Although the supposed punishment from ancestors (including death, accidents, and incurable illnesses) has been criticized as irrational and unscientific to the “modern” mind, nevertheless, the notion continues to thrive in most part of Africa. This, in a sense, demonstrates that the concept of “spirituality” is integral to African communal settings. Among other reasons, I argue that the traditional African belief in the religious order of the universe, in which the Supreme Being, ancestors, and other spirit beings are thought to be actively engaged in the world of men, plays a significant role in the sustenance of this notion. The connection between taboos and ancestors, I think, has implications for how humans relate with their natural environment, considering the fact that these ancestral spirits, supposedly

resides in objects such as trees, rivers, rocks and in certain animals as Aye-Addo's (2013) study among the Akan people of Ghana revealed.

3.2 Taboo among the Akans

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

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

Consequently, most taboos are taken seriously since they are believed to have been imposed by traditional rulers and priests on their behalf and in the general interest of the community. They may be promulgated and transmitted in the form of religious ordinances, creeds or vows. For this reason, unlike ordinary wrongs, taboos are taken more seriously and the *mmusu* type of taboos may require blood sacrifices for the pacification and forgiveness of the gods and ancestors who might, according to the traditional belief, otherwise visit their wrath on the living in the form of epidemics, drought and infertility. Since these taboo sanctions are

believed to be instantaneous and “automatic” unlike sanctions in other religions that have to wait till the end of life or stand to be mitigated by God’s mercy and forgiveness, most people will not intentionally violate them, even if they are doubtful of their metaphysical presuppositions. The sins or offences which are believed to be taboo, because punishments for them are automatic, carry their own deterrents with them, and there is no doubt that most people refrain from committing them for fear of the more or less inevitable consequences (Ackah 1988:99). As a result, the value of taboos as a source of moral guidance and motivation for social order cannot be dismissed theoretically (Osei 2006).

Within some African societies (including the Akan), people are reserved to question or challenge taboos because they are embedded within their cultural and religious practices. When something is considered a taboo, it must not be talked about, done, mentioned, touched, or looked at (Madu 2002:65). Thody (1997) identifies five categories of the “forbidden”: actions (do not do it, be it, or indulge in it); nourishment (do not eat or drink); words and themes (do not say it and do not talk about it); ideas, books, and pictures (do not think it, write it, paint it, print it or show it); and signs (do not make yourself look that). Therefore, taboo is a precautionary principle that represses open dialogue as it compels adherents to comply or face punishment, which could either be moral (weighs on the breaker’s conscience) or stigma (be subject of ridicule). The religious roots of taboo themes connote that:

...all prohibited acts or taboos are crimes in African traditional religion and any person committing any of them is regarded a criminal and is punishable. In traditional African society the sacred and the secular are inseparable... what religion forbids or condemns society also forbids and condemns (Adewale 1994).

It is believed that among the Akan, breaking taboo results in either a punishment or suffering from bad conscience (e.g., feeling sick or guilty). It appears there is an inner force that comes into action. The violation may even end in a partial surrender to the taboo as Freud (1944, cited in Madu, 2002:65) wrote in *Totem and Taboo*: “A person who breaks a taboo will be

tabooed himself or herself, because he or she has the dangerous threat of luring others into following his or her example.”

Taboo among the Akan is faced with the problem of rationale and scientific verifiability in the face of modernity and globalization. As Thody (1997) rightly argues, taboos, unlike laws, are for the most part irrational and hard to defend on practical or humanitarian ground. Christianity and Islam, coupled with modernity, claim that taboos stem from myths that do not correspond to historical chronology, and therefore, belief in the potency of taboo is tantamount to primitivism, backwardness, and superstition. To obey a taboo is therefore considered absurd and incongruous with development. But taboos in Africa are truth forms that are independent of the confines of time. Taboo is sacred; the fact of its potency can be found only in the depth of the mind, where merely rational thought cannot penetrate so as to discover its reality (Ayegeboyin & Jegede 2009).

Although taboos, especially in the context of African societies, are associated with the supernatural and religion, and infringement results in an automatic penalty without human or divine mediation taboos are “overridable” (Ayegeboyin & Jegede 2009). This means they are not construed as absolute or eternal and therefore unchanging rules. Among the Akans for instance, this overridability of taboos is expressed in many ways. While it is (generally) a taboo to carry anything in a palm leaf basket to the king’s palace, it is also, emphatic that notwithstanding this prohibition, it is not a taboo to carry nuggets of gold in a palm leaf basket into the king’s palace (Ofosuhen 2006). Taboos are therefore, overridable, since they permit reasonable exceptions as necessitated by special circumstances.

Within Akan societies, and using development as a benchmark, one may argue that some taboos are counter-productive since they do not support the well-being of the people concerned. Taboos that encourage cruel widowhood rites and those that place restriction on farming activities are dehumanizing and affect economic productivity respectively. No matter how

unimportant or unreasonable taboos may appear to the modern mind in details, embedded in them are “germinant principles of social progress and moral order” and therefore “the cornerstone of the whole social order” (Cassier 1992:106). Although Cassier saw taboos associated with African Traditional Religion (ATR) as “savage taboos”, and so sidelined from moral discourse, since ATR is not considered among the major religions, my analysis in the following discussion will point out that, on the contrary, taboos associated with ATR are not savage as they have rational and scientific explanations and ethical values. Key among them is the significant role of taboos in Akan people’s indigenous ways of preserving the environment.

3.3 Akan indigenous ways of preserving the environment: the role of taboos

Informed by their worldview, the Akan people of Ghana have taken steps to preserve nature. Herein, I give attention to the various forms of taboos and their roles in the Akan indigenous ways of preserving the environment. Traditional authorities utilized taboos for regulating the ethical use of the environment in view of its resources for the ecology and sustainable development. I argue here that at the back of the well-known personal and mystical explanation for taboos, there are deep scientific or rational explanations with significant implications for biodiversity. Among the indigenous ways of conservation include: sacred groves, belief in totem and belief in *Sasa* (a sort of spirit believed to possess certain kinds of plants and animals).

3.4 Institution of sacred groves

The idea of sacred groves is well-known in the Akan traditional society and in many parts of Ghana. Several studies have confirmed that the concept of sacred grove is popular in Asia and Africa (see Ntiamoah-Badu 2008, Fomin 2008). Sacred groves, according to Awuah Nyamekye (2009:259) are the “indigenous reserves that have been strictly protected, and in some cases many centuries ago due to their religious and cultural significance.” The institution of sacred

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

...the creation of the sacred groves and the methods they have in place for dealing with environmental issues have a *primarily* conservationist motivation rather than a religious one.

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

Sacred groves 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.

Different Akan communities have different local names for sacred groves. Prominent among them include: *nananom mpow* (ancestral groves), *mpanyin pow* (ancestral forest), *nsaman pow* (burial grounds) (Awuah-Nyamekye 2014) and *kwayeyenno* (a forest that no one is allowed to clear) (Ntiamoah-Babu 2008). Within the Akan traditional society, forests are regarded as

essential natural resource for humanity. Therefore, the Akans being influenced by their religion and culture have established certain measures to preserve their forests in order to guarantee their sustainable use. The institution of sacred grove/forest has been one among many means the Akan uses to conserve forest. Examples of the popular sacred groves among the Akan traditional area include: *Koraa*, *Mfensi*, *Nyina Kofi*, *Tano* and *Osudum* sacred groves.

Sacred groves are protected by taboos, norms and belief systems in the traditional communities. As Berre et al (2009:27) rightly notes, “Sacred groves are areas of vegetation preserved through local taboos and sanctions that express ecological and spiritual values.” One may argue that, the continued existence of these groves are not merely based on the fact that they have been designated as “sacred”, but rather, is based on the strict observance, and the fear that comes with breaking taboos attached to these reserved areas. Unlike ordinary forests, people do not tamper with sacred groves because failure to observe the taboos associated with these groves may result in mishappenings such as ill-luck, diseases, untimely death, drought and social sanctions (Rattray 1959; Osei 2006).

Within the Akan society, taboos serve the purpose of not only preserving trees in areas marked as “sacred”, but also various species of animals, fishes and rivers in such groves. For example, the taboo attached to the *Koraa* sacred grove (a name derived from the *Koraa* River) in the Akan town of Biadan, seriously prohibits people from fishing in the river *Koraa*, located in the grove. History has it that, people who ate fish or crab from the river would experience stomach troubles or even death (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009).

Again, taboos play an important role in the institution of sacred groves because of the belief that such groves are the abodes of the gods and ancestors. Taboos associated with the gods and ancestors prohibit people from exploiting these groves. For instance, the *Osudum* sacred grove located at Aburi-Akuapem is believed to house the river goddess *Osudum Ama*. This grove is said to have a pond with a lot of alligators. It is believed that these alligators are the children of

the goddess, and is a taboo for any of the alligators to move out of the grove, as this is said to bring bad omen to the entire community. The ecological significance of the *Osudum* sacred grove is noted in the fact that it provides a habitation for important endangered trees, crocodiles, pythons, butterflies, bees and different species of birds (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009).

Among the Akan people located in the forest zones, farming and hunting are forbidden in the forest at some particular days and seasons of the year. It is also a taboo for a hunter to kill animal and refuse to eat. It is even a more serious offence for a farmer or hunter to kill game that is young, pregnant or feeding their young ones. The general believe is that, breaching any of these taboos could result in death and infertility or loss of children (in the case of killing a pregnant or young game).

Undoubtedly, traditional Akan people's taboos and restrictions on access to sacred groves have ecological implications. The traditional Akan was of the knowledge that cutting down all or a large amount of the existing forest will not only disinherit the future generations of rare plants and animals, but will also have an effect on the delicate balance between plants, animals and humans with their needs for food, medicine, space, clean water and clean air. This demonstrates that environmental consciousness had been part of the traditional Akan mind centuries ago. However, I must stress here that, with the arrival of foreign religions and formal education, some of these traditional believes are steadily losing their value in these communities, and as a result has led to the termination of many animals and putting at risk so many others.

3.5 Belief in totems

The Akan like many other African people acknowledge that spirits work in the human world through birds, animals, fish etc. These animals, birds and fishes are termed *totems*. Freud (1913: 6) defines totem as:

an animal, either edible or harmless, or dangerous and feared...which stands in a peculiar relation to the whole clan. The totem is first of all the tribal ancestor of the clan, as well

as its tutelary spirit and protector; it sends oracles and, though otherwise dangerous, the totem knows and spares its children.

As I have pointed out earlier, the Akan has a religious worldview. This religious worldview influences other areas such as their social life. For instance, their clan system, though a social institution, is made religious through the notion of totem (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009). The Akan tribe consists of eight (8) different clans with each having their own taboos and prohibitions toward particular animals. The totemic symbols of the eight Akan clans are shown in the table below:

Clan	Totem (Local Name)	English Name	Symbolic meaning
Asona	Kwaakwaadabi	Crow	Wisdom
Biretuo	Osebo	Leopard	Aggressiveness
Aduana	Okraman	Dog	Humility/Friendliness
Asakyiri	Opete	Vulture	Intelligence/Stamina
Asenie	Apan	Bat	Diplomacy
Ekuona	Ekoo	Buffalo	Uprightness
Agona	Ako	Parrot	Eloquence
Oyoko	Akroma	Falcon/Hawk	Patience

Table 1: Akan clans and their corresponding totems. Source: <http://www.abibitumikasa.com>.

The Akan word for totem is *akyeneboa* or *atweneboa*, which literally means “an animal leaned on or relied upon for spiritual inspiration” (Lumor 2009:21). There are many myths surrounding how each clan came to be associated with a particular animal or bird as its totem. But common to all is the belief that these totemic objects play a significant role in the lives of members of the clan and their ancestors (Awuah - Nyamekye 2009). To this end, totemic objects among the Akan people of Ghana are revered and it is a taboo to kill or eat totems, rather, they must be protected. Parrinder

(1961:172) notes that when a totem dies, members of the clan show their reverence by, for example, mourning and burying it like human beings. Aside totems associated with the eight Akan clans, several other animals and birds including crocodile, monkey, lion, whale, and owl are considered totems among the Akans. For instance, the taboo on hunting and harming the monkeys of Boabeng-Fiema village has resulted in the famous Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary which serves as a home to over 700 monkeys. Within this sanctuary are diverse types and rare species of monkeys such as the *Colobuspolykomos* (black and white colobus) and *Cercopithecuscampbelli* (mona monkey). These monkeys regarded as sacred are referred to as “children of the gods” (Adu-Gyamfi 2011:149). The taboo carries with it the responsibility of “caring for the monkeys”, which translates into a hunting ban. Researchers time and again refer to this case as an example of a successful traditional conservation practice (Ntiamoah-Badu 1995; Fargey 1992; Awuah-Nyamekye 2014). In his research on traditional taboo and their role in biological/environmental conservation, Fargey (1992) observed that:

Taboo does indeed reduce the hunting threat to the monkeys of Boabeng-Fiema, and that in fact the reduced hunting threat is most likely mainly responsible for the increasing *colobus* population.

Nukunya (2003) asserts that totemism can be exploited as a tool to spur on or bring about solidarity in human societies particularly, in Africa for biodiversity conservation. In other words, there is rational interest in preserving totemic species. One may argue that Akan communities, clans, families, and traditional leaders recognized the need to protect certain animals, fishes and birds, thus using them as their totems with the application of taboos and other supernatural beliefs. Among the coastal Akan areas, it is a taboo to eat certain kind of fish, even if they were caught by the fishermen they were freed because of their totemic status. While taboos associated with these fishes may have religious explanation, recent scientific investigation has shown that such fishes has low productivity rate and immense harvesting may cause their extinction (Acheampong 2010).

3.6 Conception of land

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

Religious beliefs and traditional practices characterize land and ownership in the country... Typically with the Akans, land is a supernatural feminine spirit with Thursday being the natal day of the spirit and set aside from the cultivation. Any breach incurs legal sanctions. These religious concepts of land have affected not only the ownership scheme of land but also the uses and manner of usage of the land.

The above quotation points out the significance of land (*AsaaseYaa*) to the Akan people. It is not surprising the Akans consider the earth as a *mother* and a *deity* (Danquah 2014). The earth is viewed as a goddess and, in the Akan traditional society, the *AsaaseYaa* is regarded as Mother Earth, the goddess of fertility and the upholder of truth. On the one hand, the earth as a mother suggests man's means of sustenance comes from the earth. On the other hand, when an Akan wants to prove his credibility, he touches his lips to the soil; this act witnesses to the regard in which the earth is held in her character as the upholder of truth. Moreover, because Thursday is set aside as *Asaase Yaa's* day, it is seen as a sacred day. This sacred day, aside its religious importance, Awuah-Nyamekye (2009:256) notes, serves as resting day not only for human beings, but also the animals, forests, lakes, river and all that pertain to the land. The Akan generally refrain from tilling the land on that day.

Like most gods and goddesses among many African tribes, the Land as a goddess among the Akan people deems certain things as taboos or detestable. These include: tilling the land on her sacred day, spilling of blood on the land, sexual intercourse on the bare land particularly in the bush among others. One can draw a basic attitude to land from the Akan perspective. Land is

a gift from God to the ancestors, and they own and guard the land. Belief in the sacredness of the land serves as a check on their attitude towards the use of land. Falola et al (2012:69) write:

Their (the Akan) earth goddess, known as AsaaseYaa, is highly revered and considered a provider, protector, owner, and mother of her people. She not only controls the land, productivity and fertility but also is severely responsible for public morality. Anyone caught defiling the land is severely punished by her.

The Akans therefore believe that if one does not relate to sacred aspects of nature per prescribed taboos and prohibitions, it will provoke the wrath of the gods, including the earth goddess (AsaaseYaa), who might visit the offender(s) or the entire community with calamities such as strange diseases and poor crop yield.

3.7 Water bodies

Water bodies are sacred because they are the dwelling place of animals associated with spirits. The Akan use the concept of *nsuo abosom* (river/water deities) in relation with this. This is the belief in deities inhabiting the waters. These spirits rule over the sea, rivers, lakes and lagoons. It is this belief that leads the Akans to worship the gods of the sea, of the lake, of the river, or of the lagoon, in the facade of giving worship through them to *Onyankopon* (the Supreme Being) (Aye-Addo 2013:35). Considering the fact that spirits inhabit in water bodies, people must approach sacred water bodies cautiously and observe taboos. Taboos among the Akans serve as a defensive barrier against harmful human activities that endangers water bodies. For Akan people in general, it is a taboo to defecate near water bodies, particularly rivers (probably this is to protect the water bodies from pollution and avoid many water related diseases), or to farm close to river channels. While it is believed among certain Akan communities that such human activities anger the spirits living in these water bodies, and may strike the defaulter(s) dead instantly with no mercy nor give a second chance (Acheampong 2010), the rationale behind this prohibitions may largely be ecologically motivated. Conceivably, the latter restriction finds its origin in the supposed

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

The concept of *nsuo abosom* is also very strong among Akan fishing communities. In time past, people feared the river gods and hence adhered strictly to orders and conserved the water bodies better than what exists in modern Ghana. Acheampong (2010) notes that, apart from the general regulations, there are “specific prohibitions and taboos to prevent the use of metal implements in lakes and rivers, to ban fishing at specific times of the year, and to disallow laundering of clothes on certain days.” Among the Fante (an Akan fishing community), it is believed that, Tuesdays are sacred days for the sea and other river goddesses who spend time with their children (mostly fishes). In order not to disturb the goddess and her children, it is a taboo to go fishing on Tuesdays. It is also a taboo to employ unapproved methods for fishing, for example, using poisonous chemicals to catch fish (Acheampong 2010). In the case of the *Tano* and *Koraa* rivers in the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana, fishing is strictly forbidden for the fishes are regarded as the children of the spirit dwelling in the water bodies (Awuah-Nyamekye 2009). In all the above cases, breaking the taboos may result in instant death of defaulters, strange diseases, drowning among others. Apart from the religious explanations assigned to these taboos, it ensures the natural quality of water bodies for the present and future generations.

3.8 Some sacred sites in Ghana



The Tano Sacred Grove



The Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary cemetery



Koraa sacred grove showing the Koraa River



Rock formation located at the Tanoboase forest



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

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION - POLICY QUESTION

The core argument of this essay has been that taboo, as a religio-cultural element of the Akan people of Ghana can help in addressing some of the contemporary ecological problems in Ghana. I have pointed out that environmental degradation has become a pertinent issue in Ghana with both the government and other environmental movements realizing that the earth is losing its capacity to sustain life. Evidence abounds of the constant deterioration of the environment as manifested in land degradation, deforestation and desertification, coastal erosion and river pollution, loss of species among others. The government of Ghana and some environmental movements have made and continue to make several attempts scientifically, politically, geographically and economically to save the situation, but the desired outcomes are yet to be realized. From the foregoing discussions (particularly in chapter 3), available literature have shown that taboos play a crucial role in environmental sustainability as it encourages the Akan to live in harmony with nature. Yet, in Ghana, the issue of culture, particularly indigenous religious practices, generally appears to have been ignored as having a role to play in conservation. The National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP), which provides the basic policy framework for environmental and land management in Ghana, unfortunately does not underscore the potential of religion in this endeavor. The question worth asking is: Why is indigenous religion not given the needed recognition in environmental conservation policies despite the critical role it plays in the traditional Ghanaian society? In the following conclusion, I address one of such reasons: “Westernization”.

4.1 Westernization

In most part of Africa, the conception of knowledge is bound by the philosophy and methods of Western science: not many acknowledge that there are countless sciences rooted in

cultures of other people and civilizations all over the world. Consequently, attempts at finding answers to some crises besetting the modern world have totally overlooked religion and other cultural practices of indigenous people. The term “Westernization” is used here in two senses: Ghana’s adoption of the Western perspectives of development and nature; and, the introduction and impact of Western education and religions on traditional cultural values.

4.1.1 Western perspective of development and nature

Ghana’s adoption of the “Western” perspective of development (studies by Kalu 2001; Ojomo 2011 confirms this) is a key cause for the marginalization of indigenous knowledge of conservation in environmental policies. This perspective does not only perceive humanity as superior and in charge of creation (Ojomo 2011), but also sees indigenous knowledge of conservation as “savage superstition” and counter-productive. Luthfa (2006:15) notes:

Drawing from the modernist approach to civilization, indigenous knowledge was seen as savage superstition that was useless and negligible compared to the useful scientific knowledge.

With the adoption of this perspective, government places economic growth high on its developmental agenda even at the expense of preserving natural resources. To achieve government’s developmental agenda means the full exploitation of natural resources by mining companies and timber industries. It is evident that this “Western” perspective of development is in conflict with indigenous knowledge of conservation (at least in the case of the Akan people of Ghana). While the former seeks to exploit natural resources for economic development now, the later seeks to preserve it for the future generation through measures such as the institution sacred grove, the belief in totemic animals among others. It may be against this back drop that policy makers in Ghana today exclude indigenous knowledge in environmental policies, as it appears not to champion the cause of government’s developmental agenda, and therefore is seen as counter – productive.

Underlying the above mentioned perception is the Western view of nature, which attributes exclusively to humans, the ability to master and utilize nature for their own betterment. I must stress here that, the “Western” perception of nature is viewed through the lenses of science, which is envisaged as a process that yields objective, rational, and positivist data. Hence, decisions consistent with Western scientific knowledge often command acceptance, and meaning is more secure than indigenous knowledge and beliefs (Ali 2003). Conversely, indigenous beliefs are often perceived as “excess baggage” that could obstruct a society’s progress (Dove 1988). This perception may however, not be entirely true. Indigenous knowledge of conservation may not be inferior to modern and scientific methods as some people claim. While indigenous knowledge and beliefs are transmitted through oral tradition, often by storytelling, they are verified, validated, and revised daily and seasonally through the annual cycle of natural and human activities. Both indigenous knowledge and beliefs, according to Appiah–Opoku (2007:82), are “explained through spiritualisms, experience, cultural norms, myths, and taboos within a specific geographic context and environment.” This is in opposition to Western science which “thrives on a set of assumptions on which knowledge generation is based and by which it is tested for validity in a setting that is often far removed and isolated from the natural environment” (83). Despite their variations, both Western science and indigenous knowledge/beliefs can learn from each other.

Although indigenous knowledge of conservation is not officially acknowledged in Ghana’s environmental conservation policy presently, it is heartwarming that some Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and researchers are recognizing the significance of various traditional religious beliefs and culture-based knowledge schemes in dealing with the alarming environmental crises. Anane’s (1997) study confirms this. In fact an agreement appears to be emerging that a new kind of rapport is needed among indigenous people, national governments and international development agencies. This new relationship is essential in combating

contemporary environmental crises. In this proposal, some NGOs in Ghana have already launched conservation projects with traditional religion playing crucial roles (Anane 1997). Furthermore, the value of indigenous knowledge and beliefs for the protection of biodiversity and the attainment of sustainable development are gradually being acknowledged globally. For instance, Article 8 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity advises humans to “...respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity...” (United Nations, 1992).

Notwithstanding the positive recognitions given to indigenous knowledge, the difficulty in approaching the knowledge from indigenous cultures (mirrored in the way in which we describe and name it) poses a serious challenge for it to be recognized in environmental conservation policies. While there is no universal definition available, there are many terms used in establishing what indigenous people know (Mazzocchi 2006), including traditional knowledge or traditional ecological knowledge, indigenous knowledge or science, folk knowledge, local knowledge, tacit knowledge among others. The challenge is that, each of these terms carries different insinuations, and the question of which one is the most appropriate comes to play. For instance, Berkes et al (2000), recognizes this difficulty when they note that the term “traditional”, for example, “places the emphasis on the transmission of knowledge along a cultural continuity, but might ignore the ability of traditional societies to adapt to changing circumstances.” Moreover, while the word “indigenous” is meant to highlight the autochthonous nature of [traditional] knowledge, it might overlook knowledge from populations who are not officially recognized as indigenous (cited in Mazzocchi 2006). Such lack of specificity tends to limit the contributions that traditional people can make to decisions and policies required to achieve ecological sustainability. While this challenge may be viewed as “universal”, its impact on national policy is enormous, particularly in poor countries such as those in Africa, considering

their heavy dependence on international donors in funding most of their national projects. The unpredictable and fragmented nature of foreign aid coupled with externally imposed conditionalities for accessing benefits not only makes development planning and management difficult but also weakens policy ownership and distorts the policy priorities of developing countries like Ghana.

4.1.2 Western education and religions

Underlying the spread of Western perspectives among people of other continents, especially those in Africa, is the introduction of monotheistic religions and formal education. With the introduction of formal education in Ghana, local residents often learn values that conflict with indigenous beliefs. For instance, missionaries and colonial masters who flocked Ghana and other parts of Africa saw some traditional religious practices as a hindrance to development. They discouraged traditional practices which they described as idolatry and heathen (Anane 1997). Consequently, indigenous knowledge and beliefs (including those that preserve the environment) are being lost as more and more traditional societies become assimilated into Western culture and religions. Appiah-Opoku (2007:84) corroborates:

Formal education contributes to the demise of indigenous beliefs either by commission or omission. Formal education admits children into a new world which lies outside the boundaries of indigenous communities. Formal education tends to promote Western science and values at the expense of indigenous beliefs and values. It also fails to put forward indigenous beliefs and knowledge as worthwhile subject matter and therefore creates attitudes in children that militate against the acquisition of indigenous beliefs and knowledge.

As a result of formal education, traditional leaders such as chiefs who serve as representatives of the ancestors here on earth, and for that matter, as custodians of traditional cultural values no longer see these cultural values as relevant to the modern world. They neither enforce their practice nor push it forward for consideration by policy makers. It seems a truism that such cultural values overtime has become unappealing to policy makers.

One may argue that, the coming of the “Westerner” and his culture has paved the way for a new culture and a “modern” approach of viewing the world that has apparently alienated Ghanaians from the sacred earth. As Golo & Yaro (2013:297) note, “many lands were once considered sacred, not to be disturbed; today all the noble values are destroyed under the cover of modernity and new religions”. In consequence, by means of acculturation, indigenous knowledge and beliefs of environmental conservation are no longer being passed down from the older generation to the younger one.

In conclusion, indigenous religious beliefs and traditional cultural values such as taboos, undeniably, are indispensable to modern-day conservation and environmental protection efforts. Obviously, traditional practices disclose that African societies were conscious of the need to protect their environment in the past. This is enfolded in religious beliefs, partly because religion permeates nearly all aspects of African life. This understanding led to an environmental ethic, which suggested using the spiritual world to protect the environment. Perhaps what policy makers, modern conservationists and researchers must do is go back and learn from a traditional religion and culture that managed to live in harmony with the rivers, animals and forests and use them sustainably. While religious beliefs and ideas alone may not be sufficient in solving Ghana’s environmental crises, a major challenge that Ghana and most other African countries continue to face is how to reconcile indigenous knowledge and modern science without substituting each other, respecting the two sets of values, and building on their respective strengths. I think further studies to look into this challenge will be worth it.

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