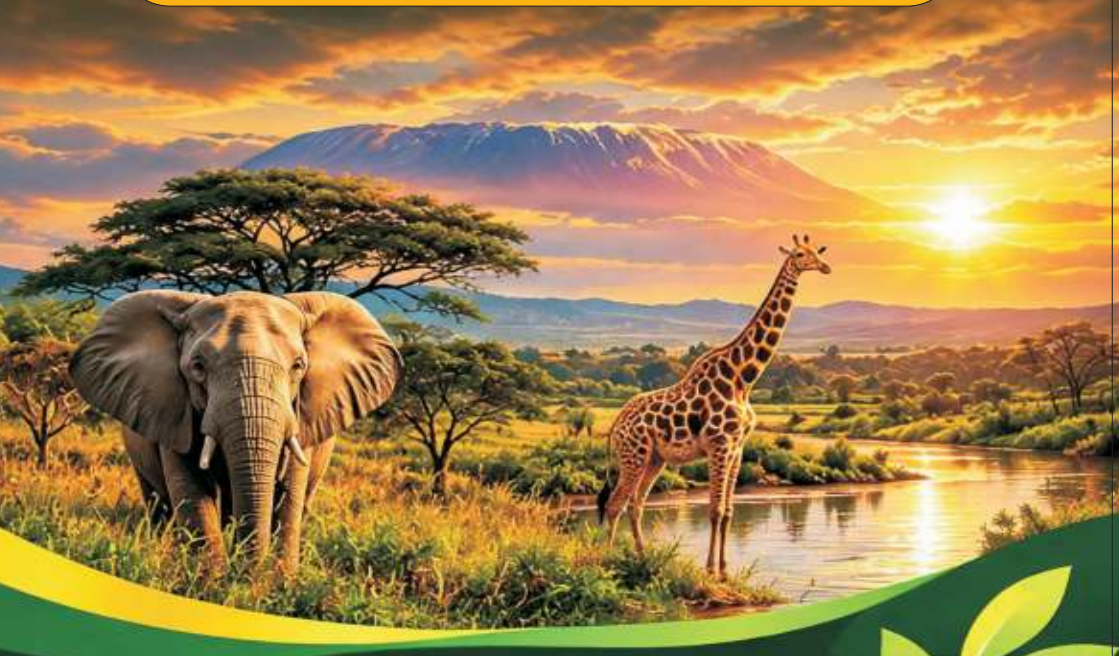
AFRICAN ECOLOGIES, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEWS:

RETHINKING HUMAN NATURE RELATIONS, BIODIVERSITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Proceedings of the 2026 International Conference of the Association for the Promotion of African Studies (APAS)



Editors

Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, PhD
Ejikemeuwa J. O. NDUBISI, PhD
Ngozi Dora ULOGU, PhD
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APAS

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APAS

13245 Trebleclef Lane Silver Spring
20904 Maryland,
United States of America

DEDICATION

To

The Loving Memory of Late Sr. Dr. Chika Eze, SHCJ, for her contribution towards the success of the 2026 APAS Conference as the LOC Chairperson

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PREFACE

It is with great pleasure and a profound sense of responsibility that I present this book, *African Ecologies, Philosophy and Religious Worldviews: Rethinking Human Nature Relations, Biodiversity and Environmental Responsibility*, one of the three volumes of scholarly proceedings emanating from the 10th International Conference of the Association for the Promotion of African Studies (APAS), held at Veritas University, Abuja, from Tuesday, 26 May to Friday, 29 May 2026. The conference was organised around the theme, "*Biodiversity, Conservation and Public Health in Africa: Challenges and Prospects*." The choice of this theme was both timely and significant. Africa stands at a critical ecological and developmental crossroads. The continent possesses an extraordinary wealth of biodiversity and natural resources, as well as rich indigenous knowledge systems and cultural traditions that have historically shaped African peoples' relationships with the land, water, forests, animals and the wider cosmos. Yet, these resources and relationships are increasingly threatened by climate change, environmental degradation, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, pollution, urbanisation, loss of biodiversity and other manifestations of ecological crisis. These challenges are not merely environmental or scientific problems; they raise profound philosophical, ethical, religious, cultural, social, political and public-health questions.

This volume responds particularly to the conceptual and normative dimensions of these challenges. It invites us to rethink the prevailing assumptions about the relationship between human beings and the natural world and to recover, interrogate and creatively reinterpret African philosophical and religious resources for contemporary ecological responsibility. The papers assembled here demonstrate that the question of environmental sustainability cannot be

adequately addressed without engaging the ideas, values, worldviews and moral traditions through which African communities have understood humanity's place within the larger web of existence.

One of the central insights that emerges from the contributions to this volume is the importance of relationality. Several of the papers challenge an exclusively anthropocentric understanding of nature and call attention to conceptions of existence in which human beings are understood as participants within an interconnected community of life. The discussion of African relational metaphysics, for instance, opens an important philosophical pathway for reconsidering environmental responsibility and biodiversity conservation. Similarly, the exploration of ontological relationalism beyond anthropocentrism raises fundamental questions concerning the nature of being, coexistence and responsibility in the context of contemporary ecological and public-health challenges.

The book also demonstrates the richness of African religious and indigenous ecological consciousness. The examination of *Ala* as ecological mother in the Igbo religious worldview, reflections on eco-spirituality in the Igbo cultural and natural landscape, the recovery of indigenous environmental mores, and discussions of indigenous ecological knowledge all point to the possibility of learning from African traditions without romanticising or uncritically idealising them. Rather, these traditions can provide conceptual and ethical resources for engaging the environmental realities of the present. The contributions remind us that the African past is not simply an object of historical curiosity; it can constitute an intellectual resource for confronting contemporary problems.

Equally important is the engagement with Christian theological perspectives. The philosophical reading of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, reflections on stewardship theology, deep incarnation, indigenous

epistemologies, Christian mission, prophetic imagination and public-health advocacy demonstrate the possibilities of dialogue between African intellectual traditions and Christian ecological thought. Such dialogue is especially relevant in an African context where Christianity, traditional religious worldviews and indigenous cultural practices frequently intersect in complex ways. Environmental responsibility, therefore, calls for an intellectually open and mutually enriching conversation among different traditions of knowledge and belief.

The papers on environmental ethics and ecological justice further deepen this conversation. Questions of sustainability cannot be separated from questions of justice. Environmental degradation does not affect all individuals, communities or regions equally. The burdens of pollution, extractive activities, climate change, ecological displacement and declining environmental quality are often borne disproportionately by vulnerable communities. The inclusion of an Afro-ecofeminist perspective and an ethics of care and inclusion in this volume appropriately draws attention to gender, power, vulnerability and the unequal distribution of environmental burdens. Ecological responsibility must consequently include a commitment to justice, dignity, inclusion and the protection of human and non-human life.

I am particularly pleased that the volume does not restrict itself to abstract philosophical reflection. Its contributors connect metaphysical and ethical questions with biodiversity conservation, public health, traditional medicine, environmental education, climate change and technological development. This interdisciplinarity reflects one of the fundamental intellectual commitments of APAS: the conviction that African problems require conversations across disciplinary boundaries. Philosophy must converse with theology; theology with indigenous knowledge; indigenous knowledge with

science; science with public policy; and all these fields with the lived experiences of African communities.

The contribution on African indigenous knowledge systems and traditional medicine is particularly illustrative of this interdisciplinary orientation. Biodiversity is not simply a collection of species to be catalogued or preserved; it can also constitute the ecological foundation of medicinal knowledge, cultural identity and community well-being. The relationship between biodiversity and traditional medicine therefore deserves sustained scholarly attention, especially at a time when Africa is searching for sustainable pathways to development while simultaneously seeking to preserve its cultural and intellectual heritage. The same spirit informs the contributions on technological progress and environmental stewardship. Technology is neither inherently destructive nor automatically beneficial. Its value depends, to a considerable extent, upon the purposes for which it is developed and employed and the ethical framework within which it operates. African philosophy, with its concern for relationality, communal responsibility and the conditions of meaningful human flourishing, can contribute significantly to the debate on how technological advancement may be reconciled with ecological responsibility.

The papers collected in this volume consequently invite a fundamental reconsideration of what it means to be human in an ecologically interconnected world. If human beings understand themselves as isolated masters of nature, environmental exploitation may easily be justified in the name of progress. If, however, humanity understands itself as existing in relationships with other human beings, with communities, with ancestors and generations yet unborn, and with the wider natural world, then environmental responsibility becomes not merely an external obligation but an integral dimension of responsible existence. This perspective is

particularly important for Africa. Sustainable development on the continent cannot simply involve importing models developed elsewhere without critical examination. Africa needs approaches that take seriously its own ecological realities, cultural resources, indigenous knowledge systems, philosophical traditions, religious experiences and contemporary developmental aspirations. This does not imply rejecting global knowledge. Rather, it calls for a creative dialogue between African knowledge traditions and global scholarship, producing responses that are contextually appropriate, intellectually rigorous and practically meaningful.

The papers contained in this volume make diverse contributions to that task. They approach African ecological questions from philosophy, theology, religious studies, environmental ethics, literature, gender studies, indigenous knowledge, public health and related disciplines. Their diversity is a strength. It demonstrates that no single discipline or intellectual tradition possesses a monopoly of insight into the ecological crisis. The complexity of the challenges confronting Africa demands equally complex and collaborative intellectual responses.

As President of the Association for the Promotion of African Studies, I wish to express my profound appreciation to the members of APAS for their constant scholarship, intellectual commitment and remarkable zeal towards the promotion and sustenance of African heritage. APAS continues to draw its strength from the dedication of scholars who believe that the advancement of Africa requires not only research and publication but also the preservation, interrogation and creative transformation of African intellectual and cultural resources. The scholarship represented in this volume is a testimony to that commitment. I equally acknowledge with gratitude the efforts of the conference organising committee, the contributors to this volume, the reviewers, editors, rapporteurs and all those whose intellectual and

logistical contributions made the 2026 conference possible. I particularly appreciate Veritas University, Abuja, for hosting the conference and providing a fitting environment for intellectual exchange, scholarly encounter and interdisciplinary dialogue.

The 10th International Conference was also significant because it marked an important milestone in the continuing history of APAS. From its establishment as a platform for the promotion of African scholarship, the Association has continued to grow as a community of scholars committed to bringing African questions, African experiences and African intellectual traditions into sustained academic conversation. The publication of these proceedings is therefore more than a record of a conference; it is part of the continuing intellectual journey of APAS and its contribution to the global conversation on Africa. I am confident that this volume will be useful to philosophers, theologians, scholars of African studies, environmental researchers, social scientists, policy-makers, educators, religious leaders, students and all who are concerned about the future of Africa and the planet. More importantly, I hope that the volume will stimulate further research and conversation. The essays should not be regarded as the final word on African ecological thought. Rather, they are invitations to further questioning, dialogue and action. The ecological crisis confronting humanity requires more than technological solutions. It requires a transformation of consciousness, a reconsideration of our understanding of ourselves, our relationships with one another and our place within the natural world. Africa possesses intellectual, cultural and spiritual resources capable of contributing meaningfully to this transformation. The task before African scholars is to retrieve these resources critically, subject them to rigorous reflection, and bring them into fruitful conversation with contemporary knowledge. This volume is one contribution to that important enterprise.

I therefore commend *this book* to the scholarly community and to all readers interested in the search for more sustainable, just and humane futures for Africa and the wider world. May the scholarship contained herein deepen our understanding, enrich our conversations and inspire responsible action for the protection of biodiversity, the preservation of our common ecological heritage and the promotion of human and planetary well-being.

Professor Ejikemeuwa J. O. NDUBISI, PhD

President, Association for the Promotion of African Studies

12 September, 2026

PAPER 1

A PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF ECOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN LAUDATO SI'

Francis Kayode FABIDUN, PhD
St. Albert the Great Major Seminary,
Idowu-Offonran, Abeokuta, Ogun State. Nigeria
francisfabidun@gmail.com

Anthony Taiwo Adebayo
St. Albert the Great Major Seminary,
Idowu-Offonran, Abeokuta, Ogun State. Nigeria

Abstract

Ecological and environmental issues form a major challenge in the 21st century. This is manifest in different crises such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. This paper examined several attempts and postulations made by experts such as scientists, technologists and policy makers, to salvage the ecosystem for human explorations. Manifestly, the scientific and policy-oriented responses employed to mitigate these challenges were often devoid of the critical philosophical and ethical principles that are fundamental in human engagement with his environment. Hence, this paper engaged Laudato Si' as it underscored the imperative of moral responsibility of human engagement with his environment. The paper employed the analytical and hermeneutical methodologies to analyse how the encyclical critiqued consumerism, technocratic domination, and

exploitative economic systems, while proposing an ethical reorientation rooted in stewardship, the common good, and respect for creation. This proposal formed the ethical, metaphysical, and socio-political underpinnings that are fundamental frameworks in environmental ethics and Catholic Social Teaching. The paper argued that Laudato Si' represents a comprehensive philosophical framework and advocacy for environmental sustainability, social justice, and collective moral responsibility capable of helping to preserve the environment for present and future generations. Therefore, it is imperative for everyone at individual and institutional levels, to cultivate ethical consciousness and sustainable practices, and foster interdisciplinary collaborations, for instance, among philosophers, theologians, scientists, and policy-makers.

Keywords: Ecological Crisis, Environmental Degradation, Integral Ecology, *Laudato Si'*, Moral Responsibility.

Introduction

Ecological and environmental crisis remain one of the most pressing concerns facing humanity even in the 21st century. Other associated issues include different forms of pollution, climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion that threaten not only the natural world but also the social fabric of human communities. The severity of environmental degradation continues to be a constant variable in scientific investigations, deliberations on ethical responsibility, economic models, and the duty of humanity in nature have intensified.[1] This intersection of science, philosophy and environmental ethics has become crucial in the bid to addressing these challenges, and to provide agendas for understanding human obligations to nature, and chart a path for future generations and the global community. This has changed the direction of contemporary

[1]Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), p. 152.

environmental discourse that has been dominated by empirical and policy-oriented frameworks to an awareness or recognition of the need for a deeper ethical and metaphysical understanding of humanity's relationship with nature.[2] In this context, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si',* subtitled "On Care for Our Common Home," emerges as a significant contribution to the discourse on environmental responsibility. With its roots in Catholic Social Teaching, the encyclical[3] presents a holistic vision that integrates theology, philosophy, economics, and political critique. Unlike previous Church documents on environmental issues such as Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Laudato Si'* directly engages with contemporary scientific findings, ethical concerns, and global socio-political structures. It calls for an "integral ecology," emphasizing the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and spiritual dimensions of human life.[4] The integral ecology of *Laudato Si'* emphasises that the natural world cannot be severed from the society within it. How our treatment of nature has direct impacts on human communities, and vice versa

Thus, this paper is a philosophical reading of *Laudato Si';* its ethical, metaphysical, and political implications. It explores its advocacy that humans are to be morally responsible toward nature. The paper begins with the background to the encyclical and examines its metaphysical, political and socio-economic underpinnings, and precedes to its critique of consumerism and its advocacy for ecological justice.

2Bryan G. Norton, *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 45.

[3]An encyclical is a formal letter issued by the Pope, primarily addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, though it is typically intended for all Catholics and often for "all people of good will." It is used to teach, guide, or clarify the Church's position on important matters of faith, morals, or social issues.

[4]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015, p. 45; hereafter cited as Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'.*

Background of *Laudato Si'*

Laudato Si' is an encyclical by Pope Francis published on May 24, 2015. It focuses on urgent ecological and environmental issues facing the global community. The document emerges against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating ecological landscape, with growing concerns over climate change, deforestation, pollution, biodiversity loss, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. The title of the encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, translates to "Praise be to you," taken from St. Francis of Assisis' *Canticle of the Sun*, reflects the document's deep spiritual connection to the natural world and its call for a renewed ecological consciousness rooted in respect and care for creation.[5]

The release of the encyclical occurred at a pivotal moment in the global environmental history. By 2015, the world had seen the publication of major reports on climate change, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report published in 2014, which warned of the dire consequences of inaction on global warming. The states assert that human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. According to the report, anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions have increased since the pre-industrial era characterised largely by economic and population growth. 2000 to 2010 witnessed highest the emissions in history. Historical emissions have driven atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide to levels that are unparalleled in at least the last 800,000 years, resulting in an uptake of energy by the climate system.[6] Evidently, recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems.

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[5] *Laudato Si'.*
[6] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si', p. 10.*

Additionally, the encyclical was released just months before the Paris Climate Agreement of UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris on 12 December 2015, a global accord aimed at reducing carbon emissions to curb global warming. It was noted that climate change has become an issue of global emergency that goes beyond national borders. As such, it requires international cooperation and coordinated solutions at all levels. The timing of the document emphasizes the urgency of Pope Francis' call for environmental action and establishes *Laudato Si'* as a moral and ethical response to these environmental crises.[7]

Laudato Si' approaches the environmental crisis not merely from a scientific or political standpoint but from a profoundly philosophical and theological perspective. From a theological angle, the tone and conceptual framework of the encyclical clearly draw upon the previous social teachings of the Church, particularly the numerous reflections and teachings of Pope John Paul II's *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) that addresses global development and introduces solidarity as a fundamental moral virtue that binds humanity together and Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) that addressed integral human development and also highlights the Church's emerging role in environmental stewardship. In this regard, Jonathan Chaplin opines that the frequency with which John Paul II and Benedict XVI are cited in *Laudato Si'* shows that Francis's ideas are no radical departure from tradition but instead another creative "development" of the Church's well-established social doctrine.[8] This means that *Laudato Si'* is not an isolated advocacy but a continuation of Church's advocacy. Fundamentally, it is of historic significance as the first papal encyclical exclusively devoted to environmental issues and a unique appeal for conscientious engagement with the environment.

[7]Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report, pp.1 and 44.

[8] Clare Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology and the Practice of Sustainability*, (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), p. 39.

At the philosophical level, Pope Francis draws on Jacques Maritain's concept of integral humanism, which advocates a society founded on human dignity, moral and spiritual values, and the common good rather than materialism or radical individualism. According to Ryszard Sadowski, *Laudato Si'* reflects a broader tradition of integral ecology, influenced by twentieth-century holistic approaches that emphasize the interconnectedness of reality. These include Ken Wilber's Integral Theory, Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory, and Jan Smuts' holism. The encyclical also resonates with earlier formulations of integral ecology, particularly those developed by Leonardo Boff, Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael Zimmerman, and the cultural historian Thomas Berry.

Pope Francis argues that environmental degradation is inseparable from social and economic injustice. He identifies exploitative economic systems and consumerist lifestyles as major drivers of ecological destruction, while emphasizing that the abuse of nature is closely linked to the exploitation of the poor. Consequently, *Laudato Si'* offers a comprehensive critique of the modern technocratic paradigm, which elevates economic growth and material prosperity above human dignity and environmental sustainability. It calls instead for an integrated vision that promotes justice, ecological responsibility, and the common good. This paper now examines the major ecological and environmental issues highlighted in the encyclical.

Ecological and Environmental Issues in *Laudato Si'*

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis advances a basic idea of care for creation through several interconnected themes or issues. The major themes include:

The Ecological Crisis

One of the central themes of *Laudato Si'* is the ecological crisis, which Pope Francis characterizes as a multifaceted issue affecting

the entire planet. The document highlights various forms of environmental degradation, including deforestation, the loss of biodiversity, pollution, and climate change. These ecological problems are not presented as isolated phenomena but as deeply interconnected issues that reflect a profound disturbance in the balance between humans and nature. Pope Francis argues that environmental issues cannot be addressed in isolation, for they are symptomatic of a broader ecological imbalance that arises from a flawed worldview that treats nature as a mere resource to be exploited for human gain.[9]

The encyclical critiques unsustainable practices of modern society, particularly the economic systems that prioritize profit over the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. He criticizes the dominant economic models that foster consumerism and unbridled growth, which lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources. The document addresses the destruction of ecosystems, including the disappearance of forests and oceans, and refers to as the "sacrilege" of treating nature as disposable.[10] Moreover, the encyclical emphasizes the urgency of combating climate change, describing it as the most critical challenge of our time, one that exacerbates inequalities and disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable.

Pope Francis calls for an immediate and radical response to this crisis, urging individuals, governments, and institutions to adopt sustainable practices and to take responsibility for their role in the ecological degradation. He stresses that human activity has directly contributed to the deterioration of the Earth's ecosystems, but it is also human action that can restore ecological harmony if guided by ethical principles of care, respect, and solidarity.[11]

[9]Stephen Schneck, "*Laudato Si'*: On Care for our Common Home by Pope Francis", in *Energy Law Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 79, 2022, pp. 79-80.
[10]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 56.
[11]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 24.

Humanity's Relationship with Nature

At the heart of Pope Francis' ecological philosophy is a rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature. *Laudato Si'* emphasizes that human beings are not separate from nature, rather a part of it, intricately linked to the rest of creation. This understanding stands in stark contrast to the anthropocentric worldview that has dominated much of modern thought, which sees nature as an object of human dominion and exploitation. Instead, Pope Francis advocates for an "ecocentric" approach, where human beings are seen as stewards of the Earth, responsible for its care and preservation.[12]

This shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric perspective is one of the central themes of the encyclical. *Laudato Si'* emphasises that the Earth is not a mere object for human consumption but a shared home that deserves respect and reverence. Drawing inspiration from the *Canticle of the Sun* by St. Francis of Assisi, it frames nature as a reflection of divine creation and it is both beautiful and sacred. According to the encyclical, "the entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us".[13] This theological grounding leads to an ethic of care, wherein humans are not masters of the Earth but caretakers entrusted with its well-being.

In developing this ecocentric view, Pope Francis critiques the technocratic paradigm, which he argues has led to the exploitation of nature for the benefit of human progress and material wealth. This paradigm, according to Pope Francis, views nature as what is be controlled, dominated, and reduced to a set of resources to be exploited for economic gain. Hence, the encyclical calls for a re-orientation of human activity, urging humanity to abandon a mindset of control and domination in favour of one rooted in mutual respect and ecological responsibility.[14]

[12]Andrea Tilche and Antonello Nociti, "*Laudato Si'*: The Beauty of Pope Francis' Vision", in *Sapiens*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2015, pp. 23-24

[13]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 84.

[14]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 112.

Environmental Justice

Another central aspect of *Laudato Si'* is the emphasis on environmental justice, particularly the disproportionate impact of ecological degradation on the poor and vulnerable. Pope Francis argues that the ecological crisis exacerbates existing social inequalities, with the poorest members of society suffering the greatest consequences of environmental damage. This includes communities living in areas prone to natural disasters, such as flooding and drought, as well as those who live in regions where pollution and deforestation have devastated local ecosystems.[15] The Pope writes that the "poor and the vulnerable" are often the first to suffer from environmental degradation, yet they are the least responsible for causing it. Thus, environmental justice becomes a moral issue, one that calls for solidarity and a commitment to addressing the root causes of inequality and environmental harm. He critiques the global economic system for perpetuating these injustices, calling for a more equitable distribution of resources and a shift in priorities from profit maximization to the well-being of all.[16] Pope Francis argues that it is imperative that wealthier nations and individuals to take action to rectify this problem.

In his call for environmental justice, Pope Francis draws on the Catholic Church's long-standing tradition of social justice, which emphasizes the dignity of the human person, the common good, and the preferential option for the poor. For Pope Francis, the advocacy for the environment is inseparable from the fight for social justice. The environmental crisis is not only a challenge for the natural world but also a moral challenge for humanity, calling for solidarity and a commitment to the flourishing of all people, particularly those who are most vulnerable.[17]

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[15]Thomas Massaro, "What Precisely Did Pope Francis Contribute? Parsing Key Terms and Claims in *Laudato Si'*" in *Social Sciences*, Vol. 12, No. 10, 2023, p. 79
[16]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 41.
[17]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 161.

The issues discussed above constitute important subjects for philosophical investigation. Accordingly, the next section of this paper undertakes a philosophical analysis of different themes in the encyclical. This is in keeping with the enduring task of philosophy, which pays careful attention to environmental and ecological issues by critically examining their underlying assumptions, conceptual foundations, ethical dimensions and implications for human existence and the natural world. The philosophical examination of environmental and ecological issues is well established within contemporary environmental philosophy. Scholars such as Arne Næss, Aldo Leopold, Holmes Rolston III, J. Baird Callicott, Bryan G. Norton), Val Plumwood, and Hans Jonas, argue that philosophy has a critical role in analysing the ethical, metaphysical, and practical dimensions of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Philosophical Themes in *Laudato Si'*

From a philosophical perspective, *Laudato Si'* addresses enduring questions concerning the relationship between humanity and nature. Issues discoursed in *Laudato Si'* are dialectical with major philosophical traditions, such as Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kantian moral philosophy, phenomenology, environmental ethics, social contract theory, and the philosophy of technology. Subsequently, *Laudato Si'* transcends merely as a religious document but it is an important contribution to contemporary environmental philosophy. Briefly put *Laudato Si'* bears on environmental ethics (moral responsibility toward nature); philosophical anthropology (human dignity and stewardship); philosophy of technology (critique of the technocratic paradigm); social and political philosophy (common good and environmental justice); ethical responsibility, virtue, sustainability; metaphysics (interconnectedness of all creation); epistemology (dialogue etween science, philosophy and religion); political philosophy (global governance and ecological responsibility); development ethics (integral human development); and environmental

philosophy (integral ecology and care for creation).

Metaphysics of Nature

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* offers a philosophical reflection on the metaphysical nature of creation. The encyclical postulates a metaphysical vision in which reality is an interconnected order rather than a collection of isolated entities. An interconnectedness of all creation the core of *Laudato Si'*. Nature, according to this document, is not merely a collection of resources to be exploited by human beings, but a gift from God, imbued with intrinsic value. *Laudato Si'* defines nature as a "sublime communion" rather than a mere resource. Nature is understood as a community of beings, each possessing its own value and purpose. The Pope draws upon the theological and philosophical tradition that sees nature as both a reflection of divine creativity and as an integral part of the moral order. This metaphysical understanding of nature contrasts sharply with the mechanistic worldview that emerged from Enlightenment thought, which views the natural world as a collection of objects to be studied, controlled, and utilized.[18]

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis underscores the importance of recognizing the inherent dignity of the natural world. He writes that "each creature is a thought of God" and that "the entire material universe speaks of God's love".[19] He considers the universe as purposeful. The ultimate destiny of the universe is not to be found in humans. instead, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.[20] This view of nature as both sacred

[18]Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of the Environment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 102

[19]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 2015, p. 84

and purposeful reflects a broader metaphysical framework in which the material world is seen as imbued with meaning and significance. The Pope's metaphysical understanding aligns with the views of philosophers like Aldo Leopold, who proposed the concept of "land ethics," which calls for humans to view themselves as part of a larger ecological community, bound by ethical obligations to the environment.[21] In this sense, *Laudato Si'* offers a radical rethinking of humanity's place in the cosmos, inviting us to view the Earth not as a mere object for human domination but as a living, interconnected system that must be respected and protected. Human beings are endowed with intelligence and love in order to respond positively to the call to lead all creatures back to their Creator. The metaphysical perspective presented in *Laudato Si'* encourages a shift away from utilitarian deposition toward a more holistic understanding of the environment, one that acknowledges its intrinsic worth and the sacredness of creation.

Ethical Responsibility and Moral Duty

Laudato Si' also touches on the ethical responsibility of human beings toward the environment. Central to the encyclical is the notion that humanity must assume a moral duty to care for the Earth, both because the earth is a gift from God and because its health directly affects the well-being of future generations. Rather than viewing the environment merely as a collection of natural resources for human exploitation, the encyclical proposes an ethic of care, stewardship, responsibility, and solidarity rooted in the belief that creation is God's gift entrusted to humanity. The encyclical rejects the idea that humans may exploit nature simply because they possess the power to do so.

[21] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 203.

The Pope critiques the prevailing consumerist and technocratic cultures that encourage a disregard for the environment in favour of short-term material gain. He calls for a moral awakening, one that recognizes the intrinsic value of nature and fosters a profound respect for the interconnectedness of all living beings.[22] In this way, Pope Francis frames environmental action not only as a political or economic issue but as an ethical imperative grounded in respect for both human dignity and the integrity of creation. It contends that the ecological crisis is fundamentally a moral and spiritual crisis, requiring not only technological solutions but also ethical conversion.

Pope Francis appeals to the concept of *stewardship*, a moral responsibility to care for creation in a sustainable manner. Stewardship means that human beings are caretakers rather than absolute owners of the earth. The natural world belongs ultimately to God, while humanity exercises only delegated authority. As a result, exploiting natural resources without regard for ecological balance constitutes an abuse of this trust. This ethical stance is deeply influenced by Catholic Social Teaching, which upholds the dignity of the human person and emphasises that all people, particularly the marginalized, have the right to a clean and healthy environment. In this framework, the destruction of the environment is not only an ecological problem but also a moral one, as it infringes upon the basic rights of the poor and future generations.[23] This calls for a shift in moral thinking, away from anthropocentrism, which views nature solely in terms of its utility to humans, to a more ecocentric perspective, where the value of nature is recognized in its own right.

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[22]Fabio Tarzia and Emiliano Ilardi, "The World Is the Road to God: The Encyclical *Laudato Si'* and the "Ecological" Vision of Pope Francis", in *Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 646, 2024, p. 91

[23]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 96.

Pope Francis' critique of contemporary ethical systems that promote unchecked consumption and profit maximization aligns with broader critiques of neoliberal capitalism. Philosophically, his argument resonates with the works of ethicists like Aldo Leopold, whose land ethic stresses that humans have an ethical obligation to maintain the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. By viewing nature as an end in itself, not a mere means to human ends, Pope Francis' call to moral duty echoes the principles found in virtue ethics, particularly the Aristotelian notion of flourishing, where the well-being of individuals is intimately connected to the well-being of their environment.[24] He also identifies particular virtues which he regards as ecological virtues' as fundamental to this responsibility. These are: prudence, temperance, justice, solidarity, humility, gratitude, care and ecological conversion. These virtues shape moral character rather than merely regulating individual action.

The Concept of the Common Good

Another central philosophical theme in *Laudato Si'* is the concept of the "common good," which Pope Francis explicitly invokes as a guiding ethical principle in addressing the ecological crisis. The principle of the common good implies respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development. It pertains to the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups, applying the principle of subsidiarity. Outstanding among those groups is the family, as the basic cell of society. Finally, the common good calls for social peace, the stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice; whenever this is violated, violence always ensues. Society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good.[25]

[24]Clare Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology and the Practice of Sustainability*, p. 53.
[25]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, No. 157.

The common good, as articulated in Catholic Social Teaching, refers to conditions that allow individuals and communities to thrive and fulfil their potential. In this context, Pope Francis extends the concept of the common good to encompass the entire Earth and all its inhabitants, asserting that the health of the planet is a shared responsibility that concerns all people, regardless of nationality or economic status.[26] Pope Francis argues that the Earth is "our common home," and its resources belong to all humanity and should be managed responsibly. Environmental goods such as clean air, safe drinking water, biodiversity, forests, and oceans are not commodities reserved for the wealthy but common goods upon which everyone depends.

Pope Francis uses the common good as a lens through which to view the ecological crisis, arguing that environmental harm inflicted by a few - particularly wealthy nations and corporations - can have devastating effects on the many, especially the poor and vulnerable. The encyclical stresses that the degradation of the environment is an injustice because it disproportionately affects the marginalized, who often have the least capacity to address its consequences. The Pope writes, "The poorest are those who suffer most from the deterioration of the environment".[27] In this regard, the common good becomes both a moral and political imperative that calls for global cooperation and solidarity. Philosophically, Pope Francis' interpretation of the common good is aligned with communitarian thought, which stresses the importance of collective well-being over individual rights. Communitarian philosophers such as Michael Sandel have argued that the pursuit of individual self-interest must be balanced with consideration for the collective good, especially in the context of environmental sustainability.[28] Pope Francis echoes this sentiment,

[26]Fabio Tarzia and Emiliano Ilardi, "The World Is the Road to God", p. 93
[27]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 48.
[28]Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 120

arguing that the pursuit of economic and technological development must be subordinated to the overarching goal of protecting the common good — understood as the health of the planet and the flourishing of all people.

The common good also highlights the ethical importance of future generations. Pope Francis emphasizes that the current generation has a responsibility to preserve the planet for the benefit of those who will inherit it. This forward-looking perspective recalls the concept of intergenerational justice, which has been central to contemporary environmental ethics. Philosophers like John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum have argued that justice must extend beyond the present to include the needs and rights of future generations. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis reiterates this by asserting that the degradation of the environment is a form of injustice that harms future life on Earth.[29] Accordingly, the encyclical offers an important contribution to contemporary environmental philosophy and provides a strong framework for addressing the intertwined crises of ecology, justice, and sustainable development.

Epistemology: Dialogue between Science, Philosophy, and Religion.

Another philosophical theme inf *Laudato Si'* is its epistemological vision, which advocates an integrated method to knowledge. For Pope Francis, ecological crisis cannot be effectively understood through a single discipline but requires dialogue among empirical science, philosophy, ethics, religion, politics, and indigenous knowledge. In doing so, the encyclical rejects both **scientism**, which treats empirical science as the sole valid source of knowledge, and **fideism**, which relies solely on faith without recourse to reason and scientific inquiry.

[29]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 160

The encyclical recognizes the indispensable role of science in explaining climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. However, science alone cannot answer ethical questions concerning humanity's responsibilities toward nature, future generations, or social justice. These normative issues belong to philosophy and ethics, which provide the moral principles necessary for responsible environmental action. Likewise, religion contributes spiritual meaning, moral motivation, and a vision of creation that inspires ecological responsibility without undermining scientific autonomy.

Drawing on the classical philosophical tradition, *Laudato Si'* reflects Aristotle's distinction between scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), and philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), suggesting that ecological challenges require all three. Philosophy serves as a bridge between science and religion by examining ethical principles, conceptual assumptions, and questions of meaning that empirical methods alone cannot resolve. The encyclical also promotes interdisciplinary collaboration and values indigenous and local ecological knowledge, recognizing that sustainable environmental solutions emerge from diverse intellectual traditions rather than disciplinary isolation. This epistemological openness extends to public policy, where environmental decisions should involve scientists, philosophers, ethicists, religious leaders, policymakers, and local communities.

DISCUSSION ON POPE FRANCIS *LAUDATO SI'*

Excessive Focus on Political and Economic Systems

One of the most prominent criticisms of *Laudato Si'* comes from those who argue that the encyclical places too much emphasis on political and economic systems at the expense of individual responsibility and practical, localized action. Critics, particularly from conservative political and economic circles, assert that Pope Francis' critique of capitalism, consumerism, and the neoliberal economic order is overly broad and fails to provide sufficient

consideration of the positive contributions that markets and technological innovation can make in addressing environmental problems.

For example, in addressing the economic systems that contribute to environmental degradation, Pope Francis criticizes the "throwaway culture" of consumerism and the idolization of economic growth, which he believes are at the heart of ecological destruction.[30] However, some critics argue that this critique does not adequately engage with the role of free markets and entrepreneurship in generating technological innovations, such as renewable energy solutions, which could mitigate climate change and environmental harm.

Insufficient Attention to Technological Innovation

Another criticism of *Laudato Si'* comes from those who argue that the encyclical downplays the potential of technological innovation in solving the ecological crisis. Critics from the scientific and technological communities assert that Pope Francis' skepticism toward certain technological solutions and his calls for a more restrained, less consumer-driven society overlook the potential of cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence, clean energy, and geoengineering, to provide effective solutions to environmental challenges.[31]

Pope Francis acknowledges the importance of technology in addressing environmental problems but insists that technological advancements should be used in a way that respects the environment and promotes the common good. He cautions against a "technocratic paradigm" that sees technology as the sole answer to ecological issues, advocating instead for an ethical approach that considers the social, cultural, and environmental impacts of technology.[32] This is,

[30]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 35

[31]Daniel DiLeo, "Introduction: The 'Climate Emergency' and US Catholic Responses to *Laudato Si'*", in *Journal of Moral Theology*, Vol. 9, Special Issue 1, 2020, p. 69.

[32]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 108.

for some, a limiting perspective that neglects the capacity of innovation to offer transformative solutions, particularly in the realm of renewable.

Theological/Religious Focus and the alienation of Secular Audiences

Some secular critics have argued that *Laudato Si'* is too closely tied to Catholic theology and the language of faith, which may alienate non-religious audiences or those from other religious traditions. The frequent references to Catholic doctrines, such as the sanctity of creation and the role of the Church in guiding moral action, might be seen as a barrier to widespread engagement with the ecological message. Critics suggest that a more secular or universal language would make the call to action more accessible to those outside the Catholic tradition.[33]

In response, Pope Francis emphasizes that *Laudato Si'* is meant to engage all people, regardless of their religious beliefs, in a common cause for the protection of the environment. While the encyclical is rooted in Catholic theology, its moral and ethical teachings on the environment are universal and relevant to people of all faiths and philosophies. Pope Francis invites individuals of all backgrounds to join in the shared responsibility of caring for the Earth, which he views as a common home for all of humanity.[34] The Pope's message is ultimately a call to solidarity, transcending religious and secular divides in the pursuit of environmental justice and sustainability.

Overly Idealistic and Unrealistic

Some critics view Pope Francis' vision as overly idealistic and disconnected from the practical realities of global politics and economics. They argue that his calls for a global shift in values, international cooperation, and the reimagining of economic systems

[33]Daniel DiLeo, "Introduction: The 'Climate Emergency", p. 54.
[34]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p. 14.

may be overly ambitious, especially in the context of entrenched political and economic power structures. Skeptics suggest that the changes Pope Francis advocates for would be difficult to implement in a world where powerful vested interests, such as multinational corporations and wealthy nations, prioritize profit over environmental or social concerns.[35]

Finally, while *Laudato Si'* offers a compelling pluralistic epistemology, it provides limited guidance for resolving conflicts between scientific findings, ethical judgments, and religious beliefs. Nevertheless, its holistic framework remains a significant philosophical contribution, presenting knowledge as an interdisciplinary and value-oriented pursuit directed toward truth, justice, sustainability, and the common good. While the encyclical strongly advocates dialogue, it provides only limited methodological guidance for adjudicating disagreements among these epistemic communities. This remains an important area for further philosophical inquiry.

Conclusion

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* is not just a theological or political document; it is a philosophical manifesto that addresses one of the most pressing moral and existential challenges of our time: the ecological crisis. Rooted in the Catholic tradition but addressing a global audience, the encyclical offers a profound critique of the modern economic, social, and technological systems that have led to widespread environmental degradation. Through a philosophical lens, *Laudato Si'* invites a reevaluation of human nature, the concept of the common good, and the ethical implications of humanity's relationship with the Earth. It urges us to confront the moral dimensions of the environmental crisis and to reconsider our responsibilities as stewards of creation, ultimately calling for a more

[35]Daniel DiLeo, “Introduction: The 'Climate Emergency”, pp. 55-56.

just, compassionate, and sustainable world.

In conclusion, *Laudato Si'* offers a transformative philosophical vision that invites both individuals and societies to rethink their values, priorities, and relationships with the Earth. By articulating a vision of *integral ecology*, Pope Francis challenges humanity to adopt an ethical stance that recognizes the interdependence of all life and acknowledges the sacredness of nature. His critique of consumerism, technocracy, and neoliberal capitalism presents a bold alternative to the dominant worldview that prioritizes economic growth at the expense of ecological sustainability and social justice.

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PAPER 2

AFRICAN RELATIONAL METAPHYSICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY: RETHINKINGAPPROACHES TO BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

Adaora Ngozi Ogbonnaya
Department of Philosophy, Veritas University, Abuja
adaegwu@yahoo.co.uk

Michael Sunday Sasa, PhD
Department of Philosophy, Veritas University, Abuja
dvc@veritas.edu.ng

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, PhD
Department of Philosophy, Veritas University, Abuja
ikee_mario@yahoo.com

Abstract

Africa's biodiversity loss and environmental degradation pose growing ecological, social, and economic challenges. While contemporary scientific, technological, and policy-oriented approaches provide important foundations for conservation, their effectiveness can be strengthened through engagement with culturally grounded ethical and ontological perspectives. This paper examines how Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike, as African relational metaphysical frameworks, complement contemporary environmental ethics in biodiversity conservation. Using qualitative conceptual analysis, critical hermeneutics, and comparative philosophy, the study argues that these philosophies enrich conservation discourse by emphasizing relationality, ecological complementarity, communal responsibility, indigenous knowledge, and collaborative stewardship. Empirical cases from Africa further illustrate the relevance of sacred landscapes, customary institutions, and community participation to biodiversity conservation. The paper concludes that integrating African relational metaphysics with contemporary conservation

science and policy can provide a more holistic, culturally legitimate, and participatory framework for sustainable environmental governance in Africa.

Keywords: Ubuntu; Ibuanyidanda; Igwebuike; African relational metaphysics; biodiversity conservation; indigenous ecological knowledge

Introduction

Africa faces increasing ecological challenges, including biodiversity loss, deforestation, desertification, pollution, and climate change, threatening ecological sustainability, food security, public health, and socioeconomic development (IPCC, 2023; IPBES, 2019; Kanu, 2022). Although scientific research, technological innovation, and environmental policies have advanced conservation, sustainable environmental stewardship also requires ethical frameworks that shape responsible human–nature relationships (Chemhuru, 2019; Murove, 2004). Western environmental ethics, particularly Leopold's *Land Ethic* and Naess's *Deep Ecology*, have significantly enriched conservation discourse by emphasizing ecological integrity and the intrinsic value of nature (Leopold, 1949; Naess, 1973). However, scholarship recognizes the value of engaging Indigenous knowledge systems and culturally grounded environmental ethics in conservation practice (Chemhuru, 2019; Chigangaidze, 2023).

African relational metaphysics offers a complementary perspective. Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike understand reality in relational terms, emphasizing interconnectedness, complementarity, solidarity, and communal responsibility as foundations of human and ecological well-being (Ramose, 1999; Asouzu, 2011; Kanu, 2017). Rather than displacing Western environmental ethics, these perspectives can enrich conservation

discourse by grounding ecological responsibility in African communal worldviews and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Despite growing interest in Indigenous environmental ethics, limited scholarship has brought Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike together as a coherent philosophical framework for biodiversity conservation. Existing approaches remain predominantly scientific, technological, legal, and policy-oriented, with comparatively less attention to the ontological and ethical foundations of conservation in African philosophy (Chemhuru, 2019; Kanu, 2023). This paper therefore examines these three philosophies as complementary African relational metaphysical resources for rethinking biodiversity conservation and environmental responsibility. Through qualitative conceptual analysis, it argues that they can strengthen contemporary environmental ethics by integrating ecological sustainability with communal responsibility, participatory stewardship, and Indigenous knowledge, thereby contributing a culturally grounded philosophical framework for biodiversity conservation in Africa.

Statement of the Problem

Africa faces significant biodiversity loss manifested in deforestation, desertification, species extinction, and environmental pollution (IPBES, 2019; Kanu, 2022). Although Western environmental ethics, particularly Leopold's *Land Ethic* and Naess's *Deep Ecology*, have shaped contemporary conservation discourse, their application in African contexts calls for greater engagement with Indigenous knowledge, communal values, and culturally grounded environmental stewardship (Chemhuru, 2019; Murove, 2004). Yet limited scholarship has integrated African relational metaphysical frameworks, particularly Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike, into a coherent philosophical approach to biodiversity conservation.

This study addresses this gap by examining how these complementary philosophies can enrich conservation discourse. It argues that African relational worldviews provide an ethically grounded and culturally legitimate framework that complements scientific and policy-oriented strategies while strengthening community participation and environmental responsibility.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

Biodiversity conservation refers to the protection, sustainable management, and restoration of biological diversity, habitats, and the ecological processes that sustain life (IPBES, 2019). Contemporary conservation draws on scientific knowledge, environmental policy, and community participation to address threats such as habitat loss, climate change, pollution, and unsustainable resource use. Western environmental ethics, particularly Leopold's *Land Ethic* and Naess's *Deep Ecology*, provide important normative foundations by emphasizing ecological integrity and the value of nature, while Indigenous knowledge and culturally grounded practices can complement these approaches (Chemhuru, 2019; Leopold, 1949; Naess, 1973).

Environmental responsibility denotes the ethical obligation of individuals, communities, and institutions to protect and sustainably manage the environment for present and future generations. In African thought, this responsibility is fundamentally communal, grounded in reciprocity, solidarity, and the interdependence of human beings, nature, and the spiritual order (Bujo, 2001; Chemhuru, 2019). African relational metaphysics conceives reality as an interconnected whole in which human beings, nature, ancestors, and the spiritual order exist in relationships of mutual dependence and complementarity (Asouzu, 2011; Kanu, 2017; Ramose, 1999). Biodiversity conservation, therefore, becomes not merely a technical or policy

concern but an ethical responsibility toward the wider community of life. This relational orientation provides the philosophical basis for examining Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike as complementary resources for environmental stewardship.

Table 1: Complementary Perspectives on Biodiversity Conservation: Western Environmental Ethics and African Relational Metaphysics

Dimension	Western Environmental Ethics	African Relational Metaphysics	Complementary Contribution to Biodiversity Conservation
Philosophical Orientation	Ecological integrity, intrinsic value of nature, and environmental stewardship (Leopold, 1949; Naess, 1973).	Relational existence, communal responsibility, and harmony among humans, nature, and the spiritual order (Ramose, 1999; Asouzu, 2011; Kanu, 2017).	Combines universal ecological principles with culturally grounded environmental ethics.
Human–Nature Relationship	Humans are members of the wider biotic community with moral obligations toward nature.	Humans exist within an interconnected web involving nature, community, ancestors, and the spiritual world.	Promotes ecological responsibility alongside relational stewardship.
Ethical Foundation	Intrinsic value, stewardship, ecological justice, and sustainability.	Reciprocity, complementarity, solidarity, and communal obligation.	Connects broader environmental ethics with community-based responsibility.

Conservation Approach	Scientific research, environmental policy, regulation, and protected-area management.	Indigenous ecological knowledge, customary institutions, communal participation, and cultural stewardship.	Combines scientific evidence with local knowledge and community participation.
Governance Perspective	Institutional governance through environmental legislation and policy.	Participatory governance through customary authority, communal norms, and collective responsibility.	Supports collaboration between formal institutions and local communities.

Source: Author Created

The comparison demonstrates that Western environmental ethics and African relational metaphysics are better understood as complementary than competing traditions: the former contributes established normative and institutional approaches to conservation, while the latter adds communal, relational, and culturally embedded dimensions that can strengthen their application in African contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in African relational metaphysics, which conceives reality as an interconnected whole sustained by mutual dependence, complementarity, and communal responsibility (Asouzu, 2011; Kanu, 2017; Ramose, 1999). From this perspective, biodiversity conservation is not merely a scientific or policy concern but an ethical responsibility toward the wider community of life. Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike therefore provide complementary lenses for interpreting environmental responsibility and conservation.

Ubuntu emphasizes relational personhood, solidarity, and communal responsibility, expressed in the principle that personhood is constituted through relationships with others (Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2011). Applied to environmental ethics, this relational ethic extends responsibility beyond human communities to the natural world, framing biodiversity conservation as a shared obligation connected to collective well-being. Ibuanyidanda, developed by Asouzu, centres on complementarity and the idea that realities are mutually dependent "missing links" within an interconnected whole (Asouzu, 2011). Applied to biodiversity, this perspective highlights the interdependence of humans, species, and ecosystems and suggests that environmental degradation results from disrupting relationships that sustain ecological life. Igwebuike, developed by Kanu, emphasizes unity in diversity, solidarity, and collective strength (Kanu, 2017). In conservation, it provides a basis for collaborative stewardship by encouraging cooperation among governments, communities, traditional institutions, scientists, and civil society in protecting shared ecological resources. Together, these philosophies provide a coherent relational framework: Ubuntu establishes communal ethical responsibility, Ibuanyidanda explains ecological complementarity, and Igwebuike emphasizes collective and collaborative stewardship. They therefore complement scientific and policy-oriented conservation by strengthening its ethical, cultural, and participatory dimensions.

Empirical Studies

Empirical studies indicate that biodiversity conservation in Africa can be strengthened when scientific approaches are complemented by Indigenous knowledge, customary institutions, and community participation. Sacred landscapes and communal governance systems have long provided practical mechanisms for

environmental stewardship across African societies (Chemhuru, 2019; Murove, 2004). In Ghana, sacred groves protected through customary laws, spiritual beliefs, and communal responsibility continue to support biodiversity conservation, illustrating how cultural values can reinforce formal conservation efforts (Chemhuru, 2019). Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, traditional taboos regulating hunting, tree felling, and river use have similarly supported sustainable resource management by recognizing human–nature interdependence (Murove, 2004). These practices resonate with Ubuntu's communal responsibility and Ibuanyidanda's principle of complementarity.

Nigerian cases further demonstrate this relationship. The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove shows how indigenous religious traditions, customary authority, and community participation can sustain forest biodiversity (Adeyanju et al., 2022; Falade & Taiwo, 2020). In Cross River State, community-based forest conservation involving local communities, traditional institutions, government agencies, and conservation organizations demonstrates the value of collaborative governance for forest management and biodiversity protection (Ite, 1996; Oates et al., 2004). Recent evidence from southeastern Nigeria likewise shows that sacred forests, totemic traditions, and community stewardship can function as nature-based approaches to biodiversity conservation and climate-change mitigation through customary laws and traditional ecological knowledge (Nwafor et al., 2026). These cases demonstrate that African relational principles are reflected in longstanding conservation practices. Ubuntu highlights communal responsibility, Ibuanyidanda ecological interdependence, and Igwebuike collective stewardship. These principles complement scientific and policy-oriented conservation by strengthening its ethical, cultural, and participatory dimensions.

Aim and Objectives

This paper examines how Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike, as African relational metaphysical frameworks, complement contemporary environmental ethics in advancing biodiversity conservation. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between African relational metaphysics and biodiversity conservation;
2. Analyse the contributions of Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike to environmental responsibility;
3. Assess selected African conservation practices through these philosophical perspectives; and
4. Demonstrate how African relational metaphysics complements contemporary environmental ethics in promoting collaborative conservation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual methodology informed by critical hermeneutics and comparative philosophy. Conceptual research is appropriate to philosophical inquiry because it facilitates the critical analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of ideas rather than empirical measurement (Stebbins, 2001). The study therefore examines African relational metaphysics as a philosophical framework for biodiversity conservation. Critical hermeneutics guides the interpretation of African philosophical texts and Indigenous knowledge traditions. Drawing on Gadamer (1975) and Ricoeur (1981), it considers the historical and cultural contexts of meaning while critically examining the assumptions underlying environmental responsibility and conservation. This approach is used to interpret Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike as resources for ecological stewardship.

Comparative philosophy provides the basis for examining convergence and complementarity between African relational metaphysics and Western environmental ethics, particularly Leopold's *Land Ethic* and Naess's *Deep Ecology* (Mall, 1998).

Through conceptual and comparative analysis, the study relates communal responsibility, complementarity, and collaborative stewardship to contemporary biodiversity conservation. The methodology thus enables a philosophically grounded assessment of how African relational perspectives can complement scientific and policy-oriented approaches to environmental governance in Africa.

Discussion and Findings

The analysis indicates that Africa's biodiversity crisis, including deforestation in the Congo Basin, land degradation in the Sahel, and climate-related pressures, requires conservation approaches that combine scientific knowledge with culturally grounded ethical frameworks (Global Forest Watch, 2025; UNCCD, 2024). While contemporary environmental ethics and conservation policies provide important scientific and normative foundations, the findings suggest that their effectiveness can be strengthened through Indigenous ecological knowledge, communal institutions, and participatory governance.

A central finding is that African relational metaphysics provides a complementary ethical and ontological framework for biodiversity conservation. Western environmental ethics contributes principles concerning ecological integrity and the value of nature, while Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike deepen these principles through communal responsibility, ecological complementarity, and collaborative stewardship. The empirical cases examined; including sacred groves in Ghana, Shona environmental traditions in Zimbabwe, the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, community-based forest management in Cross River State, and sacred forests in southeastern Nigeria, demonstrate that these relational principles are reflected in living conservation practices grounded in customary institutions and Indigenous ecological knowledge (Adeyanju et al., 2022; Nwafor et al., 2026).

The findings further show that conservation is more likely to achieve durable outcomes when technical interventions are accompanied by local participation and ownership. The Great Green Wall illustrates the importance of community engagement in large-scale ecological restoration (UNCCD, 2024), while continuing deforestation in the Congo Basin highlights the limitations of approaches that inadequately incorporate local and Indigenous governance structures (Global Forest Watch, 2025). These cases support the argument that scientific conservation is not weakened but strengthened when complemented by culturally legitimate institutions and ethical frameworks.

Accordingly, African relational metaphysics should not replace contemporary conservation science or environmental policy but should complement them. Ubuntu provides the ethical emphasis on communal responsibility; Ibuanyidanda offers an ontological account of ecological interdependence and complementarity; and Igwebuike emphasizes collective strength and collaborative stewardship. Their integration with scientific and policy-oriented approaches therefore offers a more holistic, culturally responsive, and participatory framework for biodiversity conservation in Africa.

Conclusion

Africa's biodiversity crisis demands conservation approaches that are scientifically effective, ethically grounded, and culturally legitimate. This study has argued that African relational metaphysics provides an important ethical and ontological foundation for enriching contemporary biodiversity conservation. Rather than treating African and Western traditions as competing paradigms, it demonstrates their complementarity: contemporary environmental ethics provides important scientific and normative foundations, while Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, and Igwebuike deepen

conservation through communal responsibility, ecological complementarity, and collaborative stewardship.

The study's principal contribution is to demonstrate that these African relational philosophies are not merely indigenous intellectual traditions but enduring frameworks with contemporary relevance for biodiversity conservation and environmental governance. Their integration with conservation science, environmental policy, and Indigenous ecological knowledge can strengthen the cultural legitimacy, community participation, and ethical foundations of sustainable environmental practice.

The study therefore concludes that biodiversity conservation in Africa is best advanced through constructive dialogue among scientific knowledge, environmental policy, Indigenous knowledge, and African relational metaphysics. Such integration offers a more holistic, participatory, and context-sensitive approach to environmental governance while affirming biodiversity conservation as both an ecological and ethical responsibility.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, this study recommends that African governments, regional organizations, and environmental agencies integrate the ethical and ontological insights of African relational metaphysics into biodiversity conservation policies and governance frameworks. Conservation strategies should complement technocratic approaches with principles of communal responsibility, ecological complementarity, and collaborative stewardship. Conservation programmes should systematically document and preserve Indigenous ecological knowledge, including sacred groves, customary conservation practices, traditional ecological institutions, and community-based resource management, while prioritizing participatory approaches that

strengthen collaboration among governments, local communities, traditional authorities, scientists, and civil society.

Educational institutions, researchers, environmental practitioners, and policymakers should also promote interdisciplinary engagement among African relational metaphysics, contemporary environmental ethics, and conservation science. Such collaboration can support the development of culturally responsive, scientifically informed, and ethically grounded approaches to biodiversity conservation in Africa.

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PAPER 3

AFRO-ECOFEMINIST NARRATIVES: WOMEN'S RESISTANCE TO OIL EXPLOITATION IN THE NIGER DELTA

Francisca Ogechi Okwulehie
Department of Philosophy
University of Lagos
franokwulehie@gmail.com

Abstract

Despite growing scholarship on ecofeminism and environmental justice in the Niger Delta, limited attention has been paid to how women's lived experiences and oral testimonies, read alongside literary narratives, generate ecological knowledge and contribute to environmental justice. This study uses Afro-ecofeminism as its analytical framework and adopts a phenomenologically informed hermeneutic reading of Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow, Tanure Ojaide's The Activist, and women's oral testimonies from Gbaraun, Bayelsa State. Through thematic and comparative narrative analysis, it examines how ecological degradation is lived, remembered, narrated, and resisted. The findings articulate that women's oral accounts and literary representations document ecological violence, preserve Indigenous ecological knowledge, and challenge extractive capitalism, patriarchal governance, and colonial legacies. The paper positions storytelling as an Afro-ecofeminist environmental praxis through which embodied experience becomes ecological knowledge and through which community-centred, gender-responsive pathways to environmental justice are imagined.

Keywords: Afro-ecofeminism; Environmental Justice; Feminist Political Ecology; Environmental Humanities; Black Ecologies; Niger Delta

Introduction

Afro-ecofeminism links ecological degradation to gendered, colonial, and capitalist relations of power while centring African Indigenous knowledge, communal ethics, and women's environmental experience (Tamale, 2020; Juma, 2025; Randriamaro, 2024). Rather than treating women only as victims of environmental harm, it recognises them as producers of ecological knowledge and agents of environmental resistance. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Niger Delta, where oil extraction has disrupted livelihoods, cultural relations with land and water, and community authority over natural resources.

Recent literary studies have sharpened gendered ecocritical readings of the Niger Delta. Okolie and Ukwueze (2023), for example, centre women's precarious position and agency in *Yellow-Yellow*, while Nwoga (2026) examines maternal imagery in Niger Delta eco-poetry. Such studies remain primarily textual. Less attention has been paid to what emerges when literary representations are read alongside women's oral testimonies as complementary, but not identical, forms of ecological knowledge. This study addresses that gap by bringing fiction into dialogue with lived accounts from an oil-impacted community.

Accordingly, this study reads Kaine Agary's (2010) *Yellow-Yellow*, Tanure Ojaide's (2016) *The Activist*, and women's oral testimonies from Gbaraun, Bayelsa State, through an Afro-ecofeminist and phenomenologically informed framework. The oral testimonies are drawn from focus-group discussions reported by Ecofem Tales Environmental Foundation (2025); they are therefore treated as mediated lived accounts rather than as primary interviews conducted for this study.

The study is guided by one central research question: How do literary representations and women's oral testimonies, read through

an Afro-ecofeminist lens, contribute to understandings of environmental justice in the Niger Delta? The paper first outlines Afro-ecofeminism and the extractive history of the Niger Delta, then reads *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and the Gbaraun testimonies comparatively. It concludes the analysis with a phenomenological critique of embodied, place-based experience before considering storytelling as a pathway to environmental justice.

Afro-Ecofeminism as an Analytical Framework

Afro-ecofeminism centres African Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, and gendered experience in analysing the relationship between environmental justice, gender equity, and the decolonisation of ecological thought (Juma, 2025). As an African-centred strand of ecofeminist thought, Afro-ecofeminism situates environmental injustice within intersecting histories of colonialism, extractive capitalism, patriarchy, and Indigenous dispossession. Tamale (2020) treats Afro-ecofeminism as part of a decolonial feminist project that reclaims African knowledge, communal ethics, and social relations from colonial epistemic hierarchies. Environmental degradation is therefore read not simply as ecological decline but as a political and historical process that simultaneously exploits natural resources and marginalises communities (Malik et al., 2026).

Randriamaro (2024) further places African ecofeminisms within struggles against neoliberal extractivism and "green colonialism," while Juma (2025) emphasises relational and eco-spiritual dimensions of African ecological ethics. These approaches reject the idea that women are naturally connected to nature, recognising instead that their environmental knowledge is shaped by their social and material experiences. This framework is especially useful in the Niger Delta, where women's everyday relations with land, water, subsistence, and community expose the gendered

consequences of ecological destruction while also preserving knowledge of environmental change. Environmental justice therefore encompasses not only the repair of ecological harm but also cultural continuity, gender equity, recognition of marginalised knowledge, and meaningful community participation (Schlosberg, 2007; Whyte, 2011).

This study uses Afro-ecofeminism to interpret *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and women's oral testimonies from Gbaraun as distinct but dialoguing forms of environmental narration. The framework makes it possible to compare literary representation with lived testimony without collapsing one into the other.

Niger Delta: Oil Exploration and Environmental Exploitation

The Niger Delta is one of the world's major oil-producing regions and one of its most environmentally damaged wetlands. Decades of oil spills, gas flaring, contaminated waterways, and loss of agricultural land have disrupted ecosystems and resource-based livelihoods, producing persistent environmental and socio-economic inequalities (Azaiki, 2003; Asuni, 2009). Farming, fishing, and other natural-resource-based livelihoods historically sustained local economies and Indigenous ecological knowledge. Colonial resource extraction and post-independence centralisation of petroleum ownership progressively alienated host communities from land and resources (Aniefiok et al., 2013; Asuni, 2009). Oil wealth has consequently coexisted with pollution, poverty, and political marginalisation in producing communities (Bodo, 2019).

Women are particularly affected because many livelihoods and household responsibilities depend on farming, fishing, and access to water (Lele, 2023; Odoemene, 2011). Pollution threatens both economic survival and ecological knowledge embedded in these

practices (Nwankwo, 2023). These burdens make oil exploitation simultaneously ecological, social, and gendered (Jike, 2004; Odoemene, 2011). From an Afro-ecofeminist perspective, these experiences are not only accounts of victimisation. They also reveal situated ecological knowledge and forms of resistance. This historical context frames the comparative readings of *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and the Gbaraun testimonies that follow.

Afro-Ecofeminist Readings of Literary Environmental Narratives

Yellow-Yellow: Storytelling as Ecological Resistance

Kaine Agary's (2010) *Yellow-Yellow* presents environmental injustice as a lived condition in which ecological destruction, gender inequality, and socio-economic exclusion reinforce one another. Through Zilayefa, polluted land and waterways are connected to constrained livelihoods, mobility, identity, and future possibilities. Environmental violence thus extends beyond damaged landscapes to the social worlds built around them.

The novel also exposes structural inequalities in Nigeria's oil economy. Oil wealth is extracted from the Niger Delta while local communities remain excluded through inadequate infrastructure, education, and access to opportunity. Zilayefa's observation that scholarship opportunities existed but were practically inaccessible because no one in her community knew how to obtain them illustrates how environmental injustice is reproduced through institutional neglect and unequal access to information (Agary, 2010). The point is significant for an Afro-ecofeminist reading: extraction produces not only ecological loss but unequal life chances (Omuta, 2013), particularly for young women whose futures are shaped by the same political economy that degrades their environment (Acey, 2016).

Agary also presents the female body as a site where ecological and

patriarchal violence converge. Zilayefa's experiences of sexual exploitation, exclusion, and identity conflict parallel the commodification of the Niger Delta, revealing how extractive and patriarchal logics can operate together (Randriamaro, 2024). This parallel should not be read as an essentialist equation of women with nature. Rather, it exposes how bodies, land, and labour can be rendered available for use by unequal systems of power. The novel therefore connects intimate vulnerability to the wider political economy of oil without reducing Zilayefa to a symbol of the environment.

Beyond documenting suffering, *Yellow-Yellow* turns memory and everyday survival into ecological witnessing. Zilayefa's narrated experience preserves environmental change as social memory and makes visible the forms of knowledge generated through living with degradation. In this sense, storytelling becomes both testimony and resistance (Tamale, 2020).

The Activist: Environmental Justice as Collective Resistance

Tanure Ojaide's (2006) *The Activist* locates ecological degradation within the interconnected structures of oil extraction, political corruption, and the marginalisation of Niger Delta communities. Unlike *Yellow-Yellow*'s (2010) intimate focus on Zilayefa, the novel adopts a broader collective register, representing resistance through community mobilisation, intellectual and student activism, grassroots action, and women's environmental organising. Ebi Emasheyi, an educated woman and wife of the Activist, emerges as an important female figure in this resistance, participating in women's responses to the environmental and social crises affecting the Niger Delta. Ojaide's depiction of disappearing rivers, declining fisheries, and the loss of traditional food sources signals not only material damage but also the erosion of cultural memory and ecological knowledge built through long interaction

with the environment (Ojaide, 2006; Randriamaro, 2024). This wider social scale complements Agary's embodied perspective by showing that environmental injustice is experienced both personally and institutionally.

The novel critiques collusion among corporations, political elites, and state institutions while showing how host communities are excluded from decisions over resources extracted from ancestral lands. Characters such as Chief Goodluck Ede and military officials embody a political order in which environmental costs are displaced onto local communities while benefits accumulate elsewhere (Ojaide, 2006). Chief Ishaka's insistence that those who depend on the rivers are best placed to protect them foregrounds the political exclusion of local ecological knowledge. From an Afro-ecofeminist perspective, environmental governance is therefore also a struggle over whose knowledge counts, who participates in decision-making, and whose relationship to place is treated as legitimate (Juma, 2025). Violence against women during conflicts over oil resources in the novel further reveals how ecological degradation, militarisation, and patriarchal violence can converge within extractive economies (Tamale, 2020; Randriamaro, 2024).

Afro-Ecofeminist Analysis of Oral Testimonies

Oral testimonies from Gbaraun provide a more immediate account of how oil exploration and recurrent spills enter women's livelihoods, health, and cultural life. In focus-group discussions reported by Ecofem Tales Environmental Foundation (2025), women describe contaminated fishing nets, unsafe waterways, dead fish, disappearing crayfish, and declining crops such as ogbono and plantain. Ama's account of oil coating fishing nets and making navigation and fishing increasingly difficult turns “pollution” from an abstract environmental phenomenon into an interruption of everyday labour and food security (Ecofem Tales, 2025). These accounts show how ecological damage undermines

productive and reproductive labour while eroding knowledge tied to fishing, farming, and household subsistence (Ecofem Tales, 2025; Juma, 2025).

The testimonies also describe cultural, spiritual, and health-related loss. Pollution has damaged sacred river sites associated with the Woyin festival and Egbesu tradition, while contaminated water is linked by participants to disease and child mortality (Ecofem Tales, 2025; Ifeka, 2006; Courson & Odijie, 2020). Examined with Juma's (2025) relational eco-spiritual ethics, these accounts show that ecological destruction can also erode cultural identity and Indigenous systems of environmental responsibility.

These testimonies position women as witnesses, knowledge producers, and agents of environmental resistance. Their narratives function as living ecological archives, preserving and transmitting community-based ecological knowledge across generations (Agboola et al., 2023). They also resonate with Black ecologies, which recognise Black communities as producers of ecological knowledge rather than merely as sites of environmental vulnerability (Bruno, 2024). Storytelling can therefore function as a decolonial practice through which communities preserve ecological knowledge, contest dispossession, and articulate alternative relationships with their environments.

A Phenomenological Critique: Embodied Experience, Place, and Decolonial Ecofeminism

A phenomenological reading shifts attention from environmental degradation as an external condition to how it is lived through bodies, routines, memory, and place. In *Yellow-Yellow* (Agary, 2010), Zilayefa's experiences are shaped by polluted landscapes and gendered social relations; in *The Activist* (Ojaide, 2016), ecological loss is expressed through disrupted rivers, livelihoods,

and communal life. The Gbaraun testimonies (Ecofem Tales, 2025) concretise this lived dimension by showing how pollution renders fishing, farming, navigation, drinking water, ritual practice, and care difficult or unsafe. This emphasis on situated experience aligns with Akoleowo's (2025) argument that African feminist phenomenology must begin from women's place-specific experiences. Oyěwùmí's (1997) critique of the uncritical application of Western gender categories to African societies further supports a decolonial approach that takes local social and epistemic contexts seriously, while Tamale (2020), Randriamaro (2024), and Juma (2025) challenge epistemic hierarchies and foreground relational, eco-spiritual meanings of land and water. These perspectives reveal that ecological harm disrupts embodied relationships, cultural memory, and everyday life.

A key phenomenological tension concerns scale and voice. *Yellow-Yellow* (Agary, 2010), presents environmental precarity through the intimate trajectory of a young woman, whereas *The Activist* (Ojaide, 2016), adopts a broader collective and institutional register that includes women's organised environmental activism, and the Ecofem Tales Environmental Foundation (2025) report condenses several women's voices in focus-group testimony. These differences demonstrate how narrative form shapes what becomes perceptible as environmental experience. While fiction can connect individual suffering to wider structures and imaginaries, it also selects and aestheticises experience in contrast, testimony foregrounds shared concerns but may minimise disagreement or experiences that fall outside dominant themes (Bruno, 2024). A decolonial approach therefore avoids treating African women's experiences as homogeneous and instead attends to the diverse social, cultural, and ecological contexts through which their experiences and knowledge are produced (Nyabola, 2024; Tamale, 2024).

Phenomenological interpretation requires methodological reflexivity, particularly when the researcher works across different forms of representation and does not have direct access to lived experience (Clancy, 2013; Ash, 2025). This consideration is especially important in an African research context, where knowledge is shaped by culturally situated practices, oral traditions, communal relationships, and histories of colonialism and unequal power relations (Wiredu, 1996; Hountondji, 1997; Chilisa, 2012). The oral testimonies in this study were produced through focus groups conducted by a non-governmental organisation, whereas the novels are literary representations shaped by individual authors. The comparison is therefore interpretive rather than exhaustive. Its value lies in tracing convergences and differences across narrative forms: fiction renders environmental structures, meanings, and imaginaries visible, while testimony anchors the analysis in reported experience. In this sense, a decolonial Afro-ecofeminist phenomenology asks not only what environmental damage occurs, but how it is experienced, whose knowledge is recognised, whose voices are heard, and how affected communities understand, resist, and pursue ecological repair.

Literary Narratives and Women's Oral Testimonies as a Pathway to Environmental Justice

Yellow-Yellow, The Activist, and the Gbaraun testimonies demonstrate that environmental narratives can function as ecological archives and forms of political knowledge. They are capable of preserving memories of polluted rivers, degraded farmland, disrupted fisheries, and cultural loss while challenging accounts of oil extraction that reduce development to revenue and infrastructure. In the oral testimonies especially, women emerge as custodians and interpreters of environmental change rather than passive victims (Tamale, 2020; Juma, 2025).

Storytelling also exposes the political structures that produce environmental injustice. Across fiction and testimony, ecological harm is connected to colonial legacies, state-corporate power, patriarchal governance, and the exclusion of communities from decisions over land and resources (Randriamaro, 2024; Mensah, 2024). Accounts of polluted sacred rivers further show that environmental injustice includes cultural and spiritual dispossession, making ecological damage simultaneously material and epistemic (Kanu, 2023; Juma, 2025).

Environmental justice therefore requires more than remediation of polluted ecosystems. The narratives examined here point toward accountability, ecological restoration, recognition of Indigenous ecological knowledge, and meaningful community participation. Their contribution is not that fiction and testimony are interchangeable, but that their dialogue can reveal how environmental harm is lived, remembered, interpreted, and resisted across different narrative forms (Bruno, 2024).

Conclusion

This study argues that literary representations and women's oral testimonies can be read together as complementary Afro-ecofeminist forms of environmental knowledge. Across *Yellow-Yellow*, *The Activist*, and the Gbaraun accounts, ecological degradation is inseparable from gendered marginalisation, cultural dispossession, and the erosion of Indigenous knowledge. Storytelling preserves ecological memory, contests extractive models of development, and makes visible community claims to participation and repair. At the same time, a phenomenologically informed reading cautions against treating fiction or secondary testimonies as transparent access to experience. Their value lies in the embodied, place-based meanings they disclose and in the political questions they raise about whose knowledge counts.

Environmental justice in the Niger Delta therefore requires ecological restoration together with recognition of Indigenous knowledge, women's lived experience, and community authority in environmental decision-making.

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PAPER 4

ALA AS ECOLOGICAL MOTHER: IGBO RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW AND THE ETHICS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Anthonia Chinyere Ephraim-Chukwu
Department of Igbo, African and Communication Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka
ac.ephraim-chukwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Africa's escalating ecological crisis, marked by deforestation, erosion, biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate instability, has sparked increasing calls for environmental approaches grounded in indigenous knowledge. This study explores the Igbo concept of Ala, the Earth deity seen as an ecological mother, and its relevance to today's environmental sustainability debates in Africa. In Igbo cosmology, Ala is more than a spiritual figure; she is the moral guardian of land, fertility, social harmony, and ecological balance. Traditional reverence for Ala shaped human-nature relationships through taboos, rituals, sacred groves, moral sanctions, and communal ethics that discouraged environmental harm and promoted ecological stewardship. Using Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and African Environmental Ethics as frameworks, this qualitative and interdisciplinary study analyzes oral traditions, ethnographic records, religious practices, and scholarly literature on Igbo religion and ecology. It argues that modernization, urbanization, and religious shifts have eroded indigenous ecological values, weakening cultural systems that regulated environmental care and contributing to degradation. Recovering and reinterpreting Ala's ethical principles offers culturally rooted pathways for sustainable governance and biodiversity conservation in Africa. The study concludes that indigenous African religious philosophies provide valuable ecological insights that can complement modern environmental policies and global sustainability goals.

Keywords: *Ala, Igbo Cosmology, African Traditional Religion, Environmental Sustainability, Indigenous Knowledge.*

Introduction

The world faces increasing ecological challenges threatening both humanity and the natural environment. Issues like climate change, pollution, deforestation, desertification, flooding, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion demand urgent and interdisciplinary responses. These crises are especially severe in Africa due to rapid urban growth, industrial exploitation, weak environmental governance, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems. Consequently, scholars, environmentalists, policymakers, and development experts advocate for alternative ecological paradigms that foster sustainable human-nature relationships. African indigenous religious worldviews offer rich philosophical and ethical perspectives on environmental sustainability and responsibility.

Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, the concept of *Ala* holds a central place in cosmology, morality, religion, and community life. Known also as *Ani, Ana,* or the Earth Mother, *Ala* is revered as the deity of the earth, morality, fertility, productivity, and social harmony. Rather than viewing the earth as a mere resource, Igbo metaphysics sees it as a sacred living entity deserving respect, protection, and ethical engagement. *Ala's* worldview emphasizes deep connections among humans, nature, ancestors, divinities, and the spiritual universe. Accordingly, traditional Igbo environmental ethics were embedded in religious beliefs, rituals, taboos, and communal values guiding human conduct toward land, forests, rivers, animals, and all natural elements.

The sacredness of *Ala* functioned as an indigenous ecological mechanism fostering conservation and social control. Certain forests, rivers, animals, and farmlands were protected by cultural

prohibitions and spiritual sanctions to maintain cosmic balance. Activities such as reckless tree cutting, water pollution, killing sacred animals, and misusing communal lands were seen as offenses against *Ala* and the community. This religious-ecological framework enabled sustainable practices that preserved biodiversity, balanced agriculture, shared responsibility, and harmonious coexistence with the environment.

However, colonialism, Christianity, globalization, modernization, and capitalist exploitation have weakened indigenous ecological values across many African societies. The desacralization of nature and decline of traditional religious institutions have contributed to environmental degradation, irresponsibility, and resource commodification. In Nigeria, environmental problems like erosion, flooding, pollution, deforestation, and unsustainable land use continue to threaten livelihoods and ecological stability, especially in Igbo areas. Despite these challenges, indigenous ecological philosophies such as the *Ala* worldview remain underexplored in mainstream environmental discussions and policy.

This study thus examines *Ala* as an ecological mother within the Igbo religious worldview and its relevance to modern environmental sustainability in Africa. It argues that the ethical principles in *Ala* worship offer vital indigenous frameworks for ecological awareness, environmental justice, and sustainable development. By revisiting Igbo cosmology's ecological dimensions, the study shows that African traditional religions are not only spiritual institutions but also rich repositories of environmental ethics and conservation knowledge.

The paper is organized into five sections: a literature review highlighting the research gap; presentation of the theoretical framework; description of the qualitative interdisciplinary methodology; findings addressing five research questions on Ala's

meaning, ecological values, traditional conservation, modernization's impact, and contemporary relevance; and a conclusion discussing implications for ecological justice and governance and recommendations for integrating indigenous values into African environmental policies.

Literature Review

The literature on environmental sustainability increasingly acknowledges the significance of indigenous worldviews and traditional knowledge systems in shaping human–nature relationships. Concepts such as Ala, Igbo cosmology, African Traditional Religion (ATR), environmental sustainability, and Indigenous Knowledge systems have gained scholarly attention for elucidating ecological ethics in African societies.

Concept of Ala in Igbo Cosmology

Ala, also known as *Ali, Ani, or Ana,* is revered as the Earth Mother and a principal deity in the Igbo pantheon, integral to cosmology, morality, religion, and social organization. Scholars like Mbiti (1969) and Arinze (1970) observe that African cosmology perceives the universe as a sacred, interconnected order where divinities, ancestors, humans, and nature coexist. *Ala* functions as the spiritual custodian of land, fertility, morality, and communal harmony. Isichei (1976) explains that the earth in Igbo thought is not merely physical but a sacred entity with spiritual and moral authority. The reverence for Ala reflects the belief that the earth sustains human life and serves as the resting place of ancestors. Metuh (1987) further notes that *Ala* embodies the community's ethical conscience, with offences against social morals interpreted as offences against Ala. Taboos on murder, incest, land pollution, and desecration traditionally attracted spiritual sanctions.

Ala's cosmological importance extends to agriculture and communal prosperity. Uchendu (1965) highlights that agricultural productivity depended on Ala's favour, promoting careful

stewardship of farmlands and natural resources. Through rituals, sacrifices, and festivals, the Igbo nurtured a spiritual connection to nature that reinforced ecological responsibility and social cohesion.

Igbo Cosmology and Human-Nature Relationship

Igbo cosmology emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, spirituality, and ancestors. Unlike mechanistic modern views, the traditional Igbo see nature as sacred and spiritually animated. Tempels (1959) argues that African ontology is grounded in the philosophy of vital force, where all beings possess spiritual essence and relational significance. Rivers, forests, mountains, animals, and farmlands are spiritually significant and command reverence. This worldview established moral guidelines for human-environment interactions. Sacred forests and rivers were protected as abodes of spirits and deities. Mbon (1991) notes that many African societies developed environmental conservation through religious taboos and customary laws prohibiting indiscriminate resource destruction. In Igbo society, sacred groves preservation, hunting restrictions, and pollution sanctions reflect the spiritualization of ecological spaces.

Communalism in Igbo cosmology fostered collective environmental responsibility, viewing the environment as communal heritage for present and future generations. This aligns with contemporary principles of sustainability, stewardship, and intergenerational justice.

African Traditional Religion and Environmental Sustainability

ATR constitutes a major indigenous system through which African societies historically interpreted and managed their relationship with nature. Mbiti (1969) notes that religion permeates all aspects of African life, including environmental practices. Nature is regarded as sacred, intimately linked to spiritual forces, ancestors,

and divinities. Scholars like Kanu (2018) and Nwala (1985) argue that African indigenous religions embed ethical principles that promote environmental sustainability. Mechanisms such as rituals, sacred spaces, seasonal restrictions, and moral sanctions preserved biodiversity long before formal conservation policies. Among the Igbo, reverence for Ala encouraged sustainable agriculture and regulated land use, with prohibitions on farming during sacred days, pollution, and destruction of sacred forests serving ecological purposes.

However, colonialism and missionary activities contributed to the decline of indigenous environmental ethics, with Christianity and Western modernity desacralizing traditional systems. This has led to environmental degradation and ecological disconnection in contemporary African communities.

Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Conservation

Indigenous knowledge encompasses the cumulative local experiences, beliefs, practices, and skills developed through prolonged environmental interaction. Warren (1991) highlights that indigenous knowledge provides context-specific sustainable management solutions, transmitted orally via myths, rituals, folklore, and communal customs. In Africa, indigenous ecological knowledge has traditionally guided farming, water management, forest conservation, and biodiversity preservation. Dei (2000) describes it as holistic, integrating spirituality, morality, ecology, and communal welfare. Among the Igbo, ecological knowledge embedded in cultural and religious practices related to Ala includes restrictions on over-farming, protection of sacred species, rotational farming, and communal land ethics.

Contemporary scholars increasingly recognize indigenous knowledge's role in addressing global ecological crises. The United Nations and other organizations advocate for indigenous inclusion

in environmental governance and climate adaptation. Nonetheless, indigenous African ecological philosophies remain underutilized within formal policies. Urbanization, globalization, and cultural displacement have further eroded traditional ecological consciousness, especially among younger generations, underscoring the need to reintegrate indigenous ethics into sustainability frameworks.

Human Ecology and African Environmental Ethics

Human ecology studies the relationship between societies and their physical environment, examining how cultural values, economic systems, and social institutions shape environmental interactions. African philosophy roots human ecology in communalism, spirituality, and coexistence with nature. Unlike anthropocentric Western ethics prioritizing human dominance, African environmental ethics emphasize harmony, balance, reciprocity, and respect for all life forms (Ugwuanyi, 2011). Nature is a sacred partner within the cosmic order. The Igbo conception of Ala embodies this ethic, portraying the earth as a spiritual mother and moral authority. Humans are expected to live within ecological boundaries established by communal customs and divine principles. Environmental violations are moral offenses disrupting social and cosmic harmony.

Contemporary environmental crises have renewed interest in indigenous ecological ethics as alternative sustainable development frameworks, with African cosmological values contributing to biodiversity conservation, climate justice, and community-based environmental management.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses a qualitative research approach, which is well-suited for exploring cultural beliefs, religious worldviews, indigenous ecological practices, and philosophical views on environmental sustainability in Igbo society. Qualitative methods

allow for a deep understanding of the meanings, values, symbols, and social realities within indigenous religious systems and ecological ethics. Specifically, the study employs a documentary research design. This involves systematically collecting, examining, and interpreting both written and oral materials related to Ala, Igbo cosmology, African Traditional Religion, indigenous ecological knowledge, environmental ethics, and sustainability practices. The data primarily come from secondary sources such as textbooks, journal articles, conference papers, theses, dissertations, archival documents, and relevant scholarly publications. Additionally, oral traditions, proverbs, myths, ritual practices, and ethnographic accounts regarding the worship and significance of Ala in Igbo society are carefully analyzed.

Using the frameworks of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) and African Environmental Ethics, the study analyzes these sources to explore Igbo religion and ecology. The findings are presented in accordance with the research questions guiding the study.

Summary and Lacuna in Literature

Extensive literature exists on Igbo religion and African Traditional Religion, particularly on cosmology, morality, rituals, and communal life. Likewise, studies on environmental sustainability and indigenous knowledge highlight traditional ecological practices in Africa. However, there is limited scholarly focus specifically on Ala's ecological role as an environmental ethic within Igbo cosmology.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach, which is well-suited for exploring cultural beliefs, religious worldviews, indigenous ecological practices, and philosophical views on environmental sustainability in Igbo society. Qualitative methods allow for a deep understanding of the meanings, values, symbols,

and social realities within indigenous religious systems and ecological ethics. Specifically, the study employs a documentary research design. This involves systematically collecting, examining, and interpreting both written and oral materials related to Ala, Igbo cosmology, African Traditional Religion, indigenous ecological knowledge, environmental ethics, and sustainability practices. The data primarily come from secondary sources such as textbooks, journal articles, conference papers, theses, dissertations, archival documents, and relevant scholarly publications. Additionally, oral traditions, proverbs, myths, ritual practices, and ethnographic accounts regarding the worship and significance of Ala in Igbo society are carefully analyzed. Using the frameworks of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) and African Environmental Ethics, the study analyzes these sources to explore Igbo religion and ecology. The findings are presented in accordance with the research questions guiding the study.

Ala, Igbo Cosmology, and the Sacredness of Nature

This study shows that *Ala* holds a central role in Igbo cosmology as the Earth Mother, moral guardian, and protector of fertility, social order, and community life. This aligns with the wider African religious view, which sees the physical and spiritual worlds as deeply connected. Scholars like Mbiti (1969) and Metuh (1987) highlight how African religious consciousness shapes all aspects of life and emphasizes interconnectedness. In this context, the earth is not just a physical resource but carries religious, moral, and communal importance. The Igbo concept of Ala offers a vital foundation for understanding how religion relates to ecology. Isichei (1976) points out land's importance in Igbo culture, while Nwala (1985) explores the philosophical links between humans, community, and cosmic order in Igbo thought. This study builds on these ideas by examining Ala through ecological ethics.

From the perspective of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK), this worldview is a culturally passed understanding of the

environment, where human survival depends on maintaining harmony with nature. Warren (1991) argues that indigenous knowledge develops through ongoing interaction between communities and their environments. Dei (2000) stresses its holistic and context-driven nature. Thus, the Igbo relationship with Ala is more than religious belief—it's a knowledge system connecting spirituality, morality, land use, community welfare, and environmental responsibility. An elder describes this worldview: "For our people, *Ala* is not just the ground we walk on. The land feeds us, receives our dead, and sustains the community. That's why our elders taught us we must treat the earth with respect. Offending the land is not just harming soil; it disrupts the order that holds the community together." This shows that *Ala* forms an indigenous philosophical basis for viewing nature as morally significant, consistent with African Environmental Ethics, which stresses relationality, communal responsibility, and harmony between humans and nature (Ugwuanyi, 2011).

Ala and Indigenous Environmental Ethics

The sacred status of land created clear expectations for how people should treat natural resources. Ala's religious importance translated into cultural rules, taboos, rituals, and communal sanctions. This finding goes beyond the simple idea that "Igbo people respected nature." It shows that respect was institutionalized through social and religious systems. Sacred forests, rivers, groves, and certain species were protected due to religious significance. These restrictions show that environmental responsibility was culturally embedded rather than relying solely on formal laws.

Arinze (1970) highlights the role of sacrifice and ritual in Igbo religion, while Metuh (1987) discusses how religious beliefs influence moral behavior in African traditions. Seen ecologically, these rituals set boundaries around resource use. Warren (1991) explains indigenous knowledge as practical knowledge gained through long-term environmental interaction. What modern

perspectives might call "religious taboos" often served conservation purposes. An elder shares: "There were places our fathers warned us not to enter or cut trees because they belonged to *Ala* or the spirits. You couldn't just cut any tree. There were rules. People feared consequences but, more importantly, they understood some places must remain untouched." This shows that environmental ethics were embedded within religious structures. African Environmental Ethics helps explain why environmental responsibility was understood collectively and morally, not just economically or legally.

Traditional Religious Practices and Environmental Conservation

Sacred spaces, activity restrictions, communal rules, and agricultural practices protected natural resources. Your analysis identifies sacred forests, rivers, rotational farming, fallowing, sacred days, and limits on exploitation as key components of this indigenous system. Viewed through the IEK framework, indigenous ecological knowledge includes not just theoretical understanding but practical management of resources. Dei (2000) argues this knowledge deserves recognition as a legitimate system, not a lesser form of Western science. The traditional Igbo system links belief and practice: belief in Ala's sacredness encouraged limits on resource use, enforced by communal institutions. A traditional farmer explains: "Our people knew the land needed rest. We didn't farm every place continuously. There were days when some activities stopped. Elders knew this helped keep the land healthy and the community in harmony with *Ala.*"

Thus, Igbo environmental conservation was religious, cultural, economic, and ecological. To strengthen the analysis, the study should show how IEK explains the loss of ecological knowledge transmission and how African Environmental Ethics explains the weakening of moral obligations toward nature. This adds analytical depth, showing the theories in action.

Erosion of Indigenous Ecological Values and Environmental Responsibility

Social changes have weakened indigenous ecological institutions. Colonialism, Christianity, urbanization, Western education, globalization, and market development have altered traditional ways of passing ecological knowledge and values. Through the IEK lens, this knowledge is a cumulative system of practices, values, and rules developed through deep interaction with the environment (Warren, 1991; Dei, 2000). For the Igbo, ecological knowledge was woven into religious institutions, oral traditions, customs, rituals, taboos, and teaching across generations. When these institutions lose authority, the transmission of knowledge weakens. This is clear in the declining role of religious institutions linked to *Ala.* In Igbo thought, *Ala* is not only worshipped but serves as a moral authority guiding the human-land relationship. Metuh (1987) and Mbiti (1969) emphasize how African religion deeply shapes morality and social life. When these religious authorities wane, customary rules governing environmental behaviour lose power.

From African Environmental Ethics perspective, this means the moral bond between humans and nature weakens. The Igbo worldview sees people as part of a community that includes ancestors, spirits, and the natural world. Ala's principle demands restraint and responsibility in using the earth. When replaced by individualistic or purely economic views, this ethical foundation erodes. An elder notes: “We taught children what they could and couldn't do to the land. Today, many young people don't know these rules. Sacred places are being built over or used differently. The old warnings aren't respected like before.” This illustrates a break in passing ecological knowledge between generations, supporting Warren's (1991) view of indigenous knowledge as community-maintained. The problem isn't just lost beliefs but disrupted transmission. It also highlights moral weakening: when people don't know the rules, the cultural and religious basis for environmental care fades. In traditional Igbo thought, breaking environmental rules

offended *Ala* and upset cosmic harmony (Metuh, 1987). Religion and social morality are intertwined, so weaker religious authority means weaker moral sanctions on environmental harm. Colonialism and missionary Christianity played major roles by delegitimizing indigenous religious institutions, not necessarily erasing ecological knowledge immediately but reducing the power of preservers and enforcers. Urbanization and market forces accelerated this. Land became an economic commodity; sacred places turned into sites for development. African Environmental Ethics views this shift as moving from communal sacred land to economic resource, reflecting conflicting human–nature ethics.

The IEK framework explains the loss of knowledge and transmission; African Environmental Ethics explains the moral decline. Together, they clarify the erosion of Igbo ecological values today. However, this should be viewed cautiously. Indigenous systems weren't perfectly sustainable, and modern environmental problems come from many causes: population growth, urbanization, industry, waste, commercial exploitation, infrastructure, and governance issues. But the loss of indigenous institutions removed an important layer of communal environmental care. Cultural revitalization can support sustainability—not by restoring old practices wholesale, but by recovering key principles from Ala's worldview: respect for the earth, communal stewardship, restraint, intergenerational responsibility, and protecting important ecosystems—and integrating these with modern environmental science and policy.

Thus, the decline of indigenous ecological values is not just about losing religious beliefs but about losing an integrated system of knowledge and ethics. The IEK framework shows disrupted knowledge transmission; African Environmental Ethics reveals weakened moral ties between community and nature. Together, they explain why recovering and reinterpreting Igbo ecological values can strengthen modern environmental awareness and responsibility.

Contemporary Relevance of the *Ala* Worldview

Indigenous ecological principles tied to Ala can enrich modern environmental sustainability without replacing scientific approaches. Your analysis already emphasizes communal responsibility, nature's sacredness, accountability to future generations, biodiversity, and stewardship. This fits well with IEK, which values locally generated environmental knowledge. Warren (1991) stresses its practical importance for development, and Dei (2000) calls for greater recognition of indigenous knowledge in development. African Environmental Ethics adds the moral dimension, viewing nature as part of an interconnected community, offering an alternative to exploitative human-nature relations. Ala's worldview can help environmental education present ecological care as a moral and communal duty, not just a legal requirement. A cultural practitioner explains: "We can't bring back everything from the old system exactly as it was because society has changed. But the teaching to respect the earth is still valuable. If children learn the land belongs to all of us and that we have responsibilities to future generations, they'll treat the environment differently." This is key because it avoids freezing indigenous knowledge in the past. Instead, it supports critical cultural recovery, identifying valuable indigenous principles, evaluating them thoughtfully, and adapting them to today's environmental challenges.

Relationship between the Erosion of Indigenous Ecological Values and Environmental Degradation

The link between the decline of indigenous ecological values and modern environmental degradation can be understood by examining the traditional role of religion, customary institutions, and communal ethics in guiding human interaction with nature. In traditional Igbo society, ecological responsibility was inseparable from religious and moral duties. The concept of *Ala* - Earth Mother and guardian of morality, fertility, and social order, provided a spiritual foundation for seeing land as sacred, not just an economic resource. This aligns with

Mbiti's (1969) broader African religious worldview, where religion permeates nearly every area of life, and Metuh's (1987) demonstration of the close ties between African religious beliefs, moral behavior, and social order.

From the lens of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK), this connection is crucial because indigenous knowledge includes not only environmental information but also culturally transmitted rules about how people should relate to nature. Warren (1991) explains that such knowledge develops through long-term interaction between communities and their environments, while Dei (2000) highlights its holistic and contextual nature. Among the Igbo, ecological knowledge was embedded in oral traditions, proverbs, rituals, taboos, customary laws, farming practices, and religious institutions. Thus, knowledge that certain forests, rivers, trees, animals, or lands should be protected wasn't conveyed as formal regulations but as part of the community's cultural and religious heritage.

The *Ala* worldview transformed ecological care into a moral duty. The sacred status given to land, forests, rivers, and other natural elements created cultural limits on their use. Actions seen as offenses against Ala could result in communal or spiritual penalties, discouraging harm to social and ecological balance. Research shows that religious institutions were deeply intertwined with social and moral life (Arinze, 1970; Metuh, 1987). Nwala (1985) similarly frames Igbo philosophy as a relational worldview connecting humans to the broader cosmos. Therefore, traditional approaches to nature reflect an integrated religious, moral, and ecological perspective. An elder's testimony illustrates this: “Our fathers didn't see the land as anyone's personal property to use as they pleased. The land was given to us to live from, and we had rules about what we could do with it. Some forests and places were sacred; you couldn't cut trees or perform certain actions there. When people stopped respecting these rules, they stopped fearing the consequences. Today, places can be destroyed just for building or profit.” This highlights a key aspect of

IEK: environmental knowledge is inseparable from cultural authority. The elder's mention of "rules" shows that indigenous ecological knowledge was practical, guiding land use and resource management. The sacred sites also show how religious meanings served as informal conservation tools.

This testimony also bridges to African Environmental Ethics, where the idea that land cannot be used "anyhow" expresses an ethic of restraint and responsibility. African environmental ethics views humans as part of a relational ecological order, not absolute masters of nature. Ugwuanyi (2011) stresses the role of African ethical perspectives in fostering sustainable human-environment relationships. For the Igbo, Ala grounded this ethical relationship in religion.

Findings

The study reveals several important insights into the ecological relevance of Igbo cosmology and its implications for environmental ethics. First, *Ala (Ani)* is not merely a deity of morality and land ownership but functions as a cosmic ecological regulator. She embodies the sacredness of the earth, reinforcing the belief that land is a living, moral entity that must not be violated. This worldview establishes a strong ethical restraint against environmental abuse such as land degradation, deforestation, and pollution. Second, the study finds that Igbo religious cosmology inherently integrates environmental ethics into daily life. Sacred forests, forbidden days (nkwọ, eke, or ritual rest days), taboos against bush burning, and reverence for rivers and soil all function as traditional conservation mechanisms. These practices regulate human interaction with nature in a way that promotes ecological balance. Third, environmental responsibility in Igbo society is communal and spiritual, not individualistic. The community acts as a custodian of the land under the moral authority of Ala, meaning ecological violations are not only physical offenses but also spiritual transgressions that attract social and metaphysical sanctions. Fourth, the study identifies that modern

environmental challenges in Igboland are partly linked to the erosion of indigenous ecological values, especially due to urbanization, religious syncretism, and the decline of traditional authority structures. As these belief systems weaken, environmental exploitation increases. Finally, the research shows that Igbo indigenous ecological knowledge provides a viable framework for contemporary sustainability discourse, especially in areas such as conservation ethics, biodiversity protection, and community-based environmental governance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. **Integration of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge into Environmental Policy**: Government and environmental agencies should incorporate Igbo indigenous ecological principles, especially those associated with *Ala* into formal environmental laws and conservation strategies.
2. **Revitalization of Cultural Environmental Practices**: Sacred groves, traditional rest days, and ecological taboos should be revived and protected as community-based conservation tools.
3. **Curriculum Development in Schools and Universities**: Igbo environmental philosophy, including the concept of Ala as ecological mother, should be included in environmental studies, anthropology, and religious studies curricula.
4. **Community-Led Conservation Programs**: Local communities should be empowered to manage forests, rivers, and farmland using traditional ecological principles alongside scientific methods.
5. **Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems**: Oral traditions, myths, rituals, and ecological norms associated with Ala should be systematically documented to prevent cultural loss.
6. **Collaboration between Scientists and Traditional**

Authorities: Environmental scientists should work with traditional rulers, priests, and custodians of indigenous knowledge to develop hybrid conservation models.

7. **Public Awareness Campaigns**: There should be sustained sensitization on the ecological relevance of Igbo religious worldview to promote environmental responsibility among younger generations.
8. **Policy Protection of Sacred Ecological Sites**: Governments should legally recognize and protect sacred forests, rivers, and shrines as biodiversity conservation zones.

Conclusion

The study concludes that *Ala as Ecological Mother* is a powerful conceptual framework for understanding indigenous environmental ethics in Igbo thought. Ala represents more than a spiritual being; she is a symbol of ecological justice, sustainability, and moral accountability toward the earth. The Igbo traditional worldview demonstrates that environmental sustainability is not a modern invention but an embedded cultural and religious practice. Through taboos, rituals, and sacred ecological norms, the Igbo system historically achieved a form of environmental regulation that aligns closely with contemporary sustainability principles.

However, the weakening of these indigenous systems has contributed to ecological imbalance and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Therefore, ignoring indigenous environmental philosophy risks undermining efforts toward sustainable development in Igboland and beyond. The study ultimately affirms that integrating Ala-centered ecological ethics into modern environmental discourse can strengthen sustainability efforts by reconnecting humans with the moral and spiritual dimensions of nature.

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PAPER 5

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM: TOWARDS AN AFRICAN ONTOLOGICAL RELATIONALISM FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Ejikemeuwa J. O. NDUBISI, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State, Nigeria.
ejikon4u@yahoo.com

Abstract

The increasing convergence of biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, climate change, and emerging public health crises has exposed the inadequacy of prevailing anthropocentric approaches to environmental management and human well-being. Although contemporary scientific frameworks such as One Health and Planetary Health have significantly advanced interdisciplinary understanding of the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and ecosystems, they remain largely grounded in empirical and policy-oriented analyses with limited engagement with the deeper ontological assumptions that shape humanity's relationship with the natural world. This paper argues that the current ecological crisis is fundamentally an ontological crisis rooted in anthropocentric conceptions of reality that privilege human interests while reducing nature to an instrument of economic and technological exploitation. Employing the philosophical methods of critical analysis, hermeneutics, and comparative inquiry, the study reconstructs African metaphysics as a systematic relational ontology capable of providing an alternative philosophical framework for biodiversity conservation and public health. The major findings reveal that anthropocentrism constitutes an ontological error because it fragments the relational unity of existence; that biodiversity possesses ontological value as an expression of the plurality and richness of Being rather than

merely instrumental or intrinsic value; and that public health is best understood as the harmonious flourishing of the entire community of life rather than simply the absence of disease. The study's principal theoretical contribution is the formulation of African Ontological Relationalism*, defined as the metaphysical doctrine that reality is constituted by a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, and flourishing arise through relationships of complementarity and participation. Therefore, extending African metaphysical insights into contemporary debates on environmental philosophy, biodiversity conservation, and global health, the study provides a novel ontological foundation that complements existing scientific frameworks and offers a philosophically grounded paradigm for sustainable ecological governance, public health policy, and future interdisciplinary research.*

Keywords: African Metaphysics; African Ontological Relationalism; Anthropocentrism; Biodiversity Conservation; Public Health; Environmental Philosophy

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented convergence of biodiversity loss, climate change, ecosystem degradation, and public health emergencies, revealing the profound interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. Across the globe, forests are disappearing at alarming rates, species are becoming extinct at levels unprecedented in recorded history, freshwater ecosystems are deteriorating, and climate-related disasters continue to threaten both ecological stability and human well-being (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES], 2019). Simultaneously, the emergence and re-emergence of zoonotic diseases, increasing antimicrobial resistance, environmental pollution, food insecurity, and climate-sensitive illnesses have reinforced the growing realization that the health of human beings cannot be understood independently of the health of animals,

ecosystems, and biodiversity (Cunningham, Scoones, & Wood, 2017; Zinsstag, Schelling, Waltner-Toews, & Tanner, 2011). These developments have stimulated renewed scholarly interest in integrated frameworks such as One Health and Planetary Health, both of which emphasize the interconnectedness of ecological and human systems (Munyua et al., 2021). Such frameworks represent an important departure from earlier biomedical paradigms by recognizing that environmental degradation directly influences human health outcomes. However, despite their interdisciplinary significance, these approaches remain predominantly empirical, scientific, and policy-driven. Comparatively, little attention has been devoted to the deeper philosophical assumptions that underlie humanity's relationship with nature. Consequently, the ontological foundations of contemporary environmental crises remain insufficiently explored.

Every environmental ethic presupposes an ontology. Human attitudes towards forests, rivers, animals, microorganisms, and ecosystems are ultimately shaped by fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of reality and humanity's place within it. Environmental exploitation is therefore not merely the consequence of technological advancement, economic globalization, or weak governance. These factors themselves reflect a deeper metaphysical orientation that conceives the human person as existing above, outside, or independently of the wider community of existence. From this perspective, the contemporary ecological crisis may be interpreted not simply as a crisis of environmental management but as a crisis of Being itself. This ontological orientation is commonly identified as anthropocentrism. Although anthropocentrism has assumed different forms throughout the history of Western philosophy, its central assumption remains that human beings possess superior moral and ontological status while the rest of nature derives its significance primarily from its usefulness to humanity (Norton, 1984). Reinforced by Cartesian dualism and the mechanistic

worldview of the Scientific Revolution, anthropocentrism has profoundly influenced modern economic development, industrialization, scientific rationality, and technological progress (Bacon, 2000; Descartes, 1984). Within such a worldview, biodiversity is frequently evaluated according to its economic productivity, pharmaceutical potential, agricultural utility, or contribution to ecosystem services. Nature becomes an object of management rather than a participant in existence.

Increasingly, however, the limitations of anthropocentric thinking have become evident. Climate change, biodiversity decline, habitat destruction, pollution, and emerging infectious diseases reveal that humanity cannot flourish independently of the ecological systems upon which life depends (IPBES, 2019). Aldo Leopold's (1949) *Land Ethic* marked an important philosophical departure by arguing that humanity is "a plain member and citizen" of the biotic community rather than its conqueror. Similarly, *Deep Ecology* challenged the instrumental valuation of nature by affirming the intrinsic worth of all living beings (Naess, 1973). While these approaches significantly expanded environmental philosophy, they remained largely within Western conceptual categories and did not systematically engage African metaphysical traditions as possible ontological alternatives.

African philosophy offers such an alternative. Unlike dualistic metaphysical systems that separate humanity from nature, African metaphysics generally conceives reality as an indivisible community of interdependent beings united through relationships of participation, complementarity, and vital force (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Tempels, 1959; Kanu, 2016; Kanu, 2017). Existence is fundamentally relational. Human beings neither stand above nature nor exist independently of it; rather, they participate within a dynamic community embracing fellow humans, animals, plants, ancestors, spiritual realities, and the physical environment. Consequently, biodiversity is not merely a collection of biological

resources but an expression of the relational structure of Being itself. This relational understanding finds expression in numerous African philosophical traditions. Tempels' (1959) doctrine of vital force, Mbiti's (1969) philosophy of communal existence, Ramose's (1999) ontology of Ubuntu, Asouzu's (2007) complementary ontology of Ibuanyidanda, Tangwa's (2004) eco-bio-communitarianism, and Kanu's (2016) philosophy of Igwebuike all affirm, in different ways, that existence is constituted through interconnectedness rather than isolation. While these traditions differ in emphasis, they converge upon the conviction that reality is fundamentally relational and that authentic human flourishing depends upon maintaining harmonious relationships within the wider community of life. Building upon these insights, this paper introduces the concept of African Ontological Relationalism as its principal theoretical contribution. African Ontological Relationalism is understood here as the metaphysical doctrine that reality consists of a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, intelligibility, and flourishing are constituted through relations of complementarity and participation within a unified order of Being. The framework synthesizes central insights from African metaphysical traditions into a coherent ontology capable of engaging contemporary debates in biodiversity conservation and public health.

Methodology

This study adopts a philosophical methodology grounded in analysis, hermeneutics, and comparative philosophical inquiry. Analysis as a philosophical method is employed to clarify the meanings and philosophical implications of key concepts such as ontology, anthropocentrism, biodiversity, relationality, flourishing, and public health. Since these concepts often carry different meanings across disciplines, philosophical clarification becomes essential for constructing a coherent theoretical framework. Also, hermeneutics is utilized to interpret selected African metaphysical traditions, paying particular attention to the

philosophical significance of concepts such as vital force, Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, eco-bio-communitarianism, and Igwebuike. Rather than treating these concepts merely as cultural or religious beliefs, the study reconstructs them as expressions of a systematic ontology capable of addressing contemporary ecological challenges.

The study further employs comparative philosophical inquiry by placing African metaphysics in dialogue with dominant anthropocentric traditions in Western philosophy as well as selected perspectives in contemporary environmental ethics. This comparative engagement is neither intended to privilege one tradition over another nor to produce a simple synthesis. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that African metaphysics offers conceptual resources capable of extending current philosophical debates on biodiversity conservation and public health beyond the limitations of anthropocentrism. Accordingly, the study is analytical, reconstructive, and normative. It does not present empirical findings but develops a philosophical framework intended to illuminate contemporary environmental and public health challenges through the lens of African metaphysical thought.

Anthropocentrism as an Ontological Error

The ecological crisis confronting contemporary humanity is frequently explained in terms of industrialization, population growth, technological expansion, climate change, and failures of environmental governance. While these explanations illuminate important empirical dimensions of environmental degradation, they often leave unquestioned the philosophical assumptions that make such patterns of exploitation appear rational and legitimate. Ecological destruction does not arise in an intellectual vacuum. Every mode of environmental practice presupposes a particular understanding of reality, of humanity's place within that reality, and of the moral status of the non-human world. Consequently, the biodiversity crisis is not merely ecological or political; it is

fundamentally ontological. Ontology concerns the nature of Being and the relationships that constitute existence (Heidegger, 1962). It seeks to answer questions concerning what exists, how beings relate to one another, and what it means for something to be. Environmental ethics, therefore, is necessarily grounded in ontology because ethical obligations towards nature depend upon prior assumptions regarding the status of nature itself. If the natural world is conceived merely as an assemblage of inert objects existing for human use, exploitation becomes philosophically defensible. Conversely, if reality is understood as an interconnected community of mutually dependent beings, environmental responsibility becomes an ontological imperative rather than simply a moral preference.

Anthropocentrism derives from the Greek words *anthropos* (human being) and *kentron* (centre), denoting a worldview that places humanity at the centre of existence. Philosophically, anthropocentrism maintains that human beings possess unique intrinsic worth, while the value of non-human beings is derivative and instrumental, measured principally by their usefulness to human interests (Norton, 1984). Such a worldview has exercised considerable influence upon Western intellectual history, shaping theological, philosophical, scientific, and economic understandings of humanity's relationship with nature. Although elements of anthropocentrism may be identified in aspects of classical Greek philosophy, particularly in Aristotle's hierarchical conception of nature, its most influential formulation emerged during the Scientific Revolution. Francis Bacon's vision of scientific inquiry encouraged the systematic investigation of nature for the purpose of improving the human condition through technological mastery (Bacon, 2000). Knowledge became power, and power increasingly implied control over the natural world. René Descartes further reinforced this orientation through his

dualistic distinction between *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance), thereby separating the rational human subject from the material world (Descartes, 1984). Nature consequently came to be understood as mechanistic matter devoid of intrinsic purposiveness, existing primarily as an object of rational manipulation. This metaphysical separation profoundly influenced the development of modernity. The Industrial Revolution, capitalist economic systems, technological innovation, and contemporary consumer culture all inherited assumptions that regard nature primarily as a resource to be managed, exploited, and commodified. Forests became timber reserves; rivers became water resources; animals became units of agricultural production; biodiversity became genetic capital; and ecosystems became providers of marketable services. Such language is not philosophically neutral. It reflects an ontology in which non-human beings possess significance only insofar as they contribute to human welfare (Rolston III, 2012).

The anthropocentric worldview has undoubtedly facilitated remarkable scientific and technological achievements. Advances in medicine, transportation, communication, agriculture, and industrial production have significantly improved human living conditions. Nevertheless, these achievements have also generated profound ecological consequences. Deforestation, habitat fragmentation, biodiversity loss, pollution, desertification, climate change, and the overexploitation of natural resources reveal the limitations of an ontology founded upon domination rather than participation (IPBES, 2019). Ironically, the very worldview intended to promote human flourishing increasingly threatens the ecological systems upon which human survival depends. The central weakness of anthropocentrism lies in its fragmentation of reality. Its attempt to separate humanity from nature, subject from object, culture from environment, and mind from matter, constructs a series of dualisms that obscure the interconnectedness

characterizing living systems (Plumwood, 2002). Such dualistic thinking encourages the illusion of human autonomy while ignoring the ecological dependence that makes human life possible. Humanity appears as an independent agent confronting an external environment rather than as a participant within an integrated community of existence. This fragmentation is not merely conceptual; it has practical consequences. Contemporary biodiversity loss illustrates that the destruction of ecological systems inevitably rebounds upon humanity through declining food security, emerging zoonotic diseases, climate instability, and deteriorating public health (Cunningham, Scoones, & Wood, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the intimate relationship between environmental degradation, wildlife exploitation, and human vulnerability, demonstrating that ecological imbalance ultimately becomes a human crisis. These developments reveal the paradox of anthropocentrism: in seeking to elevate humanity above nature, it undermines the very ecological foundations upon which human flourishing depends.

Environmental philosophers have long recognized the inadequacies of anthropocentrism. Leopold's (1949) *Land Ethic* proposed that humans should regard themselves as "plain members and citizens" of the biotic community rather than its conquerors. Naess (1973) advanced *Deep Ecology* by arguing that every living being possesses intrinsic worth independent of human utility, while Rolston III (2012) defended the objective value of biodiversity within environmental ethics. These perspectives represent significant advances beyond narrow anthropocentrism because they challenge the exclusive privileging of human interests. Yet these approaches remain incomplete from the standpoint of African philosophy. Their primary concern is ethical, expanding the moral community to include non-human nature. They devote comparatively less attention to reconstructing the ontology upon which ethical obligations depend. African metaphysics begins

precisely at this point. Rather than asking merely who deserves moral consideration, it asks a prior question: What is the nature of Being? It is this ontological inquiry that enables African philosophy to move beyond both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism towards a relational understanding of existence. African philosophy rejects the assumption that reality consists of isolated entities arranged hierarchically according to human interests. Instead, it understands existence as fundamentally relational, participatory, and complementary (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Asouzu, 2007; Kanu 2016; Kanu, 2017; Ndubisi, 2020; Chemhuru, (2024; Kyei-Nuamah & Peng, 2024). Human beings are not external observers of nature but participants within a dynamic community embracing fellow humans, non-human life, ancestors, spiritual realities, and the physical environment. The fragmentation characteristic of anthropocentric ontology is therefore regarded as metaphysically false because it misconceives the very structure of reality.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that anthropocentrism should be understood not simply as an inadequate environmental ethic but as an ontological error. It misrepresents the nature of existence by privileging human autonomy over relationality, domination over participation, and separation over communion. Consequently, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and public health crises are not accidental by-products of modern civilization but logical consequences of a defective ontology. Overcoming these crises therefore requires more than technological innovation or policy reform; it requires a fundamental reorientation in humanity's understanding of Being. African metaphysics offers precisely such an alternative, and it is to this constructive vision that the discussion now turns.

African Metaphysics of Life: Towards an African Ontological Relationalism

Having argued that anthropocentrism represents an ontological error grounded in the fragmentation of reality, the task now is to articulate an alternative metaphysical framework capable of addressing the philosophical roots of contemporary ecological crises. African philosophy provides such an alternative through its understanding of Being as fundamentally relational, participatory, and dynamic. Unlike anthropocentric ontology, which conceives reality as a hierarchy of independent entities centred upon human interests, African metaphysics understands existence as an indivisible communion of beings whose identities, meanings, and flourishing emerge through relationships of complementarity and mutual participation. This relational conception of Being is neither accidental nor peripheral within African philosophy. It constitutes one of its defining metaphysical orientations. Although African philosophical traditions are diverse and cannot be reduced to a single system, they exhibit remarkable convergence in their understanding of reality as an interconnected whole. Whether expressed through Bantu ontology, Akan conceptions of personhood, Ubuntu philosophy, Ibuanyidanda, Igwebuike, or Eco-bio-communitarianism, African metaphysical reflection consistently rejects atomistic conceptions of existence in favour of relationality, communal participation, and ontological interdependence (Asouzu, 2007; Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Kanu, 2016).

This understanding of relationality receives more systematic philosophical elaboration in Mogobe Ramose's (1999) interpretation of Ubuntu. Ramose argues that Ubuntu should not be understood merely as an ethical principle encouraging compassion or generosity. Rather, Ubuntu is a philosophy of Being itself.

Reality is characterized by being, a continuous process of becoming-with others. Human existence is therefore inseparable from the existence of the wider community. Ontology precedes ethics because ethical responsibility arises naturally from the relational structure of existence. An equally significant contribution emerges from Innocent Asouzu's (2007) philosophy of Ibuanyidanda, perhaps one of the most sophisticated contemporary reconstructions of African metaphysics. Rejecting every form of reductionism, Asouzu argues that reality consists of complementary "missing links," each indispensable for the realization of the whole. No entity possesses absolute autonomy or complete self-sufficiency. Every existent contributes something unique to the comprehensive order of Being while simultaneously depending upon others for its own realization. Complementarity is therefore not merely cooperation among independent beings but the ontological principle through which reality itself becomes intelligible. Similarly, Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu's (2016; 2017) philosophy of Igwebuike reinforces this relational orientation. Literally understood as "there is strength in number," Igwebuike extends beyond social cooperation to express an ontology of interconnectedness in which plurality does not threaten unity but enriches it. Diversity is not an obstacle to existence but one of the conditions of its fullness. Within this framework, every being acquires significance through participation within a larger network of relationships. This insight possesses profound implications for biodiversity because ecological diversity itself becomes an expression of ontological richness rather than merely biological variation.

African environmental philosophy has already begun to recognise some of these implications. Godfrey Tangwa's (2004) theory of Eco-bio-communitarianism argues that African worldviews traditionally perceive human beings as members of an extended

community embracing both human and non-human life. Tangwa's contribution represents one of the earliest systematic African philosophical responses to environmental ethics and deserves recognition for challenging anthropocentric assumptions within global ecological discourse. Kyei-Nuamah & Peng (2024) argue that Ubuntu can guide ecological education and policy, emphasizing humanness, collectivism, and eco-communitarianism. Nevertheless, Eco-bio-communitarianism remains primarily an ethical framework concerned with environmental responsibility. The present study seeks to move one step further by asking the ontological question that underlies environmental ethics itself: What conception of Being makes ecological responsibility intelligible? It is at this point that the present study advances its principal theoretical contribution through the formulation of African Ontological Relationalism.

African Ontological Relationalism may be defined as the metaphysical doctrine that reality consists of a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, intelligibility, and flourishing are constituted through relationships of complementarity, participation, and reciprocal dependence within a unified order of Being. Within this framework, relationality is not merely an ethical ideal or social value but the very structure of existence itself. Several philosophical implications follow from this definition. First, being is fundamentally relational rather than substantial. Entities do not first exist independently before entering into relationships; rather, relationships themselves constitute the conditions under which beings become intelligible. Identity emerges through participation rather than isolation. Second, reality is complementary rather than competitive. Diversity is not evidence of fragmentation but an expression of ontological richness. Every being contributes uniquely to the flourishing of the whole, and no entity can be

dismissed as metaphysically insignificant. Third, existence is participatory rather than hierarchical. Human beings occupy a distinctive place within reality because of their rational and moral capacities, but this distinctiveness does not confer absolute domination over other beings. Humanity participates within, rather than governs from above, the community of existence. Fourth, flourishing is communal rather than individualistic. Authentic well-being is realised only when harmonious relationships exist among human beings, non-human life, ecosystems, and the wider spiritual order. Individual flourishing detached from ecological flourishing represents an ontological contradiction because it ignores the relational conditions that make existence possible.

These propositions distinguish African Ontological Relationalism from both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism privileges humanity as the centre of existence, while ecocentrism frequently locates primary value within ecosystems themselves. African Ontological Relationalism adopts neither position. Instead, it proposes that relation itself constitutes the primary ontological reality. Value arises not because something is human or because something belongs to nature, but because every being participates within the dynamic communion of Being.

The philosophical significance of this reconstruction extends beyond African philosophy. Contemporary discussions of biodiversity, environmental ethics, sustainability, and public health increasingly recognise the interconnectedness of ecological systems, yet they often lack an explicit metaphysical account of why such interconnectedness matters. African Ontological Relationalism provides precisely this missing foundation. It explains that biodiversity is not valuable merely because ecosystems function efficiently or because human beings derive benefits from nature. Biodiversity is valuable because the plurality

of life constitutes the relational richness through which Being manifests itself.

Biodiversity and Public Health through African Ontological Relationalism

The reconstruction of African metaphysics undertaken in the preceding section provides the ontological foundation for rethinking two of the most pressing challenges of the contemporary world: biodiversity conservation and public health. These concerns are often treated as distinct academic and policy domains, the former belonging primarily to environmental science and conservation biology, and the latter to medicine and public health. Increasingly, however, scientific research demonstrates that the health of humans, animals, and ecosystems is deeply interconnected (Whitmee et al., 2015; Zinsstag et al., 2011). While these interdisciplinary approaches have significantly enriched contemporary scholarship, they frequently lack an explicit philosophical account of why such interconnectedness exists. African Ontological Relationalism supplies this missing metaphysical foundation by interpreting biodiversity and public health as complementary expressions of the same relational order of Being.

Conventionally, biodiversity is defined as the variability among living organisms at the genetic, species, and ecosystem levels (Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD], 1992). This definition has become the standard within conservation biology and environmental governance. Nevertheless, it remains largely descriptive. It explains what biodiversity is without adequately addressing why biodiversity possesses fundamental significance beyond its ecological functions or economic utility. Much of contemporary environmental policy continues to justify biodiversity conservation by appealing to ecosystem services,

pharmaceutical discoveries, agricultural productivity, climate regulation, or economic sustainability (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Such arguments, though practically important, remain vulnerable to anthropocentric reasoning because they value biodiversity primarily in terms of its usefulness to humanity.

African Ontological Relationalism proposes a more fundamental account. If reality is constituted through a communion of interdependent beings, then biodiversity is not merely an assemblage of biological entities but the concrete manifestation of ontological plurality. Diversity is intrinsic to the structure of Being itself. Every species, ecosystem, and ecological relationship contributes uniquely to the richness and intelligibility of existence. Consequently, biodiversity possesses ontological value before it possesses economic, scientific, or instrumental value. The disappearance of species therefore represents not merely ecological loss but a diminishment of the relational fullness through which Being discloses itself. This interpretation resonates strongly with Asouzu's (2007) complementary ontology. Within Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda philosophy, every being functions as a "missing link" whose significance becomes fully intelligible only within the comprehensive totality of existence. Applied to ecological systems, this means that no organism is metaphysically insignificant. Whether microorganisms, insects, plants, amphibians, mammals, or human beings, every form of life participates in sustaining the relational equilibrium that makes existence possible. Biodiversity conservation is therefore not simply the protection of natural resources but the preservation of the ontological integrity of the community of Being.

Similarly, Tempels' (1959) conception of vital force suggests that life should not be understood as an isolated biological phenomenon but as a dynamic continuum permeating the cosmos. Every living

being participates in this life-generating force, and the flourishing of one dimension of reality contributes to the flourishing of the whole. Environmental degradation weakens these life-sustaining relationships by disrupting the dynamic interactions through which vital force circulates. From this perspective, ecological destruction constitutes not merely environmental damage but a disturbance of the ontological conditions necessary for life's continuity. The implications of this ontology become particularly evident when examined alongside contemporary public health. Traditional biomedical models have understandably concentrated upon diagnosing disease, treating illness, and prolonging human life. Yet the increasing prevalence of zoonotic diseases, antimicrobial resistance, climate-related illnesses, and environmentally induced health conditions has exposed the limitations of approaches that isolate human health from ecological systems (Whitmee et al., 2015). The One Health paradigm has emerged in response to these limitations by emphasizing that the health of humans, animals, and ecosystems constitutes an integrated whole rather than separate domains of concern (Zinsstag et al., 2011).

African Ontological Relationalism deepens the philosophical significance of One Health by demonstrating that such interconnectedness is not merely biological but ontological. Human health depends upon biodiversity because both participate within the same relational order of Being. Healthy ecosystems regulate climate, purify water, sustain food systems, maintain soil fertility, preserve pollinators, and reduce opportunities for pathogen spillover. Conversely, ecological disruption increases the likelihood of emerging infectious diseases, food insecurity, environmental displacement, and mental health challenges associated with ecological instability (IPBES, 2019). These relationships are not accidental correlations; they are manifestations of an underlying ontological unity. The COVID-19

pandemic provides a particularly compelling illustration of this unity. Although initially addressed as a biomedical emergency, subsequent research has demonstrated that the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 cannot be adequately understood apart from broader patterns of habitat destruction, wildlife exploitation, land-use change, and increased human encroachment into natural ecosystems (Cunningham, Scoones, & Wood, 2017). The pandemic therefore revealed a truth long recognised within African metaphysics: human beings cannot violate the integrity of the ecological community without simultaneously undermining their own well-being. Public health crises frequently arise where the relational equilibrium of existence has been disrupted. This insight finds practical expression within many African indigenous ecological traditions. Across numerous African societies, sacred forests, protected rivers, ritual restrictions, seasonal harvesting regulations, and totemic practices historically functioned as mechanisms for preserving ecological balance (Tangwa, 2004; Mbiti, 1969). Such institutions were not merely religious customs nor irrational superstitions. Rather, they embodied a sophisticated ontological understanding that recognised the mutual dependence of human communities and the natural environment. Respect for biodiversity emerged not simply from utilitarian calculation but from the conviction that every component of nature participates within the wider community of life.

Contemporary conservation science increasingly acknowledges the importance of Indigenous and local knowledge systems in biodiversity governance. Nevertheless, African Ontological Relationalism suggests that the value of these traditions extends beyond empirical ecological knowledge. Their enduring significance lies in the metaphysical worldview that sustains them, a worldview in which human beings understand themselves as participants rather than proprietors of existence. Such an ontology nurtures environmental responsibility because it regards ecological care as fidelity to the very structure of Being. This relational perspective also

transforms the meaning of public health itself. Health cannot be reduced to the absence of disease or the efficient functioning of biological systems. Rather, health is the harmonious flourishing of persons within healthy communities, healthy ecosystems, and a healthy biosphere. It encompasses physical well-being, ecological integrity, social justice, cultural continuity, food security, environmental sustainability, and spiritual equilibrium. Public health therefore becomes an ontological condition before it becomes a biomedical achievement. Wherever relationships among human beings, nature, and the wider community of life are sustained, conditions favourable to health emerge; wherever these relationships are systematically disrupted, disease and ecological decline become increasingly probable.

Towards an African Ontology of Ecological Flourishing

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that the contemporary crises of biodiversity loss and public health are not isolated phenomena but interconnected manifestations of a deeper ontological disorder. Anthropocentric conceptions of reality have encouraged patterns of domination that fragment the unity of existence, reduce nature to an instrument of human utility, and obscure the relational conditions upon which both ecological integrity and human well-being depend. If the roots of these crises are ontological, then their long-term resolution demands more than technological innovation, legislative reforms, or economic incentives. It requires a philosophical transformation in humanity's understanding of Being. Such a transformation is what this study describes as an African Ontology of Ecological Flourishing.

Ecological flourishing, as conceived within African Ontological Relationalism, is neither synonymous with economic development nor reducible to environmental conservation. Rather, it denotes the harmonious realization of life through the preservation and

enhancement of the relational order of Being. Flourishing occurs when human beings, non-human life, ecosystems, and the spiritual dimensions of existence participate in relationships of reciprocity, complementarity, and mutual care. It is therefore an ontological condition before it is an economic or political achievement. Sustainable societies emerge not merely through technological efficiency but through fidelity to the relational structure that constitutes reality itself. This understanding challenges dominant development paradigms that continue to evaluate progress primarily through economic indicators such as gross domestic product, industrial productivity, or technological expansion. While such measures remain important, they frequently obscure the ecological costs at which economic growth is achieved. Development that destroys biodiversity, degrades ecosystems, contaminates water resources, or undermines public health ultimately contradicts the very purpose of development because it erodes the ontological conditions necessary for human flourishing. African Ontological Relationalism therefore calls for a reconceptualization of development as the enhancement of the entire community of Being rather than the accumulation of material wealth by human societies alone. This perspective resonates with contemporary international efforts to integrate sustainability into development discourse, particularly the aspiration expressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to balance economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental protection (United Nations, 2015). Nevertheless, African Ontological Relationalism extends beyond the SDGs by providing a metaphysical justification for sustainability. Environmental protection is not merely a policy objective or a strategy for securing future human welfare; it is a philosophical obligation arising from the relational nature of existence itself. Human beings preserve biodiversity because they are ontologically constituted through the very relationships that biodiversity sustains.

An important implication of this ontology concerns environmental governance. Contemporary conservation policies often emphasize legal regulation, protected areas, technological monitoring, and scientific management. While these instruments remain indispensable, their long-term effectiveness depends upon the philosophical worldview that informs human behaviour. Environmental laws may regulate conduct, but they cannot by themselves cultivate ecological consciousness. African societies historically developed mechanisms of environmental stewardship through sacred forests, totemic systems, communal ownership of natural resources, ritual prohibitions, and customary ecological practices (Mbiti, 1969; Tangwa, 2004). Although these institutions evolved within particular historical contexts, their enduring significance lies in the ontological conviction that humanity belongs to, rather than dominates, the community of life.

Consequently, contemporary environmental governance in Africa should seek a creative integration of scientific conservation with indigenous metaphysical wisdom. Such integration does not imply the uncritical revival of every traditional practice, nor does it romanticize precolonial societies. Rather, it recognizes that African philosophical traditions contain conceptual resources capable of enriching modern environmental policy. Scientific knowledge explains ecological processes with remarkable precision, while African metaphysics provides the ontological orientation that motivates responsible participation within those processes. Together they offer a more comprehensive foundation for biodiversity conservation than either perspective can provide independently. The implications of African Ontological Relationalism extend equally to public health. Increasingly, scholars of global health acknowledge that environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, and climate change significantly influence patterns of disease and human well-being

(Whitmee et al., 2015). The One Health and Planetary Health paradigms have already highlighted the interconnectedness of these phenomena. African Ontological Relationalism deepens this conversation by arguing that health is fundamentally relational. Human health is not an isolated biological state but an expression of harmonious participation within healthy ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual relationships. Public health policy should therefore incorporate environmental restoration, biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, and the preservation of Indigenous ecological knowledge as integral dimensions of preventive healthcare rather than as external environmental concerns.

Education likewise becomes a critical instrument of ontological transformation. Much of contemporary education continues, often unintentionally, to reinforce anthropocentric assumptions by presenting nature primarily as a repository of resources for economic exploitation. African philosophy invites an alternative educational vision in which ecological responsibility emerges from an understanding of humanity's relational identity. Educational curricula at all levels should therefore encourage dialogue between modern science and African philosophical thought, cultivating environmental literacy alongside metaphysical reflection. Such an approach prepares future generations not only to manage ecosystems effectively but also to appreciate the ontological significance of biodiversity as a constitutive dimension of human existence. This educational transformation also carries important implications for philosophical scholarship itself. African philosophy has often been interpreted either as the documentation of indigenous worldviews or as the critique of Western intellectual traditions. While both tasks remain valuable, contemporary African philosophy increasingly bears the responsibility of generating constructive theoretical frameworks capable of addressing global challenges. African Ontological Relationalism

represents one such effort. It does not reject scientific knowledge, nor does it oppose Western philosophy. Instead, it contributes an original metaphysical perspective through which contemporary debates concerning biodiversity, sustainability, and public health may be reconsidered. In this respect, the study participates in the broader project of decolonising knowledge by demonstrating that African metaphysical traditions are not merely objects of historical inquiry but living intellectual resources for global philosophical discourse.

Conclusion

The accelerating crises of biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, climate change, and emerging public health challenges have increasingly revealed the limitations of conceptual frameworks that regard humanity as existing independently of the natural world. While contemporary scientific paradigms such as One Health and Planetary Health have significantly advanced interdisciplinary understanding of the interdependence between human, animal, and environmental health, they remain largely concerned with empirical relationships and policy interventions. This study has argued that these crises ultimately possess a deeper philosophical dimension. They are manifestations of an ontological disorder rooted in anthropocentric conceptions of reality that privilege human beings while fragmenting the relational unity of existence. Against this background, the study has proposed African metaphysics as a constructive philosophical alternative. Through a critical engagement with African metaphysical traditions, including the concepts of vital force, communal existence, Ubuntu, Ibuanyidanda, Igwebuike, and Eco-bio-communitarianism, it has demonstrated that African philosophy consistently conceives reality as a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence is

constituted through participation, complementarity, and relationality. Unlike anthropocentric ontology, which separates humanity from nature, African metaphysics affirms that human flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of the wider community of life.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in the formulation of African Ontological Relationalism as a systematic metaphysical framework for understanding biodiversity conservation and public health. African Ontological Relationalism has been defined as the doctrine that reality consists of a dynamic communion of interdependent beings whose existence, identity, intelligibility, and flourishing arise through relationships of complementarity and reciprocal participation within a unified order of Being. In advancing this framework, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of African environmental thought and reconstructs diverse African philosophical traditions into a coherent ontological paradigm capable of engaging contemporary global debates. This reconstruction has generated three interconnected philosophical claims. First, it has shown that anthropocentrism is fundamentally an ontological error rather than merely an ethical deficiency because it misconceives the relational structure of existence. Second, it has argued that biodiversity possesses ontological value, since the plurality of life constitutes an essential expression of the richness, complementarity, and intelligibility of Being itself. Third, it has demonstrated that public health should be understood not simply as the absence of disease but as the harmonious flourishing of persons, communities, ecosystems, and the broader community of life. These claims collectively reposition biodiversity conservation and public health within the domain of metaphysics, thereby extending contemporary environmental philosophy beyond the limits of anthropocentric and exclusively ecocentric paradigms.

The implications of this framework extend beyond theoretical philosophy. African Ontological Relationalism provides a conceptual foundation for reimagining environmental governance, sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, health policy, and ecological education. It challenges development models that pursue economic growth at the expense of ecological integrity and instead advocates a vision of development measured by the flourishing of the entire community of Being. In doing so, the framework encourages greater dialogue between African philosophy, environmental science, public health, and global sustainability studies, demonstrating that philosophical reflection remains indispensable to addressing the ecological challenges of the twenty-first century.

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PAPER 6

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AS A DETERMINANT OF PUBLIC HEALTH IN WEST AFRICA:RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES, POLICY GAPS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Grace Ifeoma Otubah
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
gi.otubah@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Biodiversity conservation has increasingly been recognised as a fundamental determinant of public health, particularly within the African context where human livelihoods remain deeply interconnected with natural ecosystems. Biodiversity supports critical ecosystem services such as food production, water purification, climate regulation, and the provision of medicinal resources that directly influence human health and well-being. However, the accelerating loss of biodiversity due to deforestation, climate change, urban expansion, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources poses significant threats to public health across the African continent. This study examines biodiversity conservation as a determinant of public health in Africa by focusing on three key dimensions: religious perspectives, policy gaps, and future prospects. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from environmental studies, public health research, and religious ethics. It argues that religious traditions which includes: African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam, have historically played important roles in shaping environmental ethics and conservation practices across African societies. These religious frameworks often promote stewardship, sacred ecology, and moral responsibility toward the natural environment. Despite these ethical foundations, significant policy gaps persist in biodiversity

governance, including weak institutional frameworks, limited integration between environmental and health policies, inadequate recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge, and socio-economic pressures that drive environmental degradation. The study concludes that effective biodiversity conservation is essential not only for environmental sustainability but also for safeguarding public health and achieving sustainable development in Africa.
Keywords: biodiversity, conservation, environmental sustainability, religious environmental ethics, environmental policy gaps.

INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity Plays a fundamental role in sustaining human life and promoting public health across the globe. It refers to the diversity of living organisms, including plants, animals, microorganisms, and the ecosystems in which they interact. These biological systems provide essential ecosystem services that support human survival and well-being. Such services include food production, clean water supply, climate regulation, disease control, and the provision of medicinal resources (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015). In recent decades, the relationship between biodiversity and public health has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Healthy ecosystems are vital for maintaining environmental conditions that support human health. For example, forests regulate atmospheric conditions, wetlands filter water pollutants, and diverse ecological systems can reduce the transmission of infectious diseases (Keesing & Ostfeld, 2021). Biodiversity also plays a critical role in food security and nutrition, particularly in developing regions where communities rely heavily on natural resources.

In Africa, biodiversity conservation is especially important because the continent possesses some of the world's richest ecosystems and biological resources. Africa hosts vast tropical forests, savannahs, wetlands, and marine environments that support both wildlife and human populations. Many African communities depend directly on

biodiversity for their livelihoods, including agriculture, fishing, forestry, and traditional medicine (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005).

However, biodiversity across Africa is under increasing threat from multiple environmental pressures. Rapid population growth, deforestation, land degradation, urban expansion, and climate change have accelerated biodiversity loss across many African ecosystems (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES], 2019). These environmental changes have significant implications for public health, as ecosystem degradation can contribute to food insecurity, water scarcity, the spread of infectious diseases, and the loss of medicinal plant resources (Chivian & Bernstein, 2008).

The outbreak of zoonotic diseases in recent decades has further highlighted the close relationship between environmental health and human health. Scientific research indicates that biodiversity loss and habitat destruction can increase human contact with wildlife reservoirs of pathogens, thereby raising the risk of emerging infectious diseases (Keesing & Ostfeld, 2021). Despite growing awareness of these connections, biodiversity conservation in Africa continues to face several challenges, including policy limitations, governance weaknesses, and socio-economic pressures. Additionally, cultural and religious factors play an important role in shaping environmental attitudes and conservation practices within African societies.

Religion remains one of the most influential social institutions in Africa. Religious beliefs often shape people's understanding of the natural world and their responsibilities toward the environment. African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam all contain ethical principles that emphasise stewardship of nature and respect for ecological balance (Gottlieb, 2006). Understanding the role of

religion in biodiversity conservation can therefore provide valuable insights into culturally appropriate strategies for promoting environmental sustainability and public health. This study examines biodiversity conservation as a determinant of public health in Africa by exploring three major themes: religious perspectives on environmental stewardship, policy gaps in biodiversity governance, and future prospects for integrating biodiversity conservation into public health strategies across the continent.

Research Objectives

1. To critically assess the influence of biodiversity loss on public health indicators in African settings.
2. To explore the ways in which religious beliefs influence environmental stewardship and health behaviours.
3. To propose evidence-based recommendations for integrative, faith-informed strategies for conservation and public health.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating a systematic literature review, policy analysis, and key stakeholder interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between biodiversity conservation, public health, and religion in Africa. Mixed-methods approaches enable the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of findings (John W. Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The systematic literature review synthesises recent scholarly work on biodiversity, public health, and religion within the African context. Policy analysis examines national policy documents to assess the extent to which religious perspectives are integrated into biodiversity and health strategies. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including religious leaders, conservation practitioners, and public health officials, in selected

African countries to capture experiential and contextual insights. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled **data** triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity and reliability of the study.

Literature Review

The relationship between biodiversity and human health has been widely examined in serious environmental and public health scholarship. Biodiversity contributes to human health through a wide range of ecosystem services that support survival and well-being. These services include provisioning services such as food and medicinal resources, regulating services such as climate and disease control, and cultural services that support social and spiritual well-being (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Scholars have argued that biodiversity is essential for maintaining ecological resilience and protecting human populations from environmental hazards. Diverse ecosystems tend to be more stable and better able to withstand environmental shocks such as climate change and disease outbreaks (Cardinale et al., 2012).

One of the most significant links between biodiversity and public health relates to infectious disease regulation. Research suggests that higher biodiversity levels can reduce disease transmission by limiting the dominance of particular pathogen-carrying species. This phenomenon is often referred to as the "dilution effect," whereby ecological diversity reduces the spread of infectious diseases (Keesing & Ostfeld, 2021). In contrast, biodiversity loss can increase disease risks by disrupting ecological balances. Habitat destruction can force wildlife species into closer contact with human populations, thereby increasing the likelihood of zoonotic disease transmission. Many emerging infectious diseases, including Ebola, HIV, and COVID-19, are believed to have originated from wildlife reservoirs linked to environmental disturbances (WHO, 2015).

Furthermore, biodiversity plays an important role in supporting traditional medicine systems that are widely used across Africa. A significant proportion of medicinal plants used in traditional healthcare systems are derived from forest ecosystems. The loss of these ecosystems threatens access to important medicinal resources and undermines public health systems in many rural communities (Chivian & Bernstein, 2008). Religion has long been recognised as a powerful influence on environmental ethics and ecological behaviour. Across many societies, religious traditions shape how people perceive nature and define moral responsibilities toward the environment (Gottlieb, 2006).

In Africa, African Traditional Religion provides one of the most influential indigenous frameworks for biodiversity conservation. Traditional African cosmologies emphasise the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. Natural elements such as forests, rivers, mountains, and animals are often regarded as sacred or spiritually significant (Mbiti, 1990).

Sacred groves represent one of the most important examples of indigenous conservation practices. These protected forest areas are often preserved due to religious beliefs that they are inhabited by deities or ancestral spirits. As a result, sacred groves frequently serve as biodiversity refuges that protect rare plant and animal species (Sheridan & Nyamweru, 2008). Similarly, totemic beliefs in many African societies prohibit the killing or consumption of certain animals associated with specific clans or families. These cultural practices function as informal conservation mechanisms that protect wildlife species (Gadgil et al., 1993). Christianity has also contributed to environmental ethics through the concept of stewardship. Christian theology emphasises that humans are caretakers of God's creation and have a moral obligation to protect the natural world. In recent years, Christian eco-theology has increasingly addressed environmental issues such as climate change

and biodiversity conservation (Horrell et al., 2010). Islamic environmental ethics similarly emphasise the concept of stewardship, known as *khalifah*, which recognises humans as guardians of the earth. Islamic teachings encourage responsible resource use, ecological balance, and environmental justice (Foltz, 2003). Together, these religious traditions provide important moral frameworks that can support biodiversity conservation and promote environmentally responsible behaviour across African societies. Despite growing recognition of the importance of biodiversity for public health, several policy and governance challenges continue to undermine conservation efforts in Africa. Environmental governance across many African countries is often constrained by limited financial resources, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations (Achieng et al., 2023). These challenges hinder effective biodiversity monitoring and conservation planning

Another major challenge is the lack of integration between biodiversity conservation and public health policies. Environmental protection and health systems often operate in separate policy domains, despite their close interdependence. Scholars increasingly advocate for interdisciplinary approaches such as the One Health framework, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health (WHO, 2015). Integrating biodiversity conservation into public health strategies could significantly improve disease prevention and environmental sustainability. Additionally, many environmental policies overlook indigenous ecological knowledge systems that historically supported sustainable resource management across African communities (Berkes, 2018). Recognising and integrating indigenous knowledge into modern environmental governance could enhance biodiversity conservation and promote culturally appropriate public health strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between biodiversity conservation and public health in Africa can be better understood through several interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives. This study is primarily anchored in Ecosystem Health Theory, the One Health Approach, and the Stewardship Theory of Environmental Ethics. These frameworks provide conceptual foundations for explaining how environmental conservation influences human health and how religious ethics can contribute to sustainable ecological management.

Ecosystem Health Theory

Ecosystem Health Theory emphasises that human health is closely linked to the health and stability of ecological systems. The theory argues that ecosystems function as complex networks in which biodiversity plays a crucial role in maintaining balance and resilience. When biodiversity is degraded through deforestation, habitat destruction, pollution, or climate change, ecosystem services that support human health become weakened (Rapport et al., 1998; Myers et al., 2013).

In the African context, healthy ecosystems contribute to public health in several ways. They regulate infectious diseases, provide nutritious food, supply medicinal plants, and ensure clean water and air. Conversely, biodiversity loss increases vulnerability to zoonotic diseases, malnutrition, and environmental hazards. For example, the destruction of natural habitats can increase human contact with disease-carrying wildlife, thereby elevating the risk of emerging infectious diseases (Jones et al., 2008; Whitmee et al., 2015). Ecosystem Health Theory therefore highlights that biodiversity conservation is not merely an environmental concern but a fundamental determinant of population health and human well-being.

One Health Approach

The One Health Approach is another theoretical framework that informs this study. This concept recognises the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. It emphasises that sustainable public health outcomes require integrated strategies that address ecological conditions alongside medical and social interventions (Destoumieux-Garzón et al., 2018). In Africa, many infectious diseases such as Ebola, Lassa fever, and zoonotic malaria are closely linked to ecological disturbances and biodiversity loss. The One Health framework therefore encourages collaborative efforts among environmental scientists, health professionals, policymakers, and local communities in order to address health risks associated with environmental degradation. Biodiversity conservation within this framework becomes a preventive public health strategy. Protecting wildlife habitats, maintaining ecological diversity, and promoting sustainable land use help reduce disease transmission and enhance human resilience to environmental threats.

Stewardship Theory of Environmental Ethics

Stewardship Theory provides a moral and ethical foundation for environmental conservation. The concept of stewardship suggests that human beings have a moral responsibility to protect and care for the natural environment. This idea is deeply rooted in many religious traditions, including African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam (Gottlieb, 2006). Within African indigenous belief systems, nature is often regarded as sacred, and many communities traditionally protect forests, rivers, and wildlife through cultural taboos and sacred institutions (Taringa, 2014). Similarly, Christian teachings emphasise responsible stewardship of the earth as part of humanity's moral obligation to creation. Islamic teachings also promote environmental responsibility and prohibit wasteful exploitation of natural resources (Foltz et al., 2003). Stewardship Theory therefore provides a normative framework for integrating religious values into biodiversity conservation efforts. By

encouraging ethical responsibility towards nature, religious perspectives can promote environmental behaviours that support both ecological sustainability and public health. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks demonstrate that biodiversity conservation is both an ecological necessity and a moral obligation that directly influences public health outcomes.

Religious Perspectives On Biodiversity Conservation In Africa

Religion is one of the most influential social institutions in Africa. Religious beliefs and cultural values shape how communities perceive nature, environmental responsibility, and human relationships with ecosystems. Across the continent, religious traditions—including African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam—have historically influenced biodiversity conservation practices.

African Traditional Religion and Sacred Ecology

African Traditional Religion (ATR) provides one of the most significant indigenous frameworks for environmental stewardship in Africa. ATR emphasises the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. In many African cosmologies, natural elements such as forests, rivers, mountains, and animals are believed to possess spiritual significance or to be inhabited by deities and ancestral spirits. Because nature is perceived as sacred, many ecosystems are protected through traditional cultural norms, taboos, and rituals. These cultural practices historically functioned as informal environmental management systems that preserved biodiversity long before modern conservation policies were introduced. One important example of this traditional conservation practice is the preservation of sacred groves. Sacred groves are forest areas protected because they are considered dwelling places of spiritual beings or ancestors. In many African communities, activities such as hunting, logging,

or farming are prohibited within these areas. As a result, sacred groves often serve as biodiversity refuges that protect endangered plant species and wildlife (Ntiamoa-Baidu, 2008). Traditional ecological beliefs also include totemic systems in which clans associate themselves with specific animals or plant species. Members of these clans are forbidden from killing or consuming their totem species, thereby contributing to wildlife conservation. These indigenous ecological ethics promote conservation through cultural taboos, ritual restrictions, and communal responsibility. Research shows that indigenous religious beliefs significantly influence environmental behaviour and conservation outcomes. Communities that maintain traditional religious values often demonstrate a stronger commitment to protecting forests and biodiversity because environmental stewardship is embedded in spiritual obligations (Deopa & Rinaldo, 2023). However, the influence of traditional ecological practices has weakened in some regions due to modernisation, urbanisation, and the spread of formal religions. Nevertheless, ATR continues to offer valuable insights for sustainable environmental management.

Christian Environmental Ethics

Christianity is one of the most widespread religions in Africa, and Christian theology increasingly recognises environmental stewardship as a moral responsibility. The concept of stewardship is central to Christian environmental ethics and is rooted in biblical teachings that humans are caretakers of God's creation. Christian eco-theology emphasises that the natural world is part of divine creation and should therefore be protected from exploitation and degradation. In recent years, many Christian institutions have promoted environmental awareness, climate action, and biodiversity protection through church programmes, community outreach, and advocacy initiatives.

In recent years, many Christian organisations have developed environmental programmes aimed at promoting ecological sustainability. Churches in various African countries engage in tree planting campaigns, environmental education, and climate change advocacy initiatives (Rheeder, 2021). Studies in Nigeria and other African countries show that Christian teachings encourage environmental responsibility through theological concepts such as creation care and stewardship (Fiahenoo et al., 2024). Christian organisations also play a role in public health initiatives related to environmental protection, including water sanitation programmes, tree planting campaigns, and sustainable agriculture projects.

Islamic Environmental Ethics

Islam also offers important ethical principles that support biodiversity conservation. Islamic environmental ethics emphasise the concept of *khalifah*, which means stewardship or guardianship of the earth. According to Islamic teachings, humans are trustees responsible for maintaining ecological balance. The Qur'an emphasises the importance of avoiding environmental corruption (*fasad*) and encourages moderation in the use of natural resources. Islamic environmental principles promote sustainable resource use through values such as justice (*adl*), balance (*mizan*), and trust (*amanah*). Historically, Islamic societies developed conservation systems such as the *hima* system, which designated protected areas for grazing and natural resource management. These traditional conservation zones functioned as early models of sustainable environmental governance.

Religion as a Driver of Environmental Behaviour

Religion influences environmental attitudes by shaping moral values, social norms, and cultural identity. In many African societies, religious leaders play a significant role in mobilising communities for environmental protection initiatives. Empirical research in Nigeria demonstrates a strong correlation between

religious teachings and environmental conservation behaviours such as tree planting and water protection practices (Oguche et al., 2025). Thus, religious institutions represent an important resource for promoting biodiversity conservation and improving public health outcomes.

Policy Gaps in Biodiversity Conservation and Public Health in Africa

Despite growing awareness of the link between biodiversity and human health, several policy gaps continue to hinder effective conservation in Africa.

Weak Policy Implementation

Many African countries have adopted biodiversity policies, but their implementation remains weak due to governance challenges, limited resources, and institutional fragmentation. Research indicates that conservation policies are often undermined by insufficient funding, weak enforcement mechanisms, and limited technical capacity within government institutions (Achieng et al., 2023). Furthermore, environmental policies often exist only on paper, while illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, and land conversion continue largely unchecked.

Fragmented Environmental Governance

Environmental governance in many African countries is fragmented across multiple government agencies. Ministries responsible for agriculture, mining, energy, and infrastructure often operate independently of conservation agencies. This fragmentation leads to conflicting policies and weak coordination. For instance, economic development projects such as mining or large-scale agriculture are sometimes approved in biodiversity-rich ecosystems despite existing conservation commitments

(Hlatshwayo et al., 2024). As a result, biodiversity considerations are frequently subordinated to short-term economic priorities.

Inadequate Integration of Public Health and Environmental Policies

Another major policy gap is the insufficient integration of biodiversity conservation into public health frameworks. Although the concept of the "One Health" approach recognises the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health, many African public health policies still treat environmental conservation as a separate sector. The degradation of ecosystems increases the risk of zoonotic disease outbreaks because habitat destruction forces wildlife into closer contact with human populations (Keesing & Ostfeld, 2021). However, environmental conservation strategies are rarely integrated into national disease prevention frameworks.

Insufficient Data and Research Infrastructure

Another major barrier is the lack of comprehensive biodiversity data. Many African ecosystems remain poorly studied, and monitoring systems are inadequate. Limited data availability constrains evidence-based policymaking and reduces the ability of governments to respond effectively to biodiversity loss (Achieng et al., 2023). In addition, research funding in Africa remains disproportionately low compared to other regions, despite the continent containing some of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems.

Socio-economic Pressures

Poverty, rapid population growth, and dependence on natural resources also contribute significantly to biodiversity loss. Many rural communities rely on forests for food, fuel, and income. As Africa's population continues to grow, pressure on land and natural ecosystems is increasing, leading to deforestation, habitat

fragmentation, and wildlife decline (Bezeng et al., 2025). Unless sustainable livelihood alternatives are provided, conservation policies may face resistance from local communities.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN AFRICA

Despite existing challenges, there are several promising opportunities for strengthening biodiversity conservation and public health governance across Africa.

Integrated Environmental and Health Policies

Future policy frameworks should adopt integrated approaches that recognise biodiversity conservation as a key determinant of public health. Collaborative strategies involving environmental scientists, health professionals, policymakers, and community leaders can help address complex environmental challenges more effectively. The One Health approach, which emphasises the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health, provides a useful model for integrating conservation and health policies (Destoumieux-Garzón et al., 2018).

Nature-Based Solutions

Nature-based solutions involve restoring ecosystems to address environmental and social challenges simultaneously. Examples include reforestation, wetland restoration, and mangrove conservation. These approaches enhance biodiversity while also improving water quality, reducing climate risks, and supporting food security (Seddon et al., 2022).

Strengthening Community-Based Conservation

Community participation is essential for successful biodiversity conservation. Local communities often possess valuable knowledge regarding natural resource management and environmental protection. Community-based conservation

initiatives empower local populations to participate actively in natural resource management. These programmes promote sustainable livelihoods while protecting biodiversity (Western & Wright, 1994). Future conservation initiatives should prioritise community-based approaches that empower local populations to participate in environmental decision-making processes. Such strategies can enhance conservation outcomes while improving local livelihoods and health conditions. Community participation also increases the effectiveness of conservation policies by aligning environmental protection with local socio-economic interests.

Harnessing Religious Institutions for Environmental Advocacy

Religious institutions represent powerful platforms for promoting environmental awareness and conservation ethics in Africa. Churches, mosques, and traditional religious institutions can mobilise large communities and encourage environmentally responsible behaviour. By incorporating religious teachings on environmental stewardship into conservation campaigns, policymakers and environmental organisations can strengthen public support for biodiversity protection.

Promoting Environmental Education and Research

Educational institutions and research organisations play an important role in advancing biodiversity conservation and environmental health knowledge. Increasing investment in environmental research, biodiversity monitoring, and public health studies will provide valuable data for evidence-based policy development. Environmental education programmes can also raise awareness among young people and encourage sustainable lifestyles that support ecological sustainability.

Findings And Discussions

The study identified several key findings regarding the role of biodiversity conservation in public health across Africa, the influence of religious perspectives, policy gaps, and future prospects for sustainable interventions. These findings are derived from the analysis of documentary sources, key informant interviews (KIIs) with policymakers and religious leaders, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with local community members.

1. Biodiversity as a Determinant of Public Health

The findings confirm that biodiversity is a critical determinant of public health in African communities. Participants highlighted that diverse ecosystems provide essential resources, including:

- **Medicinal plants:** Rural communities rely heavily on indigenous plant species for primary healthcare. Loss of these species threatens access to effective traditional medicine.
- **Food security:** Biodiverse agricultural systems support nutritional diversity, including wild foods, fisheries, and livestock that supplement rural diets.
- **Disease regulation:** Participants reported that ecosystem degradation, such as deforestation and wetland loss, was associated with increased exposure to infectious diseases, including malaria and zoonotic diseases.

2. Religious Perspectives Supporting Biodiversity Conservation

Religious beliefs and practices emerged as significant influences on community conservation behaviours:

- **African Traditional Religion (ATR):** Sacred groves, taboos, and cultural norms restrict overexploitation of species and habitats. Many participants noted that ATR encourages reverence for nature, indirectly protecting

ecosystem services that sustain human health (Taringa, 2014; Mbiti, 1990).

- **Christianity:** Stewardship teachings were frequently cited by church leaders, with initiatives such as tree planting, community environmental education, and promotion of sustainable agriculture. Churches serve as advocacy platforms, linking moral responsibility to practical conservation efforts (Gottlieb, 2006; Agbiji & Swart, 2020).
- **Islam:** Islamic principles of moderation (*khalifah*) guide resource use and promote environmental ethics. Mosques and faith-based organisations are actively involved in environmental awareness campaigns and sustainable resource management (Foltz et al., 2003).

These findings demonstrate that religion can be an effective vehicle for encouraging environmentally responsible behaviour and improving public health outcomes.

3. Policy Gaps

Despite the recognition of biodiversity's health importance, several policy gaps were observed:

- **Fragmentation of policies:** Environmental conservation and public health policies often operate independently, leading to inadequate coordination.
- **Weak enforcement:** Enforcement of existing environmental laws and wildlife protection regulations is inconsistent, resulting in continued habitat degradation and illegal wildlife trade.
- **Limited incorporation of indigenous knowledge:** Traditional ecological knowledge, including practices embedded in ATR, is rarely integrated into formal policy frameworks.
- **Funding challenges:** Conservation initiatives and environmental health programmes are underfunded, often

relying on international donor support.

These gaps impede the effective protection of biodiversity and reduce its potential contribution to public health.

4. Community-Based Conservation and Indigenous Knowledge

Findings indicate that community-led initiatives are more effective in conserving biodiversity while simultaneously improving health outcomes. Local knowledge systems guide sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants, fishing practices, and forest management. Participants emphasised that empowering communities to manage natural resources strengthens both conservation outcomes and local livelihoods (Berkes, 2012).

5. Future Prospects

Several opportunities were identified for strengthening biodiversity conservation as a determinant of public health:

- **Integrated policies:** Adoption of interdisciplinary approaches like the One Health framework can link ecosystem management with health planning (Destoumieux-Garzón et al., 2018).
- **Religious mobilisation:** Leveraging religious institutions for environmental advocacy was highlighted as a practical strategy for raising awareness and promoting stewardship.
- **Environmental education:** Educating communities about biodiversity's impact on health can enhance public support for conservation initiatives.
- **Sustainable development strategies:** Aligning economic development with ecological protection can ensure ecosystem services continue to support human health.

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PAPER 7

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND JUSTICE AS FOUNDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IN AFRICA

Emmanuel Onucheojo Egwu
Department of Philosophy,
Veritas University, Abuja
emmanuelegwu977@gmail.com

Michael Sunday Sasa, PhD
Department of Philosophy,
Veritas University, Abuja
dvc@veritas.edu.ng

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, PhD
Department of Philosophy,
Veritas University, Abuja
ikee_mario@yahoo.com

Abstract

There is an urgent need for accountability in managing the natural environment if we are to safeguard the health of our ecosystem and secure the well-being of future generations. Africa, once renowned as a cradle of rich biodiversity, is now increasingly threatened by environmental degradation. If such ecological decline can occur in a region historically celebrated for its biodiversity, the implications for the rest of the world are deeply concerning. While many scholars identify physical and economic factors as the primary drivers of environmental crises, this study argues that the absence of environmental ethics and justice constitutes the fundamental cause of ecological degradation. Consequently, if humanity is to thrive sustainably, serious attention must be given to these ethical and justice-oriented dimensions. To address this concern, the study adopts an analytical and conceptual approach. Central concepts such as "environmental ethics," "justice," and "climate change" are critically examined and clarified to establish their relevance to the discourse. Within this framework, Peter

Singer approaches environmental concerns from a utilitarian perspective, emphasizing human welfare and the reduction of suffering. In contrast, Thomas Pogge argues that we must confront the structural and foundational causes of environmental crises, particularly how the actions of wealthy nations adversely affect poorer nations and hinder their development. Similarly, Arne Naess, through his theory of "deep ecology," advocates for a responsible and respectful relationship with the natural environment while rejecting radical anthropocentrism. This article contributes to the ongoing discourse on climate change by emphasizing the ethical and justice-related foundations of environmental degradation. It argues that continued ecological destruction poses a serious threat not only to human survival but also to other sentient beings, organisms, and plant life that depend on a balanced ecosystem.

Keywords: Environmental justice, Ethics, Africa, climate change, Ecosystem, Accountability

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most serious environmental and developmental issues facing Africa. The continent contributes relatively little to global greenhouse gas emissions, yet it faces severe consequences. They include droughts, floods, biodiversity loss, desertification, food insecurity and declining agricultural productivity (IPCC, 2022, 2023). These impacts are not distributed equally. Poor households, rural communities, women, children and other vulnerable groups often have fewer resources to adapt. Hence, climate change is not only an ecological problem. It is also a question of responsibility, justice and human welfare.

Existing responses have largely asserted scientific knowledge, technological innovation, finance and public policy. These remain necessary, but they do not by themselves answer important moral

questions. Who should bear responsibility for climate-related harm? What duties do affluent countries have towards vulnerable societies? How should environmental burdens and adaptation resources be distributed? What obligations do present generations have to future generations? These questions require ethical analysis. Environmental ethics tackles the moral relationship between human beings and the natural world. Environmental justice examines the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, participation in decision-making and the recognition of vulnerable communities (Schlosberg, 2007; Agyeman, 2014).

This paper brings these concerns together through a dialogue among Arne Naess, Peter Singer, Thomas Pogge and Ubuntu philosophy. Naess (1973, 1989) interrogates anthropocentrism by asserting the intrinsic value of the natural world and the need for a less exploitative relationship with nature. Singer (1972, 2011) draws attention to the moral obligation to prevent avoidable suffering, particularly where those with greater resources can provide assistance. Pogge (2002, 2008) shifts attention from individual duties to the global structures that produce and sustain inequality. Ubuntu adds an African relational perspective centred on interconnectedness, solidarity, reciprocity and communal responsibility (Ramose, 2015). Generally, these perspectives provide a broader framework for understanding both the ecological and distributive dimensions of climate change. The paper asserts that environmental ethics and environmental justice should not be treated as separate responses to the African climate crisis. Ecological responsibility must be accompanied by justice and justice must recognise humanity's dependence on the natural world. Thus, the paper proposes an integrated framework in which ecological responsibility, the prevention of suffering, structural justice and Ubuntu-based communal responsibility foster one another. This framework is applied to African climate realities, including resource extraction and environmental degradation, to

evince why effective climate governance requires not only technological and institutional reform but also ethical transformation.

Statement of the Problem

Climate change presents a serious threat to Africa's ecological stability and socio-economic development. The continent contributes relatively little to global greenhouse gas emissions but bears a disproportionate share of climate-related harms. Droughts, floods, desertification, declining agricultural productivity, biodiversity loss and water scarcity increasingly threaten livelihoods and human well-being (IPCC, 2022, 2023). These pressures are particularly severe for poor and rural communities whose adaptive capacity is limited. Thus, climate change exposes a persistent problem of unequal vulnerability: those who contribute least to the crisis often have the fewest resources to respond to it. Current responses have produced important scientific, technological and policy interventions, but they remain insufficient when considered only in technical terms. Climate governance also involves questions of moral responsibility, fairness, participation and accountability. Resource extraction, pollution, land degradation and unequal access to adaptation resources evince that environmental harm is often connected to wider economic and political structures. Hence, the problem is both ecological and distributive. Communities may bear environmental costs without receiving a fair share of the benefits or having meaningful influence over decisions that affect their lives (Schlosberg, 2007; Pogge, 2008). Moreover, there is limited integration of African philosophical perspectives into contemporary climate governance. Ubuntu and indigenous ecological knowledge assert relationality, communal responsibility, reciprocity and respect for the natural environment (Ramose, 2015; Ojakorotu & Bamidele, 2019). Yet these perspectives often remain peripheral to formal environmental policy.

Consequently, this study tackles this gap by examining environmental ethics and environmental justice as complementary foundations for climate governance. It brings Naess's ecological responsibility, Singer's concern for human suffering, Pogge's structural account of global injustice and Ubuntu's relational ethic into a single analytical framework. The study opines that climate action in Africa will be more effective when ecological protection, social justice, communal responsibility and institutional accountability are treated as interconnected rather than separate concerns.

Review of Relevant Literature

Environmental Ethics and Environmental Justice

Environmental ethics and environmental justice tackle different but connected dimensions of the environmental crisis. Environmental ethics asks how human beings ought to relate to nature. Environmental justice asks who suffers environmental harm, who benefits from environmental resources and who participates in environmental decisions (Schlosberg, 2007). The distinction is important, but the two perspectives cannot be separated in practice. Environmental protection without justice may ignore vulnerable communities. Justice without ecological responsibility may fail to protect the natural systems on which human life depends. Environmental ethics interrogates the assumption that nature exists mainly for human use. Leopold (2002) views human beings as members of a wider biotic community. Naess (1973, 1989) develops this concern through deep ecology. He rejects excessive anthropocentrism and roots for respect for the intrinsic value of nature. His position is relevant to Africa because extractive activities often place short-term economic interests above ecological integrity. However, environmental protection must also recognise the development needs of poor communities. Hence, a viable African approach must protect ecosystems without ignoring poverty, employment, energy

access and other basic needs. Environmental justice adds the question of fairness. Bullard (1990, 1994) evinces how environmental hazards can be concentrated in already disadvantaged communities. Sze and London (2008) further expose that environmental justice involves social movements, policy and public participation. These concerns are relevant to Africa, where communities affected by mining, petroleum extraction, deforestation and other activities may receive limited economic benefits while carrying substantial environmental costs.

Naess, Singer and Pogge: Three Dimensions of Climate Responsibility

Naess, Singer and Pogge advanced different but complementary ways of understanding climate responsibility. Naess focused on the relationship between human beings and nature. Singer focused on the duty to prevent avoidable suffering. Pogge focused on the structures that produce and sustain inequality. Generally, they move the discussion from ecological value to human welfare and then to institutional responsibility. Singer's (1972, 2011) position is particularly relevant to climate justice. His polemics that preventable suffering creates moral obligations calls affluent societies to assist those facing severe climate-related hardship. Applied to Africa, this supports greater assistance for adaptation, food security, health protection and disaster response. Yet Singer's approach mainly asserts the duty to assist. It does not fully explain why some societies repeatedly bear greater environmental burdens. Pogge's (2002, 2008) structural approach handles this limitation. He draws attention to international arrangements that reproduce unequal opportunities and deprivation. In the climate context, his position directs attention to historical emissions, unequal economic power and unequal access to finance and technology. Consequently, these three perspectives complement one another. Naess explains why ecological systems deserve protection. Singer explains why those able to prevent suffering have duties to act. Pogge explains why climate responsibility must

also handle unjust structures. None is sufficient alone. They collectively provide a stronger ethical basis for analysing Africa's climate vulnerability.

Ubuntu and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

Ubuntu brings an important African contribution to this framework. Its stresses on relationality, solidarity, reciprocity and communal responsibility issues highly individualistic approaches to environmental responsibility (Ramose, 2015). Environmental protection, from this perspective, is not merely a private choice. It is a communal obligation. Moreover, Ojakorotu and Bamidele (2019) connect failures in resource management with the erosion of values such as caring, sharing and communal responsibility. Ubuntu also provides a useful link between environmental ethics and environmental justice. Respect for nature is connected to respect for people. Decisions concerning land, water, forests and other resources should consider the interests of the wider community. This supports participatory approaches to climate governance and strengthens the recognition dimension of environmental justice.

Indigenous ecological knowledge adds a practical dimension. African communities have developed knowledge of local soils, rainfall, forests, water systems, crops and other ecological conditions over generations. Such knowledge can support conservation and climate adaptation. It should not, however, be romanticised. Some traditional practices may no longer be adequate under changing demographic, economic and climatic conditions. Thus, indigenous knowledge should be critically appraised and combined with scientific knowledge.

African Climate Experience and the Literature Gap

Recent African climate research demonstrates the practical importance of these ethical concerns. Mugambiwa (2021) shows

that Africa's limited contribution to global emissions contrasts sharply with its exposure to climate impacts. Vulnerable populations, particularly poor communities and women, bear significant burdens. Research on adaptation finance also indicates that policies designed by governments and external institutions may fail when affected communities are not adequately consulted. These findings foster the importance of both distributive and procedural justice. Specifically, the Niger Delta provides a concrete example of the connection between ecological harm and social injustice. Decades of petroleum extraction have generated substantial economic value while many host communities have experienced pollution, environmental degradation and threats to their livelihoods (Olawuyi, 2020). The case demonstrates why climate governance cannot focus only on national economic gains. It must also consider ecological integrity, community rights, participation and fair distribution of benefits.

Consequently, the literature brings important insights but remains fragmented. Environmental ethics often concentrates on humanity's relationship with nature. Environmental justice focuses on unequal burdens and participation. The works of Naess, Singer and Pogge tackles ecological value, human suffering and structural inequality respectively. Ubuntu champions an African account of relational responsibility. What remains insufficiently developed is a framework that brings these perspectives together in analysing Africa's climate crisis. Hence, this study tackles that gap. It treats environmental ethics and environmental justice as complementary rather than competing approaches. Naess contributes ecological responsibility. Singer contributes the duty to reduce avoidable suffering. Pogge contributes structural justice. Ubuntu contributes communal responsibility and an African relational perspective. Their integration provides the philosophical basis for a more context-sensitive approach to climate governance in Africa.

Methodology

This study adopts analytical, critical and comparative philosophical methods. The analytical method clarifies key concepts such as environmental ethics, environmental justice, anthropocentrism, sustainability, ecological responsibility and climate change. The critical method examines the arguments of Naess, Singer, Pogge and relevant environmental justice scholars in relation to Africa's climate realities. It appraises their strengths and limitations. The comparative method places these perspectives in dialogue with Ubuntu and indigenous African ecological thought. It identifies areas of convergence and difference and evinces how they can complement one another. The study also uses selected African environmental experiences, particularly the Niger Delta, to show the practical relevance of the philosophical arguments. The analysis is based on relevant scholarly literature and policy materials. It does not claim to provide empirical measurement of climate impacts. Rather, it develops a normative framework for understanding and responding to climate change in Africa.

Findings

The study found that Africa's climate vulnerability is closely linked to global and domestic inequalities. Although the continent contributes relatively little to global greenhouse gas emissions, it faces severe impacts on agriculture, water, food security, health and livelihoods (IPCC, 2022, 2023; UNEP, 2021). Poor and rural communities are particularly exposed because they often have limited infrastructure, finance, and adaptive capacity. Thus, climate vulnerability is not simply a geographical problem. It is also a problem of justice.

The study further found that environmental ethics and environmental justice are mutually supportive. Naess's (1973, 1989) ecological perspective evinces the need to move beyond excessive anthropocentrism and protect the integrity of nature.

imposing a moral duty to reduce preventable suffering. Pogge (2002, 2008) extended the analysis to global structures that reproduce unequal vulnerability and responsibility. Environmental justice then provides practical criteria for assessing these concerns through fair distribution, participation, recognition and accountability (Schlosberg, 2007). Hence, the findings support an integrated rather than fragmented approach to climate governance.

The study also found that Ubuntu and indigenous ecological knowledge can strengthen this framework. Ubuntu asserts relationality, reciprocity, solidarity and communal responsibility (Ramose, 2015). Indigenous ecological knowledge similarly provides locally developed practices for managing land, water, forests, agriculture and biodiversity (Berkes, 2018). These perspectives can improve community participation and make adaptation policies more culturally appropriate. However, they should be critically appraised and combined with scientific knowledge rather than treated as complete substitutes for it.

The review further found that environmental injustice is visible in concrete African contexts. The Niger Delta evinces how resource extraction can produce economic benefits while imposing substantial environmental costs on host communities. Pollution, ecological degradation and loss of livelihoods raise questions about distribution, participation, accountability and compensation (Olawuyi, 2020). Like issues arise in other African contexts affected by deforestation, mining, land degradation and climate-induced livelihood losses. These cases show that climate governance must tackle both environmental protection and the social consequences of environmental decisions.

Finally, the study found that weak institutions, inadequate climate finance, limited community participation and poor enforcement continue to constrain effective climate action. Hence, scientific and technological interventions are necessary but insufficient.

Sustainable climate governance requires ethical leadership, accountable institutions, fair access to resources, meaningful participation and stronger cooperation between scientific and indigenous knowledge systems. The central finding is that Africa needs a climate framework that connects ecological responsibility with human welfare, structural justice and communal responsibility.

Discussion

The findings evince that Africa's climate crisis cannot be understood only in terms of environmental exposure. It is also a question of justice and responsibility. The continent contributes relatively little to global emissions but experiences severe climate impacts. Pogge's (2002, 2008) account of structural injustice helps postulate this disparity. Climate vulnerability is shaped not only by environmental conditions but also by unequal economic and political structures. Wealthier countries have greater financial and technological capacity, while many African countries face limited resources for adaptation. Hence, climate justice must include greater responsibility from those with greater capacity and historical contribution to the problem.

Singer's (1972, 2011) position fosters this argument from a different direction. If suffering can reasonably be prevented, those capable of preventing it have a moral obligation to act. Applied to climate change, this creates a strong ethical case for greater international support for vulnerable African societies. Climate finance, technology transfer, disaster assistance and adaptation support are not merely acts of charity. They can also be understood as responses to a moral responsibility to reduce avoidable suffering. However, Singer's method does not fully explain the structural genesis of unequal vulnerability. Pogge's analysis complements it by showing why responsibility must extend beyond individual acts of assistance to the institutions and global arrangements that sustain inequality.

Naess (1973, 1989) adds the ecological dimension that both approaches require. His deep ecology questions the assumption that nature has value only because it serves human interests. This is important in Africa where oil extraction, mining, deforestation and other forms of resource exploitation have often produced serious ecological costs. Yet Naess's postulate must be applied with sensitivity to African socio-economic realities. Communities facing poverty, unemployment, inadequate energy access and weak infrastructure cannot simply be asked to place ecological protection above all other needs. Therefore, environmental ethics must combine ecological limits with legitimate human development needs. The Niger Delta illustrates this given. Petroleum extraction has generated substantial economic value, yet oil pollution and ecological degradation have imposed serious costs on many host communities (Olawuyi, 2020). The problem is not simply that nature has been damaged. It is also that the people living with the consequences may have limited influence over resource decisions and may not receive benefits proportionate to the burdens they bear. Thus. the Niger Delta brings Naess's concern for ecological integrity into direct conversation with Pogge's structural account of injustice and Singer's concern for preventable suffering. It also evinces why environmental ethics and environmental justice should be considered interconnected.

Ubuntu deepens this synthesis by providing an African ethical language for environmental responsibility. Its stress on relationality, reciprocity, solidarity and communal well-being interrogates the idea that environmental responsibility is primarily an individual or state obligation (Ramose, 2015). Environmental harm affects relationships within communities and between communities and their natural surroundings. Hence, Ubuntu supports participatory governance in which affected communities are not passive recipients of climate policies but active participants in environmental decision-making. Indigenous ecological knowledge strengthens this position by providing locally grounded knowledge of land, water, agriculture,

forests and biodiversity.

The combined framework consequently offers four connected dimensions of climate responsibility. Naess provides ecological responsibility; Singer provides the duty to reduce preventable suffering; Pogge provides structural and historical responsibility and Ubuntu provides communal and relational responsibility. Environmental justice connects these dimensions through fair distribution, meaningful participation, recognition and accountability. This synthesis is more useful for Africa than any single theory because the continent's climate problems involve ecological degradation, human vulnerability, unequal global structures and local governance at the same time.

The significance is that African climate governance should move beyond narrowly technical responses. Scientific knowledge and technological innovation remain essential, but they should operate within institutions guided by justice and ethical responsibility. Climate policies should protect ecosystems, reduce human suffering, tackle structural inequalities and recognise local communities as partners in environmental governance. Such an approach would make climate action not only more ethically defensible but also more responsive to the social and ecological realities of African societies.

Conclusion

Climate change in Africa is not merely an environmental problem. It is also a problem of justice, responsibility and governance. This study has shown that Africa's vulnerability cannot be separated from unequal global structures, ecological exploitation and weak domestic institutions. Naess, Singer, Pogge and Ubuntu offer complementary resources for tackling these problems. Naess postulate responsibility towards nature. Singer asserts the duty to reduce preventable suffering. Pogge projects structural inequality and historical responsibility. Ubuntu adds the principles of solidarity, reciprocity and communal responsibility. Generally, these perspectives evince

that effective climate governance must protect ecosystems while also protecting vulnerable people. Thus, Africa needs climate policies that combine ecological responsibility with distributive and procedural justice, scientific knowledge with indigenous ecological knowledge and economic development with environmental sustainability. Such an approach offers a stronger ethical basis for climate resilience and more inclusive sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the study makes five recommendations:

1. **Integrate environmental ethics and justice into climate policy.** African governments should embed ecological responsibility, fairness, accountability and intergenerational responsibility in climate legislation and development planning. Ubuntu-based principles of solidarity and communal responsibility should also inform relevant policies.
2. **Strengthen community participation and indigenous knowledge.** Local communities, women, youth and other vulnerable groups should participate meaningfully in climate planning and implementation. Indigenous ecological knowledge should be integrated with scientific research where it can improve locally appropriate adaptation and conservation.
3. **Promote a multidimensional approach to climate justice.** Climate adaptation should consider distributive, procedural, recognitional and intergenerational justice. Climate finance should reach communities that face the greatest risks and have the least capacity to respond.
4. **Strengthen environmental institutions and accountability.** Governments should improve regulatory enforcement, transparency, environmental monitoring and accountability in sectors such as petroleum, mining, forestry, and infrastructure. The Niger Delta and similar cases

demonstrate the need to ensure that economic development does not transfer environmental costs to vulnerable communities.

5. **Strengthen international climate responsibility and future-oriented action.** Developed countries and other high-capacity actors should expand accessible climate finance, technology transfer and adaptation support for vulnerable African countries.

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PAPER 8

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS, JUSTICE, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN SURVIVAL

Kenneth Oduma Chiabuotu Odanwu
Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities,
Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi
Kenneth.odanwu@funai.edu.ng
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2906-8204

Abstract

The contemporary environmental crisis presents one of the most serious ethical challenges to human survival. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, resource depletion, and ecological degradation increasingly threaten human health, food security, livelihoods, and the integrity of ecosystems. This paper examines the relationship between environmental ethics, environmental justice, and the future of human survival. It argues that environmental degradation is not merely a scientific, technological, or economic problem but fundamentally a moral problem concerning human responsibility toward nature, vulnerable populations, and future generations. The study draws on utilitarianism, deontological ethics, virtue ethics, deep ecology, land ethic, ecofeminism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, Rawlsian justice, the capabilities approach, and African communal ethical perspectives. Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative philosophical analysis, conceptual clarification, critical interpretation, and normative argumentation. Particular attention is given to African cases, including environmental degradation in Nigeria's Niger Delta, sacred-grove conservation among communities in southwestern Nigeria, Igbo totemic and sacred-grove practices in southeastern Nigeria, the Konso people of Ethiopia, and Yoruba environmental thought concerning reciprocal relations with the natural world. Evidence from these

cases demonstrates that environmental ethics can be strengthened when philosophical principles are connected with concrete social and cultural practices. The paper argues that environmental justice requires an equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, meaningful participation in environmental decision-making, recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge, and stronger obligations toward future generations. It concludes that human survival depends upon an ethical transformation from domination and excessive exploitation toward ecological responsibility, justice, restraint, reciprocity, and stewardship.
Keywords: Environmental Justice; Climate Change; Biodiversity; Sustainability; African Environmental Ethics; Human Survival

Introduction

The contemporary environmental crisis has become one of the defining challenges of human existence. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, desertification, water scarcity, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources increasingly affect the conditions necessary for human flourishing (IPCC, 2022). These problems are particularly significant in Africa, where many societies have made relatively small historical contributions to global greenhouse-gas emissions but experience substantial climate-related losses and vulnerabilities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that African development sectors are already experiencing losses associated with human-induced climate change, including biodiversity loss, water shortages, reduced food production, loss of lives, and reduced economic growth (IPCC, 2022). Africa's vulnerability is further complicated by high dependence on climate-sensitive livelihoods, including agriculture, pastoralism, fisheries, and forestry (IPCC, 2022).

Environmental degradation is also inseparable from questions of

justice. Environmental benefits and burdens are not equally distributed. Communities that contribute relatively little to global environmental degradation may experience disproportionate exposure to pollution, climate-related disasters, food insecurity, displacement, and loss of livelihoods (Schlosberg, 2019). The IPCC similarly observes that Africa faces significant climate-justice challenges because vulnerable communities are already experiencing serious impacts despite the continent's comparatively low historical contribution to global emissions (IPCC, 2022).

Environmental degradation in the region consequently raises questions of distributive justice, responsibility, accountability, participation, compensation, and human dignity. The problem addressed in this study is therefore the insufficient integration of ethical responsibility, environmental justice, and culturally situated ecological knowledge in responses to the environmental crisis. Scientific and technological approaches are indispensable, but they cannot by themselves determine what human beings ought to value, what obligations present generations owe future generations, or how environmental burdens should be distributed. The main objective of this paper is to critically examine the relationship between environmental ethics, justice, and human survival. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the philosophical foundations of environmental ethics.
2. Analyze the relationship between environmental degradation and justice.
3. Examine the implications of environmental degradation for human survival.
4. Evaluate selected African environmental practices and ethical traditions.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative philosophical

approach based on conceptual analysis, critical interpretation, and normative argumentation. It engages philosophical literature alongside selected empirical and policy evidence concerning African environmental conditions and conservation practices. This approach is interdisciplinary because environmental questions require engagement with philosophy, ecology, development studies, political theory, and environmental governance. The use of Indigenous Knowledge is particularly relevant because the IPCC recognizes Africa's Indigenous and Local Knowledge as an important strategic resource for sustainable development and climate adaptation (IPCC, 2022).

Conceptual Clarifications

Environmental Ethics: Environmental ethics is the branch of moral philosophy concerned with the moral relationship between human beings and the natural environment. It examines whether nature possesses intrinsic value and whether human beings have moral duties toward non-human entities and ecological systems (Callicott, 1989). The philosophical significance of environmental ethics is therefore its attempt to reconsider the moral status of nature. Rather than viewing forests, rivers, animals, and other natural entities exclusively as resources, environmental ethics asks whether human beings have responsibilities toward them independently of their economic utility.

Environmental Justice: Environmental justice concerns the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens and the equitable participation of affected communities in environmental decision-making. It includes distributive, procedural, recognitional, and corrective dimensions (Schlosberg, 2013, 2019). Environmental justice is therefore broader than environmental protection. A society cannot be considered environmentally just if it protects ecosystems while systematically excluding vulnerable communities from decisions affecting their

land, health, livelihoods, and cultural resources.

Human Survival: Human survival refers not merely to biological continuation but to the preservation of the ecological, social, economic, and cultural conditions necessary for dignified human existence. Human beings depend upon functioning ecosystems for food, water, breathable air, climate regulation, medicine, and livelihoods (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Human survival must therefore be understood in ecological as well as biological terms. If ecological systems are systematically degraded, the conditions necessary for human flourishing are simultaneously undermined.

Theoretical Framework

Utilitarianism: Utilitarianism evaluates actions according to their consequences for overall well-being. Bentham's classical utilitarianism emphasizes the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain, while Mill develops a more sophisticated account of happiness and human welfare (Bentham, 1789/1996; Mill, 1863). Applied to environmental questions, utilitarianism provides a framework for evaluating environmental policies according to their consequences. Pollution, deforestation, and climate change are morally objectionable when they generate widespread suffering, disease, economic losses, ecological damage, and insecurity.

Deontological Ethics: Kantian ethics emphasizes duty, moral law, and respect for persons (Kant, 1785/1998). Applied to environmental questions, deontological reasoning suggests that human beings have duties not to destroy the ecological conditions necessary for the dignity and flourishing of present and future persons. A deontological approach is particularly relevant to environmental justice because it emphasizes the moral prohibition against treating persons merely as means to economic or political

ends. Communities should not be sacrificed for economic development without consideration of their rights and dignity.

Virtue Ethics: Aristotelian virtue ethics emphasizes moral character and the cultivation of virtues necessary for human flourishing (Aristotle, 2009). Environmental responsibility can be understood through virtues such as moderation, humility, prudence, care, responsibility, and ecological solidarity. Environmental degradation frequently reflects vices such as greed, excessive consumption, irresponsibility, wastefulness, and indifference to long-term consequences. Environmental sustainability therefore requires not merely regulations but morally responsible citizens and institutions. Virtue ethics is particularly useful because environmental sustainability cannot be achieved exclusively through external laws. It also requires internal dispositions that encourage individuals and institutions to exercise restraint and responsibility.

African Environmental Ethical Perspectives

African environmental thought should not be presented as one uniform philosophical system. Different communities have developed distinctive relationships with land, forests, water, animals, ancestors, and spiritual institutions. In southwestern Nigeria, Yoruba sacred groves demonstrate the connection between religious values and environmental conservation. Adeyanju et al. (2022) examined three sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria and found that their long-term preservation depended upon cooperation between customary institutions and formal government legislation. The study specifically identified Osun-Osogbo and Idanre among the cultural landscapes where religio-cultural practices intersect with biodiversity conservation (Adeyanju et al., 2022).

African environmental ethics can therefore contribute to

contemporary environmental philosophy through concepts of communal responsibility, reciprocity, restraint, sacredness, relationality, and respect for ecological systems. However, such traditions must be examined critically and contextually rather than romanticized. These examples demonstrate that African environmental ethics should be understood through particular communities and historical practices rather than through generalized claims about the entire continent.

Environmental Crisis and Human Survival

Climate Change

Climate change is among the greatest environmental threats to human survival. Rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, droughts, floods, heatwaves, sea-level rise, and other climate-related changes affect ecological and human systems (IPCC, 2022). Africa is particularly vulnerable because many communities depend heavily upon climate-sensitive activities such as rain-fed agriculture, pastoralism, fishing, and forestry. The IPCC reports that climate change is already affecting African food production, biodiversity, water availability, health, and livelihoods (IPCC, 2022). The ethical significance is clear: communities with limited historical responsibility for global greenhouse-gas emissions may nevertheless experience severe consequences. This creates questions of distributive justice, historical responsibility, international solidarity, and climate finance.

Biodiversity Loss

Biodiversity supports ecological resilience and provides essential services including pollination, water regulation, soil fertility, food, and medicinal resources (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Biodiversity loss consequently threatens both ecosystems and human societies. African biodiversity is particularly vulnerable to climate change and habitat destruction. The IPCC projects increasing biodiversity risks with increasing warming, including risks to terrestrial species, freshwater fish, and other

ecosystems (IPCC, 2022). Concrete African conservation experiences demonstrate that cultural institutions can contribute to biodiversity protection. Research on three sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria found that long-term conservation depended upon cooperation between customary institutions and formal governmental legislation (Adeyanju et al., 2022).

Pollution and Public Health

Pollution represents another major threat to human survival. Air, water, and soil pollution affect human health, ecosystems, food systems, and livelihoods (WHO, 2021). The Nigerian Niger Delta provides a significant case of environmental injustice. Petroleum extraction has generated major economic benefits for Nigeria while environmental degradation has affected communities whose livelihoods depend upon fishing, farming, wetlands, and other ecological resources. From an ethical perspective, the problem extends beyond environmental damage to questions of responsibility, compensation, participation, dignity, and justice. The situation demonstrates why development should not be evaluated exclusively according to economic benefits.

Resource Depletion

Unsustainable exploitation of forests, minerals, fisheries, fossil fuels, and freshwater threatens the ecological foundations of future human life. Excessive consumption reflects an ethical problem because present interests may be prioritized at the expense of future needs. The problem is particularly significant because ecological resources are often treated as unlimited commodities. Leopold's land ethic challenges this mentality by insisting that human beings are members of an ecological community and should act in ways that preserve its integrity (Leopold, 1949). A sustainable ethical framework therefore requires moderation, responsible consumption, ecological restoration, and recognition of ecological limits.

Environmental Justice and African Case Studies

The Niger Delta, Nigeria

The Niger Delta illustrates the relationship between environmental degradation, economic development, and justice. Petroleum extraction has contributed substantially to Nigeria's economy, yet oil-producing communities have also experienced environmental costs. From an ethical perspective, the central issue concerns whether the distribution of benefits and burdens is fair. Communities that depend upon local ecosystems for agriculture and fishing may experience environmental harm while receiving inadequate participation in decisions concerning resource extraction.

Sacred Groves in Southwestern Nigeria

Sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria provide a contrasting example in which cultural and religious institutions can support conservation. Adeyanju et al. (2022) studied three sacred groves and found that their long-term preservation depended upon collaboration between customary institutions and formal government legislation. The researchers explain that sacred groves represent traditional forms of community-based conservation in which religious and cultural norms can restrict access and protect biodiversity (Adeyanju et al., 2022). The study therefore provides concrete evidence for the philosophical argument that environmental responsibility can be embedded within community institutions.

The Osun-Osogbo grove provides an especially important example of the interaction between religious beliefs and environmental protection. Research examining land-use changes between 1986 and 2017 found that, despite substantial urbanization around the grove, the sacred site remained relatively intact, with religious taboos identified as an important factor in its protection (Adewoyin, 2021). This case challenges the assumption that

conservation must originate exclusively from modern scientific institutions. Traditional institutions can provide moral and social mechanisms for regulating access to ecologically important spaces.

Igbo Communities in Southeastern Nigeria

Recent research involving 27 communities in Enugu State investigated totems and sacred groves as traditional ecological knowledge systems. The study identified culturally significant plant species and documented the relationship between cultural practices and biodiversity conservation (Ogonegbu & Ogelenya, 2026). This example is philosophically important because conservation is not treated simply as resource management. Particular plants, animals, forests, and ecological spaces can possess cultural and spiritual significance, thereby generating obligations concerning their protection.

The Konso People of Ethiopia

The Konso of southwestern Ethiopia provide another distinctive case. Research conducted through interviews, focus groups, and observation examined the cultural and spiritual significance of *dinna*, or holy woodlands (Workneh, 2023). These woodlands provide spaces in which cultural practices and relationships with nature intersect. The Konso example illustrates the importance of understanding environmental conservation within local cultural systems rather than imposing universal models that disregard local meanings. The philosophical lesson is that environmental responsibility can emerge from cultural understandings of sacredness, community identity, and intergenerational continuity.

Ethical Dimensions of Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation raises at least four major ethical questions: responsibility, interconnectedness, intergenerational justice, and the moral status of non-human life. First, human beings

possess responsibility because they have the capacity to transform ecological systems on a massive scale. Industrial production, deforestation, fossil-fuel consumption, pollution, and unsustainable resource extraction are not morally neutral activities (IPCC, 2022). Second, ecological interconnectedness demonstrates that environmental harm cannot easily be isolated. Damage to forests can affect water systems; damage to wetlands can affect fisheries; climate change can affect food production and health. Human beings therefore exist within ecological relationships rather than outside them (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Third, intergenerational justice requires present generations to consider the interests of people who will live in the future. Future persons cannot participate in present environmental decisions, yet present choices can significantly determine the ecological conditions they inherit (Rawls, 1971). The moral problem is therefore not simply whether present generations can exploit natural resources but whether they may do so at a level that seriously restricts the options and capabilities of future generations.

Fourth, environmental ethics asks whether non-human entities possess moral value. Biocentrism and ecocentrism answer this question affirmatively (Taylor, 1986; Callicott, 1989), while anthropocentric approaches tend to locate environmental value primarily in human interests. A balanced environmental ethic should recognize both human needs and the integrity of ecological systems. The objective should not be to eliminate all human use of nature but to establish morally responsible limits to exploitation.

Toward a Sustainable and Just Future Ethical Transformation

Sustainability requires transformation in the values governing production and consumption. Excessive consumption, waste, and unlimited exploitation cannot be reconciled with ecological limits.

Virtues such as moderation, responsibility, humility, prudence, and care should therefore become central to environmental education and public policy (Warren, 2000). Environmental ethics requires a shift from the idea that nature exists primarily for human consumption toward an understanding of human beings as participants in ecological systems (Leopold, 1949).

Environmental Education

Environmental education should cultivate both ecological knowledge and ethical responsibility. Schools and universities should help students understand the relationship between human choices and ecological consequences. In African contexts, environmental education can also engage indigenous ecological knowledge where such knowledge remains relevant and is critically evaluated. The IPCC identifies Indigenous and Local Knowledge as a strategic resource for climate adaptation and sustainable development in Africa (IPCC, 2022). Such education should not romanticize indigenous knowledge. Instead, it should establish dialogue between traditional ecological knowledge, modern environmental science, and contemporary ethical principles.

Responsible Technology

Technology can contribute to renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, environmental monitoring, waste management, and climate adaptation. However, technological development must be guided by ethical principles. Technological efficiency alone cannot determine whether an environmental policy is just. Questions of access, distribution, participation, unintended consequences, and effects on vulnerable communities must also be considered. The IPCC emphasizes that climate responses can produce maladaptation when they fail to account for interactions between sectors, communities, ecosystems, and long-term consequences (IPCC, 2022). Technology must therefore serve ecological

sustainability and human well-being rather than simply accelerate resource extraction.

Global Environmental Justice

Environmental problems transcend national boundaries. Climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean pollution, and atmospheric pollution require international cooperation. A just global environmental order should recognize differentiated responsibilities, particularly the historical contribution of industrialized economies to greenhouse-gas emissions. It should also provide adequate support for vulnerable countries to pursue adaptation and sustainable development. Climate justice therefore requires international solidarity as well as domestic environmental reform (Schlosberg, 2019).

Conclusion

The relationship between environmental ethics, environmental justice, and human survival demonstrates that the ecological crisis is fundamentally a moral crisis. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion are not simply technical problems awaiting technological solutions. They raise questions concerning responsibility, justice, human dignity, ecological value, and obligations to future generations (IPCC, 2022; Schlosberg, 2019). The analysis has shown that different ethical theories provide complementary resources for responding to the crisis. Utilitarianism emphasizes consequences and collective welfare (Bentham, 1789/1996; Mill, 1863); deontology highlights duty and responsibility (Kant, 1785/1998); virtue ethics emphasizes moral character (Aristotle, 2009); deep ecology, biocentrism, and ecocentrism challenge anthropocentrism (Naess, 1989; Taylor, 1986; Callicott, 1989); ecofeminism emphasizes care and structures of domination (Warren, 2000); Rawlsian justice highlights fairness and the protection of the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971); and the capabilities approach draws attention to the

substantive conditions necessary for human flourishing (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

The African cases considered in this study demonstrate the importance of contextualizing environmental ethics. The Niger Delta illustrates environmental injustice associated with resource extraction. Sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria demonstrate how customary institutions can contribute to biodiversity conservation (Adeyanju et al., 2022). Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria provide examples of totemic and sacred ecological practices (Ogonegbu & Ogelenya, 2026). The Konso of Ethiopia demonstrate the relationship between cultural values, spirituality, and holy woodlands (Workneh, 2023), while Yoruba environmental thought provides a relational account of more-than-human care (Sunday, 2025). These cases confirm that Africa cannot appropriately be treated as a culturally homogeneous environmental space. Rather, African environmental ethics is plural, culturally situated, and historically diverse.

The original contribution of this paper lies in bringing environmental ethics, environmental justice, human survival, and selected African ecological traditions into a single normative framework. Rather than treating African environmental practices merely as cultural illustrations, the study argues that they can contribute philosophically to contemporary debates about ecological responsibility, provided that they are critically examined and placed in dialogue with modern environmental science, human rights, and democratic governance. Environmental sustainability requires more than technological innovation. It requires an ethical transformation in the way human beings understand their relationship with nature, vulnerable communities, and future generations. Human survival depends upon moving from domination toward stewardship, from excessive consumption toward responsible restraint, and from unequal environmental burdens toward justice. The preservation of the Earth is therefore not only an ecological necessity but a moral responsibility shared by present generations for the sake of both

human and non-human life.

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PAPER 9

GENDER AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN AFRICA: RETHINKING BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH AN ETHICS OF CARE AND INCLUSION

Mary Winifred Eche, PhD
Department of Philosophy,
St. Thomas Aquinas Theological and Philosophical Institute
Makurdi, Benue State
winieoge@yahoo.com

Abstract

Africa continues to face an ecological crisis marked by biodiversity loss, deforestation, climate change, environmental pollution, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. These challenges threaten ecological sustainability and the livelihoods of communities whose survival depends largely on the natural environment. However, the effects of ecological degradation are not felt equally, as women and other vulnerable groups bear a disproportionate burden because of their roles in agriculture, food production, water management, and the preservation of indigenous ecological knowledge. Despite their significant contributions to biodiversity conservation, women remain largely excluded from environmental governance and decision-making. This article examines the relationship between gender and ecological justice in Africa by rethinking biodiversity through an ethics of care and inclusion. It argues that biodiversity conservation should be understood not merely as an environmental or scientific concern but as an ethical responsibility rooted in relationality, solidarity, and respect for the interconnectedness of all life. The article further contends that ecological justice requires the meaningful inclusion of women and local communities, whose knowledge and experiences are indispensable to sustainable biodiversity conservation. The paper used analytical and critical methods and concludes that an ethics of care and inclusion

provides a viable moral basis for promoting ecological stewardship, gender justice, and sustainable development in Africa.

Keywords: Gender, Ecological Justice, Biodiversity, Ethics of Care, Inclusion

Introduction

Biodiversity is not only a cornerstone of ecological health but also a critical component of sustainable development, particularly in Africa, where diverse ecosystems provide livelihoods and cultural identity. "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials.[36] "This pollution is, for the most part, irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is, for the most part, irreversible."[37] "In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little recognised partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world, the very nature of its life."[38] Africa today stands at the intersection of two deeply interconnected crises: ecological degradation and human vulnerability. Across the continent, communities continue to face the devastating consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental pollution, food insecurity, and fragile public health systems. From oil pollution in the Niger Delta to desertification in the Sahel and recurring floods across different African regions, the environment is increasingly a site of suffering and inequality. Yet these ecological problems are not experienced equally. Women, children, rural dwellers, and economically marginalised populations often bear the heaviest burdens of environmental decline because their daily survival is closely tied to

[36]Rachel Carson (1962). *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. p. 6
[37]Ibid.
[38]Ibid.

land, water, forests, and local ecosystems. [39]

In many African societies, women play central roles in farming, water collection, food preservation, caregiving, and the transmission of indigenous ecological knowledge. They are often the first to confront the consequences of ecological disruption when crops fail, water sources become contaminated, or diseases spread through polluted environments. Despite this reality, women and vulnerable groups remain insufficiently represented in environmental governance, policy formation, and public health decision-making.[40] This imbalance reveals that ecological degradation is not only an environmental problem but also a question of justice, inclusion, and human dignity. The growing loss of biodiversity in Africa further intensifies public health challenges. Deforestation, habitat destruction, and uncontrolled extraction of natural resources contribute to the spread of infectious diseases, food shortages, malnutrition, and unsafe living conditions. Ecological destruction weakens the delicate balance between humans and nature, creating conditions where both ecosystems and human communities become increasingly fragile.[41] Consequently, public health cannot be separated from environmental sustainability, just as environmental sustainability cannot be separated from social justice.

This article advocates for a rethinking of biodiversity through an ethics of care and inclusion, proposing that gender perspectives are essential in addressing ecological justice. By integrating an ethics of care, we can foster more inclusive and effective environmental

[39]Mery Banik and Md. Kamal Uddin (2025). "Environmental degradation and human rights challenges for coastal populations in Bangladesh". Retrieved from Discover Global Society. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00268-4

[40] Wangari Muta Maathai (2009). *The challenge for Africa*. Pantheon Books, New York. p. 253.

[41]World Health Organisation (2015). *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. Geneva: WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

policies that recognise the vital role of women in conservation and resource management. It argues that addressing Africa's ecological crisis requires more than scientific or technological interventions alone. It demands an ethical rethinking of how human beings relate to one another and to the natural world. An ethics of care and inclusion offers a valuable ground for such reflection because it emphasises relationality, mutual responsibility, compassion, interdependence, and attentiveness to vulnerability. Rather than viewing nature merely as a resource for exploitation, the ethics of care invites a vision of ecological stewardship rooted in solidarity and respect for life.[42]

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender and Gender Justice

Gender refers not merely to biological distinctions between male and female persons, but also to the social, cultural, political, and economic meanings societies attach to those differences. "Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural rather than biological connotations; if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'; ... Gender is the amount of masculinity or femininity found in a person. while there are mixtures of both in many humans, the normal male has a preponderance of masculinity and the normal female a preponderance of femininity."[43] What Ann meant is that sex is a biological distinction, whereas gender is a matter of culture. Gender Justice entails ending the inequalities between women and men that are produced and reproduced in the family, the community, the market and the state. [44]

> Gender justice is a concept that promotes the full realisation of rights and opportunities for all genders. It seeks to realise

[42]Carol Gilligan (1982*). In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Library of Congress Cataloguing In Publication Data, USA. P. 63

[43]Ann Oakley (1972). *Sex, Gender and Society.* Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, Australia. P.159

[44]UNIFEM (2010). "Gender Justice: Key to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals". Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2010/1/gender-justice-key-to-achieving-the-millennium-development-goals Sourced 19/05/2026

> equality between men and women, as well as between diverse gender identities, in terms of rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. It is a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of gender discrimination and ensures that women and other gender minorities are not excluded from the full enjoyment of their human rights.[45]

In many African societies, gender roles have historically shaped patterns of labour, leadership, access to resources, and participation in decision-making. While these roles may contribute to social organisation, they can also create systems of inequality when one gender is excluded from opportunities, recognition, or social power. Gender justice, therefore, seeks to ensure fairness, dignity, participation, and equal access to social and environmental resources for all, regardless of sex or social status. Within the context of ecological justice, gender is an important category because environmental crises affect men and women differently. "With the violation of nature is linked the violation and marginalisation of women, especially in the third world. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biological, but also through their social role in providing sustenance."[46] Women in rural African communities often depend directly on forests, rivers, and agricultural land for family survival. As primary caregivers and food providers in many households, they are disproportionately affected by water scarcity, deforestation, pollution, and climate-related disasters.[47] Yet despite their intimate knowledge of environmental sustainability, women remain underrepresented in ecological governance and public policy.

[45]SAHR (Strategy Advocacy for Human Rights). (2024). "What is Gender Justice?" Retrieved from https://www.wearesahr.org/blog/what-is-gender-justice#:~:text=Gender%20justice%20is%20a%20concept,rights%2C%20responsibilities%2C%20and%20opportunities. Sourced 19/05/2026

[46]Vandana Shiva (1989). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 42.

[47]Vandana Shiva (1989). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 42-44.

Gender justice in this sense involves not only equal rights but also the recognition of women's experiences, indigenous knowledge, and contributions to environmental stewardship.

Ecological Justice

Ecological justice is a concept within environmental moral philosophy that emphasises the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens among all living beings, including humans, animals, and ecosystems. It seeks to "understand how the logic of a given problem can be linked to social justice issues."[48] Cynthia further explained that ecological justice recognises that all living beings, including humans and the natural environment, have an inherent right to fair and equitable treatment and that it emphasises the interconnectedness of social justice and environmental sustainability, and indicates its ethical responsibility to protect the environment while ensuring the well-being of humans, other species, and the natural world.[49] In other words, ecological justice concerns the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. It concerns fairness in the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, as well as moral responsibility toward ecosystems and biodiversity. Therefore, ecological justice challenges exploitative attitudes that treat nature merely as an object for economic gain without regard for the consequences on human well-being and ecological balance.

In Africa, ecological justice is deeply connected to questions of poverty, development, and survival. Environmental degradation often affects the poorest communities most severely because they depend directly on natural resources for their livelihood. Oil spills, mining activities, desertification, and deforestation have

[48]Cynthia Louise Grier (2026). "What Is Ecological Justice?" retrieved from https://ecologiclife.com/what-is-ecological-justice-definition.html. Sourced 22/05/2026

[49]Ibid.

destroyed farmlands, polluted water sources, and displaced local populations across several African regions. Consequently, ecological injustice is also social injustice because environmental harm frequently reinforces existing inequalities and human suffering.[50]

Biodiversity

Biological diversity (biodiversity) is "the variability among living organisms from all sources, including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems."[51] This definition of biodiversity refers to the variety of living organisms within ecosystems, including plants, animals, microorganisms, and their ecological interactions. Healthy biodiversity sustains life by maintaining ecological balance, supporting food production, preserving medicinal resources, regulating climate systems, and protecting water and soil quality.[52]

Ethics of Care and Inclusion

The ethics of care emerged as a moral principle that emphasises relationships, compassion, attentiveness, empathy, and responsibility toward vulnerable persons. Unlike ethical theories that focus primarily on abstract rules or individual autonomy, care ethics emphasises human interdependence and the moral importance of responding to others' needs.[53] The ethics of care recognises that human beings flourish within relationships of

[50]United Nations Environment Programme (2013). *Africa Environment Outlook 3: Our Environment, Our Health,* Nairobi.

[51]World Health Organisation (2015). *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Geneva. P.1

[52]World Health Organisation (2015). *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Geneva. P.

[53]Carol Gilligan (1982*). In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Library of Congress Cataloguing In Publication Data, USA. P. 63

mutual support and shared responsibility. "The ethics of care starts from the premise that, as humans, we are inherently relational, responsive beings, and that the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence."[54] Within African societies, the ethics of care resonates strongly with communitarian traditions that prioritise solidarity, hospitality, and collective well-being. African moral thought often stresses that a person becomes fully human through relationships with others.[55] Care is therefore not merely an emotional attitude but a social and moral obligation necessary for communal harmony and survival. Applying an ethics of care to ecological justice means recognising that the environment is not separate from human life but part of the relational network that sustains existence. Nature should not be treated only as a commodity for exploitation but as a shared home requiring stewardship and protection. An ethics of care encourages attentiveness to ecological vulnerability and challenges systems that sacrifice communities and ecosystems for profit or unchecked industrial expansion. Inclusion complements care ethics by insisting that marginalised voices must participate in decisions affecting their lives and environments.

Gender, Biodiversity, and Ecological Crisis in Africa

Over 70 per cent of Africa's population is rural and depends directly on land for livelihoods and the natural environment for its well-being. Thus, how environments, goods and services are used will have consequences for alleviating poverty, improving human well-being and ensuring sustained economic development.[56] Africa continues to experience serious ecological challenges that threaten both biodiversity and human well-being. Climate change,

[54]Carol Gilligan (2011). "Ethics of Care". Webteam. Retrieved from https://ethicsofcare.org/carol-gilligan/. Sourced 23/05/2026.

[55]Ifeanyi Menkiti (2020) Menkiti on Community and Becoming a Person. Edited by Edwin Etieyibo and Polycarp Ikuenobe. Lanham Boulder, New York, London. P.137

[56] United Nations Environment Programme (2006). *Africa Environment Outlook 2: Our Environment, Our Health*. Lanchester Library, Nairobi.p.2

deforestation, desertification, pollution, rapid urbanisation, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources have contributed to the destruction of ecosystems across the continent. These environmental problems affect forests, rivers, wildlife, agricultural lands, and local communities that depend directly on nature for survival. However, the ecological crisis in Africa is not experienced equally by all people. Gender significantly shapes how environmental degradation is experienced because women and men interact differently with natural resources based on social responsibilities and economic roles.[57]

The involvement of African women in farming, fishing, biodiversity conservation, and environmental management is widely recognised. However, women's involvement and representation in decision-making processes which relate to their livelihoods, families and environmental well-being are often relegated.[58] Rural communities rely heavily on forests, water bodies, medicinal plants, fertile soil, and diverse agricultural systems for food security, healthcare, and economic livelihood. In Nigeria, for example, biodiversity supports subsistence farming, fishing, traditional medicine, and local industries. Yet increasing environmental degradation continues to threaten these ecological systems. Oil pollution in the Niger Delta, desertification in northern Nigeria, deforestation in rainforest regions, and flooding in coastal communities illustrate the growing ecological instability confronting the country.[59] These crises weaken ecosystems while simultaneously increasing poverty, food insecurity, displacement, and public health vulnerability. Women in Africa, just like every

[57]Socio-Health (2026). "Ecology, Environment and Urban Development: Exploring the Gender-Environment Nexus: Interconnected Challenges". Retrieved from https://socio.health/ecology-environment-urban-development/gender-environment-nexus-challenges/. Sourced

[58]Sam, Kabari & Zibima, Tubodenyefa. (2023). Inclusive Environmental Decision-making in a Developing Nation: Insights from the Ogoni Remediation Project, Niger Delta, Nigeria. Environmental Management. 73. 1-15. 10.1007/s00267-023-01885-y.

[59]Ibid.

other part of the world, remain an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practise. At one level, nature is symbolised as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance.[60] "With the violation of nature is linked the violation and marginalisation of women, especially in the Third World. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance."[61]

At the same time, they are among the most affected by ecological degradation because of their close relationship with the environment in many African societies. In rural communities, women are primarily responsible for food production, water collection, fuel gathering, and family care. Their daily survival activities depend directly on access to healthy ecosystems and biodiversity. Consequently, when forests disappear, rivers become polluted, or agricultural productivity declines, women often bear the heaviest social and economic burdens.[62] For instance, deforestation forces many women to travel longer distances searching for firewood, while water scarcity increases the time and labour required to secure safe water for household use. Though they are not merely victims of ecological crisis, they are also important custodians of biodiversity and indigenous ecological knowledge.[63]

> Rural women are pivotal to development in African countries as they play diverse roles in development projects and initiatives. They contribute to wage

[60]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 37

[61]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 41

[62]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. Pp. 41-42

[63]Yetunde Adebunmi Aluko (2018). "Women's Use of Indigenous Knowledge for Environmental Security and Sustainable Development in Southwest Nigeria," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 9, no. 3. P.2

> activities, engage in the marketing and distribution of foodstuffs, and ensure the survival of both the family and social unit. Specifically, their domestic activities make vital contributions to the maintenance of local economies. For example, Yoruba women possess an enormous amount of knowledge about food production and processing, medicine, childrearing, and other survival skills. It is therefore important that Indigenous women, as custodians of knowledge about both biodiversity and land use and management, are recognised and encouraged to use their knowledge to enhance sustainable development.[64]

Their farming methods often rely on mixed cropping, organic fertilisation, and environmentally sensitive practices that protect biodiversity more effectively than exploitative industrial systems. Despite their contributions to environmental sustainability, women remain largely excluded from ecological governance and environmental decision-making across many African societies. Patriarchal structures continue to limit women's access to land ownership, political participation, and environmental policy formation.

Rethinking Biodiversity through an Ethics of Care and Inclusion

The growing loss of biodiversity across Africa has raised urgent questions about humanity's relationship with nature and the moral responsibilities required for ecological sustainability. Increasing rates of deforestation, climate change, pollution, urban expansion, oil exploration, overgrazing, soil erosion, and desertification threaten the biodiversity of medicinal and food-security value. Overharvesting and climate change also contribute to biodiversity

[64]Yetunde Adebunmi Aluko (2018). "Women's Use of Indigenous Knowledge for Environmental Security and Sustainable Development in Southwest Nigeria," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 9, no. 3. P.2

degradation, leading to imbalances in predator-prey relationships that may create conditions for disease outbreaks. Unsustainable agricultural practices also continue to destroy ecosystems that sustain both human and non-human life.[65] Yet many responses to biodiversity loss remain largely economic, scientific, or technological, often neglecting the ethical and social dimensions of ecological destruction. Biodiversity cannot be separated from human well-being, especially in Africa. The reason is that millions of people depend directly on forests, rivers, fertile land, and local ecosystems for food, medicine, livelihoods, etc. Consequently, the ecological crisis demands not only environmental policies but also an ethical rethinking of how human beings relate to nature, community, and one another.

"Biodiversity conservation ethics addresses normative questions about what should be conserved, how, and why, guiding actions and decisions over values and their potential conflict."[66] Ethics as a philosophical discipline involves systematising, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour, and, broadly, considers questions about how we should (or should not) act and what obligations we have to other beings.[67]

> By ethical reasoning, we refer more broadly also to non-academic approaches to ethical questions that are internal to humanity. Ethical reasoning influences economic, political, and other societal decisions that ultimately cause biodiversity loss by triggering its main drivers: land-use change, climate change, and over-exploitation. Ethical reasoning also influences people's perceptions of problems, of relevant factors in resolving them, and the

[65]UNEP (2013). "Africa Environment Outlook 3: Summary for Policy Makers". p. 10
[66]Cortes-Capano, Gonzalo et-al (2022). "Ethics in biodiversity conservation: The meaning and importance of pluralism. Biological Conservation". Retrieved from https://www.elsevier.com/locate/biocon 275. 109759. 10.1016/j.biocon.2022.109759.
[67]Ibid.

> disposition to promote and comply with policies and regulations to tackle them. Thus, engaging in ethical reasoning is crucial as it shapes human actions and is influential to both biodiversity decline and its conservation.

The ethics of care emphasises empathy, relationships, and responsibility, unlike traditional ethical theories that emphasise fairness and justice.[69] It highlights the need to nurture and care for individuals in various contexts. From this perspective, biodiversity protection becomes more than a technical environmental duty; it becomes a moral obligation rooted in the preservation of life and communal well-being. The relevance of care ethics to biodiversity conservation becomes clearer within the African context, where communal life and relational identity remain important cultural values. African communitarian philosophy generally understands the individual as existing within networks of relationships that include family, community, ancestors, and nature

> According to John, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group. This relational understanding encourages respect for interconnected life and supports ecological responsibility.[70]

Nature is not merely viewed as property for private exploitation but

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[68]Ibid.

[69]Neeshu Rathore (2025). The Heart of Relationships: Exploring Ethics of Care.

[70]Retrieved from https:// glossary. psywellpath.com/ethics-of-care#what-is-ethics-of-care/

as part of the communal heritage necessary for collective survival. In many African societies, women have historically embodied this ethic of care through their relationship with biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Women are often responsible for farming, food preservation, seed conservation, water management, and family health. Through these activities, they maintain practical relationships with ecosystems and preserve indigenous ecological knowledge passed down through generations. Their interaction with biodiversity is often shaped by care-centred responsibilities aimed at sustaining households and communities rather than maximising profit. This explains why women in many rural communities often adopt environmentally sensitive practices, such as mixed cropping, traditional soil conservation, and the preservation of medicinal plants.

However, as mentioned above, despite their ecological contributions, women and local communities are frequently excluded from biodiversity governance and environmental decision-making. Environmental policies in many African states continue to operate through centralised political and economic systems that prioritise industrial development and resource extraction over ecological sustainability and local participation.[71] Such exclusion weakens conservation efforts because those most closely connected to ecosystems are denied meaningful involvement in decisions affecting their environment. Inclusion, therefore, becomes essential to any serious attempt at biodiversity protection.

An ethics of inclusion insists that ecological justice must involve participation, recognition, and shared responsibility. Biodiversity conservation cannot succeed when vulnerable populations remain marginalised from environmental governance. Rural women,

[71] Sam, Kabari & Zibima, Tubodenyefa. (2023). Inclusive Environmental Decision-making in a Developing Nation: Insights from the Ogoni Remediation Project, Niger Delta, Nigeria. Environmental Management. 73. 1-15. 10.1007/s00267-023-01885-y.

indigenous communities, farmers, and local environmental actors possess valuable ecological knowledge developed through long interaction with local ecosystems. Excluding them from ecological policies creates solutions detached from the realities of community life. Inclusion, therefore, strengthens biodiversity conservation by integrating indigenous knowledge, grassroots participation, and communal accountability into environmental management.

Ecofeminist thought further deepens this discussion by arguing that the domination of nature is closely connected to systems that marginalise women and vulnerable groups. Vandana Shiva contends that exploitative economic systems frequently reduce both women and nature to objects of control and consumption.[72]

In many African societies, environmental degradation intensifies the burdens carried by women through food shortages, water scarcity, displacement, and declining agricultural productivity. At the same time, women continue to emerge as important agents of ecological resilience and biodiversity preservation. Rethinking biodiversity through care and inclusion, therefore, requires moving beyond purely anthropocentric and profit-driven models of development. Economic growth that destroys ecosystems, displaces communities, and deepens social inequality cannot be regarded as genuine development. Sustainable biodiversity conservation must instead be rooted in ecological stewardship, moral responsibility, and communal well-being. This involves recognising that human survival depends upon healthy ecosystems and that environmental protection is inseparable from social justice.

Therefore, rethinking biodiversity through an ethics of care and inclusion offers a more humane and sustainable approach to ecological justice in Africa. It shifts environmental discourse away

[72]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. Pp. 92-93

from domination, exclusion, and excessive exploitation toward relational responsibility, solidarity, and ecological stewardship.

Toward an Inclusive Ecological Future in Africa

The ecological future of Africa depends greatly on the ability of its people, governments, institutions, and communities to rethink the relationship between humanity and the natural environment. Across the continent, environmental degradation continues to manifest through climate change, desertification, pollution, flooding, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity. These ecological crises affect human life directly, especially among poor and vulnerable populations whose survival depends largely on the land and natural resources. Scholars have increasingly argued that ecological destruction in Africa cannot be separated from questions of social justice, inequality, gender exclusion, and poor governance.[73] Thus, the search for an inclusive ecological future requires more than environmental reforms; it demands a transformation in the ethical, social, and political structures that shape African societies.

An inclusive ecological future begins with recognising the interconnectedness between human beings and nature. Many traditional African worldviews understood the earth not merely as property for exploitation but as a sacred reality entrusted to the community for present and future generations. John S. Mbiti observes that in African thought, the individual exists within a network that includes the community, ancestors, and the natural world.[74] This relational worldview can provide an important ethical foundation for ecological responsibility in contemporary Africa. Instead of viewing nature solely as something beneficial for industrial expansion, African societies can recover indigenous

[73]Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier (1997). *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South.* Earthscan, London. Pp. 13-15.

[74]John Mbiti (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy.* Heinemann Educational Publishers, Oxford. Pp. 106-107

ecological values that emphasise harmony, communal responsibility, and respect for life.

Furthermore, it has been clearly established that women remain central to ecological sustainability in Africa. This is because of their close relationship with food production, water management, caregiving, and agriculture. In light of their contributions to the environment, environmental justice cannot be achieved without their inclusion and empowerment. Maathai's environmental activism in Kenya demonstrated how ecological restoration and human dignity are deeply interconnected. Therefore, an inclusive ecological future in Africa must ensure that women are not treated merely as victims of ecological crises but as active participants in environmental transformation.

Young people also play a significant role in shaping Africa's ecological future. The growing ecological crisis demands a generation that is environmentally conscious, ethically responsible, and socially engaged. Education is essential in this regard. Ecological education should encourage young people to recognise that caring for the environment is not only a scientific concern but also a moral obligation to humanity and future generations. Pope Francis emphasises in Laudato Si' that ecological challenges require a new lifestyle marked by responsibility, solidarity, and care for our common home. “He emphasised that we lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life”.[75] This ethical consciousness is especially important in Africa, where rapid urbanisation, unemployment, and environmental exploitation continue to threaten sustainable development.

[75]Pope Francis *(2015). Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City. No. 202

The role of political leadership and governance cannot be ignored in discussions about Africa's ecological future. Corruption, irresponsible mining practices, deforestation, and poor environmental policies have contributed significantly to ecological destruction across the continent. Sustainable ecological development requires leaders who prioritise the common good over personal or economic interests. Governments must strengthen environmental laws, support renewable energy initiatives, invest in sustainable agriculture, and protect local communities from exploitation by multinational corporations. Africa's future depends on reimagining forms of development that value human life and ecological sustainability rather than systems rooted in exploitation and exclusion.

Religious institutions also have an important contribution to make in promoting ecological awareness and ethical responsibility. Since religion continues to shape moral consciousness in many African societies, churches, mosques, and traditional religious communities can help cultivate values of moderation, stewardship, and communal care. Theological reflections on creation increasingly emphasise that human beings are caretakers rather than masters of the earth. Ecological spirituality, therefore, challenges individuals and communities to adopt lifestyles that respect both human dignity and the integrity of creation. Faith communities can further contribute through environmental education, tree-planting initiatives, advocacy, and support for vulnerable populations affected by ecological crises.

Furthermore, ecological sustainability in Africa must be built upon dialogue and inclusion. Local communities, indigenous groups, women, scholars, policymakers, and environmental activists should all participate in shaping ecological policies and development projects. Too often, development initiatives in Africa are designed without listening to the experiences of those most affected by environmental degradation. Inclusive participation

ensures that ecological policies are not imposed from above but emerge from the lived realities of communities themselves. Such an approach promotes justice, accountability, and sustainability.

Ultimately, the future of ecology in Africa depends on developing a vision of progress that balances economic growth with human wellbeing and environmental protection. Africa possesses rich cultural traditions, communal values, and indigenous ecological knowledge that can contribute meaningfully to global environmental discussions. An inclusive ecological future, therefore, calls for a renewed commitment to care, justice, solidarity, and responsibility. By embracing these values, Africa can move toward a future where development does not destroy nature, where vulnerable voices are included, and where humanity lives in harmony with the earth.

Conclusion

The ecological crisis in Africa is not only an environmental problem but also a moral, social, and human challenge that demands urgent attention. This article has shown that ecological degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, especially women and marginalised communities, whose lives are closely connected to the natural environment. By examining biodiversity loss, gender exclusion, and ecological injustice within the African context, the paper argues that sustainable ecological development cannot be achieved without inclusion, care, and social responsibility.

Drawing from African communal values, ecofeminist insights, and ethical reflections on care and responsibility, this paper emphasises the need to rethink humanity's relationship with nature. An inclusive ecological future requires the participation of women, local communities, religious institutions, scholars, and political leaders in shaping environmentally responsible policies and practices. Ecological justice must therefore go beyond

environmental protection to include human dignity, equity, and the well-being of future generations. Ultimately, this work calls for a renewed ecological consciousness in Africa, one that promotes harmony between humanity and nature, respects biodiversity, and embraces an ethics of care and inclusion as essential pathways toward sustainable development and ecological justice.

Although care and communal solidarity have traditionally been regarded as defining features of many African societies, contemporary ecological and social conflicts reveal a growing disconnect between these ethical ideals and lived realities. Rising xenophobic violence, resource-based conflicts, environmental degradation, and political exclusion suggest that the practice of care has become increasingly selective and contingent upon ethnic, political, and economic interests. Consequently, the challenge before contemporary Africa is not to abandon the ethics of care but to reclaim and expand it as an inclusive moral principle capable of responding to present ecological and social crises.

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PAPER 10

ECRAA'S MODEL OF INCARNATIONAL-RELATIONAL MISSION: DEEP INCARNATION, INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES, AND THE RENEWAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN MISSION

Nnaemeka Ali, OMI
Saint Paul University Ottawa
nali4@ustpal.ca

Abstract

This article examines how the Enugu-Ezike Clergy, Religious and Aspirants Association (ECRAA) integrates the theological framework of deep incarnation with Indigenous relational epistemologies to revitalize incarnational Christian mission in contemporary Nigeria. Drawing on postcolonial theology, African religious studies, and contextual missiology, the article argues that Western colonial Christianity's anthropocentric and hierarchical methodologies have marginalized Indigenous spiritual wisdom, creating a spiritual vacuum particularly among young people. Deep incarnation—understood as God's radical presence throughout creation—provides a theological framework for recovering an authentic African Christianity rooted in land-based relationality, ancestral wisdom, and ecological wholeness. Using ECRAA as a constructive theological case study, the article examines the association's ministry in healthcare, education, and environmental stewardship to demonstrate how a decolonial, incarnational missiology can respond to contemporary crises of spiritual fragmentation, ecological degradation, and youth disengagement from institutional Christianity. The article concludes that ECRAA models an authentically contextual Christianity rooted in African relational epistemologies, remaining faithful to Scripture while engaging Indigenous wisdom systems through critical inculturation rather than syncretism.

Keywords: deep incarnation; Indigenous epistemologies; postcolonial theology; African Christianity; decolonization; incarnational mission; Enugu-Ezike; relational ontology; decolonial theology; critical inculturation

Introduction: Context and Research Problem

In Enugu State, southeastern Nigeria, many youths from Enugu-Ezike—an ancient Igbo kingdom in the Nsukka region—have recently begun returning in significant numbers to ancestral religious practices, describing their experience as a "return to the roots." According to these young adults, traditional Igbo spirituality offers spiritual depth and relational meaning they perceive as absent from institutional Christianity . This perceived phenomenon, articulated by both young practitioners and church leaders in the region, reflects deeper tensions inherent to postcolonial African Christianity . As Sakupapa emphasizes, such "perceived phenomena" warrant theological recognition by church leadership rather than dismissal, thereby marking what might be understood as a prophetic critique from the margins . The situation is not simply a reasoned rejection but rather spiritual desperation—a search for healing, belonging, and meaningful practice within communities where institutional Christianity has failed to adequately address the relational and embodied dimensions of spiritual life (Eze 2018).

Ethnographic research from Enugu-Ezike similarly shows that local understandings of health, suffering, and well-being remain profoundly relational, integrating physical, spiritual, communal, and environmental dimensions of life . Such findings help explain why approaches that separate spiritual formation from everyday lived realities often fail to resonate fully within the local context. The historical record reveals that this contemporary crisis has deep roots in colonial missiological practice. When Western missionaries arrived in Igboland, they systematically

delegitimized African Traditional Religion through categorical dismissal. Early missionaries, informed by Enlightenment frameworks, dismissed Igbo theological concepts as incompatible with Christian truth. According to Emil Ludwig, for instance, "deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing in their minds," thereby establishing a framework that pathologized Indigenous knowledge as primitive superstition (Eze 2018, 53). Such epistemic violence did not simply introduce the Gospel; it also reshaped the theological categories through which many African Christians came to interpret their own religious heritage, often weakening long-standing relationships between faith, land, community, and cultural memory.

The “roots” to which many young people refer are not simply nostalgic appeals to a forgotten past but to a historically coherent Indigenous religious worldview that continues to shape communal identity despite the spread of Christianity. Studies on Enugu-Ezike demonstrate that its traditional religious life was organized around belief in Ezechukwu-oke (the Supreme Being), intermediary spiritual beings, ancestral continuity, sacred land, and ritual institutions such as the *Inyama* priestesses, who exercised religious, judicial, and healing functions within the community . This historical context matters because it suggests that contemporary religious searching takes place within a living cultural memory rather than in the recovery of an entirely abandoned tradition.

The contemporary "return to the roots" is theologically significant not as a rejection of Christianity, but as an implicit critique of forms of Christianity that have failed to be genuinely incarnational. Young people seek the embodied spirituality inherent in deep incarnation theology, which integrates faith community, land, and everyday experience. Their renewed interest in Indigenous traditions is not nostalgia but a theological hunger for a Christianity rooted in the relational ontologies that have always characterized

African worldviews. The question this raises is urgent: What kind of Christian mission can respond faithfully to this spiritual hunger while remaining grounded in biblical revelation? Within African theology, this question has increasingly been addressed through the language of inculturation, understood not as superficial adaptation but as the mutual encounter between the Gospel and culture in which both the integrity of the Christian message and the lived realities of local communities are taken seriously –. This broader theological conversation provides an important framework for understanding ECRAA's missionary vision, which seeks to deepen discipleship in Christ through critical inculturation rather than legitimize a return to ancestral religion.

Research Question and Thesis

Against this background, this article asks: How does the Enugu-Ezike Clergy, Religious and Aspirants Association (ECRAA) integrate deep incarnation and Indigenous relational epistemologies to revitalize Christian mission in contemporary Nigeria? The article argues that deep incarnation, understood as God's radical presence throughout creation, provides a Christological framework through which Indigenous relational epistemologies can be critically integrated into Christian mission. When read alongside decolonial theology, deep incarnation challenges inherited dualisms that separate spirit from matter, heaven from earth, and Christian faith from Indigenous ways of knowing . By recuperating the theological insight that Christ's incarnation encompasses the entire cosmos—not merely human nature or individual souls—African churches can develop missiological frameworks that honour both biblical fidelity and cultural authenticity. ECRAA helps us understand that such integration is not only theologically coherent but also pastorally necessary and missionally fruitful.

Literature Review

African Christian theology has long understood evangelization as requiring a genuine encounter between the Gospel and the cultural worlds in which it is proclaimed. Rather than reducing mission to cultural adaptation, African theologians have argued that inculturation is a transformative process in which the Christian message is expressed through the language, symbols, values, and lived realities of local communities while remaining faithful to the Gospel (Magesa 2016, 109–112). As Magesa argues, liberation and inculturation are inseparable dimensions of African theology because authentic Christian freedom cannot be achieved apart from the affirmation and transformation of African cultural life (Magesa 2016, 109–110).

Recent scholarship on African Christianity reveals a critical gap: institutional churches have largely adopted Western epistemological frameworks that systematically marginalize indigenous knowledge systems and relational ontologies. Lephakga documents how colonization conquered the Being of Africans through epistemicide—the deliberate suppression of African ways of knowing—alongside land dispossession and forced proselytization. This epistemological violence persists in contemporary theological education and missional practice, fragmenting what ought to remain integrated: spirit and matter, faith and culture, individual and community.

Munyao & Tanui demonstrate how colonial Christianity functioned as an instrument of Whiteness, violently separating African bodies from souls and persons from their communities to enable resource extraction and spiritual domination. Yet African relational ontologies offer sophisticated alternatives. Bayuo articulates how the ubuntu philosophy provides a coherent onto-epistemological framework that emphasizes relationships, community, and holistic understanding across physical and spiritual contexts. Rather than treating this as cultural residue,

contemporary scholarship recognizes it as a legitimate epistemological resource for theological reflection.

This understanding resonates with Duncan's description of inculturation as a dynamic process of adaptation, innovation, and reflexivity, in which Christian communities neither reject culture nor accept it uncritically but continually discern how the Gospel may be faithfully embodied within changing historical contexts . Sakupapa proposes African decolonial theology as the foregrounding of local, indigenous, contextual knowledge rooted in analysis of historical realities—what the author terms "mission from the margins" . These converging insights suggest that authentic African Christianity requires not wholesale adoption of Western theology nor uncritical cultural nationalism, but rather a genuine integration of incarnational Christology with decolonial praxis and Indigenous relational knowing. This article contributes to that conversation by bringing African theories of inculturation into dialogue with the theology of Deep Incarnation, arguing that ECRAA's missionary practice illustrates how these theological trajectories converge within a particular African context. Although Gregersen developed Deep Incarnation primarily through his work, subsequent scholarship has emphasized its significance for understanding God's solidarity with the whole created order and the Church's participation in the renewal of creation .

Method and Approach

This article employs a constructive theological methodology informed by contextual theology, postcolonial theology, African religious studies, and missiology. Rather than presenting an ethnographic investigation, it examines ECRAA as a constructive theological case study, drawing on ECRAA's publicly articulated mission statements, institutional lecture series , documented ministries in healthcare, education, environmental stewardship, and community development, together with contemporary

scholarship on African theology, Deep Incarnation, and Indigenous epistemologies. The purpose is to demonstrate how ECRAA's practice offers a constructive model for revitalizing incarnational Christian mission within contemporary African contexts.

ECRAA is an Indigenous association of Catholic clergy, religious, and aspirants drawn from the thirty-three villages of Enugu-Ezike. Rather than emerging as a centrally planned ecclesiastical initiative, it developed organically alongside the establishment of Catholicism in the area as a network of solidarity that encouraged vocational discernment, sustained communal unity, and supported young men and women entering priestly and religious formation. Over time, the association evolved into a structured body that promotes regular retreats, vocational formation, communal discernment, pastoral collaboration, member welfare, and missionary outreach. Today, it includes more than 500 priests and religious serving in Nigeria and abroad, while over 200 seminarians and aspirants remain in formation through its vocational network

The study does not present empirical findings derived from interviews, surveys, or participant observation. Rather, it offers a constructive theological interpretation of ECRAA's self-understanding, ministries, and public theological witness within the historical and religious context of Enugu-Ezike. □

Methodologically, the article is grounded in decolonial theological education scholarship. Sakupapa's framework of "mission from the margins" orients the analysis toward centring local epistemologies and lived experience, or as Sakupapa writes, "consider the 'social location of all engaged in mission work'" rather than imported theoretical categories . This approach is also consistent with African understandings of inculturation as a process through which the Gospel becomes meaningfully embodied within particular cultural worlds while remaining faithful to its theological integrity

–. Rather than treating culture as a passive recipient of missionary activity, the analysis assumes an ongoing dialogue between Christian revelation and Indigenous knowledge systems –. Nanthambwe further shows how African Indigenous Knowledge Systems can serve as legitimate resources for contemporary theological reflection and institutional renewal.

The discussion proceeds through four stages: first, examining theological foundations through deep incarnation, decolonial theology, and Indigenous epistemologies; second, analyzing how these commitments are embodied in pastoral practice; third, considering implications for healthcare, education, and ecological stewardship; and finally, arguing that ECRAA offers an instructive model for African churches seeking integration of biblical fidelity with authentic cultural expression grounded in decolonial pedagogical principles.

Theological Foundations of ECRAA's Mission

Deep Incarnation as Christological Foundation

ECRAA's incarnational missiology is grounded in the theology of deep incarnation, which fundamentally reframes classical Christology. Where traditional Christology often restricts incarnation to human nature alone, deep incarnation insists that Christ's incarnation encompasses the entire material cosmos. . The Johannine statement that the Word "became flesh" (John 1:14) signals not merely the assumption of human nature but God's self-giving entry into the whole created order—land, water, animals, ecosystems, and all creation.

Deep incarnation presents the incarnation as far more than God becoming human in a general sense. It understands the incarnation as God's complete identification with the whole created order through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God enters the depths of material existence, embracing not only humanity but the wider community of life, with all its beauty,

vulnerability, and suffering. This vision portrays creation as the arena of God's redemptive presence and affirms that salvation extends beyond humanity to encompass the entire cosmos.

As Gregersen (2016) explains:

> God's own Logos (Wisdom and Word) was made flesh in Jesus the Christ in such a comprehensive manner that God, by assuming the particular life story of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, also conjoined the material conditions of creaturely existence ('all flesh'), shared and ennobled the fate of all biological life forms ('grass' and 'lilies'), and experienced the pains of sensitive creatures ('sparrows' and 'foxes') from within –.

Accordingly, deep incarnation understands God's self-giving as reaching to the very roots of material and biological existence. It embraces not only the flourishing of creation but also its suffering, fragility, and mortality. In doing so, it offers a Christological vision in which God stands in profound solidarity with the whole created order, including what Gregersen describes as the *tenebrae creationis*—the darker dimensions of creation itself . Bentley (2016) develops this insight further by arguing that the incarnation is not merely "skin deep" but embraces "the entire realm of creation," thereby reinforcing the theological basis for mission that attends to ecological integrity, communal wellbeing, and the renewal of creation . This theological vision affirms the sacred dignity of all bodies and reveals creation as a sacramental medium of divine presence. The radical embodiment of God in Christ's flesh affirms that there are no marginal cases of being human, and this incarnational reality grounds authentic Christian spirituality in embodied vulnerability and solidarity with creation's suffering.

Within African theology, this broader understanding of incarnation resonates with inculturation, in which the Gospel becomes embodied in particular histories and cultures without losing its

Christological centre. Duncan describes this process as one of "adaptation, innovation and reflexivity," – while Magesa argues that authentic inculturation is not "a one-sided activity of cultural accommodation" but a process through which the Gospel encounters culture in a way that "transform[s] it and remake[s] it so as to bring about a 'new creation'" .

However, as critics such as Nesteruk caution, deep incarnation theologies must carefully maintain the transcendence and hypostatic unity of Christ; without such vigilance, expansive formulations risk collapsing important Christological distinctions between Creator and creation. Nesteruk argues that while the historical Incarnation provides necessary cosmological conditions, the sufficient conditions of the Incarnation as God's redemptive inauguration cannot be reduced to the fabric of the material world, nor can the transfigured flesh of Christ be de facto equated with the rest of creation without "depriving the process of deification of humanity and transfiguration of the visible universe of its temporal dimension" . From this perspective, salvation is not escape from matter but the renewal and restoration of creation in its full relationality and cosmic redemption—a vision ECRAA operationalizes through careful attention to both incarnational presence and biblical particularity.

This understanding has profound missiological consequences. If Christ's incarnation encompasses creation, then the Christian mission cannot be reduced to preparing souls for a heavenly escape. Instead, mission participates in God's redemptive work within history through the healing of persons, communities, and the created order. For ECRAA, deep incarnation therefore provides the Christological foundation for understanding healthcare, education, ecological stewardship, and community development not as peripheral social concerns but as integral expressions of the Gospel. Stefanus argues that when priests and religious ministers provide healthcare, they do not undertake secular work bracketed

from Gospel proclamation; rather, they participate in Christ's incarnate healing of creation—a missional-contextual theological approach that frames Christian ethics as active alignment with God's justice, love, and holiness enacted within particular communities and contexts –.

Decolonial Theology and Epistemological Critique

While deep incarnation provides Christological grounding, decolonial theology offers the epistemological lens through which ECRAA evaluates the historical legacy of colonial Christianity. Decolonial theology exposes how colonial systems of knowledge systematically fragmented the sacred from the material, privileged hierarchy over relationality, and marginalized Indigenous knowledge systems through what Achille Mbembe terms "epistemic violence" . The colonial missionary project was not theologically neutral; it imported entire metaphysical and epistemological frameworks that pathologized African theological reflection as incompatible with authentic Christianity.

The Igbo evidence illustrates this clearly. When Christianity arrived in Igboland, missionaries presented the faith "as *onochie*—a substitution or displacement of traditional religion, not as *ononye*—an accompaniment" . This approach was deliberate. Early Christian teaching instructed believers to treat deities with contempt, establishing the framework that would eventually drive young Igbo away from their ancestral heritage. The result was epistemological colonization: Indigenous ways of knowing were systematically dismissed, and African Christians learned to interpret their own spiritual traditions through imported Western categories that rendered those traditions unintelligible or inferior.

Decolonial theology calls for the recovery of Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate partners in theological reflection rather than dismissing them as incompatible with the Christian

faith. Such recovery does not mean uncritical acceptance of every Indigenous practice. Rather, it creates space for authentic theological inculturation in which local epistemological wisdom is brought into genuine dialogue with Scripture and Christian tradition. This is critical inculturation: allowing the Gospel both to affirm and to transform culture, while simultaneously allowing local cultural wisdom to reshape and enrich Christian theological expression . However, scholars, including Gandonu , warn that the deployment of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in academic and institutional contexts risks commodifying and appropriating living spiritual traditions, converting embodied practices into extractable "data" for institutional purposes . True critical inculturation must therefore remain accountable to living communities and their sovereign determination of how their epistemologies are engaged, rather than allowing theological institutions to unilaterally determine the terms of Indigenous knowledge incorporation.

This constructive task is consistent with Magesa's understanding of inculturation as “the process of integrating the message of Jesus Christ into a local context.” He argues that authentic inculturation is not “a one-sided activity of cultural accommodation” but a transformative encounter in which the Gospel both affirms and renews culture, bringing about a “new creation” rather than replacing one culture with another . This recovery of Indigenous epistemologies also reflects broader African theological understandings of personhood. Gathogo argues that African theology is grounded in a relational vision of humanity in which identity is constituted through community rather than isolated individuality. His engagement with Ubuntu shows that Christian discipleship is lived through relationships of mutual belonging and responsibility rather than autonomous self-sufficiency .

Indigenous Relational Epistemologies and Contextual Hermeneutics

Within many African contexts, relationality is not merely an ethical value but an ontological reality. Human identity is constituted through relationships with the living community, ancestral presence, the land, creation, and the divine. This understanding differs significantly from epistemologies that privilege the autonomous rational individual as the foundation of knowledge and morality. Instead, knowledge emerges through participation in an interconnected community of life . Nanthambwe likewise argues that African Indigenous Knowledge Systems constitute legitimate theological resources for contemporary Christian reflection rather than merely cultural artifacts to be preserved.

The Enugu-Ezike principle, *Ala dị nsọ* ("the land is sacred"), expresses this relational ontology in concrete form. Land is not an inert resource to be exploited for economic gain but a living relation that sustains sacred bonds between humanity, creation, and God . This is not a poetic metaphor but a lived theological conviction: the earth itself participates in moral and spiritual agency. When the earth goddess *Ala* witnesses wrongdoing—especially violations like adultery (*nso ala*, "an abomination against the earth")—the consequences are understood to flow from cosmological imbalance rather than external legal punishment. Restoration requires propitiation and reconciliation with the sacred land itself .

Such perspectives resonate deeply with deep incarnation theology by affirming that creation participates in God's ongoing redemptive purposes. They offer resources for reimagining Christian mission in ways that honour creation as theologically significant, spiritually alive, and participant in God's economy of salvation. Within this relational worldview, ancestors occupy a unique and theologically significant position. They remain participants in communal identity and moral memory; their wisdom continues to

shape the lives of the living not as an alternative source of salvation but as part of the community's historical and spiritual continuity . When ECRAA engages with ancestral wisdom, it understands this engagement as critical inculturation rather than ancestor worship. It seeks to honour cultural memory while maintaining biblical particularity, especially the uniqueness of Christ's saving work and the exclusive mediation of Christ for salvation. This is a subtle but crucial distinction that allows for authentic cultural expression without compromising theological integrity.

Taken together, deep incarnation, decolonial theology, and Indigenous relational epistemologies form an integrated theological framework that shapes ECRAA's understanding of mission. Deep incarnation establishes the Christological vision of God's presence throughout creation; decolonial theology critiques the epistemological assumptions that have marginalized Indigenous knowledge; and Indigenous relational epistemologies provide the contextual hermeneutic through which Christian faith is embodied within the lived realities of Enugu-Ezike communities. These three perspectives do not function independently but form the theological grammar of ECRAA's incarnational and relational missiology. Critically, this framework must also be gendered: African feminist epistemology reveals how women's relational knowing offers essential dimensions for incarnational theology that male-centred approaches have often obscured . Nkama's work on decolonizing relational knowing emphasizes that authentic incarnational practice requires centring women's embodied knowledge and leadership within communities, restoring what patriarchal colonization and male theological dominance have systematically erased –. ECRAA's incarnational-relational model, therefore, must intentionally integrate women's theological voice and epistemic authority to avoid reproducing patriarchal structures under the guise of cultural authenticity.

Implications for African Christian Mission

Healing Fragmented Relationships

ECRAA's integration of incarnational theology with relational epistemologies reflects how Christian mission can be renewed when theological reflection, Indigenous knowledge systems, and pastoral practice are held together rather than treated as competing realities. Its significance extends beyond Enugu-Ezike, offering institutional churches across African contexts a constructive framework for engaging contemporary spiritual, ecological, and theological challenges while remaining faithful to the Gospel.

First, ECRAA contributes, in a practical way, to healing the fractured relationships created by colonial forms of Christian mission. Where colonial Christianity frequently separated Christian faith from land, ancestry, and Indigenous cultural identity, ECRAA members seek through their mission to restore these relationships through an incarnational understanding of salvation as relational restoration. Salvation is understood not merely as the forgiveness of individual sin but as the restoration of right relationships with God, neighbour, creation, and communal memory, for "trauma cannot be cured by isolation but only by reconnection—to one another, to ancestors, and to the living earth" . Young people who have felt compelled to choose between Christian faith and cultural belonging discover in ECRAA's model that such a choice is theologically unnecessary.

Ecological Stewardship as Integral Mission

Second, ECRAA demonstrates that ecological stewardship lies at the heart of Christian mission rather than on its periphery. The Nsukka evidence reveals that, among Igbo communities, deities historically functioned as ecological guardians—protectors of sacred groves, streams, and natural boundaries (Eze 2018, 53). These were not merely superstitious taboos but effective conservation strategies that maintained ecosystems and prevented resource depletion. When creation is understood through deep

incarnation as participating in God's redemptive purposes, environmental care becomes an expression of Christian discipleship, a vision reinforced by the Enugu-Ezike conviction that *Ala dị nsọ* ("the land is sacred"), ideas that can be translated to what Adinoyi and Asuwe explain as reverence, reciprocity, and responsible stewardship toward the earth.

Authentic African Christianity

Third, ECRAA contributes to the development of an authentically African Christianity. Its model demonstrates that Christian faith need not be expressed through imported cultural forms in order to remain faithful to Scripture. Rather, biblical revelation may be received and embodied through Indigenous relational epistemologies, producing a Christianity that is simultaneously rooted in the Gospel and in African cultural realities . Such an approach represents neither a romantic return to pre-Christian religion nor an uncritical acceptance of every cultural practice.

The historical record illustrates this principle. Early Irish missionary Bishop Joseph Shanahan recognized that Igbo traditional religion "needed transformation and not destruction" . This insight anticipates what this article has described as critical inculturation: a missionary approach that transforms rather than displaces culture. ECRAA embodies this principle by integrating healing practices, community formation, and environmental stewardship within explicitly Christian frameworks. Its own historical development reflects this trajectory. Emerging as a grassroots association that accompanied vocations rather than replacing local communal structures, ECRAA gradually became a vehicle for holding together the Catholic faith and Enugu-Ezike's communal identity, rather than treating them as opposing realities .

Youth Engagement and Spiritual Meaning

Fourth, ECRAA offers an important response to youth disengagement from institutional Christianity. Research indicates that young people increasingly seek forms of spirituality that integrate faith with community, land, ancestry, and embodied decision-making, whereas institutional Christianity has often presented salvation in individualistic or otherworldly terms disconnected from these relational realities . Echoing Mokhoathi's contextual theological approach, ECRAA illustrates that Christianity need not be experienced as the rejection of African identity but as its fulfilment in Christ . In this way, the Church becomes a place where cultural memory and Christian discipleship enrich rather than oppose one another.

Decolonial Fidelity Without Compromise

Finally, ECRAA illustrates how decolonial theology can reshape Christian mission without abandoning biblical fidelity. Decolonization is understood here not as rejecting Christianity but as recovering Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate partners in theological reflection . Such engagement is not static but, as Duncan (2014, 3) argues, involves a continuing process of "adaptation, innovation and reflexivity," through which the Gospel is faithfully embodied within changing cultural contexts without surrendering its theological integrity . This requires cultural humility, mutual learning, and a willingness to recognize God's activity beyond inherited colonial categories.

Deep incarnation provides the Christological foundation for this vision by affirming God's presence within the whole created order, while Indigenous relational epistemologies provide the contextual wisdom through which that presence is discerned and embodied. The theological coherence of this approach deserves emphasis. It is not syncretism because it maintains biblical distinctiveness (Christ as unique saviour) while affirming cultural particularity (African relational modes of knowing). It is not cultural essentialism

because it engages Indigenous practices critically rather than romantically. It is authentic inculturation because it allows the Gospel to become genuinely incarnate within the relational worlds in which African communities already encounter God.

Yet a critical tension must be acknowledged: despite decolonial theology's liberatory promise, neocolonial structures and what Munyao and Tanui term the persistence of "Whiteness in the version of Christianity" continue to constrain African churches even as they pursue decolonization . Institutional Christianity in Africa remains deeply shaped by Western missionary legacies, foreign funding streams, and imported theological training models that subtly reinforce the very epistemological hierarchies decolonial theology seeks to dismantle –.

ECRAA's model, while constructive, operates within these contested institutional spaces where genuine decolonization remains perpetually incomplete. Moreover, Olagunju's work on esoteric languages in African religious discourse reveals how theological inculturation risks appropriating Indigenous knowledge systems through academic repackaging, potentially converting embodied spiritual wisdom into decontextualized theological concepts . The danger of "neocolonial domestication"—absorbing Indigenous epistemologies into Western-styled theological discourse while leaving power structures intact—remains a persistent challenge.

Conclusion: Toward an Incarnational, Ecological, and Decolonial Mission

This article has argued that the contemporary spiritual crisis many young people in Enugu-Ezike experience presents not only a pastoral challenge but also a theological opportunity. The growing search for spiritual meaning beyond institutional Christianity reveals a deeper longing for faith that is embodied, relational, culturally meaningful, and attentive to the integrity of creation. This movement should not be interpreted simply as a regression to traditional religion but as an

implicit theological critique of forms of Christianity that have failed to be genuinely incarnational.

Using ECRAA as a constructive theological case study, the article has shown that deep incarnation provides a Christological framework through which Indigenous relational epistemologies can be engaged critically within Christian mission. Read alongside decolonial theology, deep incarnation challenges inherited dualisms that separate spirit from matter, heaven from earth, and Christian faith from Indigenous ways of knowing . In doing so, it offers a theological vision in which God's redemptive presence embraces the whole created order and calls the Church to participate in the healing of persons, communities, and creation.

Within this framework, ECRAA shows that authentic African Christianity needs not choose between biblical fidelity and cultural authenticity. Its ministries in healthcare, education, environmental stewardship, and community development illustrate how Christian mission can be both deeply rooted in Scripture and meaningfully engaged with Indigenous relational epistemologies. Such engagement is presented not as uncritical acceptance of every cultural practice but as an exercise in critical inculturation, allowing the Gospel to affirm, purify, and fulfill those dimensions of Indigenous wisdom that promote human flourishing and faithful discipleship .

The significance of ECRAA extends beyond Enugu-Ezike precisely because its historical development exemplifies how an organically formed Indigenous Catholic association can sustain biblical fidelity while cultivating vocational formation, communal solidarity, and contextual missionary practice. Its incarnational-relational model contributes to contemporary African missiology by demonstrating that Christian mission is most persuasive when embodied within the lived realities of the communities it serves. It offers a model in which ecological responsibility, relational justice, pastoral care, and

theological reflection are understood not as separate concerns but as interconnected expressions of participation in Christ's reconciling work. In this sense, ECRAA represents a practical expression of what decolonial and incarnational mission can look like within contemporary African Christianity.

The question is no longer whether African Christianity can become authentically African, but how the Church can continue to cultivate forms of discipleship in which the Gospel is genuinely incarnated within African histories, cultures, and relationships.

Beyond the Enugu-Ezike context, this study contributes to African missiology by showing that deep incarnation and critical inculturation are mutually enriching rather than competing theological paradigms. ECRAA demonstrates that faithful Christian mission need not choose between biblical integrity and Indigenous epistemologies; rather, it embodies what Magesa (2016) describes as "the process of integrating the message of Jesus Christ into a local context" while remaining more than "a one-sided activity of cultural accommodation" (Magnesa 2016, 110) . In this way, the article offers ECRAA as a constructive model for African churches seeking to renew mission through theological fidelity, relational belonging, and contextual authenticity.

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PAPER 11

LINES OF BECOMING: COMMUNITY, SACRED ECOLOGY, AND THE METAPHYSICS OF RELATIONS

Izuchukwu Kizito Okoli, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
izk.okoli@unizik.edu.ng

Stephen Chibuikem Onyedika, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.
stephen.okeke@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the interconnectedness of community, sacred ecology, and relational existence through the conceptual framework of "Lines of Becoming." It responds to the ecological and social crises intensified by modern anthropocentrism, which has reduced nature to an object of exploitation and weakened relational worldviews. Using the hermeneutic method, the study interprets sacred ecological traditions, particularly sacred groves, as lived expressions of relational ontology and communal identity. Drawing on African philosophy and environmental ethics, especially the works of Mbiti, Asouzu, and Berkes, the paper argues that sacred ecology embodies a metaphysics of relation in which human and non-human existence are mutually constitutive. The findings suggest that sacred ecological systems function not only as environmental conservation mechanisms but also as moral and spiritual institutions that sustain biodiversity and communal cohesion. The study concludes that ecological sustainability requires more than technological solutions; it demands a recovery of relational worldviews grounded in reciprocity, complementarity, and indigenous ecological knowledge.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Hermeneutics, Indigenous Knowledge, Lines of Becoming, Relational Ontology, Sacred Ecology.

Introduction

One of the most significant characteristics of modernity is anthropocentrism which has contributed substantially to environmental degradation by legitimizing patterns of consumption and development that prioritize short-term economic gains over ecological sustainability (Paul W. Taylor 44-52). The consequences are evident globally: forest ecosystems disappear at alarming rates, species extinction accelerates, and ecological disruption threatens both human and non-human life. Across many cultures, particularly in Africa, Asia, and indigenous societies of the Americas, nature has historically been understood not as an inert object but as a sacred reality intertwined with human existence. African philosophical traditions emphasize interconnectedness, mutual dependence, and communal existence. This relational understanding of existence finds philosophical expression in a metaphysics of relation, where being itself is fundamentally interconnected through participation, complementarity, and mutual dependence.

The study explores environmental concerns through the conceptual framework of "Lines of Becoming," signifying dynamic processes through which identities, communities, and ecological systems emerge through relationships. The central argument is that sacred ecological traditions embody a metaphysics of relation capable of addressing both environmental degradation and social fragmentation. These traditions demonstrate that sustainable coexistence requires the recovery of relational worldviews grounded in interconnectedness, reciprocity, and indigenous ecological knowledge. The discourse proceeds with conceptual and theoretical expositions.

Conceptual Clarifications

Community

At its most basic level, community refers to a network of relationships characterized by shared values, mutual responsibilities, collective identity, and common purposes (Posio 532-534). Within African philosophy, community is not merely a social arrangement but an ontological reality. The individual emerges within a communal context and derives meaning through participation in a larger network of relationships. This is captured in John Mbiti's observation: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 109). This expresses the idea that personal identity is inseparable from communal existence; human beings become persons through relationships.

Sacred Ecology

"Sacred ecology" denotes systems of environmental knowledge, values, and practices grounded in spiritual understandings of nature. Fikret Berkes describes it as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission (7). Sacred ecology recognizes that nature possesses meanings that transcend economic utility. Sacred spaces; forests, rivers, mountains, and groves function as sites of ritual activity, communal memory, and moral education, embodying spiritual realities and ancestral presences.

Metaphysics of Relation

Metaphysics of relation, shifts attention from isolated beings to the relationships that constitute and sustain them (Smirnov 345-350). It begins from the assumption that existence is fundamentally interconnected; entities derive meaning and identity through their relationships. Reality is understood as a web of interdependence rather than a collection of self-contained substances. Ecological degradation therefore represents not merely destruction of external

objects but a disruption of the relational structures upon which existence depends.

Lines of Becoming

"Lines of Becoming" provides the interpretive lens through which community, sacred ecology, and relational metaphysics are brought together. The notion emphasizes process, transformation, and emergence rather than fixity. It refers to the dynamic pathways through which relationships generate identities, communities, ecological systems, and cultural meanings. Human beings become through relationships; communities become through shared practices and histories; ecological systems become through ongoing interactions. Sacred ecological traditions are not frozen remnants of the past but living processes through which communities continually negotiate their relationship with nature, ancestors, and future generations (Nche and Michael 280-286). Similar but distinct from relational ontology and process philosophy, Lines of Becoming captures the specific dynamic trajectories and transformations through which beings continually develop and change.

Theoretical Framework: Hermeneutics and Relational Ontology

The philosophical foundation of this study rests upon two complementary frameworks: hermeneutics and relational ontology. Hermeneutics provides the methodological lens through which sacred ecological traditions are interpreted, while relational ontology offers the metaphysical framework for understanding the interconnectedness that such traditions embody. Among contemporary hermeneutic philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer occupies a central position. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer challenges the assumption that understanding can be entirely objective or detached from historical experience. He argues that interpretation occurs through what he famously calls the "fusion of

horizons," whereby the interpreter's present perspective encounters the historical world of the text or tradition (Gadamer 305). While hermeneutics provides the methodological framework for interpretation, relational ontology supplies the metaphysical foundation of this study. Relational ontology challenges the notion that reality consists primarily of isolated and self-sufficient entities. Instead, it maintains that existence is fundamentally constituted through relationships. The roots of relational ontology can be traced to numerous philosophical traditions. However, its contemporary significance is particularly evident within African philosophy, where interconnectedness occupies a central place in reflections on reality, personhood, and community. A useful point of departure is John Mbiti's well-known characterization of African communal thought, thus, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (109). Although often cited in discussions of community and personhood, this statement possesses broader ontological implications. It suggests that existence itself is relational. Individual identity is not an independent possession but emerges through participation in a network of relationships. Similarly, Ubuntu philosophy presents human existence as fundamentally grounded in mutuality and interdependence. According to Mogobe Ramose, "Ubuntu is the root of African philosophy" (49). For him, being human involves participation in a web of reciprocal relationships that extends beyond the individual. The self is neither autonomous nor self-contained but constituted through interactions with others.

This relational understanding of existence acquires systematic philosophical expression in the work of Innocent Asouzu. His theory of Complementary Ontology, or *Ibuanyidanda* philosophy, represents one of the most sophisticated contemporary articulations of relational metaphysics in African thought. Asouzu argues that reality is structured by complementarity rather than

isolation. According to him, "Anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality" (*Ibuanyidanda,* 103). This statement captures the essence of his philosophy. No being is self-sufficient. Every entity contributes to the realization of a larger whole. Existence is therefore characterized by interconnectedness, participation, and mutual dependence.

4. Sacred Ecology as an Expression of Relational Being

This section argues that sacred ecology constitutes a practical expression of relational being. Sacred ecological traditions reveal an understanding of reality grounded in interconnectedness, complementarity, and mutual dependence. Through sacred groves, ritual landscapes, ecological taboos, and communal environmental practices, communities affirm a metaphysical vision in which human flourishing and ecological well-being are inseparable.

Sacred Space and the Ontology of Interconnectedness

One of the defining characteristics of sacred ecology is the attribution of sacred significance to particular natural spaces. Across diverse cultures, forests, rivers, mountains, caves, and groves have frequently been regarded as sacred sites inhabited by divine beings, ancestral spirits, or mysterious powers. Such spaces are distinguished not merely by geographical features but by their participation in a wider network of meaning. From a modern secular perspective, sacred groves may appear to be a little more than cultural artifacts or remnants of pre-scientific belief systems. However, a hermeneutic reading reveals a deeper philosophical significance. Sacred spaces function as symbolic affirmations of the interconnected nature of existence. They embody the recognition that nature possesses intrinsic value beyond its utility to human beings.

This understanding resonates strongly with the insights of sacred ecology scholarship. Fikret Berkes defines sacred ecology as "a

cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission" (7). This definition highlights the fact that sacred ecological traditions are not merely religious customs. They represent complex systems of environmental knowledge and ethical practice developed through sustained interaction with ecological realities. Sacred spaces therefore serve not only spiritual functions but also ecological and social functions that contribute to communal well-being.

The distinction between sacred and ordinary space reflects a particular way of understanding reality. It challenges the reduction of nature to a collection of exploitable resources and instead presents the natural world as a realm worthy of reverence and ethical consideration. In many indigenous traditions, sacred spaces are understood as locations where relationships between humans, nature, ancestors, and spiritual forces become especially visible. Such spaces remind communities that existence is relational rather than atomistic. This perspective resonates strongly with the relational ontology developed by Innocent Asouzu. Asouzu argues that anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality. The philosophical implication of this assertion is profound. If every being contributes to the realization of reality as a whole, then no element of existence can be dismissed as insignificant or disposable. Forests, rivers, animals, and ecosystems participate in the same ontological network that sustains human communities. Sacred ecological traditions express this intuition in practical form. Through the protection of forests, rivers, and groves, communities acknowledge the participation of non-human realities in the broader community of being.

Sacred Groves as Ecological and Communal Institutions

Among the most significant manifestations of sacred ecology are sacred groves. Found throughout Africa, Asia, and other parts of

the world, sacred groves are areas of vegetation protected through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and communal regulations. They represent some of the clearest examples of how spiritual values can contribute to ecological conservation. Although often viewed primarily in religious terms, sacred groves perform multiple ecological, social, and cultural functions. They serve as centers of ritual activity, repositories of communal memory, and sanctuaries for biodiversity. Their preservation demonstrate how ecological sustainability can emerge from cultural commitments and spiritual values rather than solely from formal environmental policies.

Adeyanju et al., in a comparative study of sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria, found that traditional beliefs and community institutions continue to play significant roles in biodiversity conservation (94-107). The study demonstrates that sacred groves often function as effective community-based conservation systems capable of complementing modern environmental management strategies. Similarly, Agbelade et al. report substantial tree-species diversity within sacred groves in southwestern Nigeria and conclude that such forests possess considerable conservation potential despite growing developmental pressures (334-348). These findings support the broader observation that sacred groves frequently serve as biodiversity sustenance within heavily modified landscapes.

Ecological Taboos and the Ethics of Restraint

A central feature of sacred ecology is the presence of ecological taboos. These include prohibitions against cutting particular trees, hunting certain animals, fishing during specific seasons, or entering sacred spaces without authorization. Such restrictions are found in many indigenous societies and frequently form part of broader systems of environmental governance. From a purely rationalistic perspective, such taboos may appear superstitious or

irrational. However, contemporary environmental scholarship increasingly recognizes their ecological significance. Many traditional taboos function as mechanisms for regulating resource use and preventing environmental depletion. Berkes argues that traditional ecological systems often contain "rules of thumb" developed through long-term interaction with local environments and refined through generations of communal experience (15-18). Similarly, Kandari et al observe that sacred beliefs and taboos frequently contribute to biodiversity conservation by restricting destructive human activities and preserving ecologically sensitive areas (Kandari et al). Such practices demonstrate that cultural values can serve as effective instruments of environmental management even in the absence of formal regulatory institutions.

The philosophical importance of ecological taboos lies not merely in their practical outcomes but in their ethical orientation. They cultivate habits of restraint, humility, and responsibility. Rather than encouraging unlimited exploitation, they remind communities that human freedom must operate within ecological limits. This ethical orientation contrasts sharply with the dominant logic of consumerism. Contemporary consumer culture often associates freedom with unrestricted choice, unlimited acquisition, and the continual expansion of human control over nature. Sacred ecological traditions propose a radically different conception of freedom, one grounded in responsibility toward the wider community of life.

Anthropocentrism, and the Erosion of Sacred Ecological Values

A defining feature of modernity is what scholars have described as the "disenchantment" of the world; nature came to be viewed through scientific rationality, calculation, and utility. While producing remarkable advances, this encouraged a conception of nature as a collection of objects available for human control. Forests became timber reserves, rivers became economic

resources, and ecosystems became repositories of raw materials. The natural world was increasingly interpreted according to its usefulness rather than its intrinsic significance.

Fikret Berkes warns against such reductionism by emphasizing that traditional ecological systems integrate "knowledge, practice, and belief" (7) into a coherent understanding of environmental relationships. This section expands the argument that modernity, particularly in its anthropocentric orientation, has contributed significantly to the erosion of sacred ecological values and the weakening of relational modes of existence.

Anthropocentrism and the Logic of Domination

Closely connected to this is anthropocentrism: the belief that human beings occupy the central position within the universe, evaluating nature primarily according to its usefulness for human interests (Samways 28-31). Environmental destruction becomes easier to justify when nature is perceived primarily as a resource rather than a community of interconnected beings. The critique finds expression in Godfrey B. Tangwa's eco-bio-communitarian ethics, which challenges the sharp separation between humanity and nature that characterizes much of modern Western thought. According to Tangwa, "The attitude of humans towards nature should be one of cautious humility" (391). This notion of cautious humility stands in direct opposition to the modern ideology of domination. Whereas anthropocentrism often encourages the treatment of nature as an object of unlimited exploitation, Tangwa advocates a relationship grounded in respect, restraint, and coexistence. Human beings remain important, but their importance is situated within a larger ecological community that includes animals, plants, ecosystems, and future generations.

The philosophical problem with anthropocentrism is not that it recognizes human value. Rather, the problem arises when human value is interpreted in ways that deny or diminish the value of other

forms of existence. Such a perspective encourages what may be called the logic of domination, the assumption that nature exists primarily for human use. This logic stands in direct opposition to Innocent Asouzu's complementary ontology. If, as Asouzu argues, "Anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality" (*Ibuanyidanda*, 103), then no being can be regarded as merely instrumental. Every component of reality contributes to the realization of the whole. Rivers, forests, ecosystems, and animals are not simply resources; they are participants within the larger community of existence.

Consumer Capitalism and Ecological Alienation

Another significant factor eroding sacred ecological values is consumer capitalism. Modern economies depend on continual production, consumption, and growth, encouraging exploitative relationships with nature. Consumer culture promotes identities based on acquisition rather than participation, treating nature as a reservoir of commodities rather than a community of relationships (Jackson 82-87). Berkes observes that traditional ecological systems cannot be separated from their ethical and cultural foundations; environmental stewardship emerges from recognition of interconnectedness (17). Consumer capitalism obscures this interconnectedness by separating individuals from the ecological consequences of their actions. Goods appear in markets detached from the ecosystems, labour, and communities involved in production. Consumption becomes disconnected from responsibility. This condition may be described as ecological alienation: human beings become increasingly unaware of the relationships that sustain their existence. Sacred ecology counters this alienation by emphasizing visible and meaningful relationships between human actions and ecological realities, restoring awareness of interdependence.

The Need for a Relational Environmental Ethics

The ecological crises confronting contemporary humanity (climate

change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, desertification, water scarcity) have generated renewed interest in environmental ethics. Yet many approaches remain limited by modern assumptions, focusing on which entities possess moral standing rather than examining the relational structures that make existence possible. Relational environmental ethics offers an alternative framework grounded in interconnectedness, reciprocity, and mutual dependence. Rather than asking who or what possesses value, it asks how relationships ought to be constituted within the broader community of existence. This orientation finds support in African philosophy. Innocent Asouzu's complementary ontology provides a systematic articulation: "Anything that exists serves as a missing link of reality" (*Ibuanyidanda* 103). This establishes an ethical principle, if every being contributes to the whole, moral responsibility extends beyond human concerns. Asouzu further states: "To be is to be in mutual complementary relationship with all that exists" (The Method and Principles of Complementarity 44). Ethical responsibility arises from participation in a network of complementary relationships that includes ecosystems, species, communities, and future generations.

Recent environmental scholarship increasingly supports such perspectives. The 2022 IPBES Assessment Report identifies "relational values" as a crucial to environmental responsibility, noting communities protect ecosystems not merely for economic benefits but because of meaningful relationships connecting people, places, and ecological systems (IPBES 18-22). Chan et al. argue that relational values emerge from meaningful relationships between people and nature, explaining why communities protect ecosystems with deep cultural and spiritual significance (Chan et al. 1463).

A central principle of relational environmental ethics is reciprocity. While conventional environmental ethics emphasizes duties, rights, or obligations; sacred ecological traditions frame

environmental responsibility in terms of reciprocal relationships. Human beings receive benefits from nature and bear corresponding responsibilities. This challenges extractive relationships encouraged by consumer culture, emphasizing that receiving from nature creates duties of care. Ecological responsibility emerges not from external compulsion but from recognition of mutual dependence, transforming environmental responsibility into ethical commitment rooted in gratitude and belonging. As Gould, Martinez, and Hoelting argue that sustainability requires moving beyond individualistic models toward relational frameworks emphasizing reciprocity, interdependence, and collective responsibility (Gould et al. 6-8).

Conclusion

This study has examined sacred ecology as a framework for understanding sustainable environmental practices. The analysis revealed that sacred spaces, sacred groves, ecological taboos, and communal conservation practices embody a relational understanding of existence. These institutions preserve biodiversity, cultivate environmental stewardship, strengthen communal identity, and reinforce ethical obligations toward both human and non-human members of the community of life. The study also examined the impact of modernity, anthropocentrism, and consumer capitalism on sacred ecological traditions, arguing that environmental degradation is linked to the erosion of relational worldviews and the rise of instrumental attitudes toward nature. The weakening of sacred ecological institutions has contributed to environmental decline and social, cultural, and spiritual fragmentation.

In response, the study proposed a relational environmental ethics grounded in reciprocity, complementarity, ecological stewardship, and communal responsibility. Drawing upon Asouzu, Ramose, Mbiti, Tangwa, Berkes, and contemporary sustainability scholars,

the paper demonstrated that environmental responsibility emerges naturally from recognition of humanity's embeddedness within larger networks of relationship.

The central argument is that sacred ecology constitutes a practical manifestation of relational being, and its recovery offers valuable philosophical resources for developing a sustainable environmental future. Ecological sustainability depends not only upon scientific knowledge and technological innovation but upon the cultivation of relational consciousness capable of recognizing humanity's place within the wider community of existence.

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PAPER 12

NURTURING THE LAND, NURTURING LIFE: BALI NYONGA CULTURAL VALUES AND E COLOGICAL HARMONY

Judith Ngihbi, PhD
Department of Philosophy, Catholic Institute of West Africa
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
mambujudith@gmail.com

Abstract

The Bali Nyonga is an ethnic group from Northwest Cameroon whose worldview integrates ecological harmony into the foundations of their culture. Central to Bali Nyonga philosophy is the belief that humans form an inseparable part of nature, and that community well-being is contingent upon the health of the land. The land is conceived not merely as property but as a spiritual entity, communally managed under the authority of the Fon and the council of elders, who safeguard equitable distribution and prevent overexploitation. The Fon's palace (Ntoh) functions as a sacred shrine and the spiritual nucleus of Bali Nyonga society. Rituals performed there reinforce equilibrium between humans and the natural world. A prominent example is the Lele Festival, which honours both the land and the ancestors while inaugurating the farming season. Through sustainable land practices, reverence for ancestral heritage, and conservation of natural resources, the Bali Nyonga sustains reciprocity with nature. This paper examines the values and traditions that foster a symbiotic relationship between the Bali Nyonga community and their environment. Natural elements such as forests, rivers, and animals are revered and often associated with ancestral spirits or deities, thereby strengthening collective efforts to protect sacred sites and natural resources. These practices uphold ecological balance and illustrate how cultural values and spiritual beliefs converge to nurture both land and life. Employing qualitative analysis, this study concludes that Bali Nyonga ecological stewardship provides valuable insights

into biodiversity preservation and the advancement of environmental sustainability.
Keywords: Bali Nyonga, Cultural Values, Environmental Sustainability, Community, Conservation

Introduction

The escalating global climate crisis has prompted a critical re-evaluation of Western-centric conservation models, which often bifurcate "nature" and "culture." In contrast, indigenous epistemologies have long maintained that ecological health is inseparable from social and spiritual well-being. Among the Bali Nyonga of the Northwest Region of Cameroon, environmental management is not merely a matter of policy, but a core tenet of cultural identity. For this community, the landscape is a living archive of ancestral presence, where the "indivisible whole" of humanity and nature dictates daily life and governance. Despite the documented success of indigenous stewardship in maintaining biodiversity, these traditional systems are frequently overlooked in contemporary sustainability discourse. In the Bali Nyonga context, land is not viewed as an inert commodity for extraction; rather, it is a spiritual entity held in trust by the Fon and the council of elders. This communal governance structure serves as a primary defense against resource overexploitation. However, through traditional ecological knowledge, the Bali Nyonga has created a sophisticated system of taboos and rituals that protect vital ecosystems, such as sacred forests and riverbanks, which are believed to be the dwellings of deities. This paper asked: How do Bali Nyonga cultural values nurture ecological harmony?

Theoretical Framework

This study situates Bali Nyonga environmental practices within three interrelated theoretical traditions namely; Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Indigenous Environmental Philosophy, and Social-Ecological Systems Theory. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), is a cumulative bodies of knowledge, practice,

and belief about the relationship of living beings with one another and with their environment, handed down through generations (Berkes, 2018). TEK is not static information but a dynamic process of observation, experimentation, and adaptation. In Bali Nyonga, TEK is embedded in proverbs, taboos, seasonal calendars, and the management of sacred groves. These practices constitute a local science of conservation that regulates human interaction with forests, water, and soil.

Indigenous Environmental Philosophy provides the ethical and ontological foundation for TEK. Within many African worldviews, including that of the Bali Nyonga, the land is not a commodity but a living community of humans, ancestors, and non-human beings. Reciprocity, respect, and responsibility form the moral basis of human-environment relations. Rituals, ancestral veneration, and prohibitions against desecrating streams or cutting certain trees express this philosophy. (Gyekye, 1995). They position humans as custodians rather than owners of nature.

Social-Ecological Systems (SES) Theory, offers a structure for analyzing how communities govern common-pool resources (Ostrom, 2009). An SES consists of resource systems, resource units, governance institutions, and actors who interact and produce outcomes. In Bali Nyonga, the resource system includes forests, farmlands, and streams. Governance is carried out through a polycentric structure involving the Fon, the Kwifor, age grades, and women's associations. Rules such as closed hunting seasons, restrictions on farming near water sources, and sanctions for violating taboos function as institutional mechanisms that maintain ecological balance. Taken together, these three structures allow us to read Bali Nyonga cultural values not merely as tradition, but as an integrated system of knowledge, ethics, and governance that nurtures ecological harmony. TEK supplies the empirical content, Indigenous Philosophy supplies the moral reasoning, and SES Theory supplies the institutional analysis.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how Bali Nyonga cultural values contribute to ecological harmony.

Data Sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, two focus group discussions, and participant observation conducted between February and May 2026 in Bali Nyonga, Northwest Region of Cameroon. Secondary data included archival materials from the palace, published ethnographies, and oral histories recorded by community elders.

Participant Selection. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of key knowledge holders. A total of 24 participants were interviewed, comprising 10 elders from the traditional council, 6 women leaders from market and farming associations, 4 herbalists and ritual specialists, and 4 youth representatives. Effort was made to achieve gender and generational balance.

Research Methods. Interviews focused on environmental rules, taboos, rituals, and changes in land use over time. Focus groups with women explored their roles in resource management beyond farming. Participant observation was carried out during two community rituals related to land fertility and during farm visits to document agroecological practices.

Analytical Procedures. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. Coding was guided by the three theoretical frameworks. First, data were coded for TEK indicators such as species protection and seasonal regulation. Second, they were coded for expressions of Indigenous Environmental Philosophy such as reciprocity and sacredness. Third, they were coded for SES elements such as rules, actors, and enforcement. Triangulation was done by comparing interview data with observations and archival records to ensure credibility.

Findings

"In Bali Nyonga, the area surrounding the ancestral shrine remains a protected forest patch. Cutting trees there is prohibited by palace decree and spiritual sanction. Elders report that this grove continues to harbor medicinal plants such as *Prunus Africana* and provides habitat for birds and small mammals. Similarly, women's groups regulate the harvesting of firewood and non-timber forest products. They set informal quotas and monitor streams to prevent pollution, thereby exercising environmental decision-making that extends beyond agricultural labour."

Bali Nyonga Cultural Foundations

The Bali Nyonga Kingdom epitomizes Cameroon's characterization as "Africa in miniature," which embodies a diversity of vegetation, topography, climate, culture, ethnicity, and religion. According to Nyamndi, Bali Nyonga was established around 1830 by Nah Nyonga, daughter of Gawolbe. She constituted a profound challenge to prevailing Chamba gender norms (Nyamndi, 1988, p. 49). Prior to this historic moment, women within Chamba society were categorically excluded from political participation and denied access to public office. Consequently, the founding of Bali Nyonga by a woman was perceived as a radical and unsettling development among Chamba leaders, whose community was deeply entrenched in patriarchal traditions.

The political history of the Bali Nyonga Kingdom is marked by both continuity and transformation. Since its establishment in the early nineteenth century, the Kingdom has been governed by five successive leaders, each contributing to its consolidation and expansion. The founding figure, Nah Nyonga, daughter of Gawolbe, occupies a unique place in this narrative. Although she was instrumental in establishing the Kingdom around 1830, Nah

Nyonga did not assume the throne herself. Her decision reflected the prevailing gender norms of Chamba society, where women were systematically excluded from political authority and public office. Conscious of these constraints, she transferred leadership to her son, Nyongpasi, a formidable warrior who ascended as Fonyonga I, thereby initiating the dynastic line that continues to define Bali Nyonga's political identity. This act of succession depicts the tension between cultural innovation and traditional structures. On one hand, Nah Nyonga's role as founder challenged the patriarchal assumptions of the Chamba, demonstrating that women could exercise agency in shaping political destinies. On the other hand, her refusal to occupy the throne represents the enduring influence of gendered expectations, which confined women to the margins of formal governance. The paradox of her leadership founding a kingdom yet relinquishing direct rule is a correlation between gender, power, and tradition in nineteenth-century Chamba society.

> In Bali Nyong, a number of causes like natural calamities, Bata domination, and Fulani ascendancy, forced the Chamba out of the village in the late 18th century. The Ndangambila were one of five bands that made up the Chamba Leko diaspora. The Ndangambila moved southward under Gawolbe's leadership. The Chamba were a warlike people in general, and it appeared that receiving military instruction at an early age was a silent requirement for social inclusion. In the mid-1920s, the Bamenda Division's District Officer, claimed that the Chamba were "essentially a warrior caste; they knew how to fight, and loved to fight." As Gawolbe led his tribe southward during a period of survival of the fittest, this quality became useful (Titalanga, 202, p. 350).

Bali Nyonga's cultural roots are still influenced by Nah Nyonga's choice. Cultural standards are negotiated rather than strictly enforced, reflecting a larger theme of adaptability and resilience. With a population that came from a wide variety of backgrounds, customs, and perspectives, it was the largest and most varied empire in the grasslands. The Bali-Nyonga Empire was challenging to rule due to its diverse population, and stability needed to be established via both force and diplomacy. She maintained the stability of the new government and ingrained her influence in its founding by giving authority to her son. In addition to influencing Bali Nyonga's leadership path, this historical event provides a prism through which to view how gender and political legitimacy interact in indigenous African communities. The story of Nah Nyonga, the daughter of Gawolbe, creating Bali Nyonga is noteworthy for its ecological ramifications as well as its gender and political authority. Aware of the patriarchal limitations of Chamba society, Nah Nyonga did not take the throne herself, but her act of founding the Kingdom and giving power to her son Nyongpasi (*later Fonyonga I*) guaranteed stability and leadership continuity. The care of the land and resources that were essential to the community's survival was closely linked to this succession, which was more than just political.

In Bali Nyonga, leadership has historically been viewed as a kind of stewardship over both people and the natural world. Thus, the foundational moment demonstrates how ecological responsibility and political legitimacy were correlated. Nah Nyonga created a cultural structure where taking care of the land was essential to taking care of life by integrating her influence into the Kingdom's beginnings. The community's respect for sacred locations such as agricultural land, rivers, and forests are guarded by taboos and customs that serve as ecological barriers (Titanji, 2018). These customs show how cultural norms and indigenous spirituality function as strategies for biodiversity conservation. Additionally,

Bali Nyonga's agricultural customs, such as seasonal planting cycles, intercropping, and soil protection, represent ecological knowledge that has been passed down through the generations. Rituals associated with planting and harvest seasons, which symbolically connect human survival to natural rhythms, support these activities (Fokwang & Langmia, 2010). The continuation of these customs was guaranteed by leadership succession, pointing out the significance of cultural governance in maintaining ecological equilibrium. The actions of contemporary cultural institutions like the Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association (*BANDECA*), seek out funds for environmental, health, and educational programs, also reflect the foundational legacy of Nah Nyonga. These connections expand Nah Nyonga's vision into modern circumstances by embodying the idea that ecological care and cultural resilience are mutually supportive.

Women as Guardians of Local Ecology

In Bali Nyonga, women are the main growers of subsistence crops such as cassava, beans, and maize. The rotation of crops, intercropping, and soil conservation are examples of their agricultural practices that demonstrate ecological intelligence derived from indigenous knowledge systems (Titanji, 2018). Women embody the idea that tending the land nourishes both family and community life by overseeing household farms, which guarantee food security while preserving soil fertility. This function is consistent with findings in other Cameroonian societies, such as the Bakweri and Bamileke, where women's farming methods are essential to resilient ecological systems (Fonchingong, 2005). The women's involvement in fertility, planting, and harvest rituals strengthens the spiritual bond between nature and community. Women participate actively in taboos and rituals that protect sacred forests, streams, and farmlands, protecting biodiversity (Fokwang & Langmia, 2010). Similar customs are seen among the Yoruba in Nigeria, where women's ceremonial duties safeguard holy trees that are hotspots for

biodiversity. This cultural ecology is not exclusive to Bali Nyonga. These similarities highlight the wider African trend of women acting as intermediaries between spirituality and environmental preservation. Due to their extensive involvement in a variety of land uses and their capacity for large-scale landscape management, women in Cameroon must be at the cutting edge of the development and implementation of forest and land conservation.

> Women are highly aware of how trees are used to support livelihoods. Many have taken up leadership positions at the African Forest Forum. In women, you will gain more, and become familiar with the species and their applications. They understand how to take care of it. Women don't perceive timber when they own a tree. The fruit, leaves, and bark are all visible to them. They hope the tree will remain there for a long time since they are inadequate. You end life if you cut it. You are aware that it is ingrained in our culture, education, behaviour, and way of life.[76]

In Cameroon, the African Forest Forum is significantly impacting governmental decisions to promote women's forest rights. Additionally, it is enabling female community leaders to advocate for the preservation of forests and the means of subsistence for their family. Giving women a voice will perhaps pave the way for a future full of growth. According to Nzoyem, women's participation in landscape management is crucial. Women will be thinking about the variety of crops to grow, water access, and all the things that help them put food on the table, while men will always talk about productivity. Women are typically more dependent on natural resources because they are frequently in charge of gathering firewood and water, as well as cultivating and preparing food for the home. They are most affected when these resources are threatened by erratic weather or natural disasters. However,

[76]https://www.forestsnews.org › in-cameroon.

women are the perfect sustainability leaders because of this innate connection to the natural world (Nzoyem, 2022).

Ecological Harmony in Practice: The Case of Bali Nyonga

In Bali Nyonga, ecological harmony is a lived reality ingrained in spiritual traditions, agricultural systems, and cultural activities rather than an abstract idea. The community's history is a comprehensive approach to sustainability by fusing environmental stewardship with human survival. The foundation of Bali Nyonga's economic and cultural identity is agriculture. To preserve fertility and lessen erosion, farmers use crop rotation, intercropping, and organic soil enrichment. To ensure food security and protecting biodiversity, these system exemplify ecological intelligence that has been passed down through the centuries (Titanji, 2018). Planting and harvesting are determined by seasonal cycles, which strengthen the community's harmony with nature's rhythms. Similarly, the Bamenda Grassfields villages where ecological agricultural customs support both livelihoods and landscapes exhibit similar practices (Nkwi, 2010). These similarities show how indigenous ecological knowledge is shared throughout Cameroon. Furthermore, sacred forests, streams, and farmlands in Bali Nyonga are protected through taboos and rituals, which function as cultural mechanisms for conservation. These sites are often associated with ancestral spirits, making their preservation a spiritual obligation (Fokwang & Langmia, 2010). The restriction of exploitation, traditionally safeguard biodiversity and maintain ecological balance. In Bali Nyonga, communal governance structures that assign collective responsibility for resource management and land use encourage ecological harmony. In an effort to ensure that ecological practices are socially rooted, community councils frequently make decisions about farming, forest use, and water management. In a collective morality, the idea of sustainability and shared responsibility are essential to individual undertaking.

Governance and Ritual: The Lele Festival

The *Lele* Festival is one of the most significant cultural institutions of the Bali Nyonga Kingdom in Cameroon. It is rooted in the Chamba-Nyonga migration and conquest narratives of the eighteenth century. The festival has evolved into a complex ritual that embodies history, identity, and ecological stewardship. It is both a royal institution and a communal celebration, reinforcing the interconnectedness of leadership, ancestry, and land. The *Lele* Festival traces its origins to the Chamba-Nyonga migration from Nigeria into Cameroon. As the Chamba settled in the Bamenda Grassfields, they commemorated their victories and territorial consolidation through ritual displays of arms and communal gatherings (Fardon, 2006). The festival became institutionalized under the Fon, the sovereign leader of Bali Nyonga, and was tied to the sacred sanctuary of *Wolela*, a site central to the community's identity. The festival begins with a public ceremony led by the Fon, symbolizing renewal and continuity. This ritual emphasizes the collective responsibility of the community in sustaining both cultural and ecological balance. When a new Fon is enthroned, he ascends the *Wolela*, presenting himself to the people and ancestors. This act links political legitimacy to sacred ecology, reinforcing the idea that leadership is custodianship of both people and land. **The r**ituals performed during *Lele* are an honour for forests, streams, and ancestral sites. They reinforce taboos against exploitation and ensure biodiversity conservation through cultural mechanisms (Fokwang, 2020).

Historically, the festival included displays of arms and commemorating military victories. Over time, these displays have been reinterpreted as symbols of identity and resilience, reflecting the community's adaptation to colonial and postcolonial contexts. The *Lele* Festival is not only a cultural commemoration but also an ecological institution. It links leadership to sacred sites and embeds conservation within ritual practice. The sacred forests and streams are protected through taboos reinforced during the festival,

functioning as ecological sanctuaries. This demonstrates how indigenous rituals serve as mechanisms for biodiversity preservation. Comparatively, similar practices are observed among the Yoruba in Nigeria, where sacred groves are maintained through ritual observances, serving as biodiversity hotspots. The *Lele* Festival thus situates Bali Nyonga within a broader African tradition of ecological harmony through ritual. The *Lele* Festival of Bali Nyonga exemplifies how ritual can function as a guardian of both culture and ecology. By commemorating history, legitimizing leadership, and reinforcing ecological taboos, the festival embodies the theme *"Nurturing the Land, Nurturing Life."* It demonstrates that sustainability in indigenous societies is not merely technical but cultural, rooted in rituals that bind people to their land and ancestors.

Women's Roles in Environmental Decision-Making Beyond Agricultural Activities

Beyond institutional governance, gender shapes how environmental rules are practiced daily in Bali Nyonga. While women's agricultural labour is well documented in Bali Nyonga, their influence on environmental governance extends into knowledge transmission, resource regulation, and ritual leadership. A feminist political ecology lens helps reveal these roles that are often rendered invisible when analysis is limited to farming (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996).

1. Custodians of Seeds and Medicinal Knowledge: Bali Nyonga women maintain household seed banks and intergenerational knowledge of medicinal plants. Elder women determine which seeds are saved, exchanged, and planted each season. This practice sustains crop diversity and reduces dependence on external inputs. Herbalists, most of whom are women, also regulate the harvesting of plants such as *Prunus africana* and *Aloe vera*, enforcing informal norms about sustainable collection to ensure regrowth.

2. Governance of Water and Non-Timber Forest Products: Women's associations, including market women's groups, monitor streams and springs used for domestic purposes. They establish and enforce community norms against washing with soap in water sources and against farming too close to stream banks. These rules function as local environmental regulations that protect water quality and riparian habitats. In meetings, women leaders negotiate quotas for firewood collection and the harvesting of vegetables and mushrooms from communal forests.

3. Ritual and Moral Authority: Women play central roles in rituals linked to land fertility and rain. During annual rites, senior women offer prayers and libations for a productive season. Their participation legitimizes environmental rules because violations are framed not only as legal offenses but as spiritual offenses against ancestors. This gives women moral authority in environmental decision-making even where they are not members of the male-dominated traditional council.

4. Knowledge Transmission and Socialization: Through storytelling, proverbs, and daily practice, women socialize children into ecological values such as respect for taboo species and restraint in resource use. This informal education sustains Traditional Ecological Knowledge across generations and shapes future environmental behavior.

Cultural Values as Knowledge, Ethics, and Governance

The findings from Bali Nyonga reveal that cultural values function as an integrated system of knowledge, ethics, and governance that sustains ecological harmony. Through the lens of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, practices such as the protection of the sacred grove, seasonal planting cycles, and taboos against farming near streams represent adaptive, locally tested strategies for biodiversity conservation (Berkes, 2018). These practices are not merely technical but are embedded in an Indigenous

Environmental Philosophy that defines land as a living community of humans, ancestors, and non-human beings. Rituals during the *Lele* Festival and women's prayers for rain illustrate reciprocity and responsibility as moral obligations, positioning humans as custodians rather than owners of nature (Gyekye, 1995).

From a Social-Ecological Systems perspective, Bali Nyonga governance reflects Ostrom's design principles for sustainable common-pool resource management (Ostrom, 2009). The Fon, *Kwifor*, age grades, and women's associations constitute polycentric institutions that create, monitor, and enforce rules on resource use. Women's regulation of water sources and firewood shows how gendered actors function as monitoring institutions within the SES, even outside formal political office. However, this system faces pressure from modernization, formal education, and urban migration, which weaken intergenerational transmission of TEK. The Pathways for re-engagement include integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into school curricula, mobilizing associations like *BANDECA* (Bali Nyonga Development and Cultural Association) for reforestation, and adapting rituals such as *Lele* to include tree-planting campaigns. Such hybrid approaches can preserve cultural meaning while responding to contemporary ecological challenges. In aggregate, Bali Nyonga affirm that sustainability is achieved not only through policy but through cultural institutions that bind people to land.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined ecological harmony in Bali Nyonga, demonstrating its profound connection to cultural traditions, ancestral reverence, and communal governance. From the founding legacy of Nah Nyonga, history illustrates how institutions such as the *Lele Festival* have sustained biodiversity and ecological balance through ritual practice and the protection of sacred sites. Women's pivotal roles as cultivators and ritual participants highlight the gendered dimensions of ecological

stewardship, evincing the inseparability of culture and environment. Nevertheless, sacred forests and streams, once safeguarded by taboos, are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation, while agricultural cycles are disrupted by climate variability. Yet, Bali Nyonga continues to integrate indigenous ecological knowledge into policy frameworks, offering opportunities for the community to re-engage younger generations and restore cultural–ecological equilibrium. Practices such as forest preservation, crop rotation, and sustainable farming exemplify how biodiversity conservation is embedded in everyday life, ensuring harmony between human activity and nature. Ultimately, Bali Nyonga's experience affirms that ecological harmony is not merely a technical pursuit but a cultural project. Sustainability requires nurturing both land and life, ensuring that ancestral wisdom continues to guide modern ecological practices.

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PAPER 13

PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AS PATHWAYS FOR PRESERVING BIODIVERSITY

Adamu James Nanbak, PhD
University of Jos
jamesnanbak@gmail.com

Abstract

The global environmental crisis, marked by unprecedented rates of biodiversity loss and ecosystem destabilization, is increasingly recognized as a symptom of a fractured relationship between humanity and the biosphere. Western modernity, anchored in the Cartesian epistemology of cogito, ergo sum ("I think, therefore I am"), has propagated a dualistic worldview that bifurcates the human subject from the environment, often treating nature as an object of exploitation. In stark contrast, African philosophy, centered on the Ubuntu ontology of "I am because we are," promotes a relational framework where individual identity is defined through communal and ecological interconnectedness. This paper explores how African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Traditional Medicine (ATM) serve as vital, philosophy-driven pathways for biodiversity conservation. By examining the ontological differences between Western and African worldviews, this article argues that the integration of Ubuntu-based environmental ethics offers a sustainable alternative to the anthropocentric models currently dominating global conservation policy.

Keywords: Philosophical exploration, biodiversity, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Traditional Medicine

Introduction

The Anthropocene has brought to the fore an urgent need for paradigms that can reconcile human activity with the biological imperatives of the planet. For centuries, the trajectory of Western civilization has been steered by the Enlightenment ideal of human dominance over nature, a mindset deeply indebted to René Descartes' radical separation of res cogitans (the thinking mind) from res extensa (the material world). This ontological split has facilitated industrialization and technological progress, yet it has simultaneously fostered an environmental ethos that treats the Earth's biodiversity as an inexhaustible commodity.

Across the African continent, however, indigenous philosophies have historically maintained a different orientation. The philosophy of Ubuntu-a Zulu and Xhosa term often translated as "I am because we are"-extending the concept of community beyond the human sphere to encompass the land, the flora, and the fauna. Within this framework, biodiversity is not merely an external resource; it is an extension of the self and a vital participant in the communal existence of the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. This paper posits that the survival of global biodiversity may depend on our collective ability to bridge these worldviews, moving from an ethics of "mastery" to an ethics of "relationality."

The Ontological Clash: Cartesian Ego vs. Ubuntu Relationality

To understand why current global conservation efforts often struggle, one must first confront the intellectual divide between Western and African perspectives on the "self."

i) The Cartesian Legacy

According to Nanbak (2024), the Cartesian mandate, *cogito, ergo sum*, established the foundation of Western rationalism. By asserting that the proof of existence lies in individual thought,

Descartes inadvertently marginalized non-human entities that do not share human cognitive capacity. If the "I" is the only thing that is by virtue of its thought, then the forest, the river, and the soil become inanimate "others." This philosophy has been the bedrock of Western capitalism, creating a legal and economic architecture where nature is often relegated to the status of property. When biodiversity is framed merely as a resource to be managed, conservation becomes a matter of cost-benefit analysis rather than an existential imperative.

ii) The Ubuntu Paradigm

In contrast, Ubuntu posits that existence is inherently social and ecological. The individual does not exist in a vacuum; one's humanity is "breathed into" them by the collective. Critically, this "collective" in many African traditions includes the natural environment. The philosopher Mbiti (1990) famously argued that in African ontology, human life is intertwined with the ontological status of the environment. If the community is the vessel of life, and the environment provides the sustenance for that community, then the environment is effectively a member of the community. Therefore, harming the biodiversity of one's habitat is not just an economic error; it is a moral violation against one's own existence.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as Ecological Intelligence

Indigenous Knowledge Systems represent the practical application of this relational philosophy. They are not merely "superstitions" or "folk wisdom" but sophisticated, empirical, and long-tested ecological management strategies.

i) Sacred Groves and Protected Spaces

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the preservation of biodiversity is often achieved through the institution of sacred groves. These are patches of forest or land protected by religious taboos. In many cases, these spaces are considered the homes of ancestral spirits or

deities. By preventing human activity-such as logging, hunting, or agriculture- within these groves, indigenous communities have effectively created "biodiversity banks." These areas serve as seed dispersal centers and refuges for endangered species, acting as localized, community-managed nature reserves that operate without the need for external, state-enforced policing Nanbak (2024).

ii) Ethnobotany and the Ethics of Restraint

In his work, *Afromoalism* (Kanu, 2026), argues that Traditional Medicine (ATM) is perhaps the most significant application of IKS regarding plant biodiversity. In ATM, the collection of medicinal plants is governed by complex rituals that ensure sustainability. For example, a healer might only harvest from one side of a tree or wait for a specific season to ensure the plant's survival. This "ethnobotanical secrecy," often criticized by Western science as exclusionary, functions as a powerful conservation mechanism. By keeping the precise locations of rare medicinal species hidden, healers prevent the over-harvesting that would inevitably occur if such information were made globally accessible. This demonstrates a philosophy of "taking only what is needed," which stands in opposition to the extractive logic of commercial pharmaceutical bioprospecting.

The Role of Traditional Medicine in Biodiversity Advocacy

The integration of Traditional Medicine into formal healthcare systems is often debated, but its role in biodiversity conservation is undeniable. When a community values its traditional healers, it implicitly values the ecosystem that provides the tools for healing (Khomba, J. K. K. (2025). This is the same position upheld by Ayeni, & Aborisade, (2026). This can be better understood when we look at biodiversity as “pharmacy”.

Biodiversity as a "Pharmacy": The concept of the forest as a pharmacy is a cornerstone of African traditional health. When a

village relies on the forest for its primary healthcare, the degradation of that forest is experienced as a public health crisis. This creates a powerful local incentive for environmental stewardship. Unlike Western medical systems that rely on synthetic products derived from factories, ATM is bioregional. This necessitates the preservation of local plant diversity, as the specific indigenous plants required for healing cannot always be substituted.

Policy Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the efficacy of IKS, there is a historical tension between traditional methods and modern conservation policies. Colonial and post-colonial policies often disregarded IKS, viewing them as impediments to "modernization." However, as global biodiversity continues to collapse, international bodies (such as the IPBES) are increasingly acknowledging that indigenous-managed lands often boast higher biodiversity levels than state-managed protected areas. The pathway forward requires a policy shift that grants legal recognition to indigenous land-management practices, treating traditional healers and elders as key stakeholders in biodiversity governance (Terefe, Akpuogwu, & Lamwaka, 2026).

Moving Toward a Synthesis: A New Global Ethic

The transition from a Cartesian, individualistic model to an Ubuntu-inspired, relational model is not a call to abandon technology or science. Rather, it is a call to embed these tools within a more robust ethical framework.

i) Epistemological Pluralism: We must abandon the hierarchy that places Western empirical science above Indigenous knowledge. Both are valid, but they address different scales and human needs. IKS offers the local, place-based sensitivity that global scientific models often lack.

ii) *Rights of Nature:* The Ubuntu concept of interconnectedness provides a natural philosophical foundation for the "Rights of Nature" movement. If the human is part of a wider community, then nature must have standing within our legal and moral frameworks.
iii). Collaborative Stewardship: Conservation initiatives should shift from "top-down" impositions to "bottom-up" partnerships. By working with traditional leaders who already hold the authority to enforce ecological taboos, conservationists can achieve far more sustainable results than through coercion.

Conclusion

The divergence between the Western "I think, therefore I am" and the African "I am because we are" is not merely an academic curiosity; it is a fundamental difference in how humanity views its place in the world. The former has granted us the tools of modernity but has often left us ethically stranded, disconnected from the very ecosystems that sustain us. The latter offers a pathway back to a holistic understanding of life. By acknowledging the wisdom inherent in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Traditional Medicine, the global community can begin to heal the rupture between the human and the non-human. We must recognize that the "we" in "I am because we are" is not limited to humanity, but extends to every living thing. Biodiversity is not an optional luxury; it is the fundamental fabric of our shared existence. To preserve it is not only to save the planet—it is to preserve ourselves.

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PAPER 14

REVIVING SELECTED INDIGENOUS AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL MORES: IGBO-NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND THE PURSUIT OF THE ULTIMATE GOOD

Emmanuel Ezulofor, PhD & Drake Omonode
Department of Educational Foundations,
Faculty of Education, University of Benin, Nigeria
drakeomams@gmail.com

Abstract

This article critically reconstructs selected Indigenous African environmental mores for contemporary environmental education, with particular attention to Igbo and Nigerian traditions. It addresses two recurring problems: the romanticisation of inherited practices as inherently sustainable and the reduction of Indigenous knowledge to material that must first be validated by modern science. Using critical conceptual reconstruction, the paper distinguishes cultural meaning, empirical consequence, ethical legitimacy, and educational relevance. Igbo conceptions of Ala/Ani, sacred groves and totemic species, environmental taboos, erosion-control practices, and oral ecological apprenticeship are examined alongside comparative Nigerian and southern African scholarship. The analysis advances an eight-stage Critical Reconstruction Model through which inherited practices are identified, interpreted, philosophically evaluated, evidentially differentiated, ethically screened, participatorily adapted, integrated into curriculum, and translated into environmental action. The concept of the "ultimate good" is interpreted through African relational ethics, according to which the good life involves morally responsible participation in life-sustaining relationships

among persons, communities, generations, and the more-than-human world. Environmental sustainability is therefore partly constitutive of flourishing. The educational task is not cultural restoration, but the formation of ecologically knowledgeable, critically reflective, and morally accountable persons capable of sustaining just relationships with place and community.
Keywords: Indigenous environmental mores; Igbo environmental ethics; environmental education; African philosophy; critical reconstruction; relational flourishing; sustainability

Introduction

Environmental education increasingly recognises that ecological crises cannot be addressed by scientific information and technical competence alone. Learners also need ethical judgement, cultural interpretation, historical awareness, participation, and the capacity to connect knowledge with responsible action. Contemporary evidence shows that environmental education can influence knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and behaviour, while recent curriculum guidance treats sustainability learning as cognitive, socio-emotional, ethical, and action-oriented rather than as the transfer of environmental facts alone (van de Wetering et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

Indigenous environmental traditions are relevant to this task because they often join ecological observation to moral rules, communal authority, ritual meaning, and place-based learning. Their educational use, however, is philosophically difficult. One danger is assimilation, in which Indigenous knowledge is admitted only after translation into scientific categories. Another is romanticisation, in which inherited customs are presumed to be ecologically sound and ethically legitimate because they are Indigenous. A defensible approach must avoid both errors.

This article therefore asks: how can selected Indigenous African environmental mores be reconstructed for contemporary

environmental education without erasing cultural meaning, suspending evidential scrutiny, or protecting unjust authority? The analysis focuses on selected traditions, with Igbo-Nigerian material providing the principal contextual frame alongside comparative evidence from other African settings. These cases are not treated as expressions of a single African worldview, but as philosophically illustrative practices within a plural and historically changing field. Critical conceptual reconstruction guides the inquiry: cultural meaning is interpreted first, empirical claims are assessed according to their type, ethical legitimacy is examined, and educational adaptation follows only where these conditions are satisfied.

Conceptual and Philosophical Framework

Environmental mores are socially authoritative norms that prescribe or prohibit conduct toward land, water, forests, species, and communal resources. They should be distinguished from beliefs, practices, knowledge systems, and institutions. A belief may explain why a forest is sacred; a more prohibits entry or tree felling; a practice enacts the prohibition; a knowledge system gives the rule meaning; and an institution allocates authority and sanctions. This distinction matters because contemporary education may preserve a principle of restraint without reproducing every metaphysical explanation or social sanction that historically sustained it.

Critical reconstruction therefore differs from restoration. Restoration seeks to recover an earlier form; reconstruction asks what remains defensible under changed ecological, social, religious, and political conditions. The relevant criteria are contextual intelligibility, empirical adequacy where empirical claims are involved, ethical legitimacy, ecological consequence, community authority, inclusiveness, safety, adaptability, and

educational value. No single criterion is absolute. Scientific evidence does not erase sacred meaning, but sacred meaning cannot shield empirical claims about toxicity, health, or ecological effect from scrutiny. Community authority deserves recognition, but it does not override dignity, safety, or the voice of affected members (Ludwig et al., 2024; Parke & Hikuroa, 2024).

The philosophical basis of this approach is relational rather than individualistic. African moral thought has often interpreted personhood, obligation, dignity, vitality, and the common good through relationships. Metz (2022) develops communality in terms of morally valuable relationships of identity and solidarity, while Molefe and Maraganedzha (2023) show how African religious moral philosophy links vitality, moral community, and normative obligation. In environmental thought, unhu/ubuntu has likewise been developed as an ethic of connectedness, interdependence, harmony, and intergenerational coexistence (Chemhuru, 2024). These positions are not identical, and none should be treated as the African view. Their shared philosophical value lies in challenging the assumption that moral agents first exist as isolated individuals and only later acquire environmental duties.

Relationality supports three connected principles. First, stewardship limits appropriation by linking access to duties of care and regeneration. Second, intergenerational responsibility treats ecological goods and knowledge as inheritances held in trust rather than resources to be exhausted by the present. Third, environmental value is plural: land and species may have livelihood, ecological, relational, cultural, sacred, and intrinsic significance. Sustainability decisions become ethically distorted when only short-term economic value is recognised (Pascual et al., 2023).

Igbo-Nigerian Environmental Mores in African Perspective

Within Igbo environmental thought, environmental responsibility

is embedded in moral and cosmological institutions rather than expressed solely as an abstract conservation principle. One important example is the moral significance of Ala or Ani, commonly associated in Igbo thought with earth, fertility, land, ancestry, and moral order. In this framework, land is not simply property. Conduct toward soil, crops, boundaries, burial places, and communal territory acquires moral significance because human life is understood as dependent upon and accountable to an encompassing order. For contemporary environmental education, the philosophical significance of Ala does not depend on requiring learners to affirm its metaphysics. Rather, it invites reflection on what follows when land is regarded as morally considerable and socially inherited rather than as an indefinitely exploitable commodity (Nkama et al., 2022).

A second example concerns sacred groves and totemic relations. Recent empirical research across twenty-seven communities in Enugu State documented nine sacred groves and culturally significant plant species protected through customary beliefs, access rules, and symbolic relationships. The groves displayed high plant diversity, while species such as kola, oil palm, iroko, and ogirisi carried strong cultural salience. The study is important not because sacredness automatically guarantees conservation, but because it demonstrates that cultural authority can create practical limits on extraction and preserve ecological refugia under community governance (Nwafor et al., 2026). Comparable research in southwestern Nigeria shows that sacred groves can support biodiversity, regeneration, biomass, and carbon storage, while their survival still depends on governance, land pressure, and community support (Adeyanju et al., 2022; Onyekwelu et al., 2024).

A third cluster of Igbo practices concerns taboos, rest periods, and rules governing species, places, and methods of use. Nkama et al.

(2022) report practices that include restrictions around sacred spaces and species, as well as the planting of ogirisi (Newbouldia laevis) and bamboo in erosion-prone areas. Such examples reveal two different kinds of environmental wisdom. Some practices embody empirical knowledge acquired through long observation, while others create moral restraint through religious sanction. Critical reconstruction must not collapse the two. A prohibition may have ecological value even when its original supernatural sanction is not publicly shared today; conversely, a culturally powerful prohibition may become maladaptive if ecological conditions change. The educational question is therefore what principle can be responsibly retained: protection of vulnerable sites, seasonal restraint, erosion control, pollution avoidance, or limits on destructive harvesting.

A fourth example is ecological apprenticeship. Farming, fishing, herbal practice, and forest knowledge are often transmitted through observation, oral instruction, repeated participation, correction, and accountability to experienced custodians. Nwafor et al. (2026) found oral and informal transmission to remain a dominant means of preserving knowledge about sacred species and groves in the communities studied. This mode of learning is philosophically significant because it treats knowledge as situated competence rather than detached information. Environmental education can learn from this structure through supervised field observation, community mapping, ecological monitoring, oral history, and practical restoration. Yet apprenticeship also requires ethical safeguards because access may be restricted by gender, lineage, status, or religion, and some knowledge may be legitimately confidential.

Taken together, these Igbo-Nigerian cases show that sacred groves, taboos, and apprenticeship are more than conservation techniques. They function as moral-ecological pedagogies that combine a view

of reality, a norm of conduct, an institution of authority, and a method of transmission. Their contemporary educational value depends on distinguishing these elements so that ecological usefulness is not mistaken for moral legitimacy and cultural respect does not become uncritical reproduction.

The Critical Reconstruction Model

The Critical Reconstruction Model comprises eight interrelated stages. Stage 1, cultural identification, documents the practice, local terminology, knowledge holders, location, present status, and boundaries of disclosure. Stage 2, contextual interpretation, reconstructs its historical, linguistic, cosmological, ecological, and institutional meanings. Stage 3, philosophical evaluation, identifies its conception of personhood, value, obligation, authority, knowledge, and the good. Stage 4, differentiated evidential dialogue, separates empirical, moral, historical, metaphysical, and symbolic claims so that each is assessed by appropriate standards. Stage 5, ethical screening, examines dignity, equality, consent, safety, access, burden, benefit, and the treatment of dissent. Stage 6, participatory adaptation, determines with authorised knowledge holders and affected groups what should be retained, revised, restricted, or rejected. Stage 7, curricular integration, translates the reconstructed principle into learning outcomes, content, pedagogy, assessment, and teacher support. Stage 8, environmental action, tests learning through stewardship, monitoring, restoration, advocacy, or community problem-solving.

The model is iterative. New evidence, community objection, ecological change, or educational experience may require a return to an earlier stage. Four decision rules are especially important. Empirical claims remain answerable to proportionate evidence and safety. Metaphysical or sacred meanings should be interpreted rather than dismissed merely because they are not experimentally testable. Rights and public safety limit customary authority.

Finally, restricted knowledge may remain outside the curriculum without being judged inferior. The model therefore makes non-inclusion a legitimate outcome when disclosure, safety, rights, or educational relevance cannot be justified.

Implications for Environmental Education

The first implication is epistemological. Indigenous communities should be treated as producers, interpreters, and governors of knowledge, not merely as sources of examples for a scientific curriculum. Epistemic pluralism does not mean that all claims are equally valid; it means that claims are classified before they are judged, and that both community knowledge and scientific knowledge remain open to appropriate forms of criticism.

The second implication concerns curriculum and pedagogy. Learners should begin from locally authorised environmental histories, place names, species relations, customary rules, protected spaces, and experiences of ecological change. They can compare local seasonal indicators with meteorological records, customary water rules with hydrological evidence, or harvesting restrictions with regeneration data. The purpose is not to announce a winner between knowledge systems, but to understand meaning, method, uncertainty, and consequence. Place-based and community-engaged approaches can strengthen this work, especially where environmental injustice has shaped local experience, as shown in research on Ogoniland (Lele, 2023).

The third implication concerns teacher preparation and governance. Teachers need competence in environmental ethics, Indigenous knowledge, participatory inquiry, cultural pluralism, safeguarding, and community partnership. Agreements should address consent, attribution, recording, storage, reuse, benefit sharing, and withdrawal. Community participants should influence interpretation and boundaries of disclosure rather than being

invited merely to authenticate content designed by others. Such safeguards are central to avoiding tokenism and renewed knowledge extraction (Riley et al., 2024; Stein et al., 2024).

Environmental Sustainability and the Ultimate Good

Within the relational strand of African moral philosophy adopted here, the "ultimate good" is understood as flourishing achieved through morally worthy relationships and responsible participation in a shared moral world. The good life is therefore not exhausted by preference satisfaction, private happiness, or material accumulation. It includes the quality of a person's relationships, the cultivation of morally admirable personhood, participation in community, and the preservation of conditions in which life can be sustained with dignity. Metz's relational ethics interprets moral value through relationships of identity and solidarity, while African accounts of personhood and vitality locate moral development within networks of dependence, responsibility, and shared life (Metz, 2022; Molefe & Maraganedzha, 2023).

From this perspective, flourishing is relational in at least four senses. It is interpersonal because a good life requires relationships that respect agency and support mutual care. It is communal because institutions and shared practices shape the conditions under which persons can become responsible members of a moral world. It is intergenerational because present conduct inherits obligations from the past and creates conditions for descendants. It is ecological because soil, water, climate, species, and habitats are not external scenery to human life; they constitute the material and symbolic conditions through which livelihood, memory, culture, health, and future agency remain possible. Chemhuru's (2024) environmental development of unhu/ubuntu is especially relevant here because it extends relational ethics toward harmonious and intergenerational coexistence within the wider community of life.

This account does not imply that community is always morally prior to the individual, or that every traditional practice promotes the good. A community can be oppressive; a sacred rule can be exclusionary; a tradition can be ecologically mistaken. The philosophical force of relational flourishing is therefore critical rather than conservative. Relationships contribute to the good only when they support dignity, reciprocity, responsible agency, ecological integrity, and the fair distribution of benefits and burdens. Harmony cannot mean silencing dissent, and continuity cannot mean preserving inherited authority unchanged.

Environmental sustainability is consequently not merely an instrument for achieving the ultimate good. It is partly constitutive of it. A society cannot plausibly claim to flourish if its prosperity depends on poisoned water, eroded soils, destroyed habitats, environmental injustice, or the transfer of severe ecological vulnerability to future generations. Environmental education contributes to the ultimate good when it forms persons capable of knowing ecological systems, judging competing values, restraining destructive desire, deliberating with others, and acting to sustain just relationships among people, communities, generations, and the more-than-human world. The ultimate educational aim is therefore not cultural revival for its own sake, but responsible personhood within a living moral-ecological community.

Objections and Limitations

Several limitations define the scope of this argument. Indigenous traditions are plural, changing, and internally contested; neither authenticity nor antiquity establishes sustainability. Customary environmental rules may also distribute authority and burdens unjustly. Ecological benefit cannot justify exclusion, coercion, or unsafe practice, and equitable conservation requires meaningful participation by affected people (Dawson et al., 2021). In addition, the study is conceptual and does not empirically test the Critical

Reconstruction Model or claim to represent the full diversity of African traditions. Future research should use participatory case studies, curriculum trials, and community-led evaluation in particular Nigerian and African settings. These limitations reinforce the central requirement that educational engagement with Indigenous environmental mores remain open to interpretation, evidence, ethical scrutiny, participation, and revision.

Conclusion

Selected Indigenous African environmental mores can enrich environmental education when they are approached as philosophically significant systems of meaning, norm, authority, practice, and transmission. Igbo-Nigerian traditions concerning land ethics, sacred groves, totemic species, taboos, erosion-control practices, and ecological apprenticeship demonstrate how moral restraint and environmental responsibility can be cultivated while remaining open to critical examination. The Critical Reconstruction Model provides a structured basis for curricular inclusion by requiring contextual interpretation, differentiated evidence, ethical legitimacy, participation, and educational relevance. African relational philosophy also clarifies the meaning of the ultimate good within this framework: ecological sustainability is not simply useful for human flourishing, but is partly constitutive of the relationships and conditions through which dignified communal and intergenerational life becomes possible.

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PAPER 15

SUSTAINING BIODIVERSITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN IGBO CULTURAL AND NATURAL LANDSCAPE THROUGH ECO-SPIRITUALITY

Evaristus Ifeanacho, PhD
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
eo.ifeanacho@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Biodiversity is crucial to achieving ecological balance, food security, cultural heritage, sustainable development, and overall human survival. Nonetheless, the Igbo cultural landscape of Southeastern Nigeria faces increasing ecological pressures, resulting from deforestation, soil erosion, urbanization, climate change, overexploitation of natural resources, and weak environmental governance. These ecological pressures continue to threaten sustainable development in the area. The research argues that biodiversity needs to be backed by eco-spirituality, understood here as a religious and ethical vision that recognizes creation as a gift, human beings as responsible stewards, and care for the natural world as inseparable from justice and concern for future generations. Such eco-spiritual values embedded in Igbo traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam can inspire environmentally responsible behavior and strengthen biodiversity conservation efforts in Igboland. The research employs a qualitative methodology based on secondary sources. Findings reveal that the Igbo traditional societies historically preserved biodiversity through sacred groves, totems, taboos, and religious rituals that discouraged environmental destruction. It concludes that integrating eco-spirituality into environmental education, governance, and community participation can significantly enhance sustainable development outcomes in Igboland. The

researcher recommends stronger collaboration among government institutions, religious bodies, local communities, and environmental organizations in promoting eco-spiritual environmental ethics.

Keywords: Biodiversity, sustainable development, Igbo landscape, eco-spirituality, environmental ethics

Introduction

Biodiversity constitutes one of the most important foundations for human survival and sustainable development. It refers to the variety of life found within ecosystems, including plants, animals, microorganisms, genetic resources, and the relationships that sustain them. It is indispensable for food production, soil fertility, water regulation, climate stability, and human health. It is also connected with the cultural and spiritual identity of communities.

Igboland is a biodiversity-rich area due to its diverse ecological zones, including rainforests, wetlands, mangroves, and freshwater ecosystems. These ecological resources contribute significantly to economic development, agriculture, tourism, and social well-being. Despite this ecological wealth, the Igbo landscape faces severe biodiversity decline. In fact, currently, the Igbo cultural landscape of Southeastern Nigeria is experiencing serious ecological changes. It is bedeviled by ecological pressures arising from sand excavation, agricultural intensification, expanding urban settlements, industrialization, deforestation, road construction, waste accumulation, erosion, among others. These have placed pressure on natural habitats. The destruction of vegetation and wetlands has also constantly posed a threat to local food systems and equally weakens the capacity of the land to maintain soil fertility, absorb water, and support diverse forms of life. The consequences include declining agricultural productivity, food insecurity, climate vulnerability, and increased poverty levels. Biodiversity loss also undermines the achievement of sustainable development goals in Igboland.

These challenges cannot be addressed only through technological solutions. Environmental policies may fail when they are disconnected from the moral convictions, cultural practices, and communal institutions of the people. The Holy See has emphasized that Conventional environmental policies in Igboland have often emphasized scientific and technological approaches while neglecting indigenous ecological knowledge and spiritual dimensions of environmental conservation. However, many African traditional societies, and indeed Igbo traditional society, historically protected nature through spiritual beliefs and ethical systems that promoted harmonious relationships between humans and the environment. In the same vein, sustainable development must place the human person at the centre and serve the common good rather than promote economic growth detached from social and ecological responsibility (Caccia, 2023b). Eco-spirituality emerges from this understanding of the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the sacred.

This article explores how eco-spirituality can reposition biodiversity conservation for sustainable development in Igboland. It argues that integrating spiritual ecology and indigenous environmental ethics into contemporary environmental governance can strengthen biodiversity conservation efforts and encourage sustainable living.

Conceptual Clarifications

Biodiversity

Biodiversity has to do with the variability among living organisms from all ecological complexes, including terrestrial, marine, and aquatic ecosystems. It encompasses genetic diversity, species diversity, and ecosystem diversity. Biodiversity contributes to ecosystem resilience and provides ecological services necessary for human survival. According to ecological scholars, biodiversity

supports ecosystem multi-functionality, enhances resilience to environmental disturbances, and sustains human livelihoods. In Igboland, biodiversity resources include tropical forests, wildlife species, wetlands, medicinal plants, and marine ecosystems. These resources support agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and traditional medicine. However, unsustainable exploitation and environmental degradation continue to threaten these ecological assets.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development refers to development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept emphasizes the integration of economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. Sustainable development recognizes that environmental sustainability is essential for long-term human well-being. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the importance of biodiversity conservation in achieving poverty reduction, food security, climate action, and ecosystem protection. In Igboland, sustainable development requires effective management of natural resources and environmental systems.

Eco-Spirituality

Eco-spirituality is an environmental philosophy that recognizes the sacredness of nature and promotes ethical relationships between humans and the environment. It combines ecological consciousness with spiritual values that encourage environmental stewardship, reverence for life, and sustainable living. Eco-spirituality is rooted in the belief that humans are interconnected with all forms of life. African indigenous religions, Christianity, Islam, and other spiritual traditions contain ecological teachings that promote environmental care and moral responsibility toward nature. In traditional Igbo communities, sacred forests, rivers, mountains, and animal species were often protected through spiritual beliefs and taboos.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theory of deep ecology and eco-spirituality. Deep ecology emphasizes the intrinsic value of all living organisms irrespective of their usefulness to humans. The theory rejects anthropocentric views that place humans above nature and instead advocates ecological equality and environmental harmony. Deep ecology provides a philosophical foundation for biodiversity conservation by promoting respect for ecosystems and non-human life forms. Eco-spirituality complements this theory by introducing moral and spiritual obligations toward environmental protection. Together, these theories emphasize ecological balance, sustainability, and ethical environmental behavior. The relevance of these theories to the Igbo cultural and natural landscape lies in their ability to reconnect environmental conservation with indigenous worldviews and cultural values. Traditional ecological knowledge in many communities in Igboland already reflects principles of deep ecology through communal respect for sacred forests, rivers, and species.

A brisk exposé of Sustainable Development

According to Cassell's (1968) Latin dictionary, the verb sustain derives from the verb *sustinere,* meaning to hold up, sustain, support, among others. The noun form sustainable came to be included in the English dictionary in 1987 (Newton and Freyfogle, 2005). Further still, Carlowitz in his *Sylvicultura Oeconomica oder Anweisung zur wilden Baumzucht* (Chart 1), published in 1713, presented the novel idea of n*achhaltend* or *nachhaltig* (sustainable), pointing to the pillars of ecology-nature, of economic and of social ethics (Pisani, 2006). As such, the term sustainable can be conceptualized as a basis, as an umbrella term, that supports and includes the idea of sustainability and sustainable development, worrying about the future existence of natural resources to support the continuation of human life as its foundation (Feil and Schreiber, 2017).

On the other hand, sustainability has different meanings in diverse areas of its application. For Cavalcanti (2003), sustainability "means the possibility of obtaining conditions continuously equal to or greater than life for a group of people and their successors in a given ecosystem." Sachs (1997) understands "sustainability as a dynamic concept that encompasses a process of change, and the concept is subdivided into five dimensions: social, economic, ecological, geographical and cultural." Lester wrote that "a sustainable society is one that can meet their needs without compromising the chances of survival of future generations" (Brown, 1980; Andrade, 2004). From the foregoing, "a sustainable society is one that can meet their needs without compromising the chances of survival of future generations" (Brown, 1980).

'Development' is a concept which is contested both theoretically and politically, and is inherently both complex and ambiguous … Recently [it] has taken on the limited meaning of the practice of development agencies, especially in aiming at reducing poverty and the Millennium Development Goals (Thomas, 2004: 1, 2). The term "development" has various meanings to different people and can be explained in different contexts. "Development should be seen as a progress towards complex goals such as the elimination of poverty, the provision of employment, the reduction of inequality and the guarantee of human rights."(Abuiyada, 2018:115) In fact, development has diverse meanings, and most often it is understood in terms of economic growth. Consequently, it is measured only in terms of annual increase in per-capita income or gross national product without paying attention to how it is distributed and the level of people's participation in effective growth (Mahmoud, 1991). According to Seers (1972), "development means the conditions for realization of the human personality. Its evaluation must therefore take into account three linked criteria: where there has been a reduction in (1) poverty, (2) unemployment, (3) inequality".

Further still, development is also understood in the words of Pearson (2000) as "an improvement qualitative, quantitative or both - in the use of available resources". It is most often viewed through the prism of economic, social and political improvement in the life of a nation made manifest in environmental and socio-political transformation. The indices of such transformation are evident in better health care, alleviation of poverty, food security, housing, education and eradication of gender inequality. Pearson also asserts that development does not refer to one particular perspective on social, political and economic betterment. Instead, it is a hybrid term for a myriad of strategies adopted to achieve socio-economic and environmental transformation from current to desired states. Sustainable development should 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This involves integrating three 'pillars' of sustainability: environmental, economic and social.

Biodiversity and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development involves meeting present needs without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It therefore requires the integration of economic prosperity, social justice, cultural vitality, and environmental protection. Biodiversity is not an optional addition to development; it is one of its essential foundations. Agriculture, for example, depends upon fertile soil, pollinators, genetic diversity, water availability, and healthy ecosystems. The loss of biodiversity can reduce agricultural productivity and increase vulnerability to pests, drought, flooding, and disease. Forests and wetlands regulate water, protect soil, provide habitats, and support local livelihoods. When these systems are destroyed, the costs are eventually transferred to households, governments, and future generations. Pope Francis warns that environmental assessments often focus on soil, water, and air while neglecting the effects of development projects on biodiversity. Roads, plantations, dams, and urban

expansion can divide habitats and prevent species from migrating or reproducing. He also identifies biological corridors as one possible way of reducing the ecological damage caused by development projects (Francis, 2015, no. 35).

Biodiversity conservation therefore requires careful planning before the implementation of projects. Environmental impact assessments should include not only economic benefits but also the effects of a project on forests, wetlands, native species, agricultural systems, and the cultural relationship between communities and their land. Areas that contain rare species, water reserves, or particularly rich ecosystems require special protection (Francis, 2015, no. 37).

Eco-Spiritual Resources in Igbo Culture

Some elements in Igbo culture help in the enhancement of eco-spirituality. They include:

i. Communal responsibility

The traditional social life of the Igbo people strongly stress on communal belonging, mutual assistance, and shared responsibility. The individual is better understood within the context of family relationships, religious community, kindred, village, market; which eventually trickles down to the larger society. This communal orientation can provide a foundation for biodiversity conservation. Following from that, forests, streams, farmlands, wetlands, and communal spaces are not treated only as private assets. They also possess public and intergenerational significance. Based on that, community institutions can establish rules for protecting water sources, limiting destructive activities, maintaining communal forests, and restoring degraded land. It demonstrates a culture of care, encounter, and solidarity, which is essential for sustainable development because it counters individualism, egocentrism, and consumerism (Caccia, 2023). Such communal solidarity can therefore become an ecological virtue when it leads people to accept limits on personal gain for the

sake of the common good. On that note, Benedict XVI (2008) notes that creation is harmed "where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property, and we use it for ourselves alone. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves."

ii. Reverence for life and the sacredness of creation

In the Igbo traditional milieu, religious consciousness plays a very significant role. The natural world is anchored in a spiritual realm. Even though the traditional religious beliefs and practices are evaluated carefully in the light of Christian revelation and sound ecological knowledge, there is always the awareness that land, water, trees, animals, and human life should not be treated with contempt.

However, it is important to note that Christian eco-spirituality does not require an uncritical return to pre-Christian religious practices. That will bespeak of Neopaganism. Rather, it purifies and deepens the positive moral intuition that creation deserves respect. The Christian doctrine of creation affirms that the world belongs ultimately to God and that human beings are accountable for the manner in which they use it. This provides a background for protecting biodiversity while avoiding the relapse into the worship of nature.

iii. Intergenerational responsibility

The Igbo understanding of land as inheritance can be developed into an explicit ecological ethic. Land is not only what one receives from ancestors; it is also what one must transmit to descendants. Intergenerational responsibility governs every aspect of Igbo land possession, ensuring that the current custodians preserve the heritage for their descendants. Since it is handed over from one generation to another, adequate caution has to be brought to bear so that every generation must handle it responsibly. This perspective

challenges development practices that produce immediate profits while leaving future generations with polluted water, infertile soil, eroded land, and destroyed habitats. Protecting biodiversity is therefore an expression of justice between generations. Present communities have no moral right to consume the ecological inheritance of the future. Sustainable development requires a long-term view that values continuity, restraint, and responsible planning.

Threats to Biodiversity in the Igbo cultural landscape

The biodiversity in the Igbo natural landscape is under serious threat from multiple environmental and anthropogenic factors. Some of the major causes of biodiversity decline include:

I. Deforestation

Deforestation is a major environmental challenge in Igboland. Forests are cleared for timber harvesting, road construction, urbanization, and estate development. The loss of forests threatens wildlife habitats and contributes to climate change. Deforestation contributes to habitat destruction, loss of wildlife species, soil erosion, and climate change. It leads to population declines, extinctions, and loss of genetic diversity. It also disrupts the ecological interactions and processes that sustain biodiversity, such as pollination, seed dispersal, nutrient cycling, and carbon sequestration. For example, deforestation can reduce the availability of food and nesting sites for pollinators, such as bees, butterflies, and birds, which in turn can affect the reproduction and survival of many plant species (https://www.acorecycling.com/the-impact-of-deforestation-on-biodiversity/).

ii. Erosion and unregulated development

Soil erosion is intensified by the removal of vegetation, poor drainage, road construction, sand mining, and uncontrolled building. The destruction of natural drainage systems and wetlands

increases flooding and accelerates the loss of fertile soil. Oshim, O. F. (2023) observed that in South-Eastern Nigeria, particularly in Anambra State, gully erosion presents a serious environmental challenge. With over 100 gully sites in the state, only about 30 have received control measures but are still not fully under control. Development planning must protect wetlands, waterways, forest fragments, and natural drainage channels. Construction projects should be required to demonstrate that they will not cause unacceptable damage to biodiversity or increase ecological vulnerability. Where ecological damage is unavoidable, mitigation, restoration, and compensation should be clearly defined and effectively implemented. Mezie and Nwajuaku (2020) maintain that gully erosion has led to significant loss of arable land, forests, and fertility. In certain cases, houses and human lives have been lost.

iii. Pollution and waste

Urbanization has continued to attract hordes of people to major cities like Onitsha, Awka, Nnewi, Enugu, etc., in search of greener pastures. This has resulted in a tremendous increase in the volume of waste generated. Since there is not yet an advanced method of waste management, the waste is often recklessly dumped at various corners, thereby polluting the environment with unfriendly smell. More still, plastic waste, untreated sewage, agricultural chemicals, industrial effluents, and indiscriminate dumping threaten water bodies, soil organisms, livestock, crops, and human health. Pollution also reveals a spiritual problem: the tendency to treat places and people as disposable. Eco-spirituality challenges this "throwaway" mentality by cultivating gratitude, moderation, repair, reuse, recycling, and responsibility. A clean environment should be understood not simply as a matter of public appearance but as a moral obligation to protect life.

iv. Climate Change

Climate change has intensified desertification, flooding, drought, and erosion in Southeastern Nigeria. These environmental changes disrupt ecosystems, reduce agricultural productivity, and threaten biodiversity conservation efforts. Rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns affect agricultural productivity and species survival. "For human beings… to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins" further still, "to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God" (Bartholomew 1, 1997).

v. Urbanization and Industrialization

Rapid population growth and urban expansion increase pressure on natural ecosystems. Wetlands and forests are often converted into residential and industrial areas.

vi. Illegal trade on wildlife

Poaching and illegal wildlife trade threaten endangered species. Weak enforcement of environmental laws allows illegal exploitation of wildlife resources.

vii. Poverty and Unsustainable Resource Use

Poverty compels many communities to rely heavily on natural resources for survival. Unsustainable farming, fishing, and hunting practices contribute to biodiversity loss.

Eco-Spirituality and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge in Igbo cultural landscape

Traditional African societies developed ecological ethics that promoted environmental sustainability long before modern

conservation frameworks emerged. Indigenous ecological knowledge systems in Nigeria often viewed nature as sacred and interconnected with human existence.

i. Sacred Groves and Forest Conservation

Many Nigerian communities preserved sacred groves dedicated to deities and ancestral spirits. These sacred forests served as biodiversity reservoirs because hunting, logging, and farming were prohibited within them. Sacred groves contributed significantly to the preservation of medicinal plants, wildlife species, and forest ecosystems. Moreover, sacred forests were protected because they were believed to be dwelling places of deities or ancestral spirits. Such traditional ecological practices promoted controlled exploitation of resources, respect for sacred ecosystems, communal stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility.

ii. Totemism and Species Protection

Certain animals and plants were regarded as sacred and were, as such, preserved due to spiritual significance or symbolic attachment within various Nigerian cultures. Communities protected these species through taboos and cultural prohibitions. Totemism discouraged indiscriminate killing of animals and contributed to biodiversity conservation.

iii. Traditional Religious Ethics

African traditional religion emphasized communal harmony with nature. Environmental destruction was often interpreted as a violation of spiritual and moral laws. Rituals, festivals, and ancestral worship reinforced environmental responsibility and ecological balance.

iv. Indigenous Agricultural Practices

Traditional farming systems such as shifting cultivation, mixed

cropping, and agroforestry promoted soil fertility and biodiversity preservation. These practices reflected ecological wisdom developed through generations of interaction with the environment.

Eco-spirituality as a framework for sustainable development

Eco-spirituality can contribute significantly to sustainable development in Igbo land through the following dimensions:

i. Promotion of Environmental Ethics

According to Elechi (2020), the sustenance of the environment has a compelling ethical dimension. It simply means the need to preserve the environment for the future. This means that there is a natural moral urge towards self-preservation since the environment is the spatio-temporal base of human existence and coexistence. According to Alawa (2016), the environment influences how people live their lives and how societies develop. For this reason, people's progress, economic development, and the environment are closely linked. We therefore need to explore, tend to, and protect our environment in order to live happily. To that end, there is no gainsaying that promoting environmental ethics in Igboland requires blending indigenous cultural values, faith-based doctrines, and rigorous institutional enforcement. Eco-spirituality fosters moral responsibility toward nature by encouraging individuals and communities to view the environment as sacred rather than merely economic resources for exploitation. In the Nigerian context, it requires embracing indigenous Nigerian worldviews that traditionally revere nature through sacred groves, taboos, and communal land stewardship.

ii. Community Participation in Conservation

Spiritual and cultural values can motivate local communities to participate actively in biodiversity conservation programs. Community-based conservation approaches are often more sustainable because they incorporate local beliefs and indigenous knowledge.

iii. Climate Change Mitigation

Eco-spiritual lifestyles encourage sustainable consumption patterns, afforestation, environmental sanitation, and ecological stewardship, all of which contribute to climate change mitigation.

iv. Strengthening Environmental Education

Integrating eco-spiritual principles into educational curricula can enhance environmental awareness and cultivate ecological responsibility among young people. Francis (2015, n.111) maintained that ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.

v. Policy and Governance Reform

Environmental policies often do not take cognizance of the cultural milieu where the policies are to be implemented. In fact, such policies can become more effective when they incorporate cultural and spiritual dimensions of conservation. Recognizing indigenous ecological knowledge in policy formulation can strengthen biodiversity governance.

Religion and Environmental Sustainability in Igboland

Religion remains a powerful social institution in Nigeria and particularly among the Igbo people. Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion influence the values, behaviors, and worldviews of Igbo people. Religious institutions therefore possess enormous potential for promoting environmental sustainability. Christian theology emphasizes stewardship of creation. The biblical account of creation in Genesis portrays humans as caretakers rather than exploiters of nature.

Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* advocates ecological responsibility and condemns environmental destruction. The encyclical calls for an "integral ecology" that connects environmental, social, and spiritual well-being. Summarily, in the words of Francis (1997) integral ecology emphasizes the fact that human beings are deeply connected with all of creation. When we mistreat nature, we also mistreat human beings. At the same time, each creature has its own intrinsic value that must be respected. It further refers to the fact that "everything is closely related" and that "today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis" (*Laudato sì*, n.137). In fact, Christian eco-spirituality promotes stewardship, justice, moderation in consumption, care for future generations, and respect for God's creation.

Christian teachings on stewardship emphasize humanity's responsibility to care for creation. Similarly, Islamic environmental ethics promote moderation, conservation, and responsible use of natural resources. African traditional religion reinforces ecological interconnectedness and reverence for nature. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations can contribute to biodiversity conservation through environmental advocacy, tree-planting campaigns, climate education, and sustainable development initiatives. Interfaith collaboration on environmental issues can also strengthen national conservation efforts.

Challenges to the Adoption of Eco-Spirituality in Igboland

Despite its potential benefits, several factors hinder the adoption of eco-spirituality in the Igbo cultural and natural landscape:

1. Westernization and modernization have weakened traditional ecological practices.
2. Religious extremism and doctrinal conflicts sometimes discourage indigenous environmental traditions.
3. Poverty and unemployment encourage unsustainable exploitation of natural resources.
4. Weak environmental education limits public understanding

of ecological ethics.

5. Government policies often marginalize indigenous knowledge systems.

Addressing these challenges requires policy reforms, public enlightenment, and inclusive environmental governance.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for repositioning biodiversity conservation through eco-spirituality in Igbo land:

1. Government should integrate indigenous ecological knowledge into national environmental policies and biodiversity conservation strategies.
2. Environmental education curricula should include eco-spiritual and indigenous environmental ethics.
3. Religious institutions should promote environmental stewardship through sermons, teachings, and community programs.
4. Sacred groves and culturally protected ecosystems should receive legal recognition and conservation support.
5. Local communities should be empowered through participatory environmental governance.
6. Environmental agencies should collaborate with traditional rulers and faith-based organizations in biodiversity conservation campaigns.
7. Sustainable livelihood programs should be introduced to reduce pressure on natural resources.

Conclusion

From the foregoing exposition, it is obvious that sustaining biodiversity in the Igbo cultural landscape requires some basic elements which include: the integration of ecological science, cultural wisdom, ethical responsibility, Christian spirituality, and effective governance. Indeed, biodiversity is part of the common home on which human life depends, and it equally serves as the bedrock on which communities develop their identity and future.

Biodiversity conservation remains essential for sustainable development in Igbo land. However, conventional environmental approaches alone may not adequately address the ecological crisis confronting the Igbo cultural and natural landscape.

Eco-spirituality offers an alternative framework that integrates ecological consciousness with moral and spiritual responsibility toward nature. It advocates moderation in consumption, responsibility toward future generations, and practical care for the earth. These values resonate with positive elements of Igbo communal culture, including shared responsibility, respect for inheritance, mutual aid, and concern for the continuity of the community. Traditional Igbo communities historically conserved biodiversity through sacred groves, totems, taboos, and indigenous ecological ethics. These practices demonstrate the relevance of eco-spirituality in environmental sustainability. By repositioning biodiversity conservation through eco-spiritual principles, Igboland can promote environmental protection, climate resilience, social harmony, and sustainable development.

All in all, the future of sustainable development in Igboland will depend greatly on whether people and institutions can champion the course of ecological stewardship and intergenerational responsibility. Such a disposition will minimize exploitation of nature founded on an egoistic spirit of mere consumption. Eco-spirituality can help make that transformation possible. In fact, the integration of indigenous ecological knowledge, religious ethics, and modern environmental governance can foster a holistic approach to sustainability. In this way, eco-spirituality represents not only a cultural heritage but also a practical strategy for achieving environmental sustainability and sustainable development in the Igbo cultural landscape.

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PAPER 10

ASSESSMENT OF PRACTICE OF ISLAMIC MONETHEISM (TAWHID) AMONG TIV MUSLIMS IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

Ahmed Musa Ph.D
Arabic and Islamic Studies Department
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria.
talkahmedmusa 123@gmail.com

Abstract

Islamic Monotheism known as tawhid is foundational concept that defines Islamic faith. It is with it that all righteous performance of a Muslim is accepted while the absent of it nullifies and invalidates it. It represents the unwavering belief in oneness of Allah and encompasses principles of worship, devotion, and ethical conducts prescribed in the glorious Qur'an and exemplified by the life of prophet Muhammed (PBUH). Islam as a substantive religion that deals with all aspect of life with the total submission to the will of Allah which tenets also negates the concept of polytheism' or heterogeneous belief in any form of divinity. This paper aimed at looking into the various beliefs and cultural practices aside the Islamic monotheism (Islamic faith) in Tiv ,with the view of bringing out the real concept of Islamic monotheism (Tawhid) i.e oneness of Allah as the major priority from the perspective of The Qu'ran, Hadith. The study reveals that there is a prevalence of religious heterogeneity among many Tiv Muslims and impact affects them negatively of which if a continuous awareness and campaign against these beliefs is not carried out, this phenomenon will continue among these Muslims. Hence this research work is a possible outcome and solutions. This paper gives brief history of the Tiv tribe including their population and further identifies and analyzes the syncretism nature of practice of Islam among the Tiv tribe. The research employs a historical and descriptive approach

to analyze the collected data focusing on reconstructing and interpreting the past to understand current practices and predict future trends. The findings reveals significant insight into the practice of monotheism among this tribe, highlighting the role of religious institutions and community leaders in shaping the believes and practices of the Muslim. The study conclude by emphasizing the importance of continuous education religious guidance in reinforcing the principles of tawhid Islamic monotheism among Tiv Muslims. It provides recommendations for enhancing religious understanding and promoting adherence to monotheistic principles contributing to the broader discourse on Islamic practices among the Tiv Muslims.

Keywords:-Assessment, Practice, Islam, Monotheism , Cultural, Tiv.

Introduction

Islamic Monethiesm Tawhid is so significance in that it transcends mere theological understanding as it forms the cure of a Muslim identity and shapes their word view guiding their relationship with the divine, fellow human and the environment. Islam implies peace and the worship of the supernatural controlling power, it is a way of life. Every community in African setting has a culture peculiar to it; this is also true of Tiv land before the advent of Islam. The Tiv's had their culture i.e way of life but with the advent of Islam some of their cultural activities were influenced by the Islamic teachings. However, some none permissible element of the culture were mixed with some Islamic tenets to form some unique ways of life to the Tiv's, Islam as a way of life is not against any culture or tradition as long as no element of the culture or tradition contradicts the teaching of Islam. Any culture, custom or tradition that falls within the frame work provided in the basic guidelines of Islam can be rightly described as Islamic while anything that contradict Islam maybe viewed as unislamic.

Hence, this paper focuses on the various traditions and religious beliefs and practices which the Tiv Muslim perpetrates simultaneously with Islam that shows their being indifference to Islamic monotheism, it also aim at bringing out the Islamic position on each of these beliefs. Despite their proclamation of Islam, we could still notice their involvement in several acts of syncretism practices. It should be reiterated that Islam is a religion that encompasses all spheres of our daily lives as the Quran enjoins all Muslims into the religion of Islam wholeheartedly, Allah says "O you who believe Enter into Islam wholeheartedly and follow not the footsteps of Satan for he is to you a vowed enemy (Q 2:208).

Brief History of the Tiv tribe

The Tiv people are an ethnic group native to the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, primarily concentrated in Benue State, with significant populations in Nasarawa, Taraba, and Plateau States. The Tiv migrated to their current homeland in the 16th and 17th centuries from the southeastern region of what is now Cameroon. They are believed to have moved in search of fertile land for farming, which has traditionally been their primary occupation (Torkula, 20). The Tiv people have a rich cultural heritage, characterized by their social organization, language, and religious practices. Historically, the Tiv were organized into clans known as ***tar***, and their society was governed by councils of elders. The Tiv religion was traditionally animistic, centered around the worship of ancestors and various natural spirits. However, with the advent of Christianity and Islam, many Tiv people have converted, though traditional beliefs still influence their cultural practices (Torkula,20).

According to Bohannan, the Tiv tribe is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, with a population estimated at over 6 million people. The majority of the Tiv population resides in Benue State,

where they form the largest ethnic group. The Tiv language, a branch of the Southern Bantoid languages, is widely spoken among the Tiv people and serves as a unifying factor in their identity **(53).** According to Makar, while the Tiv tribe is predominantly Christian, there is a minority Muslim population within the community. The exact number of Muslims among the Tiv is not well-documented, but estimates suggest that they constitute a small percentage of the Tiv population, likely less than 5%. These Muslim communities are primarily located in urban areas and are integrated into the larger Tiv society, contributing to both the religious and cultural diversity of the region (94).

Islam was introduced to the Tiv people primarily through interactions with neighboring Muslim communities, particularly the Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri traders. These traders, who were devout Muslims, traveled through Tiv land for commerce and often established small settlements where they practiced their religion. The Hausa and Fulani, in particular, played a significant role in spreading Islam as they moved southward into Tiv territory in search of trade and grazing land (Smith, 66).

Assessment of practice of Islamic monotheism tawhid among the tiv Muslims

Some of the Tiv traditions practiced by the Muslims under Benue state that are syncretism are highlighted below:

Observation of Nyam Festival (Animal Gathering)

According to Bohannan, The Nyam Festival is a culturally significant event observed by the Tiv tribe, where various animals are gathered to display unique movements. These movements, often compared to dancing, involve the animals demonstrating intricate patterns from head to toe. For the Tiv people, this festival is deeply rooted in their spiritual and cultural heritage, serving as a

vital ritual aimed at attracting good fortune and averting misfortune. The animals' movements are seen as more than just physical activity; they are believed to be a form of communication with the spiritual forces that govern the natural world**(**57). Each animal selected for the Nyam Festival holds specific symbolic meaning within Tiv culture. Certain animals may be revered for their association with attributes like strength, fertility, or protection. The Tiv believe that the participation of these animals in the festival can transfer these positive qualities to the community, ensuring their prosperity and well-being. The rhythmic and coordinated nature of the animals' movements is considered a way to harmonize with the spiritual realm, making offerings of gratitude to the ancestors. The festival is not only a spiritual event but also a significant social occasion for the Tiv tribe. It brings together the community, reinforcing social bonds and ensuring the preservation of cultural traditions. The Nyam Festival is an opportunity for the Tiv people to reflect on the past year, celebrate their achievements, and prepare collectively for the challenges ahead **(Bohannan,**57). offering of gratitude to ancestors as mentioned above is forbidden in accordance to the tenet of Islamic Monetheism.

Muslims within the Tiv tribe contribute to the Nyam Festival in various ways, with financial support being one of the most significant. Muslims often provide monetary donations that are crucial in covering the costs associated with the festival, such as the procurement of animals, preparation of the festival grounds, and provision of food and refreshments for participants and guests. This financial support the Islamic values of charity and community welfare, demonstrating how Muslims integrate their religious practices with the cultural traditions of the Tiv (Rubingh, 69) the Muslim participation and contribution in whatever form to the festival is forbidden in accordance to the tenet of Islamic Monotheism.

Beyond financial contributions, Muslims also offer their expertise or services during the Nyam Festival. This include helping to organize the event, ensuring that rituals are performed correctly, or participating in the cultural exchanges that take place during the festival. By doing so, Muslims play a key role in preserving and enriching the cultural heritage of the Tiv tribe. Muslim involvement in the Nyam Festival often extends to supporting communal welfare activities that are associated with the event. This might include acts of charity, such as distributing food to the needy, providing medical care, or supporting educational initiatives within the Tiv community. Such contributions are in difference with Islamic teachings on caring for the less fortunate, showcasing how Muslim values complement and enhance the cultural practices of the Tiv tribe. Since Islam does not recognize any festival which is rooted in syncretism, Muslim participation in such a festival is completely forbidden (Rubingh, 69).

Quahe Festival and its Beliefs

According to Danfulani, The Quahe Festival is an essential cultural event, deeply rooted in the agricultural traditions of the community. Celebrated with great fervor, this festival is primarily focused on ensuring a fruitful harvest and abundant farm produce. It represents the collective hope and reliance of the community on their agricultural output, which remains a crucial aspect of their livelihood and survival (7). The festival typically takes place before the harvest season, acting as a preparatory ritual to invoke blessings and ensure that the crops grow healthily and abundantly. It embodies the community's connection to the land and their dependence on nature's cycles (Danfulani, 7). The *Quahe* Festival is marked by a series of ceremonies, rituals, and communal gatherings, all designed to secure the favor of the ancestors who are believed to have control over the land's fertility and the success of

the harvest. It has been already be said in the preceding pages, all glory is supposed to be directed to the Almighty Allah (Turner,49).

The Quahe Festival is more than just an agricultural celebration; it is a time when the community reaffirms its cultural identity and social bonds. The festival is deeply intertwined with the community's belief system, which holds that the prosperity of the harvest is dependent not only on physical labor but also on spiritual and moral purity (Makar, 94).

One of the key aspects of the festival is the performance of rituals and sacrifices aimed at appeasing the deities and ancestral spirits. These rituals are believed to protect the community from agricultural disasters, such as droughts, pests, and poor yields (Turner, 19). The community believes that any deviation from traditional practices or any moral lapses could anger their ancestors, leading to unfavorable outcomes. Therefore, the Quahe Festival also serves as a time for communal reflection, where people seek forgiveness for their transgressions and renew their commitment to the community's values. Allah Almighty is the one that all prayers and request should be directed to because he is the creator of the universe (Makar,99).

The festival also plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion. It brings together people from different walks of life, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose (Danfulani,7). The communal feasts, dances, and ceremonies provide an opportunity for people to reconnect with their cultural heritage, pass down traditions to the younger generation, and strengthen the bonds that hold the community together.

In communities where the Quahe Festival is celebrated, Muslims, though often a minority, have found meaningful ways to contribute to the festival, despite their distinct religious beliefs. The involvement of Muslims in the festival highlights the adaptability and inclusivity of the community, allowing for diverse expressions of faith and culture while maintaining the festival's core purpose of ensuring agricultural prosperity (Danfulani, 7). Muslim are seriously warned to dissociate from participating in any festival that originated from tradition that is rooted in syncretism.

According to Ahmad, Muslims contribute financially to the organization and execution of the Quahe Festival. These contributions may be used to purchase necessary materials for rituals, prepare communal meals, and support the logistical needs of the festival (17). In Islam, charity is highly valued, and Muslims see this as an opportunity to support the well-being of the entire community, even if the religious aspects of the festival differ from their own practices. This financial support helps ensure that the festival remains accessible to all members of the community, regardless of their economic status, thereby fostering inclusivity which is disallowed under Islamic principles (Ali, 45).

Muslims who are part of the community are often engaged in farming, which is central to the festival's purpose. By actively participating in the agricultural activities that precede and follow the festival, Muslim farmers contribute to the overall success of the harvest. Their involvement in farming reflects the Islamic principle of hard work and stewardship of the earth, which aligns with the festival's emphasis on securing a prosperous harvest (Ali,47).

Muslim leaders and community members play a significant role in promoting peace and unity during the Quahe Festival. In areas where the festival is celebrated, there is often a need to navigate

religious differences sensitively. Muslim leaders may engage in dialogues with festival organizers and other religious leaders to ensure that the festival is celebrated in a way that respects the beliefs of all community members. This promotion of social harmony is crucial in maintaining a peaceful coexistence among different religious groups within the community (Ahmad, 20).

In addition to direct participation in the festival, Muslims contribute through educational and charitable initiatives that align with the festival's goals. For example, they support programs that teach sustainable farming techniques or provide assistance to those in need during the harvest season. These initiatives are in keeping with Islamic teachings on charity, education, and community welfare, and they enhance the overall impact of the Quahe Festival by addressing broader issues related to agriculture and social well-being (Ali,11).

The involvement of Muslims in the Quahe Festival illustrates the potential for cultural and religious practices to coexist and complement each other provided the festival is not rooted in syncretism. While Muslims may not participate in the traditional religious rituals of the festival, their contributions in other areas demonstrate a respect for the festival's cultural significance and a commitment to the community's shared goals. This blending of cultural practices with Islamic values enriches the festival and reflects the diversity within the community (Ahmad,15).

Attributing Human Death to Deities Other Than Allah

Information gathered from Jibrin, F. of Ankpa Quarters, Makurdi, Benue State, indicates that Muslims in the area blend their *Tawhīd* (monotheism) with various forms of polytheism. They often

believe that human deaths cannot occur naturally; every death must be attributed to some reason. This attribution is typically sought through consultation with fortune tellers, who provide explanations for why someone has died. However, according to the Glorious *Qur'ān*, death is solely caused by Allah and is inevitable for all creatures. Each individual has a predetermined lifespan ordained by Allah, and death comes at its appointed time, without delay or extension.

Similarly, Aliyu I. from North Bank, Lafiya Road, Makurdi, Benue State, corroborates these beliefs, stating that every death in the area is attributed to specific causes. Additionally, there is a superstition that Wednesday is an ill-fated day for death. If someone dies on a Wednesday, it is strongly believed that to protect other family members from a similar fate, sacrifices must be made after consulting fortune tellers. Such beliefs contradict the principles of monotheism (*Tawhīd*), as every day belongs to Allah and He alone has the authority to decree life and death. There are no forbidden days for birth or death in Islam. To uphold true monotheistic beliefs, Muslims must abandon these superstitious practices to ensure a peaceful life in this world and the Hereafter.

Regarding Ancestors, it is important to note that they are deceased individuals who lack any capability to benefit or harm the living. The living, however, have the ability to assist the deceased through supplications (Du'a) for the peace of their souls. Any deviation from this practice leads away from the path of Allah towards the path of Shaitan (Satan), ultimately leading to eternal punishment in Hellfire.

Allah says thus:

ۦةَ قُلْ إِنَّنِى هَدَانِى رَبِّى إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ۖ دِينًا قِيَمًا مِّلَّةَ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۖ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ

*"Say (O Muhammad (*SAW*)) truly, my Lord had guided me to a straight path, a*

right religion, the religion of Ibrahim Hanif (ie the true Islamic *Monotheism to believe in one Allah (Allah ie to worship none but Allah alone) and he was not of Al-Murshrikun. Q 6:161*

قُلْ إِنَّ صَلَاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحْيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Say (O Muhammad (SAW)) Verily, my Salat (Prayer), my sacrifice, my rising, and my dying are for Allah, the Lord of the Alamin (Mankind, Jinn and all that exist) Q 6:162

Recommendations

It is pertinent on all Muslims to abide by the will of Allah and footsteps of the prophet in their religious rites in line with this verse of the Quran in chapter 59 verse 7 when Allah says, "And whatever the messenger gives you accept it and whatever he forbids you abstain (there) and keep your duty to Allah" The spirit of monotheism in terms of beliefs should be inculcated in all brethren of Islam at all level. This work recommends vividly the rejection of the concept of reincarnation as its's stated categorically in the Quran that all souls shall definitely have the taste of death and it's incumbent on all souls to die once and which follows is resurrection. At the instance of individual death there is no room for transmigration of; soul into another body or reincarnation as the case may be from that perspective of this research. It is mandatory on the learned and erudite Islamic scholars in Tiv land turn a new leave in the redirection of the infiltration of culture in Islam.

Monotheism as the basic concept of Islam should be effected at al parameters. Hence, this will curb the idea of diluting traditional Africa: belief with the doctrines of Islam. The practice of the real doctrines of Islam should be encouraged which innovations should be ignored based on the Quranic injunction which says. "O ye who

believe enter into Islam whole heartedly and follow not the foe step of Satan for he is to you an avowed enemy (Q 2:208). If these recommendations stated above are properly utilized and well taken into consideration the various beliefs attributed to Islam which is against it tenets will be reduced at a minimal level.

Conclusion

It is pertinent to understand from the foregoing deliberations and various-arguments that Islam is a pure religion with its basic fundamentals as monotheistic. virtue as the real belief of Islam and its principle as the apex belief worthy of not practicing asides other beliefs found in our contemporary societies such as the various beliefs in the African Tradition, which is contrary to the real injunction of Allah, hence this should be ignored. Therefore, Muslims should not be part to such believes and the Islamic Scholars should also preach fervently in the redirection of monotheism and its practice in Tiv land and Nigeria at large.

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2	Aliyu Idris	North Bank Lafiya Road Makurdi, Benue State	48	M	Air Force	04/03/2026
3	Umar Rabiyetu	Wandata Makurdi, Benue State	58	F	Trading	05/08/2022
4	Abubakar Usman	Market Side Gboko, Benue State	58	M	Civil Servant	06/03/2022
5	Abuh Jubairu	Aliede Makurdi Road, Benue State	41	M	Farming	02/01/2023
6	Ibrahim Bilkis	High Level Makurdi, Benue State	51	F	Business Woman	02/02/2023
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PROBLEMS OF ENFORCEMENT IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE ACT (ACJA 2015) IN NIGERIA

Egwu Wisdom Chizitere PhD
Department of Legal studies,
Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana
egwuwisdom@gmail.com

Omezue-Nnali, Eberechukwu Ekemma
Department of Legal Studies,
School of Business and Basic Studies,
Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic,
Unwana, Afikpo, Ebonyi State
ukpabie3@gmail.com

Ugwu, Chioma Chidera
Department of Legal Studies,
School of Business and Basic Studies,
Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic,
Unwana, Afikpo, Ebonyi State
ugwuchioma74@gmail.com

Abstract

The Administration of Criminal Justice Act was enacted in Nigeria in 2015 to reform criminal justice delivery. Criminal Justice resorts to the incarceration of wrongdoers upon conviction. The society after the completion of the process of convicting and sentencing within the criminal justice delivery system is faced with the challenge of what to do with the offender(s) adjudged guilty by court of competent jurisdiction. During the pre-colonial days, convicted offenders were treated informally by means of various psychological and physical punishments. At a point, physical punishment became more severe, humiliating and degrading, reformers decided that corporal punishment should be replaced with confinement or imprisonment. In Nigeria, as in most developing countries the most pronounced, most visible and most common sentence resorted to is imprisonment. Unfortunately, the Nigeria Correctional Service has failed to measure up to the international minimum standards, hence the timely choice to

examine the problems of Administration of Criminal Justice Act in Nigeria with a view to making case for reforms. It is still a problem that despite the enactment of the well detailed Administration of Criminal Justice Act in Nigeria for up to a decade, yet its enforceability has not gotten the desired results. This Study adopted the Doctrinal/ Library-based Qualitative research method by analyzing the Primary sources such as the ACJA 2015, Correctional Service Act 2019, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, the Police Act, Criminal Code, Penal Code and other Case Laws, we also relied on Secondary sources such as the textbooks, journals and journal articles; the research deployed the analytical and critical approach to examine the roles of the diverse key stakeholders in the administration of justice. This study finds that it is a need for States that have not domesticated the Administration of Criminal Justice Act to speed up the legislative process. Findings were also made on the failure of agencies like the Nigeria Police Force; the Ministry of Justice; Legal Practitioners; the Judiciary; as well as the legislature and executive to live up to expectation in terms of their various roles in administration of criminal justice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Correctional Service Act, 2019, International Minimum Standard, Conviction and Sentencing, Correctional Centre.

Introduction

The Criminal Justice system is the central mechanism through which a society maintains law and order, protects lives and property and ensures that wrongdoers are brought to justice. In Nigeria, the administration of criminal justice before 2015 was governed by two principal procedurals laws- the Criminal Procedure Act (CPA) applicable in the Southern States and the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) applicable in the Northern States. These laws were colonial legacies that became outdated, cumbersome, and incapable of meeting the contemporary challenges of crime prevention, efficient prosecution and the

protection of the rights of suspects, defendants and victims. Hence, to address these inadequacies, the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) was enacted in 2015 as a comprehensive and innovative federal legislation. The ACJA was intended to revolutionize criminal justice administration by providing for efficient management of criminal justice institutions, speedy dispensation of justice, protection of the rights of suspects and defendants, and enhanced cooperation among the various organs involved in criminal justice administration.

One of the ultimate ends of criminal justice is the incarceration of offenders upon conviction. After conviction and sentencing by a court of competent jurisdiction, the society is faced with the critical question of what to do with the offender. Historically, during the pre-colonial era, convicted offenders were treated informally through various psychological and physical punishments administered within the community. At a point, physical punishment became very severe, humiliating and degrading. This led reformers to advocate that corporal punishment be replaced with confinement or imprisonment as a more humane and reformative measure. Today in Nigeria as in most developing countries, the most common form of sentence resorted to is imprisonment. The custodian of this sentence is the Nigerian Correctional Service (Formerly known as Nigeria Prisons Service), which was reformed by the Nigerian Correctional Service Act, 2019. However, despite the laudable innovations introduced by the ACJA 2015 and the Correctional Service Act, 2019, the practical reality shows a wide gap between the law and its enforcement. The Correctional Centre are overcrowded, underfunded and have failed to measure up to the international minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners such as the Mandela Rules.

Furthermore, the enforcement of ACJA is hindered by institutional and structural challenges. The Act is a federal Legislation that

applies only to the Federal Capital Territory and federal courts, while States are expected to domesticate it, Many States are yet to domesticate the Act. Also, key Stakeholders in the Administration of criminal justices such as the Nigeria Police Force, the Ministry of Justice, Legal Practitioners, the Judiciary, the Legislature and the Executive arms of Government- have largely failed to live up to expectations in terms of their statutory roles under the Act. It is against this background that this Research work seeks to critically examine the problems militating against the effective enforcement of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act in Nigeria and make a case for holistic reforms.

Statement of the Problem:

The enactment of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, 2015 was greeted with great optimism as a panacea to the delays, inefficiencies and human rights abuses that characterized the old Criminal Procedure Act and Criminal Procedure Code. The Act introduced progressive provisions such as front-loading of evidence, non-custodial sentencing, plea bargaining, protection of the rights of suspects against unlawful arrests, prohibition of arrest in lieu, and the Administration of Criminal Justice Monitoring Committee. However, ten years after its enactment, the objectives of the Act remain largely unachieved. The enforcement is bedeviled with numerous problems such as Non-domestication by some States in Nigeria, institutional failures by the key Stakeholders in the Administration of criminal justices, failure of the Correctional System, lack of political Will by both the legislative and the executive arms of government and so on. Therefore the central problem that this Research work seeks to address is , Why has a law so well-conceived as the ACJA 2015 failed in its enforcement? What are the specific institutional, legal, socio-political factors responsible for this failure, and what reforms are necessary to ensure that the administration of criminal justice in Nigeria aligns with international best practices and constitutional guarantees of fair hearing and human dignity?

Introduction of the Problems Emanating from other Arms of the Criminal Justice Delivery System

Criminal justice system is the collective institution through which an accused offender passes until the accusations have been disposed of or the assessed punishment concluded. The system typically has three components; first is the Law Enforcement which includes; Police, Sheriffs and Marshals, secondly is the Judicial process which involves the judge, prosecutors, the defense lawyer; and thirdly the Correctional Centre which involves Correctional service officials, Probation officers, Parole officer. The criminal justices agencies are the main actors in the fight against crime: the police are responsible for detecting crime and apprehending people who violate the criminal law; the courts decide guilt or innocence, and sentence those who are convicted or those who plead guilty; and the prisons or correctional institution carry out the sentence of the court and rehabilitate criminals.[78] The issue however, is that the various institutions involved in the administration of justice in Nigeria are not amenable to the supervision of one agency or institution and this makes it difficult to function harmoniously and optimally. It is believed that with the administration of criminal justice being now in place that the synergy between criminal justice agencies will be enhanced in view of this provision.[79]

Commenting on the problem of the criminal justice system, Alemika E. E. Observed that:

> The Nigeria criminal justice system has been afflicted by several problems that undermine justice,

[77]B. A Ganer, Black's Law Dictionary, 7th Edition (Dallas USA: West Publishing Co. 2004) p. 3326. See also B. Ayorinde *et al,* an article titled "A Reformatory Approach to the Criminal Justice in Nigeria" Mondaq on twitter last updated 18th February, 2014.

[78]J. Rawls, "A Theory Justice" in A. B. Dambazau, Criminology and Criminal justice (Ibandan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007. P. 36.

[79]Which established a body known as Administration of Criminal Justice Monitoring Committee.

> human rights, security of lives and property. These problems may be traced to various factors such as the colonial origin of the system, poverty of the philosophy on which the criminal justice is anchored, the antidemocratic nature of the postcolonial governance, economic inequality and mass poverty; institutional defects as well as inadequacy of human and material resource – both in qualitative and qualitative terms, that are available to the criminal justice institutions. Consequently, at present, the Nigeria criminal justice system is characterized by processes that dehumanize and embitter suspects and offender.[80]

What is deducible from the above, is that there are inadequacies in the Nigerian Criminal Justice system as the percentage of prisoners awaiting trial in remand remains high, unnecessary adjournments prolong disputes, political interference with judicial appointment and judicial decision-making remain an issue, both in the eyes of judicial officers and the Bar, coordination among the various justice sector institution poses continuous challenges. The result of these factors has negatively impacted on the management of the prisons and the treatment meted to the offenders.

The Police

The Police is the biggest, most visible and important sub-system of the criminal justice system.

The police is the "entry point"[81] into the criminal justice system either through crime reports from the public, through personal complaints or its own discovery. The Police is the main institution

[80]E. E. Alemika, "Penal Policy Prisons Condition and Prisoner's Rights in Nigeria" in B. Angwe and C. J. Dakas (eds.) Readings in Human Rights (Lagos: Innovative Communications, 2005), p. 108.

[81]Section 4 of The Police Act Cap P. 19 Laws of the Federation, 2004 (previously, Cap 359 Law of Federation of Nigeria, 1990).

that is most unique among the other component of the criminal justice system. The uniqueness of the Police border on the fact that the decision of the policeman on the street is as important as the existence of the criminal justice system. The policemen are the "gatekeepers" of the criminal justice system as they decide who goes into trial and this decision has wider implication for the other system components. Statutorily[82] the Nigerian Police Force is imbued with the responsibility of investigating crimes, apprehension of offenders, interrogation of suspects, granting of bail to suspects on bonds pending the completion of investigation or arraignment in court, serving summonses, execution of warrants of arrest, and prosecution of cases especially at the lower court. Added to the role of Nigerian Police is the power to search and seize properties suspected to be stolen or associated with crime, organization of identification parade, the taking of measurement in cases of accident, photographs and finger prints impression of persons in custody.[83] In summary according to the Nigeria Police Act,[84] the police are employed to prevent and detect crime; they apprehend offenders, preserve law and order, protect life and property, enforce laws and regulations they are directly charged with; and perform such military duties as may be required of them.

The point is that in an effort to execute this enormous duties, responsibilities and functions, the police encounter a lot of problems and in the same process create more, all of which play a rehabilitating roles on the administration of Justice System. As muted in the forgoing it is the responsibility of the police to investigate case, how fast and well this is done determines how long a person may be in detention in prison, especially where the

[82]Section 4 of the Police Act Cap P. 19 Laws of the Federation, 2004.
[83]Section 4 of The Police Act Cap P. 19 Laws of the Federation
[84]E.E. Alemika, "Democracy and Criminal Justice and Administration in Nigeria" in C. J. Dakas, et al. (Ed) New Vistas in Law Val. 2 (Jos: Faculty of Law University of Jos, 2003). P. 307.

offence charged is capital in nature which statutorily requires the accused being remanded in prison custody.[85] This is believed to be the cause of the overflowing brim of the prison with awaiting trial inmates most of whom have been there for an endless period on the guise that investigation into their matter has not been concluded. In some situations paucity of forensic[86] laboratories hamper speedy investigation of crime. There is also lack of stationeries, transportation, constant transfer of Investigating Police Officers, pure laziness on the part of Investigating Police Officer and/or lack of supervision by the superior Officers, corruption, deficiency in knowledge of the Investigating Police Officers, delay in duplicating the case file, assembling of witnesses, carelessness and/or nonchalant attitude in the prosecution of criminal cases and the like. In some cases the limitation in the training of the police officer, degree of professionalism, personal integrity and his perception of the law cum unwarranted opposition to the temper with their witnesses compound the just administration of the prison.

However, most of these problems have been addressed in Part 2 of ACJA[87] prohibiting unlawful arrests,[88] prohibition of arrest in lieu,[89] provisions of arrest protocols aimed at protecting the rights of arrested suspects,[90] humane treatment of persons arrested[91] and prohibition of arrest for civil cases[92], mandatory inventory of

[85]Police Act ibid.
[86]Section 34(1) of the Criminal Procedure Code Cap 30 Laws of Northern Nigerian, 1963 applicable to the Northern State and which provides that "person accused of an offence punishable with death shall not be released on bail.
[87]It is regrettable that there is only one Forensic Laboratory for the whole Nigeria Federation. This is far location at the Oshodi axis of Lagos and which caters for all the forensic needs of all Government Department and Security Agencies in the Nigeria.
[88]Section 3 – 34 of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, 2015
[89]Section 3 Ibid
[90]Section 7 Ibid
[91]Section 6, 14 Ibid
[92]Section 8(1) Ibid

property[93] and records of arrests,[94] establishment of central criminal record registry[95], electronic recording of confessional statement[96] and so on. The problem is implementation, this is because after about five (5) of ACJA operation none of the provisions listed above have been implemented to its fullest.

The Ministry of Justice

The Ministry of Justice is another integral part of the criminal justice delivery system. The office of the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) is imbued with the prosecution of cases in courts in Nigeria. The practice over the years has been that the police transmit to the office of the Director of Public Prosecution some heinous offences for either legal opinion and/or prosecution. The conjecture is that either the DPP or those acting on his instructions has been with utmost respect sluggish in discharging their paid function either in giving legal opinion and/or prosecution of the matter in court; thus intensifying the problem of the prison in keeping detainees for a very long period.

Associated with the delay in giving legal opinion by the office of the DPP is lackadaisical attitude sometimes demonstrated by counsel whom a case file is assigned to in the office of the DPP (Director of Public Prosecution). In most cases, they request for an adjournment unreasonably, ranging from that the counsel handling the matter is on another assignment and therefore wants an adjournment to enable him appear personally, that they have not received the duplicate of the case file from the police and/or that they have asked the police to further investigate the matter with regards to a particular aspect of the case. It could be as well that the department is in shortage of manpower, that they lack fund

[93]Section 8(2) Ibid
[94]Section 10 Ibid
[95]Section 15 Ibid
[96]Section 16 Ibid

and necessary logistic such as stationeries, typewriters, computers, photocopiers, mobility and the likes as a yardstick for not performing their function effectively, efficiently and optimally. Whether the aforementioned defenses are real is not the beauty of this research; the truth however, lies in the fact that by abdicating their assigned roles they unwittingly compound the problem of the prisons service administration that has the enormous challenge of keeping in safe custody some of the accused persons sent to prison awaiting trial or trial awaiting conviction and sentencing.

The Lawyers

The bar is said to be co-ministers in the temple of justice and as such play a key function in the administration of justice. It is a fact however that some lawyers are very good in asking for frivolous adjournments either to delay the proceedings so that they would make more money or because of their unpreparedness. As noted by Yemi Osinbanjo[97]

> …many of the prisons are outdated and in some cases anachronistic, Besides, the loopholes in the law and procedure have become so obvious that lawyers especially defense lawyers have become masters in dilatory tactics. It has thus become increasingly difficult to reach close of any kind in many criminal cases. Convictions and acquittals have become exceeding rare.

Need say that the effect of the above is on the prison administration and management. We beg to note that some lawyers are actually unserious with the business of Legal practice and as such hardly let matter go on in court but rather prefer adjournment letters. Upon being confronted with an application in

[97]N. Tobi, "The Decision to Prosecute" UniMaid vol. I. L. J. 1981, pp. 15 – 22; N. Tobi, "Delay in the Administration of Justice in C. C. Nweze C. C. (ed). Justice in the Judicial Process: Essay in Honour of Justice Eugene Uboezonu, JCA (Enugu: Forth Dimension Publishing Limited, 2002), p. 151.

court, the next thing is to ask for adjournment to reply to the application which may ordinary need no reply, sometimes the aim is just to secure more opportunities for appearance fees. In another breath, to exploit the loopholes in the criminal procedure to request for adjournment. Regrettably too, matters are adjourned by lawyers for the inability of their poor clients to pay their professional fee. For whatever this is worth, the truth is that these adjournments prolong the agony of those standing trial and increase the number of those awaiting trial.

The Legislature

It had been noted that the key players in the justice sector are multifaceted; the legislature is one of the agents in the justice delivery system whose action or inaction fundamentally affect the administration of the Correctional Centre. Whether the legislators are aware that their omission or commission is imperative in swelling up the prison population is an issue. It is a known fact that the legislature has the constitutional responsibility of making and amending the laws particularly laws relating to confinement in execution of criminal liability and the terms of imprisonment thereof together with alternative to imprisonment. It has been noted with utmost displeasure that the Nigerian Legislature especially during the military regime lived below honest expectation of the masses. In this regards they failed to promptly amend the various criminal statutes or the procedure for their implementation. It is a known fact that the criminal code[98] which was first introduced into the country in 1904 has since been in operation with little or no major amendment. The Northern part of the country is not anything different, in that since the introduction of the Penal Code[99] in 1963 there have been nothing but a cosmetic amendment as touching jurisdiction of Magistrates without more.

[98]When as the Attorney General State and Commissioner for Justice Lagos State (now, the Vice-President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) addressing the charges of the Criminal Justice in Nigeria.

[99]Cap. C38 Law of the Northern Nigeria, 2004.

While on the surface, it may appear and of course true that we have laws, but the consequences of its stagnancy can be viewed as follows; first, Archaic and complicated procedure still permeate our criminal statutes such as the practice in the North under the Criminal Procedure Code whereby even if an accused person admits to committing the offence, the Area Court Judge even if he were also a Magistrate court convict the person even without hearing and evaluating the evidence.[100] Secondly, there are still many offences which need not be part of the law but which sadly still remain of force.[101] It obvious that despite the provisions of ACJA as touching alternative to imprisonment by use of non-custodial sentences such as suspended sentence, probation, compensation, restitution, community service orders, parole[26] and plea bargain[102] the Laws in Nigeria are imprisonment inclined. Unlike what is obtainable in most jurisdictions[103], almost every law made in Nigeria comes with criminal offences that prescribe various terms of imprisonment. A survey of the statutes reveals that in almost every legislation passed in this country, there is criminal sanction and almost every agency is constituted into an arm of criminal justice with power to prosecute and the commonest of punishment prescribed for each of these offences is imprisonment. It is imperative to note that some enactment in Nigeria has some overlapping effect on the other, that is, some enactments has some provision which have been taken care of by both the criminal code and the penal code respectively[104]. Some of this legislations are:

[100]Cap 89 Laws of Northern Nigeria, 1963

[101]Section 157(3) of the Criminal Procedure Code: Musa Haruna and Ors v. Bornu Authority (1967) N. N L R 19. 26 For instance, Offence relating to cruelty of criminals as contained in Ss 207 – 209 of the Penal Code, and the offences relating to criminal defamation contained in Section 391 – 395. Defamation should completely be left to the realm of tort.

[102]See sections 319, 321, 453, 455, 460, 461 and 468

[103]Section 270 ACJA

[104]For instance Nether lands Denmark, Sweden and USA, See the Report and Draft Bills for the Reform of Prisons in Nigeria (Lagos Nigeria Law Reform Commission 1991)

The Robbery and Firearms (Special Provisions) Act[105], the Indian Hemp Act[106] the Electoral Act 2010,[32] the Counterfeit and Fake Drug and Unwholesome Processed Foods (Miscellaneous Provision) Act,[33] the Export (Prohibition) Act[107], Ports (Related Offence) Act[108], Produce (Enforcement of Export Standard) Act[109]; Trade Mal-Practice (Miscellaneous Offence Act[110], the Dishonored Chewue Offence Act[111], the Recovery of Public Property (Special Provision) Act[112], the Failed Bank (Recovery of Debt) and Financial Mal-Practice and other Related Offence Act[113], the Money Laundering Act[114], the Corrupt Practices and other Related Offence Act[115], the Code of Conduct Act[116] and so on. The point is that each of those legislations contains penal sanctions and imprisonment occupies a prime place. With such laws as enumerated above, having imprisonment as its final destination, one would not be so surprise why the prisons are overflowing its inbuilt capacity. It is pertinent to submit that laws should be amended to complement the innovations in ACJA and some State that have not domesticated ACJA should swiftly do so in order to utilize non-custodial sentences.

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[105]M. A. Owoade, "Criminal Justice Administration in Nigeria "in J. A. Yakubu (ed), Administration of Criminal justice in Nigeria: Essay in Honour of Justice Mohammed Leval Uwals (Ikeja: Malthouse Press, 2000) pp. 122 – 113.
[106]Cap R. 11 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004 32 Cap 16 Laws of theFederation of Nigeria, 2004 33 Electoral Act, 2010.
[107]Cap p12 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[108]Cap RE34 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[109]Cap E22 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[110]Cap P23 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[111]Cap P23 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[112]Cap P32 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[113]Cap T12 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[114]Cap D1 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[115]Cap F2 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004
[116]Cap M12 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004

The Executive

The Executive arm holds the political will of the society and most of the government policies and programs lie in their bosom to implement. The Nigerian Prison Service which was renamed in August 2019 as Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) been one of the arms under the executive, the executive equally contribute in compounding the problem of the prison system. For instance, the inability of the executive to release completely the funds needed to finance and run the prison system. In addition to deprivation of revenue, certain actions of government tend to further compound the problem of the Correctional Centre administration and management. Another example is the failure to executive those on the death roll in prison custody. The executive arm has shown much unwillingness in execution of sentences of death passed by the courts resulting in scores of prisoners being endlessly on the death roll. For instance, the study conducted by the Civil Liberties Organization[117] in 1996 revealed that 45 people on death roll in Enugu prison alone with some spending as much as 21 years. The Nigerian Prison Statistics as at 31st October, 2014 reveal that as much as 1588 prisoners were on death roll in Nigerian prisons.[118] Though the number may appear insignificant compared to the total number of inmates in the prison yard, it remains a fact that had the executive mustered enough courage to execute them, it would have created more space for others. Thus, it is arguable that keeping these condemned prisoners endlessly on death roll without execution amount to inhuman and degrading treatment contrary to the spirit and letter of the Constitution.[119][120]

[117] Cap 31 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004

[118] Established by the Constitution under Sections 66, 102, 172, 173, 209, 292 and 318 as well as the schedule to Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999.

[119] The Civil Liberties Organization Annual Report 1997 P. 36 – 37: Saturday Puck vol. 51, 15th November, 2008 p.

[120] which reported that late President Umaru Yar'adua as pardoning old man aged 57, Ibrahim Aliyu who had spent a total of 25 years in prison, 22 on death roll at the maximum Security Prison, Lagos, and also pleaded with the Governor of Rivers State to pardon a 90 years old man, Nze Enweremedu who has spent 9 years in prison, 2 years on death roll.

One would in the circumstance suggest that Nigeria should toe the line of other jurisdictions by abolishing Death penalty sentence. For instance, in countries line Denmark, Death sentence has been abolished owing to the fact that no person has been executed since 1998. United States of America has also adopted the same line of action as in Demark.[121] According to Amnesty International[122], over 110 Countries in the world have abolished the Death penalty /capital punishment for all crimes. The Amnesty International argues that Death Penalty is a violation of human rights and thus the international law frowns at it. Countries like China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Yemen were mentioned as States where Death penalty is used the most.

The Judiciary

Obviously the proper functioning and development of any judicial system depends on the caliber of the personnel appointed to man the courts. Aside the requisite academic qualification and experience, it is vital that only persons of high moral standard and integrity are appointed as Judges and Magistrates. Nothing frustrates the citizenry and erodes their confidence in judicial system more than having a judiciary that cannot be trusted as fair and unbiased Arbiter. The singular reason is that the judicial power in Nigeria being vested in the courts determine to a great extent the management of correctional centres in general and congestion in particular. This accounts to the fact that the courts are constitutionally the arm of the criminal justice that conduct and sentence people to terms of imprisonment and the prison has no power of its own to reject anybody sent to it by the courts of law. It is therefore submitted that the action or inaction of the court

[121] http://www.Prison.gov.ng. Accessed 31/10/2017.
Amnesty International Global Death Penalty Report (2025) Death Penalty.
[122] https://www.amnesty.org/en/whatwe-do/death-penalty/ Accessed on 2/7/2026

becomes crucial in accessing the performance of the Correctional Service system. For proper appreciation of how the action and inaction of the judicial arm of government affect the management of the correctional centre, it shall be x-rayed under the below headings:- (i) Delay in administration of justice, (ii) Problem associated with grant and processing of bail (iii) Inability of courts to optionally utilize available sentencing options.

Bail:

The issue of bail in criminal matter is a constitutional issue anchored on the proposition of the law that an accused is presumed innocent until the contrary is proved[123]. Bail itself is an undertaking to pay to the court a certain sum to secure the release from custody of the accused person temporarily on the guarantee that the person bailed would appear in court on a later date. If the accused however runs away from prosecution in court, the said money is forfeited. Upon this undertaking the State temporally releases the accused on bail to a surety pending the trial and determination of his matter subject upon fulfilment of certain terms.

By this token, bail became both constitutional matter as well as statutory one hinged within the inherent jurisdiction of the court[124]. The rationale for the foregoing is not far-fetched; bail is an integral part of the fundamental right of every citizen enshrined in chapter four of the constitution[125]. Specifically speaking bail touches on the right to movement[126], personal liberty[53] and fair Apart from the court; police at the investigation

[123]S.N. Imo "Hon. Justice S. M. A. Belgore, GCON, CIN – His Career and Policies" in T. A. Oyeipo, et al (Ed), Judiciary and Democracy in Nigeria. Essay in Honour of Hon. Justice Saliku Modibo Alfa Belgore CJN. (Rtd) GCON (Enugu: Snaap Press, Ltd, 2007). P 323.
[124]Section 396 (1) – (7)
[125]Section 36 (5) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria
[126]E. Eko, The Law of Bail: Second Edition (Ibadan: Lifegate Press Publishing Ltd 2005), p. I. 53 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999.

stage before the matter is charged to court has the power to grant bail to a suspect. Though bail is a constitutional matter, it is not ranted as a matter of course, it must be based on some certain condition (s) which is aimed at seeing the attendance of the accused person (s) to stand their al in a later date. To fulfill this condition the accused sureties enters into bond with the court who releases the accused person temporally upon fulfillment of the bail bond. It is imperative to note that the sum of money or conditions to be fulfilled for the grant of bail are not codified in the criminal statutes, this means that same, are left to the fluid discretion of the court with a limb warning that it should be both judicially and judiciously exercised. It is to be noted that in the exercise the discretionary power of the court, the court has been noted to impose stringent bail condition which the accused finds difficult to fulfill, resulting in his being remanded in prison custody. Some of these conditions range from the accused to deposit with the court clerk an original certificate of occupancy, produce two sureties who must be directors is State or Federal Ministries, deposit of international passport and an undertaking to pay sums sometime outrageously fixed even for cases ordinarily bailable. In view of the stringent nature of bail in some court, accused person finds it difficult to fulfill the bail condition and process his bail, which failure takes the accused to prison in a charge he would ordinarily not have been taken to correctional. On allegation of capital offence or armed robbery most court hide under the cloak at the offence is capital in nature and therefore not bailable even when proper application is before the court in line with the criminal statutes. The instance of court on not granting bail for capital offences even in cases that are prima facie fanciful and watery gave the police the effrontery to capitalize on legal loophole and judicial trepidation, to charge most suspect under armed robbery to ensure that the accused remain in custody, particularly, where gratification is sought but refused by the accused. It is crystal clear the above views suggests that the Police compound the problems of the

Correctional service. It is applaudable the provision ACJA as touching bail which provides for liberal policy with respect to the grant of bail to a suspect though sadly applies to federal courts handling federal offences.

Conclusion

Delay in dispensation of justice in Nigerian remains the most disturbing and major challenging aspect of criminal justice. In the country, criminal trials are often delayed most especially where the person standing trial are able to exploit the weaknesses in the system as a result cause delays or frustrate the trial. This trend in the judicial process is condemnable.

It is submitted that the people who benefit mostly from the deficit in the area of criminal justice system are mainly the politicians and political office holders when they are to stand trial for corruption and abuse of offices. Many of them can afford to employ the services of Legal Practitioners who often drag trials to the point that conviction becomes unlikely as witnesses may no longer be available or where the witness is available some facts relating to the case would have been distorted, or during which the defendant gain immunity due to a political post or winning of election while trial was pending. The country is thus confronted with the unfortunate situation in which the criminal justice system has lost its capacity to conclude criminal trials involving the wealthy and politically exposed persons.

Meanwhile, the population of prisoners, mostly poor people who are held in prison custody without trials is growing. Some other factor that occasion delay in court is obsolete rules of procedure which has been described as “thematic obsolesce of our

procedural rules"[127]. Another side of the divide is delay coming from the parties themselves due to their inability to produce their witnesses or to personally attend the court to give evidence. Sometimes, it could be as a result of the modus in which the trial judge sit, some sit very late only to rise minutes after for school runs or health issues, while some sit occasionally like three times a week and the likes[128]. Associated with this, is the act of some judicial personnel in adjourning matter for ruling which would have been simply dispensed with by giving bench ruling.

Importantly too, is the fact that our judiciary still takes evidence in long hand as opposed to electronic gadget except for the launch into electronic recordings made by the Lagos State Judiciary in the recent times. What more, the totality of the foregoing factors is the reason why cases in court continue to foot-drag endlessly for years at the detriment of the chagrin of the prison/ correctional service. This is a pointer to the reason why 70% of prison population is filled with awaiting trial inmates. In the light of the foregoing it is submitted that the court directly exacerbates the prison population and by implication occasion problem to the correctional centres and prisoners. What may be added strongly is that with ACJA coming into operation and the provisions religiously followed especially as touching speedy trial of cases[129], we believe these challenges will be a thing of the past. Therefore, every State in Nigeria need to speedily domestic ACJA by their State House of Assembly inorder to tackle this menace of delayed criminal proceedings and over population of the correctional centre.

[227]O. Olatawura. "The Judiciary, the Legislative, the Police and Justice Delivery" in Nigeria Judges Conference. 2003 Op Cit. p. 87; Edet Effiom v. The State (1995)1 SCNJ 1 where the delay spanned 6 years and the accused according to the apex court, had "degenerated to a bag of bones".

[228]O. Obasanjo, "Address at the All Nigeria Judges Conference 2003" in All Nigeria Judge Conference 2003 (Ibandan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2005), pp. 20 – 30.

[229]T. A. Oyeyipo, "Chief Judge Inaugurates Rules Review Panel", The Punch, Wednesday, 2003, p. 10: 1 A, Ayua, and O. Guebadia, Technical Report on the Nigerian Court Project (Lagos: Nigerian Institution of Advanced Legal Studies, 2003), p. 7. P.

Recommendation

In view of these obvious challenges, we hereby make recommendations as follows:

1. States that are yet to domesticate the Administration of Criminal Justice Act should do so as a matter of urgency in order to speed up the course of justice.
2. War against corruption should be taken seriously, as it will go a long way in repositioning agencies that are involved in criminal justice delivery.
3. One other angle to reducing overcrowding in the correctional centre is alternative sentencing or suspended sentencing and the most common form of this aspect of criminal justice delivery is one in which those found guiltily of minor offences are sentenced to terms of community service rather than imprisonment.
4. In order to checkmate the activities of the Correctional Centre Officers, it is hereby suggested that there shall be established independent and transparent Correctional Centres Inspectorate with a definite role assigned to them to carry out inspection visits to Correctional centre, Police stations, and State CIDs and publish their findings quarterly. If this posture is taken, the issue of corruption and prisoners' welfare would have been taken care.

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The Book

It is with great pleasure and a profound sense of responsibility that I present this book, African Ecologies, Philosophy and Religious Worldviews: Rethinking Human–Nature Relations, Biodiversity and Environmental Responsibility, one of the three volumes of scholarly proceedings emanating from the 10th International Conference of the Association for the Promotion of African Studies (APAS), held at Veritas University, Abuja, from Tuesday, 26 May to Friday, 29 May 2026. The conference was organised around the theme, "Biodiversity, Conservation and Public Health in Africa: Challenges and Prospects." … This volume … invites us to rethink the prevailing assumptions about the relationship between human beings and the natural world and to recover, interrogate and creatively reinterpret African philosophical and religious resources for contemporary ecological responsibility … I therefore commend this book to the scholarly community and to all readers interested in the search for more sustainable, just and humane futures for Africa and the wider world. May the scholarship contained herein deepen our understanding, enrich our conversations and inspire responsible action for the protection of biodiversity, the preservation of our common ecological heritage and the promotion of human and planetary well-being.

Professor Ejikemeuwa J. O. NDUBISI, PhD
President, Association for the Promotion of African Studies (APAS)

APAS
13245 Trebleclef Lane Silver Spring
20904 Maryland,
United States of America

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