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Eco-Spirituality and Environmental Stewardship in Igbo Cosmology: An Analysis of Indigenous Conservation Ethics

Eko-duchowość i troska o środowisko w kosmologii Igbo. Analiza rdzennej etyki ochrony przyrody

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Abstract: Contemporary environmental discourse has been concerned with persistent challenges, including biodiversity loss, climate change, deforestation, and ecosystem degradation that undermine planetary sustainability. This paper examines how environmental conservation can achieve legitimacy and effectiveness by grounding itself in indigenous cosmological systems, specifically the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria eco-spiritual worldview. Employing philosophical hermeneutics and analysis as methodological approaches, the study argues that sustainable environmental stewardship emerges when communities engage with nature through spiritual principles rather than purely utilitarian arrangements. The paper demonstrates that Igbo cosmology, embodying concepts of vital force, ancestral continuity, cosmic balance, and sacred ecology through deities such as Ala, Amadioha, Anyanwu, and Mmuo Mmiri, provides the moral foundation necessary for authentic environmental care. The relationship between eco-spirituality and conservation establishes spiritual accountability mechanisms that transcend purely technical solutions, ensures that environmental practices reflect communal moral principles, and creates collective responsibility grounded in spiritual conviction. The paper concludes that integrating Igbo cosmological principles into contemporary conservation efforts through sacred groves, totemic protections, ritual practices, and traditional ecological knowledge offers Africa and the global community a paradigmatic pathway toward legitimate, accountable, and effective environmental governance that synthesises universal conservation principles with particular African spiritual realities.

Keywords: Igbo cosmology, eco-spirituality, environmental stewardship, indigenous conservation ethics, Ala deity, omeni, traditional ecological knowledge, SDG 15: Life on Land

Streszczenie: Współczesny dyskurs ekologiczny koncentruje się wokół stałych wyzwań, takich jak utrata bioróżnorodności, zmiana klimatu, wylesianie oraz degradacja ekosystemów, które godzą w zrównoważony rozwój na naszej planecie. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób ochrona środowiska może zdobyć wsparcie społeczne i tym samym zwiększyć swoją skuteczność oddziaływania poprzez jej zakorzenienie w rdzennych systemach kosmologicznych, a w szczególności w eko-duchowej wizji świata ludu Igbo żyjącego w południowo-wschodniej Nigerii. Wykorzystując hermeneutykę filozoficzną oraz analizę jako podejścia metodologiczne, niniejsze badanie dowodzi, że zrównoważona ochrona środowiska staje się możliwa wówczas, gdy społeczności kształtują relację z naturą w oparciu o zasady duchowe, a nie wyłącznie na podstawie działań o charakterze utylitarnym. Artykuł dowodzi, że kosmologia plemienia Igbo, ucieleśniająca koncepcje siły witalnej, ciągłości przodków, równowagi kosmicznej i ekologii sakralnej, ucieleśnione w bóstwach takich jak Ala, Amadioha, Anyanwu i Mmuo Mmiri, stanowi moralny fundament autentycznej troski o środowisko. Związek między

eko-duchowością a ochroną środowiska ustanawia mechanizmy odpowiedzialności duchowej, które wykraczają poza rozwiązania czysto techniczne oraz zapewniają, że praktyki środowiskowe odzwierciedlają wspólnotowe zasady moralne i tworzą zbiorową odpowiedzialność opartą na przekonaniach duchowych. W artykule przedstawiono wniosek, że włączenie kosmologicznych zasad Igbo do współczesnych działań na rzecz ochrony środowiska, poprzez święte gaje, ochronę totemiczną, praktyki rytualne i tradycyjną wiedzę ekologiczną, oferuje Afryce i społeczności globalnej paradygmatyczną ścieżkę do prawowitego, odpowiedzialnego i skutecznego zarządzania środowiskiem. Podejście to pozwala syntetyzować uniwersalne zasady ochrony środowiska z konkretnymi afrykańskimi realiami duchowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: kosmologia Igbo, eko-duchowość, troska o środowisko, rdzenna etyka ochrony środowiska, bóstwo Ala, omenani, tradycyjna wiedza ekologiczna, Cel Zrównoważonego Rozwoju 15 – Życie na lądzie

Introduction

Igbo cosmology holds deep knowledge of the interconnectedness of human beings and the spiritual realm and nature, which is inherently linked to ecological values and practice. The way indigenous Igbo communities relate to nature reflects their relationship with ancestral spirits and deities who govern natural systems (Kanu 2021, 18). This relationship means that failure to honour nature constitutes failure to honour the spiritual entities that oversee the well-being of the community, creating a unity between ecological responsibility and spiritual obligation. Religion possesses significant ecological advantages including the capacity to shape worldviews, moral authority, a large base of adherents, significant material resources, and community-building capacity, making it an important ally in addressing environmental crises (Sadowski 2012, 140).

The idea of eco-spirituality in Igbo settings has arisen as a distinct vision for the relationship between nature and humanity, based on indigenous cosmological frameworks. These frameworks illuminate the contribution of indigenous ecological knowledge to the administration, management, and use of natural resources (Ogungbemi 2008, 329), as demonstrated in Igbo instruction aimed at sustainable development of ecosystems. Igbo Traditional Religion is characterised by its cosmology, rituals, respect, and reverence for spiritual beings, ancestors, sacred objects, and sacred

places, forming the basis for eco-spirituality which emphasises nature as imbued with spiritual significance and demands stewardship and sustainable use of resources (Nnoruga 2025, 89). Before colonial disruption, Igbo society was structured on principles of indigenous Igbo religion that gave nature a place of spiritual significance, with the land identified with Ala deity, the earth goddess, water bodies as the home of Mmuo Mmiri, the water goddess, and the sky identified with Amadioha, the god of lightning and thunder, and Anyanwu, the god of the sun (Kanu 2021, 2). The underlying principles significant in the comprehension of eco-spirituality in Igbo worldview include the principles of community, ancestral continuity, and cosmic balance.

These principles constitute a holistic ethical system designed for humans to live in harmonious balance with nature. They signify ethical and obligatory models for behaviour aimed at nature, as required by precolonial Igbo belief systems. The relational links that bind these principles also constitute the bonds holding the entire ecosystem together, providing apparent interdependence among all living organisms. These webs, linkages, and interconnectivity among human and nature have been neglected in contemporary relations with non-human components of the ecosystem (Alumona 2024, 278), as the natural world is purposely annihilated by dictates of paradigms of modern development that disregard

indigenous ecological knowledge. Conventional Western philosophical systems have retained a fairly sharp ontological contrast between conscious beings and an unconscious nature, a dichotomy that has caused ecological degradation by perceiving nature as a resource rather than embracing it as an object of inherent worth (Ogonegbu 2025, 3). This stands in contrast to Igbo ontology, which has long acknowledged agency and consciousness in natural systems. Looking at forest ecosystems protection from religious and moral perspectives can significantly broaden ongoing debate on environmental issues and contribute to greater concern for the environment on the part of ordinary citizens (Sadowski 2012, 145).

The objective of this paper is to illustrate the distinctiveness of Igbo eco-spirituality and its applicability to environmental conservation efforts in Nigeria and beyond. This objective also has leverage on stakeholders and policymakers for coming up with more culturally appropriate and effective environmental management systems that are cognisant of the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems. The central argument is that Igbo indigenous thought offers conceptual resources for environmental ethics that integrate spiritual consciousness with ecological responsibility in ways that transcend limitations of dominant Western frameworks. Igbo cosmology presents nature as sacred manifestation of divine ordering embodied through a pantheon of deities who govern natural systems while demanding moral accountability from human communities, positioning humans as custodians within nature rather than external managers (Ekwealo 2017, 107). The methodological approach combines philosophical hermeneutics with conceptual analysis to interpret Igbo cosmological categories and their environmental implications. The paper proceeds by establishing foundational concepts of Igbo cosmology, exploring eco-spirituality within this framework, investigating indigenous conservation ethics and practical mechanisms, addressing

contemporary challenges, and considering implications for integrative conservation approaches.

1. The Nature of Igbo Cosmological Thought

Igbo cosmology represents a comprehensive system of reality interpretation that has guided the relationship between the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria and their environment for generations. This cosmological system is characterised by its fundamentally spiritual orientation, wherein the visible material world exists in continuous interaction with invisible spiritual world and forces that permeate all aspects of existence. The Igbo worldview is spirit-centred, emphasising life, relationship, harmony, and the maintenance of coexistence in ways that integrate ecological awareness with spiritual consciousness (Kanu 2021, 18). In the time past, Igbo society was structured on the principles of Igbo traditional religion, and this indigenous religion gave a fundamental place to nature as the abode of great spirits who governed the functioning of the cosmos. The land was identified with Ala deity, the earth goddess, while water bodies were recognised as the home of Mmuo Mmiri, the water goddess (Kanu 2021, 2).

The sky was identified with Amadioha, the god of lightning and thunder, and Anyanwu, the god of the sun, creating a cosmological framework in which every major natural domain possessed its own spiritual guardian. Mountains and forests were sacred places and homes to many deities and spirits, while animals, plants, and even days of the week had relationships with the human person that were accompanied by respect, devotion, reverence, and worship. This comprehensive spiritualisation of nature created a worldview in which ecological responsibility emerged as inseparable from spiritual obligation. Igbo Traditional Religion provides a holistic approach to life, integrating spirituality, morality, culture, and environmental consciousness

in daily activities (Nnoruga 2025, 89). This holistic character means that Igbo cosmology does not separate the sacred from the secular, the spiritual from the material, or the human from the natural. Rather, all dimensions of existence are understood as interpenetrating and mutually influencing, creating a unified field of relationships in which actions in one sphere inevitably affect conditions in others.

The Igbo cosmos is organised according to a hierarchical structure of spiritual beings, each occupying a specific position and performing particular functions in the maintenance of cosmic order. At the apex of this hierarchy stands Chukwu, the Supreme Being who is regarded as the creator and sustainer of all things (Nnoruga 2025, 91). Chukwu is omnipotent and omnipresent but is often approached through intermediaries rather than directly, reflecting an understanding of divine transcendence that nevertheless permits ongoing relationship through mediating spiritual entities. Below Chukwu, in the cosmological hierarchy are the various deities known as *alusi*, each associated with specific natural elements and human activities (Nwala 1985, 42). These deities are more than personifications of natural forces; they are understood as real spiritual beings with agency, consciousness, and the capacity to affect human affairs. Ala, the earth goddess, is the most important deity in Igbo public and private cults, and everything that was done in Igbo traditional society had a bearing to the land (Kanu 2021, 23).

When a person commits a crime, he or she is said to have *meruo Ala* ("defiled the land"), demonstrating how moral transgression is understood simultaneously as social offence and ecological violation. Amadioha, the god of thunder and lightning, represents justice and power within the Igbo pantheon (Nwala 1985, 43). Anyanwu, the sun god, governs the daily cycles that structure agricultural life and represents the life-giving energy that sustains all terrestrial existence. Mmuo Mmiri, the water spirit, occupies

a prominent place in Igbo pantheon and is believed to hold the key to the gate that leads to the world of solutions (Kanu 2021, 13). Immediately below the deities are the ancestors, known as *ndichie*, who are regarded as spiritual guardians who mediate between the living and the divine (Nnoruga 2025, 91).

They are venerated through rituals, offerings, and prayers, as their favour is believed to ensure protection, prosperity, and continuity for their descendants. Ancestral veneration creates a temporal continuity that extends moral community beyond the present generation to include both those who have passed and those yet to be born, establishing responsibility to maintain environmental integrity as heritage received from ancestors and preserved for future generations (Murove 2009, 317). At the base of this hierarchical structure is humanity, which occupies a unique position as both subject to higher spiritual powers and responsible for maintaining balance in the cosmos (Nnoruga 2025, 91). This anthropocentric dimension of Igbo cosmology does not reduce to mere human self-interest but rather positions humanity as the active agent responsible for ensuring that there is balance in the cosmos for the wellbeing of all beings.

Central to Igbo cosmology is the concept of vital force or life energy that permeates all existents, creating a fundamental continuity between beings hitherto separate in Western philosophy. The concept of vital force finds expression across various Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa, where the root *Ntu* epitomises the existential commonality of all living beings. Placide Tempels, in his foundational work on Bantu philosophy, described this as *force vitale*, arguing that it represents a wholeness and constant flow of being that fills everything and unites everything (Tempels 1959, 30).

This ontology provides basic continuity between human and environmental beings, placing ecological relationships as interconnections between entities partaking

of a common vital essence rather than interactions between categorically different types of being. Reality is inseparable, making the Igbo person kin to all creatures, and the whole of nature must be understood as sacred because it derives its being from the Supreme Being who is the Creator-Animator of the Universe. While Tempels' analysis of vital force in Bantu philosophy provides valuable comparative context, Igbo cosmology articulates this concept through its own distinctive religious framework centred on Chukwu, *alusi*, and ancestral spirits. The Igbo worldview positions vital force not as an abstract philosophical principle but as a concrete spiritual reality mediated through relationships with specific deities who govern natural domains. The land possesses vital force through Ala, water through Mmuo Mmiri, and sky through Amadioha and Anyanwu, creating a cosmology in which life energy operates through personalised spiritual agencies rather than impersonal metaphysical substrate alone.

The understanding of vital force pervading all existents has direct bearing on another fundamental ontological principle: the intrinsic interconnectedness of all beings in matrices of relation rather than as discrete, independent individuals. The pre-colonial traditional Igbo metaphysical worldview can be characterised as eco-bio-communitarian, entailing acknowledgment and acceptance of interdependence and harmonious existence among earth, plants, animals, and human beings (Tangwa 2004, 389). This relational ontology means that beings gain their identity and meaning through their relationships with other beings rather than through isolated essence. The idea of life as community represents the boundedness of everything, where everything shares in and lives from one common gift of life, enabling human beings to live in community and communicate with one another. The Igbo proverb *igwebuike*, which literally means there is strength in number, provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational and

complementary character of mutual relations (Kanu 2021, 5).

Relational ontology (a philosophical framework where beings gain their identity and meaning through interconnections with other beings rather than through isolated essence. It positions reality as fundamentally constituted by relationships, where humans, nature, ancestors, deities, and future generations exist in webs of mutual dependence.) has profound implications for understanding human-environment relationships because it positions ecological interactions as internal relations between members of a shared community rather than external relations between separate entities. When the human person expresses solidarity with nature, it is a way of preserving his or her own being, because the consequence of human action on the environment always has resounding effects on human health (Kanu 2021, 29). Because realities are interconnected, there is always the need for cordial relationship in nature, and any disruption in the interrelatedness of reality would disrupt the environment and compel people to respect the environment (Kanu 2021, 13).

All kinds and forms of life depend for their wellbeing on the health of the whole community, and humans are deeply aware that they need other forms of life for their survival much more than others need them. The Igbo worldview understands the universe as an intricate web of interrelations, and this interconnectedness is not abstract metaphysical speculation but concrete lived reality affecting daily practices and moral obligations (Nnoruga 2025, 89). Land in Igbo thought is not a geographical entity merely but a material-spirit reality that binds together the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born in a coterminous community of commingled being (Kalu 2001, 54). Trees, animals, rivers, mountains, and forests all possess inherent spiritual energy that demands respectful engagement rather than utilitarian exploitation (Imafidon 2014, 36). This awareness of spiritual being in nature is the philosophical basis for environmental

ethics that are premised on mutual respect and reciprocity rather than manipulation and control.

2. Igbo Eco-Spirituality: Cosmological Foundations and Divine Guardianship

Eco-spirituality represents a worldview that recognises the intrinsic spiritual dimension of nature and integrates ecological awareness with spiritual consciousness, creating a framework in which environmental care becomes religious practice rather than merely pragmatic necessity (Sadowski 2012, 145). The concept gained prominence in environmental discourse as scholars and practitioners recognised limitations of purely scientific or regulatory approaches to ecological problems, with technical solutions addressing symptoms rather than underlying causes proving insufficient for reversing environmental degradation. Indigenous traditions worldwide have maintained eco-spiritual frameworks integrated within cosmological worldviews that understand nature not as inert resource but as living community of beings deserving reverence and reciprocal care. Religious traditions offer substantial benefits for environmental protection through their ability to influence how communities perceive the world, exercise moral influence, mobilise large populations, command considerable resources, and foster collective action, positioning them as valuable partners in confronting ecological challenges (Sadowski 2012).

Sacred groves, totemic protections, taboo systems, and ritual practices demonstrate how religious motivations provide what has been called a social fence that shields ecosystems from unreasonable exploitation, often proving more effective and less costly than purely legal enforcement mechanisms. The taboo systems formerly prohibited actions considered disrespectful and harmful to sacred entities, for instance, taboos against the gathering of certain species, pollution of water bodies, or extraction of minerals in sacred groves (Ikeke 2015, 273). According to Ogungbemi, "Traditional

African societies employed taboos as means of environmental protection, prohibiting actions considered disrespectful to nature based on recognition of its spiritual significance" (2008, 333). These traditional regulatory systems evolved functional environmental protection on the basis of spiritual respect rather than technical management only, creating effective conservation mechanisms within broader spiritual-ecological frameworks.

Eco-spirituality in Igbo settings represents the integration of spiritual consciousness with ecological awareness, creating a framework in which environmental responsibility emerges as inseparable from religious obligation. This framework emphasises nature as imbued with spiritual significance, demanding stewardship and sustainable use of resources rather than exploitative manipulation (Nnoruga 2025, 89). Disrupting nature is considered a violation of spiritual laws, highlighting the interdependence between human actions and ecological balance, which means that environmental degradation constitutes not merely technical or economic problem but profound spiritual crisis requiring ceremonial rectification. The distinctive character of Igbo eco-spirituality lies in its grounding within specific cosmological commitments rather than general reverence for nature, with the natural environment understood as imbued with spiritual essence and governed by divine forces (Nnoruga 2025, 89).

Igbo eco-spirituality possesses four characteristic features that distinguish it from other environmental frameworks. First, it is strongly religious, beginning by linking a person back to God as a starting point, operating on account of the myriad of spiritual powers that dominate the Igbo world (Kanu 2021, 25). The religious affiliation of nature with God introduces an understanding of nature as the outcome of divine ordering, creating foundations for concepts of stewardship and trusteeship in which humans serve as caretakers rather than owners of environmental resources. Second, Igbo

eco-spirituality is related to the way the Igbo understand the universe and conduct themselves in it, with the universe being anthropocentric but carrying the implication that it is the responsibility of the human person to ensure that there is balance in the cosmos for his or her wellbeing (Kanu 2021, 25).

This responsibility-centred anthropocentrism differs from the exploitative anthropocentrism characteristic of Western industrial civilisation because it positions human centrality as source of obligation rather than entitlement to domination. Third, Igbo eco-spirituality establishes moral responsibility as communal rather than individual, creating collective accountability for environmental care through the principle of *igwebuiké*, which holds that there is strength in number (Kanu 2021, 5). Fourth, Igbo eco-spirituality promotes a complementary understanding of reality in which all beings exist in mutually supportive relationships rather than competitive isolation, establishing environmental ethics grounded in recognition that the wellbeing of each being depends on the wellbeing of all beings within the ecological community (Kanu 2021, 13).

The Igbo pantheon comprises numerous deities who govern specific natural domains while demanding particular forms of environmental conduct from human communities, functioning not as abstract symbols but as active spiritual agents who respond to human behaviour through blessing or punishment. The earth goddess Ala occupies the supreme position amongst Igbo deities in both communal and domestic worship, with all activities in traditional Igbo society connected fundamentally to the land (Kanu 2021). She is credited with creating the earth's surface and plant life, establishing her role as originator of the terrestrial sphere and its living inhabitants. Ala is the great mother goddess, the spirit of fertility and the queen of the underworld and is generally believed to be the most powerful of all divinities who is also the custodian of public morality, assisted by the ancestors (Ogbukagu 2008, 385).

The concept of Ala deity brings a new perspective to the understanding of nature with the concepts mother, source of life, nourisher, supporter, and teacher (Kanu 2021, 16). The land is not just a solid physical component of the universe but is conceived as "she", a female entity, possessing personality and agency that demand respectful engagement. From this understanding, the land is not seen as property belonging to people; rather, people belong to the land, with Ala deity functioning as the landlord of the earth. Living generations serve as tenants who must be of good conduct to avoid being thrown out of the earth, creating a framework in which environmental violations risk spiritual eviction from the land. When a person commits a crime, he or she is said to have *meruo Ala*, meaning "defiled the land," and if such a person dies without having *mejue Ala*, meaning pacified the land through appropriate ritual restitution, the Ala whose function it is to expose people's atrocities will reject the corpse by throwing it out of the belly of the earth (Kanu 2021, 23). The offences against Ala include suicide, incest, stealing, murder, pre-marital sex, and exploitation of nature, positioning environmental degradation alongside grave social transgressions as violations of cosmic order. Motherhood introduces the concepts of respect, love, care, empathy, support, and patience, which are indispensable for the promotion of the good health of the environment, and these concepts which are missing in the current relationship between human beings and nature lie at the heart of the present ecological crisis (Kanu 2021, 16).

Other major deities possess direct environmental significance through their associations with particular ecosystems and their enforcement of conservation practices through sacred prohibitions. Amadioha, the god of thunder and lightning, represents justice and power within the Igbo pantheon, functioning as enforcer of cosmic law who punishes those who violate moral and environmental prohibitions through dramatic displays of natural force (Nnoruga 2025, 91).

Amadioha's association with storms and rainfall also links this deity to agricultural productivity and the water cycle, positioning proper relationship with Amadioha as necessary for climatic stability and food security. Anyanwu, the sun god, governs the daily cycles that structure agricultural life and represents the life-giving energy that sustains all terrestrial existence (Kanu 2021, 2). The sun's regular movement across the sky establishes temporal rhythms that organise human activities while its warmth and light enable photosynthesis and plant growth, creating direct connection between religious observance and food production. Mmuo Mmiri, the water spirit, occupies a prominent place in Igbo pantheon and is believed to hold the key to the gate that leads to the world of solutions (Kanu 2021, 13).

This female deity underscores the awe for female fecundity, symbolises the female dimension of the Igbo universe, and serves as role model for female achievement and sacredness of life. Those who are her devotees find in her a source of fertility, children, food, health, and wealth, creating incentive structures for proper care of aquatic ecosystems. This totemic relationship provides protection for aquatic species through spiritual prohibition rather than legal regulation, with such water bodies becoming breeding grounds for species of organisms for other connecting water bodies. The spiritual understanding of water bodies helps the human person to tread with caution, as the destruction of the ecosystem would imply the destruction of a deity, raising what has been called the risk of deicide through environmental degradation.

3. Conservation Mechanisms in Igbo Traditional Practice

Igbo communities have developed sophisticated conservation mechanisms that translate ethical principles into concrete practices protecting biodiversity and ecosystem integrity. These mechanisms operate primarily through spiritual sanctions rather

than legal enforcement, creating what has been called a social fence that shields ecosystems from unreasonable exploitation (Sadowski 2012, 141). Religious motivations for protection prove more effective and less costly than purely legal frameworks because they engage deep spiritual convictions rather than relying on external coercion. This spiritual infrastructure creates accountability mechanisms that transcend human institutional capacity for enforcement, establishing protection systems that persist across generations through cultural transmission rather than bureaucratic regulation.

The physical manifestations of these conservation mechanisms appear most prominently in sacred groves (*ofia nso*) and totemic relations. Sacred groves represent forest areas designated as sanctuaries where human intervention is strictly prohibited or heavily restricted, functioning as abodes of deities and spirits (Okonkwo, Agbo, and Okonkwo 2015, 205). These groves act as reservoirs for biodiversity and natural resources, often protecting endemic and endangered plant and animal species that have disappeared from surrounding areas. A 2005 report by WWF and the Alliance of Religion and Conservation documented sacred forest areas in Nigeria whose preservation can be explained by the fact that they had been in whole or in part sacred groves or sacred forests (Sadowski 2012, 142). Totemic relations establish spiritual kinship between human communities and particular animal species, creating conservation networks distributed across multiple clans and localities. The icons of Mmuo Mmiri include python, crocodile, and tortoise, which are seen as children and messengers of water spirits and are not to be harmed (Kanu 2021, 31). Different communities maintain prohibitions on hunting or killing different species, creating patchwork protection that benefits overall biodiversity even though no single community protects all species.

Taboo systems function as ecological guardians by establishing prohibitions on particular activities, species, locations, or

times based on spiritual sanctions (Anoliefo, Isikhuemhen, and Ochiye 2003, 282). Environmental taboos limit access to and use of natural resources, with prohibitions on felling trees in sacred forests, hunting animals during breeding seasons, or fishing during spawning periods. These restrictions create temporal and spatial refugia that allow species populations to recover from harvesting pressure while maintaining ecosystem functioning. The violation of taboos triggers not merely social disapproval but spiritual consequences including illness, crop failure, or communal disaster. When taboos are violated, the gods are displeased and this results in disasters and calamities that befall not only the transgressor but the whole community, necessitating reconciliation that also involves communal participation in restorative rituals. Sacred market days possess ecological significance as there were particular market days when fishing or hunting was prohibited, allowing water bodies or forests to regenerate from use (Kanu 2021, 31). At the spiritual level, it is taken that the particular deity associated with the particular market day is having time with his or her children, which include the fish and other inhabitants.

Ritual practices connecting eco-spirituality and environmental stewardship include thanksgiving sacrifices expressing gratitude for environmental bounty, atonement sacrifices rectifying violations of environmental prohibitions, preventive sacrifices seeking protection from environmental disasters, and communal sacrifices reinforcing collective environmental responsibility. Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion is more than a ritual act but a profound expression of spiritual devotion and communal solidarity and an intent to appease or seek favour from gods (Nnoruga 2025, 90). By addressing spiritual, physical, and communal needs, sacrifices maintain ecological and cosmic balance while preserving cultural identity. Practices like reverence for sacred forests and rivers, which serve as abodes of deities, promote environmental conservation and

deter exploitative use of resources (Nnoruga 2025, 89). During festival times, the environment is protected and given new shapes because of the upcoming celebrations, demonstrating how religious calendars create temporal conservation patterns that work in concert with taboo systems and totemic protections to form comprehensive ecological management frameworks.

4. Contemporary Environmental Crises and the Relevance of Igbo Eco-Spirituality

The world currently experiences severe consequences of environmental mismanagement, posing serious threat to existence as exploitation of nature finds expression in deforestation, desertification, extinction of species, air pollution, soil erosion, oil spillage, water pollution, and natural disasters (Kanu 2021, 6). Africa's experience includes pollution of air, water, and soil caused by industries, motor vehicle exhausts, heavy metals, nitrates, plastics, and industrial waste, resulting in climate change visible in global warming, melting of polar ice caps, rise in sea levels, and unnatural precipitation patterns. The basic logic of globalisation centres on capital accumulation through transformation of everything into commodities for sale, throwing individual against individual while its concern with material wealth above human dignity dehumanises human beings and sacrifices life for greed. This exploitative worldview constructs mentality in which there is always more trees to plunder, more fish to catch, more land to amass, more minerals to mine, driven by irrational desire for more without consideration of past lessons or future generations' needs. Nigeria faces severe environmental challenges including deforestation from industrial logging treating forests as mere timber sources rather than sacred groves, water pollution from industrial waste and excessive river dredging destroying aquatic habitats, soil degradation from agrochemical misuse and exploitative agriculture treating soil as inert substrate, biodiversity loss from commercial hunting

decimating wildlife populations, and atmospheric pollution from emissions contributing to climate change.

Igbo eco-spirituality offers direct responses through its system of sacred groves where forests designated as sanctuaries inhabited by deities create conservation operating through religious conviction rather than external regulation, establishing social fences shielding ecosystems from exploitation (Sadowski 2012, 141). When communities recognise forests as abodes of Ala, water bodies as domain of Mmuo Mmiri, and sky as realm of Amadioha and Anyanwu, environmental degradation becomes spiritual transgression carrying severe consequences including illness, crop failure, and communal disaster. Ala deity as great mother goddess who created ground and vegetable kingdom positions land as holy, meaning soil degradation constitutes desecration of sacred mother requiring *mejuo Ala* (pacification of land) (Kanu 2021, 23). The concept brings perspective with notions of mother, source of life, nourisher, supporter, teacher, introducing respect, love, care, empathy, support, patience indispensable for promoting good health of ecosystems (Kanu 2021, 16). Traditional taboo systems protecting wildlife through spiritual sanctions and totemic relationships creating spiritual kinship between communities and animal species protected diverse fauna through distributed responsibility.

The key advantage of eco-spiritual approaches over purely secular environmental regulations lies in ability to create internal motivation for conservation grounded in religious conviction rather than relying on external enforcement mechanisms.

The concept of *omenani* (natural law) establishes cosmic balance as fundamental ordering principle, positioning environmental degradation as violation of spiritual order carrying consequences beyond merely physical or economic damages (Kanu 2021, 5). When people understand that environmental violations disrupt relationships with Ala, Mmuo Mmiri, Amadioha, and ancestral

spirits, creating risks of illness, crop failure, and communal disaster, they possess powerful reasons for conservation transcending short-term economic incentives for exploitation. The principle of *igwebuike* creates communal rather than individual responsibility for environmental care, meaning entire communities share accountability for maintaining cosmic balance, making conservation a matter of collective identity rather than private choice (Kanu 2021, 5). The temporal extension of moral community to include ancestors and future generations creates intergenerational environmental ethics transcending short-term calculation characteristic of market economics, with land understood as material-spirit reality binding together living, dead, and yet-to-be-born (Kalu 2001, 54).

Addressing Nigeria's environmental crises through Igbo eco-spiritual frameworks requires a concrete application adapted to contemporary circumstances. Sacred groves can receive legal protection as biodiversity reserves, combining spiritual sanctions with state enforcement while providing scientific documentation of ecological value. River protection can integrate spiritual reverence for Mmuo Mmiri with scientific monitoring of water quality and aquatic biodiversity, with communities maintaining traditional prohibitions on water pollution receiving support for monitoring and enforcement, creating hybrid systems combining spiritual motivation with technical capacity. Agricultural policies should recognise Ala deity as philosophical foundation for soil conservation, supporting farming practices honouring land as sacred mother rather than exploiting soil as inert resource. Totemic protections for wildlife can be documented and revived through community initiatives validating traditional knowledge while providing material support for conservation. The challenge lies in adapting traditional wisdom to contemporary circumstances without losing spiritual foundations, creating hybrid approaches that validate indigenous knowledge while

engaging productively with modern realities. Success requires policy frameworks recognising traditional authorities, educational programmes presenting indigenous wisdom respectfully, and institutional support for community-based conservation maintaining spiritual motivations while providing technical capacity.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Igbo cosmology offers substantial philosophical and practical resources for addressing contemporary environmental crises through its integration of spiritual consciousness with ecological responsibility. The analysis has shown how Igbo eco-spirituality operates through distinctive ontological commitments including vital force pervading all existents, relational frameworks positioning beings in networks of mutual interdependence, and hierarchical spiritual orders establishing accountability for environmental care. The pantheon of deities governing natural domains, Ala for land, Mmuo Mmiri for water, Amadioha and Anyanwu for sky creates spiritual sanctions protecting ecosystems through religious conviction rather than external regulation alone. Sacred groves, totemic relations, taboo systems, and ritual practices function as conservation mechanisms that have maintained biodiversity and ecosystem integrity for generations, demonstrating effectiveness that rivals or exceeds purely legal frameworks. These traditional systems embody sophisticated ecological knowledge accumulated through careful observation and transmitted through cultural practices, validating indigenous wisdom that modernising forces have dismissed as primitive superstition.

The relevance of Igbo eco-spirituality for contemporary environmental crises lies in its capacity to provide motivational structures transcending the economic incentives driving ecological destruction under globalisation. Nigeria faces severe environmental challenges including deforestation for commercial logging, water pollution

from industrial waste and excessive dredging, soil degradation from exploitative agriculture, biodiversity loss from commercial hunting, and atmospheric pollution contributing to climate change. These crises stem from worldviews treating nature as infinite resource available for unlimited exploitation, transforming everything into commodities valued only for market price while ignoring spiritual significance and ecological functions. Igbo eco-spirituality counters this commodification by positioning nature as sacred manifestation of divine ordering inhabited by spiritual beings whose violation carries consequences extending beyond physical or economic damages to include spiritual sanctions affecting entire communities.

The principle of *igwebuike* establishes communal rather than individual responsibility for environmental care, creating collective accountability more effective than purely individualistic ethics. Revitalising these spiritual frameworks while integrating them with contemporary conservation science offers Nigeria pathways for addressing environmental crises grounded in cultural authenticity rather than imported regulations. The challenge lies in adapting traditional wisdom to contemporary circumstances without losing spiritual foundations, creating hybrid approaches that validate indigenous knowledge while engaging productively with modern realities. Success requires policy frameworks recognising traditional authorities, educational programmes presenting indigenous wisdom respectfully, and institutional support for community-based conservation that maintains spiritual motivations while providing technical capacity. Igbo eco-spirituality demonstrates that solutions to environmental crises need not rely solely on Western scientific frameworks but can draw on indigenous philosophical traditions offering distinctive and potentially more effective approaches to human-environment relationships.

Statements

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