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Land stewardship and environmental ethics in African languages and culture

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Abstract: Land stewardship and environmental ethics in African societies are deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems expressed in African languages and cultural practices. This study examines how African languages work as vehicles for conveying environmental values, land-use principles and the moral responsibility to respect the natural world. Unlike Western paradigms, which often view land as an economic commodity, many African cultures view it as a shared and sacred legacy that links the living, the ancestors, and future generations. These perspectives are encoded in linguistic terms, idioms, oral stories, ritual expressions, and naming practices that emphasise respect, restraint, and sustainability. The paper examines how indigenous ecological ethics guide traditional land management systems such as rotational farming, sacred groves, seasonal grazing, and water management. Through linguistic analysis of selected African proverb and oral texts, the study shows how language promotes collective responsibility, discourages overuse and promotes harmony between human communities and the natural world. African languages not only preserve ecological knowledge but also serve as educational tools to teach the elderly about the care of the environment and the management of their land. In addition, the research highlights the relevance of African environmental ethics today to address current challenges such as land degradation, climate change and resource conflicts. The marginalisation of African languages in formal education and policy making has contributed to eroding indigenous land-based values. Reintegration of African linguistic and cultural perspectives into environmental management can increase community participation and sustainable spatial practices. The study concluded that the strengthening of African languages is essential to revitalise the indigenous ethos of the environment and to promote sustainable development. Recognizing language as a critical component of soil management offers valuable insights into environmentally responsible policies rooted in African worldviews.

Keywords: Land management; Environmental ethics; African languages; Indigenous knowledge; Sustainable development

Introduction

Land stewardship and environmental ethics in African languages and culture are rooted in indigenous worldviews that emphasise harmony, interdependence, and moral responsibility toward the natural world. Unlike Western paradigms that often conceptualise land as a commodified resource, African indigenous knowledge systems understand land as a living entity connected to God, ancestors, community identity, and future generations. African languages play a critical role in transmitting these values by embedding environmental ethics within proverbs, oral traditions, rituals, and everyday communication.

African environmental ethics are grounded in the belief that humans are inseparable from nature. The natural environment land, water, forests, and animals—is viewed as part of a moral universe governed by spiritual and communal obligations (Mbiti, 1990). This worldview recognises the interconnectedness of all forms of life and stresses

the responsibility to maintain balance within ecosystems. In Africa, faith in God forms the foundation of religious practices constituting a pivotal element of African ontology and spirituality (Mbiti 1969). Africans believes that the cosmos as a creation initiated by God, who provides essential components for its sustainability. The divine role emphasizes God's provision of life, health, rainfall, and other necessities (Nche, & Michael, 2024). This notion that God created all things strongly permeates African perspectives on the environment (Emmanuel, & Ekpenyong, 2021)

Cultural practices stemming from indigenous ethics, including rotational farming and community-based water management, demonstrate a profound understanding of ecological limits. These practices are upheld by ethical norms that emphasize the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and ancestors. Sacred landscapes, viewed as revered conservation zones, help preserve biodiversity and ecological balance. Indigenous land stewardship systems, despite their sustainability, have been marginalized due to colonial policies, urbanization, and language loss. Modern environmental governance frequently prioritizes technocratic methods over indigenous knowledge. However, the rising concerns of climate change and environmental degradation have reignited interest in indigenous ecological ethics. By integrating African languages and cultural insights into environmental education and policy, sustainability efforts can be grounded in locally relevant ethical frameworks, highlighting the interconnection between protecting indigenous languages and their environmental wisdom.

This paper explores how African languages and cultural practices convey environmental values and guide sustainable land stewardship, demonstrating their continued relevance in contemporary environmental governance.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach grounded in indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Interpretive research is based on the premise that social reality is shaped by way of human experience and social backdrop, thereby making it well suited to do research on human behaviours which are related in the context of its socio-cultural issues (Bhattacherjee, 2012). According to Wangui et al. (2020), Indigenous Knowledge Systems are vital for sustainable development as they provide locally adapted solutions that have stood the test of time and are essential for decolonizing knowledge production and policy-making in African contexts. Understanding IKS through a structured framework helps bridge indigenous and scientific knowledge systems, promoting cross-cultural dialogue and co-management of resources. It supports sustainable development by leveraging locally adapted solutions to challenges such as climate change, food security, and biodiversity loss (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, it contributes to decolonizing research and policy by valuing indigenous epistemologies on equal footing with Western paradigms.

Data were collected through a review of existing literature, including academic journal articles, books, policy documents, and ethnographic studies focusing on African environmental ethics, land tenure systems, and linguistic practices. Sources were drawn from disciplines such as environmental studies, anthropology, linguistics, and African philosophy.

In addition, the study draws on documented African proverbs, and case studies from selected African communities, particularly in Southern Africa, to illustrate how land stewardship is articulated in African languages. Content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes related to environmental responsibility, communal ownership, spirituality, and sustainability. According to Schreier (2021) content analysis is a methodical approach to qualitative research that involves classifying, coding, and detecting patterns, themes, or meanings in textual, visual, or auditory data in order to comprehend and analyze its content. By looking at the existence, frequency, and context of particular words, phrases, or concepts, social science researchers might draw conclusions about communication, social phenomena, or cultural trends. The analysis prioritised indigenous perspectives and sought to interpret environmental ethics as expressed through language, cultural practices, and customary norms.

Results and Discussion

African Languages as Carriers of Environmental Ethics

The findings reveal that African languages play a central role in shaping environmental ethics and land stewardship practices. They serve as repositories of ecological knowledge and moral instruction. Through proverbs, idioms, folktales, and praise poetry, environmental values are encoded and transmitted across generations (Finnegan, 2012). These linguistic forms carry lessons about moderation, respect, and sustainable land use without reliance on written texts. Proverbs such as the isiZulu saying “Umhlaba awuthengiswa, uyabolekwa” (The land is not sold, it is borrowed) encapsulate the principle of intergenerational responsibility. Such expressions reinforce the idea that land must be protected for future generations rather than exploited for short-term gain. Its express African ecological ethics and stewardship principles, emphasizing responsibility to future generations (Kaya & Seleti, 2013). Further, African

languages contain specialised vocabulary related to seasons, soil types, vegetation, and farming practices. This linguistic specificity reflects generations of environmental observation and adaptation (Berkes, 2018). The erosion of indigenous languages thus poses a significant threat to the survival of traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable land-use practices.

Proverbs are widely used in storytelling, traditional courts, religious teachings, and leadership discourse. Elders often employ proverbs to advise youth, resolve disputes, and convey criticism indirectly but respectfully. This indirect communication style promotes reflection rather than confrontation, strengthening social cohesion (Finnegan, 2012). Furthermore, proverbs play a central role in African societies as a means of communication that emphasizes respect, communal responsibility, and social harmony. For example, the isiZulu proverb "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person through other people) highlights the philosophy of Ubuntu, which stresses interconnectedness, compassion, and mutual care. Such proverbs reinforce communal values over individualism and guide social behaviour in everyday life (Broodryk, 2006).

Proverbs in contemporary Africa remain significant in literature, education, theology, and politics, even amidst modernization and globalization. However, the decline of African languages endangers this oral tradition. To uphold African cultural knowledge systems, it is crucial to preserve and incorporate proverbs into formal education and public life. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2022) emphasizes that decolonising education requires reclaiming African epistemologies that were historically excluded from formal schooling. By incorporating proverbs, educators legitimize African ways of knowing and bridge the gap between formal education and community-based knowledge.

To preserve African proverbs, systematic documentation, translation, and digitization are crucial. Collaboration among elders, scholars, educators, and cultural practitioners will ensure authenticity and intergenerational transmission. Incorporating proverbs into educational materials and research agendas is necessary for their longevity; without these efforts, the erosion of African languages may result in the irreversible loss of this heritage (Finnegan, 2012).

Communal Land Ownership and Responsibility

Across many African societies, land is collectively owned and managed, with access regulated by customary law. This system fosters a strong sense of accountability, as misuse of land affects the entire community. African languages encode these norms through terms that emphasize sharing, care, and collective well-being. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* underscores the belief that human dignity is inseparable from the health of the environment.

Barajas, Kubitza & Lay (2024) explained that Communal land systems face modern challenges, including legal pluralism, land reform, and changing economic pressures. As customary and statutory laws interact, unclear responsibilities can emerge, affecting how land is managed and who makes decisions. In some cases, formal recognition of communal land rights can empower communities to protect and manage their land, but the process of formalization also introduces new dynamics and responsibilities

Scholes (2017) elucidate further that Communal ownership can promote environmental responsibility when strong social norms and institutions exist to manage land use. Under customary governance, community members share a sense of long-term connection to the land and recognition that its degradation harms everyone. This contrasts with individualistic tendencies where short-term gain may override ecological considerations.

However, the effectiveness of communal stewardship depends on institutional capacity. Without clear rules, enforcement mechanisms, and accountability structures, communal land can be vulnerable to overuse, conflict, and degradation—a pattern often linked to the so-called "tragedy of the commons." Yet research shows that well-defined communal regimes can avoid degradation if clear use boundaries and governance norms are upheld.

The Notion of God and its Impact on African Environmental Ethics

The notion of God in African worldviews profoundly shapes moral values, social relations, and interactions with nature. Unlike Western dualistic traditions that often separate humans from the environment, African cosmologies tend to emphasize interconnectedness between God, humanity, nature, and the spiritual realm.

African Traditional Religions generally perceive God as a Supreme Being who is creator, sustainer, and moral governor of the universe. Although names differ across cultures—uNkulunkulu (Zulu), Modimo (Sotho-Tswana), Nyame (Akan), Chukwu (Igbo)—the attributes are remarkably consistent: God is eternal, powerful, benevolent, and intimately involved in the cosmos (Mbiti, 1990). God is not viewed as distant. Instead, divine presence permeates all of creation. Nature is therefore sacred, not merely a resource for exploitation. Mountains, rivers, forests, and animals are often seen as manifestations of divine order and as spaces where spiritual forces operate (Idowu, 1973).

In African theology, humans are placed within creation as custodians, not owners. The belief that land and nature ultimately belong to God underpins ethical obligations toward the environment. A well-known isiZulu proverb "Umhlaba awuthengiswa, uyabolekwa" (The land is not sold; it is borrowed) This reflects the idea that humans receive the earth in trust from God and must preserve it for future generations. This stewardship ethic resonates strongly with African communal values and the philosophy of Ubuntu—"Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person through other persons), which extends relational responsibility beyond humans to the natural world (Tutu, 1999).

Traditional Land Stewardship Practices

Traditional land stewardship practices in indigenous African societies exemplify environmentally sustainable management, viewing land as a communal and sacred trust. Through practices like rotational farming, seasonal grazing, sacred groves, and traditional water management these communities maintain ecological balance while addressing human needs, rendering them particularly relevant amid climate change and biodiversity loss.

Rotational Farming

Rotational farming involves cultivating different crops on the same land in a planned sequence, often combined with fallow periods that allow the soil to recover (Altieri, 2004). Indigenous farmers used crop diversity to maintain soil fertility, reduce pests, and ensure food security. Recent agroecological studies affirm that crop rotation improves soil health, increases resilience to climate variability, and reduces dependence on chemical fertilizers (Altieri & Nicholls, 2020). This practice aligns with African ecological ethics that emphasize balance, patience, and long-term productivity rather than short-term exploitation.

Seasonal Grazing

Seasonal grazing is a land-use practice primarily associated with pastoral and agro-pastoral communities. Livestock are moved according to seasonal rainfall patterns and pasture availability, preventing overgrazing and allowing grasslands time to regenerate. Recent studies show that indigenous grazing systems enhance soil fertility, maintain plant diversity, and reduce land degradation when compared to sedentary grazing systems (Oba & Kotile, 2021). Seasonal grazing also reflects communal governance, where access to grazing land is regulated by elders and customary laws to ensure sustainability and equity.

Sacred Groves

Sacred groves also known as Sacred forests (SFs), segments of the landscape, containing trees and other life forms and geographical features that are delimited and protected by human societies under the belief that to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state is an expression of an important relationship of humans with the divine or with nature (Sinthumule, 2024).These spaces are often associated with rituals, burial sites, or places of worship, and human activity within them is strictly regulated. Contemporary research highlights that sacred groves function as biodiversity hotspots, conserving indigenous plant species and wildlife (Ormsby & Bhagwat, 2020). In African contexts, taboos and spiritual sanctions have historically prevented deforestation, demonstrating how belief systems can serve as effective conservation mechanisms. Sacred groves therefore represent an intersection between spirituality and environmental stewardship.

These practices illustrate how environmental ethics are embedded in cultural systems rather than separated from daily life.

Traditional Water Management

Water management has always been central to traditional land stewardship. African communities protected rivers, springs, wetlands, and wells through customary rules and taboos that restricted pollution and overuse. Activities such as washing, farming, or settlement near water sources were regulated to preserve water quality. Recent scholarship recognizes indigenous water governance as vital for climate adaptation and sustainable water use, particularly in rural communities (Dladla & Muchapondwa, 2021). These systems ensured equitable access while safeguarding water as a life-giving and sacred resource.

Despite all the statutes and reforms to address water issues, South Africa is still facing huge challenges. The historically disadvantaged communities are still lacking access to water. The Water Allocation Reforms mostly failed due to contradicting water, land and agriculture legislation, institutions not being established, Irrigation Boards' failure to transform to Water User Associations, lack of land for agriculture, lack of funding and training, and water scarcity (Water and Sanitation Master Plan, 2018).

The country is projected to face a 17% water deficit by 2030 without significant intervention. Over 3 million people lack access to basic water. From 1999 to 2011, the number of main rivers in South Africa in poor ecological condition increased by 500%, and over 50% of wetlands were lost, with one-third of the remaining wetlands in poor condition. Additionally, only 5% of agricultural water usage is by black farmers. In response, the country is initiating efforts to address these water challenges (Water and Sanitation Master Plan, 2018). There is a need to refocus the approach to indigenous knowledge in water resource management. Efforts toward hybrid water legislation are commendable, but there is a need to increase the pace at which this is done. Water management should go beyond being mentioned in discussions and documents. Genuine engagement is required.

Contemporary Challenges

Despite their sustainability, indigenous land stewardship systems have been marginalised by colonial land policies, urbanisation, and language loss. Modern environmental governance often overlooks indigenous knowledge systems in favour of technocratic approaches (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). However, growing recognition of climate change and environmental degradation has renewed interest in indigenous ecological ethics.

Integrating African languages and cultural knowledge into environmental education and policy can enhance sustainability efforts by grounding them in locally meaningful ethical frameworks. Protecting indigenous languages is therefore inseparable from protecting indigenous environmental wisdom.

Conclusion

This paper explored how African languages and cultural practices convey environmental values and guide sustainable land stewardship, demonstrating their continued relevance in contemporary environmental governance. It was found that the Land stewardship and environmental ethics in African languages and culture represent holistic systems that integrate moral values, spiritual beliefs, and ecological knowledge. African languages function as vital vehicles for transmitting environmental ethics, shaping attitudes toward land use and reinforcing communal responsibility. Traditional practices such as rotational farming, sacred grove protection, seasonal grazing, and water management demonstrate sustainable alternatives to exploitative land-use models. Recognising and preserving these linguistic and cultural systems is essential for advancing ethical environmental stewardship and sustainable development in Africa

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