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Eramatare: A Missional and Theological Approach to Environmental Stewardship

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Abstract

While climate change is not a 'settled science' (it is not the nature of scientific inquiry to be 'settled'), the fact of climate change is incontrovertibly obvious and its real effects on real communities (perhaps especially in the majority world) are devastating, including in East Africa. For Christians, environmental stewardship (also known as 'Creation Care' or 'Earth Keeping') should be an automatic part of Christian ethos and praxis. Failure to steward the earth or to 'care for creation' represents both a failure to keep the second 'greatest commandment' and also theological irresponsibility. Examining local evidence in East Africa in the contexts of biblical theology, Christian witness, and Maasai indigenous knowledge, this paper proposes approaches for Creation Care for world Christianity. In keeping with the author's positionality amidst African orality, the article attempts to maintain the styles of oral communication.

Introduction

> *Traditionally, Africans have placed a high value on the environment and their place in it. It was understood that human well-being depended on respecting and caring for the physical environment.*
> (Shenk 2001:102)

Andrew Walls recognised that 'theology […] arises from Christian life and activity, from the need to make Christian choices, to think in a Christian way'

(2017:74). It is clear that 'too often followers of Christ have neglected the environment as not being important in God's eyes' (Sorley 2011:137), with devastating effect. It is increasingly obvious, in the light of so many ecological crises around the world, that 'the degradation of the earth is a threat to all life' (Oyugi 2019:108). Indeed,

> only a wilful blindness worse than any proverbial ostrich's head in the sand can ignore the facts of environmental destruction and its accelerating pace. (Wright 2006:413)

This sharp increase in 'environmentally related disasters' around the world has resulted, at least in part, from 'human departure from God's purposes in Creation' – and the effects in Africa have been particularly devastating (Kaoma 2015:280-281).

In this context, how do we 'think in a Christian way' and 'make Christian choices' that will result in the practice of a theology of environmental stewardship? How can we put 'in place a specifically African Christian morality' which draws people towards a holistically 'evangelical spirit of life and hope' (Mushipu-Mbombo 2022:91; my translation)? My wife and I have worked within and alongside Maasai communities since 2007. What we have learned from Maasai culture has enhanced our understanding of biblical stewardship. When we have shared those lessons with Christians in North American contexts, they have agreed that this intercultural hermeneutics has also opened their eyes to a deeper understanding of Christian stewardship. African (and specifically Maasai) concepts of stewardship can point the way forward not only for the church in Africa but for world Christianity as a whole. These issues form the focus of this paper. Methodologically, I have approached the topic by combining original research on East African contextual realities and Maasai indigenous knowledge with an extensive literature review. Through sustainable and wildlife-friendly grazing, such as traditionally practised by the Maasai and the closely related Samburu, sustainable agricultural methods such as 'Farming God's Way' as practised by the Turkana, and assertive tree-planting efforts, such as exemplified by Wangarĩ Muta Maathai (1940–2011) in Kenya and the Association of African Earth-Keeping Churches (AAEC) in Zimbabwe, Christians in Africa and elsewhere can practise a 'theology of the

environment' which 'is not written in books but symbolised' by the ecological restoration of 'ravished countryside[s]' (Daneel 2015:18).

Siri, Will It Rain This Year?

Isampurumpur
etiu osinkolio:
kelotu enchan?

(the white butterflies
which are like unto a song:
are the rains coming?)

In Maasai culture, northward migrations of white butterflies are evocative of hope; whenever this ecological sign is observed, according to traditional Maasai wisdom, good rains are soon to follow. Such migrations are never seen before a rainy season that fails to be rainy. In May of 2012, we had seen clouds of those butterflies, some travelling south and others flying east. Adequate rains were not forthcoming that year. In March of 2016, we observed clouds of white butterflies (*isampurumpur*), all flying north, and I journaled the Maa haiku above (*Maasai* refers to the people while *Maa* refers to their language). *Osinkolio* means equally 'song' and 'dance' and depicts the fluttering movements of the butterflies and is evocative of times of joy. So I originally wrote *kelotu enchan!* ('the rains are coming!') in my haiku because that northward dance has always been a sure and hopeful sign. Sure enough, the long rains began shortly thereafter and were very good that year. As I repeated my haiku in 2023, I asked *kelotu enchan?* ('are the rains coming?'), because in Maasai land we are no longer sure of the answer.

My family moved to Maasai Land in southern Kenya in January 2007 and we have been resident in Kenya ever since. From 2007 to 2019, the majority of our work was in partnership with Maasai communities. When we arrived in 2007, East Africa was experiencing record rainfall associated with an El Niño event. It was truly an *olari seur* – an exceptional, and exceptionally long, rainy season. The rains began in September 2006 and continued into June 2007. The grass was tall and lush, wildlife and livestock were fat, and driving (or walking) anywhere was a muddy adventure. We were assigned to a bush house that

was beside a marsh and wondered about the choice of the building site. A Maasai proverb says *Mamoda amu mamany meleeno* ('I am not foolish because I investigated the land before building [my homestead]'). Had the missionaries who built it failed to study the land? We later learned that the area was only a marsh during El Niño years. While much of the land was lush, we also witnessed the effects of overgrazing and deforestation, which when combined with the heavy rains yielded startling patterns of erosion and degradation.

Equatorial East Africa has a bimodal pattern of seasons: the 'short rains' are usually between October and December and the 'long rains' between March and May, with some regional variation. These are interspersed with two dry seasons. Variability to these weather patterns has generally been associated with El Niño or La Niña events (periods of unusually warmer water or unusually cooler water, respectively, in the equatorial Pacific Ocean). El Niños typically result in wetter weather for East Africa while La Niñas result in drier conditions (Palmer *et al*. 2023:254-256). The Indian Ocean Dipole, as the similar dynamic in the Indian Ocean is called, can cause similar effects. When an El Niño and the 'positive phase' of the Dipole overlap, severe flooding can result across East Africa; the 'flooding in Southern Kenya' in April and May 2024, widely covered in international media, is an example. In Maasai Land, south of the equator, December-January compose, when it is not rainy, the hot season and June-August are the cooler months. Kenyans from a variety of ethnocultural groups and regions (including but not limited to Kamba from south-east-central Kenya, Kikuyu from central Kenya, Luhya from western Kenya, Maasai from southern Kenya, and Samburu from northern Kenya) have attested to me that, historically, predicting the weather with a fair degree of accuracy only required knowing the date: the beginning and duration of the rainy seasons were reliably the same from year to year. Occasionally there would be a particularly wet El Niño or Dipole year or a drought associated with a La Niña event. But the weather was otherwise predictable, which made life easier for the majority of Kenyans who were either agriculturists or pastoralists. Today the average Kenyan will affirm that this predictability has been lost. In parts of the world, people will ask their iPhone, 'Siri, will it rain today?' so they know what to wear. In parts of the world more affected by climate change, people might rather ask simply 'Will it rain this year?'

The *olari seur* of 2006-2007 resulted in devastating flooding in eastern Uganda that was immediately followed by a severe regional drought. By July 2009, over two million people in the region were deemed at risk of starvation from famine. Zac Niringiye reflects:

> Famine of this magnitude in a well-watered country with abundant rainfall and tillable land is a contradiction in terms. We ask: What went wrong? The answer is short and simple: distortions in climate patterns. In short: Two million people in Uganda face starvation as a result of climate change! (2010a:19).

This was followed by a particularly strong La Niña in July-August 2011 (as part of a longer 2010-2012 La Niña event). This resulted in the worst East African drought in sixty years, as the short rains failed in 2011 and the long and short rains in 2012 were inadequate. Another La Niña followed beginning in 2020 (Kabukuru 2023). The short rains in 2020, the long and short rains in 2021, and the long rains in 2022 were all in deficit. The long 'rainy' season of March-May 2022 was anything but rainy; it was the 'driest one in over 70 years for Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia' (Mahapatra 2022). While periods of El Niño and La Niña are part of a natural weather pattern – technically known as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) – of the earth's ecological system, in recent decades their effect is growing in intensity, resulting in a greater frequency of extreme weather patterns such as droughts and floods (Johnson 2022). It is increasingly clear that 'unrestrained human exploitation of nature has led' to these ecological crises (Bauckham 1986:236).

Jesse Mugambi notes that

> comparatively, the continent of Africa as an ecological region is most adversely affected although its inhabitants are least responsible for the industrial pollution of which they are the most affected victims. (2017:109)

In West Africa, the past fifty years have seen 'a notable decline in rainfall' (Okyere-Manu and Morgan 2022:93). In East Africa, simultaneously water bodies such as Lake Naivasha and Lake Nakuru in Kenya are at historically

record high levels, flooding shore communities, while in other areas the rains frequently fail, resulting in widespread drought with accompanying crop failure and devastating loss of livestock. This is more than a natural cycle alternating between natural resource wealth and dearth. A striking example is that much of Turkana Land in northwest Kenya was once classified as grasslands but today is generally experienced as desert. I have stood on barren ground in places where the grass grew shoulder high within living memory. Musa Dube notes that across Africa and around the globe,

> we have all witnessed significant climatic changes and deadly natural disasters. In some places, it is growing frequency of droughts and floods while some places are characterised by deforestation and desertification. (2021:93-94)

Indeed, 'environmental challenges are emerging almost everywhere' (Sorley 2011:138) – but climate change disproportionately affects the world's most vulnerable people (Cherrington 2008). A 2021 study by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN (FAO) determined that '22 million of Kenya's total population of 56 million are chronically hungry' (Sorley 2023:20). In light of these changing contextual realities, 'African nations are struggling to find answers to ecological issues' (Aidoo 2019:41).

Theological Anthropology

> *Human dominion over the rest of creation is to be an exercise of kingship that reflects God's own kingship. The image of God is not a license for abuse based on arrogant supremacy but a pattern that commits us to humble reflection of the character of God.*
> (Wright 2006:427)

Christian teaching has typically recognised a specialness of humans by virtue of their being created in the image and according to likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27), although '*as* the image' and '*according to* the likeness of God' may be a more accurate translation, as Imes explains:

> [to] talk about *being* God's image (rather than being *made in* God's image) reinforces the concept that the *imago Dei* is essential to human identity rather than a capacity that can be lost. (Imes 2023:4-6)

> the image of God is not so much something we *possess*, as *what we are. To be human is to be the image of God*. (Wright 2006:421)

Thus

> if we take Scripture seriously, we cannot conclude that humans are merely a product of time and chance. Genesis 1 insists that humans are the climax of God's creative work and the crown of creation. (Imes 2023:19)

Insofar as nonhuman animals are not created as God's image and likeness, humans can be said to be superior to animals. But to what end? We must ask

> how human beings as the image of God are related to the rest of creation and how we understand the command to have 'dominion' over the creation given the destruction of our planet. (Peppiatt 2022:5)

According to Genesis 1:26 and 28, we are 'to *rule over* creation and to *subdue* the earth', meaning that 'the first way in which all of us can glorify and serve God is by caring for his creation' (Assohoto and Ngewa 2006:11), thereby fulfilling 'a unique purpose in God's created order' (Blasu 2020:68). This means that

> we need to imagine new models for the relationship between ourselves and our earth. We can no longer see ourselves as namers of and rulers over nature but must think of ourselves as gardeners, caretakers, mothers and fathers, stewards, trustees, lovers, priests, co-creators and friends of a world that, while giving us life and sustenance, also depends increasingly on us (McFague 1987:13)

Importantly, the mandate in Genesis 1:28 for humans to *rule* and *subdue* does not use language that implies 'violence and abuse' but rather 'benevolent care for the rest of creation as entrusted into human custodianship' (Wright 2006:425). Similarly the language of Genesis 2:15 conveys a message 'of environmental care' (Ottuh 2022:8-9). We are not merely '*masters* of nature' but are also '*curators* of nature' (Bauckham 1986:235). Thus as we consider the environment, 'the language of stewardship and responsibility, of care and nurture', is more helpful than the language of 'rule and reign' (Peppiatt 2022:81). Jesus teaches that we should not 'lord it over' others as do those outside of a covenant relationship with God (Matt. 20:25; Mark 10:42); similarly humans are not called to 'lord it over' creation but rather to care for creation.

Certainly, those who reject environmental stewardship – often referred to theologically as 'Creation Care' or 'Earth Keeping' – embody a startling degree of disregard for creation. Golo notes that the neglect of care for creation by some Christians, including in Africa, on the grounds of a 'belief that the earth and earthly existence is temporal' represents 'an unbiblical and faulty theology' and perhaps even heresy (2012:355). At least in part, 'the current ecological crisis in Africa' may be a result 'of the church's poor eschatology that fails to promote an environmental biblical theology' (Falconer 2019:119). Recognising that this is simply wrong, others have thrown out the baby with the bathwater, rejecting all notions of humans having any superiority, as divine image-bearers, over other creatures. But the root of anti-environmentalism is not found in an overblown sense of anthropocentricity, though that can be a contributing factor, but rather in a failure to truly embrace the theological anthropology found equally in biblical texts and in classic Christian tradition. That is, precisely because such people fail to truly and fully appropriate 'image and likeness of God' anthropology, they also fail to appropriate the creation mandate given to humans to care for the earth and its nonhuman occupants. In the Genesis creation accounts, 'the well-being of humanity is closely linked to the well-being of the land' (Aidoo 2019:52). A truly Christian anthropology recognises the way in which humans are superior to animals (and plants) but applies that to our having a greater responsibility to protect (and restore) the environment. The creation accounts of Genesis show us that

> ecological order, life, harmony, growth, and reproductivity in the created order would be maintained through humanity's exercise of responsible stewardship in the context of 'being in union' (communion) with God. (Niringiye 2010a:29)

Such relational harmony resonates with the African concept of *ubuntu* (Mvula 2015:245). Since we are created as God's image and likeness, we also must act as God's governing agents (Blasu 2020:90, 95-112; see also Bauckham 1986:233).

Christian theology recognises that, because of sin, 'the relationship of human beings and the creation to God [has] changed' (Rutledge 2015:163), and the relationship between humans and the rest of creation on the earth has been imperilled. As missiologist Ruth Padilla DeBorst noted in a plenary address at a conference in Limuru, Kenya, as a result 'the relationship between God's earth and God's people was damaged' (2010:7-8). Not only was the harmony between God and God's images (humanity) replaced with discord, but 'the harmony between humanity and the rest of creation, and within creation itself, was also dismembered' (Niringiye 2010b:38) because 'the fall disturbed humanity's harmonious relationship with nature' (Bauckham 1986:240). Some embrace an eschatology that results in a 'throw-away' consumeristic ecology; because the earth will be 'destroyed by fire', they say (misunderstanding 2 Peter 3:10, NIV-1984), and there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth' (2 Pet. 3:13 and Rev. 21:1, NIV-1984), humans are absolved of environmental responsibility and environmental crises are welcomed as signs of the 'end times'. This view fails to recognise the natures of both the old creation and the new creation, for there is a 'necessary continuity between the old and new creations' arising from the fact that the new creation will be 'the redeemed transformation' of the old creation: 'an other-worldly negation of a duty of environmental care for this present world is thereby made impossible' (Polkinghorne 2002:116). Sadly, this flawed otherworldly and futurist eschatology was brought to Africa by some missionaries to the detriment of African Christianity (see Lowery 2019:19-21). Alternatively, then,

> eschatological hope which is hinged upon the consummation of the cosmos may call Africans to action in how they relate to their environment. (Muriithi 2019:94)

In Ephesians 1:10, Paul asserts that God's purpose is 'to bring unity to all things in heaven and earth under Christ' which means that 'we are not going to be saved *out of* the earth, but saved *along with* the earth' (Wright 2015:186). Unfortunately, mere intellectual 'assent to the belief that God made humans stewards over the earth and its natural resources' and that Christians consequently have 'a duty of caring for the environment' does not always translate into the church having a positive 'impact on climate change, adaptation, and mitigation' (Okyere-Manu and Morgan 2022:91). It is therefore necessary to insist upon the 'theological character' of 'creation's integrity' (Jenkins 2008:121) and environmental health.

Models of stewardship

> *If we care for our environment it will care for us.*
> *If we mess up our environment it will mess us up in return.*
> (Mugambi 2016:1120)

In many North American churches across various denominations, teaching on stewardship can often be summarised like this: 'That stuff you think you own? It's not really yours; it's God's. So treat "your" resources accordingly.' (I have heard hundreds of sermons and meditations on this theme across denominational lines.) This approach can be effective because from childhood we are taught to take better care of something borrowed than of something owned – borrowed items should always be returned in the same condition as received or, when possible, in better condition. But this approach only captures one part of biblical teaching on stewardship. In Genesis 2:15, we see that *Ha-Adam* is placed in the garden to work it and keep it. In this narrative, humans are stewards, not owners – 'the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it' (Ps. 24:1 and 1 Cor. 10:26, NIV-1984). Thus in Job 41:11 God emphasises, 'Everything under heaven belongs to me' (NIV-1984). Because 'all resources are God's resources', this approach to stewardship teaches, 'their use should follow divine principles and values' (Oyugi 2019:116). This approach is legitimate, but it is not complete.

Genesis 1:26-29 paints a different picture. In that narrative, humans are fashioned as God's image and likeness. It is thus only natural that they are

given dominion. In effect, they are owners. Old Testament texts about land tenure affirm a 'meaningful sense of personal or family ownership' (Wright 2006:297). What bearing does this have on how stewardship should be taught? Here cross-cultural life and work gives insights which may otherwise be missed. Asking what it means, practically speaking, to live in allegiance to Jesus from the viewpoint of a different language and culture can open one's eyes to the teachings of Scripture in new and profound ways. This is also true for those who strive to find and maintain culturally relevant and biblically faithful ways to teach stewardship, including environmental stewardship.

Stewards or Owners? Enaishooki enkAi iyiook, enaang

'You're not owners; you're stewards.' In East African cultural contexts, this approach to resource management typically slams into a brick wall. As soon as a preacher insists, 'it's not really yours', the audience is lost. The Maasai (who speak the Maa language), semi-nomadic pastoralists of Kenya and Tanzania, have a proverb that explains this: *Etejo enkiteng, 'Mikintaaya! nchooyioki!'* ('The cow said, "don't lend me! Just give me away!"'). This is because the cow knows that within Maasai culture if it is lent, there is a likelihood that it will not be well cared for (cp. similar Samburu proverbs, with explanations, in Lesarge 2018:83-84, 94; the Samburu are closely related to the Maasai). Strikingly, the Maa word *enkoito* refers to a cow that is skinny *because its owner is dead*: left ownerless, it is uncared for. Only when there is ownership is there also proper stewardship:

> The hired hand, who is not a shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and abandons the sheep and flees. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. He runs away because he is only a hired hand and has no concern for the sheep. (John 10:12-13, my translation of NA27)

I have learned from informants in many African cultures – e.g., in Cameroon (Yamba), Kenya (Kalenjin, Maasai, Samburu, Turkana), and Nigeria (Etulo, Ibirom, Idoma, Ibirom, Igala, Igede, Jukun, Nupe, Tiv, Yoruba) – that only when one can say *enaai* ('it is mine') or *enaang* ('it is ours') can effective stewardship be faithfully practised. There is a place to teach that stewardship is the management of someone else's resources in trust (e.g., see Matt. 25:14-30). But it is also necessary to recognise that we are the recipients of God's gifts.

Enaishooki enkAi iyiook, enaang (‘what God has given us, is ours’). Because *ekebikoo intokinin pooki naaramat iloopeny* (‘all things which their owners care for last long’), as the Maasai say, we must care for the earth which we have been given.

Your Father is Alive

A pair of Maasai cultural proverbs suggest an alternative approach to the traditional Western interpretation, one that is built on Genesis 1:26-29 as well as 2:15. *Memurata olayioni oota menye* (lit., ‘a son who has a father is not circumcised’). ‘Now if you have a living father,’ it observes, ‘you’re not really circumcised.’ Alternatively, *emurata olayioni otua menye* (‘the son whose father is dead is circumcised’) – this person is free to make decisions on his own. For many ethnocultural groups in East Africa, including the Maasai, boys are ritually circumcised during adolescence. This event marks a major transition. No longer a boy, the circumcised male is now a warrior and a man. So the proverb is saying that if your father is still alive, it is as if you are still a boy. Culturally, if your father is alive, it is as though you are still a youth. Why is this? Because you show natural respect for your father. You honour him by consulting with him before you so much as sell a goat in order to obtain school fees for your children. Are you sixty and a grandfather? If your father is still alive, you will consult with him before you sell a goat to obtain school fees for your grandchildren. Traditionally (or at least according to cultural ideals) this is not abusive patriarchalism. It is not just that the old man remains the nominal head of the extended family. Rather, he is recognised to have wisdom. He can guide the younger generations in the best way forward. Being past the point of self-seeking desire, he has a broader perspective about what is best for the whole family. The primary interest of the old man is in the well-being of his whole family. So he will advise them accordingly. He receives *enkanyit* (‘proper respect’ and ‘honour’; *enkanyit* inherently involves reciprocal mutuality) and gives in return counsel and blessing (Barron 2019:17-18). Those of us who follow Jesus know that our Father, *Papa enkAi* (‘Father God’; though *enkAi*, the word for ‘God’, is grammatically feminine; see Barron 2023:21-22), is alive. This does not mean we are not responsible adults. It does mean we should invite God into the process as we consider the management of our resources – including environmental resources such as land, water, and air.

Eramatare: Maasai Stewardship

The primary Maa verb for taking care of something or someone is *aramat* (used in the proverb above, *ekebikoo intokitin pooki naaramat iloopeny* – 'all things which their owners care for last long'); the noun is *eramatare* ('the caring for/tending of/management of [something]' or 'stewardship'). The most common word that approximates the idea of 'steward' is *olaramatani* (cp. *muramati* in Gĩkũyũ/Kikuyu). Two popular female names are *Naramat* and *Kiramatisho*, both of which signify a woman who is a good household manager who is dedicated to and skilled at taking care of home, home-based businesses, and children – that is, a woman who is proficient and effective in her exercise of *eramatare*. My wife's Maasai name is *Naramati*, 'she-who-is-well-cared-for'; this name connotes the opposite of *Lo-Ruhamah*, 'not-loved', in Hosea 1:6. As Christians, we know that we are called *Naramati* (or *Leramati* for males) by God. Thus we should strive to have the character of a *Naramat* or *Kiramatisho* (or *Leramat* and *Olaramatisho* for males) in how we exercise stewardship of our resources, including environmental resources. We have seen above that in Maasai culture *eramatare* is most effective when there is a sense of ownership or investment.

The Maasai are traditionally seminomadic pastoralists. Within most African worldviews, 'the life of the community [is] intertwined with the land' (W'Ehusha 2015:267); this is certainly true for the Maasai. Where government policy has taken ownership of the land away from the Maasai community, the practice of environmental *eramatare* has suffered. Overgrazing often becomes a problem, as they still own the livestock but now have only limited grazing rights. Where government policy has implemented individual ownership of the land, not returning the land to the Maasai community as a whole but returning it to Maasai individuals, the sense of ownership has been restored and the land is no longer overgrazed. (Though when private ownership of land has been instituted without an understanding of what private ownership is, this has generally led to dispossession of the land from the Maasai.) Prior to interference by colonial governments and then by the governments of Tanzania and Kenya, the Maasai practised stewardship of the land in ways that allowed their grasslands and forests to thrive. Demonstrating that 'caring for the environment and the climate is not something foreign to the peoples of Africa' (Tarusarira 2017:406), they were so successful in sharing the land with wildlife that, where other areas suffered deforestation and overgrazing,

Maasai Land offered pristine examples of thriving ecosystems. As their reward, governments confiscated some 16,665 km^2 from the Maasai to set apart the Serengeti, Maasai Mara, and Amboseli reserves for conservation. Thus

> Maasai communities are now facing the destruction of their livelihoods under the guise of conservation, despite centuries of sustainable Maasai stewardship of these lands. (Minority Rights Group 2023)

Such dispossession of land is a grievance to all who suffer it, for, as a Maasai proverb says, *egiroo enkulukuoni oshola* (lit., 'soil goes beyond that-which-melts') – 'land is superior to money'.

We lived in the Maasai Mara region before the transition from group ranches to the current regime of demarcation and private property. When land was assigned to group ranches, the Maasai were still able to maintain select plots as *olokeri* (a dedicated pasture upon which only the livestock of the owner may graze, together with wildlife, usually reserved for sick animals as a place to recover). Because a sense of ownership remained, each *olokeri* had lush grass, even when the surrounding land was subjected to severe overgrazing. After demarcation and the establishment of privately held property, every family's plot has been treated like an *olokeri*, carefully protected from overgrazing or other misuse and often improved though the planting of trees. When we visited the region in January 2023, we were amazed at the transformation from degradation to restored ecological health in the Maasai homesteads, in spite of the challenges of the recent drought. It is not only the cow but the very land that says, 'don't lend me; give me'.

Roads to Restoration: Sustainable Agriculture and Reforestation

Deforestation leads to degradation of soil and water resources and sometimes to desertification. From 1973 to 2003, the government of Kenya estimates that Kenya lost 55% of its forests and woodlands (Sorley 2011:137). The results of this have been as catastrophic as they are obvious to those of us who live here, but some are taking positive action. Wangarĩ Muta Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977 to combine indigenous ecological knowledge with bold action. According to GBM's website, the movement has planted 51 million trees. Maathai received a Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for the

environmental progress engendered by GBM. A Rocha Kenya has successfully rehabilitated large tracts of the mangrove forests on Kenya's coast (Mugambi 2017:118). These environmental issues are common across sub-Saharan Africa. Revivalist Christian communities in Uganda include reforestation efforts as part of ordinary Christian practice (Jenkins 2008:5). Extensive environmental research in the 1980s in Zimbabwe led to the establishment of Association of African Earth-Keeping Churches (AAEC) and a 'war of the trees' to counter the 'obviously deteriorating environment, never-ending droughts, and the growing pressures on the land' (Daneel 2000:4-6). While reforestation, 'the protection of water resources, and wildlife conservation' is the focus of this movement, it has also been theologically fruitful as the Holy Spirit has come to be not only understood as 'healer of humankind' but also as 'healer of the land' and Christ is understood not only as king, elder brother, guardian, and saviour but also as 'healer of all creation' (Daneel 2000:5, 40).

Concurrent with the deforestation mentioned above, agricultural yields in Kenya plummeted (Sorley 2011:137). Brian Oldreive noticed the same conditions in Zimbabwe and pioneered, in 1984, the 'Farming God's Way' (FGW) method of sustainable agriculture; today FGW methods are practised in some twenty countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Spaling and Kooy 2019:412-413) with significant improvements in both harvest yields and soil quality (Sorley 2011:142-143; Spaling and Kooy 2019:412, 415-417). In 2005, Craig and Tracy Sorley founded Care of Creation Kenya (renamed Creation Stewards International in 2022), which bills itself as equally evangelical and environmental. Since then, the organisation has offered practical training in FGW methods, tree-planting, theo-agricultural teaching, and a wealth of locally published resources (e.g., Sorley 2009 and Sorley 2016). In Turkana Land in northwest Kenya, FGW is being used successfully to transform patches of desert into lush garden spots. When I first taught my Missions and Evangelism course for Community Christian Bible Training Institute in Lodwar in 2011, I took my students (a cohort of Turkana church leaders) to see FGW plots. Those who had not seen them before were amazed at the difference that God- and creation-honouring agricultural methods make. I also used the careful *eramatare* that is needed to care for the land and its crops as a parable to model how we should make disciples. The Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23), or perhaps the Parable of the Soils, has an additional lesson to teach us: just as a farmer can use FGW methods to uproot thorns, remove rocks,

loosen up hard-packed soil, and provide mulch to protect the soil and seedlings from the scorching sun, so a disciple-maker can work to remove obstacles to the successful growing of the seed of the gospel. One obstacle to Christian witness today is the refusal of some Christians to engage in loving their neighbours through the practice of environmental stewardship.

Creation Care As Witness

> *Mission that ignores creation will always present too small a vision of God and his purposes. Mission that encompasses caring for creation – as long as it always keeps Christ central and makes him known – provides a message of hope and of life in all its fullness*.
> (Bookless 2008:104)

Around the world, Christians are connecting Creation Care with missional witness with increasing boldness:

> If Jesus is Lord of all the earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth. For to proclaim the gospel that says 'Jesus is Lord' is to proclaim the gospel that includes the earth, since Christ's Lordship is over all creation. Creation care is thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ. (*The Cape Town Commitment* 2010:32-33)

Just

> as Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity, we are called to *metanoia* and a renewed and just relationship with Creation that expresses itself in our practical life. (World Council of Churches 2022:1)

Missiologist and biblical scholar Christopher J. H. Wright reminds us that

> it is creation that is broken by human sin, so it is creation and humanity together that God intends to mend. (Wright 2006:212)

As a result,

> Anything less than an integral approach to mission – seeking God's kingdom rule in every dimension of society and creation – is ultimately a denial of the lordship of Christ. (Bookless 2023:16)

We must recognise that 'practical environmental action [is] a legitimate part of Christian mission' (Wright 2006:413).

The second greatest commandment is to love our neighbours as our ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; Jas 2:8). But loving one's neighbour as oneself is more than a commandment – 'it is an essential implication of our common createdness' as God's image 'and is as relevant in mission as in any other walk of life' (Wright 2006:424). Our neighbours, according to the parable of Jesus about the 'good Samaritan' (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28), are those who are vulnerable whom we have the power to help.

> God's restoration is never dependent on us, but part of the good news of the gospel is that God invites us to partner in the work of restoration. When we chose to leverage privilege for the furtherance of the kingdom and the good of our neighbours we become instruments of peace that God uniquely uses to introduce freedom and justice for our fractured world. (Gilliard 2021:59)

When we fail to love our 'neighbour' we fail to witness to the Lordship of Christ. Truly loving our neighbours means caring for their environment. Because humans are created as the image of God, we can recognise humans 'as creators with a specifically God-given role in relation to the care of creation' (Peppiatt 2022:120).

As Christians, 'Jesus models for us how to appropriately exercise God's rule over creation' (Imes 2023:3). Allen Yeh (2020:118) notes that

> to love one's neighbour, and to love the earth, are both part of the world that God created, and are part and parcel of each other.

Niringiye argues compellingly that 'humankind is faced with an environmental crisis unparalleled in human history' (2010a:20). This has largely been caused by 'environmental mismanagement', which represents 'a violation of God's sacred stewardship of the earth and its resources' and which 'adversely affects the quality of life for all of God's creatures' on the earth (Oyugi 2019:97). In light of this, 'there is an overwhelming need to combine creation stewardship with a clear connection to the gospel' (Sorley 2023:21). Only in this way can we demonstrate love of neighbour.

There is a 'necessary continuity between the old and new creations' arising from the fact that the new creation will be 'the redeemed transformation' of the old creation: 'an other-worldly negation of a duty of environmental care for this present world is thereby made impossible' (Polkinghorne 2002:116). Craig Sorley, a proponent and practitioner of Farming God's Way sustainable agricultural methodologies, argues that we must simultaneously 'work to heal creation and relieve the sufferings of the poor, so that people have a full and abundant life', by 'help[ing] them restore their small piece of creation' and 'work just as hard to bring these people into his kingdom' (2023:22). A Samburu proverb states, '*Nkiteng' sas ake nayiolo neiko koon*' ('It is only the emaciated cow that knows how to handle itself'); in other words, solutions to problems are best sought by those most affected by the problem (Lesarge 2018:70).

> Unless the vision to address climate change is articulated by those for whom it is intended, it cannot inspire and sustain a people. Any climate change enterprise must begin by considering how people's full range of resources, including their spiritual or religious resources, can be used for their general well being. (Tarusarira 2017:410)

Kä Mana agrees, noting that 'people should become the driving force behind their own quality of life' (1997:44; my translation).

It is clear that 'ecological concerns cannot be side-lined as they are central to all aspects of society' (Berman *et al*. 2021:35). Environmental *eramatare* is necessarily tied to our Christian witness, as 'how we treat the earth reflects how we treat its Creator and ours' – 'because the earth is part of the creation that bears the mark of God's own goodness', the exercise of godly *eramatare* of the earth honours the Creator but degradation of the earth dishonours God by spoiling the earth's 'reflection of its Maker' (Wright 2015:185, 398). Oyugi concurs and draws the logical conclusion: 'to abuse the environment is to tarnish God's reflection in nature. Environmental abuse is sin' (2019:116). From a missiological perspective, the current 'ecological crisis is sinful' because it is a result of our disregard for 'our sacred duty to care for God's creation' (Kaoma 2022:707). Moreover, because the opposite of faithful witness is blasphemy, Wendell Berry has referred to 'the abuse of land and creatures as a kind of blasphemy' (2009:x).

African Christian theologising and praxis

> must promote an integrated ecotheological agenda in its missional outlook that equips [believers and] students of the Bible to be partners in caring for land, waterbodies, and the environment. (Aidoo 2019:42)

As Christians, we need to both ask 'what is God's will for our community in these situations?' (Sorley 2011:139) and act on the answers we discern. Recognising that 'creation care is a prophetic opportunity for the church', the church must awaken 'to the urgent need to address the ecological crisis' and do so from within a 'biblical framework'; this will necessarily involve witnessing for Christ both against 'forces of greed and economic power', with their associated political frameworks, and also against 'pantheistic, neo-pagan and New Age spiritualities' (Wright 2006:416-417).

Conclusion

The spiritual wholeness that the gospel brings
is neither disembodied nor dematerialised but
reflects the love of a God who expresses the divine
identity in total solidarity with creation.
(Bevans and Schroeder 2004:377-378)

Human ontological status – our being made as God's image and according to God's likeness – means that we are to be 'responsible stewards, gardeners and servants of God's creation' (Mvula 2015:244). Similarly, it is increasingly clear that 'concern for God's creation is intrinsic to Christian mission' (Robert 2015:81) – a failure for Christians to demonstrate care for creation is thus a failure of Christian public witness. Thus current environmental crises should be seen as a call to a more complete Christian conversion and a more faithful public witness. Andrew Walls notes that

> Moral renewal follows inner transformation: people will adhere to God from their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). And this change will herald universal renewal, in which the flora and fauna and the whole environment are enriched and violence is unknown, and the Gentiles will acknowledge Yahweh as their own God (Isa. 11:6-9). (Walls 2004:3)

Thus more robust forms of stewardship, including an *eramatare* of creation care informed by indigenous cultures such as that of the Maasai, are a necessary part of Christian witness and mission.

It follows that when such theological environmentalism or creation care is placed at 'the heart of Christian mission', Christianity – perhaps especially in Africa – will be able to 'make meaningful contributions to the resolution of life-threatening environmental problems confronting us' (W'Ehusha 2015:278). When we treat the earth as a Maasai whose father is still alive cares for a treasured *olokeri* ('special protected pasture'), we demonstrate love for our neighbour, participate in God's mission for the whole of creation, and declare the Lordship of Christ until he returns. 'Elijah was a human person just like us,' we read in the book of James. 'He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it didn't rain for three and half years. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain' (Jas 5:17-18; my translation of NA27). Perhaps if we earnestly pray and earnestly do the work of *eramatare* of creation, then when the migrating butterflies dance in Maasai Land, we can again be certain that the rains, in due time and right measure, are following. *Kelotu enchan!*

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