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

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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).[1]

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

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

(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.

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, 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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