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A DEMARCATION BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION: RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS WISDOM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Abstract. In recent times, there has been a global resurgence in the recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in addressing contemporary crises, particularly environmental challenges. IKS simply refers to locally founded systems of knowledge, values, and practices, which are developed through long-term interaction between communities and their environments. However, in a world where scientific innovation and development are on the rise, the acceptance of these systems may be threatened due to their spiritual foundations, which are often misunderstood as purely religious. This misinterpretation arises from the widespread belief that spirituality is inseparable from religion, thereby limiting the acceptance of Indigenous perspectives in global environmental interventions by institutions and individuals. In addressing the above concern, this paper engages with the assumptions surrounding the above postulation from a philosophical perspective. Being philosophical in nature, the paper is at the intersection of environmental ethics and philosophy of religions, and as such, its arguments follow suit. It adopts a qualitative method, particularly, the method of conceptual and critical analysis, and by so doing, it clarifies the distinction between spirituality and religions. From an African perspective, this paper challenges the assumption that religion and spirituality are inseparable for the purpose of environmental conservation. It argues that, while religion and spirituality have historically intersected they are conceptually and practically distinct. It concludes by contending that the spiritual dimensions of IKS are independent of religious affiliation. Thus, this paper seeks to strengthen the credibility, acceptance, and applicability of IKS in environmental policy and sustainable practice, and as such, it provides a path toward more inclusive and ethical approaches to environmental sustainability.

Keywords: environmental stewardship; Indigenous Knowledge System; religion; spirituality

1. Introduction. 2. Materials and methodology. 3. Conceptual clarifications. 3.1. The concept of religion. 3.2. The concept of spirituality. 4. Misconceptions of religiosity and spirituality. 5. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and its spiritual foundations for environmental stewardship. 6. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current global discourse on environmental sustainability has consistently begun to acknowledge the value of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), with the recognition that Indigenous peoples at present manage about 80% of the world's biodiversity, coupled with their traditional knowledge aligning with contemporary sustainable development goals (IIRR, 2022-2023). IKS refer to locally founded knowledge that is nurtured over a period of time, built through the lived experiences of the people. In other words, it encompasses the totality of the systems with which people depend on to navigate through life and its adversities. According to the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): "Indigenous knowledge refers to the understanding and practices developed by indigenous communities over generations, rooted in their unique cultural experiences and relationships with the natural environment. This knowledge encompasses aspects of ecology, agriculture, and medicine, linking traditional wisdom with the natural sciences" (UNESCO, n.d.).

As mentioned, such knowledge systems have their foundations in centuries of lived experiences, holistic environmental ethics, and intergenerational wisdom, and they have been established to offer alternative perspectives for solving contemporary ecological challenges (Rawat, Mishra, 2021; IIRR, 2022, Mogaji, 2025). They include knowledge of sustainable human–environment relationships (see Njau, 2014; Lasisi, 2023), effective governance (See Mascarenhas, 2004; Mahlala *et al.*, 2023), and extend even to the field of education (See Mawere, 2015; Madusise, 2022)

Accordingly, IKS are founded on certain spiritual foundations, which guide human-environment relationships (Rawat, Mishra, 2021; IIRR, 2022, Mogaji, 2025). In line with the Indigenous knowledge of the Yoruba people, Mogaji (2025: 126) argues that "the Yoruba people see every existence including hills, mountains, rocks, thick

forests, and so on, as possessing spiritual elements." Similarly, the authors of the IIRR (2022) found out that the Indigenous knowledge of the Indigenous people made them recognize the spiritual nature of forests, which informs their relationship with it. Hence, it is arguable that it is this spirituality that forms the basis of traditional ecological knowledge, as found among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Māori of New Zealand, or the Ojibwe of North America (see Mogaji, 2025; Nepal, 2024; 2019; Rawat and Mishra, 2021; McAllister *et al.* , 2023; Lasisi, 2023). However, its global applicability may be a critical misunderstanding, one that conflates the spiritual foundations of Indigenous knowledge with religion, and in some cases it is often missed (Nepal, 2024). This is mostly a result of confusing spirituality with organized religion, often bound by ritual, creed, and institutional hierarchy, thereby losing its epistemological independence and becoming suspect in scientific deliberations (see Mogaji, 2025).

In a world that is rapidly advancing in scientific innovation and technological rationalism, the reliance on IKS often breeds epistemological resistance from mainstream policy-making institutions (see Mogaji, 2025). The misrepresentation of spirituality as religious belief has meant that knowledge systems informed by Indigenous worldviews are sidelined in policy frameworks that give priority to materialist and mechanistic worldviews. However, as Nepal (2024) argues spirituality in Indigenous communities reflects a kind of consciousness grounded in ecological interconnectedness, which IIRR (2022) exposes as supporting sustainable behavior grounded in relational ethics. This integrative mode of environmental understanding is often void of Western scientific frameworks, but over time it has however helped and sustained Indigenous people's strive for sustainability and ecological justice (IIRR, 2022). Thus, in this context it is safe to say that Spirituality is not a doctrine but a dynamic, lived experience through which humans understand their place within a sacred ecological order. It is this spirituality that forms the basis of traditional ecological knowledge, as found among the Yoruba

of Nigeria, the Zulu people of South Africa, or the Māori of New Zealand, (see Mogaji, 2025; McAllister *et al.*, 2023; Lasisi, 2023). It is on this basis that this paper challenges the presumption that Indigenous spirituality must be synonymous with religious doctrine, arguing instead that the former embodies a deeper ontological and epistemic orientation that is often erroneously subsumed under the latter. By engaging critically with the research on religion and spirituality, and with an extensive focus on the lived experiences of the Africans, this paper contends that, while religion and spirituality may share historical or symbolic connections they are conceptually distinct, and that such distinction is critical for legitimizing IKS in climate and environmental justice debates.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is neither a sociological nor a psychological study. Rather, it is philosophical research, one that connects environmental ethics and philosophy of religion. It adopts the method of conceptual and critical analysis to rearticulate the boundaries between religion and spirituality. It contains four sections. The first section clarifies the concept of spirituality and that of religion. The second section looks into the misconception of spirituality as dependent on religion, thereby undermining the credibility of IKS due to spiritual misclassification. The third section examines Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Stewardship. It discusses the nature, scope, and values embedded in IKS, with a particular focus to their spiritual (not necessarily religious) foundations, and how they have contributed to environmental sustainability through their roadmaps that prioritize mutual respect.

3. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

3.1. THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION

Over the years, the concept of religion has been explained and conceptualized from different perspectives, considering various socio-cultural foundations, orientations, and influences. This means that the meaning of religion can be viewed from different perspectives. To begin with, the term *religion* originates from the Latin word *religio*, which itself comes from *ligo*, meaning "to tie" or "to bind"; a root also found in the English word "ligament" (Saucier, Skrzypinska, 2006). Hence, etymologically, we could argue that religion is a system or practice that binds individuals to a set of beliefs, duties, or a higher power. In contemporary times, many have considered religion to be that which necessarily encompasses the idea of God that finds expression in various definitions of the term 'religion'. According to Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975, 1), religion is "a system of belief in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power." Joseph (1988) describes religion as the outward or external expression of faith. He suggested that religion has to do with how belief systems manifest in public rituals and communal identities. In a different vein, Pargament (2002) argues that religion has to do with the human quest for meaning, specifically in relation to what is considered sacred or transcendent, which highlights the existential and spiritual dimensions of a religious life. Furman and Chandy (1994) view religion as a structured collection of beliefs and ritual practices shared by a faith community, emphasizing its social and institutional characteristics.

According to Ogunbado (2012), the idea of religion is often regarded as a structured framework of beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, and acts of worship that recognize the existence of a supreme being, deity, or set of sacred principles. However, as argued by Akande (2013) history has shown us that there are countless religions without the idea

of a supreme god or being, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and Marxism among many others, all of which are based on moral principles, ethical positions, and an upright way of life. Cascio (1998) defines religion as the acceptance of a specific set of doctrines and moral principles, which guide ethical conduct and personal convictions. In the same vein, Gotterer (2001) in a more minimalist sense argues that religion is simply the act of "believing," which points to the core cognitive and affective trust in metaphysical or moral truths. From the above positions, we infer that there are two main ways to understand religion: on the one hand, there are those who believe religion as implying the existence of a God; on the other hand, there are those who believe there are Godless religions, implying that religion is not necessarily about a God. A position that captures both camps is that of Kwaghga and Alifa (2025), who define religion as a unifying social system grounded in beliefs or attitudes directed toward a person, object, supernatural entity, or worldview regarded as sacred or divine, and encompassing ethical principles, rituals, cultural values, institutions, and particular modes of thought. In other words, it is safe to argue that religion cannot be confined to a singular interpretation, as it is at once personal and communal, cognitive and emotional, doctrinal and experiential. Differences aside, the above definitions share the idea that religion concerns a moral framework that directs both personal and communal behavior through established rules and principles, all of which ultimately influence human interactions and inform our perspectives on life and the world. However, there are other definitions of the concept of religion.

According to Zinnbauer and Pargament (2021), traditional psychological research into the understanding of religion has approached it from both a substantive aspect, which defines religion by its essence (the sacred), and a functional aspect, which sees religion in terms of the roles it plays in a person's life. In some cases, the subjective aspect of religion has also been emphasized focusing on the individual's beliefs, motivation, emotions, behavior, etc. (Zinnbauer,

Pargament, 2021). The sociological understanding of religion sees it as a social control mechanism that reinforces social order (Settler, 2022). Here, religion is considered a social institution that influences beliefs, behaviors, and societal structures in order to mold people and society. In turn society influences religion, thereby leading to its evolution (Rivis-Tipei, 2023). The phenomenological understanding of religion attempts to interpret religious phenomena by looking at various religious experiences and how worshippers understand these experiences they encounter (DeRoo, 2020). It seeks the significance of religious occurrences. On this understanding, religion is seen as the interpretation of how the sacred manifests itself to people, how people comprehend and care for what is revealed to them, and what is ultimately a complete mystery (Smith, Schapiro, 2021).

The religious understanding views religion as the realization that everything in the universe is the expression of a force greater than human comprehension (Koenig *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, religion is often defined as beliefs, rituals, and practices pertaining to the transcendent or sacred deity. It entails the prescription of rules or ways in which worshippers are to behave in this life, the description of what life after death is, as well as beliefs about spirits, angels, and demons.

The naturalistic understanding of religion tries to mediate between supernaturalism and scientific reductionism. It tries to find a middle ground between the position that holds there is "a transcendent Creator beyond the physical domain," and the antagonistic position that "denies the possibility of grounding meaning in or beyond the universe" (Leidenhag, 2024). According to this view, the characteristics traditionally attributed to God, such as being the creator of order in the universe and the master designer, can be legitimately ascribed to the workings of nature (Spiegel, 2020). This account sees nature in its totality as having religious significance and deserving the reverence that traditional religions give to "the sacred deity" (Leidenhag, 2024).

However, essential to religion are three key aspects. The first is the cosmological explanation of how the world was ordered and its underlying structure, which can be mythical, philosophical, or theological (Leite *et al.*, 2023). This framework enables people to conceive how things came to be and why they exist. The second key aspect concerns rituals. Rituals are symbolic and repetitive behaviors prescribed by religion, which are believed to affect the intrinsic and extrinsic world of people, and are considered to be of deep religious significance (Rohman *et al.*, 2024). Rituals are said to put humans in their rightful place, as it is believed that by performing them humans can connect with the sacred being. The third key aspect is that religion provides ideas and methods for fundamental change that are meant to guide people toward spiritual perfection. This is what is usually interpreted as salvation and a proper relationship with the divine. Thus, it is arguable that a religion is typically organized and practiced within a community, though it can also be practiced individually. A key component of religion is that it rests on long-standing customs, which result from a community of individuals who share the same beliefs and engage in similar practices regarding the sacred (Horwitz, 2021). Research into religion often explores feelings, actions, ideas, and connections that are either directly tied to a transcendent or immanent force or are sacred in themselves (Zinnbauer, Pargament, 2021).

From the above, it is arguable that religion can take on both positive and negative forms. This can be seen in religions where people degrade themselves in reference to a higher force, and in religions where the divine (God) symbolizes self-realization. In the negative expression of religion, the transcendent is seen as possessing those good characteristics that individuals do not possess because they are "imperfect." By contrast, in the positive expression of religion, the attributes of the transcendent symbolize human potential and act as support (Leidenhag, 2024).

3.2. THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY

The word *spirituality* is traceable to the Latin term *spiritus*, which itself comes from *spirare*, meaning "to breathe" (Wulff, 1997). This etymology suggests that spirituality is intimately connected to the very essence of life and being. Shafranske and Gorsuch (1984, 231, cited in: Saucier, Skrzypinska, 2006, 1259) define spirituality broadly as "a transcendent dimension within human experience . . . discovered in moments in which the individual questions the meaning of personal existence and attempts to place the self within a broader ontological context." This definition positions spirituality as a reflective process through which individuals seek understanding beyond the material world, which could be through critical or skeptical inquiry. In a different vein, Vaughan (1991, 105, cited in: Saucier, Skrzypinska, 2006, 1259) provided a more narrowed and focused perspective by describing spirituality as "a subjective experience of the sacred," placing more emphasis on the personal, inner dimension of connecting with what is perceived as holy, meaningful, or ultimate.

Exposed in the work of Hodge and McGrew (2005), the concept of spirituality has been expressed in diverse ways across scholarly literature. Derezotes (1995, 1) characterizes spirituality as "a complex, intrapsychic dimension of human development," suggesting a deep psychological and developmental significance within the individual. From another perspective, Bullis (1996, 2) views spirituality as "the relationship of the human person to something or someone who transcends themselves." Here, Bullis points to a transcendent and relational dimension of spirituality. Following the above perspective, Netting *et al.* (1990) describe it as involving "a kind of relationship to a force which is greater than oneself." Barker (1995, 363) argues from an ecological perspective that spirituality is the "devotion to the immaterial part of humanity and nature," which tries to establish a reverence that bridges human consciousness and the natural world. From an existential perspective, Sheridan and Amato-von

Hemert (1999, 129) understand spirituality as "the human search for purpose and meaning of life experiences." In the same vein, Carroll (1997, 27) conceptualize spirituality as "the essence of the individual," and in a later work as "one's basic nature" (Carroll, 1998, 2). Akande and Ofuasia (2020) and Ibiyemi (2023) also considered spirituality through the Yoruba purview as the essence of being, or rather the underlying factor that defines being, which Ofuasia and Obi (2024) and Akande and Motadegbe (2022) argue is inherent in every human. Hence, by looking inwardly the above sets of varying perspectives collectively illustrate spirituality as an integral part of human life, framing it as an experiential and existential journey that transcends religious boundaries, involving both personal enlightenment and connection to a greater reality.

Historically, the concept of spirituality has often been said to be that part of humans larger than religious belief. It has been averred to be that through which humans connect to something larger than themselves, which can be others, nature, or divine entity/entities. It has also been conceived as that which concerns the connection with another existence (Saucier, Skrzypinska, 2006), as arguably a medium through which humans as existential entities find meaning and life purpose. According to Engelbrecht-Aldworth and Wort (2021), to be spiritual is to be a man who quests for meaning and purpose in life as an authentic existential being with knowledge of the bigger picture (a reality outside him). Spirituality determines the values we hold dear, our worldviews, and the choices we make in our lifetime (Fetzer Institute, 2020). Spirituality makes man self-aware as it enables him to engage in the investigation of his inner world, and to recognize the interdependence of all living and nonliving things in the environment (Nidhi, Gayathri, 2024). In the words of Nandram (2010, cited in: Engelbrecht-Aldworth, Wort, 2021), spirituality is a "… social DNA, the link between the higher self and the social environment," a fundamental characteristic of being human. This explains why Engelbrecht-Aldworth and Wort (2021) further argue

that the qualities of the "human spirit", such as compassion, love, harmony, and a sense of obligation, that enhance one's own and other people's happiness are what it means to be spiritual.

As it is clear from the above, the term 'connective' cannot be separated from the term 'spirituality' because to be spiritual is to be connected. In other words, spirituality helps build a sense of community and as a result enhances general well-being and life satisfaction. It could also be considered a universal aspect of us that transcends our personal experiences; a way of existing that we are able to attain through becoming aware of the spiritual (transcendent) dimension embodied in interconnectedness; a higher meaning and purpose in life; a belief in the intrinsic value of nature and others (Aldworth, Wort, 2021; Luetz, Nunn, 2023). Hence, hope, connectivity, and meaning are integral aspects of spirituality, and these are essential for man's well-being.

Without much ado, we can now categorically affirm that spirituality is about transcendent experiences such as feeling or becoming aware of one's connection to everything that exists. It has to do with the idea of being whole with the universe, connected with it, and engaging with it through a persistent exercise of inquiry.

4. MISCONCEPTIONS OF RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY

It is a prevalent misconception in current debates that being religious equates to being spiritual, or, to put it another way, that participating in religious activities is the only way to access the spiritual aspect of human existence. According to Rohman *et al.* (2024) this has led to the misconception that, if one does not identify with or belongs to a religion, the spiritual insights embedded in knowledge systems available to those who do are inaccessible. This has further led to the majority rejecting IKS. This situation is especially aggravated by those misconceptions favoring secular scientific paradigms, which often hold that IKS cannot be taken seriously or used as a framework

for action because they are founded on traditional religious views that cannot be empirically verified (Leite *et al.*, 2023). We argue that, when spirituality becomes confusingly mixed up with religiosity (as Olatade (2023), among others, pointed out), the acceptance of IKS is often hindered because they are considered religious due to their spiritual elements. It is thus necessary to show how spirituality differs from religiosity.

According to Zinnbauer and Pargament (2021), the existential aims people strive to achieve, which include finding purpose, wholeness, inner potential, and connections with others, were once considered religious aims but are actually spiritual. An illustration of this would be that religion has been found to be associated with formal belief, institutions, and collective practices, whereas spirituality is a search for universal truth and a belief system that links us as individuals to the outside world and helps us find meaning and purpose (Newberg, Newberg, 2021). As a result, the claim of DeRoo (2018) that religiosity is the basic aspect of all experience, including spiritual experience, is therefore questionable. Specifically, his idea that any living manifestation of spirituality (i.e., any spirit) is inherently religious can be refuted: religion primarily serves a supportive role in helping individuals fulfill existential needs, such as connecting with the world and finding meaning and purpose; spirituality, on the other hand, addresses these functions more directly (Zinnbauer, Pargament, 2021). Following Gschwandtner (2021), it could be argued that the contrast between spirituality and religion lies in the obvious fact that, while spirituality is considered "personal", "transcendent", and has to do with "interconnectedness", religion is characterized as "institutional", "organized", and "social". Zinnbauer and Pargament (2021) further argue that spirituality involves viewing the human condition through a broader or transcendent lens, and it includes caring about the meaning and purpose of life, as well as things that cannot be seen, such as an individual's connection to a larger force. In contrast, being religious refers to a commitment to beliefs and

practices of specific traditions. Aish *et al.* (2020) further explain that spirituality is a personal life principle that transcends words and leads to a connection with a supreme entity. Religiousness, on the other hand, is a system of organized beliefs and worship that a person practices. In other words, while spirituality is a personal affirmation of the transcendent and is therefore subjective, religion is institutional as it involves the means and methods of seeking the sacred that receive validation and support from an identifiable group of people (Leidenhag, 2024).

According to Reniko (2022), over time traditional ecological knowledge has been neglected by African people, largely due to their adoption of Western science and other Western practices. Reniko argues that most of the IKS, which historically guided environmental consciousness, have been abandoned primarily because of formal education and religion. In particular, religion plays a significant role in this neglect as it reflects the misconception that IKS are inherently religious. This misconception stems from the deep spirituality that underlies IKS, manifested in practices such as taboos, rituals, and sacred observances. Reniko emphasizes that the adoption of Western religious practices often appears incompatible with Indigenous worldviews. As a result IKS, which have been developed over generations through interaction with the environment are wrongly dismissed as mere religious beliefs, rather than recognized for their spiritual and ecological significance. For example, the practice of taboos, which has long guided environmental relations through ritual prohibitions against certain activities or contact with specific places or objects, has been widely abandoned due to the belief that such practices are religious or superstitious (Mapira, Mazambara, 2013).

In a related study, Mji (2019) explores the epistemological and ontological tensions in Indigenous healing processes, particularly focusing on the role of women as healers. Her study revealed that the Indigenous healing practices of the Madwaleni people were rejected by colonial-era ministers of religion, who dismissed them

on the grounds that the practices were rooted in paganism. As a result, these healing approaches, carefully developed over many years through experiential knowledge and deep environmental awareness, were delegitimized and erased, not because they were ineffective, but because of the misguided belief that they were religious rather than spiritual. Similarly, Nepal (2024) contends that over the years IKS have been consistently marginalized by institutionalized systems of knowledge generation and transmission, which inherently favor Western scientific paradigms. According to her, such paradigms are built on biases that ignore or undermine the value of spiritual wisdom embedded in IKS. Rather than embracing the genuine connection between Indigenous communities and the natural world, mainstream institutions have opted for denial, leading to the widespread rejection of Indigenous spiritual epistemologies. It is on this note that Fernández-Llamazares *et al.* (2021), among other renowned scientists, argue and warn that the threat to IKS, or as they put it local knowledge systems, endangers our future stewardship and risks the collapse of our planet. They first call attention to the kind of relationship we often have with IKS, built on neglect and denial. For them, the foundations upon which such knowledge systems are built strengthen society through a set of practices, which however often face disconnection, suppression, and are based on a misinterpretation as we have pointed out earlier. As Abimbola (1977) argues, *Ifá*, which is often considered religious, is in fact an encyclopedic corpus of the Yoruba civilization. It serves as a repository of the people's culture, history, medicine, law, and even philosophy, all of which point to a system of knowledge that goes beyond mere religious practice. In other words, Ifá can be argued to encompass, among others, elements of religion, science, and ethics; however, it is not, in itself, a religion.

5. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND ITS SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

The idea of IKS spans across various cultures and traditions and is grounded in a unique system of underlying principles. As a result, there are multiple IKS, such as the Indian knowledge system (Khan, Sharma, 2024), the Canadian knowledge system (McGregor, 2021), and the African knowledge system (Ayeni, Aborisade, 2022), among many others. In general, IKS refer to local or traditional knowledge, which constitute a repository of wisdom often embedded within the cultural fabric of the respective communities. It could also refer to a holistic body of practices, beliefs, and experiences passed down through generations. In other words, it can be understood as the deep insight and adaptive understanding exhibited by Indigenous communities. According to Warren (1991), it encompasses the knowledge employed by local inhabitants over time to adapt and thrive within their unique environments. Further elaborating on this, Ellen and Harris (2000) argue that IKS are distinctive to each culture, housing practices and methods that have been refined through experimentation and adjustment in response to changing circumstances.

Over the years, these systems have significantly influenced how people make decisions about their survival and relate to various phenomena in their environments. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 1997), IKS encompass rich, interconnected domains, including ecological, social, economic, and spiritual dimensions, all of which are suitable for transformational development, built on cultural traditions and belief systems. In essence, such systems reflect an understanding of the relationships that exist between humans, nature, and the cosmos at large. This relational worldview embedded in IKS challenges the dominant anthropocentric models that often isolate humans from their ecological context. Using Africa as a case study, Chikaire *et al.* (2012) acknowledge that their knowledge system can significantly contribute to addressing

contemporary challenges and building a more inclusive and equitable future in Africa. Using the Indian case, Mandavkar (2023) argues that the Indian knowledge system holds significant potential for addressing contemporary societal challenges across various domains, including holistic health, psychology, neuroscience, environmental conservation, and sustainable development. In other words, an Indigenous knowledge system is arguably a set of knowledge that has been developed over the course of history to help solve practical issues, aid survival, and ensure progress and development, rather than some knowledge set outrightly pertaining to religion. The custodians of such knowledge system are no other than the Indigenous people, and their knowledge of the environment, concerning mainly environmental stewardship is quite different from the currently dominating cultural paradigms, having to do with. Now, what do we mean by environmental stewardship?

According to McLeod *et al.* (2024, 1), "Environmental stewardship is a term describing both the philosophy and the actions required to protect, restore, and sustainably use natural resources for the future benefit of the environment and society." This definition shows the dual nature of stewardship as both a mindset and a practice. It denotes intentional care, responsibility, and long-term vision in the management of ecological systems. In other words, it is arguable that environmental stewardship is not simply about conservation, but it encompasses the idea of ensuring a respectful and ethical relationship between humans and the natural world, recognizing their interdependence and prioritizing sustainability over exploitation. However, how have Indigenous people approached it?

There is not a unique definition of Indigenous people, as over time numerous interpretations have been ascribed to the concept. In a literal sense, the term "Indigenous people" refers to culturally distinct ethnic groups who possess unique identities, often separate from that of the national society (particularly within contemporary contexts). However, according to Melchias (2001), Indigenous

peoples are considered those who rely on local resources and often lack political dominance within their respective regions. The World Bank (1991) defines Indigenous people as social groups with distinct socio-cultural identities who have historically been vulnerable to disadvantages within the development process. This is primarily because they are often secluded from the general population due to their deep-rooted connection with the fabric of the environment. Especially when it comes to environmental issues, Indigenous people are perceived as being closer to nature than to the broader society. Here, „environment" refers to the natural ecosystem, which is often interpreted through a spiritual lens. The African concept of the Ubuntu, for instance, has often informed the people that the environment is part of the community, and should be treated as one (See Samuel, Omosulu, 2024). Similarly, in the Indian knowledge system the verse "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" promotes familyhood and considers every creature as a member of one big family, to be treated with care (Gautam, Gautam, 2017; Kar, 2023). In the same vein, Raven *et al.* (2012) argue that, showing that the relationships between organisms, humans, and the environment is the underlying factor that ensures ecological balance. These principles have a spiritual foundation, considering our submission in an earlier section that spirituality is about transcendent experiences such as feeling or becoming aware of one's connection to everything that exists. Spirituality has to do with the idea of being whole with the universe, connected with it, and engaging with it through a persistent exercise of inquiry.

According to Ashton (2010, cited in: Rawat, Mishra, 2021), ancient civilizations, many of which were grounded in IKS, revered the Earth and recognized their interconnectedness with the natural world through their spiritual consciousness. This worldview promotes the maintenance of a sacred reverence for the Earth's cyclical rhythms, which is spiritual in nature since spirituality is seen as the social DNA that connects the individual with the environment (Engelbrecht-Aldworth, Wort, 2021). These set of world views are

managed and implemented by means of taboos and customs (Pásková, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2008), all of which have contributed to the respect and care Indigenous communities extend toward water bodies, mountains, and animals. Such acts are regarded as sacred entities (Ashton, 2010, cited in: Rawat, Mishra, 2021). Merchant (1992) further supports this by noting that IKS often view nature as alive and imbued with intelligence. As a result, actions such as cutting a tree are carried out with reverence and respect. In other words, their understanding of the environment, which is determined by their relationship with the environment, has consistently informed and guided their practices of environmental stewardship, which we consider spiritual. According to Nepal (2024) spirituality is the core of Indigenous knowledge, which in turn serves as a guide to ecological practices. Rather than viewing nature as a separate or subordinate entity to be controlled or exploited, their spiritual understanding of the environment as having more than the physical dimension we perceive enables Indigenous epistemologies to portray a sense of kinship, reciprocity, and respect between human and non-human life (see Ojomo, 2011; Ogungbemi, 1997). This ethical orientation has implications for contemporary environmental stewardship, especially in the face of escalating ecological crises driven by extractivist development models.

However, it is quite important to note that the distinction between spirituality and religion advanced in this paper does not imply that spirituality must always exist independently of religion. This is because within several religious traditions, particularly Catholic theology and Christian mystical thought, spirituality is understood as an integral dimension of religious life rather than a phenomenon external to it (See McGinn, 1991; Sheldrake, 2012). For example, if we consider the spiritual traditions associated with figures such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, and the Desert Fathers and Mothers, which illustrate forms of spirituality that are embedded within religious practice and theological reflection, we realize the intricate connection between spirituality and religion (See Merton, 2004;

Tyler, 2011). In this context, Olatade (2023) argues that spirituality is the foundation which religion operates on, simultaneously affirming that spirituality is much broader than religion and its independence from religion. In essence, the position advanced in this paper should not be interpreted as a universal definition of spirituality; rather, it is a philosophical framework adopted for the purpose of clarifying the spiritual foundations of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The claim this paper pursues is that spirituality is not necessarily dependent upon institutional religion. Therefore, IKS should not be dismissed just because they encompass a spiritual dimension.

6. CONCLUSION

Beginning with the conceptualization of religion as a system that is often institutionalized and centered on worship, we have shown how religion differs from spirituality, especially from an African perspective, and portrayed spirituality as encompassing a sense of connection, purpose, and the search for meaning in one's life, often involving a relationship with the world or a higher, transcendent entity. Next, we have demonstrated how, despite sharing some similarities, the two concepts are frequently misconceptualized as identical. Lastly, we have shown that IKS are not founded on religiosity, but rather on spirituality. No doubt, religion and spirituality may both share a core sense of awe, which is what Olatade (2023) argues when he claims that spirituality is "… the underlying canon of religion." However, there is a distinction between the two concepts. For example, we have shown that the definitions of religion frequently mention membership to a place of worship or allegiance, ritual performance, organizational practices or activities, adherence to institutionally-based belief systems, or dedication to organizational values. On the other hand, the definitions of spirituality frequently refer to finding purpose, searching for meaning, and experiences or feelings of interconnectedness with the world and living things. Thus,

to claim or assume that religiosity is synonymous with spirituality is to err and bias, for even if there is some overlap they are two distinct experiences. Following on from the thrust of this paper, the authors advance the stance of an African environmental ethics, calling for a global acceptance of Indigenous knowledge for the purpose of environmental conservation, even with its spiritual dimension. As for the latter, the spirituality embedded in IKS has nothing to do with religion; rather, it is a representation of how people have understood nature over a long period of time.

STATEMENTS

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