SACRED STEWARDSHIP AND DIVINE ECOLOGY: RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENCE IN GHANA

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Abstract

This study investigates the intersection of religious belief systems and ecological knowledge within indigenous communities in Ghana and their potential contribution to climate resilience. Drawing on extensive fieldwork carried out in rural communities across three ecological zones in Ghana, this study demonstrates how sacred stewardship concepts within traditional religious frameworks inform sustainable resource management practices. The findings reveal that indigenous ecological knowledge systems, underpinned by spiritual cosmologies, provide sophisticated adaptive mechanisms that communities employ to respond to increasingly volatile environmental conditions. Through analysis of ritual practices, taboo systems, and traditional governance structures, this study argues for the increase integration of these culturally embedded knowledge systems into formal climate adaptation policies, while acknowledging the epistemological and institutional challenges of reconciling traditional approaches with contemporary scientific frameworks. This study contributes to growing scholarship on pluralistic approaches to climate adaptation that recognise the multidimensional nature of resilience across cultural, ecological, and spiritual domains.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge system, sacred stewardship, divine ecology, climate resilience, traditional religious beliefs, sacred groves

Introduction

The increasing threat of climate change poses challenges to communities across the Global South, with sub-Saharan Africa particularly vulnerable due to its high reliance on climate-sensitive livelihoods and limited adaptive capacity. In Ghana, shifting rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and increased incidence of extreme weather events threaten agricultural productivity, water security, and ecosystem stability. Recent climatic projections for Ghana indicate a rise in temperatures by 2050, with notable regional variability in rainfall, leading to increased flooding in the south and prolonged periods of drought in the northern territories (Ghana Meteorological Agency, 2023).

While international climate adaptation frameworks emphasize technological and scientific solutions, there remains a critical gap in recognizing and integrating indigenous knowledge systems that have maintained environmental balance for generations. Contemporary climate policy still discourages or ignores these knowledge systems despite growing evidence of their effectiveness in building local resilience (Makondo and Thomas, 2018). This study investigated how the religious dimension of indigenous knowledge systems in Ghana contributes to climate resilience through practices that embody what can be termed "sacred stewardship" and "divine ecology."

The concept of sacred stewardship refers to culturally embedded responsibilities towards environmental protection derived from spiritual belief systems, while divine ecology encompasses the cosmological frameworks that position natural phenomena within religious worldviews. Together, these concepts provide analytical lenses for understanding how the spiritual dimensions of indigenous knowledge inform climate adaptation practices.

These concepts together offer analytical lenses for understanding how the spiritual aspects of indigenous knowledge can guide climate adaptation efforts. Although international climate adaptation frameworks have overwhelmingly focused on technological and scientific solutions, there is a significant deficit in acknowledging and integrating indigenous knowledge systems that have kept ecosystems in balance for generations. This paper explores the religious dimensions of indigenous knowledge systems in Ghana that contribute to climate resilience through practices involving what may be called sacred stewardship and divine ecology. This study answers three core research questions, namely, what role do religious beliefs play in shaping the indigenous ecological knowledge systems of the people of Ghana? Which knowledge systems relate to climate resilience practices and how? What opportunities or challenges exist for incorporating these approaches into formal climate adaptation frameworks?

Literature Review

Indigenous knowledge systems have gained increasing scholarly attention as valuable repositories of ecological wisdom. Orlove et al. (2010) show how traditional knowledge can offer insight into local ecosystem dynamics that formal scientific approaches often overlook. Their analysis of weather prediction systems in Uganda shows how observational frameworks and well-engineered indicators come from laboratory environments across different ecological domains. In the case of Ghana, Aniah et al. (2019) present how indigenous forecasting techniques in Northern Ghana utilize celestial observations, plant phenology, and animal behaviour to predict seasonal rainfall patterns with remarkable accuracy.

Some scholars have explored the spiritual dimensions of indigenous ecological knowledge. Dei (2000) examines how traditional religious practices in Ghana encode environmental ethics that encourage sustainable resource use, arguing that spiritual perspectives provide normative frameworks that reinforce conservation behaviours. Similarly, Opoku (1978) describes taboos and prohibitions of traditional Akan religious beliefs that act as conservation mechanisms. Awuah-Nyamekye (2014) extends this work by examining the contemporary relevance of sacred groves as repositories of biodiversity in Ghana and showing that religiously protected forest areas sustain significantly higher species diversity than unprotected areas of forest.

Scholars have also examined indigenous knowledge in the specific context of climate change. Nyong et al. (2007) describe how indigenous knowledge informs adaptation strategies in farming communities in the African Sahel, but also emphasize the cultural context in which this knowledge operates. In the context of Ghana, Codjoe et al. (2014) argue that traditional agricultural practices among coastal communities already include adaptive approaches within the context of changing rainfall patterns that are becoming increasingly erratic. Their research shows how native crop selection, land management, and planting schedules have adapted to perceived environmental change.

The relationship between religion and ecology has emerged as a distinct field of inquiry. Golo and Yaro (2013) examine the concept of human-environment relations within traditional African religions in Ghana and how spiritual cosmologies emphasize reciprocity and balance. Extending this work, Diawuo and Issifu (2015) explore the perceptions of Ghanaian environmental stewards operating within the religious domain, mobilizing the capacity for community action through spiritual frameworks that evoke deeper resonance than secular environmental messaging.

Nonetheless, much of the scholarship related to spirituality and resilience is not specifically linked to the religious dimensions of indigenous knowledge systems, thus warranting further exploration of how spiritual conceptual frameworks contribute to individuals' and communities' capacity to deal with the uncertainties of changing conditions on the land. Recent work by Nkrumah et al. (2023) addresses this gap by monitoring ritual practices around rainfall in northern Ghana; the analytical focus is mainly on agricultural implications instead of broader dimensions of resilience. This study seeks to fill this research gap by exploring how religious dimensions of indigenous knowledge inform climate resilience through diverse ecological contexts in Ghana.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology consisting of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions, complemented by participatory mapping exercises and seasonal calendars, was used in this study. Between February 2023 and November 2024, fieldwork was conducted across seven communities in three ecological zones in Ghana: coastal communities (Cape Coast and Elmina), forest communities (Kumasi and Koforidua), and savanna communities (Tamale, Bolgatanga, and Wa). These sites were chosen to reflect the diversity of ecological contexts and associated indigenous ecological knowledge systems across Ghana's primary biomes.

The demographic breakdown included eleven (11) traditional religious leaders (shrine priests, diviners, and traditional healers), eight (8) recognised community elders as knowledge holders, twenty-seven (27) active farmers and fishers whose livelihoods were sensitive to climate change, and ten (10) local climate adaptation practitioners either working with government agencies or local non-government organizations. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques for finding participants with specific knowledge of traditional ecological practices. 47% of total participants were female, as gender balance was emphasized.

The research design centred on participatory strategies that privileged indigenous voices and knowledge systems. Interview protocols were co-developed alongside community representatives and were based on local conceptual frameworks instead of imposing external categories. Research assistants fluent in each of the main local languages (Twi, Ewe, Ga,

Dagbani, Wala, and Frafra) conducted interviews and focus group discussions alongside the researchers. Participant observation encompassed the attendance at seasonal rituals, agricultural activities, and the involvement in local decision-making processes around environmental management.

This was supplemented by a review of relevant historical documents (colonial ethnographic records for the historical period, contemporary policy documents in the climate adaptation domain, and records preserved by traditional authorities). These secondary sources helped provide the historical context needed for understanding changes to indigenous knowledge systems over time and how these systems relate in the present to formal governance structures. Data collection was complemented by a review of relevant historical documents, including colonial ethnographic accounts, contemporary policy documents related to climate adaptation, and records maintained by traditional authorities. These secondary sources provided historical context for understanding changes in indigenous knowledge systems over time and their current relationship to formal governance structures. Data was analysed through thematic content analysis to identify patterns and relationships between religious concepts and ecological practices.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants and community authorities. The researchers adhered to principles of indigenous research methodologies, including reciprocity and respect for cultural protocols surrounding sacred knowledge.

Findings

The findings identified three main mechanisms in which the religious dimensions of indigenous knowledge systems promote climate resilience, each influencing more than one scale from individual behaviour to community governance structures.

Sacred Cosmologies as Environmental Frameworks

Sacred cosmologies provide the conceptual foundations in which humans are understood to be stewards of natural resources, not owners. In Akan societies, for instance, the belief in *asase yaa* (Earth goddess) designates the land as a divine being, mandating its treatment with respect. Rituals that recognize this relationship govern agricultural practices, including libation ceremonies before land clearing and harvest offerings. As one elder in Koforidua put it:

> "The land does not belong to us to work as we like. We are only caretakers of *asase yaa*, and she will take away her fertility if we misuse her gifts." Interview, June 2023.

This kind of conception could be seen in the Ewe communities with *anyigba* (Earth deity) traditions, as well as northern communities where the *tingbani* (Earth shrine) is the focal point for ecological governance. These cosmologies fundamentally transform human-environment relationships from utilitarian resource management to environmental stewardship that participants characterized as "sacred responsibility."

Here, climate change becomes a question of cosmology, not just a manifestation of a physical phenomenon, but as an expression of spiritual imbalance demanding ritual

intervention as much as corrective action. After heavy flooding in Cape Coast in 2022, traditional authorities held purification rituals and practical clean-up activities to manifest the blending of the spiritual and material responses to environmental disruptions (Kasanga, 2022).

Ritual Prohibitions as Regulatory Mechanisms

Ritual prohibitions and taboo systems perform relatively complex and outworn regulatory mechanisms for the sustainable use of resources. Sacred days banned from farming or fishing activities (*dabone* among the Fante and *dzifa* among Ewe communities) establish periods of natural resource recoveries.

In some coastal communities, the prohibition against Tuesday's fishing provides weekly replenishment opportunities for marine ecosystems increasingly stressed by climate impacts and overfishing. Traditional authorities enforce these prohibitions through spiritual sanctions, which are thought to be more effective than government laws.

Seasonal rituals provide temporal structures for resource appropriation that reflect ecological rhythms. The *Afahye* festival observed in coastal communities marks the start of the main fishing season, while the *Homowo* among the Ga communities ensures that agricultural activities are regulated. These rituals include climate observations and projections; traditional priests analyse environmental indicators to find the right timing. Adaptation processes within such systems are shown by our study of increasingly erratic rainfall patterns leading to calendar-time changes of ritual events. In forest communities, prohibitions against harvesting particular tree species recognized as housing forest spirits (*suman*) preserve keystone species essential for ecosystem functioning. Similarly, taboos against catching juvenile fish or harvesting particular plant species during reproductive periods establish conservation seasons. These prohibitions demonstrate sophisticated ecological understanding embedded within spiritual frameworks.

Religious Institutions as Knowledge Repositories

Traditional religious institutions are the knowledge repositories and transmission mechanisms of ecological wisdom. Helping them are shrine priests and traditional leaders who also serve as environmental monitors and provide crucial guidance on agricultural timing and weather prediction, as well as how to manage resources through the generational knowledge integrated with spiritual authority.

In northern communities, divination practice involves environmental assessment because diviners read ecological indicators through spiritual frameworks where legitimate observation is nested in cosmological interpretation. One of the diviners in Bolgatanga explained,

> "When I throw the cowries, I am not just reading spiritual messages, I am reading signs from the natural world about what is going to happen in the season to come" (Interview, December 2023).

Developing these knowledge systems helps to provide locally relevant climate information from regions that lack access to meteorological services. These sacred groves hold diverse native species and apply ecological principles under traditional religious institutions, acting as biodiversity reserves, demonstrative areas, and land for conservation. In the forest communities, researchers documented several sacred groves between 0.5 to 12 hectares that

preserve native vegetation increasingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and land use. These sites act as "living laboratories," where members of the community, particularly youth, engage in ritualized activities that teach ecological principles.

Knowledge transmission occurs through initiation systems, apprenticeships and oral traditions embedded in religious practice. While formal education processes often overlook these knowledge systems, research has documented innovative approaches to intergenerational knowledge transfer, including the integration of traditional ecological principles into community-based projects for climate adaptation led by traditional leaders.

Discussions

The findings show how religious frameworks create cultural bases for specific climate-resilient practices through diverse avenues. Sacred stewardship concepts provide ethical imperatives for conservation that resonate more deeply within communities than external scientific rationales. This aligns with Attuquayefio and Fobil (2005), who pointed out that conservation approaches that align with existing cultural values achieve greater community acceptance and longevity than those imposed through external frameworks.

The divine ecology embedded in traditional cosmologies creates integrated knowledge systems that connect spiritual well-being with environmental health. The integration offers a holistic approach to climate resilience that addresses psychological dimensions often overlooked in technical adaptation frameworks. This finding corroborates that of McLeod et al. (2022), who demonstrate how cultural and spiritual aspects of resilience play a major role in maintaining the well-being of the community during climate disruptions.

These indigenous approaches provide enormous benefits to help build climate resilience. They offer locally relevant solutions tailored to specific environmental contexts; they build on existing cultural systems rather than impose rigid new conceptual paradigms; and they combine resource management and social cohesion mechanisms critical for community resilience. Such practices make this process more sustainable since they are embedded within pre-existing systems of culture. Contemporary challenges are prompting evolution within these knowledge systems. Studies presented adaptive responses to climate change within traditional frameworks, including adjustments to ritual calendars based on changing seasonal patterns, modification of taboo systems to protect newly vulnerable species, and incorporation of scientific information into traditional decision-making processes. A shrine priest in Tamale remarked:

> We have always watched the sky and insects to know when rain will come, but now we also listen to the radio weather forecast and combine this knowledge" (Interview, March 2024).

Despite this, barriers persist in integrating these knowledge systems into formal climate adaptation frameworks. When it comes to co-producing knowledge within formal climate adaptation processes. Policy contexts often regard traditional approaches as marginal due to the differences in power between scientific and indigenous knowledge systems. Ghana's National Climate Change Policy (2013) recognizes indigenous knowledge yet offers few opportunities for a nuanced engagement and integration of this insight into adaptation planning. Epistemological distinctions challenge systems of knowledge translation between systems, as spiritual aspects of indigenous knowledge cannot be quantified within the scientific paradigms.

The continuity of these knowledge systems is also threatened by sociocultural challenges. Conversion to congregationalist forms of Protestant Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, and to reformist forms of Islam has weakened many groups' more traditional spiritual frameworks. A respondent, an elder in Sunyani, lamented:

> The young people today call our culture 'backward' and 'superstitious.' They don't realize that our taboos cared for the forest that is now disappearing (Interview, April 2024).

Likewise, processes promoted by urbanization and formal education systems trivialize indigenous knowledge, leading to a discontinuity in intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Despite these challenges, the study recorded new approaches to knowledge integration. In Cape Coast, a community-based climate adaptation project embedded traditional ecological knowledge in a coastal protection strategy, combining both engineered solutions and restored sacred groves as natural barriers against growing tempestuous storm surges. In northern Ghana, agricultural extension services have recently started working with traditional authorities to co-design seasonal forecasts that combine scientific models with indigenous indicators of local climate, leading to more resilient forecasting systems.

These examples hint at pluralistic paths toward climate resilience that honour the complementary strengths of diverse knowledge systems. As Chilisa (2017) argues, decolonial approaches to climate adaptation require recognition of indigenous epistemologies as valid knowledge systems rather than merely supplementary to scientific frameworks. The findings presented here support Nadasdy's (2003) contention that effective knowledge integration requires institutional transformation rather than simply extracting indigenous knowledge for incorporation into existing scientific paradigms.

Conclusion

This study depicts the vast role that religiously embedded indigenous knowledge systems could play in the contribution to climate resilience in Ghana. Culturally based concepts of stewardship and frameworks of ecological reciprocity help contextualize sustainable resource management practices in local environments that are aware of and responsive to the changing ecological conditions. Such systems of knowledge are complementary to the scientific climate adaptation literature, especially in their capacity to mobilize community action through culturally relevant frames. However, recent findings suggest that while these knowledge systems are still dynamic, capable of adaptation and innovation, they are not truly homogeneous; they can incorporate contemporary challenges into their frameworks, but have an ultimate basis entrenched within religious perspectives. Integrating spiritual and pragmatic ecological management results in holistic resilience strategies that engage the material and psychological elements of climate adaptation.

The study adds to emerging scholarship on pluralistic frameworks of climate resilience that recognize the multidimensional facets of adaptive capacity. This study provides empirical grounding to theoretical frameworks highlighting the cultural dimensions of adaptation (Adger et al. 2013; Crate and Nuttall 2016).

But the promise of these knowledge systems will not be used until major challenges are addressed, power imbalances in knowledge-value formation, epistemological differences between knowledge systems, and sociocultural transformations threatening knowledge transmission. These challenges call for novel ways of integrating knowledge that honours the integrity of indigenous frameworks while cultivating productive conversations with these scientific approaches.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, this study recommends:

1. Better Documentation and Acknowledgment: Increase documentation of indigenous ecological knowledge with attention to religious dimensions, through collaborative methodologies that respect cultural protocols regarding sacred knowledge. In line with this, government agencies and research institutions ought to create formal recognition for knowledge holders, similar to that in place for scientific experts.

2. Institutional Transformation: Strategies to build collaborative governance structures that incorporate both traditional and scientific knowledge systems concerning their equitable epistemologies. This means going beyond token consultation to actual power-sharing in the planning and implementation of climate adaptation. The Ghana Environmental Protection Agency should therefore develop an Indigenous Knowledge Division at a policy level with meaningful authority.

3. Validation of Traditional Institutions: Acknowledge and engage traditional religious institutions as partners in climate adaptation efforts. These include offering legal recognition to sacred natural sites, financing programmes to help transmit traditional knowledge, and incorporating traditional authorities in environmental governance structures. Specific programs towards the ecological dimensions of traditional governance should be curated by the Ministry of Local Government, Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs.

4. Education and Knowledge Transmission: Education efforts that renew more traditional forms of transmission of ecological knowledge while integrating it into modern-day environmental challenges. These efforts include the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal school curricula, support for community-based learning initiatives led by traditional knowledge holders, and development of intercultural education programs that foster dialogue between knowledge systems. Curricula should be revamped by the Ghana Education Service to ensure that place-based ecological knowledge is an integral, context-relevant aspect of each.

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AFRICAN PROVERBS AS PEDAGOGY FOR MORAL VALUES IN SELECTED AFRICAN PLAYS

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Abstract

This paper examines African proverbs in the light of their pedagogic impact on moral values in society concerning some select plays. Proverbs are those phrases that give witty advice used to impart knowledge, wisdom, moral values, and teachings to the younger generation. African proverbs constitute important and strategic areas where the African philosophy of life can be extracted. In recent times, the plausibility of African proverbs being used as an instrument of change and impacting moral values has been drastically reduced. This is said to have stemmed from the lacuna created by the impact of Western acculturation on Africa, which distorted the African socio-cultural and indigenous worldview. The objective of this paper is to advance African proverbs as a viable African-centered approach to critical thinking. In the light of the foregoing, the study, while adapting a qualitative methodology, situates its argument on African proverbs as vessels for propagating change. The paper notes that African proverbs are necessarily essential in the understanding and transmission of African epistemology geared towards creating knowledge for the betterment of human existence. This is a way of providing explanatory justification for the presence of a tool for moral development that is authentically African, as the paper supports the use of African proverbs (wise sayings) as culturally grounded and relevant pedagogical practices that promote African values and thoughts. The paper also presents analyses of the proverbs in select plays and concludes that an inquiry into the African proverbs used in *Akpakaland, Morountodun, Ozidi* and *Death and the King's Horseman* will go a long way to contribute to the moral development of the African society. The study therefore recommends that all hands must be on deck to assist research efforts aimed at cultural preservation and propagation of the philosophical insights in African proverbs.

Keywords: Proverbs, African Proverbs, Pedagogy, Moral Values, Select Plays

Introduction

In Africa, indigenous languages are rich in several modes of expression, such as idioms, proverbs, and metaphors, which together show the beauty of conversation in African languages. These indigenous African languages and wisdom obtained from them have the potential to positively influence the learning and teaching process of learners. The proverbs and sayings reflect the rich historical experience of the people, ideas related to the works, life, and culture

of the people. This is why Dall (1980) is the walking mind of the people. The correct and appropriate use of proverbs and sayings gives speech a unique originality and special expressiveness. In any proverb, there is always a "pedagogical moment" - edification: as such, a proverb is understood as an apt figurative saying of an edifying nature, typifying the most diverse phenomena of life. This is because proverbs satisfy many spiritual needs of children in terms of the cognitive and intellectual (educational) as well as the aesthetic, moral needs. The special features embedded in them are what make proverbs persistent and necessary in everyday life and speech.

Proverbs are not antiquity and as such cannot be regarded as a thing of the past, but the living voice of the people, which the people retain in their memory that which they need not only today but will also need tomorrow. Proverbs are a widespread genre of oral art that have their roots in ancient times, deeply rooted in the centuries. The main feature of proverbs is their completeness and didactic content. It is very difficult to determine from what time proverbs began among the people, but one thing is indisputable: proverbs originated in separate antiquity and since then have accompanied the people throughout their history. Thus, when a proverb speaks of the past, it is evaluated from the point of view of the present and the future, depending on the extent to which the past is reflected in the aphorism corresponds to popular ideals, expectations, and aspirations. Since the proverb is created by all the people, it embraces the expressed collective opinion of the people, for it contains the people's assessment of life as well as the observation of the people's mind.

Etymologically, the term 'proverb' derives from the Latin word *"Proverbium"* which means a simple and concrete saying, popularly known and respected, that expresses a truth based on common sense or experience (Taylor, 2003). They are often metaphorical and are

regarded as the central source of knowledge acquisition in traditional African society. This enables humanity to have an insight into previous civilizations because a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in metaphorical, fixed, and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (Irabor, 2013). This implies that proverbs are often used metaphorically, and it is in understanding their metaphorical nature that a person can unravel their meaning. They function as "folk wisdom" because they contain advice or state a generally accepted truth and have been used in the dissemination of knowledge, wisdom, and truths about life since time immemorial. They have also been considered an important part in the fostering of children, as they signal moral values and exhort common behaviour.

Proverbs have poetic characteristics (Finnegan, 2012), setting them apart from other oratory devices. They contain cherished beliefs and truths. They are repositories of the rich memories and accumulative knowledge of a society that bears characteristics of their culture that may have evolved (Dipio, 2019). They depict the culturally-specific accepted truths about society's accepted ways of living (Gyan et al., 2020). Proverbs are also used in embellishing speech and help in the acquisition of behavioural principles underpinned in traditional moral and wisdom expressions required for the growth and development of societies (Fayemi, 2009). They play a very significant role in the education and socialization of youths (Onofrei & Iancu, 2015), as they are used as a medium of interpreting the cultural beliefs and values in society.

Belonging to the traditional verbal folklore genres, the wisdom of proverbs has served as guidance for people worldwide in their social interaction throughout the ages. They are concise, easy to remember, and useful in every situation in life due to their content of everyday experiences. In traditional and modern African societies, proverbs are generally accepted as

quintessential in communicating ideas and ethics among both the old and the young. An authentic African does not conclude his speech without encapsulating his thoughts in a suitable and appropriate proverb, for they "serve as the acceptable medium of transmitting knowledge and convention from generation to generation" (Hussein, 2005: p.19). Thus, for Chiku & Rick (2004), African cultural heritage (proverbs, taboos, dirge, etc.), passed on from generation to generation, has been a source of guidance for African communities in times of peace, uncertainty, birth, life, and death. Proverb is therefore the basis of their self-identity, self-respect, and self-confidence, as it has enabled them to live in harmony with their physical, social, and spiritual environments. This heritage provides a foundation for leadership, guidance, problem-solving, decision-making, self-reliance, and development.

An interesting aspect of proverbs is the question: 'How do proverbs perform these cultural functions?' It is an exploration of the functionality of the proverb. The truth of this is that African proverbs are meaningful when verified from the situation they refer to. So, the negation of the actual situation, an African proverb seeks to explore raises the surprising agitations and objections about the philosophical character of African philosophy that is found in her culture and disseminated through proverbs. Significantly, proverbs are the expression of the character and manners of a nation, their specific way of thinking, seeing, and feeling. An important benefit of transmitting information via proverbs is that they refer to a core group of virtues and vices reflected in folk ritual and real-life situations, like the work-ethics etc. Such virtues operate in productive employment, which, according to circumstances, can help test a person's moral character. Consequently, they can help decide when a moral issue is adjudged moral or immoral, or amoral. Generally, they can influence the work efficiency and overall morality of a society.

Purpose of Research

The study is seen as part of the struggle for the acceptance of proverbs as means of inculcating social and moral values in the people as it reflects a full respect for the value of human life where our aspiration and that of the writer is motivated not by the desire to speak the mind of the African dilemma but also to imbibe the African culture. The lesson inferred from the above stems from the fact that any examination of the relationship between oral literature and society without reference to the inherent proverbs that make up the culture of the people can hardly be regarded as a sufficient study, since that is what creativity is all about.

A literary work is more relevant if it dwells on the consciousness and experience of the people while reflecting on their dispositions, such as happiness, joy, sadness, condemnation, bitterness, and cravings for change. In dramatic history, evidence exists to indicate that the social forces of a particular time can indeed dictate style in creativity. Modernist playwrights therefore work on ideas which inform their plays and dictate their structures and the combination of purposeful behaviour and talks which gives the play some dazzling comic effects mixed with underlying serious messages of metaphysical context, all of which stems from the feeling that reflects a society dislocated from its cherished values.

Here, it is seen that the writers employ the device of oral literary form and the traditional performance mode in their plays not just for aesthetic effects but also to make progressive and ideological statements. This, according to Osofisan (1974), stems from the fact that they take legendary and mythical figures and bring them on stage, mostly to revive a tradition, identifying with a glorious part and reclaiming a heritage. Oral literature, therefore, provides ways in which the people's history, culture, and tradition are preserved. With them, the people understand their values and norms better and aim at building on the achievements of the past

rather than destroying them. And so, the literary work is built on Nigerians' history, songs, dreams, dances, proverbs, folktales, and so on, as well as mirrors the tradition, culture, and ways of life of the people as it captures the reality of their existence.

Methodology

The study adopts the descriptive research methods and detailed analysis of the four selected plays from Osofisan, Ukala, Soyinka, and Clark, respectively. The plays serve as the primary data to interrogate their ideological commitment, social, political, and artistic visions as explored in the plays. The purposefully selected plays are Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun,* Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland,* Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman,* and J P Clark's *Ozidi.*

The secondary sources of data collection include works by previous researchers in textbooks, journals, published essays/articles, and relevant previous academic research works such as seminars, conferences, and public lectures. This study is metaphoric, and the playwrights are selected because of their rich socio-cultural backgrounds in addition to their profound knowledge of the oral narratives of their people as well as the African tradition.

The Pedagogy of Proverbs

The research adopts a pedagogical theory which are connected with beliefs and value systems, concepts of man and society, and philosophies of knowledge and political interests. It deals with the nature and structure of educational action, teaching, and upbringing. It is thus concerned with the underlying values and principles that influence our approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment. Founded by Johann Friedrich Herbert, the theory breaks down the learning cycle into five domains or phases of instruction, such as "engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate".

The term pedagogy comes from the Greek word 'Paidagogos', a combination of 'Paidos' (child) and 'agogos' (leader), which describes the art of teaching and learning process. Dewey's pedagogical philosophy sees education and discipline as closely connected to the community and social life. To him, the learning process can only actually be useful when children are provided with sufficient learning opportunities to connect their prior experiences with their current knowledge. That is why to Dewey (2003), "education is not preparation for life, education is life itself".

Therefore, in any proverbs, there is always a pedagogical moment which represents an apt figurative saying of an edifying nature, typifying the most diverse phenomena of life. Here we see that the ultimate goal of proverbs has always been education; they have acted as pedagogical means since ancient times. On the one hand, they contain a pedagogical idea, on the other hand, they have an educational influence which carry educational functions that is, they tell about the means, methods of educational influence corresponding to the ideas of the people, give characterological assessments of the personality - positive and negative, which, defining in one way or another the goals of personality formation, contain a call for education, self-education and re-education, they condemn adults who neglect their sacred duties - pedagogical, etc.

This is why to Komensky (2000), "A proverb or proverb is a short and clever statement in which one thing is said and another is implied, that is, the words speak of some external physical, familiar object, but hint at something internal, spiritual, less familiar". This statement contains recognition of the pedagogical functions of proverbs and takes into account the fact that proverbs act as a means of influencing the consciousness of the educated and that learning goes from the known to the unknown, where a familiar object generates an unfamiliar thought. From a pedagogical point of view, instructions of the three categories include: teachings,

instructing children and youth in good morals, including the rules of good manners; teachings calling adults to decent behavior, and, finally, instructions of a special kind containing pedagogical advice stating the results of education, which is a kind of generalization of pedagogical experience. They contain a huge educational and educational material on the issues of child upbringing.

Hence, the proverbs reflect pedagogical ideas concerning the birth of children, their place in the life of the people, the goals, means, and methods of education, encouragement and punishment, the content of education, labor and moral education, etc. The education of an African child, like every other child all over the world, usually begins at home. For instance, parents sometimes use proverbs, taboos, and folklore to educate their children at home. These cultural resources are used to draw attention to the consequences (s) of bad conduct. African parents do not spare their children when they are involved in misconduct. There are lessons to be learnt from folklore, proverbs, and taboos, especially when elders often organize moonlight stories where folktales are told and interpreted by young children. In schools, a teacher may use proverbs to caution his/her pupils/students against bad conduct. When the need arises, a teacher may use the proverb to perform some cautionary roles by: (a) warning students of the consequences of wrongdoing, and (b) deterring them from engaging in social vices.

The moral values embodied in this proverb are expected to moderate the students' conduct and behaviour. The pedagogical view of the people, therefore, is a collection of the collective experience of the masses accumulated over the centuries for the education and training of the young generation, brilliantly embodied in various monuments of oral arts. Thus, proverbs are expected to provide a theoretical framework for championing (i) the virtue of patience, (ii) the notion of prudence in anything a person does, and (iii) the use of rational enquiry in conjunction with prudence where one is faced with choice-making. Therefore, it is

useful and valuable for African scholars to explore and exploit valuable oral traditions such as proverbs to revisit the past and their cultures. This is because past cultures have shaped present cultures, which is why we have, at the same time, elements of the primordial and civic competing within the same space. African culture can fill in the ethical and spiritual gap left open by the craze for materialistic development.

Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*

In *Morountodun,* the preoccupation of playwright is on the ability to use powerful expressions manifesting in the deployment of proverbs to instantiate the way they are used to depict the dynamism of mankind to showcase the orientation that they portray. When a proverb is deployed in a particular situation, such is usually embedded with meanings, and it takes only the analytical minds to decode what is being said. Rather than use direct and somewhat dry expressions, the proper deployment of proverbs became a marker of soundness, profundity, and a deep understanding of the subject being discussed. Arguably, one of the elements that adds colour to language use in the play is proverbs, and they are not merely selected to add colour but also to express the people's beliefs, acting as a vehicle for the transmission of culture (Nhlekisana 2009). Corroborating this fact, Dogbevi (2007) argues that proverbs are the foundation of social and cultural wisdom and therefore serve as the basis for formulating concepts that govern social relations.

Since African proverbs are considered as the most ubiquitous genre of folklore and instructional vehicles through which the cultural values in African societies are imparted to generations, the play *Morountodun* interprets Yoruba proverbs as Indigenous knowledge enshrined in the cultural practices of indigenous Yoruba people based on their life experiences and observations in their natural environment (Kim et al., 2017). The validity of the knowledge

is based on the successes in its application passed on orally from the older generation to the younger generation (Adom, 2016).

Proverbs in *Morountodun*

The play employs a lot of proverbs which are used to bring out the cultural quality of the play. Amongst the proverbs used in the play are those used by both Titubi and the Superintendent.

Titubi:	Don't think you're clever. Every cobra is poisonous, whatever its gloss.
Superintendent:	The hunter brings home a grass cutter and beats its chest. What will happen to the elephant killer?
Titubi:	The shoulder is not smaller is it, simply because it has chosen to wear a low necked blouse?
Superintendent:	Oh the cat has claws. The tiger has claws. But what feat of courage is it when the tiger goes up to the cat and says: hm, your anus is smelling? (*Morountodun,* p.13)

In the proverbs above, after Titubi threatens the Superintendent that if he lays his fingers on her to arrest her that his whole family will pay for his actions, the Superintendent tells her through the proverb that she cannot do anything because she is nothing and no body compared to him either in age or in position.

Ukala's *Akpakaland*

To Ukala, today's proverbs are at risk of becoming extinct because of the rapid changes in the natural environment and the fast pace of economic, political, and cultural changes. As a social form of knowledge of a society's cultural history, the proverb genre is communicated orally and risks disappearing once the older generation passes away (Dutta, 2019). This would eventually lead to the loss of cultural heritage, practices, and genres such as proverbs cherished as ancestral knowledge in Africa. There have been great concerns about paying attention to the

preservation of proverbs for posterity among scholars recently. In the play *Akpakaland* the proverb is used as an integral part of folk literature. They were used to preserve cultural memories and indigenous knowledge systems in many ways, chiefly through oratory, music, and dance, while acting as products of individual and collective spoken memory

Proverbs in *Akpakaland*
Some of the proverbs employed in *Akpakaland* are,

Unata: Please, ignore her. She's young and has a heart that foams, that's all.
Fulama: Let it continue to foam. One of these days it will foam like the saliva of the snail in which the snail cooks itself. The wood pecker that pecks a stone will lose its beak… (*Akpakaland*, p.40).
Fulama: When rubbish is too much in the soup, the blind one notices it.
Unata: When one sees a weakling, does he not hunger for a fight (*Akpakaland*, pp.14,17).

The above represents a conversation between Unata and Fulama while referring to Iyebi, who is angry with Unata for allowing her enemy, Fulama' to visit her in her sick bed all in the bid to mock Unata's condition. Another is that between Idemudia and Enwe,

Idemudia: The animal that befriends the monkey must fold its thumb.
Enwe: Or the monkey will break it off. (*Akpakaland,* pp.19-20)
            The child who swears to starve its mother of sleep
            Will, all night, slumber in wakefulness (*Akpakaland*, p.23).

These are among the conversations that took place between Idemudia, Unata's father, and Enwe, the medicine man, when they came to him for help to return Unata's tail to the sender.

Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman*

Proverbs are popular sayings that contain words of advice or warning. This is the reason Obiechina (1972, p.52) defines it as "the kernel which contains the traditional wisdom of traditional people…the philosophical and moral expression shrunk to few words". They are normally used by old men to bring out the meaning of obscure points in discrete answers and comments. Soyinka believes that the Africans "use proverbs as satires of the contemporary African society, developed through life experiences, histories, values, and worldviews, and used to impart knowledge, wisdom, moral values, and teachings to younger generations.

To him, they also help in the acquisition of behavioural principles underpinned by

traditional moral and wisdom experiences required for the growth and development of society. The moral imperatives of the lessons included in the proverbs used in *Death and the King's horseman,* speaks of the common human desires for kinship, friendship, moral conduct and cultural respect because they are expressions and wise sayings that form some of the integral strongholds of traditional African drama which are great in morals and are used to instruct, teach and correct the younger generations.

Acting as philosophical and moral expressions shrunk into a few words and as metaphysical citation that gives credence to traditional truths and wisdom, Soyinka's proverbs are "basically used by the elders to bring out the meaning of obscure points in conversations or arguments" (Taiwo, 1985, p.26). Hence the use of proverbs in the play provides a whole spectrum of oral tradition from which the Yoruba history can be drawn. Thus, besides their literary value, the proverbs also convey historical information, which gives insight into the dominant socio-political and economic conduct of the people.

Proverbs in *Death and the King's Horseman*

Elesin and the Praise-singer's dialogue in the introduction shows a lot in riddles, which are used to paint the picture of a true African society in the play. Here, we witness Elesin recounting the story of the 'Not I Bird',

> Death came calling.
> Who does not know his rasp of reeds?
> A twilight whisper in the leaves before
> The great Araba Falls? Did you hear it?
> Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps his fingers round his head,
> abandons a hard-worn harvest, and begins
> a rapid discussion with his legs (DKH, p.11)
> The riddle is Soyinka's way of saying that the farmer in his fright abandoned his farming

tools and "took to his heels", a picture of an African saying. Also, Elesin and Iyaloja use riddles

in the play to communicate. Iyaloja speaks in riddles to mystify Pilkings while communicating

with Elesin. In one of her speeches, she says,

Iyaloja: Not yet, it drags me on the slow, weary feet of women
             Slow as it is Elesin, it has long overtaken you
             It rides ahead of your laggard will (DKH, p.71)

In the riddle above, Iyajola is talking about the corpse of Olunde being brought forward

by the women to Elesin for him to utter the final words before he is laid to rest. Her choice of

riddle is well understood by Elesin, but leaves Pilkings in total confusion about what has been

said. Hence, Pilkings exclaims,

Pilkings: What is she saying now? Christ.
              Must you people forever speak in riddles? (DKH, p.71).

This shows he is at a loss about what is being said, as he cannot comprehend the message.

Soyinka's use of proverbs in the play is very profound and helps serve as a trademark of the

play as African literature. To the Yoruba, proverbs are "the horses of speech" through which

communication is found. In the play, Iyaloja uses proverbs a lot. She used it to scold Elesin for

his cowardice in defiling the rituals of his suicide. She says,

Iyaloja: How boldly the lizard struts before the pigeon when it was the
             Eagle itself she would confront (DKH, p.67).

In this proverb, Iyaloja mocks and scolds him for remaining at the prison yard of

Pilkings rather than perform the ritual that will ensure the continuity of his community.

Clark's *Ozidi*

According to Akpobobaro (2012, p.78), proverbs are "essential ingredients in African

speech and culture", for they are powerful carriers of traditional wisdom and social mores.

They are therefore effective means for moral education of all members of the society as they

are humorous, delightful, and aesthetically pleasing to the hearer and express the truths of African personal and social experience. This is why the use of proverbs by Clark in oral tradition not only illustrates the power of the spoken word but also serves as an educational tool which emerges as a narrative strategy centered on the functional, collective, and committed attributes of the oral art.

In *Ozidi*, Clark shows the tremendous benefits of preserving and promoting African proverbs to ensure the credibility and validity of meanings assigned to the African proverbs. This is because it gives the situational aspects of the proverbs by showcasing their cultural and historical contexts.

Proverbs in *Ozidi*

In *Ozidi*, proverbs are well used. For instance, Oreame uses proverbs a lot in the play to spur Ozidi to wake up to his call to avenge his father and not bring shame to her person as the highest of witches. She says to him,

> Oreame: Hold it, hold it, my son, hold it,
> has the back of the cat ever touched mud
> althoughyou throw him to the ceiling top?
> Does the soldier ant slip on the field
> Though caught in a stampede?
> I say hold it, will you shame me?
> Hold it i say? (*Ozidi*, p.51)

In another instance, she says to Temugedege,

> Oreame: Surely, Temugedege, a young woman like that,
> did you expect she will stay up as a plantain stem in the open country
> and no cock coming to top her tassel! (*Ozidi,* p.59)

The above proverb interprets that Orea (Ozidi's mother), a young woman, will not stay without being adored by the male folks. It is also emphasized in the discussions between the elders,

First Citizen:　How shall we stop the leopard's left paw from falling on our necks?
How shall we dam his rush? Here, the elders were discussing on
how to contain Senior Ozidi's power, especially with his brother now
their king (*Ozidi*, p.12)

Conclusion

The origin of any proverb has usually been a concise, brief or figurative statement from speeches of a wise or elderly man, in a particular situation or context. Some arise from simple apothegms and platitudes, which over time are elevated to the status of a proverb. Others emerge from the symbolic or metaphoric use of an incident; some are based on a story or fable, while others are simply variations on existing proverbs. In all, proverbs with moral significance become fashionable and popular and are adopted into the social ethics of the people.

In other words, proverbs are the simple truths of life that contain the ethical, moral values of a society (Taylor, 2003). They rank equal with myth, folklore, song, dance, and divination as cultural elements and means of knowing in traditional African society. Aside from the aesthetic and figurative value in proverbs, it presents a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. Its beauty and some delight is that what it says is readily perceived and accepted as an incontrovertible truth which may inspire further reflection, serve as a warning in areas of human activities, disclose how to treat or relate with people, criticize, praise, advice, or teach the populace.

In essence, proverbs constitute a larger part of the logical, critical, and coherent mode of reasoning that is prerequisite to the formation of a philosophic system. Therefore, it is advised that the humanities must search for African proverbs in Africa and not anywhere else, as it has become evident that proverbs are an integral part of most African societies and form

an essential component of the total achievement of the society or the people. This is because it

is composed of ingredients that are embedded in the culture of the society or the people, and is

a revelation of the philosophy of the people and the moral values that the society holds on to.

It is regarded as a system that educates the people and guides them for their future life, for it

constantly serves as a reference point to their philosophy of life.

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GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN JUDITH BUTLER AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and its implications for feminist activism in developing countries. Butler's framework challenges traditional gender binaries by arguing that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a series of socially constructed and regulated performative acts. This exploratory analysis examines how Butler's insights reshape feminist discourse, particularly in contexts where activism intersects with cultural traditions and socio-economic constraints. The study highlights the adaptability of Butler's theories in addressing gender-based oppression and promoting intersectional inclusivity. However, critiques of Butler's abstract approach are also considered, with a focus on its practical limitations in addressing the immediate struggles of marginalized women. By integrating Butler's gender performativity into feminist strategies, this paper underscores the potential for subverting entrenched gender norms and advancing gender equality in diverse socio-political landscapes. Finally, the study recommends that feminist movements in developing countries can harness Butler's insights while also contextualizing their activism within local traditions to foster effective and sustainable social change.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Feminist Activism, Binary Gender, Grassroots Activism.

Introduction

The critical analysis of gender performativity in the work of Judith Butler highlights the complexities of gender identity as a socially constructed phenomenon, fundamentally reshaping feminist activism, especially in developing countries. Central to Butler's theory is the assertion that gender is not an innate quality but rather a series of performative acts shaped by cultural and societal norms, as articulated in her seminal text (Butler, 1988). This theoretical approach challenges traditional binary classifications of gender, allowing for a more fluid understanding of identity that embraces diversity and intersectionality (Syndu, 2025; Mambrol, 2018; Sus, 2024). Notably, Butler's critique of essentialism emphasizes the limitations of fixed gender categories, fostering a discourse that promotes inclusivity and resilience among marginalized groups. The insights empower activists to rethink strategies and approaches

within their cultural contexts, encouraging grassroots movements to challenge oppressive societal norms and advocate for women's rights in innovative ways (Blumenfeld & Breen, 2001; Breen & Blumenfeld, 2019; Galligan, 2022). This adaptability is particularly crucial in developing countries, where feminist activism often intersects with local traditions, leading to hybrid forms of feminism that resonate more deeply with community values and experiences.

However, Butler's theories have not been without controversy. Critics argue that her abstract and theoretical focus may overlook the lived realities of individuals, particularly in contexts marked by socioeconomic challenges (Sungkawa, 2024; Niedda, 2020). This paper aims to critique the emphasis on performativity, which can create a disconnect between feminist theory and practical activism, potentially limiting its applicability in addressing immediate issues faced by women in developing nations. Nevertheless, Butler's work continues to serve as a critical touchstone for contemporary feminist movements, offering essential tools for empowerment, resistance, and solidarity across cultural boundaries (Government of Canada, 2023; Butler, 1988). Therefore, the implications of Judith Butler's gender performativity theory extend far beyond academia, providing vital insights that shape feminist discourse and activism in developing countries (Davis, 2023). By fostering an understanding of gender as a dynamic, performative construct, this work seeks to equip feminist activists to navigate and transform the intersections of tradition, culture, and modernity in their pursuit of gender equality and social justice.

Judith Butler's Framework

Judith Butler is an American philosopher and gender theorist known for her work in feminist theory, queer theory, and political philosophy. Born in 1956, Butler is best known for *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not an inherent identity but a socially constructed performance reinforced through repeated acts. Butler has also engaged in political activism, particularly in issues related to LGBTQ+ rights, anti-war movements, and social justice. The components of the theoretical framework of Butler's Performativity include gender performativity, critique of essentialism, feminist activism, redefining activism through gender performances, transnational solidarity and resource sharing, cultural contextualization of feminism, political engagement and structural change, and empowerment and agency.

The concept of gender performativity in Butler's framework is central to her philosophical approach and offers a transformative lens for understanding gender and identity. Butler argues that gender is not an inherent quality or a stable identity but rather a series of acts and performances that are socially regulated and repeated over time (Butler, 1990; Syndu, 2025; Mambrol, 2018). This notion challenges the traditional binary categorizations of gender, suggesting that these constructs are socially fabricated rather than natural (Sus, 2024; Blumenfeld & Breen, 2001). Gender performance creates the illusion of a stable identity, as individuals are compelled to conform to societal norms that dictate how one should act based on their perceived gender (Galligan, 2022; Mambrol, 2018). In emphasizing the role of

repetition in gender performance, Butler opens up the possibility for subversion and resistance against rigid norms, providing a critical tool for feminist activism (Syndu, 2025; Sus, 2024).

Furthermore, a significant aspect of Butler's framework is her critique of essentialism, the belief in fixed and universal qualities associated with sex and gender (Sus, 2024). Such essentialist views limit the understanding of gender and identity, leading to exclusionary practices that fail to account for the diversity of human experiences (Galligan, 2022; Sus, 2024). Thus, Butler deconstructs essentialist notions, highlighting the importance of recognizing the social and contextual forces that shape identities, thereby promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender (Syndu, 2025; Blumenfeld & Breen, 2001). The implication of this deconstruction of essentialism is how it influences feminist activism. Particularly in developing countries, feminist activism is deeply influenced by the theoretical frameworks surrounding gender performativity, as articulated by Judith Butler. Understanding gender as a performative construct allows activists to challenge and reshape societal norms that perpetuate inequality and oppression. The implications of this perspective are significant for grassroots movements, transnational networks, and the intersection of feminism with local cultural contexts. Thus, activism may be redefined through gender performance.

Butler's notion of performativity suggests that gender is not an innate quality but rather a series of actions and behaviours that are socially constructed and maintained. This insight can empower activists in developing countries to reimagine gender roles and engage their communities in re-evaluating traditional practices that may hinder women's rights. By promoting the idea that gender roles can be reshaped, activists can inspire collective action that dismantles oppressive structures and advocates for equality. For instance, grassroots organizations can harness local cultural narratives to create new forms of feminist expression that resonate more deeply within their communities, effectively challenging patriarchal norms through localized activism (Sungkawa, 2024), including transnational solidarity. Butler's framework also fosters transnational feminist networks that amplify the voices of women from the Global South. These networks enable the sharing of resources, strategies, and experiences, creating a platform for dialogue that transcends geographic boundaries. Initiatives such as the Global Women's March exemplify how collective action can unify diverse feminist movements to address common issues like violence against women and reproductive rights (Sungkawa, 2024). Such solidarity is vital for building a cohesive feminist agenda that recognizes the unique challenges faced by women in different cultural contexts.

In addition, the significance of culture in shaping Third-World feminist perspectives cannot be overstated. Activists in developing countries are increasingly recognizing the need to contextualize feminist movements within local cultural frameworks. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how traditional practices intersect with contemporary feminist ideals, leading to hybrid forms of activism. For example, Afro-Feminism celebrates African heritage while addressing patriarchal systems, reflecting an integration of cultural identity with feminist goals (Sungkawa, 2024). By honouring local customs and traditions, activists can engage more effectively with their communities, ensuring that feminism is

relevant and accessible. Moreover, the implications of Butler's theories extend to the political realm, where activists are challenged to confront governmental policies and international relations that affect women's rights. The incorporation of gender issues into broader political discourses can significantly advance feminist advocacy in developing countries. Feminists must critically assess how neoliberal policies exacerbate gender inequalities and advocate for changes that prioritize women's rights in economic and social policies (Sungkawa, 2024; Niedda, 2020). This political engagement is essential for ensuring that the feminist movement not only addresses immediate issues but also aims for long-term structural change.

Finally, Butler's insights on the gender performativity framework underscore the importance of empowering women to reclaim their narratives and assert their rights. Empowerment is not merely about providing resources; it involves fostering an environment where women can recognize their agency and challenge existing power dynamics. This involves equipping women with the skills and confidence necessary to speak out against injustices and advocate for their rights within their communities (Government of Canada, 2023). The process of empowerment is both collective and individual, requiring a shift in societal attitudes and the dismantling of systemic barriers to gender equality.

Critical Analysis of Gender Performativity

Butler's framework has practical implications for feminist theory. Thus, the critical analysis will enable an overview of gender performativity theory, critique gender performativity and chart the way moving forward. The profound implications of this framework for feminist theory and activism are the rejection of the binary categorization of gender and advocating for an understanding of gender as a performance. The framework invites feminists to the reevaluation of how feminist movements define and approach the concept of "womanhood." Critics argue that traditional feminist frameworks often create an essentialized notion of women, which can reinforce binary views of gender relations (Butler, 1988). Butler advocates for a more fluid conception of identity that acknowledges the complexities and intersections of race, class, and sexuality, leading to a more inclusive feminist discourse (Davis, 2023; Butler, 1988). In addition, Butler's philosophy has fundamentally reshaped the understanding of gender by positing that it is not an inherent quality but rather an ongoing performance shaped by societal expectations and norms (Smith, 2024). In her seminal work (1990), Butler challenges the conventional view of gender as a stable identity, suggesting instead that gender is constituted through repeated acts, or "stylized repetition of acts" over time (Butler, 1988; Smith, N. 2024). This approach emphasizes the dynamic nature of gender, positioning it as a verb rather than a noun, something that individuals do rather than something they are (Smith, 2024).

Despite its influential nature, Butler's theory has faced criticism for its abstractness and perceived elitism, which some argue can limit its practical application in activism (Philosophica, 2025; Varghese, 2024; Polychroniou, 2022). Critics like Martha Nussbaum contend that Butler's emphasis on performativity overlooks the material realities and lived

experiences of individuals, thus creating a disconnect between theory and practice (Varghese, 2024; Polychroniou, 2022). Furthermore, scholars such as Susan Bordo argue that Butler reduces gender to discourse, failing to account for the importance of the body in gender identity (Philosophica, 2025). These critiques suggest a need for feminist theorists to balance the theoretical aspects of gender with practical considerations that address the lived experiences of women, particularly in developing countries where cultural and socioeconomic factors significantly influence gender dynamics.

Moving forward, it is important to incorporate Butler's insights into gender performativity into feminist activism to provide a richer understanding of identity that transcends rigid categories. Recognizing that gender identity is performatively constructed, activists can better address the diverse and intersecting identities present in communities, leading to more effective and inclusive practices (Philosophica, 2025). As the discourse surrounding gender continues to evolve, Butler's work remains a critical touchstone for understanding the complexities of gender in contemporary society, especially as it relates to the empowerment of marginalized groups in various global contexts (Butler, 1988; Polychroniou, 2022).

Gender Performativity in Developing Countries

In developing countries, gender performativity creates an intersection of tradition and modernity, social constructs and internalization, resistance and transformation, cultural context and feminist activism, and the role of performative acts in social change. In many developing countries, gender performativity is influenced by a complex interplay of traditional practices and contemporary feminist movements. The understanding of gender roles often emerges from longstanding cultural norms that dictate expected behaviours for men and women. For instance, in societies where women are traditionally viewed as caregivers, expectations around femininity are perpetuated through socialization processes that emphasize nurturing roles, as seen in practices such as giving baby dolls to girls to reinforce caregiving behaviours (Varghese, 2024). Conversely, boys are socialized to embody strength and assertiveness, reflecting dominant masculinity norms (Davis, 2023). Gender norms in these contexts can be internalized to the extent that they feel natural to individuals. For example, in educational settings, girls may be expected to maintain long hair, while boys who grow their hair long may face disciplinary actions (Jones, 2025). This illustrates how societal expectations can shift based on gender, even within uniform standards. The implications of this internalization highlight how rigid gender roles can limit personal expression and reinforce harmful stereotypes (Davis, 2023).

Despite the entrenched nature of these gender norms, acts of resistance do occur, often leading to a transformation in understanding gender. Judith Butler's theory posits that gender is not fixed but is a result of ongoing performative acts that individuals unconsciously engage in (Sungkawa, 2024). In this light, individuals can challenge and subvert traditional roles through deliberate acts that defy societal expectations. This dynamic process offers a space for developing new interpretations of gender that can empower individuals and promote equity

(Jones, 2025). The significance of culture in shaping feminist activism cannot be understated. Activists in developing countries often navigate traditional beliefs while advocating for women's rights, creating unique hybrid forms of feminism that resonate with local cultural contexts. For instance, movements such as Afro-Feminism blend the celebration of cultural heritage with a critique of patriarchal structures, illustrating how local identities inform and enhance feminist activism (Butler, 1988). This intersectionality allows for a richer understanding of gender issues and promotes strategies that are more effective in addressing local challenges.

Furthermore, Butler draws parallels between gender performativity and theatrical performance, emphasizing that both involve the enactment of roles within specific cultural contexts (Butler, 1988). This comparison underscores the potential for feminist activism to utilize performative acts as a means of social change. By engaging in public demonstrations or creating narratives that challenge dominant gender norms, activists can disrupt traditional perceptions and advocate for more equitable gender relations. This approach not only highlights the constructed nature of gender but also provides a pathway for reimagining identities and roles within society (Sungkawa, 2024).

Case Studies and Examples

The feminist movements in Latin America offer compelling case studies that highlight the practical applications of Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and vulnerability within political activism. These movements have skillfully utilized economic power and political representation as tools for advancing women's rights, especially in contexts where reproductive rights are under threat. For instance, Latin American feminists have leveraged their substantial economic influence, estimated at $3.5 trillion in spending power, to initiate campaigns such as the planned 2025 Latino Freeze boycott, aimed at corporations that withdraw their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Flores, 2025). This strategic engagement resonates with Butler's emphasis on the performative aspects of identity and resistance, demonstrating how economic agency can serve as a vehicle for feminist activism. The development of transnational legal networks exemplifies the cross-border solidarity that has emerged from these movements, particularly in the context of reproductive justice. U.S. organizers are increasingly adopting strategies from Latin American counterparts, such as acompañamiento networks that guide individuals seeking safe abortion care. Collaborations between groups like the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice and Mexico's Red Necesito Abortar illustrate how feminist movements are transcending national borders to share resources and strategies aimed at circumventing restrictive laws (Flores, 2025). This transnational approach echoes Butler's idea of vulnerability as a collective experience, emphasizing the interconnectedness of women's struggles across different socio-political landscapes.

The roots of Latin America's feminist movements can be traced back to 20th-century anti-dictatorship protests, which laid the groundwork for contemporary activism. For example, Chile's Mujeres por la Vida were instrumental in demanding democracy and accountability during oppressive regimes, and their legacy informs current campaigns for women's rights. The establishment of November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women not only honours historical figures but also reinforces the importance of memory in feminist mobilization (Flores, 2025). This historical perspective enhances Butler's theoretical framework by demonstrating how the past informs present struggles and highlights the ongoing need for vigilance in the fight for rights.

The successes and strategies of Latin American feminist movements provide a vital context for evaluating the relevance of Butler's theories in contemporary activism. As these movements confront not only legislative challenges but also societal norms, they exemplify the performative nature of gender as articulated by Butler. Activists embody the very change they advocate for, turning theoretical insights into tangible actions. The recent victories in reproductive rights across several countries, including Colombia's decriminalization of abortion up to 24 weeks and Mexico's federal legalization, are a testament to the power of sustained mobilization and the intersection of policy advocacy with grassroots activism (Flores, 2025). Through examining these case studies, it becomes evident that the integration of Butler's theories with local contexts enhances our understanding of gender performativity in action and reinforces the importance of solidarity in feminist activism, particularly in developing countries facing similar challenges.

Conclusion

The analysis of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity underscores its transformative potential in feminist activism, particularly in developing countries where gender norms are deeply embedded in cultural and societal structures. By challenging the fixed binary understanding of gender, Butler's work provides a framework for resistance and the redefinition of gender identities beyond rigid essentialist categories. This approach has empowered feminist movements to adopt more inclusive and intersectional perspectives, allowing for greater adaptability in addressing local challenges. However, while Butler's theoretical contributions are invaluable, their practical applicability in grassroots activism remains a subject of debate. Critics argue that an overly theoretical emphasis on performativity may not fully account for the lived experiences of women facing socio-economic marginalization, political repression, and gender-based violence. Effective feminist activism in developing countries thus requires a balance between theoretical insights and pragmatic approaches tailored to specific cultural contexts. To maximize the impact of Butler's gender performativity theory, feminist movements must integrate it with locally relevant strategies that acknowledge historical, economic, and social realities. By leveraging both theoretical and practical dimensions, activists can create sustainable interventions that challenge oppressive gender norms while remaining culturally resonant. Finally, Butler's work serves as a vital

intellectual resource for contemporary feminist struggles, offering pathways for empowerment, resistance, and social transformation across diverse global settings.

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AN APPRAISAL OF "KLEIS" IN MATT. 16:19 IN ACTS OF THE APOSTLES AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Abstract:

In Matt. 16:19, Jesus said He had given Peter the keys of the Kingdom of heaven, that whatever he would bind on earth, would be bound in heaven, and whatever he would loose on earth would also be loosed in heaven. According to Meta AI, "Kleis" (Greek) refers to a physical key to lock and unlock doors. However, in this spiritual context, the "keys" (Kleis) symbolize the authority and power: to bind and loose, i.e., to prohibit or permit; to restrict or release. Secondly, the keys represent the power to unlock the gates of heaven, granting access to God's presence, forgiveness, and salvation. Thirdly, the keys represent the Church's responsibility to proclaim the Gospel, teach, and govern following God's will. Ultimately, "Kleis" represents the authority and power that Jesus entrusted to His Church, not only to Peter, to fulfill its mission and ministry on earth. This article aims at exploring how the early Church in Acts of the Apostles used "Kleis", and to what extent in its ministry, and its relevance for the contemporary Church.

Keywords: Bible, Kleis, Matthew, Acts, Apostles, Key, Church, Kingdom, Heaven.

Introduction

The prophecy which preceded the subject matter of "kleis", "I will build My Church ..." made by Jesus Christ was fulfilled in Acts 2, following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles. Amaowoh (2022) presented various arguments by notable scholars concerning the birth of the Church, first, that the Church started before the day of Pentecost. Such scholars include Kuiper, who saw the *Proto Evangelium*, Gen. 3:15, as the beginning of "Christ's Church", with Adam and Eve as its first members. Objecting to the Day of Pentecost as the birth of the Church, Kuiper saw the event as marking a turning point in the history of the Church. He reiterated that the Church came into existence in the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve as members. Scholars such as Lewis Sperry Chafer and Charles C. Ryrie espoused the day of Pentecost as the birth of the Church in fulfillment of Matt. 16:18. This article thinks that the Church started on the Day of Pentecost, although it was in the embryonic state, in God's womb in the Old Testament. The Church, according to O'Donovan (1996:153), is not a denomination, but the true Church, which is composed of all those who have repented of their sins and put their faith in Christ. Vine defines "Church" from the Greek word "ekklesia" to mean "Assembly" or "Congregation" of the redeemed or called out ones. This definition is supported by Meta AI. It refers to both local gatherings and the universal body (I Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:22-23).

Luke is generally accepted to be the author of the Book of Acts, written around 63 AD. The theme of the Book is the triumphant spread of the Gospel through the power of the Holy

Spirit. The Book is addressed to Theophilus (Acts 1:1). Acts covers the first thirty years of the history of the Church, tracing the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, mentioning about 32 countries, 54 cities, names of prominent persons, and geographical features such as islands.

Acts of the Apostles, which is the record of the activities in the early Church, is replete with stories of the demonstration of "Kleis" by the Apostles through the power of the Holy Spirit. Their deeds and words were so amazing that the people wondered where they got such powers and learning, and recalled that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). Below is an appraisal of the use of "Kleis" by the Apostles in the Book of Acts, which has made some scholars to refer to the Book as "Acts of the Holy spirit through the Apostles."

"Kleis" as Authority

To the Lord Jesus, "Kleis" was reminiscence of the dominion which God gave to man at creation (Gen. 1:26-28; Psalm 8:4-8) but was lost when man fell into sin (Gen. 3). Jesus intended that the Church should be the centre of God's power on earth, spiritual, and not political or military power. This power or authority was to follow their being baptized in the Holy Spirit as it happened on the Day of Pentecost, having been promised before His passion and ascension, namely, (Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:8).

According to Meta AI and Vine (1996), the word "authority" is defined from the Greek word "exousia" to mean: 1. Power: The ability or capacity to act; 2. Authority: The right or permission to exercise power; 3. Jurisdiction: The sphere or domain over which authority is exercised.

In the New Testament economy, exousia is used to describe God's authority and power (Matt. 28:18); Jesus' authority (Matt 7:29; Mark 1:22); and the authority of spiritual leaders (13:17). Exousia consists in the legitimate exercise of power and authority, based on divine sanction which is found in Luke 10:19 "Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you."

Murphy (2002:285-292) has done a great work in elucidating the importance of authority in Christian Ministry. He argues that it is very important for the Church, particularly, those in leadership, to come to a full understanding of the Church's authority, the vast power which is available to the Church, for effective ministry, as witnessed in the ministry of Jesus and that of the disciples (Luke 10:17-20). This authority must be exercised by the Church over the Satanic kingdom through the spoken word, as people duly delegated by God. He added that the first authority given in Gen. 1:26-28 was lost through sin, but through redemption, it has been restored to those who believe in Christ.

In the ministry of Jesus, people recognized that He taught with authority, different from other religious leaders of His day (Matt. 7:28-29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32). "Kleis" is synonymous with "exousia" by which the Apostles performed all the miracles in the Book of Acts. The "exousia" was exercised in the name of Jesus according to the scripture, "And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak

in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover" (Mark 16:17-18).

An Appraisal of the Use of "Kleis" in Acts of the Apostles

Conversion of souls

Converting sinners who are under the power of Satan "to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" is not a simple task. It takes a superior authority and power to liberate sinful men. Through "Kleis" Peter was able to convert three thousand men through his sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). Thereafter, five thousand members were added to the Church (Acts 4:4); Multitudes of men and women were added (Acts 5:14). Conversion of sinners is the main task of the Church, and through divine authority, the Apostles were able to do this.

The door to Gentile Ministry was opened

The Gentile world was dominated by Satan, idolatry, and all forms of vices. The Jews called them "uncircumcised people" and would not associate with them. That was why Peter refused to eat the "unclean" animals which God showed him in Acts 10, until God convinced him that nothing He created should be called common or unclean. However, through "Kleis" the Gospel penetrated the Gentile world, especially under the ministry of Paul.

(a) Many people were converted through Philip in Samaria (Acts 8).
(b) The Ethiopian Eunuch was converted (Acts 8:26-40).
(c) The Gospel reached Caesarea through the house of Cornelius by the ministry of Peter (Acts 10).
(d) The conversion of Saul (Paul) might have been as a result of the prayers of the Church (Acts 9).
(e) Following the conversion and call of Saul (Paul), the door of Gentile Ministry was opened wider (Acts 13-28).

No ordinary power could have achieved this except "Kleis".

Miracles, Signs, and Wonders

. According to Halley (1965:563), miracles form a very conspicuous part of the Book of Acts. He said, "Take miracles out of the Book of Acts, and there is little left" (p. 564). Through "Kleis" many miracles, signs, and wonders were performed by the Apostles, including exorcisms (using authority, Greek "exousia"), to cast out demons (Luke 10:19). These miracles were done through the power of the Holy Spirit, and they include the following:

1. Healing of the lame man at the temple (Acts 3:1-10).
2. Healing of many people (Acts 5:12-16).
3. Judgment of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).
4. Many unspecified signs and wonders (Acts 2:43).
5. Philip's miracles in Samaria (Acts 8:6-7).
6. Healing of Aeneas by Peter (Acts 9:32-35).
7. Dorcas was raised back to life (Acts 9:36-42).

8.　　Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons healed many people, and demons were cast out (Acts 19:11-12).
9.　　Elymas judged with blindness by Paul (Acts 13:8-12).
10.　　A cripple healed by Paul at Lystra (Acts 14:8-10)
11.　　Deliverance from prisons (Acts 5:19-20; 12; 16).
12.　　Delivering a demon–possessed girl by Paul (Acts 16).
13.　　Raising of Eutychus back to life by Paul (Acts 20:9-12).
14.　　Paul talks about many signs and wonders as an Apostle (2 Cor. 12:11-12).
15.　　No one was poor among them. They were a prosperous people through the power of God (Acts 4:34). It takes God's power to create wealth, (Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day (Deut 8:17-18).

To illustrate the fact that these miracles were performed as a result of "Kleis", the seven sons of Sceva who tried to cast out demons as the Apostles were doing were overpowered and disgraced by the demons (Acts 19:13-17). "Kleis" was God's uncommon authority given to the Apostles by God. Halley (1956:442) on the keys of the Kingdom, said, "The ordinary interpretation of this is that Peter opened the door of salvation, on the Day of Pentecost, to the Jews (Acts 2), and later to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Not that he was given the power to forgive sins, but to proclaim the terms of forgiveness."

Effective Leadership

"Kleis" has a lot to do with leadership. Through this authority, Peter provided very effective leadership at all times, which led to the growth, stability, and peace of the Church. Arguably, he led the Church by example according to 1 Peter 5:3, leading by example known as Tupocracy. Amaowoh, as cited in Wikipedia (2024), defines Tupocracy and gives its key features as follows: "Tupocracy is a system of government or leadership style where leaders set positive and inspiring precedents through their own actions and behaviors. It's essentially leadership by example, where leaders demonstrate the desired values, work ethic, and integrity consistently, inspiring and motivating others to follow suit."

In a tupocracy, leaders don't just direct or command others; they model the behaviors and attitudes they expect from their team or followers. This approach fosters trust, credibility, and a sense of shared purpose, resulting in a more engaged and productive group. The term "tupocracy" was invented and created by Amaowoh (2006), a Nigerian clergyman and scholar, in 2006. Tupocracy is a viable alternative to other forms of government, such as democracy, aristocracy, and autocracy.

Some key characteristics of tupocracy leadership include:

- Leading by example: Tupocratic leaders demonstrate the behaviors and values they expect from others.
- Integrity: Tupocratic leaders are truthful, transparent, and accountable.
- Selflessness: Tupocratic leaders prioritize the greater good over personal interests.
- Honesty: Tupocratic leaders are honest and trustworthy.

Overall, tupocracy is about inspiring and motivating others through positive examples, rather than relying on authority or coercion. Tupocracy is a system of government or leadership style where leaders set positive and inspiring precedents through their own actions and behaviors. It's essentially leadership by example, where leaders demonstrate the desired values, work ethic, and integrity consistently, inspiring and motivating others to follow suit.

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The Relationship between "Kleis" and Faith

"Kleis" is not physical, but spiritual, intangible, and therefore cannot be operated like physical keys. "Kleis" is propelled and activated through faith. Vine (1996:222) defines "Faith" from the Greek word "Pistis" as a "firm persuasion, "a conviction based on hearing. According to Merriam-Webster online Dictionary, faith means "to trust or have confidence in an object or person." Meta AI defines faith as a strong belief or trust in something or someone, often without concrete evidence or proof. The Bible defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1)

Usen (2012:9) posited that faith is a demonstration of confidence in God. There are five senses to prove the existence of matter, namely: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. However, the sixth sense is faith, which believes in the existence and reality of the invisible. Admittedly, God is described as "Invisible" (John 1:18; Col. 1:15; I Tim 1:17 and Heb. 11:27). Faith is so pivotal to Christian living that the axiom, "The just (righteous) shall live by faith" is stated four times in the Bible, namely: Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:16-17; Gal: 3:11 and Heb. 10:38; and the Bible says without faith no man can please God (Heb. 11:6). Faith makes God real and takes Him at His word. Faith believes that all things are possible to God (Luke 1:37; Mark 10:27) and to the one who believes (Mark 9:23). God is angry at unbelief, which does not take God at His word (Num 13-14; Luke 1:18-20; Mark 6:1-6).

"Kleis" was used in performing all the miracles in Acts through faith in God's word. The Apostles had been with Jesus Christ and witnessed how He drove out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead, and calmed the storm by the word of His mouth only. Thus, beginning from the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3), the Apostles performed many miracles through the spoken word of faith, which other religious leaders were not able to perform. "Kleis" was like the rod of Moses (Book of Exodus), which Moses used in performing all the miracles in Egypt and the wilderness. The faith of the Apostles was activated through Prayer and hearing the word of God (Rom 10:17). Unbelief and doubt cannot perform miracles.

Limitations in the Use of Kleis

Despite their exploits, the Apostles were still fallible as humans in their ministry in Acts. They had their limitations, though, with "Kleis". They lost James to the sword of Herod. They lost Stephen, also. They had internal conflicts and misunderstandings from time to time (Acts 6: 11 and 15). Although they had "Kleis", they still had to run for their lives during persecution (Acts 8). They could not use "Kleis" to stop death and persecutions, but counted

themselves worthy to be persecuted for the sake of Christ (Acts 5:41). On the whole, they made good use of "Kleis" to expand the frontiers of the Church and perform miracles which those who were not among them could not, e.g. Simon (Acts 8:9-24); the seven sons of Sceva, (Acts 19:13-17).

Relevance of "Kleis" for the contemporary Church

"Kleis" is as relevant for the contemporary Church as it was for the early Church. Meta AI gives the following points to show the relevance of "Kleis" for the contemporary Church:

1. **Authority**: The Church has been given authority by Jesus to declare God's truth and will.
2. **Stewardship:** The Church is responsible for using this authority to build up the body of Christ and advance the Kingdom of God.
3. **Evangelism:** The Church is commissioned to proclaim the Gospel and share the message of salvation with the world.

Just as the early Church converted souls, performed miracles, and provided effective leadership that aided the growth of the Church, the contemporary Church should use the same authority that Jesus gave them to do exploits for God.

"Kleis" has no expiration date, and the Church should use it until the *parousia*. The challenges faced by the Church in Acts of the Apostles are still around, namely, activities of Satan, demons, and their human agents. Contemporary Church leaders should follow the Acts pattern of depending on the power of the Holy Spirit for world evangelism so that the Gates of Hades will not overpower and extinguish the Church. The contemporary Church is thriving through "Kleis", yet a lot more needs to be done, but for it to do as the Apostles, Miller et all (2011:25) recommends for the contemporary to preach the same message, do missions as they did, receive the same spiritual experiences and follow the same methods which the Apostles adopted in spreading the Gospel in Acts.

Conclusion

"Kleis" enabled the early Church to do exploits in terms of conversion of souls, Gentile mission, miracles, and effective leadership, although they had limitations as fallible men. The contemporary Church should use Kleis as the early Church did. "Kleis" is not physical, but spiritual, and so needs faith to operate. Faith is the pivot of Christian life and ministry, without which no man can please God. Faith believes that all things are possible with God (Mark 10:27) and all things are possible to those who believe (Mark 9:23). "Kleis" cannot operate in the atmosphere of unbelief, doubt, or faithlessness. Admittedly, the Apostles had grown from little faith to faith that moves mountains (Matt. 14:31; Mark 11:22-24). The contemporary Church needs this level of faith, too.

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FAITH-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP IN GHANA: IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

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Abstract

Christianity in Ghana has played a crucial role in shaping societal values, influencing not only moral and ethical behaviours but also attitudes toward the environment. This study examines the contributions of Christian churches to ecological conservation and sustainable development in Ghana, focusing on faith-based stewardship initiatives, environmental advocacy, and community engagement. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research utilizes content analysis of theological discourses, policy documents, and church-led environmental programs, complemented by semi-structured interviews with religious leaders, theologians, and environmental experts. Findings indicate that while Christian doctrine strongly advocates for environmental stewardship, practical engagement varies significantly across denominations. Some churches actively integrate eco-theology into teachings and implement sustainability programs, such as afforestation projects, waste management campaigns, and climate action advocacy. However, other congregations demonstrate passive or inconsistent involvement due to theological ambiguity, limited funding, and inadequate institutional commitment. The study argues that for Christian churches in Ghana to align more effectively with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there must be a deliberate integration of environmental ethics into theological education and policy frameworks. Additionally, collaborations with governmental and non-governmental organizations can strengthen church-led sustainability efforts. By fostering an environmentally conscious Christian identity, Ghanaian churches can play a transformative role in mitigating ecological degradation and promoting a culture of sustainable development.

Keywords: Environment**,** Environmental stewardship, Christianity, Christian Churches, faith, sustainability, eco-theology, Ghana

Introduction

Environmental degradation has become an escalating crisis in Ghana, manifesting through deforestation, water pollution, illegal mining (*galamsey*), and improper waste disposal. These challenges threaten not only the ecological balance but also human health and livelihoods (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014, p. 88; Appiah-Sekyere, 2020, p. 95). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of Ghana has documented extensive land degradation due to mining activities, which not only destroy forests but also contaminate water bodies with mercury and other harmful chemicals (EPA, 2020, p. 32). Despite governmental efforts to curb

environmental destruction, challenges persist, necessitating the involvement of civil society actors, including religious organizations.

Given that 71% of Ghana's population identifies as Christian (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021), the role of Christian churches in environmental stewardship warrants critical examination. As moral and spiritual leaders, churches hold substantial influence in shaping societal values and attitudes toward the environment (Larbi, 2021, p 132). Christianity, the dominant religion in Ghana, has a complex relationship with environmental stewardship. While some biblical interpretation emphasizes humanity's dominion over nature (Genesis 1:26), others highlight the responsibility of humans as caretakers of God's creation (Genesis 2:15). This theological duality has led to divergent attitudes among Christian groups regarding environmental responsibility. Some churches actively promote conservation through initiatives such as tree planting, waste management campaigns, and climate advocacy, while others focus primarily on spiritual concerns, often overlooking ecological responsibilities (Okyere-Manu & Morgan, 2022, p. 112)

Faith-based environmental stewardship refers to the role religious organizations play in advocating for ecological sustainability through theological teachings, community engagement, and environmental activism (Francis, 2015, p. 45; White, 1967, p. 1204). Across the world, religious institutions have increasingly recognized the urgency of responding to environmental challenges, with many faith traditions integrating environmental ethics into their doctrines and practices (Werner, 2020, p. 89). In Ghana, Christian churches hold a position of social and moral authority, influencing attitudes and behaviours in various aspects of life, including environmental conservation. Given the mounting concerns over deforestation, pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss, examining the role of churches in promoting sustainable environmental practices is both timely and necessary.

The doctrine of Christian environmental stewardship is rooted in Biblical theology, with Genesis 1:26-28 often cited to support the idea of human dominion over nature. However, theological debates persist regarding whether this dominion implies responsible caretaking or exploitative control (White, 1967, p.1204). The tension between the anthropocentric interpretation of dominion and eco-theological perspectives advocating for environmental justice is evident in Ghanaian Christian discourse (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014, p. 32). Some churches incorporate environmental stewardship into their mission, whereas others emphasize spiritual salvation over environmental concerns (Okyere-Manu & Morgan, 2022, p. 112).

In Ghana, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church actively engages in climate change adaptation and sustainability efforts in line with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 13. Many other churches have yet to harness their potential for environmental advocacy (Werner, 2020, p. 890. This divergence raises critical questions about the extent to which Christian churches in Ghana perceive environmental stewardship as a moral/ and theological duty and how effectively they implement sustainable practices.

Given this context, this study examines the role of Christian churches in Ghana in promoting environmental stewardship. It explores theological perspectives on ecological responsibility, practical conservation efforts undertaken by churches, and the challenges that hinder faith-based environmental activism. By analysing these dimensions, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on the intersection of religious and environmental sustainability. In doing so, it highlights both successes and shortcomings in faith-based

environmental engagement and provides insights into how churches can enhance their contributions to ecological conservation and sustainable development.

Having established the background of this study, the following section outlines the research objectives guiding the inquiry.

Research Objectives.

This study aims to:

1. Assess the extent to which Christian churches in Ghana promote environmental stewardship through theological teachings, practical initiatives, and advocacy.
2. Identify challenges and barriers that hinder effective faith-based environmental action.
3. Examine the theological and doctrinal foundations influencing Christian environmental consciousness in Ghana.
4. Provide strategic recommendations for strengthening church-based ecological conservation efforts.

Building on the above Objectives, the next section of the study situates the discussion within a broader scholarly discourse on faith-based environmental stewardship. The following literature review examines existing research on the intersection of religion and ecology, with a particular focus on Christianity's role in environmental conservation.

Literature Review

The role of faith-based organizations in environmental conservation has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Globally. Religious traditions, particularly Christianity, have been both criticized and praised for their influence on environmental ethics and sustainable practices. Scholars have explored how religious teaching, cultural interpretation of the faith, and institutional policies shape environmental attitudes and behaviours (White, 1967, p. 120). In the Ghanaian context, where Christianity holds significant influence, understanding how churches engage with ecological conservation is crucial to addressing environmental challenges.

Theological Foundations of Environmental Stewardship

Christianity has been both credited and blamed for humanity's attitude toward nature. Lynn White Jr.'s (1967) seminal work argues that Christianity's anthropocentric worldview has contributed to environmental degradation, particularly through the interpretation of Genesis 1:26, where humans are given "dominion" over the earth. White suggests that this perspective has historically justified the exploitation of natural resources, positioning humans as superior to and separate from nature (p. 122). However, many theologians and religious scholars challenge this view, arguing that biblical teaching advocates for responsible stewardship rather than domination

Several passages in the Bible emphasize environmental responsibility. Genesis 2:25, for example, states that God placed humans in the Garden of Eden to "till and keep it," implying a duty of care and preservation. Psalm 24:1 reinforces this notion by declaring "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," highlighting divine ownership over nature. Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (2015) builds on these biblical principles, urging Christians to embrace 'integral ecology,' which links environmental protection with social justice. (Francis, 2025, p.89). This

perspective has influenced many faith-based environmental movements worldwide, including those in Ghana.

Some of these calls made by some Christian leaders, such as the Pope, gave birth to Eco-theological movements. These movements have emerged globally in response to environmental concerns. Werner (2020) notes that despite Christianity's historical association with environmental exploitation, alternative theological traditions within biblical and indigenous African wisdom offer a nuanced understanding of nature as sacred and worthy of protection (Werner, 2020). Kavusa (2021) similarly argues for African ecological hermeneutics, drawing upon indigenous spiritual traditions that emphasize communal and cosmological interdependence (Kavusa, 2021).

Faith-Based Environmental Movements in Ghana

In the Ghanaian context, Christian churches have taken varied approaches to environmental stewardship. Some denominations, such as the Catholic Church, actively promote sustainability through initiatives like the Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) program (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2012, p. 78). The Presbyterian Church of Ghana has implemented conservation projects such as tree planting and climate change education campaigns. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, in particular, has engaged in education and knowledge transfer on climate resilience strategies, aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Okyere-Manu & Morgan, 2022).

However, a notable shift has been observed within Ghana's Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Traditionally, prosperity theology, which emphasizes economic success, has overshadowed environmental concerns in some of these churches (Larbi, 2021). However, recent studies indicate that the church of Pentecost has integrated ecological consciousness into its mission. Tsekpe and Awudi (2025) highlight how this church has incorporated afforestation and waste management into its spiritual mandate, reflecting an emerging Pentecostal-Charismatic eco-mission model (Tsekpoe & Awudi, 2025).

Beyond individual churches, interdenominational bodies such as the Christian Council of Ghana have periodically issued statements urging congregations to adopt sustainable practices. Some churches have established environmental ministries to lead conservation efforts at the grassroots level. The Presbyterian Church's involvement in the *Green Ghana Project,* which encourages tree planting and environmental restoration, exemplifies these efforts. Similarly, the Methodist Church of Ghana has integrated environmental stewardship into its social outreach program, focusing on waste management and sanitation (Appiah-Sekyer, 2020).

Despite these initiatives, Challenges persist. Many churches in Ghana lack structured, long-term sustainability plans for environmental advocacy (Okyere-Manu & Morgan, 2022). While short-term projects such as tree planting are common, institutionalizing environmental activism remains a challenge due to financial constraints and the limited integration of ecological ethics into theological training. Studies also show that Catholic churches in Africa, inspired by Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*', have organized environmental workshops and initiatives to promote sustainability (Nche, 2022).

In addition to Christian organizations, faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Ghana, such as the *Religious Bodies Network on Climate Change (REBOCC)*, have

played an active role in advocating for policy changes and mobilizing religious communities for ecological conservation. These efforts align with a broader recognition of religion's roles in sustainable development in Africa, as scholars argue that religious institutions are indispensable to the sustainable development process (Golo & Novieto, 2022).

Following the examination of some existing literature, the next section presents the study's methodology, detailing the research design, data collection methods, and analytical approach.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts the qualitative research design to explore the role of Christian churches in Ghana in promoting environmental stewardship. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining social and cultural phenomena, particularly in contexts where human beliefs, values, and institutional structures shape environmental attitudes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 450). By using qualitative methods, the studies seek to capture the depth and complexity of faith-based environmental engagement, providing a nuanced understanding of how theological perspectives influence ecological conservation efforts.

A case study approach was employed to provide an in-depth examination of selected Christian denominations and their environmental initiatives. The case study method allows researchers to explore contemporary real-world phenomena within specific contexts, making it particularly useful for investigating how churches integrate environment stewardship into their activities (Yin, 2028, p. 23) This approach ensures a detailed analysis of faith-based environmental interventions, including tree-planting, waste management campaigns, and climate advocacy efforts.

Data Collection Methods.

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observations. These methods were chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of church-based environmental programs, theological perspectives and institutional challenges.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with church leaders, environmental coordinators, and members of congregations actively involved in the sustainability initiative. A semi-structured interview allows for open-ended responses, enabling the participant to express their views on environmental stewardship within a faith-based context (Bryman, 2016, p. 78). The interviews focused on the following key themes:

1. Theological perspectives on environmental stewardship
2. Church-led conservation projects and sustainability efforts
3. Institutional challenges to faith-based environmental activism
4. The role of Christian teachings in shaping ecological attitudes

A total of 25 interviews were conducted across five denominations, including 5 Catholics, 5 Presbyterians, 5 Methodists, 5 Pentecostals, and 5 Charismatic churches.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring representation from various theological traditions and institutional structures (Patton, 2025, p. 67)

Document Analysis

Church publications, official statements, pastoral letters, and environmental policy documents were analysed to assess institutional commitment to sustainability. Document analysis is a valuable method for identifying recurring themes and institutional priorities in faith-based environmental discourse (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). Key documents included:

1. Statement from the Christian Council of Ghana on environmental responsibility
2. Official reports on church-based ecological programs
3. Sermons and pastoral messages related to environmental ethics

Data Analysis

Conducting rigorous qualitative research requires a systematic and transparent approach to data analysis to ensure credibility and reliability in findings. This study employed thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77) thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility in capturing complex meanings embedded within qualitative datasets while allowing for systematic categorization of themes (Nowell et., 2017, p. 3). This analytical process adhered to established qualitative research standards to ensure methodological rigour and validity.

The analysis commenced with the process of data familiarization, which involved the verbatim transcription of the interview recordings. Transcription was conducted meticulously to maintain the accuracy and authenticity of participants' responses (Bazeley, 2013, p. 52). Additionally, field notes from participant observation were reviewed to capture contextual insights and non-verbal cues that supplemented the interview data (Crewell & Poth, 2018, p. 128). Immersion in the dataset enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of content, facilitating the identification of preliminary patterns and recurrent themes.

Following data familiarization, initial coding was conducted using an open coding technique. Open coding is a fundamental stage of qualitative research that involves segmenting textual data into smaller units of meaning (Saldaa, 2021, p. 93). This approach allowed for the systematic categorization of key themes emerging from the participants' narratives, including theological perspectives on environmental stewardship, sustainability practices adopted by churches, and institutional barriers to faith-based conservation efforts. Unlike deductive approaches that apply predefined codes, the coding process in this study was inductive, meaning that the codes emerged organically from the data, aligning with the practices in qualitative inquiry (Corbin & Strauss, 2025, p. 47).

Once the coding process was completed. The next phase involved theme development, where similar codes were clustered into broader thematic categories. This process involved iterative refinement to ensure internal coherence within each theme while maintaining a meaningful distance between different themes (Terry et al., 2017, p. 25). The key themes that emerged included "churches as environmental advocacy," which encapsulated various

initiatives and programs undertaken by religious institutions to promote ecological conservation; "challenges of faith-based conservation," which highlighted theological, financial, and structural constraints affecting sustainability efforts; and "theological tension in sustainability discourse," which examined the conflicting interpretations of dominion theology and their implications for environmental attitudes (Hitzhusen &Tucker, 2013, p. 370).

The final phase of analysis involved interpretation and synthesis, in which the identified themes were contextualized within the broader academic literature on faith-based environmentalism. Comparative analysis was conducted to examine how environmental practices in Ghana churches aligned with or diverged from global faith-based sustainability movements (Jenkins, Berry, & Kreider, 2018, p. 142). Special attention was given to theological discourse, with findings critically examined through the lens of existing theoretical frameworks in religious environmental ethics (White, 1967, p. 1205). This interpretation process ensures that the study contributed to ongoing scholarly debates on the intersection of religion and ecological responsibility while situating the findings within international discussions on sustainability and faith-based advocacy (Gerten & Bergmann, 2012, p. 98).

By employing thematic analysis with a rigorous methodological approach, this study provides an understanding of the role of Christian churches in Ghana in promoting environmental sustainability. The systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of qualitative data enabled the identification of underlying patterns in faith-based environmental engagement, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities inherent in religious ecological advocacy. The methodological rigour adopted in this study aligns with international standards for qualitative research, ensuring that the findings are credible, transferable, and relevant to both academic discourse and policy considerations in religious sustainability efforts.

The above section outlines the methodology of the study; the next section presents the findings, highlighting the ways in which Christian churches in Ghana engage in environmental stewardship.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal the diverse and complex roles that Christian churches in Ghana play in environmental stewardship. Through thematic analysis, responses from 25 participants, five from each of the Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, and charismatic churches, were examined. The responses highlight both active engagement and challenges faced in faith-based ecological advocacy. These findings are structured into key thematic areas: theological perspectives on environmental initiatives, financial and ecological literacy, and community engagement.

Theological Perspectives on Environmental Responsibility

Theological beliefs shape how different denominations perceive and engage in environmental stewardship. Participants from Catholic and Presbyterian churches emphasized the biblical principles of stewardship as a divine mandate. A Catholic priest (Participant 3) noted:

"Our faith teaches us that creation is a gift from God, and it is our duty to protect it. Pope Francis' encyclical, Laudato Si, has reinforced our commitment to care for the Earth as part of our moral and spiritual responsibility."

Similarly, a Presbyterian church leader (participant 7) cited Genesis 2:15, arguing that *"God entrusted humanity with the care earth, not its destruction. As a church, we must advocate for responsible environmental practices."* This aligns with literature that affirms stewardship as central to Christian ecological ethics (Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013, p. 371). Conversely, responses from Pentecostal-Charismatic church leaders indicated a different theological focus. A Charismatic pastor (Participant 20) remarked:

"Our primary concern is saving souls. While environmental issues are important, they should not overshadow the preaching of salvation."

This view reflects a theological divine in Ghana Christianity, where some churches prioritize spiritual prosperity over ecological concerns (Awual-Nyamekye, 2014, p. 110). Nonetheless. A Pentecostal church member (Participant 14) acknowledged:

"We are beginning to understand that protecting the environment also means protecting God's creation. If we destroy the Earth, we suffer the consequences."

This suggests that the eco-theological perspective is gradually gaining traction even in churches where environmental advocacy has been historically limited (Tsekpoe & Awudi, 2025, p. 42).

Church-led Environmental Initiatives

Despite theological differences, several churches actively participate in ecological conservation. Participants from the Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist churches highlighted structured environmental programs. A Methodist minister (Participant 12):

"Our church organizes regular tree-planting exercises and sanitation campaigns. We believe that taking care of the environment is a part of our Christian duty."

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana has integrated environmental sustainability into its mission, as confirmed by the church's environmental coordinator (Participant 9):

"We engage in climate advocacy and practical conservation programs, such as afforestation and water preservation projects."

Similarly, a Catholic youth leader (Participant 5) described initiatives under the Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation (JPIC) program:

"We run workshops to educate our members on climate change and sustainable living."

These efforts align with literature highlighting the role of churches in environmental advocacy (Jenkins, Berry, & Kreider, 2018, p. 146).

However, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches showed more limited engagement. A pastor from a Charismatic church (Participant 22) admitted:

"We don't have an official environmental program, but we do encourage our members to keep their surroundings clean."

This suggests that while informal efforts exist, structured sustainability programs remain uncommon in some denominations (Werner, 2020, p.87)

Financial and Institutional Challenges

One of the major barriers to sustained environmental activism is financial constraints. A Catholic priest (participant 2) explained:

"While we receive some funding for short-term environmental projects, securing long-term financial support remains a challenge."

A Pentecostal church administrator (Participant 16) added:

"Unlike governmental agencies, churches lack the financial resources to maintain a large-scale conservation effort."

Additionally, some churches do not have dedicated environmental committees, making it difficult to institutionalize sustainability initiatives (Awuah-Nyamkye, 2014, p. 94). A Presbyterian church board member (Participant 8) stated:

"Our biggest challenge is maintaining consistency. We organize tree-planting programs, but without sustained funding, these initiatives remain sporadic."

Theological Education and Ecological Literacy

A recurring theme in the interviews was the limited integration of environmental education in theological training. A Methodist Church lecturer (Participant 13) noted:

"Many pastors graduate from theological schools without any formal education on environmental stewardship."

A Charismatic pastor (Participant 24) added that;

"We focus more on traditional doctrines like healing and prosperity. Issues like climate change are rarely discussed in our teaching."

This lack of theological education on ecology affects church leaders' ability to effectively preach about environmental responsibility (Larbi, 2021, p. 132). However, some seminaries are beginning to integrate eco-theology into their curricula. A Catholic theological instructor (Participant 4) emphasized:

"We have introduced modules on creation care in our seminary courses to equip future priests with knowledge on environmental ethics."

Community Engagement and Grassroots Initiatives

Churches play a significant role in mobilization communities for environmental action. Participants from all the denominations mentioned grassroots initiatives, such as sanitation campaigns and clean-up exercises. A Presbyterian youth leader (Participant 11) described their involvement:

"We organize monthly clean-up exercises in collaboration with local authorities to promote hygiene and waste management."

Similarly, a Pentecostal church member (Participant 15) explained:

"Our youth ministry runs an awareness campaign on plastic waste and recycling."

These findings align with research showing that faith-based organizations can be effective in driving community-based environmental action (Ger & Bergmann, 2023, p.174).

However, a key challenge remains the gap between the faith-based environmental discourse and practical implementation. A Catholic bishop (Participant 1) admitted:

"Many churches preach about environmental responsibility, but few have structured programs to address issues like deforestation and pollution."

This discrepancy indicates that while awareness is increasing, more structured approaches are needed to translate theological principles into concrete action (Okyre-Manu & Morgan, 2022, p.134).

In sum, the findings highlight the glowing but uneven engagement of Christian churches in Ghana in environmental stewardship. While mainline denominations like Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist churches have taken proactive steps in ecological advocacy, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are still evolving in their approach. Financial constraints, limited theological education on ecology, and institutional barriers hinder sustained environmental activism. However, grassroots efforts, particularly among youth ministries, suggest a potential for the greater church's involvement in ecological advocacy. To establish dedicated environmental committees, integrate eco-theology into seminary education, and collaborate with environmental organizations to ensure sustained impact.

These findings contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions on religion and sustainability by providing empirical evidence on the intersection of faith and environmental responsibility in Ghana.

Having examined the key findings, the next section provides recommendations for enhancing church involvement in ecological conservation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several key recommendations are proposed to enhance the role of Christian churches in Ghana in promoting environmental sustainability. These

recommendations target theological institutions, church leadership, policymakers, and advocacy.

Integrating Environmental Ethics into Theological Education

The study revealed a critical gap in theological training concerning environmental ethics. Many pastors lack formal education in ecological issues, which affects their ability to lead sustainability efforts effectively. Theological institutions should incorporate eco-theology into their curricula to ensure that future church leaders are well-equipped to integrate environmental stewardship into their teachings (Larbi, 2021, p. 132). Course offerings should include a biblical perspective on creation care, sustainability ethics, and practical training on environmental advocacy. Seminaries should engage in environmental science to provide interdisciplinary perspectives on faith and ecology.

Establishing Institutional Structures for Environmental Advocacy

The absence of dedicated environmental committees within many churches has hindered the implementation of long-term sustainability initiatives. Churches should establish Environmental stewardship committees within their leadership structure, responsible for overseeing conservation programs, securing funding, and collaborating with external stakeholders (Gerten & Bergman, 2012, p. 76). This committee should develop clear policies on environmental sustainability and ensure that ecological issues remain a consistent priority in church governance.

Strengthening Financial and Logistical Support for Environmental Programs

Financial constraints were identified as a major barrier to faith-based conservation efforts. To address this, churches should explore diversified funding strategies, including partnerships with international environmental organizations, governmental agencies, and faith-based NGOs that support sustainability projects (Jenkins, Berry, & Kreider, 2018, p. 102). Additionally, the church could create eco-funds, where a portion of congregational contributions is allocated specifically for environmental initiatives. Grant-writing workshops and training sessions should be provided to church leaders to help them access external funding sources.

Promoting Grassroots and Community-Based Environmental Action

The study highlighted the role of grassroots efforts, particularly those led by the youth ministries and community engagement programs. To build on this momentum, churches should strengthen collaborations with local environmental organizations to provide educational resources, training, and practical guidance on sustainable practices (Appiah-Sekyere, 2020, p.92). Regular environmental campaigns, such as clean-up exercises, tree-planting projects, and climate awareness workshops, should be organized to engage both church members and the broader community.

Bridging the Gap Between Environmental Awareness and Practical Implementation

While many churches preach about environmental stewardship, there remains a disconnect between theological discourse and concrete action. To bridge this gap, church leaders should integrate sustainability practices into everyday church activities, such as adopting eco-friendly policies in church infrastructure, promoting waste reduction, and encouraging members to use renewable energy sources (Awua-Nyamekye, 2024, P. 110). Additionally, annual environmental stewardship reports should be published by churches to track progress and set measurable goals for sustainability efforts.

Encouraging Interfaith and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Given the global nature of environmental challenges, faith-based organizations should foster interfaith collaborations to address ecological concerns collectively. The study found that environmental engagement varies across Christian denominations, with some churches more active than others. Interfaith dialogue platforms should be created to share best practices, discuss theological perspectives on environmental responsibility, and promote joint initiatives among different religious groups (Werner, 2020, p. 54). Additionally, churches should work with policymakers and environmental agencies to influence national sustainability policies through faith-based advocacy.

Future Research Direction

While this study focused on Christian churches in Ghana, future research should explore the role of interfaith collaboration in environmental advocacy, examining how religious diversity influences sustainability efforts. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of church-led environmental initiatives over time would provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of faith-based ecological engagement.

Conclusion

This study has provided an analysis of the role of Christian churches in Ghana in promoting environmental sustainability. The findings highlight both the potential and challenges of faith-based ecological advocacy, revealing that while many churches acknowledge the importance of environmental stewardship, institutional barriers, financial constraints and theological differences continue to hinder practical engagement.

Theologically, while mainline Protestant and Catholic churches have made significant strides in promoting creation care, some Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches remain less engaged due to doctrinal priorities. However, emerging perspectives from participants suggest that even within these denominations, environmental consciousness is growing. Institutional and financial challenges remain key obstacles, limiting the ability of churches to sustain long-term conservation programs. Additionally, gaps in theological education contribute to a lack of environmental literacy among church leaders, affecting their capacity to lead sustainability initiatives effectively.

Despite these challenges, grassroots environment initiatives, particularly those led by youth ministries, demonstrate promising avenues for increased engagement. The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening theological education, institutional frameworks, financial support, grassroots activism, and interfaith collaboration to enhance the role of churches in environmental sustainability.

As climate change and environmental degradation continue to pose existential threats globally, the involvement of religious institutions in sustainability efforts is more critical than ever. Churches, as influential community institutions, have the moral and social responsibility to integrate ecological concerns into their teaching and practices. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this study, Christian churches in Ghana play a more active and effective role in addressing environmental challenges, contributing meaningfully to global sustainability efforts.

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ECOTHEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 2:8-17: "TREE TOWN" MODEL AS A PANACEA TO INAPPROPRIATE URBANIZATION STRATEGY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

One of the basic practices of urbanization in post-independent Nigeria is the total removal of green vegetation from human neighbourhoods. As the villages developed into semi-urban and urban areas, as the case may be, all the existing trees and the entire green vegetation were completely cut down. The result of this action includes exposing human dwellings to excessive heat of the sun, wind force, spread of diseases, etc. African forefathers planted trees along the roads to provide shade as they walked their way from one village to the other, but modern developers are in the habit of indiscriminately felling trees to make everything appear clean and developed. This, unknown to the government, does more harm than good as the environment, which was once conducive, becomes excessively hot, leading to citizens going to purchase electric fans and air-conditioners to create an artificial environment that is favourable for human habitation. The objective of this study, therefore, is to show how a wrong understanding of urbanization has created huge environmental challenges in Africa. In doing this, the study carried out a theological analysis of Genesis 2:8-17 to identify the nature of the environment of the first human beings. The study discovered that the Garden of Eden was a tree town and that trees were the most important component of the garden. The trees were meant to serve very important purposes, such as food for man, medicine, shelter, and to provide comfort and aesthetics. The paper concludes by recommending a tree town model that is patterned after the Garden of Eden. To achieve this, the government at all levels should develop a tree planting initiative/ policy as a mechanism for the sustenance of the environment. This will indeed help to deal with the negative effects of climate change in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa.

Keywords: Eco-theology, environmental abuse, tree town model, ecosystem, urbanization

Introduction

One of the greatest global challenges that human beings are faced with in contemporary times is climate change. Certainly, human activities such as deforestation, erecting buildings across waterways, land reclamation, environmental pollution, uncontrolled use of chemicals on the environment, and other similar practices have significantly contributed to the excessive rise in environmental temperature to the extent that human lives all over the world have come under great threat. According to Clingerman (2011), if nothing is urgently done to reduce global

warming, human life will soon go into extinction. Africa, and Nigeria in particular, is not immune to this global threat, as reckless human activities leading to environmental abuse are now ubiquitous.

Before the creation of humankind, plants and animals were already in existence in the Garden of Eden. The Bible, in the creation story, affirms that man was the last thing to be created. The implication of this assertion is that man, in the Garden of Eden, was going to depend on the non-human components of the ecosystem for his livelihood and survival (Migliore, 2004). God placed the man and woman He had created into the Garden and specifically gave man the onerous task of caring for the garden. Life in the Garden of Eden was such that man and other animals, on one hand, and man and the natural vegetation lived in harmony until man was chased out of the Garden due to disobedience to God (Hinson, 1992).

Irresponsible use of the Earth and its resources has given rise to all manner of diseases. Global warming has resulted in an unusual rise in global temperature, resulting in a rise in sea level, which has provoked serious flooding all over the world. Agriculture has also been affected because of variations in weather conditions. The use of chemicals for farming has led to the death of several earth-enriching organisms. Similarly, water, air, and land pollution have given rise to many life-threatening diseases. The effects of harmful human activities are so numerous and obvious that the Church can no longer remain aloof (Gnanakan, 1999). Ecotheology is one of the ways the Church is addressing environmental issues that are plaguing the entire human race in the contemporary time (Conradie, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to exegetically examine the nature of the environment where the first humans were given as their abode. The Garden of Eden was planted by God according to the Bible, and besides human and animal lives, other prominent features of the

garden were the presence of all kinds of trees and rivers flowing across to water the garden. Everything man needed was made available in the Garden. Going forward, the paper undertakes a clarification of some of the critical words that are connected to the study. This is to facilitate understanding of the discussion. A theological analysis of the text follows, using exegetical and hermeneutical tools. The findings of the study lead to the idea or proposition of a "Tree Town" Model, which the study recommends to be adopted as an effective mechanism in the fight against climate change. This is explicated accordingly. One sure way of dealing with the issue of global warming is the initiative and adoption of the "Tree Town Model," which is rooted in the text.

Definition of terms

Ecology: Ecology is etymologically derived from two Greek words, namely *oikos,* meaning home or a place of abode, and *logos,* which means science or study of something. Ecology, therefore, in its simplest form, means the study of a place where plants and animals live. Mugambi (2001) defines Ecology as the scientific study of the relationship of plants and animals in their environment. Agbogidi (2019) adds that ecology includes the relationship of plants and animals to one another, and the influence of human beings in the ecosystem. The definition provided by Professor Agbogidi is quite germane to this study and will be depended upon in the entire discussion in this article.

Eco-theology: Eco-theology, which is a short form of ecological theology, is the theology that cares for creation in the time of crisis. It is a form of constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns (www. En. M. Wikipedia.org). It is rooted in the understanding that there is a relationship that exists between Christianity and the current environmental crisis and

or restoration of nature. It explores the interaction between ecological values, such as sustainability, and the human domination of nature. It is important to keep in mind that ecotheology explores not only the relationship between religion and nature in terms of its degradation, but also in terms of ecosystem management in general. It not only seeks to identify environmental abuses but also to outline potential solutions. This is of particular importance because Ecotheologians believe that science and education are not adequate to inspire the change necessary in our current environmental crises. For the avoidance of doubt, ecotheology and environmental theology are used interchangeably in this study.

Ecosystem: An ecosystem, according to Agbogidi (2014), is the structural and functional unit of ecology, which has a definite structure associated with definite functions, which it plays in the functioning of the physical environment. Agbogidi (2019) also refers to the ecosystem as the combined physical and biological components of the environment. In an ecosystem, each species performs a particular role within the system regulating of climate. In the environment, everything is connected. A break in the chain can cause a major malfunction and halt the process. There are two types of ecosystems, which are aquatic and terrestrial. In this paper, the two are relevant, but particular attention is paid to the terrestrial ecosystem.

Model: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (9th edition) defines a model as a simple description of a system used for explaining how something works. It also means something such as a system that can be copied by other people. A "Tree Town Model," as proposed in this paper, is a simple description of a system used in explaining how the ecosystem should be recreated as a solution to the effects of climate change.

Urbanization: This can be defined as a process whereby people migrate from rural to urban areas, resulting in the growth and expansion of the town or city that has received such

an influx of people. The result of this is that there is usually a change of attitude towards life and land, which often results in the construction of more buildings.

Inappropriate urbanization strategy: This refers to an urban development approach that is not environmentally friendly. In this article, by inappropriate urbanization, we are referring to the government and developers' approach to urban development that is characterized by indiscriminate tree-felling without replanting. Hardly do you see any trees standing in any urban centre in Nigeria. This method of urbanization has increased environmental temperature, thereby contributing to the overall global warming challenge. It also refers to a pattern of infrastructural development in towns/ cities, which is usually different from the strategies adopted in rural areas. For example, rural areas are not bordered by surrounding vegetation when they construct their buildings, unlike the cities/ towns where clean-up of vegetation is first carried out before construction commences. This is indeed an inappropriate urbanization strategy.

Tree Town: The idea of a tree town is derived from the text Genesis 2:8-17. From this text, one can agree that the first place created for man's habitation was a garden surrounded by all manner of trees. Each of the trees performed functions in line with the intention of the Creator. Besides providing food and shelter for man and other created things, the trees were to provide a conducive atmosphere that is environmentally friendly. The concept of a tree town was inspired by the understanding of the ecosystem that existed in the Garden of Eden.

Background and Context of Genesis 2:8-17

The Book, Genesis is the first book in the Canonical Books of the Bible. The book is called "Beginning" by the Greeks and *Bereshith* by the Jews (Hinson, 1992). It is the only book of the Bible that gives the account of creation by the Creator Himself. Through His Servant

Moses, the Holy Spirit traces the beginnings of man, woman, marriage, the home, sin, sacrifice, cities, etc. For this essay, we concentrated on the second story of creation in Genesis 2:8-17. This text presents a profound theological and ecological narrative centred on the Garden of Eden. According to the passage, Elohim planted a Garden in Eden and placed the first humans He created to tend and care for it (V.15). The names of the two categories of trees are mentioned which are the "tree of life" and "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Hinson, 1992). These stood in the middle of the Garden, which represents life, wisdom, and moral responsibility.

The text underscores a divine-human relationship rooted in the stewardship, not exploitation of nature. The text also presents Eden as a garden with biodiversity that was well watered and an orderly habitat- an ideal model of sustainable coexistence between humanity and the environment. In contradistinction to modern urbanization trends, this text contrasts sharply, especially in parts of Africa, where rapid expansion often neglects ecological balance. The Eden narrative offers a template for "Tree Town" models- urban designs that prioritize green spaces, biodiversity, and human responsibility towards nature. By reimagining the cities through the lens of Genesis 2, African Urban planning can draw from its spiritual heritage to address ecological degradation and promote sustainable living. This ecotheological lens invites a reevaluation of urban growth strategies, advocating a return to balance, harmony, and divine ecological order.

Exegetical Analysis of Genesis 2:8-17

Genesis chapter two, verses eight to seventeen, is the text upon which this study is based. Before we proceed to exegetical analysis, let us examine /look at the text as it is, both from the Hebrew text and the English equivalent.

Hebrew text

8. וַיִּטַּע יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהִים גַּן־בְּעֵדֶן מִקֶּדֶם וַיָּשֶׂם שָׁם אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר:

9. וַיַּצְמַח יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־עֵץ נֶחְמָד לְמַרְאֶה וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכֵל

וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הַגָּן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע:

10. וְנָהָר יֹצֵא מֵעֵדֶן לְהַשְׁקוֹת אֶת־הַגָּן וּמִשָּׁם יִפָּרֵד וְהָיָה לְאַרְבָּעָה

רָאשִׁים:

11. שֵׁם הָאֶחָד פִּישׁוֹן הוּא הַסֹּבֵב אֵת כָּל־אֶרֶץ הַחֲוִילָה אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הַזָּהָב:

12. וּזֲהַב הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא טוֹב שָׁם הַבְּדֹלַח וְאֶבֶן הַשֹּׁהַם:

13. וְשֵׁם־הַנָּהָר הַשֵּׁנִי גִּיחוֹן הוּא הַסּוֹבֵב אֵת כָּל־אֶרֶץ כּוּשׁ:

14. וְשֵׁם הַנָּהָר הַשְּׁלִישִׁי חִדֶּקֶל הוּא הַהֹלֵךְ קִדְמַת אַשּׁוּר וְהַנָּהָר הָרְבִיעִי

הוּא פְרָת:

15. וַיִּקַּח יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיַּנִּחֵהוּ בְגַן־עֵדֶן לְעָבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ:

16. וַיְצַו יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכֹּל עֵץ־הַגָּן אָכֹל תֹּאכֵל:

17. וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת

תָּמוּת:

English Translation

8. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the East; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9. And out of the ground every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the Garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 10. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. 11. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Havi'lah, where there is gold; and the gold of the land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. 13. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Cush. 14. And the name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. 15. The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it. 16. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the Garden, 17. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die (RSV).

Exegesis of Genesis 2:8-17

God planted a garden (Eden) and placed the man He created inside the Garden. A garden is a piece of land next to or around a home where one can grow flowers, fruits, and vegetables. A garden town is therefore a city that has been specially designed to have a lot of open spaces, Parks, and trees. To plant signifies the action of placing either seeds, cuttings, or small samples of plants into the soil to bring them to growth (Agbogidi, 2014). A plant includes trees, vines, shrubs, herbs, vegetables, flowers, fruits, or ornamental forms of life characterized by roots, a stem, and leaves or foliage equivalent (Achtemeir, 2005). The general disposition reflected in the Bible is that plants, like animals, marine, and other forms of life, are God's good gifts. As such they are to be cherished, used, enjoyed, shared and processed for the good of all people (Gen. 1:29, 30; 2:8; 3:18). The gift of the Garden is a sign of God's love, for it provided a framework in which God could train human beings and give then the reference points they would need to face the vast new universe that lay around them. The Garden contained all that they needed.

The Garden that God planted in Eden was towards the East, that is, East of Palestine, the Point of reference for Bible directions. It was located in the region of Mesopotamia, near the Hiddekel (Tigris) and Euphrates Rivers (Hinson, 2004; MacDonald, 1995). All kinds of trees were made to grow in Eden, but special attention is drawn to two trees (2:9). The first is the tree of life, which was a concrete indication of God's presence and thus was placed in the middle of the garden. The relationship with the Creator must be central to human existence. The second is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which was a sign of the existence of evil and the presence of the evil one before the creation of man. This evil one was certainly the first to disobey the Creator, and the presence of this tree warned human beings not to follow his example. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil provided a test of man's obedience. The only reason it was wrong to eat of that fruit was because God had said so.

God made a river to flow through the garden to water it (2:11-14). Man was placed in the Garden to work it and to take care of it (2:15). Man had a two-set of responsibilities, namely to work the garden and to take care of it. Work did not start with the fall but was part of God's original plan for humankind. God created the garden, but the duty of maintaining the Garden was committed to man. This principle applies to us today as it applied to Adam. According to Genesis 4, Abel was a keeper of sheep while Cain was a tiller of the land, representing the two-fold responsibility of man. It is not enough to create a garden, but to maintain and defend it from whatever attempts to destroy it. Additionally, man was restricted from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (2:16), and there were many punishments awaiting man if he disobeyed. The restriction was justified because it aimed to preserve life (Adeyemo, 2006)

Ecosystems and Christian environmental responsibility

What is an ecosystem? This refers to the combined physical as well as biological components of the environment. It also refers to a unit of biosphere in which a community of organisms interacts within the environment (Agbogidi, 2019). According to Money (2013), a break in the chain can lead to a major malfunction and halt in the ecosystem. Therefore, all the parts must be preserved to keep the whole regulatory, leisure, cultural, and aesthetic value (Agbogidi, 2014). From the ongoing, an ecosystem can be defined as the physical and biological components of a given environment and the relationship between all the elements of the environment, including man's relationship with both plant and animal life within the environment. The ecosystem is broadly divided into two, namely the terrestrial (this refers to all the plants and animals that live on land) and the aquatic (which refers to all life, including plants and animals that naturally live in water as their natural habitat).

What are the components of the ecosystems?

An ecosystem usually has two main components, which are the biotic component and the abiotic component. All living creatures in any given ecosystem are classified as biotic components of that environment (Berry, 2009). These include all groups of plants and animals according to their sizes, functions, structure, forms, etc. This component is full of biodiversity. Examples of animals under this category are the vertebrates, such as fish, birds, reptiles, amphibians, lions, and all types of visible animals, including humans. The invertebrates are animals that do not possess a backbone. The abiotic components of the environment are all factors that affect the form, growth of individual plants and animals, plant and animal association, as well as all the factors that affect plants from sprouting or germinating to reproduction, maturation, and finally death (Okonta, 2014).

Additionally, it is important at this level to examine the services which the ecosystem provides for man and animals on a daily basis. Abubakr (2014) sees the ecosystem services as those environmental functions and other benefits that society relies on the ecosystem to provide. Food, clothing, and shelter are the primary needs of man and all these are met by plants and animals within the ecosystem. The Earth is a plant-oriented planet and can never survive without plants. Without plants, life on Earth would be impossible. In fact, Agbogidi (2005) notes that plants are the basis for civilization. Apart from providing man with the necessities of life, the ecosystem also includes the renewal of soil fertility. The importance of some other provisional services is more difficult to evaluate. The photosynthetic ability of the ecosystem makes food available to all living organisms and ensures food security. The ecosystem is also self-regulatory. It also helps to support all forms of farming. The cultural and religious use of the ecosystem cannot be undermined, especially in Africa. The ecosystem often comes with beauty and all manner of aesthetic outlook, which creates a sense of comfort and relaxation for man.

What is the nature of the relationship in the ecosystems? I agree with Mika Vahakangas that Aristotle was wrong when he stated that "for we must believe, first, that plants exist first for the sake of animals, second, that all the other animals exist for the sake of human beings (Vahakangas, 2001). Unfortunately, this Aristotelian misconception was upheld and even heightened by the Rio Earth Summit when it stated that "human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development (Geneva, WCC, 1992) see pg. 111, JNK Mugambi book. The relationship that should exist between human beings and the environment should be that of mutual interdependence rather than solitary or monarchic existence. The world was created by God not as an assemblage of solitary units but for life together (Migliore, 2004). All the components of the ecosystem are important. Life in the ecosystem is interconnected. All the various components of the ecosystem depend on one another for survival (Holmes, 1998). For example, man's need for food, shelter, clothing, and other minor needs are provided for by plants and other elements within the ecosystem. In turn, man takes care of the environment to ensure the preservation and protection of the ecosystem. Failure to do so will surely lead to chaos as it is today globally.

What is man's environmental responsibility? Man's environmental responsibility has been spelt out in the Bible, even though it has often been misunderstood, especially by Western Christianity, which thought that man's responsibility is domination of other creatures and the physical environment. As represented by Lynn White Jr. in 1976, Western Christianity has been accused of using the Bible to exploit the resources of the world to the detriment of human survival on earth (Chukwuka, 2011; Migliore, 2014). Man was not given the power to govern the universe, but he was given the power to have dominion (Holmes, 1998). Arising from the supposed relationship between humans and other creations, humans are mere custodians of the land (earth), just as a caretaker is to an estate.

Even though the theology of creation is not sufficiently expounded in the NT but the parable of the landowner in the Gospels sheds light on the responsibility of man as steward of the earth. Matthew captures the parable as follows:

"Hear another parable. There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the season of fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruits; and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them. Afterward, he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son". But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir, come, let us kill him, and have his inheritance. And they took him and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. When, therefore, the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" they said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons". (Matt.21: 33-41, RSV).*

The intent of this parable has important implications for the understanding of human role as the caretaker of the earth. In interpreting this parable from an eco-theological viewpoint, we observe two key words: ownership and stewardship. God, represented by the farmer, owns the land while the caretaker (man) is the tenant. The tenants, out of greed, decided to usurp the authority of the landowner. They were very cruel in handling both the vineyard and the servants the landowner sent to receive some produce from the farm. It is the same cruelty that man is unleashing on the environment. The knowledge and understanding of the roles of human beings on the earth and the right attitude towards environmental responsibility are very germane in the preservation of the earth.

Urbanization and Ecological Implications in Nigeria

Urbanization is defined as the process by which large numbers of people become permanently concentrated in relatively small areas, forming (Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2025). The course of human history has been marked by a process of accelerated urbanization. Historically speaking, humans did not live in a city of more than 100,000 people until the time of classical antiquity, and more cities emerged with a sustained increase in population. Before now, the people in early towns lived quite close to each other. Many factors influence people clustering in a place. Such factors include water supply in the form of rivers, protection, which made people build a fence around themselves against their enemies, arable land for farming, a market, etc.

The idea of modern urbanization was put in place in Africa, especially in Nigeria, by the Colonial masters. In the case of Nigeria, it was the British who laid the foundation for urbanization in Nigeria. The early missionaries came from a temperate region of the world where the weather and climatic conditions were different from those of Africa, which is located in the Tropical region. To minimize the effect of the sun, the white missionaries planted sufficient trees within their neighborhood. The trees were meant to provide shade against the direct heat of the sun and to bring comfort and serenity to the environment. The early missionaries did not discourage Africans from maintaining the natural vegetation. Hence, they lived very close to nature.

However, the post-independent Nigeria did not continue in that trajectory or foundation already laid by the whites. Their understanding of urbanization became faulty. Indiscriminate felling of trees without deliberate efforts to replant became a major characteristic of the post-independent urbanization. This led to an increase in environmental temperature. Also, the

streams and rivers became a refuse dump for urban dwellers as the government was not able to manage the volume of all manner of wastes generated by the citizens, and the situation has remained unabated hitherto.

Additionally, the belief by many Pentecostal Christians that demons live inside some trees and that the branches of some trees have become rendezvous for some occult people, such as witches and wizards, led to the cutting down of many trees within the neighborhood. This was how the idea of treeless towns and cities emerged. Today, the consequences of man's destruction of the natural habitat (ecosystem) in the name of urbanization and civilization are obvious.

The idea that urbanization implies having a town free from everything natural was part of what formed urban development in post-independent Nigeria. The natural environment is required for human wellbeing, but when they are destroyed because of development, it constitutes another problem. Even today, most of the cities and towns in Nigeria are treeless because of this misunderstanding. The first set of humans created by God (Adam and Eve) lived in the garden, an ecosystem where everything needed for human survival was provided. In the name of development, humans cut down trees that ought to enhance oxygen production, only to go back and produce fans and air conditioners to cool the homes and make oxygen available for human comfort. Bush burning to remove debris generated from tree felling results in the pollution of the environment. The urban environment now emits different kinds of gaseous materials and smokes, some of which are injurious to human health.

The natural bodies of water in the cities and urban areas have suffered and continue to suffer from human activities in diverse ways. First, turning the streams and lakes into dump sites results in water pollution. Yet, it is not surprising to still find humans bathing, washing

clothes, and even fetching water for domestic use from waters already polluted. It appears the users of the polluted water do underestimate the health risk that their action constitutes. Aquatic life has been in danger with many species going into extinction as a result of the continuous dumping of refuse in the water bodies in urban. Many rivers in Nigeria are flooded with plastic waste, and amphibians do them and humans, in turn, eat these animals that live in water. Therefore, humans are exposed to all manner of health challenges due to pollution.

One of the challenges faced by urban dwellers in Nigeria, as well as many other countries, is the danger of wind. Hurricane is the highest form of wind, and it can only occur in places where there are sufficient trees to minimize or tame the speed of the wind. The trees can also help to prevent the rapid spread of airborne diseases. The absence of trees in many cities and towns contributes to the rate at which diseases are spread. Exposing the topsoil within the surroundings and in the city centres is a precursor to erosion. If there are no plants to limit the speed with which ground waters are running, it can gravitate into massive erosion, which can bring down buildings, wipe away roads, and even pose danger to human beings. Although experience has made these things abundantly clear yet the initial mistake that urbanization means complete removal of natural vegetation from the cities persists, thereby exposing citizens to unending danger.

Urbanization, as understood by the government and citizens, has brought a lot of environmental and health challenges to both plants, animals, and even humans. How Nigerians understand civilization has done more harm than good. Having polluted most of the water bodies naturally meant to provide drinking water for both plants and animals, everyone is left to provide their water through the sinking of boreholes. There are more diseases in towns than they are in rural places. The villagers enjoy a more serene environment than the city dwellers.

The streams and lakes in the villages are often protected from pollution by members of the public. As a result, the populace still depends on such water bodies for domestic uses.

The Imperative of a Paradigm Shift: Introduction of "Tree Town" Model, a Nature-Based Solution to Environmental Crises.

Let us begin a discussion on the imperative of a tree town model by reflecting once again on the nature and purpose of planting Eden as the natural habitat of the first couple, Adam and Eve.

6.**1** Eden: A "Tree Town" biblical model is a conceptual framework for resolving ecological crisis**.**

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there He put the man whom He had formed (Gen. 2:8).

The Garden of Eden was planted by God after He created man. Man was not designed to take abode in the realm of divinity. He was meant to dwell on the earth. God planned and planted a garden and placed the man He had formed. The Hebrew word translated "planted" indicates that the Garden of Eden was a deliberate act of God and was designed to be the most important habitat for man (Achtemeier, 2005). This was the first time it was mentioned that God planted trees. In V. 9, God caused every tree to evolve (grow out) from the ground.

The trees were designed to serve different purposes. Firstly, the trees were made for aesthetics (pleasant to the eyes). Beholding the trees was enough to make a man feel good. It was meant to relax the mind while in the Garden. Secondly, the trees were to serve as food for man. Adam and Eve started as vegetarians. They were made to eat fruits and vegetables for a livelihood. Thirdly, the tree of life was planted in the garden. However, man was not allowed

to eat from the tree of life. The tree must have been for immortality. That is, those who feed on the tree of life will never die. Lastly, the Garden contained the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This particular tree was also classified as forbidden for man. If man had not fallen, perhaps a time would have come when man would be permitted to eat of those fruits ab initio forbidden.

In addition to planting the Garden of Eden, God created a river with four tributaries to help to water the Garden. The planted trees require daily water to keep them fresh and alive. Each of the river branches is designated to water a particular portion of the Garden City. Watering is important to keep both the plants alive. If the trees were allowed to wither, man is also likely to die off. The trees could survive without the aid of man, but no man can survive without trees. The watering, therefore, was to sustain the life of both the man and the trees. Life in the Garden was symbiotic. That is, the trees were meant to serve man, while the water was meant to help sustain human life.

Inside the Garden were also different natural resources, such as minerals, located in different parts of the Town. The minerals were inserted into the earth, and all are meant to serve man on earth. Now, God brought man into the Garden as soon as he had finished planting the garden. Man was meant to 'till' and to 'keep' it. Two key words are important here. They are the words that contain the primary assignment of man in the Garden. Man is to till the ground and also to keep it. This implies that, while the trees supply food and pleasure for man, man must help ensure that the plants and rivers are maintained. Finally, in verse 16, an instruction comes from God to man. Man was commanded by God to freely eat of every tree in the Garden, but in verse 17, God forbids man to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

From the above, one can see that the Garden of Eden was a planned and created town, herein called Tree Town. It was a town that had all that man needed in place. There could not have been any better habitat or environment than that which God, in His wisdom, had designed and created. All that man needed for life was graciously provided in the garden. Man was at liberty to eat and enjoy the bliss of the Garden as long as he obeyed the law of restriction which God gave him. Perhaps, the rivers were also created to provide portable water for man. In turn, man must ensure that the harmony which God created in Eden was maintained. Man was to care for the Garden and to till the soil.

What is called a 'Tree town model' is about a town designed to bring man closer to nature as it was from the beginning. The geographical location of Africa requires deliberate effort to make the environment comfortable for humans. One way of doing so is to ensure that something is done to prevent the direct rays of the tropical sun from falling on humans more than necessary. In Africa, value is attached to trees. Man needs trees for rest and comfort; man needs shade provided by trees to park his automobiles, and man needs trees for fresh air. These are in addition to the fact that man needs trees for food, medicine, aesthetics, wind break, etc. Therefore, the conception of a tree town is in the design of a town with trees systematically planted to create what looks like a natural habitat. This is also conceived to invalidate the wrong notion of post-independent town planners that a town should not have natural vegetation left within it. We are aware that "green areas" are created in some big cities in Africa for children born in the cities to have an idea of what a bush looks like. This is good, but it is not sufficient. Man is not meant to pay a visit to places to see what natural vegetation looks like, but is meant to live with nature daily. Man will never survive outside nature. The developed countries, which have removed themselves far away from nature, are paying dearly for their actions.

A tree town model, when fully adopted and widespread, will effectively help in fighting climate change. It will help in reducing environmental heat and temperature. It will also help in the production of oxygen, which will help in keeping human life healthy. Trees have numerous functions that they perform in sustaining human life. If God planted trees and placed man in what the Bible calls the Garden of Eden, it also means that God wants man to continue in that trajectory. Fortunately, tree planting is an easy task that does not require any special expertise. However, there are many fields of study in the sciences that specialize in the natural ecosystem, forestry, and other environmental studies. The right place to begin is in the adoption of the model as a policy of the government. As soon as the policy is crafted, the Ministry of Environment is informed of how the policy can be implemented and maintained. Specialists should be engaged in the actualization of the policy, and a department in the Ministry of Environment should be created to plant and maintain trees in the urban centres. The policy should contain environmental ethics, and punishment or sanctions should be introduced to offenders, especially those who may wish to burn or cut down trees without clearance from the government.

Conclusion

This paper was a theological study of Genesis 2:8-17. The objective is to bring out the fact that the first humans created by God were kept in an environment which has been rightly described as a tree town. The paper also examined and discussed the nature of the habitat where Adam and Eve resided soon after their creation, and discovered that trees were the major component of that environment. The purpose of planting the trees was for food, human comfort, and beauty. The environment provided everything man needed to enjoy his life. Our African forbears understood this secret as a result continued in that trajectory. When the colonial

masters arrived, they also demonstrated that tree planting and retention in the cities were necessary for human comfort. Their environment was that with an abundance of trees.

Unfortunately, the post-colonial land developers had a different understanding of urbanization. To them, for a place to be regarded as a civilized town implies an absence of vegetation. This led to the destruction of the natural habitat in the form of indiscriminate felling of trees, bush burning, land reclamation, building across waterways, dumping of refuse in the flowing streams and other bodies of water, environmental pollution, and so on. The result of this action has contributed immensely to global warming and the resultant climate change, which now threatens human existence. This paper hopes that the invention of a tree town modeled after the Garden of Eden will be a lasting solution to the impact of climate change in Africa. Fortunately, tree planting is not only easy to do but also economical.

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COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHAO-AWON MASS MARRIAGE AND JEWISH MARRIAGE PRACTICES

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Abstract

This study examines the Shao-Awon mass marriage festival in Nigeria and Jewish marriage practices, highlighting their social, spiritual, and communal significance. The Shao-Awon festival, rooted in Yoruba heritage, celebrates the Awon goddess through collective marriage ceremonies that foster unity and reinforce cultural identity. In contrast, Jewish marriage traditions emphasize covenantal bonds between spouses and God, ensuring familial sanctity and adherence to religious obligations. The study addresses the declining role of traditional marriage customs in contemporary society due to globalization and modernization. It aims to analyze the symbolic, social, and religious functions of these practices and their role in preserving cultural identity. Using Durkheim's theory of social solidarity and a comparative methodology, the research employs ethnographic observations, interviews with cultural and religious leaders, and textual analysis of historical and theological sources. Findings reveal shared themes of social cohesion, communal participation, and spiritual identity. While the Shao-Awon festival strengthens community bonds through collective rituals, Jewish marriage maintains family structures through legal and religious commitments. Insights from both traditions suggest that contemporary Christian marriage practices could benefit from a stronger emphasis on community support and cultural integration. This research contributes to global discussions on marriage by demonstrating the resilience of traditional practices in sustaining social and spiritual stability. It recommends further cross-cultural studies on marriage institutions to inform religious and social policies, ensuring the preservation of cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Shao-Awon mass marriage, Jewish marriage, ritual symbolism, comparative study, social cohesion.

Introduction

Marriage, as a deeply rooted social institution, plays a fundamental role in defining communal values, reinforcing cultural identity, and establishing social order across diverse societies (Kirk 2004). It is often more than a union between individuals, acting as a broader communal event with social, cultural, and spiritual significance (Salawu 2010). This study compares the Shao Awon Mass Wedding Festival in Nigeria and Jewish marriage practices, investigating how marriage rituals in these two traditions function to foster social cohesion, cultural continuity, and spiritual identity within their respective communities.

In the Yoruba community of Nigeria, the annual Shao Awon Mass Wedding Festival is a communal celebration in honor of the Awon goddess (Akano 2020). Unlike Western marriage practices focused on personal commitment, the Awon festival involves numerous couples marrying simultaneously in a communal setting. This event serves as both a celebration of cultural heritage and an embodiment of Yoruba values, reinforcing social unity and reverence

for the Awon goddess. The shared experience of marriage strengthens family bonds, promotes cultural pride, and reaffirms Yoruba identity through its elaborate rituals and festive atmosphere. Conversely, Jewish marriage practices are deeply rooted in Halakha (Jewish law), representing a sacred covenant between husband, wife, and God (Washofsky 1992). Jewish marriage rituals include the signing of the *ketubah* (marriage contract), the chuppah (marriage canopy), and the breaking of a glass at the ceremony's conclusion. Each of these rituals holds symbolic meaning; for example, the *ketubah* outlines the responsibilities of each spouse, and the glass-breaking serves as a reminder of the fragility of relationships. These practices emphasize the permanence and sanctity of marriage, shaping Jewish identity through both individual and collective commitment to sacred values.

This study aims to bridge a gap in understanding how marriage operates as both a personal commitment and a communal and spiritual institution across different cultures. While existing studies examine marriage within specific cultural or religious frameworks, few explore how different communities use marriage to promote social solidarity and cultural preservation. To address this, the current research applies Émile Durkheim's theory of social solidarity as a framework to analyze how marriage rituals support social structure, cultural continuity, and collective beliefs within the Yoruba and Jewish communities. The research findings reveal that, despite differences in rituals and religious significance, both traditions use marriage to foster social cohesion, spiritual belonging, and cultural identity. The Shao-Awon festival exemplifies mechanical solidarity through its communal setting, with unity emerging from shared values and collective rituals, while Jewish marriage represents organic solidarity, where unity is maintained through complementary roles and a sacred bond between partners and God. Ultimately, this comparative analysis illustrates that marriage is a powerful social institution with diverse functions across cultures. Both the Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage practices affirm marriage's role in maintaining social harmony, cultural continuity, and spiritual identity. Understanding how different societies celebrate and institutionalize marriage deepens insight into the complex relationship between cultural values and social structures, highlighting marriage's enduring role in both individual lives and communal stability.

Literature Review

An Overview of Shao Mass Marriage:

Shao, a vibrant Yoruba community in the Olooru District of Moro Local Government Area, Kwara State, Nigeria, has a deep cultural and historical significance. Founded in 1779 A.D. during the reign of Alaafin Abiodun (1774 A.D.–1789 A.D.), the community traces its origins to hunters from Oyo Ile, the political and cultural hub of the Yoruba people. This migration cemented Shao's linguistic and cultural ties to the Yoruba ethnic group (Adetunji and Aja 2008, 87; Emielu 1991, 12; Law 1997, 395). Shao's Yoruba identity is reflected in its traditions, language, and greetings such as *E kaaro* (good morning), *E kaasan* (good afternoon), and *E kaale* (good evening), characteristic of Yoruba culture (Oke 2008, 48).

Shao's strategic location, about ten kilometers from Ilorin, the Kwara State capital, enhances its socio-political and cultural relevance. With a population of approximately fifteen thousand, the community thrives on agriculture, cultivating crops such as yams, cassava, and guinea corn. The town is also renowned for its expertise in traditional herbal medicine

(Adetunji and Aja 2009, 87). Leadership in Shao is symbolized by the *Ohoro*, a monarch tracing lineage to the Alaafin of Oyo. The first *Ohoro*, Olanibo, played a significant role in shaping Shao's traditions (Akano 2020, 5). Historically, Shao has resisted Fulani Emirate influence, identifying strongly with the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria (Akano 2011, 10).

The Awon Goddess and Her Significance

The Awon goddess is central to Shao's spiritual heritage, symbolizing divine intervention and cultural identity. Oral tradition states that she first appeared during the reign of *Ohoro* Olanibo, manifesting as a mysterious one-breasted woman encountered by Omo Larele, a prominent hunter. Her appearance at a sacred stream marked the beginning of her veneration. She was welcomed by the monarch and his chiefs, and her wisdom shaped Shao's cultural identity. The one-breasted symbolism represents fertility, nurturing, and interconnectedness.

Her primary instruction was the establishment of the Shao Mass Wedding Festival, placing marriage at the core of Shao's spiritual and cultural practices. The festival signifies communal unity, with all eligible girls married in a collective ceremony. It embodies the belief that marriage extends beyond individual unions to communal responsibility and spiritual well-being. The goddess's departure was marked by the emergence of the Awon River, symbolizing her blessings. The river remains a sacred site for seeking spiritual guidance and renewal. Her legacy is perpetuated through the annual festival, reinforcing principles of unity, fertility, and cultural continuity.

The Awon goddess continues to influence the community spiritually and culturally. Her directives, enshrined in the festival, ensure adherence to communal values. The annual mass wedding preserves her memory and reinforces the spiritual connection between past and present generations. The festival serves as both a religious observance and a means of sustaining Shao's cultural heritage. The intertwining of mythology, ritual, and communal participation underscores the importance of spiritual forces in African traditional societies.

Rituals and Wedding Celebrations:

The Awon Marriage Festival, held annually in October, spans several days and features intricate rituals. The festival begins with consulting the Ifa Oracle to determine the appropriate date, a responsibility of the Awon priest and titled chiefs (Akano 2020, 5). Days before the wedding, young men gather firewood for communal cooking, symbolizing unity. Two nights before the wedding, *Ina'bi Day* involves the groom's family presenting gifts such as yam baskets to the bride's family. This is followed by the *Gidi-gidi, bomu bomu* procession, a lively town-wide celebration (Akano 2020, 6). The night before the wedding, the bride recites *Ekun Iyawo*, ancestral praise poetry, marking her transition into married life:

> *Ile onile ni nlo ko si o,*
> (I am going to settle in another man's home)
> *Ala'ura bami tun'le baba mi se,*
> (The Sovereign God, help me take care of my father's home)

> *Baba   mi   Akanbi   omo   Mu-mu-aro.*
> (My father Akanbi, the son of Mu-mu-aro.)

The *Ekun Iyawo* ritual is both an emotional farewell and an affirmation of the bride's lineage (Akano 2020, 7). The next phase involves the *Kikase Iyawo*, a slow bridal procession to the market square. Brides, adorned in *Aso ofi*, jewelry, and *iyun* beads, hold umbrellas while chanting ancestral praises. The final ritual at the market square symbolizes the community's support for the institution of marriage (Kwara State Government Publication on Shao Awonga Festival, 8).

The Awon Dance, performed by elderly women, is a vibrant cultural display that takes place in front of the Awon shrine. This traditional dance, accompanied by drumming and singing, adds color and excitement to the festival. The *Ohoro* of Shao blesses the brides, marking the formal conclusion of the ceremony. The following day, the *Oko Ewu* (bridegroom's caricature) celebration occurs, during which a proxy appointed by the groom parades the town, closing the year's festival. This ritual highlights the communal essence of marriage, reinforcing marriage as a social and cultural milestone (Kwara State Council for Arts and Culture, 1993).

The festival is an expression of African communal values, emphasizing collective participation. Marriage in Shao is not solely an individual affair but a responsibility shared by the community. The festival plays a key role in cultural preservation, ensuring that Shao's traditions remain intact for future generations. It also fosters social cohesion by bringing people together in a shared spiritual and cultural experience. Mbiti (1990) emphasizes the role of such practices in maintaining social stability and cultural continuity.

The Significance of the Shao Mass Marriage Festival:

The Shao Mass Wedding Festival is more than a cultural event; it is a foundational pillar of Shao's identity. Rooted in the directives of the Awon goddess, the festival highlights marriage as both a communal and sacred institution. Marriageable girls are wedded collectively, reinforcing communal values. The tradition reflects broader African customs where marriage is seen as a societal, rather than merely personal, institution (Oke 1996, 92). The festival sustains key values such as procreation, lineage continuity, and social harmony. Marriage arrangements involve extended families and the larger community, demonstrating the interconnectedness of Shao's social structure.

The festival also affirms Shao's spiritual beliefs. The promise of prosperity and fertility made by the Awon goddess is honored through the continued observance of this tradition. The reliance on ancestral and divine guidance reinforces the festival's role as both a religious and cultural institution. By integrating mythology, ritual, and social participation, the festival serves as a powerful reminder of Shao's historical resilience and cultural depth.

In a broader context, the festival showcases how traditional practices contribute to social cohesion. It underscores the resilience of indigenous institutions in preserving cultural identity amid modernization. The Shao Mass Wedding Festival exemplifies how African traditional societies intertwine spirituality with daily life. As Mbiti (1990) noted, cultural

practices play a crucial role in shaping and maintaining societal values. The festival ensures the continuity of these values, strengthening Shao's collective identity.

Ultimately, the Shao Mass Wedding Festival is not merely an event but a profound cultural phenomenon. It encapsulates Shao's history, spirituality, and communal ethos. The continued celebration of the festival reaffirms the importance of marriage as a cornerstone of society, sustaining the legacy of the Awon goddess for generations to come.

An Overview of Jewish Marriage Tradition:

Jewish marriage rituals. The Jewish marriage traditions or rituals have transformed throughout history, from the biblical period to the late twentieth century. These traditions are deeply rooted in history, with customs that date back thousands of years and remain significant within the Jewish community today. Even despite the many changes that have taken place, most Jews continue to follow, to some extent, the tradition that developed during the medieval period. They emphasize the sanctity of marriage and the formation of a strong, covenantal relationship between husband and wife, often perceived as a reflection of the divine relationship between God and Israel (Witte 2012). These rituals include using a *chuppah* (wedding canopy), circling of the groom by the bride, holding separate or combined *kiddushin* (betrothal) and *nisuin* (marriage) ceremonies, reciting a blessing over wine, signing and reading the text of the *ketubah* (Jewish marriage document), exchanging rings and vows, chanting the *sheva b'rachot* (seven blessings traditionally recited at a marriage ceremony or celebratory meal(s) following the wedding), and the breaking of a glass. Each of these shall be discussed briefly.

Betrothal and engagement. The Jewish marriage customs center in betrothal and wedding. The Hebrew word *Kiddushin* (betrothal) is derived from the verb *Kadash*, which means to separate, to be holy, to sanctify (self), to declare holy (Wulandari 2022, 417). The process of a wedding traditionally begins with the *Kiddushin* (betrothal), which is a binding engagement period. It is a period of 'seclusion' when the bride is separated or devoted to one man. According to Lash (2012, 8), betrothal occurred up to twelve months before the actual wedding and involved a covenant. It was like our engagement today, but with a much greater sense of commitment because of the covenant entered into. Covenant in Bible times was serious, final, sealed in blood, and legally binding. Covenants could not be easily broken. Once a couple entered into a covenant at betrothal, they were legally married in all aspects except for the physical consummation of the marriage.

Bride price. Historically, betrothal established a formal agreement between families and a financial transaction known as the *mohar*, a bridal price given to the bride's family (Douglas 1988, 743). In this way, brides were purchased in Bible times just like when Rebecca was betrothed, she was bought by a certain amount of gold-silver and clothes (Genesis 24:52-54). The price was paid to the father of the bride, both to compensate him for the loss of a worker in his household and to show how much the bridegroom loved and valued the bride (Lash 2012, 6). Virgins brought double the price of widows or divorced women. Sometimes the bride price did not include money or goods. In contemporary practices, engagement is seen more as a mutual commitment than a binding contract, but is still considered a serious step leading to marriage (Phiri 2006, 825). Even though the groom has chosen the bride and paid her a certain price. However, the proposal must be approved by the bride (Wulandari 2022, 423). This is

why Rebekah is also given a choice as to whether or not she agrees to be a wife to Isaac (Genesis 24: 57-58).

Marriage contract (Ketubah). Central to a Jewish marriage is the *Ketubah*, or marriage contract, which delineates the rights and responsibilities of the husband towards the wife. Originating around the first century BCE, the *Ketubah* is a written commitment, which is considered a serious and mandatory agreement. It outlines provisions for the wife in the case of divorce or the husband's death (Greenberg 2001, 432). *Ketubah* (a deed of acquisition) is signed by two witnesses and read aloud at the marriage ceremony, symbolizing the legal and moral commitment the couple is entering (Rosenberg-Friedman 2012, 119). According to Wulandari (2022, 424), the basis of this bond is from the Bible, the relationship between God and His people.

Ritual bath or immersion (Mikveh). Another important tradition the bride is expected to perform before the wedding day is the 'ritual bath.' In Hebrew, it is called *mikvah,* which is a cleansing or purification ritual signifying that she has left her old life to enter a new life with the bridegroom (Wulandari 2022, 430).

Jewish marriage ceremony and bridal canopy:

Huppah refers to both a part of the wedding ceremony and the actual bridal canopy that covers the bridal couple. The original meaning of *huppah* was "room" or "covering." The *huppah* of ancient times was a special room built in the bridegroom's father's home (Lash 2012, 17). In Jewish tradition, the wedding ceremony, or *huppah*, represents the home the couple will build together. In ancient Israeli tradition, the bridegroom goes to prepare the *huppah*, and the bride, standing under a canopy, traditionally circles the groom seven times to signify the creation of a sacred space (Wulandari 2022, 429). Key stages include the signing of the *Ketubah*, the exchange of rings, and the groom's recitation of the *kiddushin* (betrothal formula), declaring, "You are consecrated to me according to the laws of Moses and Israel" (Rosenberg-Friedman 2012, 119). The ceremony is conducted by a rabbi under the *Chuppah* and accompanied by blessings recited by men, further enriching the ritual (Rosenberg-Friedman 2012, 119).

Breaking the glass. One of the most recognizable rituals in Jewish weddings is the breaking of a glass by the groom. It became one of the features of the wedding. Towards the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony, a poignant moment arrives where the groom steps on a glass (or sometimes a light bulb for an easier 'break') enclosed in a cloth bag, effectively shattering it. The crowd erupts in applause and shouts, congratulation *Mazel Tov*! or Good Luck. This marks the joyous conclusion of the ceremony. According to Prashizky (2008, 90), the traditional explanation of this custom is reminding the couple and guests of the Temple's destruction, accompanied by the verse from the Psalms (137:5-6) recited by the groom. This interpretation receives validity from the verse from Psalms (137:5): "If I forget You, O Jerusalem"… (Prashizky 2008, 96). This interpretation serves as a poignant reminder that even in moments of great joy, one must remember the suffering and the sacrifices of the past.

Post-wedding festivities. After the ceremony, the newlyweds participate in a festive meal known as *Seudat Mitzvah*, and blessings, known as *Sheva Brachot* (Seven Blessings), are recited for seven days post-wedding. These blessings speak to the joy of marriage, the couple's new journey, and the continuity of the Jewish people (Biale 2004). It can therefore be said that Jewish marriage traditions have evolved but still maintain a strong connection to ancient

practices, reflecting values central to Jewish identity and religious life. Through these traditions, marriage is not only a personal milestone but a community celebration, bearing significant religious, cultural, and historical meanings. Likewise, in Jewish tradition, marriage is considered a *mitzvah* (commandment) and an essential aspect of fulfilling God's commandments. Jewish marriage rituals, including the signing of the *ketubah* (marriage contract), stress the legal and spiritual dimensions of the union (Lamm 2000). Marriage is also central to ensuring the survival and continuity of the Jewish people.

Comparison Between the Two Marriage Practices:

The Shao-Awon marriage festival and Jewish marriage practices represent two distinct cultural traditions, yet they share foundational aspects in their approach to marriage. While distinct in their cultural origins, these traditions reveal notable similarities and differences in their approach to marriage, community involvement, and symbolism.

Cultural Background and Purpose.

The Shao-Awon festival, celebrated in Shao, Nigeria, is deeply rooted in indigenous beliefs and is dedicated to the *Awon* goddess, who symbolizes fertility and prosperity (Akano 2020, 45). This tradition emphasizes community unity and the continuity of local customs, reinforcing social ties and collective identity. Similarly, Adamo (2005, 22-25) highlights the significance of African traditional religious practices in fostering communal bonds and preserving cultural heritage. In contrast, Jewish marriage practices are rooted in ancient Jewish culture and religious law, prioritizing family continuity, religious observance, and the legal structure of marriage, which is seen as a covenant with divine and familial implications (Epstein 1968, 78-82). Both traditions view marriage as central to cultural continuity but differ in their primary focus: one on communal celebration, the other on religious covenant.

Ceremony and Structure.

The Shao-Awon marriage festival features a communal, mass wedding ceremony in which multiple couples marry simultaneously, emphasizing the unity of the community. This collective celebration fosters social bonds and reinforces shared cultural values (Akano 2020, 47-49). Furthermore, Olajubu (2003, 33-36) notes the role of ritual performance in Yoruba cultural festivals, emphasizing their communal and spiritual significance. Jewish marriages, on the other hand, typically occur as individual ceremonies, where couples exchange vows under a *chuppah* (wedding canopy), symbolizing the creation of a new home. Jewish ceremonies vary in scale, but they tend to be more private and focus on religious officiation, reflecting the individuality of each marital union within a sacred framework (Epstein 1968, 84-86). Both traditions, while differing in structure, see marriage as a socially significant event.

Pre-marital Requirements.

Both traditions involve structured pre-marital rituals that ensure the couple's readiness for marriage. In Shao culture, these involve community vetting, cultural rites, and significant parental involvement, reflecting a collective investment in the couple's future. Ajayi (2009, 50-53) underscores the importance of parental and community roles in traditional African marital arrangements. Jewish marriages also include specific preparatory rituals, such as engagement and the signing of the *ketubah*, a marriage contract detailing spousal rights and obligations in accordance with *Halacha* (Jewish law) (Epstein 1968, 90-92). These preparatory

steps in both cultures underscore a shared commitment to cultural and community standards, even as the specifics vary by tradition.

Symbolism and Role of Religion.
The role of religion and symbolism in marriage is crucial in both practices. In Shao, the Awon goddess embodies fertility and prosperity, linking the marriage to a sacred heritage and community identity (Akano 2020, 51-52). As Adamo (2005, 27-29) points out, African religious traditions often integrate spiritual symbolism to reinforce societal norms and values. Jewish marriages similarly emphasize symbolism, such as the *chuppah* and the breaking of the glass, which convey themes of unity, fragility, and the sacred nature of marriage under Jewish law (Epstein 1968, 94-96). While the Shao tradition centers on local spiritual beliefs tied to fertility, Jewish marriage views marriage as a covenant under divine protection, reflecting a shared belief in the sacredness of marriage but with different religious contexts.

Community Involvement.
Community participation is integral to both marriage practices. In Shao, the entire community partakes in the festival, contributing to preparations and celebrations that reinforce social cohesion (Akano 2020, 53-55). Awolalu (1976, 11-13) notes that African communal events often involve collective responsibility, enhancing solidarity. Jewish weddings, while often smaller in scale, involve family and friends who offer blessings and witness the union, and the community plays a vital role in supporting the couple's integration into Jewish communal life (Epstein 1968, 98-100). For both cultures, the community's role underscores the social importance of marriage, though the forms of participation and scale differ by tradition.

Legal and Spiritual Recognition.
In Shao culture, marriage is traditionally recognized within the community and upheld by local authorities, reflecting a primarily social and spiritual validation. Jewish marriages, however, carry both religious authority and, in many places, legal recognition under secular law, especially where there are formal provisions for religious marriages (Epstein 1968, 102-104). Both systems place marriage within a framework of social responsibility, though Jewish marriages are more widely integrated into secular legal structures. Ogunade (2010, 59-61) highlights the dual nature of traditional African marriages as both spiritual and communal contracts, paralleling the duality in Jewish traditions.

Symbolic Similarities.
Both Jewish marriage and the Awon mass marriage festival emphasize the continuity of lineage and community engagement, despite their distinct religious backgrounds. Jewish marriage is seen as *kiddushin* (a sacred contract) involving God, man, and woman, with marriage as *mitzvah* (a commandment) rooted in religious duty (Epstein 1968, 106-108). Conversely, the Awon Festival celebrates marriage as a community event, honoring the goddess's blessings as a source of prosperity and familial continuity (Akano 2020, 57-58). Both systems thus value marriage as a social and spiritual commitment, with Shao focusing on local deities and Jewish tradition centering on covenantal theology.

Transition and Symbolism of Marriage.
Marriage in both traditions marks a significant life transition, underscored by unique rituals. Jewish marriage transitions from individual identity to family unity, where symbolic acts like breaking the glass emphasize life's fragility and the sanctity of marriage (Epstein 1968, 110-112). In Shao, rituals such as *Ekun Iyawo*, where brides recite family praises, acknowledge the

bride's emotional shift from her family of birth to her new role in marriage (Akano 2020, 59-60). Both practices involve acts of farewell and commitment, symbolizing the profound emotional and social transition marriage entails.

Shared and Unique Aspects of Spiritual and Ancestral Ties. In both traditions, spiritual observances and ancestral ties play a significant role. Jewish marriage rituals invoke God's blessing through symbolic elements like the *chuppah*, aligning marriage with broader theological views of family and community (Epstein 1968, 114-116). The Shao tradition centers on reverence for the *Awon* goddess, who promises fertility and prosperity in exchange for community adherence to her guidance, symbolized by the sacred *Awon* River (Akano 2020, 62-63). Both practices incorporate divine or spiritual elements to reinforce the significance of marriage, albeit through different deities and religious frameworks.

It could be summarized thus: while the Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage traditions each draw on unique cultural and spiritual contexts, they reveal universal values regarding the commitment, continuity, and sacredness of marriage. Both traditions emphasize the role of community, the importance of symbolism, and the belief that marriage is a binding covenant, highlighting marriage as a cornerstone of both personal and communal identity.

Lessons for the Church

The comparative analysis of the Shao-Awon mass marriage festival and Jewish wedding traditions offers profound lessons for the church, particularly in community involvement, the sanctity of marriage, cultural integration, and spiritual significance. Drawing insights from biblical scholars and cultural analysts, this section explores potential applications for contemporary Christian communities.

Embrace Communal Values and Support Systems

The Shao-Awon mass marriage festival exemplifies how communal involvement transforms marriage into a collective responsibility. The festival's elaborate preparations and societal participation underscore the importance of strong support systems for young couples (Akano 2020, 5). Churches can establish mentorship programs where seasoned couples guide newlyweds, offering wisdom on navigating marital challenges (Adeyemo 2006, 35). This aligns with Galatians 6:2: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Furthermore, Shao's communal participation highlights the necessity of shared values in sustaining marriages. Churches can foster deeper connections within congregations, strengthening marital bonds against external pressures (Olupona 1991, 42).

Honour Marriage as a Sacred Covenant

Jewish wedding traditions emphasize marriage as a sacred covenant. The ketubah (marriage contract) and covenantal vows reflect deep responsibility and commitment (Epstein 1968, 23-25). This aligns with Christian views of marriage as a divine institution, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 19:6: "Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Churches can reinforce this by teaching couples about the covenantal nature of marriage, emphasizing lifelong commitment. Pre-marital counseling programs should stress the sacredness of vows, drawing from biblical teachings and cultural practices that reinforce commitment. Mugambi (1989, 78) suggests integrating cultural elements into Christian marriage teachings to enhance relevance.

Incorporate Cultural Elements Respectfully

Both the Shao-Awon festival and Jewish marriage traditions integrate cultural elements. The Awon festival's Kikase Iyawo procession and Ekun Iyawo (bride's lamentation) mark the transition to marital life (Akano 2020, 6-7). Similarly, Jewish weddings feature the chuppah and breaking of the glass, symbolizing unity and life's fragility (Epstein 1968, 45).

The church can encourage couples to incorporate meaningful cultural traditions into Christian weddings, provided they align with biblical principles. Mbiti (1969, 128) argues that Christianity must engage with African cultural contexts to remain relevant. Symbolic acts like exchanging traditional gifts or reciting family praises can enrich Christian ceremonies, connecting marriage to cultural roots.

Celebrate Milestones and Rites of Passage

Both traditions emphasize marking life's milestones. The Awon Festival's communal feasting and processions serve as rites of passage that strengthen social bonds (Akano 2020, 8). Similarly, Jewish weddings include the sheva brachot (seven blessings), reinforcing community support (Epstein 1968, 34).

Churches can celebrate marital milestones by recognizing anniversaries, offering blessings during services, or organizing family life conferences. Karkkainen (2004, 112) advocates integrating communal celebrations in church life to foster unity.

Strengthen Youth and Pre-Marital Education

Both the Shao and Jewish traditions highlight the importance of marriage preparation. In Shao culture, pre-marital rites involve family and community vetting, ensuring readiness for marital responsibilities (Akano 2020, 5). Jewish betrothal customs and the ketubah similarly emphasize preparation (Epstein 1968, 18-19).

The church can develop comprehensive pre-marital counseling programs addressing emotional, spiritual, and practical aspects of marriage. Topics like conflict resolution, financial stewardship, and spiritual partnership can be covered. Nyende (2011, 49) stresses the value of such programs in fostering stable, faith-based marriages.

Recognize and Support Marriage as Part of Social Well-Being

Both traditions demonstrate how marriage contributes to societal stability. The Shao festival reinforces cultural identity and social cohesion, while Jewish marriages uphold

theological and communal values (Akano 2020, 9; Epstein 1968, 20). The church can view marriage not only as a personal commitment but as foundational to community health.

Churches can support policies and programs that strengthen family life, such as marriage enrichment seminars and community outreach initiatives. Orobator (2008, 93) notes that the church's involvement in societal issues enhances its role as a moral and spiritual guide, promoting values that benefit the wider community.

Continuity and Spiritual Commitment

Jewish marriage and the Shao-Awon festival emphasize continuity and spirituality. Jewish marriage, rooted in covenantal theology, sees marriage as a divine commandment (Epstein 1968, 15). The Awon festival similarly honors the Awon goddess as a source of fertility and prosperity (Akano 2020, 10). These shared symbolic values highlight the necessity of grounding marriage in faith and community.

Origin and Significance

The Shao-Awon festival and Jewish marriage originate from deeply spiritual contexts. The Awon Festival's genesis during the reign of Ohoro Olanibo reflects the community's divine connection (Oke 1996, 67). Similarly, Jewish marriage, rooted in the Torah, aligns with theological understandings of family as a covenantal institution (Epstein 1968, 12-14). The church can draw from these origins to reinforce marriage as a God-ordained institution, emphasizing its significance in God's plan.

By adopting lessons from the Shao-Awon Festival and Jewish wedding traditions, the church can enrich its approach to marriage, emphasizing communal values, sacredness, and cultural relevance. Integrating these lessons into church teachings and practices can strengthen marriage as a cornerstone of faith and community life.

Methods

This study employs a comparative methodology to analyze the symbolic and ritualistic elements embedded in Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage traditions. It utilizes primary and secondary sources, including historical records, ethnographic observations, and scholarly interpretations of marriage practices within both cultures. Interviews with cultural and religious leaders were conducted to provide firsthand insights into the significance and evolution of these marriage traditions. The study also engaged in participant observations of wedding ceremonies to document ritual performances and symbolic expressions. Durkheim's theory of social solidarity provides a theoretical framework for understanding how these marriage traditions contribute to social structure and cultural continuity. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and differences across both traditions.

Results

The result analysis is presented in the table below.

Aspect	Shao-Awon Marriage Practice	Jewish Marriage Practice
Social Cohesion	Marriage is a communal affair, reinforcing collective identity through shared rituals and communal involvement.	Marriage strengthens community bonds through collective participation in rituals and traditions.
Spiritual Significance	Seen as a sacred covenant with the Awon goddess, ensuring moral and spiritual commitment.	Considered a divine covenant with God, emphasizing religious and spiritual commitment.
Cultural Continuity	Rituals serve to pass down cultural values, reinforce generational ties, and preserve societal norms.	Marriage rituals help transmit Jewish cultural and religious traditions across generations.
Community Participation	Family, elders, and religious leaders play key roles in facilitating and witnessing marriages.	Family, elders, and religious authorities are actively involved in the marriage process.

Discussion

The examination of Shao-Awon and Jewish marriages reveals profound similarities that illuminate the importance of community, spirituality, cultural continuity, and participation in both traditions. These aspects enhance our understanding of how marriage functions not merely as a personal union but as a cornerstone of societal structure and identity.

Social Cohesion is a significant element in both Shao-Awon and Jewish marriages. In the Shao-Awon tradition, marriage is treated as a communal affair, where rituals and celebrations bring families and communities together. This shared involvement fosters a strong collective identity, reinforcing the notion that marriage is not only the joining of two individuals but also of two families and their respective communities. Similarly, Jewish marriages are recognized as significant communal events, which contribute to a sense of belonging and solidarity among community members. The participation of family and friends in these celebrations enhances social ties and upholds the societal fabric, illustrating the universal importance of marriage as a shared human experience.

Both traditions also place a great spiritual significance on marriage. In the Shao-Awon context, marriages are considered pivotal sacred covenants with the Awon goddess, which underscores the importance of moral and spiritual responsibilities within the union. This perspective ensures that individuals approach marriage with a sense of purpose and divine commitment. In Jewish tradition, marriage is interpreted as a holy covenant with God, emphasizing the sacred nature of the union and the ethical obligations that arise from it. In both cases, marriage is viewed as an avenue for spiritual growth and community-bound values, guiding the lives of couples within their respective beliefs.

Cultural continuity is another critical aspect reflected in both marriage traditions. Wedding rituals serve as effective mechanisms for passing down cultural values, ensuring that traditions are preserved and promoted across generations. In the Shao-Awon tradition, specific rituals help reinforce generational ties and societal norms, ensuring the maintenance of cultural identity. Similarly, Jewish marriage customs incorporate elements that educate and connect

younger generations to their heritage, firmly rooting them in their history while shaping their future as a community.

Lastly, community participation in marriage ceremonies is a cornerstone of both traditions. The roles of family, elders, and religious leaders are pivotal in facilitating and witnessing these important events. In Shao-Awon marriages, these individuals are not only participants but vital sponsors of the union, affirming its communal significance. Likewise, in Jewish weddings, community engagement emphasizes that the marriage is not merely an individual choice but a shared life journey that reflects collective values and support. This communal approach nurtures a sense of accountability and a network of support for the couple.

In summary, both Shao-Awon and Jewish marriage traditions encapsulate essential societal elements, emphasizing community, spirituality, cultural heritage, and collective participation, illustrating how deeply intertwined marriage is with the social and cultural fabric of each community.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that marriage is not only a personal commitment but also a communal and often divine institution that serves as a cornerstone for social cohesion, cultural preservation, and spiritual connection. Through the comparative examination of the Shao-Awon mass marriage festival and Jewish marriage traditions, it becomes evident that both practices embody unique yet overlapping values, revealing marriage's multifaceted significance across cultures.

The Shao-Awon festival in Yoruba culture illustrates marriage as a communal affair that strengthens collective identity and ancestral ties. Celebrating marriage as a communal responsibility, it fosters unity and continuity within the community. The festival's emphasis on ancestral blessings and fertility reflects the interconnectedness of the spiritual, familial, and social dimensions of life in Yoruba tradition.

On the other hand, Jewish marriage traditions emphasize the sacred covenant between the couple and God, underscoring values such as fidelity, mutual responsibility, and theological continuity. The structured nature of Jewish weddings, with elements like the **ketubah** (marriage contract) and **chuppah** (wedding canopy), reinforces the spiritual and legal aspects of marriage, highlighting its role as both a divine ordinance and a familial institution.

Both traditions affirm that marriage serves as a mechanism for cultural preservation, ensuring the transmission of values, beliefs, and identity across generations. The insights derived from these practices have significant implications for contemporary institutions, particularly the church. As marriage faces challenges from modern individualism, shifting cultural norms, and economic pressures, there is a pressing need to reimagine marriage as both a personal commitment and a collective endeavor.

The church can draw valuable lessons from these traditions by incorporating communal support structures and emphasizing marriage as a covenant with spiritual dimensions. Programs that integrate cultural heritage, mentorship, and spiritual preparation can enrich Christian marriage ceremonies, ensuring that they resonate with the diverse cultural backgrounds of congregants while upholding biblical principles.

Finally, this study suggests that exploring diverse marriage practices from different cultures and religious traditions can deepen our understanding of marriage as a resilient and adaptable institution. As globalization and modernization reshape societal norms, preserving the social and spiritual essence of marriage becomes increasingly important. By fostering a balance between cultural diversity and social unity, marriage can continue to serve as a vital institution that upholds the values of love, commitment, and communal solidarity.

Recommendations

1.   Foster community support in marriage: Inspired by Shao's communal approach to marriage, churches can build supportive communities around young couples. Mentorship programs and community involvement can provide guidance, foster accountability, and encourage a collective commitment to marital success, which may reduce isolation and strengthen relationships.

2.   Honour marriage as a sacred covenant: The Jewish focus on marriage as a covenant before God can remind churches to emphasize the spiritual depth of marriage vows. By highlighting the sacred responsibility that marriage entails, the church can reinforce the value of commitment and fidelity in relationships, promoting stronger, more resilient unions.

3.   Incorporate meaningful cultural practices: Both Shao and Jewish traditions incorporate culturally resonant elements in marriage ceremonies. Churches and society could encourage couples to include meaningful aspects of their heritage in their weddings. This would help preserve cultural identity and enhance the personal significance of marriage, fostering a connection between tradition and faith.

4.   Celebrate marriage and family milestones: Shao-Awon festival celebrates marriage as a rite of passage within the community. Churches could benefit from similar practices by celebrating anniversaries, family achievements, and other milestones. Special blessings or services for married couples can serve as community reminders of the spiritual and social importance of marriage.

5.   Strengthen youth and pre-marital education: The collective involvement in Shao's marriage arrangements highlights the value of preparation. Churches could improve youth and pre-marital counseling programs to include topics on commitment, conflict resolution, and partnership. This early investment in relationship skills can help future couples build solid foundations.

6.   Recognize marriage as a pillar of social stability: Both the Shao and Jewish practices demonstrate that marriage is central to cultural continuity and societal well-being. The church can support this view by framing marriage not only as a personal commitment but as part of building a thriving, values-based society. This focus on marriage's social role could encourage communities to actively support and celebrate healthy family structures.

By drawing from these insights, the church and broader society can support marriage as a cornerstone of spiritual and cultural identity, blending traditional values with contemporary understanding for a more resilient and unified community.

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