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

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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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