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VII. Towards a Setswana Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics:

The Example of Genesis 8:20-9:17

Kenosi Molato & Musa W. Dube

Abstract

The paper explores Setswana and biblical moral teachings on the environment as well as their functions in the preservation of the Earth, demonstrating with the text of Genesis 8:20-9:17. It also explores how contemporary profit-oriented relationships with the Earth constitute moral degeneration. Lastly, the chapter explores how some Setswana perspectives on the environment can constitute Earth friendly ways of reading the Bible for the revitalisation of the Earth community as a whole.

Introduction

The Botswana national anthem's first stanza starts off by asserting that "*Fatshe leno la rona, ke mpho ya Modimo, ke boswa jwa borraetsho...*" which translates to, "Our land is a gift from God, an inheritance from our forbearers." Undergirding this statement is the recognition from the Batswana founders that their land was given to them by the deity *Modimo* (God). Therefore, the song encapsulates a theology of the environment. It also summons all Batswana to understand and recognise that God is the giver of the land. Recognising the land as a sacred gift has implications for both the land and the recipients of such a gift. In this paper, we assume that by singing, "Botswana is a sacred gift from God", we recognise that the land must remain sacred, and that this must be attested to by our ways of living and of using the land. Though this is the case, there has been a decreasing awareness

among the Batswana that they are called to take care of their environment. The question then is, do we ponder on the words of this song and what they entail?

I (Kenosi), having grown up in the beautiful Okavango and Maun, recall the great river Thamalakane, which runs across the town and divides it into two; and the water reeds that beautify the riverbank in which Maun was named after. As at now, Maun remains a shadow of its former self. The water from the river, which we used for our daily sustenance, is no longer drinkable because it is polluted by us the members of the community. Musa Dube (2015:230) vocalised this eco-injustice when she states that humanity has failed to recognise that in the creation Biblical narrative, people are depicted as the children of the earth. She (2015:230) writes, “The human beings are told to keep the Earth Community just as good as God created it. Nonetheless, today’s audience cannot watch the biblical drama of creation as an innocent spectator because the Earth is facing an environmental crisis from human exploitation”.

This paper argues that at the core of human moral degradation is humanity’s failure to recognise the sanctity of the environment. And thus lead to humanity to forget who they are and their responsibility concerning the environment. In Botswana, citizens have increasingly become detached from the values of environmental ethics that are embedded in Setswana traditions and customs. This results in environmental degradation. One of the factors, which led to environmental degradation, is the failure of humanity to remember the Earth as the core member of our community. It is to be noted that the Setswana ecological traditions demonstrate that the Batswana viewed nature as sacred and since they identified themselves with nature. This paper seeks to propose a Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics in reading Genesis 8:20-9:17 in order to address the issue of environmental degradation in Botswana.

Definition of environmental degradation

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

There are close to three phases of environmental degradation awareness that have developed and unfolded over the past 58 years in the global stage (Conradie 2005). The first phase raised concerns about the chemicals used in the agricultural setting in US and Britain (cf. Oosthoek & Gills 2005). Rachael Carson published the *Silent Spring* in 1962 in order to address this issue. Consequently; DDT was banned from Britain and other countries in the middle of the 1960s (cf. Oosthoek & Gills 2005). The second phase raised a concern about population growth and economic development in the late 1960s. There was a plethora of publications addressing this issue such as: *Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich, *Unsafe at any Speed* by Ralph Nader, *The death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution* by Carolyn Merchant, and many others. The third phase of the environmental crisis awareness came in the late 1980s when scientist discovered serious signs of the ecological crisis, which suggested that humanity was destroying the environment on a global scale. The first of these signs showed the thinning of the Ozone layer, and the second was global warming (cf. Oosthoek & Gills 2005).

Human behavior is the main cause of environmental degradation. Conradie argues that when Human species lose their sense of right and wrong, it does not only affect their society but also the environment, making the Earth not to be a pleasant place to reside in (2005:183). Gabriel Setiloane (1985:40) notes that in Sotho Tswana

worldview, “*Motho* is part of Nature and Nature is *Motho*’s companion from the beginning. Nature is therefore not an object for human exploitation, for like humanity, it came out from the same Source.” In this theological understanding, human beings do not possess supreme power or rights over nature but are interconnected with nature. This worldview does not only bring the interconnectedness between the people and the environment, but also underlines the need for a relationship of liberating interdependence.

Globalisation & Industrialisation

The causes of the environmental degradation have been debated for decades now. In these debates the following factors come to the surface as the main causes or contributors to environmental degradation: technological developments; rapidly increasing human population; dramatic increases in resource and energy consumption; the emergence and development of the capitalist world economy and lastly; utilitarian attitudes towards the environment (cf. Belal, Cooper & Khan 2015:44). At the centre of these causes is the issue of Human-beings rapaciousness placed in the context of globalisation. Globalisation entails an interrelationship between countries, companies and individuals (cf. Eisenhardt 2002:88). The concept of globalisation refers to neoliberal economic policy that underlines the generation of profit across boundaries to the point where ethics are subjugated to profit-making. People and environmental welfare are sacrificed for profit. (cf. Belal, Cooper & Khan 2015:44). The key players in the globalisation concept are multinational corporations that seek cheap labor to maximise profit and which lack long-term commitment to their workers, communities and the environment.

Human beings think, imagine and invent. This they do in order to develop their surroundings. Some have argued that the human thinking capacity and the reasoning is what distinguishes them from their

surroundings.¹ Midn Frouel writes, “They create systems, devices and technologies that are more and more complex, that are quicker and quicker, and that are more and more ingenious. For several years, the process of modernism has been accelerating, seemingly impeded by nothing” (2019:1). Developments affect our daily lives such as religion and how we view our environment but, the problem is the development of the community through mining, chemical industries and forms of transport that release pollutants into the atmosphere, among many others. These human developments are failing to fathom the significance of the environment within the community structure. This depletes the ozone layer, destroys trees and vegetation and encumbers animal movement.

This is partly because humanity has not fully grasped the sacrament of the environment, although this is beginning to change since the last two decades. The sacrament of environment is crucial as we consider the impact of developments in the society because many views the environment as a mechanical concept rather than sacramental. John Chrysavgis (2006:93) argues that since humanity has failed to see the sacrament of creation, they arrogantly subject everything to their individualistic desires. The developments that do not consider these aspects end up lacking the sensitivity or disturbing the established relationship between humanity and nature.

At the heart of environmental moral degeneration is the contemporary profit-oriented attitude of human beings who use the natural resources for gain and profit rather than coming with the strategies of preserving nature. Moreover, this attitude develops a buyer and seller mentality. This consumer oriented implies that human beings use natural resources without minding that these natural resources will be depleted. Consequently, this mentality puts too much burden on

¹ However, our Tswana legendary stories, which we were taught while sitting around the fire at night, shows that Hare was the most intelligent animal in the animal kingdom.

the environment in the sense that consumerism is central to the economy of the country. Countries use their natural resources to boost their economy. Sallie Mcfague (2013:8) encapsulates this idea when she argues, “the “culture of consumerism” is not just a form of life that we can accept or reject; it has now become like the air we breathe. This is the “nature” of “culture”—culture becomes nature; it becomes “natural.” It should be noted that the reorientation of profit-making attitude towards natural resources is pivotal for environmental regeneration. If human beings do not change the way they view and use natural resources, then environmental degradation will neither be avoided nor reduced.

Setswana Perspectives on the Environment

The global environmental crisis has shown the shortcomings of the scientific approach that is developed from the western economic paradigm in trying to solve the environmental crisis (cf. Bernard 2001:33; Masondo 2014:115). Therefore, it is important to revisit the indigenous knowledge system that was utilised by native people in preserving the environment (cf. Bernard 2001:33; Chanda 1996:65). Penny Bernard (2001:33) argues that the colonisation of African countries has led many cultures to jettison their indigenous ecological knowledge thereby causing environmental crisis in their countries, which never before transpired because of the sensitivity with which native people perceived their environment. Indigenous ecological knowledge is different from book learning but is primarily rooted in the accumulation of personal experiences, which is derived from indigenous communities’ ways of preserving the environment.

For example, traditional dancing in Botswana is not mere entertainment but has cultural significance, especially in relation to agricultural rites and wildlife celebrations. It is in instances like these that Botswana show how important nature is to their livelihood. Dances are sometimes performed in rain making ceremonies. One of the dances, which is performed mostly in Maphoka village, is *Maele*. This dance is performed by women around the month of September to ask the ancestors for rain at the beginning of the rainy season. Another

dance, which is primarily associated with the environment, is *Ndazula*. This dance is usually performed to thank the ancestors for a good harvest. It is accompanied by beer drinking. Ceremonies that are connected with the rain making such as the ones mentioned above are considered important in Setswana worldview because it is in the pouring of rains, ploughing and harvest time that the consciousness of the value of the Earth and its importance is heightened. If the environment is not kind to the Sotho-Tswana people, so they appease it through rituals such as rain making dances and sacrificing of sacred animals, which are kept for the ritual events (cf. Masondo 2008:85).

In Botswana, people observe the agricultural rites such as *letsema* (To start ploughing the field), *Molomo* (the tasting of the first fruits) and *dikgafela* (Thanksgiving festival for rain after harvest) (cf. Nkomazana 2010:123). Moses Maruping argues, “Dikgafela is a traditional harvest festival meant to appease the skies or ancestors (*badimo*) to release the rains well in time before the looming ploughing season beckons.” In this celebration the women would prepare beer, which would be used during the day of the celebration, and during the celebration the beer would be given to the chief who then would take a sip and pour the beer on the ground. The reasons for performing this act has various interpretations but one of the interpretations is that the chief recognises the covenant which they have with the Earth, by doing so, the Chief acknowledges the interconnectedness between the Earth which has been given to them by God. The second interpretation is that the chief venerates the ancestors who have given them rain; therefore, they deserve to have the first fruit from their land. By pouring the beer on the Earth the Chief acknowledges that the ancestors are part and parcel of the Earth.

Seasonal observance is one of the practices under Setswana indigenous ecological knowledge. Bongani Gumbo points out that people who lived in the Okavango delta were aware of the dangers of environmental degradation and therefore they avoided it by diversifying their fishing and hunting strategies. Thus, the Riverine people of the Okavango delta in the Northwestern area of Botswana had fishing seasons and hunting seasons. By doing this, they allowed the seasons of

reproduction a cycle that was not to be interrupted (cf. Gumbo 2014:90-91). Therefore, the ecological indigenous knowledge in the Okavango delta was instrumental in preserving the deltas from the environmental crisis. Similarly, Masondo points out, “Depletion of fur animals was prevented by prohibiting their hunting during summer when they were breeding in the Sotho-Tswana culture” (2014:132). By doing this the animal reproduction season was not tempered with, which allowed the animals to multiply.

Olaotswe Kgosikoma, Witness Mojeremane and Barbra Harvie (2012:27) state that indigenous farmers in Botswana are accustomed to the eco system in their environment so much that they can notice some trends in vegetation change in response to climate changes and also the causes of environmental degradation in their environment and the actions that can be taken in order to prevent it. It is important to note how indigenous people can perceive the different land conditions since they know their environment as compared to relying on scientific studies (cf. Kgosikoma, Mojeremane & Harvie 2012:27). Indigenous farmers can predict how the next season will turn out by observing the appearance or absence of certain small plants, the normal or abnormal behavior of some animals, and certain movements of the moon and the sun.

Mythic animals provided in Setswana worldview foster a strong attachment to the conservation of the environment. Maserole Kgari Masondo argues that Mythic animals need to be decolonised for they provide a historical narrative of Sotho-Tswana culture and what it means to be human. It is in mythic animal narrative that the identities of the tribes are depicted and their value and identity (*seriti*) displayed. Willoughby (1909:263) notes that the mythic animals hold “an African in awe of unseen powers, and cast their halo around the sanctity of tribal morality”. Interwoven in this mythic animal narrative are the moral values which hold the fabric of the society, and this means that when these narratives are lost, the society degenerates. When the society degenerates, the environment too will degenerate because of the interconnectedness between human species and the environment. Masondo (2014:125) writes:

“Mythic animals deal primarily with the origin of people and certain social and ritual institutions that account for real-life situations and explain the basic conditions of human life as perceived by their authors. They humanise people by giving them identity and animalise humanity by drawing them back to their roots; their history of origin-environment.”

Jacob Olupona (2006:261) points out that the environment and nature are intertwined in African culture to such an extent that some beliefs and cosmological concepts are derived from them. This is to say that the environment and nature in an African cosmology play a huge role in establishing the laws and norms of the society. Growing up in the Okavango, I recall this intertwined relation between animals and human beings depicted by some of the narratives of my own culture (*Setawana*). There was a big ox in my grandfather’s kraal which he called “his father.” We were prohibited to slaughter this ox or hit it. My grandfather said that this ox “*Ke motheo wa lesaka*,” meaning that it was the foundation of the kraal, and if it died, all the cattle would disappear. This demonstrates the interconnectedness between nature and humanity. The rituals of the family were performed upon this Ox and therefore, when one tampers with it, s/he tampers with the livelihood of the family and the foundations that held the family together.

This narrative exemplifies the interconnection and interdependence of human beings and the environment that exist in Setswana worldview. At the centre of this cosmology is an understanding that the environment is a core member of our community. It highlights that we, human beings, are interconnected with all other members of the Earth community. The killing of other member of the Earth community is therefore also the killing of the human community. Consequently, environmental degradation comes as a result of us human beings failing to observe environmental ethics, which are integrated in our cultural beliefs, traditions and norms. This narrative also argues that the belief structure and norms are derived from other members of the community that in this context is the animal world. Therefore, the ritualistic performances, which form the fabric of the society, have no reference outside of the environment (Olupona 2006:259).

G. Mogapi and D. Timile (2011:114) have observed that there is a relationship between animals, plants and human beings in Botswana and that certain animals are totems which ethnic groups in the country are identified with. E.g. Duiker (*Phuti*) is a totem for the Bangwato; Hyena (*Phiri*) is a totem for the Bakgalagadi. People from each and every ethnic group introduces themselves to strangers using their totem rather than their usual names, and these interrelations connect the fabric of the earth community in Setswana cosmology.

The above examples show that our Setswana cosmology does not hold humanity to be superior to other members of the Earth community. Rather, they are part and parcel of the Earth community. Humanity and other members of the Earth community are intertwined as exemplified by the animal being given a human identity and vice versa. Consequently, Condradie (2004:127) authenticates this argument by asserting that the Earth consciousness movement has awakened nations to the awareness that has caused the humanity to realise that they are not in control of ecosystem and that all forms of life are interconnected.

Setswana Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics

David Horrell (2014:139) notes, “Biblical studies has always been shaped by, responsive to, and enmeshed in, issues and priorities in the contemporary context, even when it operates in a primarily historical or archaeological mode and does not acknowledge such contemporary influences on the questions and approaches it pursues.” One of the primary contemporary issues which Biblical studies have been called to engage is the environmental crisis. The call was raised by Lynn White Jr. through his classic article written in 1967, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.” In this article, Lynn White Jr blamed some Biblical texts such as the Genesis creation narrative as the ones which form the ideologies that contribute to environmental degradation. This caused some in Biblical studies to react to the accusation. This led to the birth of the Earth Bible international project which started in Australia. The project’s main aim as noted by Steven

Rockefeller (2001:516) was to 1) Develop eco-justice principles appropriate for an eco-justice hermeneutic (modes for interpretation) for understanding the Bible. 2) Publish these interpretations as contributions to current debates on ecology, eco-ethics and ecotheology. 3) Provide a responsible forum within which the suppressed voice of Earth and the Earth community can be heard.

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

The proposed Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics borrows concepts from Setswana indigenous ecological knowledge as its premise to approach and interpret a biblical text. The concept of covenant, which is derived from the *dikgafela* ceremonies whereby the Chief pours beer on the Earth as a form of acknowledging the covenantal relationship with God, will be implemented in the interpretational process. The other concept is the idea of *Motho* (person). Gabriel Setiloane argues that the concept of *Motho* in Sotho-Tswana cosmology is identified with nature, and that to be identified with nature gives one *Seriti* (identity or honour) in the society. Therefore, embed-

ded within these concepts is the idea of interconnectedness and liberating interdependence between the human being and all other members of the Earth community. The next section seeks to offer an Earth friendly reading of Genesis 8:20-9:17 from a Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics.

Genesis 8:20-9:17 from Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics

In the historical context of Genesis 8:20-9:17, God takes a look at what is happening on the Earth and behold, what he sees is just corruption. The Earth has been polluted, but the question is, since the Earth was created good in the Garden of Eden, then who corrupted and polluted the good Earth? According to this passage, it is humanity (Gen 6:5).² It is interesting to note that human beings have been and are always the polluters of the Earth. Moreover, the inclination to pollute the Earth is something which is in the heart of men, and it is consumerism embedded within the heart that drives humanity to engage in environmental degradation. Eco theologian Sallie Mcfague (2013:5) writes the following about the mentality of consumerism: "Consumerism is a cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services." Consequently, in Genesis 7-8:19, God takes the initiative towards healing and transforming the Earth, which has been polluted by human beings, and he cleans the Earth through the flood though he regrets performing this act. Exegetical questions that arise for this discussion are, 1) is this covenant only cut between Noah and God? 2) What is God's promise concerning the Earth and 3) does this covenant encourage environmental degradation? It is to be noted that the flood reflects God's wrath towards those who have polluted the Earth, and

² This passage shows that immoral degeneration in the society leads to environmental degradation.

he always seeks to find the Earth the way he has created it, namely, as “good”.

The flood does not complete the healing of the Earth but the sacrifice of blood offered to God completes the cleansing ceremony.³ This sacrifice, which completes the circles of cleaning the Earth, is followed by the divine promise: “And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” This divine promise is a renewal of the creation pronouncement stated by God before the fall but now with the emphasis of an obligation of refraining from destroying the Earth again with floods (cf. Keil & Delitzsch 1975:151). The concept of appeasing God by a blood sacrifice in cleansing the Earth is central to Setswana ecological tradition. Rain-makers were responsible for performing this act so that God’s anger should be appeased and in return the land be freed from the curse of God (cf. Amanze 2002:116). Moreover, for the sacrifice to be accepted by God, the participants (humanity) have to acknowledge that they have transgressed the environmental ethics that have been set by the ancestors.

In this narrative of Genesis 8:20-21, Noah builds an ark and offers a sacrifice. This sacrifice is accepted by God and thus led to the covenantal obligations whereby God says, “I will never curse the ground because of human beings.” Noah makes the covenant not because he is superior to the Earth but notes the response, which God makes. God’s response is not to Noah but to the ground which is used here as a representation of the Earth. Therefore, the covenant in this context is made between God and the Earth as it is unfolded and authenticated by the context, especially in Chapter 9:13, “I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and

³ The offerings of blood are central in environmental cleansing in Setswana traditions when the people had violated the environmental ethics of the society.

the Earth.” it is interesting to notes that rainbow symbol as covenant made by God is not unique to this biblical narrative but it is also present in Setswana traditions. In Setswana rainbow is called *mola wa badimo* or *motshe wa badimo*. Rather than being attributed to God (Singular) it is rather attributed to the ancestors. It usually interpreted as a sign that the rain has poured to the satisfactory amount. Setswana tradition celebration incorporate beer drinking as in both requesting for rain and in thanksgiving for rain. Consequently, when the rainbow appears in the sky, the ancestors are carrying a calabash of beer, validating that the covenant between the people and ancestors will certainly not be broken (1998:28).

Reading Genesis 8:20-9:17 from Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics highlights the theme of environment preservation. The narrative demonstrates that in this covenant, humankind is part and parcel of nature, hence the word Earth is used to incorporate both living things and nature at large. This narrative advocates for interconnect- edness and liberating interdependence between human beings, the animal world and the Earth as it has been demonstrated in the Setswana cosmology. Therefore, the Genesis 8:20-9:17 narrative offers an Earth friendly way of reading the biblical text since it reflects the Setswana worldview with regard to the Setswana environmental ethic.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that at the core of environmental degradation is the failure of humanity to realise that they are not the central figure in God’s creation but rather are part of the creation community. Failure to understand this has led to eco-injustice and the environmental crisis. This paper has described environmental degradation and demonstrated the importance and value of the other members of the Earth community, which they add to this web of relationships. While developments are important to the society, this paper has shown that

there are certain developments which are not sensitive to the fact that humanity cannot exist outside nature, neither is it above or independent of other members of the creation community. Lastly, this paper proposed Setswana ecological biblical hermeneutics, which is derived from Setswana worldview. The proposed Setswana ecological hermeneutics offer us an Earth friendly way of reading the Bible as demonstrated by the reading of Genesis 8:20-9:17.

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