

**AFRICAN TABOOS AS GUARDIANS OF THE ENVIRONMENT: A  
DIALOGUE IN INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM**

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**Abstract**

African taboos refer to the moral principles among the African people that served as proscriptions, spelling out how African traditional societies ought to or ought not to relate with the persons and things in their environment. These taboos provide and preserve balance and harmony within the community, and in the community's relationship with nature. They are respected by members of African communities because of the spiritual background that they possess, given that they are either promulgated by a deity or the ancestors. Within the context of African environmental ethics, taboos fit into several facets. Even though it can be studied as a major source of African environmental ethics, it belongs to a special place in the study of the indigenous modalities for environmental preservation. This piece, therefore, studies African taboos as guardians of the environment with the view of outlining its role in the preservation of the environment, especially in precolonial African societies. For the purpose of this study, the hermeneutic method of inquiry was employed. The paper discovered that African taboos occupied a central place in the effort of traditional African societies towards the preservation of the environment.

**Keywords:** Taboos, African, Environment, Preservation, Guardians, Indigenous, Igbo

## Introduction

The activities of human beings that continue to degrade the environment has reached its apogee in the twenty first century, accounting for its attraction of the attention and commitment of governments and organizations nationally and internationally. The result of this attention that it has attracted is that laws have begun to come into being for the preservation and protection of the environment and in fact even days and years such as *Earth Day of the United Nations on Human Environment*<sup>31</sup> and the *International Year of Sanitation*<sup>32</sup> are beginning to be observed for the purpose of giving the environment the importance that it deserves. Interestingly, the seventh agenda of the Millennium Development Goals focuses on *Environmental Sustainability*<sup>33</sup>. This has attracted also the attention of scholars from different academic backgrounds- it is one area of concern that has attracted the attention of both those in the pure sciences and the arts. Journalists, religious leaders, local communities, etc., are part of the discourse on the future of the environment.

At the international level, several multilateral agreements have been reached and laws brought into existence such as the following: Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially of Water Fowl Habitats of 1971; Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage of 1972; Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora of 1973; International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships of 1973-1978; United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982; Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer of 1985; Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer of 1987; Basel Convention on

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<sup>31</sup> It calls for collective, transformative action on a global scale to celebrate, protect and restore our planet. United Nations, World Environment Day 5<sup>th</sup> June, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/environment-day> 2022.

<sup>32</sup> The International Year of Sanitation 2008 was established by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2006 to accelerate progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goal of reducing by half the proportion of people living without access to improved sanitation by 2015. In addition, progress on sanitation will contribute to the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. UNICEF, International Year of Sanitation. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unicef-welcomes-international-year-sanitation-2008>

<sup>33</sup> Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). No. 7. *Ensure Environmental Sustainability*. <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>. 2015

the Control of Trans-boundary movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal of 1989; Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change of 1992; United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Draught, Particularly in Africa of 1994; Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational uses of International Watercourses of 1997; Kyoto Protocol of 1997; Cartagena Protocol on Biodiversity of 2000; Stockholm Convention on Present Organic Pollutants of 2001; Minamata Convention on Mercury of 2013; Paris Agreement of 2015; Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade of 1998.<sup>34</sup> These multilateral agreements shows that there is need to combat environmental degradation in other to minimize or or eradicate its threats.

However, the survey carried out by the researcher in 2022, reveals that most African people are not aware of the presence of these multilateral agreements, and the very few that know about them, do not know what their contents are. There were also difficulties regarding the possibility of their implementation, which include, the absence of a spiritual dimension to the agreements, the conceptualization and the mode of communicating them makes them very effective among the African people. The survey also reveals that the same people who are not aware of these multilateral agreements and laws are well aware of their indigenous taboos regarding the preservation of the environment, with very few knowing the taboos but with limited knowledge of details<sup>35</sup>.

The result of this survey indicates that there is the need to patronize the indigenous approaches on environmental preservation, or to begin from the culture of the people, which they know, then to that which they do not know, a bottom-top kind of approach. It is on this basis that this work investigates African taboos as guardians of the African environment. It will make a collection and presentation of African taboos that relate to the environment in such a manner that reveals their ecological values.

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<sup>34</sup> Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, *Igbo-African ecological spirituality: An Indigenous response to modern ecological crisis*. A paper presented at the Inaugural Conference organized by Harvard University (Divinity School) on Ecological Spiritualities, from April 27<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, p. 6

<sup>35</sup> Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, *Igbo-African ecological spirituality: An Indigenous response to modern ecological crisis*. A paper presented at the Inaugural Conference organized by Harvard University (Divinity School) on Ecological Spiritualities, from April 27<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, p. 7.

### **The Methodology or Approach to this study**

The approach employed in this study is the indigenous holistic approach. This is necessary give that African taboos are indigenous norms or local knowledge held by indigenous people that guided or moderated the attitude of people towards the environment. It is considered holistic because of the nature of the African worldview that is complementary and relational in character. It is this worldview that shapes African taboos. These indigenous knowledge systems as related to the environment are designed in such a manner that:

- a. Feedback comes from the environment and not just from the human society;
- b. It creates a moral economy that places a moral obligation on those who are members of the local community;
- c. It focuses on the development of the behavioral patterns of the indigenous people with the view of altering the way they relate with biodiversity;
- d. It regards the environment with awe and respect, given that the environment is understood as the abode of the divine<sup>36</sup>.

This is a contribution to local and international studies or discourse on the preservation and protection of the environment.

### **African taboos and the environment**

Below are selected African taboos<sup>37</sup> that serve as guardians of the environment.

<b>No.</b>	<b>Taboo</b>	<b>Ecological value</b>
1	Hunting from some particular forests	Protects species on the land
2	Eating new yam before the new yam festival	Preserving food

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<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Ebeku Essel, The role of taboos in solving contemporary environmental degradation in Ghana: The case of Cape Coast Metro. *Social Sciences*. 9. 4. 2020, p. 90.

<sup>37</sup> Kanu, I. A., *African philosophy: An ontologico-existential hermeneutic approach to classical and contemporary issues*. Nigeria, 2015: Augustinian Publications; Kanu I. A., *A hermeneutic approach to African traditional religion, theology and philosophy*. Nigeria: Augustinian Publications, 2015.

3	Not taking children to the stream at infancy for dedication	Introducing the next generation to the environment
4	Committing suicide	Protects life
5	Causing the fall of an elderly person	Protects life
6	Plugging breadfruit at night	Protects trees
7	Not eating some animals	Protects animal species
8	Killing of tortoise	Protects tortoise
9	Killing of a human being	Protects life
10	Hunting on some days	Protects species on land
11	Fishing on some days	Protects species in water bodies
12	Fishing from some particular streams	Protects species in water bodies
13	Killing of vulture	Protects vultures
14	Killing of ram	Protects rams
15	Killing of an owl	Protects owls
16	Killing of parrot	Protects parrots
17	Killing of python	Protects pythons
18	Entering sacred forests	Protects biodiversity
19	Cutting down of some trees	Protects trees
20	Taking more than a person needs from nature, like hunting an animal and not eating the meat	Protects natural resources

21	Killing of a dog	Protects the dog
22	Washing cloth or taking bath on some parts of the stream	Protects inhabitants of water bodies
23	Killing of a tiger	Protects the tiger
24	Killing of Iguana	Protects the Iguana
25	Killing a pregnant animal	Protects species
26	Killing an animal fending for her young	Protects species
27	Cutting or destruction of sacred forests or bushes	Protects the environment
28	Farming near watersheds	Protects water bodies
29	Digging of graves without the authorization of the chief	Protects the earth
30	Bush fire on virgin land is not allowed	Protects the land and species
31	Defecating into streams or water bodies is not allowed	Protects water bodies
32	Stealing from a persons farm land, especially yam, is not allowed	Protects the land, the property of another and pays respect to the yam
33	Urinating into streams or water bodies is not allowed	Protects water bodies

### **Taboos and environmental ethics**

Taboos promote fundamental ethical values in relation to the environment in the following ways: Justice and sustainability, sufficiency and compassion, solidarity and participation.

**1. Justice and Sustainability:** Justice is about giving each his due. This is a primary principle that underlies the African taboo's prohibitions regarding the environment. It holds that the environment must be given the respect that it deserves. It should be treated not as a voiceless aspect of nature but one that inhabits great spirits, and what taboos actually do is that they speak for nature or the environment. Taboos present the different dimensions of the environment as personalities - for instance, the python is seen as mother, and anyone who kills it is supposed to bury it as a human person. Trees such as the Iroko are described with divine and human qualities like 'protector'<sup>38</sup>.

Alongside the idea of justice is that of sustainability. What sustainability does is that it extends justice into the future and ensures that the opportunities and livelihood of the future generation is not endangered. The sustainability of the environment requires that the human person does not take from her more than is needed for survival or satisfaction of basic needs. This explains why these taboos prohibit the exploitation of rare species, and also slow down the exploitation of nature. This is to avoid the use of nature or the environment in such a manner that exceeds what we can replenish. Sustainability calls for a balance in the satisfaction of the needs of today in relation to the needs of the future generation<sup>39</sup>.

**2. Sufficiency and Compassion:** The idea of sufficiency requires that a person should not exploit nature beyond what he or she needs for his or her livelihood. This requires that individuals must share what they have and live more simply, think creatively and ensure that everyone has access to the goods that they need to live a life of dignity. The idea of sufficiency requires that we think of other persons and other realities while we relate with them instead of only focusing on our needs.

The idea of compassion comes in from the African understanding of nature as a part of the being of the human person. This requires that they also be treated with compassion rather just as instruments for profit. Animals,

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<sup>38</sup> Keith Douglass Warner OFM and David DeCosse, Using ethical principles in moral reasoning about the environment. <https://www.scu.edu/environmental-ethics/short-course-in-environmental-ethics/lesson-three> 2009

<sup>39</sup> Keith Douglass Warner OFM and David DeCosse, Using ethical principles in moral reasoning about the environment. <https://www.scu.edu/environmental-ethics/short-course-in-environmental-ethics/lesson-three> 2009

plants, and the elements (such as water, soil or air) are, therefore, considered to be morally significant, and that humans have responsibilities to act so that their needs are met too. Sometimes, the idea of compassion goes beyond the aspect of nature that is being used, it also requires that the human person becomes compassionate to himself or herself given that whatever the human person does to nature will have a way of affecting the life of the human person directly and indirectly.

**3. Solidarity and Participation:** The idea of solidarity is based on the African understanding of nature as holistic- a community of living and non-living things. It, therefore, invites the human person to consider how to relate to nature as a part of his or her worldhood. It considers the full range of our relationships and the interconnectedness and relationality of reality; it assumes that we recognize that we are a part of at least one family - our biological family, our local community, or our national community. Solidarity requires us to consider this kind of extended community, and to act in such a way that reflects concern for general well-being.

Participation is important in this because of the perception of nature as inter-relational. Since nature has different stakeholders relating together, there is need that the position of such stakeholders are not bypassed in decisions regarding their future<sup>40</sup>.

### **The Mode of Ethical Reasoning in African Taboos**

The mode of the ethical reasoning that can be drawn from these taboos include: command, consequences and character.

1. **Commands:** One of the basic features in taboos as it relates to morality is that of command. It is a command that has its authority in the ancestors. It is meant to give direction to the African society for the purpose of achieving the common good of the African people. In this case, command refers to the things that we ought to do or the things that we ought not to do. It is within the context of the idea of command that some African taboos are compared to the Ten Commandments in the Christian scriptures. The taboos regarding

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<sup>40</sup> Keith Douglass Warner OFM and David DeCosse, Using ethical principles in moral reasoning about the environment. <https://www.scu.edu/environmental-ethics/short-course-in-environmental-ethics/lesson-three> 2009



the environment are not agreements or negotiations; they are commands that must be obeyed by the members of the society. If one agrees to be a member of that society, such a person must also agree to keep to the commands for the good of the society.

**2. Consequences.** Associated with taboos are consequences. Since they are commands, the breaking of the commands go with very serious consequences. The ethical notion of consequences remind the African community that while the commands are thought about, one must also think of the consequences of one's actions if one does not keep to the commands. It is by thinking of the consequences that the human person becomes partly aware of his or her responsibilities.

The idea of consequences go with thoughts around benefits, costs, good, bad, harmful, etc. Thus, actions that lead to consequences that are beneficial, good, etc., are referred to as good actions, and those actions that lead to consequences that are bad, harmful, painful, etc., are referred to as bad. In environmental ethics, this also follows. Those actions that have harmful consequences on the environment are considered wrong and those actions that have beneficial consequences on the environment are considered good actions.

**3. Character:** Within the context of African taboos in relation to human action, those who keep to the taboos are considered to be people of good character, and also considered persons who have the interest of the community at heart. The community comes into the picture because actions that individuals carry out have resounding effects on the life of the community.

### **Ecological Value of African Taboos**

African taboos have varied ecological values, no wonder they are referred to as the guardians of the environment. These ecological values drawn from the tabulated taboos relating to the environment include:

1. Taboos, especially among the African people helps them to understand and relate with the environment within the categories that they understand. It is only within such a relationship that the project of environmental preservation becomes productive.

2. They protect the environment through the moral obligations that they impose on the human person towards the environment. In a sense, they promote in human beings the character necessary for the general good of the ecosystem.
3. They promote the understanding of the environment in metaphysical terms. With them, the environment is not just seen as a thing to be exploited but as having relationships with great spirits and the ancestors.
4. They protect endangered species in the ecosystem. Most of the taboos in African traditional societies in relation to animals and trees relate to endangered species that would go into extinction through overuse or over-exploitation.
5. They promote a sense of justice in the use of the environment- that is, treating the environment as it is due to it.
6. Through its emphasis on the consequences of human action towards the environment, taboos emphasize the reality of inter-connectivity and relationality in the environment. Thus an understanding of nature as that which must be included by the human person in his or her agenda for the promotion of survival.
7. Taboos are futuristic, in the sense that they promote the preservation of the environment for the sake of the future generation. Its commands in the present is for the survival of the next generation.

## Conclusion

For more than 25 years, environmental experts, international organizations and conferences on environmental protection, among other human efforts have tried to grapple with the challenges of ecological crisis. The present ecological situation shows that there hasn't been much success and that there is need for alternative perspectives or approaches<sup>41</sup>. These measures, in spite of the availability of the will to achieve them have not been able to solve the problem at hand but only addressed the symptoms rather than the main issues, implying that there might be need to go deeper and wider than some of the present measures can go<sup>42</sup>. It is in this regard that Pope Francis teaches that:

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<sup>41</sup>Tarusarira, J. African religion, climate change, and knowledge systems. *Ecumenical Review*. 69. 3. 2017, 398-410; Melnick, D. Jeffrey McNeely, Yolanda Navaaro, Guido Schmidt-Traub, and Robin Sears, *Environment and human wellbeing: A practical strategy: achieving the millennium development goals*. London: Earthscan, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Crockett, Daniel, Nature connection will be the next big human trend. *Huffington Post*. <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/daniel-crockett/nature-connection-will-be-the-next-big->

There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures... Nor can the notion of the quality of life be imposed from without, for quality of life must be understood within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group<sup>43</sup>.

The African people have related with their environment in a spirit of respect, solidarity and complementarity<sup>44</sup>. Ogungbemi avers that: "In our traditional relationship with nature, men and women recognize the importance of water and air management to our traditional communities"<sup>45</sup>. This understanding, is the basis for the present studies on African taboos as the guardians of the environment. It has studies selected African taboos that relate to the environment to show how traditional African societies preserved the environment before the advent of unilateral agreements and laws. Given the nature of most African societies that are glo-localized, there is the need for an emphasis on traditional indigenous knowledge and laws that are very well known to indigenous people. Such an emphasis provides a more holistic approach towards the preservation of the environment.

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<sup>43</sup> Francis, Pope, *Laudatio si (Praise be to You)*. Papal encyclical on climate. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015, no. 114.

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