

Towards a Relevant Theology of Nature: North-East India Tribal Perspective

Yiepetso Wezah
Baptist Theological College, India

with Tereso C. Casiño
Gardner-Webb University, USA

This paper deals with a tribal concept of nature and its relevance for constructing a theology of nature in the context of the random destruction of God's creation. In the context of North-East India, a theology of nature is more holistic. It aims to liberate both an oppressed people and creation to establish a more sustainable society. This theology is also concerned with preserving and caring for nature.¹ We have a three-way relationship: God, nature and human. We depend on God for our lives and on nature for our survival. Thus, a study on a theology of nature is important in order to promote human responsibility to preserve and care for God's creation. This paper attempts to highlight briefly the problems of the over-exploitation of nature. It will then delve into the tribal concept and understanding of nature. Finally, we will discuss how a Christian community can create awareness and lead people to take appropriate steps to preserve and conserve nature.

Problem

Tribes believe in the relationships among the Supreme Being, people, and nature. The human race and nature are interdependent. They maintain a close relationship with love intrigues. However, this concept greatly changed with the coming of Christianity and modern development. Early Christian missionaries condemned the beliefs and practices of people as superstitious and satanic. Thus, the people gave up their belief in the association among the spirit with forests, trees,

1. K. C. Abraham, "Christian Ethics: Methodological Issues," in *Doing Christian Ethics: Context and Perspectives*, ed. Hunter P. Mabry (Bangalore: BT-ESSC, 1996), 78.

rocks, rivers, etc. They also gave up the practice of performing rituals to the creator and spirit. They surrendered their close attachment to nature. They now look at nature as mere resources for manipulation and exploitation as they cultivate new land, cut big trees, and clear jungles.

The industrial and technological revolution brought a new way of thinking and life; in addition, they brought changes in the relationship between nature and humanity. Massive industrialization brought ruthless exploitation of natural resources. The consumerist worldview and growth-oriented economic paradigm helped people to view nature as resources for exploitation.²² K. C. Abraham writes,

The ecological crisis is created by modern industrial and technological growth, and the modern life style. A paradigm of development, the western industrial growth model is almost universally accepted. It is a process whereby we use enormous capital and exploit natural resources particularly the non-renewable ones. Ruthless exploitation of nature and fellow beings is inevitable consequences of this pattern of development. Decisions about the kind of goods to be produced and the types of technology to be used are influenced by the demands of the consumerist economy where the controlling logic of growth is greed and not need. It creates imbalances between sectors and allows massive exploitation of the rural and natural environment for the benefit of the dominant classes.³³

Samuel Rayan argues that environment degradation and threat to life are caused by people's primary objective to maximize profit and competition.⁴⁴ The degradation of nature is the product of an unlimited accumulation of wealth and wasteful life-style.

One of the main problems in the rural area of North-East India is jhum, or the slash-and-burn method of cultivation. It is the predominant modus operandi of agriculture. People burn jungles for hunting animals, trapping birds, and cattle grazing. Many people cut down trees to prepare for pit-charcoal, which earns them money by supplying resources to offices, institutions, and homes. Moreover, people in rural areas continue to use firewood for cooking food and heating their houses. Every household burns a huge amount of firewood every winter.

2. A. Pushparajan, *Ecological World-view for a Just Society* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1992), 54.

3. K. C. Abraham, *Eco-Justice: A New Paradigm for Church Mission* (Bombay: BUILT, n.d.), 4-5.

4. Samuel Rayan, "Ecological Dimension of Our Faith: To Care for the Earth," in *Towards a Theology of Nature* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991), 5.

Timbers smuggling increases to meet the demands of urban areas. Forests are destroyed.⁵

Jhuming, jungle burning, and deforestation have led to the reduction of species of plants, flowers, wild vegetables, herbs, reptiles, animals, and birds. It has also brought drought, flood, landslide and soil erosion, reduction of rainfall, crops failure, shortage of food, social unrest, migration, and crime.⁶ Poverty and degradation of natural resources are interrelated. The poor are compelled to collect forest products and other natural resources, hunt birds, and animals in order to earn their livelihood and meet their daily needs. In this context, questions must be raised. Could there be anyway to preserve and conserve God's creation? Is it possible to educate people with their own beliefs, understanding and practices about preserving the rest of creation? Let us look into tribal concept and their relationship with nature.

Tribal Concept of Nature

Tribal people have an intimate relationship with nature. Wati Longchar writes,

The tribal world of culture can be explained only in term of the world of nature. We cannot understand tribal culture adequately without understanding the world of nature. They are inseparable related. Once we divorce, we lose the meaning of life. For tribals, nature is not only a mechanical system, but it includes everything that is qualitative and spiritual.⁷

They counted the seasons of the year and sowed seeds according to the revelation of nature. Nature spoke to them about good weather, drought, famine, and prosperity. They believed the revelation of the Supreme Being was in nature.

5. K. T. Thomas Rengma, "Climate and Sustainable Development in Nagaland," in *Climate Change and Tribal Sustainable Living: Response from the North-east*, ed. Walter Fernandes and Nasfisa Goga D. Souza (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre and Indian Network of Ethics and Climate Change, 2001), 114.

6. Murohu Chotso, "Hazard of Jungle Burning and Its Mitigation in Phek District of Nagaland," (master's thesis, Sikkim Manipal University of Health, Medical and Technological Science, 2005), 13-14.

7. Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity: Focus on North East India* (Jorhat: Limatula Lkr., 1995), 24.

The Concept of Land

Land is the foundation of human life. Human survival depends on land and its resources. The tribal believed that their mother had become part of the land and thus have a great reverence for the land and its resources. One of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh believed that they came of the rock. Their story goes like this as narrated by Tedlap Tesia from Lamsa village, "The Supreme Being had created the earth, plants, trees, birds and animals. One day, a big *Tut* (rock) fell and broke into three pieces and there came human being."⁸

They called themselves *Tutsa*, people of the rock. Even today, some of them still worship the rock, and they consider the land as extremely sacred. It is taboo for them to remove the boundary stone.⁹ If any one intentionally removes boundary stones, the spirit of the land will cause sickness and even death. The Chakhesang Naga myth elaborates this point:

Once upon a time, the Spirit, tiger and human lived together as a happy family. They lacked nothing. Everything was abundant. They had no fear of death. They spoke the same language. The tiger was elder and the human was younger. One day, the human told to the family members that when the mother died, he should live in the village. But the tiger argued that he being the eldest should live in the village. One morning, the mother was sick, and the Spirit requested that the tiger bring some good meat for her. After the tiger left to hunt, their mother passed away. Hence, the Spirit and human quickly buried the mother under their fire place (oven) and start cooking food on the burial place. The tiger arrived with deer meat. The tiger asked for their mother. The Spirit said to the tiger that their mother died and disappeared within a twinkle of an eye. The tiger continue to insist that he should live in the village and human should live in the jungle. So the Spirit said to both of them that they will compete: the one who touches banana leaf at a distance first would be allowed to live in the village. The tiger was extremely happy because he was very sure that the human cannot compete with him. However, the Spirit made a bow for the human to shoot the banana leaf from a distance. On that fixed day, they competed and as instructed by the Spirit, the human shot his arrow from a distance and claimed that he touched the banana leaf first. So the Spirit asked tiger to live in jungle to take care

8. Tedlap Tesia, interview by author, Lamsa Village, India, January 13, 2011.

9. "A boundary stone is the demarcating marker for one's land property. Land is a part of what defines a Naga's identity, and as such when even a small piece of land is taken or encroached (removing boundary stone) the victim's identity is at stake. Also it amounts to theft." Rene Elias Rathiulung, email to editor, June 21, 2011.

of animals and birds, and the human was asked to live in the village. The Spirit said that he would be watching over them and extending help to both of them. However, the tiger was not willing to go to the jungle so the Spirit gave a buffalo horn to the human to blow at the back of the tiger. Human blew the horn loudly. It frightened the tiger, who ran into the forest and lived there.¹⁰

The Spirit represents the Creator, who is also the sustainer. The human represents both man and woman. The tiger represents creatures, and the mother represents the earth. Since their mother became part of the earth, the Nagas consider and respect the land as sacred. Hence, they should not claim and grab another person's land by giving false witnesses. The punishment is an early death. It is also believed that dishonesty in the land boundary is a fatal sin against the mother and the Creator.¹¹ Wati argues that the land also cries in the hands of greedy people. It was taboo to sell land.¹²

Whenever there is a land dispute or a false claim, nature would determine the outcome. If there is a land dispute where both the parties do not agree to the judgment of the elders, they would be asked to dive into the pond to bring mud from the bottom. The falsifier would not sink; he would be floating. The righteous person would easily dive into the bottom of the pond and bring mud out. The elders of the village would pronounce in judgment that the land belong to the one who brought mud out from the bottom of the pond. This practice still prevails in some of the villages among the Nagas.

Festivals celebrated the land. Prayers were once addressed to the Supreme Being, the spirits, and the land to be kind to the crops before cultivation. People offered rice-beer, rice, crabs, and leaves to the spirit of the land to ask for mercy in case burning the jungle may destroy various species of plants, animals, reptiles, and birds before lighting the field (for cultivation).¹³

10. Wekhwezu-u Wezah (Mrs.), interview by author, a Sumi Village in the Naga Hills, India, November 20, 2010. The sexes of the Spirit, tiger and human are neutral but the word "he" was used for the sake of simplicity.

11. "Land boundary defines the property of the family (as this story goes) by virtue of the mother being a part of the land. To give up the land would be to give up their mother." Rene Elias Rathiulung, email to editor, June 21, 2011.

12. Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Beliefs in the North India India* (Jorhat: self-published, 2000), 108.

13. Longchar, *Tribal Religious Beliefs*, 100.

Relationship between Human, Trees and Flowers

When people become sick, they go to the forest to breathe fresh air and hear the sound of the forest. They would claim that they feel better after visiting the forest. Traditionally, Nagas believed that before the separation of day and night, humans, nature, and animals lived together as a big family. They lived in harmony with one another. They understood one another. They helped one another in times of needs. They spoke the same language. They tried their best not to hurt one another. The world was in such a state that there were love affairs that developed between maidens and trees. For example, the following is an Ao Naga myth:

There was a beautiful maiden named Sungnaro. She used to sleep in a dormitory under the supervision of a matron as it was their custom in those days. Every evening a handsome man would come to the dorm and court her. She felt in love with him. She never saw him in broad daylight, which kept her wondering. It was said that every morning she went to the pond to fetch water. She washed herself singing, "Getting cleansed, getting cleansed." She never saw the man during the day so she became suspicious. So she shared this with her matron. Her matron advised her to make a scabbard/machete belt and give it to him in the evening when he came to court her. The next morning when she went to the pond to wash herself, she was surprised to see the belt wrapped around a huge tree by the side of the pond. In great shock she returned and told this to her matron. Her matron advised her to give a blue dyed shawl that night. She did so. To her great astonishment, the next morning, the shawl was worn around the same tree. While she wondered, the tree began to sing,

Getting cleansed, getting cleansed
 The maiden wearing the blue dyed shawl.
 Like beautiful cascade of a waterfall
 O maiden of Chungliyimti
 A hundred maidens cannot match your beauty
 Like the previous orchid
 How profoundly your beauty adorns the village.¹⁴

She went back and told the matron. She told her to keep a mug of water beside her bed every night when she slept. From that night the man did not come to her. Her matron could not keep this within herself and told her parents. Her parents immediately summoned the villagers and decided to cut the tree. The maiden was locked inside the house

14. N. Talitemjen Jamir, *AO Naga Cultural Heritage*, Mokokchung: N. Talitemjen, 1988, 9.

and the villagers began to cut the tree. In spite of all the effort, the tree would not fall. The maiden longed to see the tree. So she climbed up the roof and tried to peep from a small opening. The moment she opened it, a splinter of the tree came flying and struck her dead. Instantaneously, the tree fell with a loud noise.¹⁵

Similarly, a Sümi Naga myth talks about a relationship between people and nature.

A boy and girl fell in love. They liked each other very much. However, as days passed by another man began to like the girl but the man knew that she would not be able to separate herself from her boyfriend. Hence, he tried to trick her. One night he dressed like her boyfriend and came to her at night. He called her to come for a walk. They traveled a far distance without her noticing that the man was not her boyfriend, for he did not speak to her. At daybreak, she came to know that the man was not her boyfriend. So she insisted that she must immediately go back home. But the man told her that he was going to take her as his wife. So she began to run and the man killed her. The blood splashed on the tree and blood became an orchid flower. Her boyfriend found out that someone had taken his girlfriend away by force. He began to search for her. When he became too tired, he took rest under a tree. An orchid petal fell upon him. When he looked up, he found a beautiful orchid flower on a tree. He slept under the tree and in his dream, his girlfriend told him the whole story and how she became an orchid flower. She asked him not to pluck her but preserve her.¹⁶

People lived in an intimate relationship with nature. Love affair between humans and trees and flowers existed. The only destructive element in the past belonged to the cruelty of other human beings. Nonetheless, the relationships prevailed.

The Relationship between Human and Rat

There are many stories where animals, including reptiles and birds, helped people in times of needs. The friendship between a man and the rat is told as the following:

Humanity had no rice to eat. Their food was not good. The rat noticed that mankind had a poor diet. One day, a man was searching for food. He saw a paddy plant in the middle of the sea. He thought that it could be good for food. However, he could not collect it. At that time, the rat

15. Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of Human Being* (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2001), 71. Cf. J. P. Mills, *Ao Nagas* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1973), 317.

16. Wekhwezuu Wezah, interview by author, Sumi Village, India, December 22, 2010. Wekhwezuu Wezah was 70 years at the time of the interview.

came and told to the man that he could bring the paddy to him to sow and plant. Yet, the rat asked the man, "I will bring it for you, but I should also have my share to eat whether in the fields or at home from the barn. We should be good friends in the sharing of paddy. The man agreed and the rat brought the paddy from the sea. The man sowed the paddy and it produced good crop. Therefore, rats continued to have their share to eat in the fields and from the barns. It was believed that people should not curse or destroy the rat from eating the paddy."¹⁷

The rat eats the paddy in the field or from the barn; and it also protects paddy from the destruction of grasshoppers and other insects by eating them too. Therefore, villagers even today utter words to the rat, "Do not destroy our paddy but protect it and help it to grow so that we shall have plenty of harvest."¹⁸

A Cultivator and Earthworm

The relationship between a cultivator and earthworm goes like this,

A cultivator began to cultivate his field, and his crops did not grow well. He was extremely worried that he might not have any harvest, and his family may face starvation. An earthworm noticed the sadness of the cultivator. So the earthworm came and asked the man, "What is the matter with you? I could see some problems in your face." The cultivator replied, "I am sad because soil is dry and my crops are not growing well." The earthworm replied, "Well, I could help you if we can agree (make a pact)." The man replied, "I would agree with you if you could help me." The earthworm said, "Do not hate (or despise) me. Do not crush me so that I will make your land fertile, and your crops will grow well." The cultivator replied, "Curse be upon me if I and my children despise you." From that time onward, the earthworm made the soil fertile with its excreta.¹⁹

Even today, children are told not to despise and crush earthworms because they make their land fertile and enable the land to produce good crops.

Human and Plants

Humans depend on plants for their food and healing.

17. Wepelo Wezah, interview by author, a Sumi Village in the Naga Hills, India, December 20, 2010.

18. Wepelo Wezah, interview.

19. Wepelo Wezah, interview.

One day, two brothers went to fish for their sick parents. When they reached the river, they set out their fishing equipment and caught a good number of fish. They prepared to cook fish in a bamboo container. They used leaves as stoppers for the container and placed the [assembled] container in the fire to cook. When the brothers believed the fish was finished cooking, they removed the stoppers, and found the fish still alive. They paused and changed leaves, using different leaves as stoppers. After some time of cooking, they found the fish dead. They wondered if the first leaves were life-giving. So they reverted and used the former leaves as stoppers. Surprisingly, the fish became alive again. They decided to take the leaves home and placed them below the heads of their ailing parents. They were healed from their sickness.²⁰

There are so many narratives where plants gave life to the dying. Many herbal medicines use by tribal members without side effects. There is a mystical sharing of life between humans and plants. Trees, bamboos, rocks, and rivers were believed to be abodes of spirits. Hence, they do not destroy or kill intentionally.²¹

Birds and Humans

Birds and animals were hunted according to each season. People did not hunt during mating seasons and when the young ones were small. One story shares that adult birds will help people find alternative methods of achieving their goals if they leave their young alone.

Two young men fell in love with one girl. One day they went in search of a hornbill nest, which is located on top of a tree. They made bamboo steps and climbed up. One man was very deceitful; when his friend climbed up to the top, he climbed down. He cut the bamboo ladder and went home. His friend was left behind on top of the tree. He could not come down. So he began to eat the fruits brought by the mother of a hornbill for her little ones. He wanted to come down. He began to construct wings with the feathers and tails from the young hornbills. The mother of the chicks told him not to cut the feathers of her young ones; she said that she would bring him down to the ground. Then a huge flock of hornbills came, and slowly took him down to the ground. The man was so thankful to the hornbills.²²

The myth above demonstrates that people can have an intimate relationship with nature. Thus when members of tribes cultivate new lands, they would offer sacrifices (rice-beer, rice, crabs, and leaves) to the spirit

20. Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of Human Being*, 78-79.

21. Nungshitula, *The Naga Images of Human Being*, 80.

22. Meselhitsu-u Khalo, story narrated to author, Chakesang village, Nagaland, India, December 22, 2010.

of the land. Then they would farm the land for two to three years. After a period of ten to fifteen years, the same plot of land would be cultivated again after allowing the land to recuperate.

However, with the coming of Christianity and modern development, the belief of the presence of spirits in the trees, jungle, rocks, and rivers disappeared. The traditional beliefs were considered as superstitious. Consequently, the people of North-East India changed their attitude and looked at nature as mere sources to be exploited. Today, the tribals of North-East India have freedom to cut forests, to sell land, to burn jungles, to hunt animals, birds, fish with lime and bleaching powder.²³ These practices destroy almost every creature in the rivers.

Theological Response

It is important to rediscover the relationship among the Creator, nature, and human and their interdependence. The mother of the tiger and human has become part of the earth; creatures and people have a close attachment to the land. It feeds and nurtures all living beings and things. People are placed upon the earth to be stewards of the land and its inhabitants. We all are aware that people have to care and judiciously use it for our survival. Yet crucial questions remain. How do we educate people to treat the land and its resources with reverence and conserve it? How far can we do justice to God's creation? Can people develop affectionate love for nature?

Chakhessang Theological Association gave a series of seminars on the importance of preservation and conservation of forests and wild life. Their context was the appearance of random destruction of forests and jungles. The animals in them were hunted down. The area itself burned for *jhum* cultivation. Today, many villages in the Phek District, State of Nagaland, have started tree plantations and wild life reservations. Animals and birds, which have disappeared from the area, have returned protected in the reservations.

Ratshülo Wezah shared that Sümi Village Baptist Church celebrates the Golden Jubilee in 2014. In 2008, they have made a resolution to observe tree plantation day in the first week of May of every year. Each family will plant trees in their own land. They started to plant trees in 2009, and they will continue to 2014.²⁴ Each community could do the

23. "Bleaching powder and lime (calcium hydroxides or oxides) are painted on the bottom of tree trunks to prevent the trees from getting diseases. They are also used to contaminate the water and kill fishes locally." Rene Elias Rathilung, email to editor, June 21, 2011.

24. Ratshulo Wezah, interview by author, Sumi Village, India, December 14, 2010.

same. However, proper education should be first given, and then the community should mobilize to take appropriate steps to conserve God's creation.

Forest is the backbone of ecology of hill areas. The villages should be educated and encourage to plant trees in the deforested areas. This will help to restore ecological balance.

Social Forestry

In the tribal areas of North-East India, only a few individuals own private land. Most of the forest and cultivable lands are owned by clans and village communities. Hence, leaders of clans and village communities can initiate to control deforestation with strict rules and regulations. They can initiate to preserve and conserve forests. They can also initiate tree plantation in a wasteland. The government of Nagaland, in fact, began a campaign to develop wasteland. Unfortunately, education to mobilize a community to participate actively in reforestation is very much lacking. The church can play effective role in the process as one of its missions.

Restrictive Measures

In 1995 the Chakhesang Theological Association brought chairman of village councils, secretary of village development boards, and youth presidents together at Mission Centre, Chakhesang Baptist Church Council, Pfutsero. Together, they deliberated on the issue of jungle burning which destroys various species of plants and reptiles. After a thorough discussion, they decided to stop jungle burning, logging, and hunting. People who violate the resolutions were fined with 10,000 rupees. The officials of the village councils are given the responsibility to arrest and impose fines. This resolution was found effective for a few years. Times have declined. Currently, people are returning to the old practices of burning jungles, logging, and hunting. Public education is important today from conducting seminars to publishing educational posters.²⁵

The government of Nagaland has published posters with words that discourage deforestation and fires: "Fire kills every living organism," "Prevent Fire," "Save Natural Resources," and "Conserve Nature." The goals of these posters are to educate the public and encourage them to preserve and conserve nature.

Environmental wisdom still exists in the mind of the villagers, who still love of nature. People love natural beauties, and the elders of the villages try their best to control the exploitation of forests, animals, birds,

25. Murohu Chotso, "Hazard of Jungle Burning," 126.

herbs, orchids, and other wild flowers. This goes against the consumerist culture which has compelled young people to abuse natural resources to maximize their profits. Today, eco-theology has been introduced in theological education. Yet, most of the Christian ministers, who have been given eco-theological education, have reservations to preach on the importance of conserving nature. It is unclear as to why. After all, is it possible that we can rediscover liberating resources from traditional myths, beliefs and practices and incorporate in our theological education?

**“Theology of Nature” or “Mythology of Nature”:
Reflections on “Towards a Relevant Theology of Nature:
North-East India Tribal Perspective”**

by Tereso C. Casiño

Neglect, exploitation, and the degradation of nature remains one of the greatest problems in the history of world civilizations. While concern for environmental care and ecological protection is universal, local communities take varied contextual approaches in dealing with the environment. Yiepetso Wezah’s essay, “Towards a Relevant Theology of Nature: North-East India Tribal Perspective,” is a good example of using indigenous myths. Wezah attempts to establish a theological framework on which to ground ecological and environmental care and protection. His main concern is to liberate what he calls “oppressed creation” in North-East India from the hands of its citizens. Wezah’s presentation merits major theological and missiological implications.

Theological Implications

Wezah asserts that “a study on theology of nature is important in order to promote human responsibility to preserve and care for God’s creation.” He cites a series of North-East India myths which serve as a foundational framework of reference to construct a relevant theology of nature. He uses a triad of relationships, namely, God-nature-human. This constructive grid unfolds a literary device (myth) that fits the North-East India worldview, although it poses some theological challenges within the Christian community.

First, in the biblical theology of creation, human beings are created in “the image of God,” and, as the story of creation declares, nature was created “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*). The first man, Adam, was created from the dust of the earth. This statement established his organic connection to nature. However, Adam was also distinct from the dust of the earth. Any discussion on the relationship between nature and humanity

should make this important distinction. Theologically speaking, people are related to and yet, distinct from the earth. The *imago Dei* makes this clear-cut distinction between humanity and nature.²⁶ However, the biblical notion of the “image of God” in humanity ensures that Adam and his offspring would become responsible citizens of the earth. In contrast, just like other myths of animist-oriented societies in many parts of the world, the distinction between human beings and nature is not crystal clear in any North-East India tribes. The “image of God” differentiates human dominion over the earth from the domination of nature. Dominion points to action and creative advocacy, while domination leads only to the oppression of nature.²⁷ The North-East India myths, which are similar to creation myths in many parts of the Asian region, are full of anthropomorphism. While a love affair between “humans and trees and flowers” may be common in Naga mythologies and appeal to the affective domain of human emotions, a parallel is not found in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Second, the concept of holism in the North-East India worldview is completely different from the biblical notion of an interactive bond between humans and nature. Although the Bible may slightly identify with the animist-oriented a North-East India worldview regarding the blurred distinction between the sacred and the profane, the Judeo-Christian tradition does not support the idea of biocentrism in the universe that makes the value of nature equal to human life.²⁸ Creation myths project “unity” in nature while the Bible speaks of a creation that groans.²⁹

Third, for the North-East India myths to become meaningful in relation to a theology of nature, it is important to situate them before the Fall, not after it. This is a timeline that is often neglected and ignored in exegeting creation stories. This is surmised in Wezah’s use of illustrations through the lens of “naturism” which depicts the age of human innocence, e.g., “human and rat,” “cultivator and earthworm,” “human and plants,” and “birds and humans.”³⁰ In these stories, the curse of

26. As Donald Leroy Stults asserts, “Man was created in God’s image and, even after the fall of man into sin, there remains an essential image of God in man that makes him uniquely man.” See Donald Leroy Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1989), 197.

27. On this theme, see Ken Gnanakan, *Responsible Stewardship of God’s Creation* (Indooroopilly Q: World Evangelical Alliance, 2004).

28. For a fuller treatment on biocentrism, see Robert Lanza, *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2009).

29. For examples, Psalm 104; Matthew 6:28:30; and Romans 8:28-25.

30. For a fuller treatment of symbolic representations in animistic so-

creation was not evident. If the mythical timeline matches with that of creation stories in the Bible, innocence and the intertwining relationship between human beings and nature becomes evident.

Fourth, Wezah's use of indigenous myths point to the power of primordial stories in raising the people's collective religious consciousness. In a sense, this is a strategic educational approach in teaching members of the community eco-theology because many of these creation stories have been imbedded in their religious psyche, especially among the older generations.³¹ Wezah aptly writes,

Traditionally, Nagas believed that before the separation of day and night, humans, nature, and animals lived together as a big family. They lived in harmony with one another having good understanding in expression and helping one another in times of needs. They spoke the same language. They tried their best not to hurt one another. The world was in such a state that there were love affairs that developed between the maidens and tree (4).

Fifth, three pitfalls may be noted in the discussion of environmental and ecological concerns within the context of a biblical motif of creation. The first involves pantheism where adherents primarily view God in everywhere and in everything. The second relates to monism whereby creation identifies organically with God and human beings, blurring any distinction. The third concerns dualism that deems the spirit as essentially good, while matter is considered evil. However, any attempt to formulate a theology of nature requires a clear-cut distinction between God and creation, and, consequently, between human beings and nature.

In addition to Wezah's cognizance of factors, ranging from industrial and technological growth to slash-and-burn based farming, two major theological realities need to be considered. One is the biblical view of a fallen humanity that could account for the irresponsible behavior towards nature. While the disobedience of Adam and Eve resulted in the disorganization of creation, it is not the sole factor for environmental disasters and complications. The other concerns angelic rebellion that took place even before the creation of the first progenitors. The rebellion resulted in a continuing spiritual struggle between good and evil. This spiritual conflict continues to affect the whole of creation. The Fall

cieties, see the works of Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963); *The Sacred and the Profane* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1959).

31. Charles E. Winquist argues that stories "can be viewed as an integrating structure that organizes our feelings and forms a sense of continuous identity." See Charles E. Winquist, *Homecoming: Interpretation, Transformation and Individuation*, AAR Studies in Religion 19 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 2.

has obliterated the moral attribute (i.e. holiness) of human beings and diminished their innate capability to preserve and care for the environment. The presence of evil in the midst of goodness in nature accounts for the influence that leads to irresponsibility and poor stewardship of creation on the part of humanity.

Missiological Implications

Wezah calls for a “Theology of Nature” as stated in the title of the essay, but he fails to present clear-cut biblical teachings of creation. His hermeneutics of nature ends where the entries of North-East India folklore concludes. While Wezah voices out concerns for the oppressive exploitation of nature, of which slash-and-burn farming appears to be the prime culprit, the biblical apology for overcoming this problem is totally absent. The Bible, of course, is replete with concerns for ecology, environment, and creation as a whole.³² The church fathers also affirm the biblical injunction on environmental care when, in the opening statement of the Apostles Creed, God the Father is declared “maker of heaven and earth.” This declaration unfolds a direct call for biblical stewardship of creation as affirmed in the faith of God the Creator. Wezah asks, “Can we rediscover liberating resources from traditional myths, beliefs and practices and incorporate in our theological education?”³³ This question has serious missiological implications.

The first applies to gospel communication. Traditionally, the tribal communities of North-East India belong to an “oral tradition” where identity formation as a people took its due course through the ancient stories about them. The fact that a huge part of the Bible also came from oral traditions means that the tool for communication between the two traditions is similar.³⁴ Creation stories are powerful tools for instructing the North-East India community.

The second stresses the need for contextualization. North-East India storytelling can be used as a good device to contextualize some of the teachings of the Bible. Weza has successfully demonstrated the use of North-East India myths to create a bridge between a belief system

32. For a fuller treatment of this theme through the lens of the Old Testament, see Terrence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

33. Wezah, interview.

34. See for example, Richard E. Horsly, Jonathan A. Draper, and John Miles Foley, eds. *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2006). See also Rick Brown, “Communicating Effectively to Non-Readers: How to Make Oral Communication More Effective,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 173-178.

that was primarily naturistic – using language and metaphors of nature – and a belief system that is basically personal, relational, and redemptive. So, in terms of appropriating biblical truth, the myths of North-East India can be used for contextualization, albeit within defined limits and boundaries.

The third points to the lack of evangelistic element in North-East India mythologies. While the stories that Wezah used note the human dimension of ancient North-East India life, they do not accentuate the reality of a personal God or providential will. The biblical vision of a self-sufficient, sovereign, majestic, and merciful God is absent in animist-oriented societies across North-East India.

The fourth affirms the ecological responsibility that believers have as part of their life and mission as a community of God's people. Wezah notes how the communities of North-East India are becoming aware of the damage to their ecology, especially the slash-and-burn practice that persist in some areas. Biblical teachings on stewardship will correct this practice. The tribes in North-East India are becoming more responsible now and their concerted efforts to preserve and care for their environment is a good sign of their commitment to participation in God's work of providence, that is, taking care of creation.

In a final analysis, Wezah avoids the relationship between evangelism and ecology; he opts not to engage in the debate on whether or not ecological concerns and environmental advocacy can equal or relate to evangelism or discipleship. Wezah simply assumes that the care for environment and ecology can be the church's mission. He does not make a direct connection between environmental responsibility and disciple-making although there seems to be support for the idea that the North-East India Christian community needs to be responsible disciples of Christ.

Conclusion

A biblical theology of creation assures the communities of North-East India of their God-given identity and future. The people's claim to the land is theologically legitimate. Their present identity and determination to live as a people finds historical mooring, not simply because of their mythical stories, but because of the historical reality of existence from the time their forefathers lived in the land. The use of indigenous myths to construct a theology of nature in North-East India could pave the way for a contextualized, relevant, and innovative preservation and protection of the environment and ecology. However, uncritical employment of indigenous mythologies can dilute the biblical theology of creation or nature. Wezah stresses rightly that environmental action is a

community act, not simply an individual's sole effort. In a word, a theology of nature articulates the power of a nature-caring community composed of responsible individuals. Thus, in this particular sense, Wezah succeeds in his call to preserve, care, and conserve nature.