

The Lost Land and the Earth Mother: African Mythology and the Issue of Land in Southern Africa

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1 Introduction

The English theologian Andrew Kirk observed a fundamental difference between theology in the North and theology in the South. In the North the validity of theology depends on the answer to the question: Does it comply with the requirements of science? In the South the focus is on “its ability to inspire people to be agents and embodiments of the life of God’s new creation in Jesus Christ.”¹

The biblical accounts of creation originated in an existential framework somewhat similar to the approach in the South: “It was not the philosopher inquiring about his origins who spoke in the Creation narratives; it was man threatened by his surroundings. The background was an existential, not an intellectual problem . . . myth belonged originally to the context of survival, an expression therefore of one’s understanding of existence, of one’s understanding of the existence of the threatened-self.” “The Creation myths then had the function of preserving the world and of giving security to life.”²

Many of the motifs that are found in the biblical accounts of primitive time are also found in Africa: the motifs of the offence, the origin of death, the origin of civilization, fratricide, the building of a tower and the flood. But, says Westermann, in Africa south of the equator “the stories of the creation of man are highly developed, but those of the creation of the world hardly exist and, when they do, they appear only by way of additions.”³

The South African Janet Hodgson⁴ says the same as Westermann: in African cosmology there is no radical gap between the spiritual world and natural life, so that religion is not a separate category of thought or experience but part of everyday life. The African symbols related to creation play a role in the present

1 A. Kirk, *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (Valley Forge, PA: Gracewing Publishing, 1997), 7.

2 C. Westermann, *Creation* (London: SPCK, 1971), 11–12.

3 *Ibid.*, 71.

4 J. Hodgson, *The God of the Xhosa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), 17–18.

context. "In the mythopoeic world-view of the traditional African, the mythological past is constantly recoverable in ritual because time is eternal." Hodgson also states that most African myths of origin "are primarily concerned with the origin of man and the world round him. They are not creation stories."

There are African intellectuals who dispute this widely held view, namely that African myths of origin are not creation stories,⁵ but I will not in this article compare the African narratives of the origin of the universe with the scientific narrative, neither will I focus on the implications of the scientific understanding of the universe for the African understanding of God. I will reflect on two aspects mentioned by R. Alan Culpepper in his lecture, "*Children of God: Evolution, Cosmology, and Johannine Thought*", as they relate to the African context: the idea that evolution and the theology of John have a direction and openness towards the future, which has ethical implications, and the theological and ethical significance of creation as seen, inter alia, in the book of Proverbs⁶ and the theology of John.

These aspects will be considered after attention has been given to the way in which the mythical relationship to land has functioned in different contexts of conflict and survival in Zimbabwe and South Africa, where identity and existence have come under threat and where people have used mythical concepts regarding land to acquire power and wealth. In the political struggle against white political domination in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and against apartheid in South Africa the relationship with land played a key role, and it is still an issue surrounded by considerable tension in both countries.

2 The Concept of "The Lost Land" in the History of Zimbabwe

One motif that played a central role in the last half century in the history of Zimbabwe is the relationship of the people with the land, and the ongoing role of the Creator in guarding both the ecology and the people who live from it.

The symbolism of land played a central role in mobilising the rural communities to support the war for liberation from white domination and occupation in the time when Zimbabwe was still Rhodesia, with a white government.

5 E.g. S. Munyai, "The Tenacity of African Traditional Religion in Venda Christianity: a Missional Investigation" (Unpublished, 2015), 11.

6 Culpepper, in this volume.

In Zimbabwe, "(L)and belongs to God, the ancestors and, particularly, to the founders of the lineage, clan or tribe interred therein."⁷ Mwari is the Shona High God, the creator. The spirit mediums are the link between people and the different tribal spirits and the lesser spirits. At the end of the 19th century the mediums played a vital role in the uprisings of 1894 and 1896–1897 against the colonial occupation of the land.⁸ That was the first Chimurenga (war for freedom). After the uprisings were defeated, two spirit mediums who were leaders of the war, Nehanda and Kaguvi were executed by the colonial forces. They became martyrs, and a source of inspiration during the second Chimurenga that started in the 1960's.⁹

But before that happened, the traditional cult "went into decline, as did resistance to Christianity, the religion of the dominant power. The cult remained alive, however, albeit more secretively as it had been driven 'underground' . . . a kind of mutual appeasement between the White minority and the great majority of Blacks seemed to have emerged."¹⁰ As the number of white settlers and their political dominance increased, resistance mounted again. The white government respected the traditional chiefs, and many (not all) of these chiefs tended to cooperate with the government. Whereas some chiefs became suspect as government collaborators and "sell-outs," the mediums moved from token resistance against colonialism to active cooperation with the guerrilla fighters. The spirit mediums shifted their political allegiance from the chiefs of the present to the chiefs of the past, the *mhondoro*, who could of course only be made available to them by these mediums. It was "a veritable renaissance of traditional religion."¹¹ The mediums who took an interest in politics became the main force for nationalist sentiments after the nationalist movements were suppressed in 1964:

In rural areas meetings became political gatherings . . . the past heritage was revived through prayers and traditional singing, ancestral spirits were evoked to guide and lead the new nation. Christianity and civilization

7 G. Huizer, *Folk Spirituality and Liberation in Southern Africa* (Bordeaux: Centre d'etude d'Afrique Noire, Domaine Universitaire, 1991), 13.

8 *Ibid.*, 17–21.

9 B.-M. Tendi, *Making History in Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals, and the Media* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

10 Huizer, *Folk Spirituality*, 22.

11 M. L. Daneel, "Environmental Reform—A New Venture of Zimbabwe's Traditional Custodians of the Land," *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* (1996), 352.

took a back seat and new forms of worship and new attitudes were thrust forward dramatically. . . . the spirit pervading the meetings was African and the desire was to put the twentieth century in an African context.¹²

In an effort to counter the influence of the mediums, the Rhodesian government shot some of them, persuaded some to collaborate with the government with gifts and deference (a strategy that worked with many traditional chiefs) and “dropped pamphlets from the air over the guerilla-held areas, in the guise of anti-nationalist admonishments from local spirit mediums.”¹³

The spirit mediums facilitated the transfer of authority from the traditional chiefs to the guerillas. The fact that the guerillas claimed that they were fighting for the reclaiming of the land from the white owners played an important role to win the confidence of the mediums. From their side, the guerillas observed the taboos and rituals prescribed by the mediums. Liberation politics and traditional religion merged: “The increased authority and effectiveness of the *mhondoro* medium aided the guerillas in winning over the villages. Many traitors and ‘sell-outs’ were condemned as witches.”¹⁴

Inus Daneel, who did extensive research in these same communities, related how the senior tribal spirits commanded that people should get involved with the political struggle to reclaim the “lost land,” in 1972. That was a turning point in the war. Most of the people supported the guerillas for religious reasons and not for ideological reasons.¹⁵ The present president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, was one of these freedom fighters.

3 The Issue of Land in Independent Zimbabwe

After independence in 1978, the Mugabe government concentrated on modernizing the farming methods of the black farmers in the so-called Communal Areas, rather than on large-scale land distribution. By the late 1990s, however, Mugabe’s popularity dwindled due to a steep economic decline. Mugabe

¹² Huizer, *Folk Spirituality*, 25, quoting a certain Shamuyaria.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁵ Interview with I. van der Linde, *Vrye Weekblad*, 8 February 1991, 14.

turned on the white farmers and Great Britain and supported the invasion of commercial land by war veterans and other landless people.¹⁶

President Mugabe gradually developed his own “theology of land”. . . . As the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe worsened between 2000 and 2003, the state embarked on an intense propaganda campaign. Facing an increasingly popular opposition, the state adopted a two-pronged strategy of marketing its programmes while subjecting the opposition to violence and negative publicity. Using various media, the propagandists sought to portray the ruling party (ZANU-PF) as a sacred movement fulfilling prophetic oracles that the black majority would reclaim the lost land. State functionaries systematically appropriated religious ideas, with concepts from Christianity and African traditional religions being used to buttress political statements. The controversial land reform programme was couched in religious terms and notions like sovereignty attained mythical proportions.¹⁷

In the urban areas, Mugabe would couch his rhetoric in Christian terminology. A royal mythology was built on Mugabe as “messiah, son of God, new Moses, supreme leader, divine king and breadwinner.” He was portrayed as an analogy of the suffering messiah and redeemer of the Bible. In rural areas, on the other hand, he would focus on Traditional African Religion. Here he was portrayed as the legitimate heir of Nehanda and Kaguvi, the two spirit mediums who were executed at the end of the first Chimurenga (Machingura 2012: 208, 259, 260). “Mugabe made use of traditional Zimbabwean religion as a way of making land the central issue in the Third Chimurenga.”¹⁸

There have been numerous reports that Mugabe’s cronies, and not the poor and landless in whose name the land was taken, benefitted from the land restitution programme. Agricultural production, food security and the economy as

16 M. Spierenburg, “Staking Claims, Struggling about Identities; the Role of Spirit Mediums in Conflicts about Land in Dande, Northern Zimbabwe,” in: Van der Borgh, E. (ed.) *The God-given Land. Religious Perspectives on Land Reform in South Africa*, Vol. 2 of the SAVUSA POEM proceedings series 2009, 17; Tendi, *Making History*, 81.

17 E. Chitando, “‘In the Beginning Was the Land’: The Appropriation of Religious Themes in Political Discourses in Zimbabwe, Africa,” *Journal of the International African Institute* 75, 2 (2005), 220–239.

18 Tendi, *Making History*, 93.

a whole declined sharply. The symbol of the lost land was also used for a most constructive purpose.

4 The Use of the Concept “Lost Land” for Ecological Purposes in Zimbabwe

Inus Daneel¹⁹ played a key role in a new movement that took place after the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. During a period of “intensive field research in the mid-eighties,” in which he was investigating the role of religion in the liberation struggle, he was “in close touch with ex-combatants, chiefs, mediums and African Independent Church leaders. Endless discussions about the military struggle to recapture the lost lands led to consideration of land and environmental issues.” Daneel realized that the chiefs and mediums were frustrated because the new government did not recognize them. The mediums ascribed the prevailing droughts to the failure of the government to recognize the role of the spirits in the war for liberation. The chiefs and the mediums saw the rampant deforestation, particularly in the resettlement areas, as an opportunity to gain influence again. A new movement, the War of the Trees, emerged. It took on the character of a liberation struggle, based on “the same religious tenets and holistic African world-view as the struggle for political independence.” The land that was lost to the white settlers was now lost in ecological degradation.

Given their marginalized political position, the chiefs and mediums now joined forces. Both were dependent on and linked to the senior regional ancestors, upholding “a holistic African world-view in which the living and the living dead, the creator-divinity and all of creation are inseparably linked in a seamless totality on one continuum. . . . the maintenance of the equilibrium between a healthy environment and the well-being of the humans living there is considered to be the guardian ancestors’ prime concern.”²⁰

It was not a return to the past, but a contextual combination of old and new. They were, for example, joined by ex-combatants, who were frustrated because they did not share in the privileges of political liberation. Preserving the environment offered them a means of job creation. The ancestors symbolized “much more than the localized spirit interests of the old religion. They represent a new black identity and cultural awareness in which people take

¹⁹ Daneel, *Environmental Reform*, 347.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 348.

pride; they represent liberation from colonial oppression, the recent birth of a nation, as well as that nation's ambition for development and progress."²¹

The hope of reclaiming the lost land is well illustrated in one of the ceremonies where Chief Makumbe of the Gutu district proclaimed that once the trees were planted "the rains will abound, the *mhondoro* spirits will return and the *njuzu* will re-inhabit the pools."²² The *njuzu* spirits are benevolent spirits that provide traditional female "doctors" with healing powers, medicinal knowledge and herbs so that they can successfully heal their patients, particularly barren women.²³

In the process, the role of the creator was changing: instead of merely requesting the senior ancestors to forward a local plea to a seemingly remote oracular deity, as is common in rain rituals, "god is addressed more directly as an insider, one who is present at the ceremony. . . . (the) ceremonies affirm Mwari's traditional role as ecological liberator, that is, as rain-giver, who periodically liberates selected regions or the entire country from crippling droughts. In this respect the creator god's perceived role in the third *chimurenga*, the green struggle, is innovatively contextualized within the age-old traditional religious framework."²⁴ As with the political struggle, where "sell-outs" were regarded as wizards, wanton tree felling and water pollution were now stigmatized as a form of wizardry punishable by fines or, in extreme cases, banishment from the ward or chiefdom where the offense took place.²⁵

The main elements of this movement, according to Daneel were: unity of purpose and cooperation between the key functionaries of the Mwari cult at the local district level, and the interplay of natural forces, earth keepers, ancestors and the "creator god."²⁶

The Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation (ZIRRCO), the institutionalized and extended version of Daneel's research team, was founded in 1984. This body took responsibility for the initiation and development of two affiliated organizations: the Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists (AZTREC) which was formed in 1988, and the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches (AAEC), a grassroots environmental and

21 Ibid., 354, 364.

22 Ibid., 363.

23 M. L. Daneel, "Life Around the Pool in African Independent Churches," in *New Faces in Africa—Essays in Honor of Ben Marais*, J. Hofmeyr and W. S. Vorster (eds.), (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1984).

24 Daneel, *Environmental Reform*, 364.

25 Ibid., 366.

26 Ibid., 365.

tree-planting movement composed of 180 African Independent denominations, which was founded in 1991.²⁷ By 1996 AACE comprised some 120 member churches, mainly prophetic African Independent Churches, with an overall membership of some 2 million adherents throughout Zimbabwe.²⁸

In the first fifteen years of ZIRRCO's existence—the period during which Daneel acted as director—an estimated 12–15 million trees were planted.²⁹ Could a similar movement be expected in South Africa?

5 The Mythical Relationship to Land in the Struggle against Apartheid in South Africa

In the 1980's the issue of land was prominent in the struggle between the apartheid government and the liberation movements. However, there is little evidence of a movement based on a relatively pure Traditional African Religious tradition as existed in rural Rhodesia and later Zimbabwe.

The image of Africa that emerged in the Black Consciousness movement in South African townships of the 70's, such as Alexandra and Soweto had much more in common with the ideas and ideologies of prominent politicians and writers in the rest of Africa: movements such as Negritude of president Leopold Senghor (also a renowned French poet) and African Personality of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

Cartey called the symbol of mother and earth, the earth of Africa, a dominant motif throughout modern African literature at the time.³⁰ In an anthology of African poetry, jointly edited by Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, the "chief celebrant is the Black Woman, the Earth Mother, the anthropomorphic symbol of primal sensuality."³¹

While the Black mother predominated as a source of love and affection, of rebirth and inspiration, the father was throughout a symbol of failure and alienation. Albeit indirectly, he was disturbingly linked with that God, described

27 M. L. Daneel, *Christian Mission and Earth-care: an African Case Study*. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2011, The Free Library (Accessed 6 October 2014.09.17) <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Christian+mission+and+earth-care%3a+an+African+case+study.-a0261080602>.

28 Daneel, *Environmental Reform*, 355.

29 Daneel, *Christian Mission*.

30 W. Cartey, *Whispers from a Continent. The Literature of Contemporary Black Africa*. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969) 3.

31 K. Awoonor, "Tradition and continuity in African literature," in R. Smith (ed.), *Exile and Tradition*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976) 1550.

by Serote, who as an old man created the world rather absentmindedly and carelessly (Africa dropped from his back pocket) and eventually, as ineffectual as the fathers, only relates to earth as a spectator. Serote blamed God that he accepted no responsibility for all the misery around him. In “Looking at sorrow” God is listed with the sky, moon and stars that look on passively while people bleed and die. Suffering, disaster, blood, tears and screams are part of a mystery for which God is somehow held accountable.

This is in some respects in line with the remark of I. Ritchie that, in many African creation myths, the fallen state of humanity seems due to an oversight (usually a *human* oversight), which is associated with a tendency to fatalism. Mbiti ascribed this tendency to a *lacuna* in Traditional African Religion, the absence of any solution to the human dilemma after the Fall.³²

The seventies and eighties, however, were times of activism. Liberation was in the air. Unlike in Rhodesia, Christianity did not take a back seat. Strong church leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak were prominent leaders in the struggle against apartheid. The Theology of Liberation contextualized Christian faith in and combined it with the struggle for liberation. African Theology contextualized it in Traditional African Religion. Traditional values were brought into play again within the context of the church and modern culture, such as the well-known concept of *Ubuntu*, a term which refers to the wide-spread African view that a person is a person through and with other people, which was often preached by Christian leaders such as Desmond Tutu. Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Nelson Mandela as president, wanted to introduce traditional values into society with his propagation of an African Renaissance, and Jacob Zuma, his successor as president, brought back various traditional customs, such as polygamy—he has four wives at the moment. But it was never in such a pure form and big scale as in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.

The issue of land was one of the main political driving forces and is still a very strong motive in politics. In an article entitled, “A Black Christology: A new beginning” published in the *Journal of Black Theology*, the Christian theologian Thakatso Mofokeng referred to the importance of land in Black Culture in the late 1980’s:

As far as the Black cultural tradition is concerned, land is the mother and Black people are ‘sons and daughters of the soil.’ It gives Black people an identity and in turn receives an identity from them . . . Land is the source of livelihood . . . It is also of religious significance as the location of sacred

32 I. Ritchie, *Creation in African Thought*, <http://www.escape.ca/~iritchie/ATSC.Chapter3.htm>, (Assessed on 01.07.2014).

places where we dialogue with the founding fathers of the Black community . . . Tearing these people away from this land is sacrilegious (sic). The land is also socially and psychologically significant . . . We always come back to our roots . . . The land is also the bedroom where we put our departed loved ones to bed. It is also the house of our ancestors. We always go back to them to have our dialogue with them, to retain and promote our sense of community. Without them we lose our sense of continuity and history. Without them and their land we float like a ship without an anchor and compass on a stormy sea . . .³³

Mofokeng here took up a dominant theme in the African literature of the time and used it in the political context.

In the 1970's, in Soweto and Alexandra, the two most prominent townships around Johannesburg, there were a number of Black Consciousness poets who published in English, such as Oswald Mtshali, Wally Mongane Serote (already quoted above), Siphso Sepamla and Pascal Gwala. For some reason, almost none of their books were banned. They took up basic motifs of Traditional African Culture, such as the cyclical concept of time, and earth who is our mother. They combined these motives and applied them to the political struggle: we return to be reunited with the earth, our mother, in death, as part of the circle of life and death. Death, in this case the deaths of political activists, becomes the source of life and freedom. This was also a strong recurrent theme in the sermons of the black theological students at the University of the North, where I was lecturing at the time.

This thought-pattern is deeply embedded in African funeral rites. Death is traditionally seen as the beginning of a new stage of life, as rebirth into a new, better life. The corpse was often buried in the shape of an embryo. There were symbols for the womb and for the navel. Corn seeds are thrown into the grave, as a symbol of new life.³⁴

The thought-pattern that death leads to life had been applied to politics before. In *A Grain of Wheat* that was first published in 1969, Ngugi wa Thiong'o dealt with the tensions and struggles in Kenya before independence. The book takes its title from 1 Corinthians 15:36, which appears on one of the first pages,

33 T. A. Mofokeng, "A Black Christology: A New Beginning," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* (1987) 1–17, here 11.

34 T. Sundermeier, "Todesriten und Lebenssymbole in den Afrikanischen Religionen," in *Leben und Tod in den Religionen*, (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1980) 253 and H. Häselbarth, *Die Auferstehung der Toten in Afrika* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1972) 34, 35.

before the text itself begins: “Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain.”

A young leader of the resistance movement told his friends that they should take up their cross, deny their fathers and mothers, and serve their one Mother, Kenya. He said that Jesus failed because His cross did not change anything: “In Kenya we want a death which will change things, that is to say, we want a true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ.”³⁵

The basic message of the cross, that life has come to us through the death of Jesus, is here taken as a pattern that can be repeated endlessly in different contexts, including the political context, without any faith in Christ Himself.

In the years that Ngugi’s book was reprinted repeatedly, the South African poet M. W. Serote used many symbols to express the idea of life-through-death. The tree, for example, has a cyclical pattern: the tree grows up and the fruit falls down, to become a new seed in the earth and a new tree that grows up again. The earth remains the basic source of life. “I’m the seed of this earth/ . . . I’m the fruit of this earth . . .” To be a seed has a political meaning.

It is a black seed, looked after
by black saints and prophets
by Sobukwe Mandela Sisulu
Fanon Malcolm x George Jackson³⁶

The first three mentioned here were South African anti-apartheid activists: Robert Sobukwe was the founder of the Pan Africanist Congress and was in house arrest at the time; Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu were members of the African National Congress and were in detention on Robben Island at the time. Frantz Fanon was the well-known revolutionary writer from Martinique. Malcolm x and George Jackson were black political activists in the USA—both died violently, Malcolm x in 1965 and Jackson in 1971.

The pattern embraces not only time, but also the cyclical continuity of rise and fall, up and down, life and death. The tree, the image and bearer of life, has a time to grow and spread its branches, and a time to dry out, shed leaves and crash to the ground. Existence takes place in the shifting balance between

35 Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Heinemann’s African Writers Series*, 7th reprint, 78, 83.

36 M. W. Serote, *The Seed and the Saints* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975) 34.

the forces of life and the forces of death. "The trees' understanding of seasons could caress my heart," writes Serote.

when fruits are ripe they fall to the ground
and leave a seed
ah
how can we forget
Luthuli's voice . . . Sobukwe . . .³⁷

Albert Luthuli was a devout Christian. He was often detained because of his resistance against apartheid, and he was Africa's first winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace and president of the ANC until his death (under mysterious circumstances) in 1967. In 1952 he issued a statement to the press "*The Road to Freedom is via the Cross*," an idea that was taken up by both Christians and non-Christians.³⁸

The fruit of freedom is the legacy that the black heroes and martyrs leave the following generation. The present generation must remember their suffering and continue their work. The poet wants to bear fruit by dying for the coming ones:

oh you black mother
black woman
mama
your smile that paves through the wounds and the hurt
breaks me
like a twig loaded with green leaves and ripe fruit
mama
let me fall to the earth let me fall to this soil
let my rest be a seed
i will take this fall
gently, gently,
with my bare feet and my naked body.³⁹

The way that the symbol of mother and earth is used in the context of political activism is also meant to define African identity. To put it differently: the search for political freedom is also a search for cultural freedom, the search for

37 M. W. Serote, *Behold Mama, Flowers* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker 1978) 23.

38 Cf. <http://africanhistory.about.com/library/biographies/blbio-lutuli.htm>.

39 M. W. Serote, *No Baby Must Weep*. (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1975), 42.

a free and authentic African identity. Political freedom and cultural identity merge. Awoonor commented on the unity described by the Négritude poet, Leopold Senghor, between earth, mother, Africa and night. The opposition between Europe and Africa is that of day and night, of White and Black.

“Senghor makes the choice to be Black, washed clean of all the contagions of civilized men . . . The search for identity connotes a spiritual return to Africa, to the mythical landscape populated by the dead ancestors, the memorials of childhood, and the presence of the mother . . . the poet invokes the Black woman, the maternal principle, who is at the center of the return to the African world . . .” The African night stands in opposition to the light of Europe: at this hour, at the call of the woman, the Earth Mother, the ancestors gather to talk to their children.⁴⁰

The unity with the earth, in this case the polluted urban earth, at night is expressed in a striking poem by Serote, “Alexandra”. There is intense longing as well as a profound fear of Alexandra. The interplay between love and fear comes close to the experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. In the circle of life and death, birth becomes a form of death and exile, and death is homecoming that brings new life. Although at first fear and alienation are predominant,

we have only one mother, none can replace,
 Just as we have no choice to be born,
 We can't choose mothers;
 We fall out of them like we fall out of life to death.

The township has scared him, humiliated him and been cruel to him, but still:

I have gone from you, many times,
 I come back.
 Alexandra, I love you;
 I know
 When all these worlds became funny to me,
 I silently waded back to you
 And amid the rubble I lay,
 Simple and black⁴¹

⁴⁰ Awoonor, *Tradition*, 167, 168.

⁴¹ M. W. Serote, *Yakhal' Inkomo* (Johannesburg: Renoster Books, 1972), 22–3.

It seems that the symbol of the Earth Mother, with others, represents a sense of having an African identity, different from the Western identity. It also represents a mood that was very prevalent during the struggle against apartheid, that freedom and liberation can only be found through suffering and death, which included the destruction of buildings and infrastructure. The question is to what extent this symbol can now represent a movement towards life, and towards solutions to the present ecological dilemmas that threaten life in our part of the world.

6 The Symbol of the Earth Mother and the Role of the Past in the Search for a Healthy Ecology

The symbol of the Earth Mother plays a role in the search for a healthy ecology in various contexts in the world today: it has been taken up in some of the more esoteric Gaian and New Age movements, where *Mother Earth* is prominent, as well as in Christian theology.

An example of the way the symbols of Earth, Creator and Ancestor are used in mainstream African theology can be found in Desmond Tutu's recommendation of Kopya John Kaoma's book *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics*. Tutu writes: "Just as we fought against colonialism, racism and apartheid, we must unite to fight this life-threatening problem." The problem he refers to is the ecological crisis: "We are one Earth family, God's Family. We must protect the rights and dignity of Creation without overlooking those of the poor . . . The Earth is the Lord's; thus a sacrament of ecologically interconnected beings held together in Jesus Christ, who, as Kaoma argues, is the Creator, the Life and the Ecological Ancestor of all life." Kaoma used both African and Christian traditions.⁴²

In Africanist circles, also, the relation to the land and the search for a healthy ecology has been linked.

Wally Serote was appointed to oversee the construction of Freedom Park, a national monument where those who died in defense of the country are commemorated. He was the chief executive of Freedom Park until 2010.

In 2013, when his book *Rumours* was launched, Serote described the rituals and ceremonies that were performed at Freedom Park in a symbolic cleansing of the land and people, since the soil of South Africa was soaked in blood and needed cleansing. "He ended by saying that climate change now presented a

⁴² K. J. Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2013).

different challenge to the land, where grasses in certain places had stopped growing and this had chased away the natural food of the predators. As a result there have been cases of lions carrying off children from villages. Africans need to communicate with the land and live with it as one in the old way. He said that he believes that this could reverse the desertification of the land.”⁴³

When Serote used the symbol of the death of political heroes becoming the seed of freedom and life, one could observe the huge energy amongst masses of people who had in some way a similar idea that their struggles would produce freedom through suffering and destruction. And Inus Daneel could initiate a mass movement amongst rural people who wanted to recover the lost land by revitalising traditional concepts of the land and traditional religion. But how much does the sentiments of Serote, to restore the relationship with the land “in the old way,” resonate with others? How many Africans think of climate change in a life world where lions carry off children from villages?

Serote here continues the idea of restoring the past that occurred several times in the black urban poetry of the seventies, for example, in 1977 Mafika Pascal Gwala of Soweto published a book of poetry under the title *Jol'iinkomo*. This is also the title of the last poem in the book. This poem ends as follows:

Promise your brother,
The cattle shall have herded home
to our ancestral kraal.
Jol'iinkomo!
African shall be one in her past.
Jol'iinkomo!⁴⁴

Zimbabweans who support Mugabe often give a similar reason for supporting him: he is restoring the past, he makes a new beginning possible.

In 2003 we did some focus group sessions with people in a South African township, in a landscape dominated by coal mines and huge industries. In a discussion with a group of jobless youth on the ecology, they made the following statement: “The mines and industries have disturbed our ancestors by disturbing their graves, so that they are restless; the only solution is to go back to the past. The mines must go, the industries must go and the farms must go, because they occupy the land that can be used for traditional tribal farming. Mugabe is a hero, because he is restoring the past.”

43 Amy Mongane, Wally Serote Launches *Rumours*, <http://jacana.bookslive.co.za/blog/2013/06/25/mongane-wally-serote-launches-rumours/> 2013.

44 P. Gwala, *Jol'iinkomo* (Johannesburg: Ad.Donker, 1977), 70–1.

In this longing for the past, the search for a healthy ecology remains a rather romantic ideal: some believe that, in the past, unlike today, people were healthy and strong, cattle were fat, good rains fell and the land was fertile.

7 The Unresolved Conflict

The aim of restoring the past is not always so clearly formulated, but Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe remains a very popular figure in Southern Africa. In August 2014 Mugabe became chairperson of the 15-member Southern African Development Community (SADC), where he is a popular figure. How should we understand the popularity of Mugabe in the region's official *development* institution, given the fact that he severely damaged the modern economy of his own country? Is there an understanding of what development should be, and what the relationship to the land should be, that is different from the understanding of development in the West?

Ezra Chitando gives one explanation: "Mugabe has posed as the last standing advocate of black pride and economic liberation. This has seen him receiving wide acclaim as a consistent revolutionary in the global South. Feted as an African liberation icon, Mugabe has had African crowds in raptures with his fiery rhetoric on black pride and dignity, even as his domestic record is heavily compromised by inefficiency, rampant corruption in the public sector and lack of creativity in addressing the country's multiple problems."⁴⁵

Two multi-award winning writers, the brothers vs and Shiva Naipual, (vs won the Nobel Prize in 2001) give another reason. They observed that the externalities, the luxuries of the modern world, once acquired all too often led to disillusionment and a desire to destroy. They used the term "African nihilism" to describe the urge to destroy the remnants of Western colonialism in post-Uhuru Africa. They ascribed this urge to the fact that Western culture has had a devastating effect on the traditional African world and identity. Some people found Western culture very attractive, but it excluded them. And once they had it, they felt misled. It robbed them of their own selves, their souls, their identity. If this foreign culture cannot be absorbed and assimilated, it must be destroyed.⁴⁶ Being attracted by modern culture and the wish to destroy it stand in conflict with each other, and this conflict has not been resolved. Mugabe's

45 E. Chitando, N. Taringa, T. P. Mapuranga, "Zimbabwean Theology and Religious Studies during the Crisis Years (2000–2008): A Preliminary Study," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40.1 (2014).

46 S. Naipual, *A Hot Country* (London: Abacus, 1984), 184–5.

ranting against the West, and England in particular, did not prevent him to maintain a very luxurious lifestyle, and his wife Grace to spend huge amounts in Harrods, London.

This unsolved conflict is made visible in the fact that Mugabe is the leader of the body that must promote development in the region.

The conflict has its origin in the meeting of different cultural traditions, modern Western culture and traditional African culture. The way in which productivity, the promotion of life, is understood in the different cultural traditions is a case in point.

The western approach to land is to a large extent a de-mystified approach. Economists regard land merely as a means of production. This approach has economic results: Western farmers have developed methods and techniques that have made impressive production on farm land possible. Not only modern methods, but private ownership is important for production as well.

The Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann wrote that the world view introduced in Genesis 1–11 opened the way for science and technology to develop. The first astronauts who went to the moon read from the first chapter of the Bible before setting off for the moon, with very good reason: The presentation of Genesis 1 gives the first indications of a scientific understanding of how the world came into being. Genesis 1 is followed by philosophical-theological and scientific eras of reflection on the whole and the origin of the world; it is preceded by the Creation narratives of the primitive cultures and the myths of the great polytheistic cultures. It does even more: it still serves to warn and correct the way in which this development has taken place in our time.⁴⁷

Today we would put more emphasis on the life-threatening role of this modern development. The modern secular relationship to land did not only lead to massive production and economic growth, it is also threatening the well-being of the planet. A new relationship to land is needed, and the question is if the African tradition can play a role in this.

The combination of earth and mother in the African context has consequences for the way in which one regards productivity.

In modern African literature at the time, productivity was linked to the symbols of earth and mother: "Here, too, is the relationship between earth and woman . . . Earth as well as woman should be productive, for earth is mother; its productivity not only ensures the continuity of the clan but should be ensured by the clan."⁴⁸ Traditionally, the clan ensured the fertility of the land through religious means: a good relationship with the ancestors ensured rain

47 C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Augsburg: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 1, 37–8.

48 Cartey, *Whispers from a Continent*, 344.

and good crops, while a disturbance in this relationship caused disaster and death. Several examples can be quoted. Kenyatta related how, in African tradition, ceremonies were performed to cause the rain to fall, to purify and bless the seeds, and to purify the crops:

In Gikuyu life the earth is so visibly the mother of all things animate, and the generations are so closely linked together by their common participation in the land, that agricultural ritual, and reverence for ancestral spirits, must naturally play the foremost part in religious ceremonial... Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried... the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it...⁴⁹

Soyinka talked of the ecstasy, the frenzy of religious rites which satisfy the “needs of humans to swill, gorge and copulate on a scale such as Nature’s on her monstrous cycle of regeneration... Man reaffirms his indebtedness to earth, dedicates himself to the demands of continuity and invokes the energies of productivity. Reabsorbed within the communal psyche he provokes the resources of nature: he is in turn replenished for the cyclic drain in his fragile individual potency.”⁵⁰

Modern scientific people do not try to “invoke the energies of productivity” or to “provoke the resources of Nature” by way of ecstatic rites; they use science and technology, because they have a different religious tradition that goes back to the Old Testament where the prophets of the God of Israel rejected the fertility rites of the Canaanite Baäls.

Today, in Southern Africa, we have a different mix of cultural and religious symbols and myths from what it was in the time of the Old and New Testaments. These symbols and myths clash and combine in different ways all the time. While the modern global economy uses science and technology for massive production and consumption that are increasingly recognised as being destructive and life-threatening, the traditional African concepts of the earth and mother, and the religious view of productivity still play a role.

The different views on our relationship to the land, to the earth, have not been reconciled and that tension has a destructive effect. For example: what Mugabe does is a threat to Daneel’s initiatives. In 2011 Daneel wrote about plans

49 J. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya. African Writers Series 219* (London: Heinemann 1985), 21, 243–254, 316.

50 W. Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides, A Communion Rite* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), xii.

“for two major game conservancies: one in the communal lands mainly for the protection of the endangered klipspringer antelope, and the other for a joint project of collective, interracial game farming, incorporating some fifty farms to the east of Masvingo town. These plans, already approved by ZIRRCO, had to be abandoned because of the farm invasions allowed by Mugabe in the year 2000. A few years later an estimated 85 percent of the entire game population on Zimbabwe’s farms had been destroyed. So much for game conservation and protection of the country’s natural resources!”

We are, in a sense, in a similar context as that which, according to Westermann⁵¹ was the existential framework of the Biblical accounts of creation: the context of survival and of the “threatened-self.”

8 The Way Forward

Daneel and Mugabe have one thing in common: they both have used the concept of the lost land to promote their respective aims; and both did so in two different, even conflicting, ways in different contexts: in one context they used traditional African concepts and in the other they used Biblical concepts.

The fundamental question still to be solved, it seems, is the unresolved conflict between the powerful attraction of two diverse cultural traditions: modern Western culture and traditional African culture. Can Culpepper’s reflection on the two Biblical narratives of the origin of the universe and the scientific narrative help us in this regard?

Culpepper describes another conflict: the opposition between light and darkness that sets up the oppositional dualities of the Fourth Gospel:

... it is not an ontological, metaphysical, or eternal dualism. The opposition is between persons who are empowered or transformed by ‘the light’ and those that are not. Those who are not of ‘the light’ oppose it, but shall not overcome it. These observations are important because they establish the divine identity of Jesus, the place of the cosmos as the creation of the Logos, the ultimate value of life, and especially the potential of human life lived in relation to its creator through the revelation disclosed through Jesus.⁵²

51 See above, Westermann, *Genesis*, 11, 12.

52 Culpepper, in this volume.

This opposition between light and darkness is found today in both the modern Western culture and traditional African cultures in Southern Africa. Both, and their diverse combinations, often have a destructive impact on nature, on the creation of God. In both contexts there are persons who are empowered or transformed by “the light”. The opposition between these two cultures is not as fundamental as the opposition between light and darkness, and life and death. Those who see the light, that is, who confess their faith in Jesus, should be empowered and transformed towards an ethical quality of life;⁵³ this should happen in both the modern Western and traditional African contexts.

Culpepper’s⁵⁴ view of evolution is that it is directed at the future: “. . . becoming is continuous, open-ended, and therefore ethically significant.” The same is found in the John’s gospel and epistles.

This is in stark contrast with the traditional African concept of time, which is related to events that happen: “The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place . . .” According to traditional concepts “time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually *no future*.”⁵⁵ The absence of the future means that one does not plan for the future but wait for events to happen, which is related to the tendency to fatalism, and the *lacuna* in Traditional African Religion, the absence of any solution to the human dilemma after the Fall, that was mentioned above. Mbiti correctly states that African peoples are discovering the future dimension of time, but that it is a slow process and the change from the structures built around the traditional concept to structures built around planning for the future is not smooth: this “may well be at the root of, among other things, the political instability of our nations.”⁵⁶ The history of Zimbabwe seems to provide a good case study of this statement.

Both cultures in the South African context need to be transformed by what Culpepper describes in this volume as the theological and ethical significance of creation as seen, inter alia, in the book of Proverbs. The Jewish sages “connected creation with wisdom, ethical instruction, and ultimately the Law.” The theology of John links up with this tradition: “John asserts that the Logos, like Wisdom, was the agent of creation. Wisdom brought into being living things,

53 C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People. A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2010), 93, 94.

54 Culpepper, in this volume.

55 J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books 1974), 17.

56 Mbiti, *African Religions*, 27–8.

and then gave to those who would receive it the revelation that leads to a higher way of life.”

The ethical implications of John’s writings that Culpepper refers to in his article, is of vital importance in our context. The destructive impact that we as people from both cultures have on human life and dignity, and on creation, indicates that we cannot find the way to life within ourselves and our own cultural traditions, it has to come from elsewhere, and John shows us where to look:

... “knowing the truth” involves more than just cognitive awareness; it means to accept the revelation of truth and live by it. Again, a change in relationship to the revelation of God in Jesus is offered as the means by which human transformation will occur . . . The Gospel of John also takes a dynamic view of human development. It calls its readers to accept the revelation given through the creation, the giving of the law at Sinai, and the incarnation of the Logos, to respond in faith, and to live out the commandment of love.

In Southern Africa, both cultural worlds described above, and their combinations, have to be transformed by love and wisdom that is to be found in accepting this revelation, that connects ethical instruction with the creation of God. We can conclude this reflection on our context with Culpepper’s conclusion: the call to become children of God is both John’s imperative and John’s hope for humanity, also for us in our part of the world.

