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10 Hermeneutics of trees in an African context

Enriching the understanding of the
environment ‘for the common
heritage of humankind’¹

Angela Roothaan

Introduction

In this chapter, I will look into case studies of the relations of human communities to trees, especially in West-African traditions, and ask how these contribute to a richer understanding of the environment. In traditional cultures all over the world, trees have been important to humans as ‘natural symbols’ of the central values of communal life, as sources of food and medicine, and as signs of spiritual realities. African traditional relations to trees are of special interest as they are contested in present-day clashes between modernisation movements, religious conversion movements, secular conservationist movements, and traditionalist movements. Looking into the content of the contested – a rich hermeneutics of trees – is not only of historical interest. It can also contribute to an understanding of the environment that can help create more sustainable relations of humans to their environment for the future.

In the first section, I will outline which different frameworks determine the human relationship to the environment, especially in the West-African context. The frameworks described are those of secularisation, of monotheistic theology, and of traditionalism. Whilst conservationists might work together with Christians, Muslims, or those practicing traditional religions, their basic presuppositions will be scientific and secular. All the same, Muslims and Christians have their own spiritual understanding of the relation of humans to nature, in the frame of a theology of creation, religious morality and the afterlife, which can conflict with secular as well as traditionalist outlooks. All parties mentioned will also try to negotiate their interests within the framework of the global economy, ‘selling’ sacred forests as places of touristic interest or of rare plant life, for instance, or using religious fervor to promote economic progress.

After presenting the intersections of frameworks for understanding the meaning of trees, I will discuss, in the second section, two examples of cases of the cutting of trees which show conflicting meanings attributed to trees. Here I will show how the frameworks clash into each other and make a shared discourse on what is of common human interest a complex issue. To view trees as a place of contested meaning, it is important to understand them as bearers of symbolism

and signification – something which has been described in the work on trees in public and religious discourse in Senegal by geographer and Islamologist Eric Ross. In the third section, I will go deeper into his work on the holy city of Touba, the capital of Mouride Sufism, which represents *tûbâ*, the tree of paradise. This work shows us how neoplatonic understandings of (spiritual) reality play their role in Sufi theology, and how an ontology can be seen to be at work in it (as it is in Christian traditions that value worship of holy places, moments, and persons), which I will call ‘shamanistic.’² Ross has thus shown that religious ascription of meaning to trees is not to be understood in a simple, one-dimensional manner, but that, here, as in other frameworks, complex historico-cultural developments have shaped understandings and practices.

In the final section, I will then return to a more general discussion of how different contexts and discourses lead to contested meanings of trees. I will present here also a more specific philosophical account of African views of nature, as it is given in an article by Michael Onyebuchi Eze on eco-humanism. In the tradition of writers such as Tempels and Mbiti, he proposes to adopt a holistic view of nature understood as life force, which leads to viewing human beings as an element in the whole of nature. As much as such an account helps to explain the spiritual meaning of trees, it suppresses the difficulties described in my earlier sections, arising from the clashing of frameworks. Therefore, I make a plea for a multidimensional approach, which brings the varying positions and views into dialogue after first having disentangled and understood their differences and conflicts.

Intersecting frameworks

When we study the subject of trees in an African context, several frameworks of action have to be taken into account. There is, first, the framework of modernisation, with its separate streams of secularisation, the growth of an autonomous economic sphere and technological development. These streams are often taken to be identical, but although they have been going hand in hand for the most part of European history since the 17th century, they never have been simple, and their relations are certainly more complex in other regions and times. In the United States, for instance, for a long time one of the world’s driving nations with respect to economic and technological developments, society and politics remained largely determined by the Christian religion.

On the African continent, things have been still more complex, and historiographies which are not biased by the colonial outlook are still in the process of being written. Although secularisation is a force in present developments, the processes of Christianisation and Islamisation are also an important force, although in a different manner in different parts of the continent. Economic and technological developments often also are driven by these religious developments, as well through migrant worker networks as in transformations on local levels. Further, the potential of different religious groups to impact society again depends on economic and political factualities that in themselves are not religious. The rise of

societal influence of the Sufi-Islamic Mouride brotherhood in Senegal, e.g., could take place only in the political voids left by colonialism in their destruction of traditional kingdoms and nobility, as well as in the frame of economic opportunities created by the colonial trading system, and the new global trading networks that came after decolonisation (cf. Barry, 1988; Ross, 2006).

Taken from their own perspective, movements which focus on the purification of monotheistic religion, and/or the conversion of people, may coincide with the modern secular outlook which values technological and economic progress, overruling traditional practices based on the belief in the sacredness of nature. An example can be seen in how the Mouride brotherhood in Senegal, valuing prayer and work as central values, has played a pivotal role in cutting down several forests (which are traditionally seen as sacred places) in Senegal for purposes of peanut production.³ All the same, whereas the Islamic theology in principle robs trees from the protection by guarding spirits (because the might of God/Allah will always be greater than that of any spiritual being), it still lends a spiritual meaning to nature in general, and to trees in particular, as the symbol of heavenly paradise that Allah holds for his believers⁴ (Ross, 2006).

A framework that is also of importance for understanding the plural meanings of trees is the modern-secular framework that drives the work of many international environmentalist and conservationalist organisations working on the African continent. Such a framework will make us see religious movements, as well as traditional beliefs and practices, only as having a positive or negative effect on the thriving of the environment, without valuing their normative viewpoints in their own right. The environmentalist/conservationalist framework has its own normative views, of course, of which sustainability is a key one. Our ways to live in the world should be sustainable, that is, the human race should not use up resources, looking only for short-term profit, and creating long-term death and destruction. All the same, propagators of this framework never ask about the perspective expressed in the word 'environment.' Environment for whom? For the human race, in the end. Allthough striving for a sustainable environment for humans will probably have the effect that animals and trees and other living beings also have better chances than if we strive only for profit and domination of nature, the perspective of secularism can not ask about the meaning of nature, or of trees, for that matter, in a wider frame than that of humanity. Humanity cannot be understood, by secularists, from an angle in which non-human or supra-human values count.

Finally, there are also traditionalist movements, which, in an attempt to counter the negative influences of the colonial era, aim for a return to old religious beliefs and traditional social customs. An example is to be found in Benin, where Vodun religion has been reinstalled on a national level. Traditionalist movements have for their aim to preserve (or, if necessary, to reconstruct or reinvent) traditional knowledges and practices in which the relation of humans to their environment is considered from a perspective in which the spiritual aspect of all beings is taken into account. Humans in that perspective can live healthy and prosperous lives only if they know how to address the spiritual world that transcends their strictly human

aims. In the present situation, where the forces of global economies and nation-based politics reign, traditionalism will have to negotiate its values with those of, most notably, international tourism and national culture (cf. Juhé-Beaulaton and Roussel, 2003) and, through these, also with conservationalism. We see this happening where the traditionalists' view of certain forests as sacred has now been taken up by the international conservation efforts of the UN by declaring those forests cultural heritage, naming them ICCAs: Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (www.cbd.int/pa/doc/ts64-case-studies/senegal-en.pdf). These negotiations, however, may have the effect that the return to traditional spirituality will transform into a matter of cultural folklore.

When we zoom in on the subject of trees as bearers of meaning in an African context, the different frameworks mentioned above overlap, interact and come into conflict. For my purposes, I want to question not only how these different frameworks prestructure any possible hermeneutics of trees, but also how the different meanings given to trees can enter into dialogue with each other. The meaning of trees should not be understood one-dimensionally, but we should carefully disentangle the different meanings bestowed by different groups in societies, and thus take their frameworks of reference into account.

Religion and the symbolism of trees

A first example of trees' contested meaning is provided in the case of the cutting of the Mbegué forest (Khelkom in Senegal), described by Schoonmaker Freudenberg (1991), where deforestation was carried out for economic and religious reasons (to provide opportunities for the agricultural labour through which salvation is supposed to be reached). In this case, we see how monotheistic religion can suspend possible cultural or spiritual inhibitions against felling old trees whilst at the same time stressing their symbolic religious meaning (i.e., the 'right' religious meaning). Schoonmaker Freudenberg has described in a passionate tone how in 1991 Mouride faithful, following a call of their religious leadership on the radio, cleared a whole forest in just a few weeks:

From village and city, the faithful flocked to Mbegué, bringing axes and saws to clearcut 173 square miles of one of the last remaining forests in Senegal's degraded heartland. In three weekends, they felled more than five million Sahelian trees and shrubs. [. . .] For his part, the Khalifa-General (supreme head) of the powerful Mouride Islamic brotherhood was well on the way to meeting his goal: 45,000 hectares of newly cleared and fertile land would soon be put into peanut production.

(Schoonmaker Freudenberg, 1991, p. 1)

In this example, we see a conflict of meaning given to trees by the secular environmentalist author (who wants to ward off desertification and uphold a livable human habitat) and the religious Mourides, who negotiated economic opportunities and a theology of the good religious life, resulting in the ending the life of

the forest. Underneath these conflicting views there is also a conflict between two peoples/cultures: the Wolof Mouride faithful and the Fulbe herders who traditionally lived in the forest, and who were displaced by the (legal) cutting of the trees. The Fulbe possibly also hold more traditionalist views of the spiritual meaning of trees, although they just as well consider themselves Muslims.

A second example of the contested meaning of trees is from a story narrated to me by Michael Onyebuchi Eze on the tree called Uvuru, which was dominating the central square of his native village in the present day Enugu state of Nigeria. Ukwu Uvuru may have been more than 1,000 years old, according to reports, and had served from time immemorial as a place for public assemblies, as a source of fruits for children sitting in its shade, and it was ascribed a status of sacredness. It was cut down in 2002 by young Christians, who had been motivated to do so by their pastor. The motivation given was that the tree not just symbolised, but actually embodied, evil forces which would explain the social and economic problems of the locals. It supposedly held the people chained to the past and would hinder progress – so chopping it down was expected to solve that.

Although I don't know more details of the case, it seems a clear example of what happens when Christianity claims its ground by opposing traditional (folk) beliefs and practices. The idea is that ancient sacred places (or the opposite – places of evil), be they a watersource, a magnificent tree or a crossing of roads, should either be Christianised or be removed. In many places in Europe, you see images of the Christian cross, or road altars for certain saints, where there used to be places of ancient taboos, or of worship – like under an oak, at a well, or at a crossing.⁵ Surveying the literature makes clear that traditional spirituality, which often survives in folk beliefs and practices, is seen as a problem in the eyes of many Christian leaders. In the example of Ukwu Uvuru, the loyalty of people towards anything traditional, even if there might not be an attitude involved that would contradict Christianity, is seen as a sign of lack of religious trust.

In religious studies, a sociological and anthropological point of view is predominant – leading to the explanation of the resurgence of traditional beliefs as a consequence of problems of modernisation (cf. Juhé-Beaulaton, 2008, p. 8, and Ter Haar, 1992, p. 111). Economic difficulties, or the alienation resulting from urbanisation, would be the main factor in seeking help in the spiritual realm of traditional deities. Christian theological discussions of the matter sometimes harmonise with these views in describing traditional spiritual practices as disturbing the order in society. We find an example of this approach in a recent thesis on the tensions between belief in deities and Christianity in contemporary Igbo culture. The author, Christopher Okwor, writes as a recommendation that

The church should as a matter of necessity adopt a holistic approach to evangelisation. Christianity must be ready to feed the deep spiritual and material quests of the Igbo *in order to control them and be able to divert their attention from deities* (italics are mine). [. . .] Shrines are valuable heritage of our past. [. . .] Burning of shrines should be treated as a very serious offence. [. . .] *Shrines should be developed into tourist centres. They are homes for*

endangered species of plants and animals and some have beautiful caves and springs.

(Okwor, 2012, pp. 134–135)

The central problem with traditional practices of worship of deities seems to be that they escape the dominant morality and legality and are therefore ‘beyond control.’ Here we see the secularist framework, with its two main interests, tourism and sustainability, join hands with a Christianising interest: the striving for a moral life according to biblical prescriptions for the good life. We see the same effect in the work of Juhé-Beaulaton, a historian, who directs attention to issues concerning law and order surrounding sacred forests and shrines. Like Okwor, she sees a harmonisation between conservationist, traditionalist and the legal and economic interests of the state as a solution to preserve the ‘beautiful’ places of worship whilst pacifying the spiritual needs of the people (Juhé-Beaulaton, 2008).

In these approaches, however, the inherent value of the spiritual meaning of these shrines, often part of small forests, and therefore of the trees that mark and localise them, is lost, thus excluding the other mentioned framework which claims certain meanings for the environment in general, and trees in particular, namely the framework of a more spiritual outlook on things, in monotheist as well as in traditional religions. More apprehension for this aspect is found in the work of geographer and Islamologist Eric Ross, who has studied the symbolic meanings and usage of trees in West Africa, especially in Senegal, in their own right. While in non-African contexts the central tree in an African community has become known as “palaver tree” (from the Portuguese word for speech or discussion), Ross indicates that this name is too narrow:

[it] designates what is in reality a number of different phenomena which make political, social or religious use of individualized trees. [. . .] Rather than a single ‘palaver tree’ serving as locus of public debate, politics were marked by a number of different trees, of various species, which served a variety of public and collective functions, only one of which was the ‘palaver’ process.

(Ross, 2008, p. 136)

Through field research, Ross has located and described many ancient trees in Senegal, which often have survived the royal palaces or the villages of which they at one time were the centre. He has opened up a new branch of research, combining the locating on google maps of the individual trees, photographing them, and describing the oral histories that are told by the people living there. Thus he has made a beginning to make local knowledge accessible to the wider world: the knowledge that distinguishes between the public, social, political, and religious functions of trees. The ancient, hollow, baobabs are known to have been used as shrines, altars, and tombs for the griots (court singers, like the medieval European ‘jesters’ or ‘troubadours’). Trees are also mentioned to localise where a battle took place, or a boundary existed (Ross, 2008, pp. 136–137). In their function as the embodiment of political legitimacy, they can be compared with the obelisks,

triumphal arches, and other symbolic structures in Europe. In addition, trees could be the places where justice was rendered. In these public functions, they were and are seen as ‘places of power’ and places of memory (Ross, 2008, p. 139 and p. 144). Trees thus function as

[. . .] markers, as memorials and as monuments. These functions are spatial in that they contribute meaning to the landscape, but they are also social and political, in that they ‘fix’ identities while also articulating a spiritual worldview.

(Ross, 2008, p. 146)

Trees as archetype

In his work on the sacred city of Touba (an elaborated and reworked version of his dissertation), the urban place which is the centre of worship in Senegalese mouride Islam, Ross explains the mystical and symbolic understanding of trees. Mouride mysticism is a modern branch (defying the conflict between modern and traditional) of neoplatonic Sufi understanding of the world in relation to God as creator and provider of grace for human beings. The city of Touba, in the inner land of Senegal, was founded in 1887 by Shaykh Ahmandou Bamba Mbacké (1853–1927), on the authority of a revelation from God about the locality of this sacred place. According to a local legend:

After a patient search his (of the Shaykh, AR) attention was drawn, one day, to a tree which stood out clearly from the others by its size, its importance and its peculiar location. The tree [. . .] stood on a plateau on the spot where the dome of Touba Mosque now stands. Ahmadou Bamba prayed in the shade of the tree, and that is where he had his long awaited revelation.

(cited from Ross, 2006, p. 28)

The sacredness of Touba is experienced and reinforced in the yearly pilgrimage believers make to the city, where they offer prayers in its grandiose mosque, longing to be buried within the city when they die, which for them symbolises the closest connection to heavenly paradise. Touba, the name of the city, originally comes from the word *tûbâ*, which means the Tree of Paradise in Islamic tradition. It stands for the bliss of the heavenly state of the righteous after death.

As trees often play a critical role in foundation legends of places of human habitation, as well as of religious movements (think of Buddha, who also received a revelation under a tree, and the symbolic ‘tree’ of the Christian cross), Ross explores the specifics of this role in the case of Touba within the context of Sufi neoplatonic understanding. Here Touba is seen as “a qutb, a ‘pole’ or axis mundi. [. . .] The concept of qutb is primarily an astronomical one. It designates the ‘celestial pole,’ a hypothetical spot in the sky around which the heavens revolve” (Ross, 2006, p. 18). In neoplatonism, the cosmos is understood as an unfolding

of reality in layers of being, emanating from God, which are closer or farther removed from his, so to speak, ontological and spiritual gravity centre. According to Ross,

Sufism has invested this astronomical term with several related spiritual meanings. The term *qutb* is used to describe *transcendence*. It can be applied to any being, moment, event, or place which connects various layers of reality to each other.

(Ross, 2006, p. 18)

It can be a moment, which thus should be remembered with reverence – like the moment of revelation of an individual. It can also be a special, rare and beautiful place, such as a river, a grove, a high mountain, or a city (cf. Jerusalem, which is understood as a place where the divine can be almost ‘touched’ by Jews, Christians, and Muslims). It can also be, according to Sufism, a person – which then leads to taking, for instance, the grave of this person as a place for pilgrimage. Touching the grave or some other act of dedication can then help the believer on his/her spiritual path. Ross further explains this in more philosophical language by citing Mircea Eliade:

A sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; this break is symbolised by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the axis mundi, pillar [. . .], ladder (cf. Jacob’s ladder), mountain, tree, vine, etc; around this cosmic axis lies the world (= our world), hence the axis is located ‘in the middle’, at the ‘navel of the earth’; it is the Center of the World.

(cited from Ross, 2006, p. 20)

The *qutb*, the axis, can therefore also be a tree, and it often is. To make things more clear for modern readers, Ross introduces the term ‘archetype,’ coined by Carl-Gustav Jung in his psychology of the collective subconscious. He makes clear that one does not have to accept Jungian drive-psychology to use this concept, which just indicates what Sufi theosophism means by fixed essences, the forms which ‘hold,’ or refer to, the divine presence of God. Although, as is clear from the above, designating trees as archetype of the relation of humanity to the spiritual realm is in no way restricted to an African context, trees play an important role in African spiritual symbolism (next to all kinds of other signs, of course, such as water, certain animals, fire, etc.).

As Ross’s research into the ‘palaver’ trees has made clear, the central tree of a village or royal courtyard often survives the mud-structures of the human habitats themselves. The trees thus serve as memorials of human deeds and experiences in the past. In the specific instance of Touba, the belief in the spiritual tree, symbolising the entrance of paradise, is considered as the “celestial register upon which the

names and deeds of individuals are recorded” (Ross, 2006, p. 31). The symbolism of the tree is even more elaborate, as the words of Cheickh Tidiane Sy make clear:

In Islamic tradition, Touba also designates a tree of Paradise on whose leaves are inscribed each human’s good and evil acts. Each leaf, as it falls, inexorably provokes the death of the individual whose acts have been recorded. The leaf is then preserved for the Day of Judgment.

(cited in Ross, 2006, p. 32)

To inscribe themselves on this divine spiritual record, Mouride believers scratch their names and those of their loved ones on an actual Baobab tree in the city of Touba. In this religious practice, there is thus no sharp distinction between a material act (taking out a knife and carving letters into the bark of a tree, like lovers do in modern Europe, and perhaps all over the world, to pledge the eternity of their bond) and a spiritual act of faith (believing in or hoping for the saving grace of paradise, which is just another metaphor for the nearness of God).

This ‘mixing’ of matter and mind, of belief and practice, shows how ‘shamanistic’⁶ spiritual ontologies are present in monotheistic religion, even if full shamanistic ontologies do not focus so much on unity, as in the unity of God, but see all phenomena as potential manifestations of spirit, or as vehicles to reach the spiritual realm. Moving in the spaces of such ‘hybrid’ (to borrow a concept of Bruno Latour) realities is contrary to the protestant (modern Christian) idea that only belief can save souls, for which reason much of traditional ritual behaviour then should be considered irrational, and even banned. In this respect radical Protestantism reflects the same spirit as secular modernism (although I would not want to make a historical claim as to one inspiring the other). And since this secularism forms the actual (although not the necessary) framework of most modern philosophy, it has become hard in philosophy to understand archetypal relations of humans to trees as something more than irrationality.

The relation to ancient mysticism, which is so central in Mouride Sufism, can be put in a wider framework, as Ross has done in an article from 1994. He there tries to understand present day Islam from an Afrocentric perspective. In Afrocentric research into the origins of African civilisations (originating in the work of Cheikh Anta Diop, and leading up to present day writers such as Sarwat Anis Al-Assiouty), the link with ancient Egyptian cosmology is more and more researched, as well as its influencing role in Greek, Semitic, and, in the end, European and modern African science and religion. From a more philosophical perspective, this relation resonates in the seminal work by V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, which, in a productive dialogue with the philosophy of the French philosopher Foucault, develops the understanding of African philosophy as *gnosis*, the neoplatonic word for higher wisdom, which can be sought by means of the secret training of the initiated. This concept of *gnosis*, then, according to Mudimbe, is also a vehicle to transcend the cultural-anthropological concept of ‘Africa’ as a special place, or to transcend the localising concept without leaving the place. Even to transcend the discipline and overcoming its colonialist preconditions by making

it into “a more credible anthropou-logos, that is a discourse on a human being” (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 186).

Trees – contested meanings

After outlining the attitude towards the meanings of trees in the crossroads of conversion movements, traditionalism and modernisation, we still have to take a closer look at the secularist point of view before we can try to show how the different frameworks might be brought into dialogue with each other.

The secular perspective, which is central to most environmentalism as well as to the investigation undergirding it, shows very clearly in the reports of Schoonmaker Freudenberger cited above, in the second section. In her account of the cutting of the Mbegué forest we see a shrill contrast with the tree-friendly mysticism of the Mouride brotherhood described by Ross. Schoonmaker Freudenberger shows that she has a more positive idea about the Fulbe pastoralists, who were displaced by the cutting of the forest, and who have been in conflict with agriculturalists in West-Africa several times. This choice is based, not on a more favourable view on one group’s spiritual outlook or way of life, but on insights from environmental science and prospective expectations of which lifestyle in the Sahelian landscape might be more sustainable.

It is of importance here to underline the positive aim of secularist environmentalism – to preserve the earth for future generations of human beings, as a beautiful and healthy place to live, among a wealth of other species – plants and animals. From this aim for the future, environmentalism lends its legitimacy to critically question the behaviour of human groups, peoples, but also governments and the corporate world. Its voice is an important one in the shared human efforts to live a good life, and its adherence to planning on the basis of scientific research (objective data) provides an indispensable complementary discourse to the religious conversion movements described above. All the same, one has to be critical towards its accounts too – firstly, because of the provisionality of all scientific results, which often rest on researching a limited amount of factors, leaving others in the dark, and, secondly, because it fails to grasp the role symbolism and spiritual meanings may play in motivating human behaviour. If we put this second point to work with respect to the double-edged sword of Mouride theology – respecting individual trees as representative of the spiritual tree of paradise, whilst also stimulating agriculture as a good way of life for believers, even though it kills actual trees – we might be able to not just criticise the role of the Mouride leadership, as Schoonmaker Freudenberger does, for having too much power in a relatively weak state, but we might criticise it on a theological level itself.

What would such a theological criticism look like? It should direct itself at the level of understanding the relationship between the visible/material world and the religiously understood spiritual world (the paradise of God, the afterworld). In Senegalese Mouridism, there might be a conflict at work between a ‘shamanistic’ ontology, which considers matter and spirit as potentially interacting, and a dualist

ontology of heaven and earth being separate places. This kind of conflict is not specific to this branch of Islam, but can be seen in monotheistic traditions in general, and even in modern secularist worldviews where they deal with the relationships of human beings to things. Whereas shamanistic ontologies recognise each (living) being as an expression of (divine) spirit, monotheist ontologies attribute a unique meaning to the human being as the servant of God, playing a role in his plans with the cosmos. The role the human being plays in monotheism is understood to take place in two realms simultaneously: s/he can live a moral life in the visible/material world, actually helping others or making the world a better place to live in, but the real meaning of these actions lies in the 'other' world, the world of eschatological issues concerning the spiritual salvation of the human and/or of everything created.

We find an example of this monotheistic approach in the Mouride felling of the Mbegué forest, as it lets the aims of spreading the faith and the striving of humans to deserve heavenly bliss in the afterlife prevail over the life of the trees concerned. All the same we saw the meaning of trees not to be absent in Mouride theology – as it is preserved symbolically in the reverence for certain exemplary individuals in specific holy places.⁷ Here we see a reminder of how shamanistic ontology can live in monotheistic religions, not as a strange element to be rooted out (like reformation movements such as radical protestantism or salafism aim to do), but providing ways for religiosity to be experienced and acted out in human lives. Would this shamanistic element be more explicitly acknowledged, it might be used to criticise and correct violent acts of religions against our natural surroundings, harmonising traditionalism and modern religiosity. In such an acknowledgement, we can see an alternative to the strictly secularist discourse of environmentalism, while creating the terms for a dialogue on the religious interpretation of our environment.

Conclusion

To conclude I will discuss a philosophical attempt to take the spiritual and the material wellbeing of human beings in relation to trees simultaneously into account, as presented in an article by Michael Onyebuchi Eze,⁸ which aims to provide an Africanist theory of environmental ethics. His holistic viewpoint aligns with descriptions of 'African' ontologies as given by the Belgian Franciscan Tempels and Kenyan theologian/philosopher John Mbiti. Both authors worked to present a view of African religion, ontology, and ethics in general, in reaction to ethnographic work from the colonial age that provided descriptions of so many different African cultures as local and exotic – over and against (Western) universal religion and ontology. (cf. Ellis and Ter Haar, 2009, p. 404) In Tempels' work, the concept of life force is especially important. Tempels summarises the 'Bantu' metaphysics as an ontology that encompasses all being and understands it as interdependent. Whereas *Bantu Philosophy* claims to reconstruct reality as it is, it admits this reality to be accessible through different cultural frames in different ways. Following Tempels, Eze coins an understanding of ontology as