

Christianity, Sacred Groves and Environmental Sustainability in Urhoboland: Eco-Theological Perspectives

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Abstract: *The world is presently confronted by the environmental crisis and its attendant consequences. Some aspects of the environmental crisis are deforestation, desertification, and destruction of biodiversity, degradation of sacred groves, atmospheric and marine pollution, and so forth. When it comes to both individual and corporate behaviours, people often act based on their viewpoints and beliefs. This paper theorizes that in Urhoboland, some Christians based on their erroneous beliefs/interpretation of some biblical texts have engaged in felling and destruction of sacred groves. This trend need to be reversed with an enlightened ecotheology of how the Judeo-Christian story supports environmental sustainability through the protection of trees, groves, forests, and other aspects of nature. Through a critical hermeneutics and analytic methods, the paper argues for conservation of sacred groves for the good of Urhoboland and beyond. The paper finds that there have been destruction and endangerment of sacred groves in Urhoboland as a result of narrow interpretation of some biblical texts and arising from*

colonial ideologies, and the forces of capitalist globalization. The paper concludes that a critical and balanced understanding of the Christian story with regard to environmental issues can help in environmental sustainability in Urhoboland and beyond.

Keywords: Christianity, Sacred Groves, Environmental Sustainability, Urhoboland, Eco-Theological.

Introduction

The rise and growth of environmentalism has awakened humanity to the reality that indigenous cultural beliefs and practices that were once condemned by evangelistic strands of missionary Christianity, can play a vital role in global environmental sustainability. United Nations Environment Programme (2021), Jessen, Ban, Claxton and Darimont (2022), and other sources have all attested to the ecological sustainability value of indigenous beliefs and practices. Among these beliefs and practices are conservation of sacred groves, totemism, and observances of sacred days, communal environmental sanitation, sharing of food and other natural resources, and so forth. The challenge posed by extreme forms of crusading Christianity that condemns everything that they term pagan and fetish has not abated. Till today in a place like Urhoboland there are still Christians who go out on evangelization or crusade work who cut down trees, sacred forests, sacred groves, and Curse Rivers and streams. There is need for a transformation of the mind-sets of many Christians and reformation of many Christian traditions. This paper argues for recognizing the value of sacred groves and the

need for conserving them. In a world of diversity, pluralism and freedom of religious beliefs and practices, crusading Christians and others should respect the African cultural beliefs on sacred groves and desist from destroying sacred groves in the name of Christianity.

A critical hermeneutic and analytic method is adopted here to unravel the issues involved in the paper. As a way of procedure the paper will make come conceptual clarifications, describe the situation or state of sacred groves in Urhoboland, and examine the beliefs and practices of crusading missionary forms of Christianity that has endangered sacred groves. The paper will also look at ways of reforming Christian praxis for environmental sustainability in the light of this issue as it proposes an ecotheology that is sensitive to indigenous ecological beliefs and values.

Clarifications of Concepts

The concepts that pervade this work are Christianity, sacred groves, environmental sustainability, Urhobo and Eco-Theological. Macy (2007) writes that: "Christianity can be understood as a family of faith traditions united in their monotheism and in their belief in the central role of Jesus of Nazareth in redemption" (p.232). There are diversities of Christianity but almost all groups believe in Jesus as Son of God, his incarnation, mission, death and resurrection from the dead. They also affirm that he ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection. They believe in Pentecost, the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, holiness as a way of life, the second coming of Christ and resurrection of believers on the last day. Christians believe in a created universe and some concur also on

the sacramentality of the cosmos, the spirit of God inebriating and filling all things.

Another key term here is sacred groves. Sacred refers to what is termed holy, reverent, and often times considered to be pure or free from vanity. Sacred groves, according to Nyamweru (2008) refer to “forest patches, clusters of trees and even individual trees” (p. 1451). Gadgil (2018) states that: “Sacred groves are patches of primeval forest that some rural communities protect as abodes of deities.” Forest and Environment Department, Government of Meghalaya (2019) writes that: “Sacred Groves are the tracts of virgin forests that are left untouched by the local inhabitants and are protected by the local people due to their culture and religious beliefs. Sacred groves are relic vegetation of once dominant flora. They are repositories of our rich biodiversity; they are also the last bastion where the rich culture and the customs of the indigenous people are still preserved” (p.1). These sacred groves are common occurrences in indigenous communities though they are now gravely endangered by capitalist and fanatical Christian movements.

The word, “eco” is the short for ecology. The “ecology” is from the Greek word, “*oikos*” which means “home,” “household” or “where people stay.” Boampong (2017) is on target to note that: “the term ecology was first used by Ernst Haeckle to mean ‘the science of relations between organism and their environment.’ It denotes the study of the interrelationship of all living and non-living systems among themselves and their environment” (p.18). Davila (2007) indicates that ecology refers to diverse relationship of interdependence and co-existence among living and non-living things. Ecology refers to the dynamic network of relationships

of mutuality among organisms and other beings in the world and at times, some of the relationships can also be predatory. Davila notes that ecological studies today concern itself with issues such as pollution, human and animal suffering, ecological degradation, etc.

With ecology defined it is imperative to define theology. The term, “theology” comes from two Greek word, “*theos*” meaning God, and “*logos*” meaning study or discourse. Theology then is study or discourse about God. Theology reflects on religious traditions not only the Christian religion. In some Christian cycles, some theologians have defined theology as faith seeking understanding. Eco-Theological is an adjectival from of eco-theology. It is critical study, discourse or reflections from a theological viewpoint on ecological matters. It studies the inter-relationship and dynamic interactions among all organisms and beings on earth in the light of revelations found in religions. This paper is considered to be an eco-theological reflection because it is examining the Christian religion and its relationship to ecological matters with particular reference to Christian praxis regarding sacred groves in Urhoboland.

The terms, “environmental sustainability” is also important to be defined here. Ikeke (2011) has opined that the notion of sustainability is grounded in the notion of sustainable development, a notion that came from the Brundtland report. The United Nations (1987) states that:

The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of

human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth (p. 16)

It is important to note that the notion of sustainable development is anthropocentric. By this it suffers from some weaknesses. Sustainability should be ecocentric. The focus should not simply be on human ability to meet their present needs and the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Environmental sustainability is to be preferred to sustainable development. It is flourishing of both human beings and the entire ecosystems for the welfare of all lives in the cosmos in the present and future. Spera (2023) states that: “Environmental sustainability is the responsibility to conserve natural resources and protect global ecosystems to support health and wellbeing, now and in the future.” Future generations should be inclusive of non-human lives and beings, not just human beings. Gillaspay (2013) states that: “Environmental sustainability is defined as responsible interaction with the environment to avoid depletion or degradation of natural resources and allow for long-term environmental quality. The practice of environmental sustainability helps to ensure that the needs of today's population are met without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” Science Direct (2023) cites Nazish Huma Khan et al to state that: “Environmental sustainability is a conservation concept which is the meeting of services and resources of present and future generations without affecting the health of the ecosystems that provide them.”

The term Urhobo can be used to refer to the people, culture, land and other realities associated with the people who traditionally occupy the geographic area in the western part of the Nigeria's Niger Delta region between latitudes. They rank as the major ethnic group in Delta State Nigeria. Godstime (2021) relates that the Urhobo people are currently made up of 24 kingdoms of Olomu, Uvwie, Effurun-Otor, Agbarha Otor, Agbon, Okpe, Ogor, Idjerhe, Okparabe, Okere-Urhobo, Effurun-Otor, Arhawarien, Udu, Orogun, Umiaghwa-Abraka, Oruarivie-Abraka, Eghwu, Ughelli, Ewreni, Agbarha-Ame, Ughievwen, and Uwheru, Ogharha, and Mosogar.

The Situation of Sacred Groves in Urhoboland

It is imperative to begin this section by stating Urhobo conceptual beliefs about sacred groves. Tonukari (n.d) cites an elderly Urhobo man who states that:

...the concept of the sacredness of trees, from the Urhobo historical past enters into every facet of Urhobo traditional religion. It rests on the earliest conceptions of the unity of life in nature, in the sense of communion and fellowship with the divine centre and source of life. The sacred tree is said to be deeply rooted in the primitive religious ideas of earliest Urhobo people. In the history of Urhobo religious evolution, it lies behind the primitive era.

Tonukari indicates further that the Urhobo people believed in totems such as animals and trees; and they saw groves as sacred and used them as temples and sanctuaries. In time past sacred groves can be found frequently in many places in Urhoboland. Today, you can still see sacred groves in many Urhobo towns and villages such as Ovwor, Okwagbe, Agbarho, Abraka,

Otorho-Abraka, Aragba, Akperhe, etc. In another citation of an elder, Tonukari states that: “Here stands a silent grove ...with the shade of one mighty Okpagha tree and numerous Ogriki; at the sight of it anyone could say, “there is a spirit here!” He also indicated that trees were the first temples of the gods, and “even now simple Urhobo people dedicate a tree of exceptional height to a god. Gods favour wild trees unsown by mortal hands” Sacred groves where to be preserved and protected from destruction, cultivation, and whatever could harm them. Ogwu & Osawaru (2022) have also corroborated this fact of the sacredness of groves when they state that in Orhoakpor in Ethiope East in Delta State, the Okpagha and Ogriki trees are highly revered as they are seen to belong to Aziza (god of the forest). A visit to Orhoakpor, you will still see many of these trees.

Urhoboland which is part of the Niger Delta is not exempted from the negative effects of oil and gas exploration in the Niger Delta. Sacred groves like other natural landscapes and locations in the Niger Delta have been degraded and destroyed. Kii (2017) writes that Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas indicate that oil spills have destroyed fauna and flora, polluted mangrove swarms, and killed marine creatures. There are many sacred groves that are located by streams, swarms, etc. These have been negatively impacted. Ikeke (2022) writes that the coming of oil and gas companies has led to the destruction of trees and forests, destruction of animals and plants and caused other environmental degradation as the companies’ prospect for oil and gas resources. Oil spillage has caused pollution of the land and marine resources. Sacred groves have been contaminated and polluted with crude oil, etc. Gas flaring has led to the

suffocation of animals and other organisms that inhabit sacred groves.

Many factors have led to the diminishment of sacred groves. As noted by Tonukari, “It seems the groves also suffered from the pressures of urbanization, as baths, roads, hospitals, churches, stadia, gymnasiums, schools, etc., were established. At times they also had to cater to the timber needs of the ever-increasing population.” The major factor for decline in the number of sacred groves, Tonukari avers is Christianity. He states that over-zealous pastors simply saw them as places of pagan worship and ordered for their burning and destruction. The implication of this is that these pastors did not see beyond these practices to the intrinsic and ecological value embedded in these sacred groves.

Human population growth and establishments of industries/factories have also contributed to the death of many sacred groves in Urhoboland. As human population grows, people build more houses for their residences and also create more business premises. As people create more residences, they clear more trees and forests, including sacred groves. With a Christian and capitalist frame of mind, some do not even see any value in sacred groves. They have no hesitation in cutting down sacred groves to meet their immediate human needs. Many villages in Urhoboland have grown from villages to towns. The implication is clear. More forest has to be cleared. Oil companies do not care as they site their oil facilities in the land.

Another serious threat to the existence of sacred groves in Urhoboland is the coming of Christianity and other religions. Borokini (2016) writes that:

Religious change is perhaps the most significant threat to sacred sites in Southern Nigeria. More than 80% of Nigerians today are either Christians or Muslims, and both religions discourage traditional worship and have influenced the destruction of many sacred groves. For example, there is no report of a single sacred grove in the Islam-dominated part of Northern Nigeria, while the destruction of sacred trees and groves is a gradual process in Southern Nigeria. Since independence, there has hardly been a political leader in Nigeria who has had any affiliation to traditional religions, while a significant number of the traditional rulers have converted to either Christianity or Islam.

Missionary Crusading Christianity and Sacred Groves

It is important to understand from the bible that there are texts that people have used to inform their hostility to sacred groves of traditional cultures and indigenous people. As some of these texts are examined it is noteworthy to recognize that the historical-cultural contexts in which these texts were given are quite different from those of today. At the times that Israel's religious historical and sacred writers perceive those revelations and communicated their understanding of it, the environmental crisis had not come to the foreground. Nobody should deny that within the world in which they live different religions were against most of the religious beliefs and practices of their perceived enemies. There is also the fact that biblical literalism that simply takes biblical texts cut the texts and paste into the situation of the contemporary world should be questioned. And this is why precisely there is theological

reflection. And theological reflection or study is different from a bible study class. It is painful to note that there are strands of anti-environmentalism in Christian history. Roskos (2007) shows that historical Christian precedent saw felling of sacred trees as part of saving pagan souls. She notes that when the Rungus of Borneo were asked to cut down their sacred trees they were afraid that their streams will dry up. The missionaries did not border, they went on to cut down the forest. Painfully, the streams dried up, thus Roskos (2007) states that missionaries lacked the ecological sensibility that the Rungus had.

Among the texts that have informed hostility to sacred groves are: 1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10. The first of these two texts states: "For they also built for themselves high places, and pillars, and Ashe'rim on every high hill and under every green tree" (Revised Standard Version, RSV). The second text says that: "they set up for themselves pillars and Ashe'rim on every high hill and under every green tree" (RSV). Trees have no moral responsibility and cannot be held responsible for human behaviours. There is no doubt that the Christian story abhors all forms of idolatry and worship of creatures and nature. Only God is to be worshiped. Only God is the Supreme Being. This paper agrees that only the Supreme Being is to be worshipped and not creatures. Yet this being the case, it is the actions, attitudes, and behaviours of people towards nature that amounts to worship that should be condemned and shunned. The problem is with any human being who worships the creature or nature, not the creature or nature. It is human beings who may worship nature that should correct their attitudes and actions. People should be discouraged from offering worship to nature, trees,

sacred groves, animals, etc. But the trees, groves, etc should not be destroyed. This present author has often offered the argument that when Christians do deliverance prayers for people termed to be possessed or influenced by evil spirits, they don't kill or destroy the persons to do the deliverance prayers. So also, when people perceive a tree, grove or animal to be possessed or influenced by demons, the trees or groves do not have to be destroyed, burnt or killed. Trees, or sacred groves don't have moral responsibility and cannot be blamed for being possessed, if it true that they are possessed by demons. It is those demons or evils spirits that should be the objects that Christians should combat with their prayers not destroying groves. Israel's scriptures should be understood within the historic-cultural context of their origin also. God is not against trees or any part of nature.

Maathai (2010) shows that arising from destruction of groves and trees in the biblical texts, Saints Benedict, Boniface in the 6th and 7th centuries, and Charlemagne in the 8th century had no hesitation in destroying pre-Christian groves in Europe. She notes that this acts of holy vandalism in the name of religion continue to occur as foreign missionaries came to Africa they demonized and condemned all religious practices that they did not understand and the consequences is that a lot of sacred groves and forests have been destroyed in Africa. Nigeria has not been spared from the onslaught of missionary Christianity. Christians who have gone on evangelization and crusade have destroyed trees. Umeagbalasi (2015) has written that in his Ezinifite in Aguata LGA and his homeland of Igbo crusaders in the name of Christ and prayer-warriors have labelled valuable trees such as Iroko, bitter kola,

“akpu,” rubber, etc as evil trees, location of gathering of witchcraft, and destroyed them, and sold the wood of these trees for their own private pockets. What he writes of Igboland is also common in Urhoboland. Crusades are often marked with burning of trees in the name of casting out evil spirits. In response to the felling of trees and destruction of animals by Christians in Nigeria, Abiaziem (2021) has cited Seyi Akinwumi, an environmentalist who has asked Christians to stop demonizing trees and animals.

Roskos (2007) writes that the practice of cutting down sacred groves is not limited to Judaism or Christianity; it runs through world history. She writes that at the time of Nero the Romans cut down trees as a tactic to attack their enemies, When Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire this did not stop the cutting down of trees and sacred groves. Citing the French historian Montalembert, Roskos notes that there were monks who entered forest to cut down trees. Not too long ago, she writes that Bernard Mizeki cut down an entire sacred grove in Zimbabwe in the 1800s.

White (1967) has argued that Western Christian attitude towards trees and other aspects of nature is wrong and built on a wrong theology of creation. White (1967) states that: “To a Christian a tree can be no more than physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and the ethos of the West. For nearly two millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.” The Christian missionary attitude that demeans the earthly and things associated with it is rooted in a theological anthropology from biblical texts. Peterson (2004) writes that from Romans 12:2, it averred that human beings should be

separated from the natural world, from Genesis 1, it argued for human uniqueness and superiority over plants and animals, and affirmed that: “humanity is defined first and foremost not by relations among persons, by physical embodiment, or by embeddedness in the natural world, but by an invisible tie to an invisible God” (p.116).

Towards an Eco-theology of Sacred Groves for Environmental Sustainability

Yet, sacred groves have many values, they have ecological and sustainability values. It is important to recognize that sacred groves are trees also. They by that fact perform the ecological function of trees also. Trees as well know are considered to be the lungs of the world. Human beings breathe out carbon dioxide. This carbon dioxide is absorbed by trees from the air if not human beings will suffocate and die. Trees produce oxygen, from which human beings get oxygen to breath also. Missionary attitudes and hostile behaviours regarding African sacred groves should not be swallowed hook, line and sinker. The practise of felling down sacred groves and trees is antithetical to sacramental theology. The entire universe is sacramental and carries the presence of God. In the beginning the spirit of God moved on top and across the primeval waters and oceans. God called the trees out of the soil (Genesis 1:11-12). God planted the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-9). In the biblical tradition, God created man and woman in his own image and gave him/her dominion over creation (Genesis 1:26-28). White (1967) has accused Christianity especially in its western form of teaching man’s dominance over nature as man was seen as created in God’s image and is transcendent over nature. White

notes that the Christian attitude has been that man is to have dominance over nature and exploit it. For White the environmental crisis is largely a product of this western Christian theology of dominance that influenced both science and technology. Though White also notes that there are strands of traditions in the Christian story such as the Franciscan tradition that has shown a positive and caring relationship to the earth

Kii (2017) argues that: “The repercussions of this command ‘to fill earth and conquer it’ have had a profound impact on the way Jews and Christians have related to the natural world. The New Jerusalem Bible uses the phrase ‘subdue it’; others render it as ‘have dominion over it’ – “All carry a strong overtone of actively shaping the natural world” (p. 103). Other scholars have contributed in deciphering the meaning of these texts. The divine command does not equate exploiting and oppressing the earth. Peters (1984) opines that the mandate means that human beings are to be God’s vice-regents who show kindness and tenderness in their relationship with the earth. Frethiem (2005) avers that human beings have a divine kingly responsibility to show nurture and care towards the earth, not exploiting it. Daly (2004) says the mandate is to be accountable to God in taking good care of the earth. Francis (2015) has argued that the command to have dominion does not mean unbridled exploitation, absolute ownership, domineering; rather human beings are God’s stewards and are to keep and conserve the earth.

In the New Testament Jesus shows great solicitude towards non-human lives and showers praises on creatures. He spoke of God’s care for the birds, animals, plants and flowers. He uses images and

symbols that are taking from nature to show their importance. He spoke of himself as the vine tree (John 15). Though he cursed a fig tree for its inability to provide food for him, he allowed the trees in the vineyard that was unfruitful to be left and given more time to be fruitful. He loved and frequented the garden of Gethsemane for prayers and meditation. There should be no doubt that he had a compassionate and tender attitude towards creatures. In the book of Revelation, the angel is commanded, “Do not harm the earth, the seas, or the trees” (chapter 7, verse 3).

The bible is filled with praises of trees. In the beginning God commanded the trees to grow out of the ground of the earth. The tree of life is in the midst of the garden. Trees carry the power of life within them. It is from the trees and the fruits that they bear that humanity are originally to derive his/her food. It is the branch of the olive tree that the dove brings to Noah that indicates the flood had resided. Abraham worship God at the grove of Mamre. The prophet Elijah is feed by angels under a tree. Ezekiel 47 speaks of trees growing by the river that provides healing for the nations. The tree of life is mentioned in the New Jerusalem.

In church history, the monastic tradition, some saints and others have shown great concern for the earth inclusive of birds, animals, trees, plants, etc. Menamparampil (2012) argue that:

We notice the ecological motif prominent in Irenaeus, Augustine, Francis, Luther and Calvin. We find monks seeking out wilderness for their encounter with God. For Anthony of the desert nature was a book. Basil was embarrassed about human cruelty to animals. Benedict and his monks tilled soil. Francis felt everything in

creation related to him in a personal way: sister water, mother earth, brother fire, lady poverty, brother sun, sister moon and brother wind. Ignatius noticed the relatedness of all things in nature. In his *Spiritual Exercise* he refers to the sun, the moon, the stars and the elements; fruits, birds, fishes animals; the earth. Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit, praised God for his creation, 'Glory to God for dappled things' (p.8).

In Israel's Psalms the trees, plants and animals gives glory to God and worship the almighty. It could be said that this God who spoke in the bible remains the same God. By implication his attitude towards sacred groves and trees remains that of divine admiration and providential care. This God will not desire that sacred groves and trees are destroyed in his name and on his behalf. In a proper Christian ecotheology, the mind-set and practice of Saint Francis of Assisi should be recovered and reclaimed. White (1976) avers that: "The key to an understanding of Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility-not merely for individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to dispose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his" Berry (2009) rightly avows that Christians should see the human community and the natural world as one community of life; and that the cosmological world as set in place in the Genesis account of creation mediates God's communication to humans. By this very fact the natural world has a sacramental

dimension that should evoke reverence in human beings.

In designing an authentic eco-theology of sacred groves it should not be bereft of wisdom grounded in African thought and praxis. A sacramental view of the universe is in consonance with the African belief in a sacred universe. The vital force or energy of the Supreme Being inheres and is present in all things in the universe. Lebbie and Freudenberger (1996) note that African people see their relationship with nature as a covenant with sacred entities hence, the environment should not be harmed or defiled. In speaking of sacred groves, it should be understood that African people did not see sacred groves as separate from other aspects of the natural world. Sacred groves are part of the land and earth community. Whatever power of sacred power inheres in the land or earth community is also in the sacred groves. It will not be out of place to equally note that African traditional religious thought including that of the Urhobo people saw nature as sacred and the indwelling place of the spirit. All of creation including trees, plants, and animals are seen as creatures of God. Ikeke (2013) writes that:

The African understanding of the forest cannot be separated from the African cosmological view of reality. Life is seen as one integrated bond and interrelated web. There is no pure and absolute dualism in the African worldview. All life-spirits, humans, animals, plants, trees, oceans, rocks, etc come from God. They depend on the creator God for their existence and sustenance. In the African understanding all life is infused by the active and dynamic life force of the creator (p. 346).

Kesby (2003) writes that in Sub-Saharan Africa, some plants are seen as symbolic, and some plants that had no such value in them were not eaten; and as for animals many were seen also as powerfully symbolic. The fact is that in general Africans attached reverential value and awe to many plants and animals. This should ground an understanding of sacred groves. African religious cosmology is rooted in an animistic understanding. Taylor (2009) states that:

Animism is a term that most fundamentally reflects a perception that spiritual intelligences, or life-forces, animate entities and living things. Animistic perception is often accompanied by ethical beliefs about the kind of relationships people have or should have with such beings or forces, or conversely, what behaviours should be avoided with regard to them. Animism may also involve communication or even communion with such intelligences or life forces. Such a worldview usually enjoins respect if not reverence for and veneration of such intelligences and forces (p.92).

It is imperative to state here that animism should not be equated with nature worship. This is often the excuse that missionary Christians use to fell sacred trees and destroy groves. The argument of Taylor (2009) is helpful here when he argues that: “The suggestion that animism involves the worship of natural entities is often a projection based upon Western religious assumptions that have more to do with how humans relate to high god(s) than how they relate to spiritual intelligence in nature. Veneration or “profound respect or reverence” (www.dictionary.com) is a more common posture than worship, as I understand the phenomena that term seeks to capture” (p.104). Ikeke (2017) has argued that the

Urhobo people of Nigeria's Niger Delta understand that all of creation, the environment is created by God and humans are to serve as God's steward, not engage in wanton destruction of nature. There is a spiritual presence in nature and nature is to be used in prudence and thanksgiving to the creator.

It becomes apparent that sacred groves are to be protected and nurtured. An authentic re-reading of the Judeo-Christian scriptures shows that God has entrusted to human beings the duty to preserve the earth, cultivate it and allow it to flourish. That sacred groves may be used for indigenous religious purposes that some Christian adherents may object to does not in any way make those sacred groves evil and objects damned for destruction. Though one may disagree with the religious practices of traditional worshippers, sacred groves are part of the ecosystems and have both intrinsic and non-intrinsic value. They are vital to the ecosystems in which they exist. Sacred groves as places where trees, plants and other organisms are located need to be provided. This is a theological basis for this in the rich tradition that celebrates trees, plants, flowers, etc in scripture.

That sacred groves can contribute to environmental sustainability should not be disputed. Appell (2023) researched traditional ecological knowledge and came to the conclusion that sacred groves help to protect ecosystem from degeneration, maintained the hydrological cycle (thus sustaining biodiversity), provided shade to protect streams from evaporation of the water, acted as sanctuary for forest bio-data, refuge for fauna and flora. Corroborating this, Pearce (2023) states that: "From Ethiopia's highlands to Siberia to the Australian rainforest, there are thousands

of sacred forests that have survived thanks to traditional religious and spiritual beliefs. Experts say these places; many now under threat, have ecological importance and must be saved.” Ikeke (2013) writes that:

Without traditional beliefs about sacred trees and forests, perhaps the onslaught of colonialism, its attendant consequences, and fanatical Christianity that destroys trees and forests in the name of converting people to Christ, would have been more devastating and there would have been fewer trees standing, and the effect of the ecological crisis in Africa would have been worse. As noted earlier this piece is not an endorsement of every form of beliefs and practices associated with trees and forests. Imagine if much of the African beliefs and practices mentioned above were to be revitalized, refined and reconceptualised and enhanced with further scientific data it will greatly help in ecological preservation (p. 349).

The value of sacred groves is indisputable. Borokini (2016) writes that: “Across the world, sacred groves are said to be the abodes of rare, indigenous and endangered species of flora and fauna, the repositories of genetic diversity, home to medicinal plants, sanctuary for endangered flora and centres of seed dispersal, genetic reservoirs of tree species for forestry, and hotspots of bio-cultural diversity. They also serve as corridors and landscape links between bigger protected areas.”

Conclusion

It is important to state that since the fear of paganism keeps making Christians to destroy trees and

sacred groves that Christians are reminded of the significant role that trees and groves play in the Holy Scriptures. Much of this has been stated previously. It was under the oak of Mamre that Abram built an altar (Genesis 12:6-8), Jacob made a covenant with God right under the Bethel Oak (Genesis 35:1-15), the Garden of Eden was filled with trees, It was under a tree that the angel fed the prophet Elijah, Jesus frequented the Garden of Gethsemane, Roskos (2007) rightly notes that: "It may also be worthwhile to point out that despite recent efforts among some Christians to denigrate the ancient association of the sacred with trees, most modern Christians themselves retain the residues of this association in their religious practice, whether in the form of Christmas tree, Mistletoe, or worship in Gothic-style cathedrals"(pp. 489-490). Despite some instances of persons in Christian history who cut down trees to convert people, the example of St Francis of Assisi, and saints who loved trees should never be forgotten.

The paper has revealed that sacred groves like other aspects of the natural world have intrinsic and ecological value. Sacred groves are valuable for sustainability and combating climate change. The paper has equally revealed that in Urhoboland sacred groves have been destroyed and continue to face endangerment. There is need in the light of the ecosystem value for them to be preserved. The eco-theological basis for this was provided in the. It behoves all particular Christians and theologians to use this basis to argue for keeping of sacred groves. If this is done it will greatly contribute to environmental sustainability in Urhoboland and beyond.

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