

# An Olive Agenda for Putting Economic and Ecological Justice at the Heart of Faith

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on an “olive agenda” for putting economic and ecological justice at the heart of faith. For many communities in Southern Africa, nature is defined as “that which is created” and “everything in it, is the environment”. This perspective contrasts with many of the lived realities today, where nature is seen less as being summed up in God’s creation and sustenance and is instead regarded more as something to be consumed and used for its benefits. This paper draws from Ekari Mbvundula’s *Montague’s Last* to argue for economic and ecological justice in dialogue with Steve De Gruchy’s notion of an *olive agenda* to argue for sustainable, economic and ecological justice.

### Chichewa Translation

*Mu nkhaniyi tiunikira za chuma, zachilengedwe, komanso chikhristu malingana ndi ndondomeko yotchedwa “olive agenda”. M’madera ambiri a kumwera kwa Africa, mau akuti zachilengedwe amanthauza “chilichonse chimene chinalengedwa (ndi Namalenga)”. Kutanthauzira kotereku kumatsutsana ndi zimene zikuchitika masiku ano, pamene chilengedwe chikuonongeka mu njira zosiyanasiyana chifukwa choti chimawonedwa ngati choyenera kuchigwiritsa ntchito malinga ndi zofuna za anthu. Mu nkhaniyi, tiunikira mfundo zingapo zochokera mu (a) buku la Ekari Mbvundula lotchedwa Montague’s Last ndi (b) ndondomeko ya olive agenda ya Steve De Gruchy. Mfundo zimenezi ziunikira m’mene tingayang’anire zachuma ndi zachilengedwe moyenera.*

## Introduction

I wish to start off by taking us to a scene in Ekari Mbvundula’s short story titled *Montague’s Last*.<sup>1</sup> The short story is set in early 19<sup>th</sup> century France. In it, we encounter the protagonist, Imamu or Montague – as his captor has renamed him.

Imamu is an enslaved and imprisoned inventor, mystic, and alchemist. In the scene, Imamu is in a dungeon dying from a health condition. His last act of love is transforming wood into metal – to complete an invention he wishes to leave to his daughter. Closing his eyes, he presses a length of splinter within his flesh, and addressing the splinter; he makes the following incantation in “a grinding mix of French and Chewa:”<sup>2</sup>

*“You who were once a tree became this bench. You who were once my bench, became the tool in my hands. Now you will change . . . from mother tree to father silver. Your life of wood is no more.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Mbvundula, Ekari, 2015. *Montague’s Last*. Previously published in Omenana.com Issue 3, 2015 and Strange Horizons 29/02/2016. Now available on Amazon’s Kindle books.

<sup>2</sup> Mbvundula, *Montague’s Last*, 5.

This scene captured my attention, not just because of the alchemy aspect, but because in our day-to-day lives, many of us are not likely to look at our furniture or tools and think of the trees they originate from. We may perhaps remember where we purchased them or who gave them to us. But we rarely, according to Imamu, think ‘*mother tree*.’

Similarly, many of us are unlikely to consider products made from silver and other metals as father silver, father gold, and father copper. Jordan Stier<sup>3</sup> explains that in science fiction and fantasy literature, magical elements are assigned as “female” and industrial elements are assigned as “male”; for our discussion; I refer to these two assigned notions to highlight our need to approach nature as a wholistic entity. This is in line with scholars like Maserole Kgari-Masondo<sup>4</sup>, who explains that for the Sotho-Tswana people of Southern Africa, nature is defined as “that which is created” and “everything in it, is the environment.”<sup>5</sup> She adds that from this perspective, nature is an inclusive term, a revelation of creation in any space called “home.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, “nature” as an inclusive term bears no distinction between natural resources (e.g., mother tree) and the products we commodify from it; for all things are summed up in *Modimo*, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.”<sup>7</sup> This is a contrary perspective to many of our lived realities today, where nature is seen less as summed up in God’s creation and sustenance but regarded more as for our consumption and benefit, evidenced by humanity’s parcelling of nature into commodities and thereby placing it under the fragile balance between our economic desires and ecological justice.

### **Economic and Ecological Justice**

It is not for nothing that this scene from Imamu’s story is set in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Scholars like Maserole Christina Kgari-Masondo<sup>8</sup> highlight how the industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century drastically altered the relationship between humans and their environment. The industrial revolution changed how scientific authority, political and economic ends, and capitalist demand

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<sup>3</sup> Stier, Jordan, 2022. ‘Jujutech’, Black Innovation and a Critique of Globalist History in Ekari Mbvundula’s “Montague’s Last”. *Disobedient Forms Conference* presentation. 10 April 2022. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvwnhwIwmb4>

<sup>4</sup> Kgari-Masondo Maserole, C. 2018. “Identity Construction of African Women in the Midst of Land Dispossession” in Hewitt Roderick. R. and Chammah J. Kaunda, *Who is an African*. Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 143-154.

<sup>5</sup> Kgari-Masondo, “Identity Construction”, 145.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Amanze, James, “African Traditional Religions, and Culture in Botswana,” in *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Kgari-Masondo, “Identity Construction”, 143-154.

for labour, goods, and markets affected our co-dependence relationship with the environment.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in many colonised societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the relationship to ecology ceased to be defined along the lines of nature's maternal characteristics ("mother nature")<sup>10</sup> - as it was defined historically<sup>11</sup>- and became defined in terms of being a resource. The industrial revolution, and its resultant influence globally in the ensuing years, also impacted inventions that revolutionised industries and technology. This includes the forgotten/overlooked inventors who held no status to claim or, let alone direct, how their inventions would be used commercially in ways that would reflect their values.

Today, and in a much broader sense, when we think of economic and ecological justice, we may think of sustainable lifestyles that provide for people, animal life, and nature in ways that ensure that all thrive. We may think, for example, of an idealised African village that features in nostalgia-rich works of fiction. Such nostalgia conjures up images of huts made from materials sourced in the immediate environment – wood, thatching, and mud - all intentionally put together to keep people safe from the elements and provide a welcoming, healthy and happy home. Such a hut is ideal due to its bio-degradable nature when made from naturally occurring materials. Even the maintenance agents for such a hut's floors are bio-degradable: water and soil or cow dung. Mobility is possible. If you want to relocate, there are no expensive windows, bricks, floor tiles, corrugated iron roofing, etc., to leave behind or risk damaging when searching for a better life. All you may need to take with you are the basics; you will find whatever else you need in the environment around your destination, where you will likely rely on what is grown locally and seasonally. In this imagination of village life, one is sustained by their environment and co-exists with it serenely.

But upon a closer look, the reality is that the village scene I described is unrealistic. Nature is as unpredictable as humans. Natural disasters occur as often as human conflicts. Today, rural to urban migration in under-resourced rural communities in countries like Malawi, where I come from, is

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<sup>9</sup> Kgari-Masondo, "Identity Construction", 147.

<sup>10</sup> See Chirongoma, Sophia, 2012. Karanga-Shona rural women's agency in dressing mother-earth; Contribution towards an indigenous eco-feminist theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. 142(3): 120–144. See also Soko-de Jong, Thandi and Xolani Maseko. "African Traditional Religion: Reclaiming the Sustainable Anthropocenes." *ASEAN Journal of Religious and Cultural Research* (2022) 5 (1): 6-10.

<sup>11</sup> See Lane, Belden, C. 1994, "Mother Earth as a metaphor: A healing pattern of grieving and giving birth." *Horizon*. 21(1): 7–21.

high.<sup>12</sup> Among the reasons for this is that sustainable living in a rural area is rarely a lifestyle choice. People seek opportunities to improve their lives, so moving to urban areas is considered a part of such improvement. That is to say, the opportunity to live in an urban setting and access jobs or business opportunities attracts many due to its promise of upward mobility, convenience, and permanence. From such a perspective, it is not a surprise that for many, the promise of an improved livelihood (though never guaranteed) often outweighs concerns about the cost such livelihoods collectively have on the environment in terms of, say, higher carbon and ecological footprints. Thus, when we take the case of rural to urban migrant labour on its own, there is a mix of economic and ecological concerns that provide a microcosm through which to theologise our theme, “putting economic and ecological justice at the heart of faith.”

### **An Olive Agenda as a Theological Response**

From a theological point of view, we must consider that we do not have to choose between caring for the environment and humanity’s progress, comfort, and well-being. The two are not mutually exclusive. Instead of setting up such dichotomies, it is better to pursue the well-being of both our economies and natural environments. Such an approach better reveals for us Genesis 1<sup>13</sup> where we read that God, pleased with His creation of humanity (Genesis 1: 28) and nature (Genesis 1:12; Job 12: 10), assigns us the responsibility to care for His creation.

In that relationship of care, (a) our nourishment and needs are provided for by nature around us (Genesis 1: 29); (b) and from us, nature must get what it needs to keep the balance it needs to survive and thrive (Genesis 1:26). From this perspective, our relationship with nature is a blessing rather than a curse to the Earth (Isaiah 24:4-6) or a burden to humanity (Genesis 3:17-19). “In light of this notion, Omaka Ngele argues that when God gave humanity “dominion” over His creation (according to Genesis 1: 28 in some translations), dominion was intended to invoke the recognition of our *interdependence*<sup>14</sup> with nature. This interpretation of dominion contrasts with that of others that interpret it as God’s sanctioning of the rampant exploitation of nature for profit.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zeleza Manda, Mtafu A. 2009, “Human Settlements Working Paper Series Theme: Water - 7 Water and sanitation in urban Malawi: Can the Millennium Development Goals be met? A study of informal settlements in three cities”. Published online: <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/10569IIED.pdf>, 1.

<sup>13</sup> All Bible references are from the NIV.

<sup>14</sup> In the context of this paper, ‘interdependence’ has replaced the term “stewardship” used initially in the original text, which implies an anthropocentric attitude toward humanity’s relationship with the environment. With terms such as “dominion” and “stewardship,” only human agency is recognised, thus minimising that of nature.

<sup>15</sup> De Gruchy, Steve, 2010. “An Olive Agenda: First thoughts on a metaphorical theology of development”. University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 1-2.

A theological method that looks at how we may sustain nature in response to it sustaining us is the “Olive Agenda” developed by the late South African theologian Steve de Gruchy.<sup>16</sup> De Gruchy brings together economic and ecological injustice, arguing that the two are always interconnected. Brian Konkol explains that this theological metaphor – the olive – “transcends the duality between the “green” and “brown”<sup>17</sup> agendas that has disabled dialogue for the past generations.” As a result, an Olive Agenda – one that combines green and brown – provides a profound metaphor that, according to de Gruchy, ‘... holds together that which religious and political discourse rends apart: *earth, land, climate, labor, time, family, food, nutrition, health, hunger, poverty, power and violence.*’<sup>18</sup>

In other words, the “Olive Agenda” brings together the so-called “Brown Agenda” and “Green Agenda.” The Brown Agenda addresses environmental problems in developing countries as they affect the environment and local populations, particularly the poor. The Green Agenda is concerned with global environmental issues with efforts usually led by industrialised nations. Bringing the two together into a literal *colour* and *agenda* blend, the “Olive Agenda” is about the following (quote):

[The] search for social regeneration [as humans] are confronted with these two agendas – the *brown* agenda; with its focus on poverty, and the green agenda, with its focus on the environment. While both are fundamentally right, taken in isolation from the other, each is tragically wrong –and thus, we must integrate economy as *oikos-nomos*, and ecology as *oikos-logos* in search of sustainable life on earth, the *oikos* that is our only home (end quote)  
(de Gruchy 2010:4)

What does sustainability look like in the “Olive Agenda”? The Olive Agenda emphasises that in our theology of economic and ecological justice, the interpretation of an economy of *salaam/shalom*<sup>19</sup> as God’s economy that takes into account all of creation must play a central role.

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<sup>16</sup> Steve de Gruchy<sup>†</sup> served as Professor of Theology and Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

<sup>17</sup> Colours may be exchanged for more culturally sensitive ones in places where the colours “brown” or “green” are associated with e.g., negative or harmful ideologies.

<sup>18</sup> Konkol, Brian E. “An Olive Agenda: Our Path to Economic Opportunity and Environmental Sustainability,” *Sojourners* (August 14, 2012), <https://sojo.net/articles/olive-agenda-our-path-economic-opportunity-and-environmental-sustainability>

<sup>19</sup> According to John de Gruchy, “There is no better way of understanding God’s peace than with reference to the Hebrew word “shalom” or the Arabic equivalent “salaam”. Shalom is comprehensive – refers to the overcoming of everything that is destructive of life and the affirmation of everything that makes life in all its dimensions possible. De Gruchy, John, 2014. *A Theological Odyssey: My Life in Writing*. Stellenbosch, African Sun Media.

According to de Gruchy, we are responsible for ensuring that our need for convenience and comfort does not come at the expense of God's creation.<sup>20</sup> Wanton consumerism that promotes plundering the Earth's resources should not carry pride and prestige. At the same time, conserving and adapting our comfort and convenience into sustainable forms of living should not be looked down upon as "primitive" or a "lifestyle choice." The Earth should thrive as we thrive. This should be our attitude towards God's creation.

## Conclusion

In practical terms, if we return to Imamu/Montagues' story, interdependence includes understanding that what we consume as finished products (e.g., the silver object he transformed from wood) derive from our finite ecological resources. Understanding this helps us approach examples like the rustic and nostalgic image of an African village, addressed earlier, with the awareness that human livelihoods and the environment's welfare are under strain more often than not and interventions are needed, also from a theological perspective.

Simplistic, limited and (mis)gendered binaries aside, a more wholistic approach to earth as both our "mother" (ecology) and "father" (economy), so to say, needs theologies like the Olive Agenda to remind us that we cannot sustain one without the other. In approaching the Olive Agenda, I am inspired by the "two-winged theology" metaphor advocated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in her critique of patriarchy.<sup>21</sup> In her critique, she uses "the symbol of a flying bird to explain that theology without the faith reflections of women is like a bird with only one wing, disabled and unable to take off to the air."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the case of economic and ecological justice, the two are not separate but can also be symbolised as "two wings" that inform theologies under today's theme of "putting economic and ecological justice at the heart of faith concerning poverty and the environment. We must pursue both by theologically reflecting and advocating for both because an emphasis on only one – at the expense of the other — is like expecting a one-winged bird to fly.

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<sup>20</sup> De Gruchy, "An Olive Agenda", 2-4.

<sup>21</sup> Mercy Oduyoye (the founder of the Circle of Concerned African women theologians), 1989. Opening address to the Circle founding 1989 meeting.

<sup>22</sup> See for example *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 2022. Call for Papers on "Topical Collection: Women Theologies" write-up. Unpublished.

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