

**THE LAND IN DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY AND THEOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE IBIBIO PEOPLE OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

The centrality of land to the identity and livelihood of a people is unquestionable. Land has been used from time immemorial to promote economic growth, human development and spiritual development of a people. This paper is historical, library based and reviews the Jewish and Ibibio-African Traditional perspectives on Land and its resources. It was discovered that all land belongs to God, the community/nation, and that the rights to land were conveyed through oral history/ancestors and not formally documented. It seems to me there has always been a very close link between people's faith and their status or relationship to the land. One does not have to look far for an example of this relationship. The Bible itself, particularly in the books that make up Deuteronomistic History, starts with a story of a people, of a community in transit, a community in search of a Promised Land, a community in motion on a journey that has been prompted by a promise, a community with a goal, a goal that has taken precedence over everything else in their lives: the search for land they could call their own, a piece of land they could call home. These people's journey is not merely a product of their intellectual genius or innovation. It is a process in which God is involved, a process in which the role and presence of God is paramount. Thus, the journey in which these people are involved is not just physical but also spiritual. It is a spiritual process undertaken in obedience to God's calling. It is an exercise undertaken in trust in the promise that God has made. The spirituality that motivates drives and even propels this people is, therefore, at least primarily, a spirituality of possessing their own land. A piece of land in their own name, a piece of land to which their identity as a people is linked or a piece of land from which their identity can be traced. It seems to me as if these people were unable to think of someone being human if they did not have a piece of land that they could call their own. This link between spirituality and the land seems to apply not only to ancient Israel. Rather, it seems to be a common denominator in the life and faith of all traditional religious communities, including the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State. An abstract spirituality that does not spring from the people's daily live, work and experiences seems to be alien and inconsistent with the biblical tradition. Spirituality seems to be always socially, culturally and even economically conditioned, determined and shaped. In Ibibioland, the umbilical cord of a new born baby is buried in the land. When a boy is circumcised, the foreskin and blood is also buried in the land. The sacredness of Land in Africa is further linked to the fact that the dead are buried in it. The belief that land is a gift from God and the ancestors has not left any indigenous people. The Jews and the Ibibio continue to see themselves as stewards of God's resources,

especially of communally owned land. This review recommends that all resources should continue to belong to the community/nation, but that opportunities should be given to individuals and groups that belong to the community.

KEYWORDS: Land; Deuteronomistic History; Ibibio; Ancestor; Spirituality; Promised Land

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this paper by placing Deuteronomistic history in perspective. Scholars have not clearly defined Deuteronomistic History over the years. Something close to what it is was propounded by Wright (1953:321) by summing up the key events in the books of Joshua through Second Kings as what Deuteronomistic History could mean. In his words,

It is a preaching, a proclamation and exposition of the faith of the nation, which includes the law as the expression of the will of God which must be obeyed, but which in itself is not primarily a law. It is a gospel of the redeeming God who has saved a people from slavery and has bound them to Himself in a covenant. He wishes them to know the true source of their security in the land He is giving them. By this knowledge not only will they be encouraged in the faith, but they will be warned of the consequences of faithlessness and be in possession of the means whereby both prosperity and disaster may be interpreted.

The Deuteronomistic Historian is the one who compiled the remarkable history of Israel in the Promised Land under a unified plan and theological perspective until the fall of the State of Judah. Wright (1953:316) observed that in the work of the Deuteronomistic Historian from Joshua through Second Kings, we have a remarkable history of Israel in the Promised Land written under a unified plan and theological perspective. The author collected the various traditions, selected from them, edited and revised them in order to present a comprehensive and unified account of the history of his people from the conquest of Canaan to the fall of the State. Wright (1953:318) argued that it is important to note that the feature of Deuteronomy and of the Deuteronomistic history is the homogeneity of style which so characterizes the whole as to set it apart from all other writings in the Old Testament.

Featherstone (1979:84) said the books referred to in our Bibles as Joshua, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings were in their present form in Hebrew soon after the last event they recorded in 2 Kings 25:27ff took place in the thirty-seventh year of the exile or in 561 BC. For Westermann (2000:287) the original arrangement of these books i.e. Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings was correctly considered to be a unit in itself. These historical books deal with a period of occupation from Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan until their departure from the Babylonian exile. Giving these collection of historical books a name, Featherstone (1979:84) called it the Deuteronomistic History of Israel. The stories of Israel's history according to Drane (2000:84) are now presented in the Hebrew

Bible as the result of a long process of collection and edition that took place over several centuries. The fact that this history is presented from a particular perspective does not in itself question the authenticity of the narratives. Davis (2007: 10) veered in his opinion from Drane and others that the story of Israel cannot be as straight jacketed as it is presented by the Deuteronomistic Historian. He said considering the complexity in the understanding of these historical facts and the fact that he himself had difficulty understanding the presentation of Deuteronomistic History, he has described the entire discovery as a “scholarly jargon”. According to him, what God wants us to know is in the Bible and the idea of Deuteronomistic History could confuse and mislead people. Hamlin (2005:21) saw no confusion in the Deuteronomistic History if one reads the book of Deuteronomy as a prelude to Joshua, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. In these books we find the echoes of monarchy and exile resound in its pages. Attaching a great importance to the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth and the last book of the Pentateuch, Hamlin submits that the book builds on the past and prepares for the future. In a similar vein, Wright (1953: 23, 16) explained that Noth shows that Deuteronomy 1-3 is not an introduction to the Deuteronomistic law per se, but rather to the Deuteronomistic History which began with the brief resume of the events (based on JE) following Israel’s departure from Horeb (Sinai), before entering upon the more detailed account of the conquest in the book of Joshua. The significance of Deuteronomy 1-4 is not to be understood in relation to the book of Deuteronomy alone, but to the entire Deuteronomistic History of Israel in Palestine of which they form the introduction.

It is interesting to note that while some authors included the book of Judges in the list of the books of Deuteronomistic History others do not. No one seems to give any reason for its inclusion or its exclusion. Davis however has a very narrow view of the Deuteronomistic History. It is not a scholarly jargon nor can it confuse anybody. It is a great discovery that he should have lauded. Since the content of Deuteronomistic History does not teach about doctrine but aimed only at presenting the history of a set of people from the time they entered the Promised Land until their exile in Babylon this great work should not have been disregarded. The exclusion of the book of Judges from the Deuteronomistic History may be because they were not under the period of monarchy.

Deuteronomistic Theology

Since the Land as a theological motif in Deuteronomistic History is the major task of this paper, it is important to understand what Deuteronomistic Theology is all about. Deuteronomistic Theology can be summarized as the way the people of Israel understood God and this has influenced their worship of Him. Thompson (1974:68) observes that the underlying central concept of the book of Deuteronomy provides an important clue to the basic theology of the book. In the book, Yahweh, the God of Israel appears in a strong covenantal setting. It is from this central concept that Israel’s finest theological ideas are derived. The Deuteronomistic theological achievement should not be underestimated. McConville (1993:123) observes that Deuteronomistic theology simply put, is nothing less than a theology of God and Israel on the plan of the nation’s entire history, from the promises made from Abraham to the restoration from exile.

Thompson (1974: 269) observes that the Mosaic covenant portrayed God as the great king who entered into a covenant treaty with Israel so that He became their God and Israel, His people. Yahweh is pictured as king, Lord, judge, warrior while Israel is pictured as a servant whose obligation is only to 'hearken', 'obey' and 'serve' Yahweh.

In an attempt to interpret the heart of the Deuteronomic theology, McConville (1993: 24) observes that the main difficulty lies in the deceptive profundity of the literature; in the attempt, one is at the point where the obvious gives way to the powerful and profound. It is, therefore, against this background that I shall now undertake the study of one of the central theological ideas of the Deuteronomist, namely the Land, which serves as the central idea of this paper.

The Concept of the Land in Deuteronomistic History and Theology

The word for "land" in Hebrew is 'erets, which is stressed by Harman (2001:15) to be the fourth most frequent noun in the Old Testament appearing 2504 times. This word land which refers to the Promised Land appears quite often in Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus but with a higher frequency in the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy. It is important to note that while "land" in the books of Exodus and Leviticus deals with the aspect of relationship between God and His people, the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy focus their attention on the aspect of the land, as the Promised Land.

Although the census was taken in Numbers chapter one, this only concluded the arrangement of the movement of the people towards the Promised Land. With the military preparation for the conquest of the Promised Land, the real movement of the people did not actually start until later in Numbers 10:11-12, when Israel set off from the wilderness of Sinai to the place the Lord had promised (Num. 10:29). While concluding the aspect of land in the book of Numbers, Harman (2001: 16), notes that throughout the remaining chapters of Number 31-35 nothing is embodied that does not relate to the land. Wright (1953:311), however, sees the gradual conclusion of the book of Numbers as it leads to the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy. He says at the conclusion of the book of Numbers that the long wandering of the children of Israel comes to an end, their first success in conquest have been achieved, and they stand at the threshold of the Promised Land. At this point the narrative pauses, and in Deuteronomy one encounters an exposition of Israel's faith which furnishes the clue to the meaning of the nation's independent life in the Promised Land. It is however noted that the conclusion of Harman is too brief and does not introduce one to the beginning of the Book of Deuteronomy as Wright does. The conclusion of the book of Numbers by Wright is, however, dramatic opening a new curtain of action in the beginning of Deuteronomy as the curtain of the wilderness experience in Numbers closes.

In the book of Deuteronomy, attention is drawn to the Land. By the end of the book the point is reached where the people were on the edge of possessing the land but the real situation remained that the land was yet to be reached. Harman (2001:16), admits that the book of Deuteronomy over-state the case to suggest that "the land" is only referred to as the Patriarchal promise, as references to the

promise of a large family, as the case in Deut. 1:10; 10:22 and 28:62. He concludes that it however remains true that the book of Deuteronomy is replete with references to the land, and the most characteristic phrases used of it are “the land you are about to possess”, “the land which the Lord your God gives you”. Nyoyoko (2012: 203 – 204), however, disagrees as he observes that everything about the covenant was tied to the land. According to him the idea of the land as promise has a long history. The fact that the land of Canaan had long been promised by God to the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was buttressed by Smith (1970:5). The possession of the land by Israel was only the fulfillment of the part of the promise God gave to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 15:18); to Isaac (Gen. 26:3) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13). It is pertinent to note that although the same land may be variously referred but at the time of the promise the fulfillment was still far away. This may be right since the words covenant and promise are synonymous.

Davis (2006:16, 17) notes that the book of Joshua has a lot about the Promised Land. According to him, the theme of the writer underscores the vitality of Yahweh’s promise. The content of the promise has to do with Yahweh’s gift of the land. It should be noted that the promise had long been made by God to Abraham. One can therefore see the theological roots of Joshua deeply sunk into the soil of Gen. 12 where the promise was first made to Abraham and subsequently that the ancient promise is about to receive its contemporary fulfillment. With this I want to look at the five aspects that relate to the land as Promise as follows:

First the Land has to do with a Promise. The story of Abraham in Gen. 12.1ff opens with the promise of the land. God told him to leave his country, his people and his father’s household and go to the land He will show him. (NIV study Bible, Gen. 12:1). Within this verse, there is no specific land showed him. Harman (2001:16) notes that the promise was repeatedly confirmed to him that God would give him and his descendants the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:7, 13, 16-18) and in Gen. 17:8 with geographical boundaries. This promise of the land is embedded in the covenant formulations in Gen. 15 & 17.

Harman (2001:16) objected to the use of the phrase Promised Land and prefers the phrase “sworn land”. According to him the Hebrew language does not have a specific word for promise. The verb rendered in English as “promise” can also be translated as “to say” which in Hebrew is ‘amarl or “to speak” (Heb dibber). The Old Testament’s most frequent expression in this connection is of the land which the Lord swore (Heb. Nishba) to give to Israel. Harman argues that the stress falls on the fact that the land is a free gift from the Sovereign Lord and is tied to the connection between obedience and the fulfillment of God’s promises. For example in Gen. 22:16, it is stated “because Abraham obeyed me”. (NIV study Bible). Although this promise of land was given to Abraham, it is important to note that it only started from him. The promise went down to his son Isaac. At the time of famine, Isaac in Gen. 26:3b was asked not to go down to Egypt but to stay in the land he was and enjoy the blessing of the Lord. Here, God only simply re-echoed what had only been promised to Abraham. Still tracing the land as a promise, Harman (2001:17) notes that the Israelites were reminded of the

need for their obedience when they enter the land the Lord had sworn to them as found in Exodus 12:24, 25. The presence of Israel in Egypt was only one aspect of Israel's testing in regard to this promise. It must be observed that the promise of the Promised Land went beyond Isaac as Harman would want one to believe. The same promise was given to Jacob, and Joseph reminded his brothers of this promise while still in Egypt until it was fulfilled under the leadership of Moses and Joshua. Thompson (1974:17) opines that God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be many and that they would dwell in a land that He would give them is a writ in the Patriarchal narratives. This point is made times without number in Deuteronomy that Yahweh swore to give the land to their fathers. This statement negates the claim of Harman that the promise of the land only went down to Isaac, Abraham's son. The promise actually went to the Patriarchs. There is a strong emphasis on the fact that the land was a gift from Yahweh. So Israel possessed no natural right to the land and even needed Yahweh's assistance to enter into possession of her inheritance. McConville (1993:132) in his observation points out that Israel's occupation of the land is both a decree of God and an obligation laid upon the people so much that a failure to occupy the land is a failure of faith and obedience. The gift of the land according to McConville (1993:13-2.133) is not a thing in itself, but initiates a scenario in which a people live before their God in covenant faithfulness. God's universe has an underlying order in which blessing and righteousness are proper complements. Israel is the arena in which He will make it manifest and the covenant with them is the chosen means. McConville however stresses that Israel's reluctance to go and take the land when God commanded them to and when they would have certainly succeeded gives way to an attempt to take it in their own strength when the moment has passed because there is no longer a sanction from God; the result is ignominious defeat as is found in Num. 1:26-41 cf Num. 13-14. From the above, it is clear that God gave the promise of the land but the people must take possession of it before the promise can materialize. Something must have made the land unique before God can promise it on oath to the patriarchs.

Second, the content of the Land was very unique and specific. While Hess (1996:149) believes that it is improbable to carefully define the boundaries of the tribes at the early period of Israel's history, he argues that some border towns often from tribe to tribe overlap in many passages of the Old Testament. To buttress his argument he cites the location of Kiriath Jearim which was in the territory of Benjamin in Joshua 18:28, overlapping into the territory of Judah in Joshua 15:60 and Judges 18:22. Harman (2001: 18), however, disagrees with Hess and opines that the geographical boundaries of the land are well specified in various ways in the Old Testament. This difference may be solved by saying that while Hess was talking about the land allocated to the tribes, Harman was talking about the entire Promised Land that has specified geographical boundaries. Hess (1996:294) concludes that the borders of the Northern tribes are so doubtful and this may be due to the fact that the Deuteronomistic History may be the product of Judah and that the details of the boundaries of the Northern territories may at least been forgotten.

The land that Israel was to possess had been variously called by different names with different descriptions. For example in Exodus 3:17 and Num. 34:2, Harman observes that it was called the land of the Canaanites and the land of Canaan respectively. In Deut 1:6 the same land is called the land of the Amorites. In Deut. 7:1 the land is described with reference to the seven nations who were then dwelling within its borders. In Deut. 11:24 the territorial boundaries of the Promised Land are described as being from the desert of Lebanon to the great river of Egypt that is, from North to South and from the Western sea to the East to the Euphrates Rivers in the modern day Iraq.

It must be noted that although different names were given to describe the land there is no doubt that the descriptions can either refer to the inhabitants or their land and since seven great nations were involved they are sometimes mentioned and most of the time the land is described as the land of Canaan which is only one of the seven nations (Gen. 15:19-21). The land may not be given with any accurate geographical precision but it is sufficient to note that the location of the Promised Land's location and general borders were given with sufficient clarity with its borders to the West, North, South and East.

The Promised Land is described as the "good land" and the "land flowing with milk and honey". The summary report to Moses concerning the mission of the spies when they brought back the produce of the land shows how good a land it was. It is extolled as a land rich in natural products. The reference to the land as the land which flowed with "milk and honey" is neither new nor strange. Harman (2001: 219) discovers there was a similar expression on a tablet found on the Mediterranean coast to the north of Israel. In the document called KTTU (1:6), Baal is said to send fertility and abundance in the form of fat/oil and honey. Quoting the document that refers to the land, Harman (2001: 219) wrote: "The heavens rain fat/oil. The Wadis flow with honey". The use of the phrase "the land that flows with milk and honey" in the Biblical text without any reference to Baal is actually to discredit Baal, the Canaanite god. It thereby reminds Israel that the real source of blessing is one true and the living God. There is no doubt that as part of the Fertile Crescent, Canaan must be regarded as fertile when compared with the wilderness through which Israel had wandered.

One other way in which the blessings of the land are described is to speak of it as having 'rest' in the land. When people are expelled from their land according to Deut. 28:65, they are described as having no rest. Harman (2001: 219) says the word 'rest' meant the end of life as refugees, so that Israel could look forward to enjoying a sedentary pattern of life. The idea of 'rest' also means security from their enemies. This rest was to be life in the full enjoyment of God's blessing, along with the absence of war and conflict. This also means they will settle down in one place and stop the wandering experience. Clearly, rest and the Promised Land are equated in Ps. 95:11 where God encouraged His people not to be like the wilderness generation who could not enter their rest. The writer of Hebrews 3:7-4;13 drew his inspiration from Ps. 95 while talking about the future as he gives the word rest an eschatological meaning. Just as the rest awaited the church in the wilderness so also rest awaits the New Testament believers when they get to heaven. Harman has probably interpreted

the word 'rest' in the Epistle to the Hebrews as being identical with 'the heavenly country' sought by believers, the lasting city which is yet to come.

Harman erred when he said the church was in the wilderness. Israel was in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. The idea of the church was yet to be conceived. If the church was in the wilderness then she will take forty years for her to get to her heavenly country and we do not know when the counting of the years began. Because Israel was in the wilderness for forty years if this is what made Harman to say it represents the church in the wilderness, then his typology does not work well. Wright (1953: 327) observes that God has directed the destinies of the nation, Israel, and that He owns the land of Canaan and is the one who has given the same land to Israel. God's direction of history is especially clear in this gift of the land, for it is he who directs the wars of Israel to His own ends. The conquest of the land of Canaan is considered as His conquest. The agent He uses is Israel but the success of the war is credited solely to His power. Israel however, possesses no natural right to the land; it is God's gift as the nation's inheritance. The land is a wonderful gift of God's grace, but it is also a holy gift which demanded a definite covenant decision. Let me observe here that two actors have been presented by Wright, namely God as the major actor and Israel as the minor actor who is both an instrument in God's hand and can only act in obedience. She acts only on directions from God and this denies Israel of any freedom to choose since only one choice is given to him and there was no other option.

Third, God is presented as the Owner of the Land. While Thompson (1994:71) says that although Israel is promised the land she has no natural right or claim to the land as her personal property. She needed Yahweh's assistance to enter the Promised Land and to possess it as her inheritance. Hess (1996:47) simply summarizes Thompson by saying that the land belongs to God although given to Israel as a gift. God has acquired the land and not Israel. Israel is, however, only permitted to participate in the process of acquiring the land but the real ownership remains with Yahweh. Since the land is a divine gift, its enjoyment and use and the life it sustains are gifts from God, therefore, all gratitude and worship are due to the Lord, the God of Israel alone.

Harman (2001: 20) explains that the book of Deuteronomy mentions eighteen times that God promised the land of Canaan to Israel but in fifteen times references are made to God who gives the land to Israel. He observes that long before Israel became a nation God had sworn on oath to Abraham that his descendants will occupy the land. Here God proves Himself as one who acts in history. It must however be noted that God acting in history is only in the fulfillment of helping Israel to possess the land and this Harman fails to make clear.

Although the land of Canaan was God's provision, it must be seen as a gift of pure and underserved grace to Israel who are God's people. The initiative to give the land is God's, the action is God's and the provision of Canaan and not any other place is God's. All these combine to show God's love for His people, Israel. On the one hand Hess (1996:46, 47) observes that although God gave the land to

Israel in its entirety, she must occupy it. Hess sees the combination of challenge and opportunity as the way God works with believers. Because the land is a gift, Harman (2001: 20) stresses that Israel had no natural right to the land. Before Israel entered the land of Canaan she was reminded that it was not because of her righteousness that she was given the land to occupy but to punish the wickedness of the nations who had previously possessed the land. In Gen. 15:16, God speaks to Abraham and says, “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (NIV Study Bible). This will remind Israel that she has no claim of herself to the right ownership of the land. Explaining further, Harman observes that in the Book of Deuteronomy it is stressed that Israel can never own the land of Canaan because the land belongs to the Lord and not to Israel. God has proclaimed His ownership of the land in the words, “the land is mine” (Lev. 25:23). In the Book of Deuteronomy, however, Israel can only enter into an allotment by inheritance or by entering the land to possess it. It should be seen very clearly that Israel is only entering the land as an inheritance to possess it.

It should also be observed that Hess did not talk about the ownership of the land rather he talked about the occupation of it. For Hess the owner is not known, it can either be the one who occupies it or someone else. Israel’s duty is only limited to the occupation of the land according to Hess’s argument. Harman is more concerned about the ownership and not the occupation of the land. He sees Israel as God’s tenant who has to abide by the tenancy rules and regulations laid down by God. If Israel must remain in the land obedience is required.

Elucidating on the relationship between Israel and the land, Janzen (1994:42) explains that just as life itself is a gift, Israel’s possession of the land is contingent on God’s promise and leading. Land holding for Israel is based neither on aboriginal claims nor on military power; it is an inheritance and rest granted only by God’s grace. It can however be forfeited when considered as a permanent possession and managed in human autonomy from God. Israel should remember that God alone owns the land and human existence is properly existence as “strangers and sojourners”. Harman (2001: 21) lists three important consequences to observe when one follows the general concept of entering the land as an inheritance to possess it. These three important consequences are as follow:

- i) The Israelites are not tenants to an earthly landlord. Just as Israel protected the alien or sojourner in the land, so she is a sojourner under the protection of the Lord and to the same Lord the land belonged.
- ii) Israel is different from Canaan and other neighbouring nations in that no provision appears in the Old Testament for the sale of land. This may be the reason why Naboth refused to sell his land to King Ahab in I Kings 21. Land can only come to others by inheritance. Hess (1996:48) notes that the land is a gift to families rather than to individuals. The social basis of Israel is the family, and the land provides a binding tie for the family. The family tie to the land is stronger than an individual tie is to the land. Janzen (1994:43) describes this family tie to the land as “familial paradigm”. According

to Janzen (1994:43), “preservation of life, understood as the life of the individual as it extends beyond personal existence to children and children’s children from the pinnacle of the pyramid of values that make up the “familial paradigm”. In one sense, all the land was allotted to Israel, but God also arranges the individual allotment of territory to the specific tribes.

- iii) Because the inheritance belongs to the whole nation, no one is to be denied access to the privileges bestowed by life on the land. It is in this respect that the benefits of the good land have to be shared with the Levites (Deut. 14:27), the sojourners, the widows and the orphans (Deut. 26: 12, 13).

Although there are laid down regulations on the use of the land but one may question how far these laid down regulations are adhered to immediately and later in the life of the Israelites. Harman (2001: 21, 22) observes the difficulties encountered by the kings and the rich men in trying to observe the principles on the land throughout the Old Testament period. Samuel had earlier warned the Israelites and their future kings against accumulation of property for themselves; it is however, known that against this warning that king Uzziah had vast estates according to 2 Chronicles 26:6-10. Since the poor people go to the rich and the king to borrow in the Old Testament, it is also possible that the kings and the wealthy people obtain land by taking it as a pledge and then retain it when the loan could not be repaid. Since the land could not be sold, they used it to their own advantages. The reason was that the land belong to the Lord and can therefore not be sold.

Harman (2001: 22) further observes that the loss of land may well have had a wider social consequence. For example, participation in the local assembly may well have depended upon possession of property. If anyone is deprived of his property such a person is excluded from the assembly. This point may help to explain why the widows and the orphans were at such a social disadvantage when they stand before the elders on trial. For example, the widow had no right of inheritance of property; socially she had no place in the assembly and was therefore unable to plead her own case in the law court sitting at the gate.

It is noted that the Israelites knew that the land belong to the Lord but the observance of this law was limited to a period. Harman fails to tell one what was actually wrong. He successfully cites the instruction given by Samuel but one is not told if the other prophets failed in their duty to remind the people of God’s principle on the land. No consequence is reported on King Uzziah and there is no condemnation on the rich. All that authors cite fail in telling one the consequence of flouting God’s law. Again, social justice was lacking since a widow had no place in the assembly and can therefore not plead her case in the law court sitting at the gate. Nothing was mentioned on how the widow could be heard and not cheated. There is gross social abuse which gave room to the king and the rich to cheat the poor and the needy.

Fourth, the gift of the Land threw emphasis on the Giver. Since God is a covenant keeping one whenever he swears on oath to the patriarchs He makes sure reference is made to the fact that He is the giver of the land. In Deut. 26:1-15, there is a ceremony of the presentation of first fruits and thanksgiving. The NIV Study Bible footnote observes that it is not an annual event more so that they are yet to possess the Promised Land but are still in the wilderness. From this ceremony of the presentation of first fruits and thanksgiving Harman (2001: 22) highlights five facts which according to him have evolved from this ceremony. At the ceremony of the presentation of this first fruits to the Lord, Israel would recall how God had fulfilled His promise of a land to their forefathers. At each presentation this story must be remembered and retold at this particular occasion of the presentation of the first fruits. The five facts mentioned include:-

- i) The ceremony is to take place when Israel has come into the possession of her inheritance of the land. It must be observed that in Deut. 26:1-15 Israel is yet to possess the land since the conquest took place in the book of Joshua. The ceremony could only continue when they come into the possession of the land but its proto-type ceremony has taken place in the wilderness.
- ii) The individual Israelite is to take some of the produce of the land and bring them in a basket to the sanctuary.
- iii) The priest is to make the declaration: I have come to the land that the Lord your God swore on oath to our forefathers to give us. The priest was then to take the basket and place it in front of the altar. .
- iv) The Israelite is then to make a fuller declaration concerning his father Jacob, and concerning the way God had fulfilled His word and redeemed his people from their bondage in Egypt.
- v) Along with the Levites and aliens, the Israelites are to rejoice in the bounty of God's provision.

As noted under the first point one is made to believe that a similar incident actually took place in the wilderness but the tone of the points raised are for future incident since the fruit of the land is to be presented in the sanctuary. It should be noted here that God gives the Israelites the direction on how they should live their lives while in the Wilderness and not when they inherit the land of Canaan.

Fifth, the gift of the Land meant possession and care of it. While studying the book of Deuteronomy, Harman (2001: 23) discovers that the book recognizes the rights of Israel to use the land and its produce, but only in the context of the Israelites being the covenant people of the Lord. Whenever Israel was enjoying the good produce of the land, they should remember that God provided it and Deuteronomy 8:18 is to be their guiding principle. This is to be the controlling motive to govern their use of the land and for many aspects of their social and religious behaviour. The land must be shared with the Levites who are not given any allotment and with the aliens who had no right to land. The Israelites experience as slaves in Egypt would give them a sense of compassion for the strangers in

their midst. It is pertinent to remember that the land could be desecrated by certain actions as well; hence they had to take care of it to fulfill all their obligations lest this should happen. An example is that they should not leave the body of an executed criminal on the tree overnight.

There is no argument that Israel's relationship with the land is quite different from the surrounding nations and from the Canaanites. For example, with the other nations there is often a mythical explanation of their connection with the land. Israel however did not regard the land as divine; rather she saw it as a provision of God through historical events, which Yahweh Himself controlled. The connection of Israel with the land came through history and not mythology. On this point, Israel who has been the recipient takes active roles. Although the land has been given as a divine gift she needed to possess it. She needed to fight and occupy the land. She must also take care of it. Harman stresses no part nor the role Israel was to play. Rather she is only a recipient of God's gift. It is clear that God had assigned certain roles to Israel and such roles include possession of the land of Canaan and caring for it.

The Concept of the Land in Ibibio Ethno-cosmology

In order to fully understand Ibibio concept/understanding of land, one needs to understand who the Ibibio are, Ibibio is an ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. Numbering about five million, it is a member of the Negroid people of South Southern Nigeria and occupies a total area of 850 square miles (Messenger 1959). It is located in the coastal Southern part of Nigeria between latitudes 4° 32' and 5° 33' north, and longitudes 7° 25' and 8° 25' east (<http://www.aksgoonline.com/>). The origin of the Ibibio language and name is not known. It is however reported that in 1777, Olderdrops, a missionary in Sierra Leone, placed the Moke near Ijaw of New Calabar and distinguished them from the Igbo and Bibi (the Ibibio). By 1850, the name had been in use by the Aro Igbo who called the Ibibio "Ibibi", and by the Efik who called them "Ibibio". Udo (1983) asserts: "It has been suggested that the name Ibibio is Ibibio in origin. The word means short, brief, and precise". Udo argues that this implication may stand for two, three or as many as five different things; the meaning depends upon how the word is pronounced. Generally, the Ibibio think of their name as meaning that their people do things in a precise, brief manner (Udo 1983).

Noah (2002) holds that the origin of the Ibibio is a subject of extensive speculation, but it seems that the word might have originated from the Ibibio encounters with the pygmies who originally occupied the Ibibio area. Udo (1983) observes that the early Europeans, who visited the Ibibio coast, had various nicknames for the Ibibio people with whom they lived at various points on the Ibibio coast and which later became names for the Ibibio. The Ibibio speaking people occupy the extreme southern corner of Nigeria (Udo 1983). Esen (1982) asserts: "Ibibio are the original owners of much of the land lying east of the Niger and South of the Benue".

The Ibibio people are found everywhere in Nigeria but, apart from their home state, a great number of them are found in Cross River and River States, as well as in Abia, Imo and Bayelsa States. There

are two vegetation belts, the mangrove swamp forest that fringes the coast, and the rain forest belt which lies north of the mangrove forest. And, there are two seasons within a year -the dry and the rainy seasons. The dry season begins from late October till early in March and the rainy season from late March until early October. The land itself is generally flat with few hills around Itu in the northern part of Ibibioland (http://www.aksgonline.com/about_geography/.aspx). According to Talbot (1915) the “greater part of the Ibibio country is formed of alluvial sand and a few rocks are to be encountered”.

An understanding of Ibibio cosmology is essential for the overall understanding of their cultural practices. For the Ibibio every event in this world has a cause and nothing happens by accident. The causes of events are by and large supernatural. A belief in supernatural beings cuts through the whole of Ibibioland. For them, the sacred and the profane are not two juxtaposed realities but realities related in terms of co-penetration (Umoren 1997). Abasi Ibom is in one way, Deus Otiosus (a god that has withdrawn from the affairs of men). Abasi Isong or simply called Ikpa Isong (the god of the earth) is nearer to Abasi Ibom than other divinities. Abasi Ikpa Enyong, takes charge of the ethereal region, while Abasi Ikpa Isong is concerned with the happenings on earth.

Since these deities intervene in practically every sphere of life of the Ibibio, there is practically no gap between the world of the spirits and the world of men. As Mbiti (1970) would say, the spirit world is as real as the physical world of men, and cannot be excluded from Ibibio ontology. Another result of the close relationship between the physical world and the spiritual world is the capacity of man to inhabit the spiritual world, though in an intangible way. The belief in the ancestors subsists till today. These ancestors, who are the souls of the patrilineage called Ekpo, have strong influence on the life of the Ibibio.

Among the Ibibio a fundamental resource that supports existence is land, which is viewed as the soil, water, air and other natural resources tied to the earth surface (Barlowe, 1978). Land has frequently been the non-water portion of the earth. However, Brady and Weil (1999) describe land as a broad term embodying the total natural environment of the area of the earth not covered by water: and that in addition to soil, its attributes include other physical conditions, such as mineral deposit and water supply: location in relation to centers of commerce, populations and other land, the size of individual tracts holdings, and existing plant cover, work of improvement, and the like. In African tradition, nay Ibibioland, land is highly valued. According to Moshoeshoe (2011), all natural resources are sacred and should be managed in common with the awareness of the continuity between past, present and future for the benefit of the people living in the present and those who will be born in the future. This is the traditional attitude of Ibibio; all the culture and the land belong to the nation, which means they belong to the entire people. He further explains that in traditional Ibibioland, individuals, communal bodies, the land, and the environment are joined to each other by sacred bonds. These bonds are the traditional wellspring of the lives of the people. These bonds gave rise to their communal sense of ethical responsibility towards the present and the future. Moreover, these sacred

bonds constitute nothing other than a facet of the religion of the people that supports in entirety of what constitute the peoples thinking and actions (Moshoeshoe, 2011).

Ibibio economic development has been tied to the significance of land resources. For example, village chiefs still perform traditional sacrifices to communicate with ancestral spirits (Akpabio, 2007). Rituals related to rain making, thanks giving and prayer have historically been tied to land in Ibibioland. Control of land was thus linked to complex interplay of economic, social and political power. In Africa, nay Ibibioland, land is important as a source of food, as a hunting ground through which essential skills are passed from one generation to another. Land is also a source of shelter and tools (Akpabio, 2007). Clearly, the traditional perspective on land is linked to the belief that land is a gift from God and that every indigenous member of a community has the birthright of accessing or possessing land. Therefore, land was seen as an ancestral trust, committed to the living for the benefit of the whole community including the unborn.

The centrality of land to traditional economic development has been tied to the significance of land resources to cultural and traditional practices. Rituals related to rain-making, thanksgiving and prayer have historically been tied to the land. Control of land is thus linked to the complex interplay of economic, social and political power. All said and done, the centrality of land to economic development and social welfare is unquestionable. Land has been used from time immemorial to promote economic growth and human development.

Historically, in Ibibioland, land is not owned by an individual, but rather used by an extended family or village community so that different people in a family or community had equal rights to access the land for different purposes and at different times. Such rights were often conveyed through oral history and not formally documented (Wikipedia, 2011).

In traditional African communities, land is a birth right of every African indigenous person. It has a communal dimension whereby all members of the community are expected to share its resources, especially in the rural areas, under some forms of traditional authority (Nkosi, 1998). Traditional authority from an African point of view is very central and important, because despite the fact that it is a uniting force, the community leader is seen as a steward with divine authority over land (Nkosi, 1998).

In many families, the umbilical cord of a new born baby is buried. In other communities, when a boy is circumcised, the foreskin and blood is also buried. The sacredness of Land is further linked to the fact that the dead are buried in it. Land is also valued as a resource of livelihood. The land produces food and water which gives life. Additionally, land is important as a source of food, as a hunting ground through which essential skills are passed from one generation to another. Land is also a source of shelter and tools (Akpabio, 2007).

The belief that land is a gift from God and from the ancestors has not left the people. People continue to see themselves as stewards of God's resources, especially of communally owned land. Land is regarded as life, there is no life without land since land is the basis for livelihood, given that the earth provides grass, other plants and water on which livestock depend for survival. Land provides the water and air which keep human beings alive. Land grows plants which provide people with materials for house-building and shade; energy for food preparation and other uses; utensils; sacred plants used for meetings, rituals and medicines. Sacred mountains, hills and other lands provide the environment where age groups graduate to eldership, and where vital elements in rituals must be performed regularly. Thus, the people are strongly attached to land spiritually. It seems to me that there has always been a very close link between people's faith and their status or relationship to the land. One does not have to look far for an example of this relationship. The Bible itself, particularly the book of Exodus, starts with a story of a people, of a community in transit, a community in search of a Promised Land, a community in motion on a journey that has been prompted by a promise, a community with a goal, a goal that has taken precedence over everything else in their lives: the search for land they could call their own, a piece of land they could call home.

These people's journey is not merely a product of their intellectual genius or innovation. It is a process in which God is involved, a process in which the role and presence of God is paramount. Thus the journey in which these people are involved is not just physical but also spiritual. It is a spiritual process undertaken in obedience to God's calling. It is an exercise undertaken in trust to the promise that God has made. The spirituality that motivates, drives and even propels this people is therefore, at least primarily, a spirituality of possessing their own land. A piece of land in their own name, a piece of land to which their identity as a people is linked or a piece of land from which their identity can be traced. It seems to me as if these people were unable to think of someone being human if they did not have a piece of land that they could call their own.

Conclusion: Implications for the Ibibio People of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Harman (2001:124) observes that the land was granted to Israel on the condition that she remained true to the requirements that God had placed on her. Because she had to operate within certain rules and regulations, Israel was not free to do as she liked to the land. The threat of exile from the land is first stated in Leviticus 26:27-35 and then repeated in Deut. 4:26, 27, that if they fully obey ..., the Lord will grant them the land but if they fail to faithfully obey the words of this law the Lord will uproot them from the land they are entering to possess.

God reminded the Israelites that the earlier generation did not go into the land because of their unbelief and disobedience, and that of course included Moses, the servant of the Lord. Later when the prophets were threatening the disobedient people with exile they often seem to echo the very language of the covenant curses of Deuteronomy. Vine, Unger and White (1996:107, 108) explain that the Hebrew word *san1a°* translated as "to hear, hearken. listen, obey, publish" occurs in all historical layers of Hebrew and about 1,160 times in the Bible. In the case of hearing and hearkening

to a higher authority, sama can only mean to “obey” and it is in this context that Israel can only continue the possession of the land of Canaan. Let me note here that Israel was God’s tenant and had no power over the land in whatever form. The use of the land was the prerogative dictates of the giver who is Yahweh.

The link between spirituality and the land seems to apply not only to ancient Israel. Rather, it seems to be a common denominator in the life and faith of all traditional religious communities, including the Ibibio. An abstract spirituality that does not spring from the people’s daily live, work and experiences seems to be alien and inconsistent with the biblical tradition. Spirituality seems to be always socially, culturally and even economically conditioned, determined and shaped. In dealing with the challenges that are raised by indigenous communities with particular reference to their land claims, I am dealing with genuinely spiritual concerns that have always shaped the spiritual journey of the people of God. The question of land, which is the primary source and sustainer of human life, cannot but be central to the spirituality of all the indigenous communities, including the Ibibio.

I am yet to find an African who can convincingly argue that there is no link between a people’s spirituality and their status or relationship to the land. Land lies at the heart of the social, political, religious and economic life in most of Africa, where agriculture, natural resources and other land-based activities are fundamental to livelihoods, food security, incomes and employment. Land also continues to have major historical and spiritual significance for Africa’s people. Land is understood as embracing the ecological, cultural, cosmological, social and the spiritual. Clearly, the traditional Ibibio perspective on land was more pronounced before the colonial era and is linked to the belief that land is a gift from God and that every indigenous member of the community has the birthright of accessing or possessing land. Therefore, land is seen as an ancestral trust, committed to the living for the benefit of the whole community including the unborn. Therefore, the Ibibio traditional perspective on Land and its resources is the best system among others.

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