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Seeking phronesis from Indigenous knowledge for eco-pastoral care during the African Anthropocene[1]

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Abstract

The article brings practical theology into dialogue with African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK). The conversation stands in service of informing eco-pastoral care during the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is framed in the African context to arrive at the notion of the African Anthropocene which poses unique challenges to the continent. Eco-pastoral care is envisaged as the active engagement of faith communities in biodiversity conservation. As it is assumed that practical theology and pastoral care are at their core Western notions, the research is performed as part of the contextualization discourse, seeking theoretically to further embed them in the African context. This motivates the discourse with AIK as an ancient source of wisdom that may further motivate African faith communities to act as pastoral stewards of the earth as it may resonate with African culture and ways of being in the world. This research proposes that the task of practical theology resides in initiating and stimulating conversations with African faith communities who are the custodians of AIK that can lead to the construction and practice of eco-pastoral care.

Keywords

eco-practical theology and pastoral care; phronesis; African Anthropocene; African Indigenous Knowledge

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Introduction

Dialogue about environmental degradation has permeated most layers of modern-day society. Political and economic leaders, academics, religious leaders, activists, and ordinary individuals alike are part of the diverse discourses that came to characterize the so-called Anthropocene age.

Consequently, in his summation of the past five decades of eco-theology, Ernst Conradie (2020:2) points out that the dialogue gained a rather "amorphous character":

> Covering a wide array of themes and underlying problems, situated in diverse geographical contexts, expressed in multiple languages, emerging in basically all confessional traditions and schools of theology, covering all the traditional sub-disciplines of Christian theology …

This trend is exacerbated by the divides between global positions, confessional differences, worldviews, and the cultures of the different conversation partners, as Conradie indeed suggests.

Despite the challenges this creates for eco-theology, in terms of a general focus and uniform methodology, Conradie maintains that Christian eco-theology can generally be organized according to four tasks: A twofold critique and a twofold constructive contribution (Conradie 2020:2). In terms of its critiquing duties, eco-theology is both devoted to an "ecological critique of Christianity and a Christian critique of ecological destruction"(ibid.). As for its constructive duties, eco-theology should be committed to a "Christian authenticity and, on that particular basis, also a contribution to public, inter-disciplinary discourse on sustainability" (ibid.).

The relevance of Conradie's observations for this research is that they provide a framework and orientation for taking part in the eco-theological dialogue. This research will enter the discourse from a practical theological paradigm aimed at contemplating eco-pastoral care as a response to current environmental challenges in the African context. As such, it will depart from an eco-practical theological paradigm that denotes a specific focus on critical reflection on the church's communicative actions regarding the well-being of God's creation through biodiversity conservation grounded

in pastoral care actions of faith communities towards the environment (Brunsdon 2023:553). In a sense, the research will largely align with the constructive function of eco-theology by contemplating eco-pastoral care that represents a Christian perspective on sustainability. In the process, it will also indirectly critique current pastoral passiveness and ecological destruction, by attempting to stimulate thinking on how faith communities can become part of biodiversity conservation.

Seen within the broader field of practical theology, it will align with the notion of the contextualization of practical theology and pastoral care in the African context. This departs from the premise that practical theology and pastoral care emanated from Western paradigms and are, on many levels, foreign to African thinking.

At the root of the contextualization of practical theology and pastoral care is an inter-contextual dialogue that strives to identify common ground with other expressions of Christianity, different cultures, traditions, and belief systems. In this particular case, the research pertains to considering conversation partners for eco-pastoral care that can further inform the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) needed to challenge environmental degradation that may resonate with African culture and ways of being in the world. Here, African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) comes into focus as an ancient source of wisdom that may further motivate African faith communities to act as pastoral stewards of the earth.

Theoretical framework

The article will depart from a framing of the Anthropocene in the African milieu based on a literature study. It will be argued that the Anthropocene poses unique challenges to the African continent given its many historic dispositions and other enduring trials. How faith communities can respond to this will be considered in terms of eco-pastoral care. Eco-pastoral care will be contemplated in light of the shift from anthropocentric to eco-centric care. Given the very tangible challenges of the Anthropocene, it is argued that eco-pastoral care should be informed by practical wisdom (*phronesis*) as it is aimed at cultivating practical ways of thinking and doing. Against this background, AIK will be explored as a form of Indigenous knowledge

shaped by African philosophies and beliefs and aimed at flourishing life in the unique framework of the continent. The main research question, the article attends to is whether AIK can be regarded as a form of African phronesis that begs the further attention of eco-practical theology and pastoral care.

The Anthropocene in an African context (African Anthropocene)

In popular discourse, the notion of the Anthropocene is widely used to acknowledge a new era in history where human exploitation of the earth has led to phenomena such as climate change, the extinction of various species, and the gradual depletion of natural resources (Pavid n.d.) – also known as the loss of biodiversity. The direct implications of biodiversity loss gave rise to two extreme opposites in the discourse, namely the "optimistic- and catastrophic" perspectives of the Anthropocene (Malhi 2017:94). In the former, the Anthropocene is embraced as an opportunity for humanity to manage its impact on the globe optimally to arrive at a "good Anthropocene" (Malhi 2017:94). Underlying this notion is the belief that sustainability is not yet under final threat. In the latter, also known as the "eco-catastrophist perspective", it is propagated that modern "progress has hit the boundaries of a finite planet" (Malhi 2017:94). Consequently, ecological collapse is inevitable if human exploitation of the environment is not halted. The inclination of this article is towards the latter, aligning with Malhi (2017:79) who suggests that the Anthropocene requires nothing less than a "new worldview" (Malhi 2017:79) and a radically changed approach toward sustainability to avoid an eco-catastrophe. This suggests that a total reorientation of life on earth is inevitable to manage growing biodiversity loss.

Of course, the notion of the Anthropocene is not uncontested. For some, it represents a very limited understanding of the complexities of the earth's current condition in which humans are attributed a "new triumphalist self-understanding" (Bergmann 2021:162-163). The term is also criticized for its lack of social justice and apocalyptic character (Bergmann 2021:163-164). Irrespective of legitimate criticism of the notion of the Anthropocene, it would be hard to deny that we have reached an eco-*Kairos*-moment

that calls for an urgent reappraisal of the human relationship with the environment.

As the focus of this research is primarily on the African context, one now needs to probe what the Anthropocene entails in this setting. In her essay, *The African Anthropocene* (2018), Gabrielle Hecht not only draws attention to the lack of focus on Africa in the eco-debate but also highlights the unique role context plays in experiences of the Anthropocene. The meaning of the Anthropocene and its effects thus directly relates to where it occurs. Framing the Anthropocene in Africa subsequently requires a contextual reading.

In this framework, it seems that Africa is often neglected in eco-dialogue. In part, this can be attributed to wrong perceptions about the Anthropocene and the continent itself. Often, the Anthropocene is associated with developed countries, where industrial growth depleted natural resources and over-exploited the land. On a large continent like Africa that is still associated with a developing region and less industrialization, less of an impact on the earth is expected. Unfortunately, this is not the case, as ecological degradation is not solely dependent on current industrialization and development patterns, but on an array of factors that include a region's history, the unique challenges governments and citizens impose on the land, as well as external influences from political and economic alliances through the process of globalization. These denominations enable a contextual reading that affords a view of the African Anthropocene.

Historically, the African continent has been associated with colonization in all its guises. It is quite difficult to think about Africa separated from its long colonial history. Also referred to as "mercantile colonialism" (Sennott 2020), it was during the colonial period that the African continent started to suffer environmental damage that endures to the current day. It is, therefore, fair for Kanu (2021:ix-x) to relate the colonial history of Africa to its current environmental challenges such as climate change, the depletion of the ozone layer, and minerals, soil erosion, deforestation, desertification, and extinction of species, to name a few.

However, ecological damage is also inflicted by current governments and citizens of the continent, whose behaviour towards the environment functions in a reciprocal relationship. Edebor (2014) accuses African leaders

of a lack of vision and being more interested in self-enrichment than good governance by "plundering available resources for self-aggrandisement". Endemic poor African governance inevitably impacts citizens, who are forced to migrate elsewhere in search of economic stability. Subsequent urbanization in turn leads to over-exploitation of urban areas, leaving deep scars on the environment. In addition to this, Kalemba (2010) raises the idea that pollution in areas with a great concentration of Africans is partially due to waste disposal habits that are harmful to the environment. In this regard he refers to pollution of the environment through littering: "One finds piles of waste and refuse, including human excrement mixed with urine, almost everywhere: on certain street corners, in the marketplaces, schools, hospitals and churches, etc." (Kalemba 2010:58).

Closer investigation of African urban areas and informal settlements often reveals dubious human waste management that ends up in waterways like streams and rivers, contaminating water (Hinsch & Quibell 2002). Omole and Ndambuki (2014:5187) note a host of African countries have acute water scarcity and lack of sanitation in the wake of urbanization that intensifies pollution and depletion by human activity, insufficient funding, and poor management of infrastructure. These include Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Burundi, Sierra Leone, and Zambia, to mention a few.

Eventually, the ecological degradation of the African continent is not only driven by historical deficits, current governments, and citizens. Globalization and subsequent partnering with external stakeholders also contribute to the problem. Africa has become an attractive area for establishing industries by developed countries that are continually seeking areas with less restricted industrial regulations in developing countries. These partnerships unfortunately move environmental pollution to Africa, especially through carbon emissions (Bataka 2021:192). According to Idialu (2020), this opens the door for affluent economies to "buy" their way into Africa to dispose of hazardous and toxic waste.

Given the above, a few deductions about the African Anthropocene are possible. The most important would be to underline the reality of the African Anthropocene. For some, Africa is still seen as a vast, serene, and pastoral continent that has largely escaped industrialization and mega-development that are generally associated with eco-degradation. We are

also misguided by the huge discrepancies between European and African green-living initiatives and regulations – as if to say that Africa is in less need of environmental reformation than Europe. However, Africa might environmentally be worse off than Europe due to the enduring historic exploitation of its natural resources and the mega-urbanization trends that are currently emerging (cf. Hecht 2018). Hence, the African Anthropocene must find a place in the environmental vocabulary of Africans themselves and the global community while deforestation, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, and oil spills must become the buzzwords in this vocabulary, according to Nguyen (2022), these are the burning issues in the current African-environmental scenario.

Apart from this, foreign investors should engage the continent from the stance of accountability and social justice, recognizing Africa as an equal partner that deserves the same eco-courtesies as the rest of the developed world in the climate change discourse.

Another important deduction relates to Africa assuming ownership of its environmental state. According to Hecht (2018), Africa is still being disregarded by the global community in many ways. Good examples pertain to little recognition of Africa's environmental challenges in popular discourses, the absence of international monitoring of pollution, and the assumption that Africa can be provided with fuels of a lesser standard than those provided to developed countries. As shown above, however, the continent is also disregarded by its leadership who are consumed by corruption and greed instead of working towards safe living conditions. Taking ownership will mean that ordinary Africans should live green, collectively agitate for better living conditions, and bring their environmental concerns under the attention of leaders, local and abroad, actively taking ownership of biodiversity conservation.

Finally, in the case of the African Anthropocene, charity literally and figuratively also begins at home. Mindful of African cultural practices that are harmful to the environment, Africans need to rediscover life-giving wisdom and practices grounded in their heritage and worldviews as the African Anthropocene calls to be challenged from within.

The following section will thus argue that Africans need to assume an eco-pastoral disposition, guiding individuals to actively take care of the

environment. This is in line with Kalemba's (2010:59) call that "African theologians have to raise awareness among Africans from different walks of life and relevant institutions to help" in the quest to conserve and nurture the environment.

Eco-pastoral care

Historically, pastoral care developed as a highly anthropocentric venture (Swain 2019:615; Miller-McLemore 2022:361). At its heart, it was always about *cura animarum* or care of the human soul. Building on pastoral anthropology, its primary aim was to understand the human being aimed at restoration in various contexts. The thrust of pastoral anthropology was towards understanding humans considering the Christian texts, framed within a pastoral context (Brunsdon 2019:14). This focus is carried forward by novel concerns about human well-being in the face of the Anthropocene. "Eco-anxiety" presented itself as yet another human problem that begged pastoral attention. Pihkala (2022:1) defines this as the "variety of difficult emotions and mental states that are significantly related to environmental problems, while 'climate anxiety' refers to the climate-change-related forms of eco-anxiety". However, the threats to sustainable human living during the Anthropocene are shifting pastoral thinking into a direction where care for the earth comes to the fore. A new consensus seems evident that pastoral care can no longer be perpetuated as anthropogenic reductionism but should broaden its focus to include the human habitat and the role of humans in taking care of it. While such a call can initially be perceived as equally homo-centric, in so far as eco-pastoral care runs the risk of being driven by fear of losing the earth as life-giving habitat, our motives for becoming involved with eco-pastoral care are at this stage subservient to the urgency and reality of biodiversity loss. In this regard, as Wallace (2016:137) reiterates, the earth has already become a "biocidal runaway train" heading towards what is generally known as the Sixth Great Extinction.

While it is suggested by some that the field of practical theology has in the past lacked attention to environmental issues, Bonnie Miller-McLemore compiled a comprehensive research report towards the end of 2022 on the contributions of practical theology, titled *Climate violence and earth*

justice: A research report on Practical Theology's contributions. After assessing contributions from practical theologians since 1950, she suggests that "there is more scholarship than most people realize. Better knowledge of this evolving corpus should allow us to articulate and refine what we have to offer". The focus of Miller-McLemore's report is, however, mainly on the contribution of European and American practical theologians, bar references to South Africans Daniël Louw (2007), and ecological missiologist, Marthinus Daneel (2015).

An extensive bibliography on African contributions titled *African Christian Creation Care: Ecotheology and Environmental Stewardship* by Barron and Bie (2023) provides a substantial collection of contributions to eco-theology from a host of different approaches, including bibliological, systematic theological, and ethical perspectives. In terms of creating awareness of the environment and contemplation on theological frameworks to enable bio-diversity conservation, there is evidence of a vast and growing corpus of literature from African scholars. Although the intent of some contributions can be interpreted as pastoral, there still seems to be room for contextualizing eco-theology in a pastoral framework that can equip and motivate faith communities to actively act as pastoral stewards of the environment. From this perspective, the thinking of Andrew Kyomo (2001) and Immanuel Lartey (2017) serve as examples of African pastoral theologians who recognize ecological crises by reinterpreting pastoral care in an ecological framework. Also, specific strands of eco-practical theology like "green-" preaching, liturgies, and Christian education framed in the context of the African Anthropocene attest to a reorientation from an anthropocentric to an ecological understanding of pastoral care.[2]

When considering African pastoral responses to ecological crises, one must not overlook what Miller-McLemore (2022:330) refers to as "practical theology as an activity of faith or way of life". Of this, the journey of veteran eco-missiologist Marthinus Daneel and the Earth-keepers movement in Zimbabwe is not only an intriguing example but an invaluable resource for eco-pastoral care (cf. Daneel 1998, 1999, 2001). Also, Emmanuel

2 See Brunsdon ((2023:558–559): *Waging the Green War. Initial steps towards eco-practical theology and pastoral care in the African context* offers a more comprehensive discussion of ecological or green-preaching, liturgies, and Christian education.

Katongole's (2022) narrative on the Bethany Land Institute in Ghana illustrates practical outcomes of biodiversity conservation resting on what he depicts as integral ecology.

A distinct move from the anthropogenic to the ecological is thus discernible in pastoral care globally. In terms of the African context with its rich cultural and spiritual heritage – and within the framework of the contextualisation of traditional Western understandings of pastoral care – the attention will now shift to sources of practical wisdom to enrich the notion of eco-pastoral care.

Seeking phronesis for eco-pastoral care in the African context

The notion of *phronesis* offers itself as an important paradigm for eco-pastoral care in the Anthropocene, as it foregrounds practical wisdom. As such it translates into wisdom or discernment that results in actions that could be regarded as the right or the best way of approaching a matter. Of course, the term cannot be used without recognizing that it is a multi-layered, rich historical, highly philosophical, and spiritual term. One that, over centuries, and in most cultures, gained recognition as the premise for meaningful living.

One of the main traits of *phronesis* is that it is anchored in a source or sources (cf. Brunsdon 2015:4). These can include written sources, depending on the tradition to which it relates as well as the narratives and lived experiences of communities which regard these sources as normative for reflection that informs wise action in a particular context – or simply the driving force behind mindful actions. This essentially means that phronesis does not vest in one tradition in particular, but that each society or context "devises" virtues to serve that context with wise actions. In this regard, Browning (1983:11) calls for ongoing "critical dialogue" between different traditions "toward the end of shaping common life" – suggesting that no one tradition holds all wisdom in its hands. It is from this stance that Indigenous knowledge will be viewed.

African Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge (IK), as defined by the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Centre of the North-West University, in general, refers to:

> Local skills, understandings, philosophies, technologies, and knowledge that are unique to a particular community and inform decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life such as agriculture, natural disaster management, food security, climate change, etc. (in which) [L]language and spirituality are important components.

Mashego, Maditsi, and Bhuda (2021:17250) contend that Indigenous knowledge is "engrained" in all cultures from which "unique information structures" emanated that enable meaningful living and flourishing in different contexts.

African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) in particular, is described in several ways: Emeagwali (2020:37) denotes it as a synthesis of different disciplines, interconnecting epistemologies, and value systems established by communities in ancestral lands that have developed paradigms and forms of life. "Trial and error experimentation, as well as scientific methods and paradigms relevant to ecological, geographical, technological, social, and other traditions of life", have all contributed to this cumulative body of knowledge (Emeagwali 2020:37). Mashego, Maditsi, and Bhuda (2021:17250) describe AIK as collections of long-standing African local community traditions and practices that include "the skills, inventions, beliefs, values, experiences, and perspectives of people living in their respective environments and societies – collected over time and implemented to preserve or develop their livelihood".

Embedded in AIK is traditional environmental knowledge (TEK). In following Berkes (1993), Diyal (2021:50) typifies TEK as a "cumulative body of knowledge and beliefs, handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings". This includes interrelations between humans, but also between them and the environment.

Diyal (2021:51) also identifies at least 12 characteristics or beliefs that are integral to TEK, of which I mention five I deemed to be the most important in the context of this article.

- The holistic or integrated nature of everything.
- Knowledge about the environment is gained qualitatively through intimate engagement and applied intuitively.
- Communities are the custodians of TEK which is handed down from generation to generation via oral tradition and taught to younger generations through cultural practices.
- TEK relates to spirituality and morality, ultimately grounded in a supreme being/creator that created a "moral universe with appropriate laws".
- Aimed at responsible stewardship in daily living.

In linking AIK to the environment, Gumo et al. (2012:525) also emphasize that African cosmology is a spiritually integrated concept. This means that creation is "intimately associated" with the creator God. This, in turn, creates respect for all of nature of which humans are equally part – on par with "hills, forests, animals, and rivers" (Gumo et al. 2012:525). The upholding and continuance of the universe is believed to be dependent upon God himself (Odozor 2019:1), rendering God, creation, and humans in a dynamic spiritual relation. Herbert Moyo articulates these links further by claiming that AIK is "embedded in African Traditional Religions" (ATR) (Moyo 2013:207), rendering it difficult to sever the ties between AIK and ATR.

It seems safe to argue then that AIK can be regarded as an expression of African phronesis that drinks from the wells of the wholistic African heritage which rests on an integrated spiritual view of life. In light of this Moyo (2013:209) argues that AIK needs to be (re)considered objectively as a source of knowledge for pastoral and environmental care. More than that – and as far as the African Anthropocene is concerned – Moyo argues that AIK deserves *priority* as a source of wisdom as "Western knowledge systems (WKS) are inherently different from African knowledge systems therefore WKS cannot be pre-packaged as solutions for African challenges" (2013:207). Mindful of this strong sentiment, the next section will contemplate such a conversation between practical theology and AIK

in search of phronesis in contemplating the challenges of the African Anthropocene.

Facilitating a conversation between practical theology and AIK with a view on eco-pastoral care

While a descriptive account of AIK and its positive relationship to the environment as expressed in TEK becomes feasible in light of the recent resurgence in writing about AIK, engaging AIK in academic conversation with Western paradigms is somewhat more challenging. Based on the innate religious character of AIK, facilitating dialogue with Christian theology, in this case, practical theology, subsequently also hints at a certain level of difficulty. It is my observation, as a long-standing protagonist of the notion of the contextualization of practical theology in the African context, that these conversations usually end in an "either-or" approach, where one is dismissed at the cost of the other. In deliberating on this, one has to first clear up some of the "smog" that repeatedly seems to blur such conversations.

From an academic point of view, AIK appears to be submerged in the decolonization discourse. It is often portrayed by African scholars as one of the main victims of colonization, perpetuated in the post-colonial period by universities in Africa still following Western curricula (Niyitunga 2021:170, 174). It is subsequently apologetically placed against Western knowledge and paradigms through which it was subjugated during the colonial period. Strong pleas for the eradication of Western influence to be replaced with IK fence the topic in and render conversation with and about IK complicated, if not conducted by Africans themselves.

From a theological point of view, the strong identification between IK and ATR (cf. Moyo 2013:207) is equally problematic. A deep-rooted perception that Western mission in Africa was one of the main vehicles of colonization undergirds the position that Christianity obscured both Indigenous Religion (IR) and AIK. Moyo (2013) voices frustration about this by accusing Christian traditions of dismissing ATR/AIKS by "demonizing" it from a monotheistic stance. Even if "demonizing" is a rather strong word, it is true that Christianity has always remained wary of Africa's "enchantment" with

nature and that conversations between Christianity and IR often derail at this junction (cf. Brunsdon 2017). This is duly illustrated by Balcomb's (2019) discussion of the recent growing interest in IR as protagonist of nature conservation. In revisiting Lynne White's (1967) classic accusation of Christianity's complicity in environmental destruction, he argues that IR has become somewhat of a redeeming agent based on its inherent inclination to environmental harmony and conservation. He challenges IR's perceived faith-induced harmony with nature by presenting a pragmatist view of IR that approaches nature with reverence born from a mixture of "fear, respect, and a sense of profound dependence" (Balcomb 2019:4), more than anything else. He quotes Catherine Tucker's observation that explains:

> Traditional peoples live within animate worlds of mutual obligations with spirits or nonhuman beings, and their beliefs constrain the behaviour of members of the communities, ideally limiting their environmentally destructive behaviour. Modernization processes, on the other hand, disenchant and despiritualize those worlds to enable life without the constraints and obligations.

Even though Christianity has seemingly failed to do so (cf. White), a Christian eco-ethos demands the same constrained behaviour, but on the grounds of other motives, such as obedient stewardship based on respect for and love of God and his creation. Afro-Christianity is thus freed from fear of punishment from spirits or nonhuman beings and respect nature as part of a Christian ethos.

In line with this argument, Balcomb (2019:11) suggests that an integration (conversation) of Christian theology and IR to arrive at eco-friendly practices is somewhat of a conundrum as that would suggest reverting back to fear-driven religious frameworks for the sake of saving the environment.

> While Indigenous Religion offers an example of best practice when it comes to the environment and many Western theologians are falling over themselves attempting to emulate it, it does not remain an option for those who live close to it physically, spiritually, culturally, historically, and emotionally.

Mindful of these arguments, the "smog" that needs to be cleared seems to primarily vest in a mutual exclusivity created by both sides of the dialogue.,

i.e., AIK is the sole domain of Africans and must replace Western knowledge and IK is submerged in African cosmology that does not relate well with authentic Christianity.

To make the smog even thicker, IK as source of practical wisdom contains a few inherent challenges of its own, especially if approached from a practical theological (Western) perspective. To name a few:

- It is evident that AIK is embedded in African communities as localised and narrative traditions – which raises the question: Who will "extract" this knowledge/phronesis and how?
- The notion that cross-cultural reflection changes the original meaning of wisdom, i.e., Western reflection on African knowledge, will effectively alter its original meaning (meaning that only Africans can contribute to the AIKS dialogue).
- How has changes among African themselves that came in the wake of globalisation, urbanisation, and modernisation changed their own attitudes towards IK?
- The applicability of "ancient knowledge systems" to current-day problems.

All of these issues raise the question whether a dialogue between practical theology and IK is at all possible and if it should be pursued further.

From a purely practical theological stance, practical theology must remain committed to contribute to biodiversity conservation through eco-pastoral care. Over many years, practical theology positioned itself for conversations like these and both explored ideas and developed frameworks for inter-contextual conversations. Without going into any depth into the frameworks themselves, we are reminded of Julian Müller's (2011) notion of post-foundational practical theology or transversal rationality, Esther Acolatse's (2014) notion of a pastoral hermeneutic of primal speech, and Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger's (1995) bilingual approach. All of these approaches theoretically positioned practical theology to explore other traditions of interpretation, because, at heart, practical theology should be concerned about real people in real contexts in light of the Christian text (cf. Müller 2011:4). In the case of the African Anthropocene, it is also about real people in a real, but decaying, context. It is thus not really about

the question whether we *should* pursue such dialogues but *finding* ways of entering into them.

Proposal and conclusion

The proposal of this research is that the task of practical theology resides in initiating and stimulating conversations with African faith communities who are the custodians of AIK that can lead to the construction and practice of eco-pastoral care. More specifically, it will be about stimulating critical reflection in African faith communities about its communicative actions regarding the well-being of God's creation through biodiversity conservation grounded in pastoral care actions of faith communities towards the environment. The sub-question being, how TEK can be synthesised with an authentic Christian eco-pastoral care in African contexts. This will call for "contextual analysis and exegesis" (cf. Brunsdon 2017:6) by African practical theologians to uncover the prevalence and influence of AIK in local faith communities that can be contextualised in preaching, liturgy, and Christian education. Subsequently, how this can be revived as *phronesis* that can stand in service of the gospel message regarding Christian stewardship and care of the environment.

In this proposal, I am taking my cue from African scholars, such as Kwame Bediako (2001) and Ebenezer Blasu (2017), who particularly grapple with Scriptures and African culture and framing it within eco-theology. In this way Blasu arrives at what he typifies as African Christian Theocology, "a synthesis of Christian religious and scientific ecology that promises to pragmatically provide impulsion for creation care" (Blasu 2018:1). Relating this thought to IK as a form of African *phronesis*, it is interested in how IK can do the same (pragmatically provide impulsion for creation care) by appealing to African Christians to take care of the environment. I concur with Balcomb (2019:11) who insists that African environmental theology must eventually be "theocentric, resonate with the motifs found in established theological traditions in the field, and be biblically based". I also concur with Blasu (2017:129) when he says: "Kinship with nature, should be part of a 'reconstructed' Christian cosmology that considers some elements of African culture and worldview and combines them with a theology of the incarnation." In this case, TEK should be considered in

deliberations about eco-pastoral care. What exactly will be found is outside the scope of this research, other than to suggest that TEK seems to be unchartered territory from a practical theological stance, but that it shows tangible promise to support African Christians in the quest to assume responsibility for the environment in tangible ways. It also supports an openness to African wisdom that may have up to now, been shunned out of conversations, conceived as suspect to multi-theism. It resonates something of Paul's attitude of becoming a Jew for the Jews to arrive at obedience to Christ (1 Cor 9:20), entering the dialogue with respect for culture. For, as Niebuhr (1952:201) reminds, culture is ultimately being transformed by Christ to stand in service of faith.

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