

# Dancing with the Land: Significance of Land for Doing Tribal Theology

A. WATI LONGCHAR\*

**T**he task of this paper is to examine the tribal people's understanding of land and its theological significance for doing theology in the tribal context. Let us try to explore the tribal's understanding of land by citing a few sayings and two myths of creation.

## Sayings

"The land is the Supreme Being's land"

"One cannot become rich by selling land"

"Do not be greedy for the land, if you want to live long"

"Land is life"

"The one who does not have land always cheats others or cannot become a good citizen"

"The land cries in the hands of greedy people"

"The land never lies, do not lie to the land"

"If anyone should take another's land by giving false witness, will not live long"

"The land is like a bird, it flies away soon in the hands of greedy people"

"You can sell other things, but not land"

"You are a stranger without land".

## Myths

God sent seven families to earth to restore order... But the seven families soon found that the world was full of stones. There was no soil and so they faced difficulties in cultivating the land. Syiem U Lakriah, therefore, went to heaven to ask for soil from God. U Lakriah came back

with three baskets of soil and covered the stones with soil ....<sup>1</sup>

Long ago the gods Hemphu and Mukrang took counsel together for the creation of the world .... The god sent Helong Recho, the king of the earth-worms, who worked up the piece of the earth .... The gods said, 'We must cause plants to grow on it'....<sup>2</sup>

### Significance

The above sayings and myths speak of the tribal people's understanding of the land. For the tribals, the affirmation that "the Supreme Being created the land and it belongs to God" is the starting point of theology. The land is the centre and key for understanding our worldview. Human selfhood, the Supreme Being, the Spirit, history and ethics are defined and perceived only in relation to the land. In short, the land is the basic component of the spirituality of the tribal people. The whole reality is approached from the perspective of land. Therefore, for the tribals, the land is a profoundly theological issue.

(a) **The Supreme Being and the Land:** The tribal myths and rhetoric speak of the land as belonging to the Supreme Being. Like the Hebrews, "the Earth is the Lord's and fullness thereof" (Ps.24:1), the tribal people also affirm that the land belongs to the Supreme Being. The village, clan and individual own the land but within the wider understanding that the land belongs to the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being alone is the ultimate owner of the land. Thus, the land equally belongs to all with equal rights and freedom to live in it and no one can claim it exclusively for himself/herself nor can we sell it as though it is their exclusive property. Human's ownership is only temporary. The whole land is the home of the Supreme Being and humans are only members in it. Hence, the ownership of land by village, clan and individual has to be understood within the greater recognition that the land belongs to the Supreme Being.

Symbolically, the land is also understood as the spouse of the Supreme Being by many tribal communities. For example,

the Aos and the Sangtams of Nagaland call their Supreme Being, *Lijaba*. *Li* means 'earth' and *jaba* means 'real'. It means the Supreme Being is 'the real earth'. Sometimes people call him *Lizaba*. *Li* means 'soil' and *zaba* means 'enter', meaning 'the one who enters or indwells the soil'. *Lijaba* is believed to enter the soil just as a vital seed which gets buried beneath the soil and germinates as the life of plants. Therefore, for the tribals, the land and the whole of creation are manifestation of the Supreme Being. In other words, the Supreme Being is an integral part of the land; the land is not external to God. Without the land the Supreme Being ceases to work. Thus, in the tribals' view, the land and the Supreme Being are inseparably related. The Supreme Being indwells not only in human person but also in creation.

The affirmation of this interrelatedness of the land and the Supreme Being should not lead us to assume that the tribal religion is pantheistic. There is no evidence in the tribal myths that teach the Supreme Being to be everything and everything to be the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is rather manifested in natural objects and phenomena. He/she is both outside and beyond creation. Though the Supreme Being is personally and inseparably involved in creation, it is outside of him/her and therefore the Supreme being is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

A distinctive and unique feature of the tribal religion is that it does not have a written sacred scripture like other religions. The whole religious ethos is contained in people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and in the land. The land and people themselves are living sacred scripture. Samuel Rayan considers the land to be more original holy scripture than our Bible and Vedas.<sup>3</sup> The land is the witness to God's continued action in the world. Rayan writes that "the language of the land is more universal and concrete, more picturesque and colourful. The illustrations of land are more illuminating, far more telling and more touching."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, for the tribals, the land is the exegesis of the Supreme Being. The land declares the Supreme Being. The tribal religious meaning, thus cannot be grasped without the land.

(b) **Dancing and singing with the soil:** Unlike other religions of the world, the tribal religion does not have any founder(s) or reformer(s) or guide(s) nor do tribal people dance and sing adoring a divine historical person(s). The tribals have traditions of divine birth and manifestations but they are not worshipped. They have priests, officiating elders, diviners and other famous men and women in the body of beliefs and mythologies who are respected and form an integral part of the religious milieu, but they are neither worshipped nor adored as divine representatives. Instead, the tribals dance and sing with the soil itself. In short, the tribal religion is centred on the soil itself. The religious practices, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and dances are all centred on the soil. Together with the soil, the tribals worship God. Some of the festivals may be cited here as examples:

i) *Purification of forests:* This festival is observed to mark the beginning of jungle clearing for the new shifting cultivation. It is a day of dedication for the new tract that is to be cleared and cultivated. Prayers are addressed to the soil, trees and rivers to be gentle and kind.

ii) *Purification of the soil:* The soil is holy. During the time of the burning of the rice field, animals, reptiles and birds may have been inadvertently burnt alive. Such action pollutes the soil. Thus this ceremony is observed to purify the soil.

iii) *Dedication of seeds:* This ceremony is observed for the dedication or consecration of seeds. Through this ceremony, people invoke the Supreme Being and the land to be kind, fertile and generous as they sow and work on the soil.

iv) *The day of land:* Every year, many tribes observe three to six days sabbath (genna) to pay respect to the land. Once the day is chosen, at least for three days and nights nobody can dig or break or poke the soil, nor may the mud be collected. Besides, no one is allowed to spit or jab a spear in the holy ground while observing the ceremony. People are restricted even from husking the rice or fetching water and firewood. Speaking aloud or shouting is also not allowed. In that way, the soil is treated as a host with all kindness, concern and the

utmost care. Any action that may hurt the land is discouraged rigorously.

v) *Festivals of thanksgiving*: A thanksgiving festival is observed by many tribes in honour of the Supreme Being and the land. It occurs just before harvest time when the paddy fields are almost ready for harvest. People at the sight of the ripe paddy fields rejoice and in turn give thanks to both the Supreme Being and the land for their unspeakable love and blessings.

Likewise, the tribals observe a number of both regular and irregular ceremonies throughout the year. They are celebrated to invoke blessings and adore the Supreme Being and the land. The whole pattern of the tribal religious milieu moves with the soil. All these celebrations affirm that place or space is very central to the tribal people. The pattern of our social, ethical, economic life is directly related to the soil. People cannot think of the Supreme Being or a community celebration without relating to the land. This deep-rootedness in the soil is unique to the tribal worldview.

c) **The land, history and time are one**: The tribal myths do not make a sharp distinction between the land, history and time. Being a soil centred community, the tribals' concept of history and time is also closely associated with the soil. For example, if one asks a tribal when he/she was born, the answer may be, "I was born when my parents were cultivating that particular field, during that season, at the time when people were going from/coming to the field". Likewise, the tribals count time according to their activities related to the soil. To make a random comparison, the western idea of history and time is conceived linearly as a continuum. This creates a powerful and dynamic conception of the future that is pregnant with possibilities for change, experimentation, and a new life. This idea makes people think that humans are progressing continuously entering a higher level of existence. It leads one to expect a better life in a future beyond death. The other aspect of time in technological society is that, time is a commodity which must be utilized, sold and bought. Humans are slaves of time.<sup>5</sup>

However, that is not the case in the tribal concept of time. The tribal people experience time in a circular way. Time is a communal affair even though some events like birth and death have an individual character. Further, in the tribal understanding, the land, the Supreme Being, ancestors, spirits, trees and animals are related to the concept of history and time. The whole universe is a religious universe. Rocks and boulders, trees and rivers are not just empty objects, but religious objects; the voices and songs of animals speak of a religious language; the eclipse of the sun or of the moon are not simply a silent phenomenon of nature, but they speak to the community that observes it, often warning of an impending danger and misfortune. Thus, for the tribals, the whole history and time are a religious phenomena. It is in that milieu that the tribal people experience history and time.

In a nutshell, the tribal people experience history and time as cyclical and rhythmic rather than linear and progressive. They move along with the soil cycle; it is centred on the soil. It is the soil that creates history and time and human moves along with the rhythm of the soil and surrounding environment. Therefore, when the soil and surrounding environment are destroyed, the tribals do not have time. They are left in a vacuum. People do not know what to do. In that way, the tribal concept of history and time is inseparably interlinked and rooted in the soil.

d) **The land is mother:** Most of the tribes have myths which say that they are born out of the earth. Many Naga tribes, the Mizos and Garos say that their foreparents emerged from stones. Some tribes have myths which speak of their foreparents who emerged from a big hole of the earth or from the bowel of the earth. All these myths symbolically tell us that the land is mother; we are born out of the earth. The mother gives life, unity and identity to all living creatures.

The land is the source of life. Everything springs forth from the earth. The trees, the rivers, the flowers, fruits, grains and so on. People live by what the land provides. Thus the tribals do not think of the land and all the things in it as being inanimate objects but regard them as having life and power in themselves.

The land is the symbol of unity. The land holds not only the clan, village and tribe as one, but it also unites the Supreme Being, spirits, ancestors and creation as one family. Without the land there is no *oikoumene*.

The land is not just a source of life and unity, but it is also a symbol of identity. If the land is lost, the family, clan, village and tribe's identity too will be lost. In the tribal understanding, a person who is not deeply rooted in the land cannot become a good citizen. He/she is like a stranger without an identity and a home. Since the tribal people's identity is closely attached to the land, it is usual for the tribals to identify themselves with their village or tribe. A stranger rather than giving his/her name, gives the name of his/her village or tribe. Since the community is inseparably related to the land, the individual person's identity is subordinate to the community identity. Thus, the land is an integral part of the tribal people's identity.

The land, therefore, is a symbol that provides an inseparable relationship among the creatures and the Creator. Without the land it is impossible for people to co-exist with other living beings and with their Creator. The land is the basis of life. People may own the land, but within the wider recognition that the land belongs to the Supreme Being and home of all living beings. The land as mother must be respected and revered - not worshipped. Anyone who dares to manipulate the flow of the land receives divine punishment. This understanding of the land provides an ethical basis of sharing, caring and responsible stewardship. Hence, this centrality of the land for understanding the reality cannot be ignored if Christian theology is to make sense and be meaningful in the tribal context.

### **A. Theological Implication**

The affirmation of the centrality of land is significant because of many reasons:

*Firstly*, like never before, the whole universe is on the verge of ecological destruction. Ecologically, the earth is one. All eco-spheres are inseparably inter-related. Every individual organism is interlinked with each other and is interdependent.

But today the land, animals, forest, air and water that sustains life are all seriously threatened.

*Secondly*, the present ecological crisis and the survival crisis of the tribal people is a product of modern development ideology. Since the whole concept of development is rooted in the uni-linear concept of history and philosophy, the modern western industrial society is projected as the goal to be reached and followed. In this race, the criteria of measuring human society are economic and the presence of industries. This notion justifies the oppression of the tribal people by perpetuating the soil-centred life and culture as “uncivilised” and “primitive”. The tribal people who live and work closer to the land are looked down upon as inferior culturally, socially and even spiritually. If we do not reclaim and reaffirm the centrality of land and challenge the one-sided development ideology, the tribals will continue to suffer humiliation. They will always be treated as inferior in all spheres of life.

*Thirdly*, the tribals are the worst affected community by the ecological disaster. We have become victims of development by being deprived of basic necessities. In addition, many tribal people are being uprooted and displaced from the traditional soil-centred life and culture which eventually leads to an identity crisis.

*Fourthly*, most of the inter-tribal and intra-tribal rivalries are an integral part of the ecological degradation associated closely with modernity. The increase of population and urbanization create problems of space among the people leading to various uprising movements. For example, Jharkhand movement, the ULFA movement, Bodo struggle, Khasi Students movement, Zeliangrong movement, Independence movements in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, Karbianglong, ethnic conflict between the Nagas and the Kukis, etc., are all an integral part of the crisis on land issue. People have no choice except to struggle among themselves. There is a fear among the people that their identity and rights will be lost if the land is not protected. All these people's movements indirectly express that people cannot attain liberation without liberation of the land. The struggle of people's liberation and the land are one.

*Fifthly*, Christian theologies of land/creation developed in the dominant Christian traditions including third world liberation and dalit theologies are not adequate to respond to the present tribal people's problem. Christian theologies have been predominantly anthropocentric and androcentric in their approaches. The dominant Christian theologies have been insensitive to the problems and needs of the tribal people.

All these problems demand a rethinking and a re-evaluation of our currently held values and ideas. If Christianity is to play a vital role in the context of the ecological/land crisis and liberate the tribal people who are being dehumanized, disfigured, alienated and uprooted in our time, Christians must, first, rediscover the centrality of land in Christian theology. As pointed out earlier, a basic difference in the perception of reality between the tribal worldview and dominant Christian traditions is that in the dominant Christian traditions, humanity is the central point of reference and norms, but in the tribal worldview the land is the key and central point of reference and norm. The whole reality including humanity, the Supreme Being and the Spirit is approached from the perspective of the land. In short, while the land or space is subordinate category in the main line Christian traditions, the land or space is the central category in the tribal worldview. This is not to argue that the dimension of space or land is absent in the Christian traditions nor is it to argue that the people have no sense of temporal understanding. The question here is of priority.<sup>6</sup> In the dominant Christian traditions, the land is viewed from the anthropocentric perspective. The primary dictum of doing theology is human life and their liberation. However in the traditional tribal worldview, the land is the key and central point of reference. This affirmation of the centrality of the land makes the tribal worldview distinctive and significant.

Therefore, the land, for the tribals, is not merely a justice issue to be considered alongside other justice concerns. It is a foundational theology of self-understanding out of which justice and then peace will flow naturally and necessarily.<sup>7</sup> Harmony and inter-relatedness with land is the starting point of the tribal people's spirituality. In other words, commitment and

dedication to the harmony of the land springs in love, nurture, care and acceptance. When there is justice in the land, the fields and forest and every living being including humans will dance and sing for joy (Ps. 96: 11-12). In short, an immediate awareness of being one with the land is the spiritual foundation of the tribal people. This acknowledgement of sacredness and inter-relatedness of all creation made the tribal people to observe taboo, totem, divination, festivals and ceremonies. Therefore, a theology of land must begin with a self-understanding of the individuals and communities as part of the land.

Several attempts have been made by the Christian theologians in response to the present ecological/land crisis in our time. Some such responses are: the process theology, eco-feminism, the programme of the WCC on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and minority voices in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. All these responses seem to view the land from the anthropocentric perspective, but not from the perspective of land/creation itself. That is why, for them, the integrity of creation is one of the agenda along with other justice concerns. Humanity and their liberation is the central focus. Liberation of the land follows when humanity attains liberation. For example, many Catholic and Orthodox theologians argue that creation participates in God only through human beings.<sup>8</sup> In other words, creation attains liberation and perfection in God only through human beings. Creation is imperfect without the human. Similarly, the eco-feminists, though they see the oppression of women and eco-justice as one whole, their main thrust is liberation of women. The JPIC process also approaches the issue of creation/land in the same way. Human liberation is the centre of all concerns. While acknowledging the importance of human liberation from all forms of injustices and oppressions, we have to affirm that humanity without commitment and dedication to the harmony of land/creation, one cannot expect a genuine liberation. "Liberation" is a theological concept largely based on anthropo-progressive philosophy which declares that human development is rectilinear and progressive and that the mind tends necessarily towards greater and greater rationality and

complexity. We have to suspect that any theology that gives dominance to anthropo-progressive dimension would undermine the spirituality of the people who work and live close to the land. The tribal communities will always be looked upon as objects of liberation. We will always be treated as inferior, uncivilized and primitive. Thus justice concern of the land should not be made as one of the justice concerns, but it should be made as the foundation of all justice concerns. The tribal can make a significant contribution in the search for a new understanding of Christian faith by making the land as the foundational category for doing theology. The traditional tribal worldview provides an organic vision that each item of creation is in God, all creatures as one family, a holistic understanding of salvation, an ethics of conservation and so on.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Having said the traditional understanding of land, one may raise a number of questions: Why are the Nagas and Kukis fighting for the land? Why do we have so many land cases in the court? Why are the tribals sensitive to foreigner issue? Why are they not welcoming? Why does every tribal community fight for it's own independence? and so forth. It appears to be a contradiction to the traditional tribal worldview. By way of conclusion we make two observations:

1. The tribals have almost forgotten our past heritage. Historically, the disintegration of the traditional organic tribal worldview begun with the new political climate of colonialism, which in its wake brought about a new infrastructure including urbanization and its allied processes. In addition, the Christian missionaries introduced a new faith, a new worldview, along with literature and education which paved the way for the initiation of the process of modernization in the tribal society. This process was further intensified through attainment of India's independence and later through the creation of separate tribal states particularly in North East India. Modernity has already come home and many modern people would not like to abandon it. Needless to say, the tribal

community should strive to become an integral part of the modernized world community. However, the undergirding philosophy of modernity which is being upheld today is dangerous not only to the people, but also to creation as a whole. It has made the tribal to not only forget our past heritage but also to view our traditional culture as something primitive and uncivilized. Therefore, in our search for a new ideology for the post-modern society, we should strive to make the relatedness of human community in the land as the basis of modernity.

2. No culture is static. Unfortunately, for more than a century, serious attention has not been made to reinterpret the tribal heritage. Inter-tribal and intra-tribal, village and clan conflicts over the issue of land and commercialization of land are a new phenomena in the tribal society. These problems are partly the product of modernity. On the other hand, these are struggles to reclaim our rootedness on the land. People are uprooted from the soil-centred pattern of life leading to an identity crisis and spiritual impotency. In the past, people lived in their own world without much contact with the outside world. Today no community can remain in isolation. People have to co-exist with people of different cultures, religions, languages and race both in rural and urban places. Thus, it is imperative to reinterpret the traditional worldview relevant in today's context.

The purpose of this exploration is to show that in the tribal worldview the land is the central concept in understanding all realities. The ethics, religion, culture and other social patterns of the tribals cannot be perceived without taking into account this aspect, that is, the land. This centrality of land cannot be ignored if we want to make our modern tribal society meaningful and sustainable.

## References

1. This is a Khasi-Jaintia creation myth. See Soumen Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills: A Study of Folklore* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1985), pp. 168-169.
2. This is a Karbi creation myth. See Sir Charles Lyall, *The Mikirs* (Gauhati: United Publishers, no year), pp. 70-72.

3. Samuel Rayan, *Contemporary Reflection on the Earth of our Mother and Fathers: Personal Witness*. (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991), p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. Cf. John Mbiti, *The African Religion and Philosophy*.
6. Cf. George Tinker, "American Indian and the Art of the Land" *Voices From the Third World*, Vol.XIV, No.2 (December 41, October, 1985), p. 535.
7. Cf. George Tinker, "The Integrity of Creation: Restoring Trinitarian Balance", *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol.41, October, 1985, p. 535.
8. Cf. K.M. George, "Towards a Eucharist Ecology", *Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation: Insights from Orthodox*, ed. by Gennadios Limouris (Geneva: WCC, 1987), p. 51.