

## TOWARDS EARTHKEEPING: AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

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**The concern of this paper is to explore the intricate relations between social control mechanism and the environmental ethics. The main methods employed include; qualitative, observations and interviews. We observed that indigenous religion has incorporated in itself social mechanisms such as taboos, laws of exclusion, laws regulating exploitations etc, which has direct bearing on the environment. The paper concludes that indigenous knowledge on environmental conservation should not be seen as primitive. Rather it is the manifestation of the people's close attachment to nature which ensures sustainability and clean environment. We recommend that indigenous knowledge in sustainable development should be retrieved in order to be tapped into current conservation programs.**

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous knowledge, flora and fauna, sustainability, social control, environmental ethics.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out to explore the intricate relations between social control mechanisms and the environment in Akyem Abuakwa in Ghana. The indigenous religion has incorporated in itself social control mechanism, which has bearing on the environment. The social control mechanisms within the Akyem Abuakwa traditional area are meant to protect the atmosphere, water bodies, flora and fauna and Mother Earth. Since the traditional deities and spirits reside in non-human creation—the mountains, rocks, rivers, trees and other water bodies; traditional laws serve as social control mechanisms to protect these abodes. The thoughts behind these traditional or religious philosophies which were shrouded in secrecy and myths meant to frighten people were well intended. They were meant to ensure a sustainable harmony of human beings with their environment for the purpose of

survival. It is now very critical to examine the role of the traditional religion in the light of massive exploitation of Ghanaian's natural resources and the resultant environmental degradation to find resources to reverse the massive degradation.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted within Akyem Abuakwa traditional area of Ghana. The study used the qualitative approach to collect data in writing this paper. Both structured and semi-structured forms of interview were adopted in this study. We interviewed some Akan traditional leaders such as chiefs, queens, chief's spokespersons, among many others and also referred to works of other authors as secondary source, which included both published

and unpublished books, and articles in journals. The descriptive method was employed to describe and interpreted all the data that were gathered from the field of study to assess their validity.

## DISCUSSION

The topic of this paper is discussed under the following:

### SOCIAL CONTROL MECHANISM PARADIGMS

Every human society has a set of ideas about what is good or bad, right or wrong, and what is deemed to be good behaviour and what is regarded as reprehensible behaviour and Akyem Abuakwa is not an exception. These notions, which have a great deal of influence on the conduct of the members of that particular society, are usually based upon some recognized authority whose sanctions are accepted and obeyed.

To some people, moral sanctions are derived from human society, thus making morality nothing more than a social phenomenon. But to others, common sense is the source of morality to a religious or supernatural source. Whatever the source, moral sanctions have power to compel obedience. Every ethical conduct within the Akyem Abuakwa traditional area may be said to be religious oriented. It is founded in religion and effectively backed by mystical sanctions. What constitutes moral codes- the laws, taboos, customs and set forms of behaviour- all derive their compelling power from religion. Hence morality flows out of religion and through this the conduct of individuals is regulated; and break of the moral code is regarded as evil and punishable. Asare Opoku has observed that an important fact about the rules which constitute the ethical code of African societies is that they are usually integrated into a unified system, and to understand the ethical code no rule can be considered apart from the system as a whole. And this system has one desirable idea- social harmony and peace for the good of man and society (Opoku, 1978).

### ENFORCEMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS

Kudadjie (1983) notes that the social structure

itself contribute a great deal both to the formulation of ethical ideas and the setting up of moral standards, as well as the actual enforcement of the morality shared by the community. As factors that determine morality, one may mention the values and norms enshrined in the peoples' customs and traditions; their religious beliefs, practices and taboos, their "we-feeling" and desire for group solidarity, the experiences, common sense and conscience of the individual, the influence of proverbs, wise sayings, folk tales and *ananse* stories some of which may be based on custom, experience, "we-feeling" and religious ideas.

But in addition to the influence of these factors and to the sheer influence of the various instructions in the society which would mechanically and unconsciously make the people do the right and avoid the wrong towards the environment, one can identify broad classes of enforcing morality: the religious and social sanctions. Williamson (1965) has noted that in the olden times there were no police men and no need of them, the gods were the policemen; in those days, the customs and traditional ways of life sanctioned by the spirit-ancestors and the gods provided the framework of the Akan ethical code. By that the gods and the spirit-ancestors were the policemen that protected the family lands and property. In the Akyem Abuakwa traditional societies, the people's beliefs about God and the various gods and divinities were invoked to enforce morality. Land, the forest and the rivers, animals are nobody's property. It is community owned. The chiefs or family heads hold them in trust, that is, on behalf of the extended family. No one has the right to sell land or destroy rivers or the forest (grooves) because they are legacies from ancestors who closely monitor how we use them. Any abuse of land, rivers, forests (grooves) and wanton killing of animals and birds is likely to be met with punishment in the form of death, diseases like blindness, impotence and paralysis.

Ancestral lands, grooves and sacred places cannot be sold to foreigners in the name of so-called African hospitality. Once the land is sold there is no way anybody can control how it is used and for what purpose. In the olden days, precious minerals such as gold, were not supposed to be kept in large quantities by individuals.

In Akyem Abuakwa traditional society, the people hold a common belief in God, the various gods and

divinities that they are the custodians of morality and justice. The people's beliefs about God and the various gods and divinities were invoked to enforce morality. The promise and expectation, coupled with actual experience of the blessing and protection of the supreme God and the other spirit-powers for those who kept the moral code, on the one hand, and the fear and threat, coupled with actual experience, of punishment and desertion by the spirit-powers kept people doing what was right and avoiding what was wrong.

The Akyem Abuakwa people regard the earth as a mother. They address the earth as *Asase Yaa*, meaning the Mother Earth. Among the Abuakwa people, Mother Earth is revered as the provider and sustainer of life. In a similar vein, the Birim River is addressed as *Birim Abena*. She is revered as the protector and sustainer of life. *Birim Abena* features prominently in the socio-religio-culture life of the people. *Birim Abena* provides religious space for most religious rites in Abuakwa State. Mother Earth, *Asase Yaa* and River Birim, *Birim Abena* could be invoked to enforce morality and enhance social justice.

### **DAYS OF REST AS ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL MECHANISM**

The people of Akyem Abuakwa Traditional area have days of rest on the traditional calendar. The earth is expected to rest or get restored after use in one of the seven days of the week. For proper land management, the Abuakwa people have instituted some days of rest for Mother- Earth, who is seen as a living Goddess. In addition to the weekly 'Sabbath' for the land, the Abuakwa people consider certain days as bad days that the land should not be disturbed. The days of rest are meant to reduce the risk of over exploitation of the land and reduce drastically the extinction of species.

The traditional calendar of Abuakwa State hangs on the Akan calendar month which spans a period of forty- two days, that is, between two *Akwasidae*. The Abuakwa people observe two festive and seven ceremonial days in the month which occur as follows:

When *Akwasidae* falls the fifteenth day after it is a Monday, which is referred to as *Dwoda Fodwoo*. The following Friday, that is four days later is *Fida Afidam*. The fourth day after *Afidam* which is a

Tuesday is referred to as *Benada Dapaa*. The word *dapaais* a corruption of *Da-pa* which translates 'a good day'. The next day is *Awukudae* which is sacred. The next day is *Ayawdae*. The eighth day after *Ayawdae* is a Friday which is termed *Fofie*. The following Tuesday goes under the name *Benada Kwabena*. The Saturday which follows is *Memenada Dapaa* which heralds the next day which is *Akwasidae*.

Abuakwa State has instituted taboo days during which the people are restricted, hence no weeding, farming, fishing, excessive noise making are permitted. The whole community is responsible for policing the state. This means that the whole community maintains public order and protects persons and property from the hazards of public accidents and the commission of unlawful acts. Apart from the apparent of spirits, which these taboos instilled in the people, there were also physical sanctions against breaking the taboos. To ensure the propitiation of the spirits, which involved the spilling of blood, the culprit had to offer sheep and some bottle of schnapps liquor. These sanctions were considered deterrent to scare people from breaking taboos deliberately. In Abuakwa State, there was a taboo against the clearing of vegetation close to the edges of streams and rivers, particularly *Birim Abena*. The people were aware that this could protect the rivers and Streams from excessive evaporation. The people have a high sense of land preservation. An important aspect of the people's cultural heritage is the preservation of the environment culminating in innumerable taboos and sanctions very useful for our contemporary as well as our future life. The people recognised that life would be robbed of parts of its essential meaning if people would not respect or even revere the environment around them. Characteristic of Akyem Abuakwa traditional culture is its reverence for nature and oneness with it. Akan spirituality considers God, ancestors, human beings and the natural world as interconnected. Thus whoever harms nature harms God, ancestral spirits and human beings. Whoever degrades the environment or pollutes the rivers degrades God, ancestral spirits and human beings. Human beings are to treat the rest of creation with utmost respect. Taboos are instituted to protect and preserve the natural world. Human beings and the natural world seem to have made a covenant to depend on each other. Days are set aside to celebrate Mother Earth. For the

people of Abuakwa “nature is not just an object, but a tangible reality from which humanity derives its sense of wholeness and well-being. We agree with Asare Opoku (1998) that “our traditional attitude to the environment is not only valid but actually essential for the future of the world”.

### **TABOOS AS ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION MODEL**

The people of Akyem Abuakwa knew of the absolute need to preserve the environment and its resources for the survival of the humankind. The people achieved this goal by the institution of taboos to prevent people from degrading the environment. Taboos were always shrouded in mystery and secrecy since its *modus operandi* is spiritual. The fear of breaking taboo laws and customs, involving dread punishment by unseen and allegedly powerful elements in traditional religion, provided an effective preventive factor. In Abuakwa state religion and law were so linked among the people that religion became ‘the engine of law’. This is to say that a consideration of the role of traditional religion in the Abuakwa state can check the massive exploitation of its natural resources and its resultant environmental degradation. The focus here would be to examine how taboos were exercised to protect Mother Earth, Water Bodies, Flora and Fauna.

### **MOTHER EARTH**

In Abuakwa state, Tuesdays, *Akwasidea*, *Memenada-Dapaa* and *All da bone* (Bad Days) are observed as days of rest or traditional holidays. These days are set aside when it is strictly forbidden to go to farm. This prohibition is meant for the earth to replenish lost energy. The people of old have an interesting story; if one goes to the bush on that day one is sure to encounter Mother Earth disguised in the form of weird old woman or a dwarf (*Aboatia*) or a monster (*Sasabonsam*). This was to ensure that people obey rules.

Mother Earth of the Abuakwa people abhors suicide and the spilling of blood and cohabitation in the bush, such acts are considered taboos (*mmusu*); for it is believed that when they are committed, the earth will refuse to yield her increase and untold calamities will befall the state. Sacrifices

are therefore made to *AsaseYaa* to avert the consequences of such crimes. The distinctive feature of traditional religion lies in its being a way of life, and the purpose of religion is to order our relationship with our fellow men and with our environment, both spiritual and physical. At the root of it is a quest for harmony between man, the spirit world, nature and society. Land is no body’s property. It is communally owned. The chief or family head holds it in trust that is on behalf of the extended family. No one has the right to sell part of it because it is a legacy from ancestors who closely monitor how it is used. Any degradation or pollution of the land is likely to be met with punishment in the form of diseases like blindness, impotence or death. Taboos are instituted to protect the sanctity of the earth. It is a crime against Mother Earth for mining operators to strip her naked by removing the vegetation cover and the top soil containing nutrients much needed for plant growth. Mining activities expose the land to soil erosion which impoverishes the soil rendering it barren and useless for agriculture.

The traditional priests in the various localities stand tall in the hierarchy to dispense punishment to the culprits that break the social norms especially the environmental taboos. Chinua Achebe puts it rightly the role of the African priest in every locality when he observed:

*The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase and we shall all perish ... You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred curies (Achebe, 1967).*

Abuakwa moral education is geared towards creating the awareness of interdependence and interconnectedness. Abuakwa’s moral education caused some people to eschew selfishness. Moral enforcement mechanisms such as curses, public opinions, ostracisms, supernatural rewards and punishments reinforce the need for individuals to behave right towards the environment. The idea is that in taking a moral decision that is of benefit to the individual, the person is enjoined to balance the personal benefit against the consequences of the act on the family and community at large. A morally good person is one who while pursuing interests also factor into his moral decisions the welfare of the

collective. This moral precept emanates from both religion world view and ecological ethos that stress on relationship of all existence.

Social control mechanism in Abuakwa is full of warnings against the misuse and overuse of the land and its resources. Bloodshed pollutes the land. Asante (2001), has observed that the earth is polluted by the sins of those who dwell in it. Having sex in the bush, murdering a fellow human being in cold blood, working on the land on sacred days and over exploiting the land without reverence desecrate the land. To maintain the sacred purity of the land, the land must not only be purified through sacrifices, but dwellers on the land must also conform to the socio-realism norms of the land. It is precisely this that made our forefathers to institute taboos to protect the land.

### **WATER BODIES (RIVERS)**

In Abuakwa state, it is a taboo to defecate into any of the water bodies. Rivers are considered as pure and the water from *Birim* is used for the purification of the state and the stool during religious festivals such as *Akwesidae* and *Ohum*. As a sacred entity, water should not be desecrated. Any infringement of this role, it is believed would bring disaster on the offender and on the society. In the 1980's it was common to hear the warnings, punishment or sanctions of the *Birim* Priestess to people who violate the tuesday's injunctions to visit the riverside in Abuakwa state.

The water taboos are meant to enforce the cleanliness and purity of the river against water pollution. Pollution would bring harm including diseases of all sorts on people who drink it. The water taboos, therefore, serve the needs of the people by protecting them from contracting water borne diseases and also live in a sound environment. A return to the traditional regulations would greatly enhance man's health (Opoku et al., 2008).

### **FISHING AND MINING IN BIRIM**

Fishing in certain parts of Birim is prohibited. At Akyem Tafo where the *Ohum* festival is celebrated with all seriousness, there is a special religious site along the River Birim (*agyempremoso*) where

fishing is not allowed. Rituals are performed at the site during the celebration of the *Ohum* festival.

Generally, mining is not permitted on the beds of river *Birim*. The reason for such taboos is religions and is always shrouded in secrecy and myth. We realise, however, that this prohibition helps to protect the stock of fish from getting depleted and thus saving fish population for the use of the people. Chemicals used in the washing of gold dust also pollute the river and kill fishes in the river. Chemical pollution of Birim River is also dangerous for the health of the people.

### **FLORA**

In Abuakwa state there are several taboos to protect the flora (Flora: All forms of plant life that lives in a region, period or special environment). The social control mechanism is based on "a view of life which affirms that the concentric circles of relationships experienced by all human beings require sensitivity to the presence of other and to the centre which is Ultimate Being, God. Secondly, community is a web that links all together and as such, underlines the interdependence and mutual accountability of neighbours" (Oduyoye, 2002).

The Abuakwa people recognise the earth as the home. Human survival depends on its health and wholeness. The people have ecological mind-set; that calls attention to the larger neighbourhood within which our human communities develop. According to Oduyoye (2002), the "planet earth belongs in a heavenly environment that it responds to and to which we, in turn relate". As earth dwellers, our lives are in constant relationship with the sun, the moon and the atmosphere around us. On earth, other beings are our neighbours—plants, animals, mountains and rivers are all our neighbours. The social control mechanism is hooked on ecological sensitivities that underlined the principles of connectedness, interdependence and mutual sustainability. The flora is our neighbour. When air, water and the vegetation are in danger, human life too is endangered. With the awareness of ecology, human understanding of neighbourliness has begun to expand to include all creations, seen and unseen.

The flora provides medicinal plants, fruits and nuts. The flora again provided our fore bearers primary occupation such as hunting and gathering.

Some huge and tall trees are believed to be inhabited by spirits and gods and therefore revered. The silk cotton tree, noted for its commanding height and size is also revered. Before it is harvested for any purpose certain rituals have to be performed. It is believed that in traditional setting failure to do so may bring calamity upon the harvester, his family or the community of which he is a member.

The climbing plant called *ahomakyem* commands awe and respect by its commanding presence, with the upper end entangled in the branches of some giant tree and the lower end rooted in the ground at an angle of about 45 degrees. It is claimed that any slash of the cutlass on the stem by anyone who attempts to cut the plant down calls forth blood instead of the usual sap we expect from the trees and that during the night that follows it wails (Marfo, 2008).

The *odi* plant is said to have potency in healing strange diseases. Taboos and myths are created around these plants to be mystified in order that the plants escape extinction. In the wisdom of our people, the traditional religion is full of warnings against the misuse and exploitation of the flora. Whenever, the people disobeyed and broke the traditional norms the earth (land) is defiled and the people incurred ancestral displeasure. According to Rattray (1923), the gods and the ancestors are responsible for enforcing the wishes of the Supreme Being. Furthermore, the ancestors are the guardians of the Akan morality: they have the power and authority to punish, even by death, someone who breaks the moral norms of the society (Ackah, 1988). Busia (1951) notes:

The ancestors are believed to be always watching the behaviour of those they have left behind on earth, sending them help and protection, or punishing them with misfortune if they do not act well.

Any infringement against the traditional norms affects the sacred character of the land. It also implies that the sacred character of the ancestral lands is maintained through obedience and commitment to the Akan morality and ethical standards. Wanton exploitation of the flora is un-African. It behoves on traditional leaders to safeguard all sacred groves and religious sights. The flora is our inheritance bequeath to us by God through the ancestors. The challenge is how to live as neighbours in the family and culture that have made us and how to derive and cultivate resources

for nurturing global neighbourliness from these primary experiences (Oduyoye, 2002).

## FAUNA

On Fauna (Fauna: All forms of animal life that lives in a region, period or special environment), the Abuakwa people have instituted social control mechanism based on traditional beliefs and practices and environmental ethics to protect animals, birds, insects and other creatures. The community norms, mores and ethics are rooted in a common culture that includes the belief in a Supreme Being, who sanctions all the ethical requirements. But the people of Abuakwa again, believe that they live under the keen eyes of their ancestors, who are concerned that traditions that have enabled the community to protect the fauna—animals, birds, insects, snakes, and other reptiles and fish are diligently kept. In other words environmental protection is guided by religion and culture. Again, social control mechanism is as well guided by some religion and culture.

## TOTEM

Totemism, which is a social and religious institution, has it that a sacred alliance exists between an animal species and a human group. In other words animal species and human group relate to each other. Taboos exist to enhance the relationship that exists between the animal species and the human group. The relationship between the totem and the totemite makes the members of the same totem-kin regard themselves as brethren. They, therefore, act together on all occasions, with common likes and dislikes Nkansa- Kyeremanteng (1990). The social control mechanisms within totemism involve:

- ❖ Marriage between members in the same group is strictly forbidden.
- ❖ The animals representing the various clans as are not edible by the clan members.
- ❖ The animals representing the various clans as totems are not to be killed or trapped.
- ❖ On the sale or death of a totem, any member of its representative tribe would buy or bury it with every show of respect and dignity.
- ❖ If a totem is captured alive, ransom of a

- ❖ large sum of money would be offered to set the totem free.
- ❖ Every totemic animal or bird is given a spiritual or symbolic quality.
- ❖ Totemic animal or bird is the spiritual guardians of the various clans.
- ❖ A harmonious relationship should exist between the totemic animal/bird and the clan; a breach of this harmonious existence would cause calamity in the clan.

To ensure the sanctity of the environment and animal lives, indigenous knowledge guided and orientated hunters to respect a period of the year when no one was allowed to hunt in order to allow animal species time to breed. Indigenous knowledge again ensured that fishermen threw back small fishes into the river or sea to ensure good fish stock in the rivers. Pregnant animals and very young ones were not killed or their habitat should not be tempered with to ensure their security. Snails were not to be picked at night. Indigenous knowledge points to the fact that being nocturnal, a whole population of snails may be out to feed and may be decimated. These were several means by which the indigenous people of Abuakwa preserved nature. The social control mechanism guaranteed the prohibition of the killing of certain animals, birds and reptiles for their spiritual, social and ecological values. The thought behind these prohibitions were all well intended. They were meant to ensure a sustainable harmony of human beings with their environment for the purpose of survival. The fundamental aim of totemism is to ensure the survival of certain species, nothing more and nothing less. It will therefore be unfortunate and superficial to associate such beliefs with primitive mentality (Marfo, 2008). Whatever reason is given for the choice animals as totem, the fact still remains

that by revering these animals we contribute to environmental conservation.

## CONCLUSION

Abuakwa state had evolved social control mechanism based on religious beliefs and practices to ensure a concept of environmental protection. Besides the people employed simple tools and technology so that they do not impact negatively on the soil and destroy roots. The people were forbidden to farm and fell trees on slopes and in watershed areas—all aim to conserve the rivers and streams. By demystifying areas hitherto considered sacrosanct, Christianity has indirectly encouraged people to disrespect sacred groves, water bodies, plants and animals and defiled Mother Earth. It is suggested strongly, that indigenous knowledge in sustainable development should be rediscovered in order to be tapped into current conservation programmes. Abuakwa indigenous knowledge on environmental conservation should not be seen as primitive. Rather it is a manifestation of the people's close attachment to nature which ensures sustainability and clean environment.

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