

## ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: INDIGENOUS WISDOM IN RELATION TO THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

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### Abstract

*Africa faces an escalating ecological crisis rooted in the widening gap between modern conservation models and indigenous worldviews. This article bridges African indigenous ecological wisdom with the prophetic theology of Isaiah to construct a contextual ecological ethic that responds to African realities while engaging global concerns about sustainability. Whereas previous scholarship has often treated African Traditional Religion (ATR) and biblical theology as distinct spheres, this study employs hermeneutical and postcolonial methodologies to facilitate an intercultural dialogue between the two. It reveals that ATR's principles of communal stewardship, sacred natural spaces, and restorative taboos resonate profoundly with Isaiah's critique of exploitation and his vision of cosmic shalom. By integrating ATR's tangible reverence for creation with Isaiah's eschatological hope, the article advances a holistic ethic of covenantal responsibility. Its original contribution lies in formulating a contextually grounded African ecotheology that reclaims ATR from notions of primitivism, enriches Christian ecological discourse with indigenous insight, and offers practical pathways for policy, education, and grassroots movements toward ecological renewal in Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Ecological Ethics, African Traditional Religion, Indigenous Wisdom, Book of Isaiah, Creation Theology, Environmental Stewardship, Contextual Theology*

### INTRODUCTION

Africa stands at the crossroads of a deepening ecological crisis marked by deforestation, desertification, pollution, and biodiversity loss. While modern conservation strategies have sought to address these challenges, many remain detached from the spiritual and cultural foundations that historically shaped African communities' relationships with nature.<sup>1</sup> The resulting disconnection between imported environmental models and indigenous ecological consciousness has weakened communal responsibility toward creation and limited the effectiveness of environmental interventions.<sup>2</sup>

In response to this challenge, recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that African Traditional Religion (ATR) embodies a rich ecological ethic grounded in reverence for the land, the interconnectedness of all life, and the sacredness of natural spaces. Nevertheless, these indigenous frameworks have often been marginalised or dismissed as pre-scientific or animistic within dominant

<sup>1</sup>United Nations Environment Programme, *The State of Africa's Forests 2020* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2020),61.

<sup>2</sup> Ezra Chitanda and David C. Chitumba, "Climate Change and African Christianity: A Theological Reflection," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 152 (2015): 48-50.

academic and theological discourses. This marginalisation has created a significant gap in the development of contextual African ecological theologies capable of addressing contemporary environmental crises in culturally meaningful ways.

At the same time, the Book of Isaiah offers profound prophetic insights that speak directly to ecological ethics. Isaiah's theology affirms divine sovereignty over creation, exposes the relationship between social injustice and land degradation, and articulates a vision of cosmic restoration characterised by justice, peace, and harmony (shalom). These themes resonate strongly with indigenous African ecological worldviews, yet they have rarely been brought into sustained dialogue with ATR. As a result, biblical ecological reflection in Africa has often relied on Western eco-theological frameworks, while indigenous wisdom remains underutilised in biblical interpretation.

This article argues that a dialogical engagement between the ecological ethics of African Traditional Religion and the prophetic theology of the Book of Isaiah provides a coherent and contextually grounded framework for ecological ethics in Africa. By integrating ATR's cosmology of interconnectedness, sacred space, and communal stewardship with Isaiah's prophetic critique of exploitation and vision of creation's renewal, the study advances an African ecotheology that is both biblically faithful and culturally resonant.

Methodologically, the study employs phenomenological, hermeneutical, and postcolonial approaches to facilitate an intercultural theological dialogue. Phenomenology enables ATR to be interpreted on its own terms, free from colonial and theological reductionism. Hermeneutical engagement places Isaiah's ecological vision in constructive conversation with indigenous wisdom, while postcolonial critique reclaims African theological agency by challenging dominant Western interpretive paradigms.

The article proceeds in four main sections. First, it examines the ecological ethics embedded within African Traditional Religion, focusing on cosmology, sacred spaces, and communal environmental practices. Second, it analyses the ecological vision of the Book of Isaiah, highlighting its theology of creation, prophetic critique of injustice, and eschatological hope for restoration. Third, it brings ATR and Isaiah into dialogical engagement, identifying points of convergence and tension that contribute to a holistic ecological ethic. Finally, the study constructs a theological framework for environmental sustainability in Africa, demonstrating its implications for church practice, theological education, public policy, and grassroots ecological action. By bridging indigenous African wisdom and biblical prophetic theology, this study contributes to the growing field of African ecotheology. It offers a spiritually grounded, culturally rooted, and practically applicable response to Africa's ecological crisis.

### **Ecological Ethics in African Traditional Religion (ATR) and the Book of Isaiah**

In this pursuit, two profound reservoirs of wisdom offer immense potential. The first is the ecological ethics embedded in African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR, often mischaracterised or marginalised in dominant discourses, is founded on a cosmology of intrinsic interconnectedness, in which humanity, the divine, and the natural world exist in a delicate, sacred balance.<sup>3</sup> This worldview engenders practical ethics of reverence, communal stewardship, and specific taboos

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Alifa, "African Traditional Religion and Its Relationship with Nature," *Njiko: Journal of African Traditional Religions* (2023): 5, <https://www.acjoi.org/index.php/njiko/article/view/3991>.

that have historically protected the ecosystem.<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the book of Isaiah, present a powerful and often overlooked ecological vision. Isaiah contains a searing critique of environmental exploitation linked to social injustice, a profound theology of creation as belonging to Yahweh, and a hopeful vision of ultimate renewal and shalom for all creation.<sup>5</sup> Scholars like Davis have compellingly argued for an “agrarian reading” of the Bible that takes its material and ecological concerns.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the richness of these two traditions, current scholarships reveal a significant gap. Studies on ATR and biblical ecology often remain within the domain of anthropology or religious studies.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Christian ecological theology in Africa frequently relies heavily on Western eco-theological constructs or general biblical principles, with limited engagement with specific prophetic traditions such as Isaiah’s.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, detailed comparative studies that place ATR’s indigenous ecological wisdom in a sustained, dialogical engagement with the prophetic texts of the Old Testament are scarce. This lack of integration represents a missed opportunity for developing a holistic and authentically African ecotheology.

### ATR’s Ecological Wisdom

ATR’s ecological wisdom, when interpreted through the lens of Isaiah’s prophetic vision of creation and restoration (40:28, 42:5, 45:18), provides a holistic, practical, and culturally resonant theological framework for promoting environmental sustainability in Africa. This framework effectively bridges the gap between indigenous knowledge and biblical faith, offering a decolonial approach to ecological ethics.

A significant body of scholarship establishes that ATR is fundamentally imbued with an ecological ethic. Foundational works by several African scholars lay the groundwork by detailing the African cosmological worldview, characterised by a holistic, interconnected universe in which the sacred permeates the natural world.<sup>9</sup> This perspective inherently fosters a relationship of respect and reciprocity with the environment. On the other hand, contemporary scholars have built on this foundation to articulate ATR’s environmental principles explicitly. Samuel Alifa, for instance,

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<sup>4</sup> John N. Amanze, “African Approaches to the Protection and Conservation of Nature,” (ScienceDirect, 2024): 12- 15.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel A. Bassey, Joseph N. Ogar, Asira E. Asira, and Ekomobong I. Bassey, “Land Ethic According to the Biblical Book of Genesis and Isaiah,” *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis* 4, no. 1 (Special Issue, May 2021): 23–29.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Neha Deopa and Daniele Rinaldo, “Sacred Ecology: The Environmental Impact of African Traditional Religions,” (arXiv preprint, 2023): 2.

<sup>8</sup> H. Ferreira and L. Sutton, “Ecological Hermeneutics as a Current Trend in Old Testament Research in the Book of Psalms,” *Acta Theologica* 44, no. 1 (2024): 30

<sup>9</sup> Ezra Chitando, Ernst M. Conradie, and Susan M. Kilonzo, eds., *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change* (London: Routledge, 2022); Munamato Chemhuru, ed., *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Francis Kehinde Adebayo, “Worldview, Conflicting Spiritualities and Religious Ecology in Nigeria,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 28, no. 2 (2024): 143–162; Neha Deopa and Daniele Rinaldo, *Sacred Ecology: The Environmental Impact of African Traditional Religions* (working paper, 2023).

argues that the relationship between ATR and nature is not merely functional but sacral, with specific natural objects and spaces seen as manifestations of the divine or abodes of spirits.<sup>10</sup> This sacralisation directly translates to conservation practices, a point elaborated by John N. Amanze, who documents “African approaches to the protection and conservation of nature” through taboos, totems, and the institution of sacred groves.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the work of Ezra Chitando in *Religion and Environment: An African Perspective* provides a broader framework for understanding how indigenous religious beliefs inform environmental attitudes and behaviours across the continent.<sup>12</sup> The quantitative study by Neha Deopa and Daniele Rinaldo, “Sacred Ecology,” lends empirical weight to these claims, analysing the tangible environmental impact of these traditional religious practices.<sup>13</sup> Collectively, this scholarship demonstrates that ATR offers a rich, community-centred model of ecological stewardship rooted in reverence and practical ethics.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that African Traditional Religion does not merely contain incidental environmental values but also embodies a coherent, practised ecological ethic rooted in cosmology, sacred space, and communal responsibility. These elements reveal that environmental care in ATR is not an external obligation but an integral expression of moral and spiritual life. This insight is crucial for the present study because it establishes ATR as a substantive theological resource rather than a cultural appendix, thereby positioning indigenous ecological wisdom as a legitimate partner in dialogue with biblical theology.

### **Biblical Perspectives on Ecology**

Within biblical studies, a robust conversation on ecology has emerged, challenging anthropocentric readings and recovering the creation-centric themes of the Bible. The book of Isaiah is central to this discourse. Ellen F. Davis’s commentary on Isaiah 40–66 highlights the profound link between covenant faithfulness, social justice, and the well-being of the land, positioning the prophet’s message within a cosmic framework of YHWH’s creative power and redemptive purposes.<sup>14</sup> Brandon R. Frick’s PhD dissertation offers a comprehensive critique of the traditional Christian concept of “stewardship,” arguing that it is deeply anthropocentric and therefore inadequate for addressing contemporary environmental degradation. In contrast, Frick proposes covenantal ecology as an alternative theological framework that understands God, humanity, and nonhuman creation as partners in a mutually constituted relationship. Drawing on biblical texts from both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the theological insights of scholars such as Karl Barth, Michael Northcott, and Robert Murray, Frick develops an ethic of non-exploitative relationship with the created order.<sup>15</sup> Richard Bauckham’s *The Bible and Ecology* further advances this by proposing a model of the community of creation, in which humans are part of a wider creaturely fellowship under God’s

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Alifa, “African Traditional Religion and Its Relationship with Nature,” *Njiko: Journal of African Traditional Religions* (2023): 5-7, <https://www.acjournals.org/index.php/njiko/article/view/3991>

<sup>11</sup> John N. Amanze, “African Approaches to the Protection and Conservation of Nature,” (ScienceDirect, 2024): 12- 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ezra Chitando, *Religion and Environment: An African Perspective* (Uppsala: Swedish Science Press, 2019), 88-105.

<sup>13</sup> Neha Deopa and Daniele Rinaldo, “Sacred Ecology,” *Journal of Development Economics* 161 (2023): 103053.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen F. Davis, “The Vision Expands: Isaiah 40–66,” in *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 269-279.

<sup>15</sup> Brandon R. Frick, *Covenantal Ecology: The Promise of Covenant for a Christian Environmental Ethic* (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2014).

sovereignty, a theme powerfully evident in Isaiah's vision of a peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11:6-9).<sup>16</sup> Davi's "agrarian reading of scripture" brings a unique and practical lens, arguing that the Bible's wisdom is fundamentally tied to the land and sustainable agricultural practices. Her work provides a hermeneutical key for reading Isaiah's critiques of land monopolisation (Isaiah 5:8, 11: 6-9, 35:12, 55:12-13) and vision of agricultural restoration (Isaiah 32:15-17, 65:21-22) as central to its theological message.<sup>17</sup> The methodological scope of this ecological hermeneutics is confirmed by scholars such as Ferreira and Sutton, who identify it as a current and growing trend within Old Testament scholarship.<sup>18</sup>

Despite robust parallel discussions of ATRs and biblical ecological perspectives, a critical concern remains about their intersection. While scholars of ATR, such as Alifa and Amanze, ably describe indigenous ecological wisdom, they typically do not engage in sustained dialogue with the specific textual and theological resources of the biblical prophetic tradition, including ecological nuances. Conversely, seminal biblical Eco theologians like Bauckham, Davis, and Fretheim, while profoundly insightful, primarily operate within a Western academic context and do not systematically apply their frameworks to engage with African indigenous knowledge systems. Even within the context of African Christianity, the dialogue remains underdeveloped. Chitando and Chitumba's work on climate change and African Christianity, for example, rightly calls for a theological response but does not deeply integrate the detailed ecological vision of a specific biblical book, such as Isaiah, with the specific tenets of ATR.<sup>19</sup> Scholars like Francis X. Clooney hint at the potential for a constructive, comparative theological project, but this methodology is not applied to the domain of African ecological ethics.<sup>20</sup> Based on the above presentation, the lack of a focused, dialogical engagement between the ecological ethics of ATR and the detailed prophetic vision of the book of Isaiah remains a notable distance among academic circles.

Isaiah's ecological vision reveals that concern for the land is inseparable from questions of justice, covenantal faithfulness, and divine sovereignty. The prophetic linkage between social injustice and environmental degradation provides a theological grammar that resonates strongly with African indigenous worldviews. For this study, Isaiah's theology functions not merely as a biblical parallel but as a critical interpretive lens through which ecological ethics can be articulated within a covenantal framework that speaks directly to African socio-ecological realities.

### **Phenomenological and Hermeneutical Approach to Ecological Ethics**

To interpret the ecological ethics of ATR without the bias of Western or exclusively Christian presuppositions, a phenomenological approach is adopted. Rooted in the work of scholars like

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 60-65.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>18</sup> H. Ferreira and L. Sutton, "Ecological Hermeneutics as a Current Trend in Old Testament Research in the Book of Psalms," *Acta Theologica* 44, no. 1 (2024): 308.

<sup>19</sup> Ezra Chitando and David C. Chitumba, "Climate Change and African Christianity: A Theological Reflection," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 152 (2015): 58.

<sup>20</sup> Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley- Blackwell, 2010), 10.

James L. Cox, phenomenology of religion seeks to describe religious phenomena such as rituals, beliefs, and symbols on their own terms, prioritising understanding over judgment.<sup>21</sup> This method allows for a systematic presentation of ATR's ecological principles, such as the sacrality of nature, communal stewardship, and restorative taboos as a coherent and valid worldview in its own right. By suspending initial theological evaluation, this approach ensures that ATR is not prematurely forced into a biblical model but is instead appreciated for its intrinsic logic and wisdom. This descriptive foundation establishes ATR as an equal partner in the subsequent dialogue with the biblical text.

The hermeneutical engagement calls for dialogical reading, which places the ecological vision of Isaiah in conversation with the indigenous wisdom of ATR. This method is informed by Rita D. Sherma and Purushottama Bilimoria's *Religion and Sustainability* work that connects Religion, Ecology and Hermeneutics.<sup>22</sup> This study exemplifies an interdisciplinary approach by bringing religious studies, theology, ethics, and environmental sciences into dialogue to interpret ecological crises through diverse religious worldviews. Its interreligious and hermeneutical engagement shows how religious meanings and practices can be critically read and mobilized as ethical resources for sustainability discourse. Based on this approach, the biblical texts are engaged contextually and dialogically with the African worldview and are not treated as opposing systems but as mutually enriching sources that offer symbolic, moral, and narrative resources for sustainability. Such an interpretive encounter opens space for a contextual theology of ecology that is both biblically grounded and culturally resonant. It invites readers to rediscover ecological ethics rooted in divine justice and community harmony, integrating the prophetic call for renewal in Isaiah with the ATR's emphasis on interdependence among humans, the spiritual realm, and the natural world.

The hermeneutical engagement process, when placed in conversation with the indigenous wisdom of African Traditional Religion (ATR), is inherently interactive and dialogical. Insights from ATR's cosmology of interconnectedness align meaningfully with Isaiah's theology of creation (cf. Isaiah 40:28–31), deepening the understanding of humanity's embeddedness within the broader created order. This dialogical encounter enriches theological reflection by revealing the mutual reinforcement between biblical and indigenous ecological visions. Conversely, Isaiah's prophetic critique of socio-economic exploitation and its correlation with land degradation (cf. Isaiah 5:8–10) provides a robust ethical framework that both interrogates and validates ATR's indigenous taboos against environmental abuse. Thus, the hermeneutical engagement with ATR cosmology transcends mere parallel hunting; it constitutes a constructive theological dialogue aimed at producing contextually grounded insights that shape ecological ethics within African traditions and cultural perspectives. In this respect, Doane's work serves as a valuable model, bringing ecological hermeneutics into direct conversation with environmental humanities, affect theory, animal studies, and ethics to challenge anthropocentric readings and reframe biblical interpretation considering contemporary ecological crises, showing how scripture can inform ecological responsibility and ethical engagement with the Earth.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> James L. Cox, *A Phenomenology of Indigenous Religions: Theory and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 141-162.

<sup>22</sup> Rita D. Sherma and Purushottama Bilimoria, eds., *Religion and Sustainability: Interreligious Resources, Interdisciplinary Responses* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 69-80; 91-97.

<sup>23</sup> Sébastien Doane, *Reading the Bible amid the Environmental Crisis: Interdisciplinary Insights to Ecological*

## Postcolonial Critique and African Indigenous Ecological Wisdom

Underpinning this endeavour is a postcolonial critique that seeks to challenge dominant interpretive paradigms and to reclaim theological agency within African contexts. As articulated by scholars such as Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango, the postcolonial framework advances African biblical scholarship, not just as critique but as constructive engagement with indigenous ways of knowing and reading biblical texts.<sup>24</sup> It brings it into an *African theological scholarship context* that explicitly dialogues with colonisation, Christian interpretation, and cultural agency on the continent. It is important to note that this approach critiques and resists the colonial legacy that has often dismissed African Traditional Religion (ATR) as “primitive” or “demonic,” thereby invalidating its profound ecological insights and moral frameworks. This study adopts postcolonial critique as a methodological tool to decolonise African ecotheology, intentionally moving beyond an uncritical reliance on Western ecological hermeneutics—while still engaging their constructive elements—to foreground African indigenous wisdom as a legitimate and primary theological source. In doing so, it reframes ATR not as a relic of the past but as a dynamic reservoir of ecological ethics capable of addressing pressing environmental crises in contemporary Africa. This approach resonates with Tim Hartman’s engagement with Kwame Bediako’s concerns with calls for a theology authentically grounded in Africa’s cultural and religious experience, thereby fostering a contextual theological identity that speaks meaningfully to both faith and ecology.<sup>25</sup> Bediako’s central concern was identity of the African people—specifically what it means to be African and Christian in the aftermath of the failures of colonialism—the relationship of theology and culture, and the need of indigenous expressions of Christian faith for the health of theological reflection worldwide.

## AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND ECOLOGICAL ETHICS

African Traditional Religion (ATR) provides a comprehensive cosmological framework that inherently fosters environmental sustainability. Rooted in a vision of a unified cosmos, it prescribes a relationship of reverence, reciprocity, and responsibility between humanity and the natural world. This section elucidates the core principles of this ecological ethic: a holistic cosmology, the sacrality of the natural world, and practical ethical injunctions enforced through communal responsibility and ethics.

### ATR Cosmology: The Interconnectedness of Beings

The foundational principle of ATR’s ecological ethics is its cosmology of interconnectedness. As John S. Mbiti famously articulates, existence in African thought is a unified whole where the Universe is divided into two interrelated spheres: the visible world of the living and the invisible world of spirits, ancestors, and deities.<sup>26</sup> Humanity does not stand above this cosmic order but exists within a web of relationships that includes the divine, the ancestral, the human community, and the natural environment. This worldview, often summarised in the proverb “I am because we are,” extends this “we” to encompass the entire created order. Nche and Michael’s concept of “African ontology and holistic interconnectedness” finds a profound resonance here, as ATR perceives humans, animals,

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*Hermeneutics* (Lexington Books, 2024), 1-30.

<sup>24</sup> Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations, Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 13* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2024), 1-28.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Hartman, *Kwame Bediako: African Theology for a World Christianity* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2021), 1–186.

<sup>26</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 15

plants, and even non-biological entities as existing within a shared, interconnected cosmos rather than as isolated objects.<sup>27</sup> The interconnectedness negates any notion of human dominion over nature, instead establishing a relationship of mutual dependence and care.

### Sacred Spaces as Ecological Sanctuaries

This sacralised cosmos is made manifest in the physical environment through the designation of sacred spaces. Specific groves, forests, rivers, mountains, and other landmarks are often regarded as the dwelling places of deities (abosom, orishas) or ancestral spirits.<sup>28</sup> As Samuel Alifa observes, these are not merely symbolic entities but are revered as tangible “*ecological sanctuaries*” wherein the divine presence is made manifest.<sup>29</sup> The reverence accorded to such spaces translates directly into environmental conservation.<sup>30</sup> Sacred groves, for instance, function as *de facto* nature reserves—protecting biodiversity, preserving watersheds, and serving as reservoirs of genetic life. Strict ritual taboos, including prohibitions on hunting, farming, and logging, often govern access to these sites. Such practices reveal a profound theological intuition: that creation itself participates in the sacred order and should be approached with awe and restraint, rather than domination.

In a parallel theological vision, the Book of Isaiah portrays creation as an active participant in the divine economy. The prophet envisions a cosmos infused with God’s presence, where “the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing” and “all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isa. 55:12). This poetic imagery suggests that the natural world is not a passive backdrop but a liturgical partner in the worship of the Creator. Isaiah’s prophetic imagination thus sacralises the ecological realm, presenting the land, the waters, and all living creatures as integral to God’s covenantal purpose. Moreover, the eschatological vision of peace, where “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (Isaiah 65:25), echoes the African indigenous notion of sacred balance within creation. Both perspectives affirm that ecological harmony is a theological mandate grounded in the holiness of God and the moral integrity of creation itself. To violate sacred land, therefore, is to disrupt divine order and to sin against the Creator who indwells all life.

### Ethical Principles and Practical Illustrations from Isaiah and ATR Cosmology

The cosmology of interconnectedness and the sacral nature of space in African Traditional Religion (ATR) yields a distinct ethical vision that closely harmonises with the prophetic theology of the Book of Isaiah. Both traditions affirm that creation is imbued with divine presence and that humanity stands as a custodian rather than a conqueror of the earth. In ATR thought, environmental stewardship is a communal vocation that binds the living, the ancestors, and the unborn in a sacred covenant. The land is not private property, but a divine trust, and exploiting it for selfish gain constitutes both a moral failure and a spiritual rebellion. This principle finds resonance in Isaiah’s critique of those who accumulate land unjustly - “Woe to those who join house to house and add field to field” (Isaiah 5:8-ESV). This denunciation frames ecological exploitation as a violation of divine justice. All the biblical references used in this text are from the English Standard Version (ESV). Similarly, the system of *akyiwadee* (taboos) in ATR serves as a theological safeguard for

<sup>27</sup> George C. Nche and Benson Ogar Michael, “*Perspectives on African Indigenous Religion and the Natural Environment: Beings, Interconnectedness, Communities and Knowledge Systems*,” *Phronimon* 25, no. 1 (2024): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/14621>

<sup>28</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 120.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Alifa, “African Traditional Religion and Its Relationship with Nature,” *Njiko: Journal of African Traditional Religions* (2023): 8, <https://www.acjoi.org/index.php/njiko/article/view/3991>.

<sup>30</sup> Neha Deopa and Daniele Rinaldo, “Sacred Ecology: The Environmental Impact of African Traditional Religions,” (arXiv preprint, 2023): 10

creation, restricting exploitative acts such as indiscriminate hunting or tree felling. As Amanze notes, these taboos function as indigenous regulatory mechanisms that express reverence for divine order.<sup>31</sup> Isaiah likewise interprets the corruption of the earth as a result of human transgression, declaring, “The earth mourns and withers... because they have broken the everlasting covenant” (Isa. 24:4– 6). In both worldviews, ecological degradation signifies not only environmental collapse but also the moral disorder of a community estranged from its Creator.

Reverence for creation stands at the heart of this shared ethic. In ATR, rituals such as libation and proverbs like “*The land does not belong to us; we belong to the land*” articulate a theology of humility and relational dependence on the earth as sacred.<sup>32</sup> This moral sensibility finds theological amplification in Isaiah’s vision of renewal, where “the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the rose” (Isa. 35:1) and “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (Isa. 65:25). Both traditions envision the natural world as living participants in divine redemptive creation that praises, mourns, and awaits restoration. Thus, ecological care emerges not merely as a cultural virtue but as a theological mandate, calling humanity to participate in God’s ongoing work of sustaining and sanctifying creation. The dialogue between Isaiah and ATR cosmology, therefore, offers a profoundly spiritual framework in which ecological ethics becomes an expression of covenantal faithfulness and reverent partnership with the Creator.

### **Toward a Theological Ecology of Sacred Reciprocity**

The dialogue between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and the Book of Isaiah unveils a profound theological synthesis: that creation is not a mere backdrop to human history but a living participant in God’s covenantal relationship with humanity. Both Isaiah’s prophetic vision and ATR cosmology affirm the intrinsic holiness of the earth and humankind’s moral responsibility as its steward. In ATR, sacred groves, rivers, and mountains embody divine presence. At the same time, in Isaiah, the natural world becomes a theatre of divine glory where “the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6:3). Each tradition, in its own idiom, recognises that ecological violation is a theological offence, a disruption of divine order that demands repentance and restoration.

Together, these perspectives form a theology of sacred reciprocity, where human flourishing and ecological harmony are mutually dependent expressions of divine will. The ATR ethic of communal stewardship and reverence for creation complements Isaiah’s vision of a renewed cosmos marked by justice, peace, and joy. This convergence calls the contemporary faith community to reclaim ecological care as a spiritual vocation and moral imperative. The task of theology, therefore, is not only to interpret the sacred text or preserve indigenous wisdom but to participate actively in God’s redemptive work of healing the earth. In embracing this shared vision, the Church and African communities alike are summoned to embody an ecological discipleship that mirrors the Creator’s own care for creation, transforming reverence into restoration and faith into faithful stewardship of the earth.

### **Theological and Ecological Vision in the Book of Isaiah**

Isaiah’s creation theology directly informs its stinging prophetic critique. The well-known “Song of the Vineyard” (Isaiah 5:1-7) is a masterpiece of environmental ethics. The vineyard, a symbol of Judah, is meticulously prepared by God who “expected justice (*mishpat*), but saw bloodshed;

<sup>31</sup> John N. Amanze, “African Approaches to the Protection and Conservation of Nature,” (ScienceDirect, 2024): 14.

<sup>32</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 46.

righteousness (*tsedaqah*), but heard a cry!” The failure of the vineyard is a moral failure, and its consequent desolation, “I will make it a waste,” demonstrates the intrinsic link between covenant disobedience and the degradation of the land.

This theme is elevated to cosmic proportions in Isaiah 24. Here, the earth is personified as a victim: “The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.” This theme is elevated to cosmic proportions in Isaiah 24, where the earth is personified as a violated subject: “The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants...” (Isa 24:5). Norman C. Habel interprets this passage as an ecological indictment, arguing that covenantal violations expressed through social and economic injustices—such as land accumulation and exploitation condemned in Isaiah 5:8—produce direct and devastating consequences for the earth itself.<sup>33</sup> The land itself mourns as part of a covenant community that includes humanity, a concept that resonates deeply with the ATR view of an interconnected cosmos.

A powerful vision of hope and restoration ultimately frames the prophetic critique. Isaiah’s eschatological hope is not for an escape from the material world but for its redemption. The peaceable kingdom of Isaiah 11:6-9 presents a transformed creation where primordial harmony is restored: “The wolf shall live with the lamb... They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” This vision signifies the healing of the violent and exploitative relationships that characterise the fallen order.

This restoration is elaborated in Isaiah 65:17-25, where the creation of “new heavens and a new earth” is described in strikingly this-worldly terms. It is a world where premature death and calamity are absent, and humans enjoy the fruit of their labour: “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” Davis’s agrarian reading highlights this as a vision of shalom that is profoundly economic and ecological - a world in which the fundamental relationships among humanity, God, and the land are set right.<sup>34</sup> The role of justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*) is paramount here; they are the indispensable pillars upon which this ecological *shalom* is built. The book of Isaiah provides a coherent ecological vision: the world is God’s good creation; its defilement is a direct result of human injustice; and its ultimate hope lies in a divine restoration that encompasses the entire cosmic order. This prophetic framework provides a powerful counterpart to ATR’s indigenous wisdom.

The book of Isaiah presents a sophisticated and multifaceted ecological vision that is integral to its prophetic message. The vision is not a minor theme but a central component that weaves together theology, ethics, and eschatology. It can be understood through a triad of interconnected themes: a robust theology of creation, a sharp prophetic critique linking environmental degradation to social injustice, and a hopeful vision of cosmic restoration and shalom.

The latter part of the Book of Isaiah offers one of the Old Testament’s most profound declarations

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<sup>33</sup> Norman C. Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2019), 65–82.

<sup>34</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12.

of God's sovereignty as Creator. In the passages like Isaiah 40:12-31, the prophet uses a series of rhetorical questions to magnify YHWH's transcendent power and wisdom in ordering the cosmos: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span?" This is not a deistic creation but an ongoing, sustained relationship. Christopher B. Hays reframes divine sovereignty as non-coercive but deeply involved, which calls for creation care rather than distance, an understanding in which the world is dynamically dependent on God.<sup>35</sup> The creation narratives in Isaiah 44:24-28 and 45:18 emphasise that God fashioned the earth *to be inhabited*, establishing a purposeful and inherently good world. Richard Bauckham expands on this idea, asserting that it envisions a "community of creation" in which all beings—human and non-human alike—stand in mutual relationship before their Creator, thereby confronting and correcting anthropocentric arrogance.<sup>36</sup>

The most striking area of convergence lies in the foundational understanding of a sacred, interconnected cosmos. The ATR principle of a holistic universe, where humanity, the spirit world, and nature are kin, finds a powerful echo in the Isaiahic vision of a "community of creation" under the sovereignty of YHWH.<sup>37,38</sup> Both worldviews fundamentally reject the concept of nature as a mere resource for human consumption. This shared cosmology gives rise to a shared ethic of reverence and respect. The ATR practice of designating sacred groves out of reverence for the spirits within them aligns functionally with the Isaiahic view of the whole earth as "my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:9). In this space, destructive exploitation is anathema.

Furthermore, both traditions inextricably link ecological well-being with social justice. Isaiah's prophetic critique directly connects land degradation to social sins, such as land monopolisation (Isaiah 5:8). Similarly, in ATR, environmental taboos are not arbitrary superstitions but are deeply embedded in a framework of communal responsibility; violating a taboo harms the entire community, both visible and invisible.<sup>39</sup> In both systems, an offence against the created order, and vice versa. The ATR concept of the land as a trust held for ancestors and future generations also resonates with the covenantal, multi-generational perspective inherent in Isaiah's theology.

Acknowledging points of divergence is essential for honest dialogue. The most significant difference lies in the cosmological framework. The ATR's cosmology is often characterised by a pervasive immanence, in which divinities and spirits are intimately present in nature (e.g., in a specific river or tree). In contrast, Isaiah's vision is firmly rooted in a monotheistic and often transcendent framework. Nature is not divine but is the creation of a transcendent God who stands distinct from it, even while being intimately involved with it. For Isaiah, the danger is the worship of creation itself (Isaiah 44:9-20), whereas for ATR, worship is directed through creation to the spirits and deities inherent within it.

A related tension exists in the temporal focus of their ecological visions. ATR's ecological ethics

<sup>35</sup> Christopher B. Hays, *The Origins of Isaiah 24–27* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 112–130.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 45.

<sup>37</sup> John N. Amanze, "African Approaches to the Protection and Conservation of Nature," (ScienceDirect, 2024): 14.

<sup>38</sup> Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 45.

are primarily concerned with maintaining balance and harmony in the present world. Its practices are geared towards sustaining the existing community. Isaiah's vision, however, is profoundly eschatological. While it has implications for present justice, its most vivid images of ecological harmony (Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17-25) are future-oriented, depicting a divine intervention that will radically transform the current order. This can create tension between maintaining the current balance and working toward a future restoration.

The Book of Isaiah and African Traditional Religion (ATR) together articulate an intercultural theological framework that invites dialogue rather than division. Their apparent differences reveal a deep complementarity that can nurture a holistic ecological theology for Africa. Isaiah's eschatological vision of *shalom* - a divinely orchestrated harmony of creation - finds grounding in the tangible, earth-centred ethos of ATR. The daily practices of reverence and respect for Nature within ATR prevents Isaiah's future-oriented hope from becoming an abstract ideal, anchoring it instead in concrete ecological responsibility. In turn, Isaiah's prophetic vision infuses ATR's this-worldly spirituality with a transcendent hope that sustains ecological commitment even amid environmental degradation and cultural erosion.

Moreover, both systems provide distinct yet convergent sources of ethical motivation and theological correction. ATR's use of taboos and reverence for the sacred order offers a powerful internal drive for conservation rooted in cultural consciousness. Isaiah, by contrast, frames ecological ethics through the covenantal imperatives of justice and righteousness, grounding stewardship in the very character of God. Together, these traditions temper one another: Isaiah's emphasis on divine transcendence guards against a deification of nature that could hinder scientific engagement. At the same time, ATR's sense of sacred immanence corrects the risk of a distant, desacralised creation open to exploitation. In the end, Isaiah and ATR emerge not as theological rivals but as dialogue partners - ATR embodying the lived ethos of reverence and Isaiah proclaiming the prophetic narrative of hope and renewal. Their integration yields a resilient, contextually rooted ecological theology for Africa that unites the spiritual, moral, and practical dimensions of creation care.

### **Constructing a Theological Framework for Environmental Sustainability**

The dialogical engagement between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and the book of Isaiah reveals a set of complementary principles that, when integrated, form a robust theological framework for environmental sustainability in Africa. This framework is not a mere theoretical exercise but is designed to inform practice, influencing policy, education, and grassroots action. It is built on three core, interconnected pillars: the sacredness of creation, prophetic covenantal stewardship, and communal responsibility for *shalom*.

### **Integration of ATR Ecological Principles with Isaiah's Vision**

The authors' integration of African Traditional Religion (ATR) ecological principles with Isaiah's prophetic vision presents a groundbreaking theological synthesis that redefines environmental ethics within an African context. The framework is built on three theological pillars that weave together reverence for creation, covenantal stewardship, and communal responsibility. The first pillar, the Sacredness of Creation, fuses ATR's recognition of nature as infused with sacred presence with Isaiah's assertion of the world as God's purposeful and good creation (Isa. 45:18). Here, creation is not merely a utilitarian resource but a sacred relative within the cosmic family of

God, possessing intrinsic worth by virtue of its divine origin. The second pillar, Prophetic Covenantal Stewardship, merges ATR's regulatory systems - such as taboos that protect the environment—with Isaiah's moral linkage between justice (*mishpat*), righteousness (*tsedaqah*), and ecological well-being. Environmental abuse, therefore, becomes not only an ethical lapse but a theological breach—a breaking of covenant with God, land, and community, echoing Isaiah's denunciation of social and ecological injustice (Isa. 5:8-10). The third pillar, Communal Responsibility for Shalom, integrates ATR's communal orientation, inclusive of ancestors and future generations, with Isaiah's vision of holistic peace (*shalom*). Sustainability thus emerges as an act of faith—a participatory pursuit of the well-being of all creation that anticipates the peaceable kingdom (Isa. 11:6–9).

Beyond theoretical synthesis, the authors' contribution lies in translating this theology into practical frameworks for ecological transformation. The integration offers a moral and spiritual compass for policy, education, and community action. At the policy level, it calls for the legal protection of sacred ecological spaces, the recognition of indigenous conservation wisdom, and environmental justice informed by prophetic, covenantal ethics. In theological education, it provides a basis for developing curricula that merge African proverbs and narratives with biblical exegesis, enriching Christian pedagogy with indigenous ecological consciousness. Churches can embody this theology through symbolic practices - such as tree-planting rituals that celebrate the land as God's gift—while grassroots movements can reclaim indigenous ecological knowledge as a source of dignity and divine wisdom. Ultimately, this integrated theological vision is both authentically African and biblically grounded, offering a coherent and actionable framework for sustainable living. It affirms that true ecological renewal in Africa must emerge from a covenantal partnership between faith, culture, and creation itself.

This study makes a distinct and groundbreaking contribution to African ecotheology. It establishes the Bible, particularly Isaiah's prophetic vision of creation, as the primary theological source through which African Traditional Religion (ATR) can be both illuminated and renewed. While ATR offers profound cultural insights into the sacredness and interconnectedness of creation, it is the biblical cosmology that provides the ultimate framework of divine purpose, moral order, and eschatological hope. By integrating ATR's reverence for nature with Isaiah's revelation of a Creator who forms the earth “not to be empty but to be inhabited” (Isa. 45:18), this research anchors ecological ethics in God's covenantal relationship with all creation. ATR's taboos and communal values gain new theological coherence when interpreted through Isaiah's call to *mishpat* (justice) and *tsedaqah* (righteousness), transforming cultural practice into covenantal stewardship. In this way, the dialogue is not one of equality but of enrichment - where ATR's insights are refined and elevated by the biblical vision, allowing African ecological wisdom to find its ultimate meaning within the redemptive narrative of Scripture. The resulting framework - sacredness of creation, prophetic covenantal stewardship, and communal responsibility for *Shalom* - offers an authentically African yet deeply biblical model for ecological renewal. It provides a decolonial, practical, and theologically coherent alternative that empowers churches, communities, and policymakers to ground sustainable development in the Creator's design and to see environmental care as a sacred vocation under the authority of God's Word.

These convergences between ATR's ecological wisdom and Isaiah's prophetic vision highlight the potential for a unified ecological framework that speaks directly to African contexts. Rather than collapsing the two traditions into sameness, their dialogical engagement reveals complementary ethical resources capable of addressing environmental degradation through culturally rooted and

theologically grounded responses.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the ecological ethics of African Traditional Religion (ATR), analysed the ecological vision of the Book of Isaiah, and developed a dialogical theological framework responsive to Africa's ecological crisis. The findings confirm that these objectives were coherently achieved. First, the study established that ATR embodies a substantive ecological ethic grounded in interconnected cosmology, the sacrality of nature, and communal stewardship. Practices such as sacred spaces and taboos function as indigenous mechanisms for environmental care, affirming ATR as a legitimate theological resource. Second, the analysis of Isaiah demonstrated that ecological concern is integral to prophetic theology. Isaiah's linkage of land degradation with injustice and covenantal failure reveals that environmental abuse is both a moral and theological crisis, positioning the prophet as a normative voice for ecological ethics. Third, the dialogical engagement between ATR and Isaiah revealed significant convergence in their understanding of creation as sacred and entrusted to the community. This convergence supports an integrated ecological framework structured around three pillars: the sacredness of creation, prophetic covenantal stewardship, and communal responsibility for shalom. The practical significance of this framework lies in its applicability to churches, theological education, and environmental governance, offering a culturally grounded and biblically informed approach to sustainability. In conclusion, ecological renewal in Africa requires theological frameworks that integrate faith, culture, and environmental responsibility. By bringing ATR into dialogue with Isaiah, this study advances African ecotheology and reframes ecological care as a covenantal vocation.

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