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

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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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