Indigenous Cultures and Environmental Preservation

James Wambugu, PhD
Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Nairobi, Kenya)

Abstract

Indigenous cultural and religious practices made it possible for tribes to coexist peacefully with their surroundings. This promoted a balanced and sustainable utilisation of natural resources. Today, the world is stirring at an environmental disaster of catastrophic magnitude. This is practically experienced through drastic environmental degradation and extraordinary changes in weather patterns, among others. This has brought a plethora of related effects, such as diseases that are continually being discovered. These conditions are risky to humanity if they continue unabated because there is a link between human activity and the destruction of the ecosystem. This paper, therefore, draws from our African indigenous cultural practices to rediscover how they preserved the ecosystem. This can be an African contribution to the larger pool of initiatives toward environmental preservation. The work is guided by the following questions: i. What are the threats of environmental degradation in Kenya? ii. What are those indigenous African cultural practices that critically enabled the preservation of the environment? iii. What strategies are adoptable and applicable in contemporary times for the enhancement of environmental preservation? This is fundamentally important in conscientizing all persons in society toward their responsibility in environmental preservation, as declared in the Laudato Si! movement initiated by the late Pope Francis.

Keywords: Indigenous Cultures, environmental disaster, ecosystem preservation, contemporary, conscientizing

Introduction

Indigenous cultural and religious practices have long enabled tribes to coexist harmoniously with their environments, fostering a balanced and sustainable use of natural resources. However, the world today faces an environmental crisis of catastrophic proportions, marked by severe ecological degradation and unprecedented shifts in weather patterns. These changes have led to a cascade of adverse consequences, including the emergence of new diseases and heightened risks to human populations. The persistent link between human activities and environmental destruction necessitates a reevaluation of traditional practices that once supported ecological balance. This paper aims to explore African indigenous cultural practices that have historically contributed to ecosystem preservation. This article argues that confronting the acute environmental degradation in Kenya requires a theoretical understanding of the human-nature nexus. By analysing indigenous African cultural practices, the paper uncovers a proven model of sustainable mediation. The final section explores how to adapt these principles for contemporary application, asserting that such cultural reinvigoration is essential for effective and equitable preservation.

Local tribesman fishing with a net on a stick at the top of Victoria Falls during sunset, Zimbabwe. Photo by Ed Wingate on Unsplash

The Threats of Environmental Degradation in Central Kenya

In Central Kenya, many people still live within their cultural context despite the onslaught of forces of modernisation. This might not be easily noticed when society is living within what is assumed to be normal daily experiences. However, during extraordinary circumstances when a society is facing challenges like severe droughts, Africans and people from Central Kenya quickly return to their traditional beliefs and practices [Mbiti, 1991]. Under the threat of severe environmental degradation, we take recourse from our traditional beliefs and practices to mitigate the threat.

Most parts of Central Kenya are now urbanised. This has come along with the mega construction of infrastructures like roads and houses that have gradually turned some sections of Central Kenya into a jungle of stones. Some parts of Central Kenya that were predominantly calm and peaceful are now turned into business hubs. Traffic and noise pollution are the order of the day. Natural rivers that used to provide clean water and create a serene environment for city dwellers are now dumping sites. Heaps of garbage are stretching for many kilometres in Nairobi's

Eastlands, producing the most disgusting odour.

City dwellers are literally pushed to the edge of life, and many contagious diseases are spreading like wildfire. Psychologically, many Nairobians are overwhelmed by air and noise pollution. Cases of suicide, murder, and other vices are on the rise as the standards and value of life in the city are compromised. The worrying factor is that people do not take individual responsibility for the impending environmental crisis. Rather, they point an accusing finger at the elected members of the City Council for their inability to govern and put strategies in place that can contain and develop a better environment. Due to unmitigated levels of corruption, it is certain that our environmental crisis is an issue that will remain unattended.

Large populations in Central Kenya are predominantly agriculturalists. Therefore, they depend on physical environmental resources for their livelihoods. Pressure has been placed on the available resources as a result of the growing population, fossil fuel use, and global climate change. This has resulted in the abuse or deterioration of essential resources like soil, water, animals, and forests. This is resulting in profound severe ecological degradation.

The major environmental issues include flooding, water shortage, river silting, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, degraded water quality, poaching, and domestic and industrial pollution, as well as an increase in human-wildlife conflicts, poverty, overcrowding, war, and human rights abuses. The contribution of indigenous religious practices and beliefs to environmental preservation has not received much scientific attention. Apparently, these religious beliefs and practices are frequently disregarded or dismissed during environmental conservation strategies and debates by contemporary scientists and scholars who are also proponents of secularisation [Nyandika, 2019]. There is increased dependence on science and technology, which is an unattainable exercise because of cost implications and expertise that are not affordable within the local context. Efforts to promote environmental consciousness cannot stand if they are not supported by regional, national, and global policies that enhance environmental preservation.

Human-Environment Relationship Theory

This study is guided by the Human-Environment Relationship theory [Ingold, 1992], which posits that human interaction with nature is mediated by culture and belief. This framework is apt for analysing how communities in Central Kenya historically negotiated their ecosystem. The theory elucidates a dynamic relationship: humans adapt to the environment, actively shape it to their needs, and are in turn shaped in character by it through cultural lenses.

We apply this triad to Central Kenyan indigenous knowledge: (1) Adaptation is seen in rituals regulating resource use; (2) Shaping is evident in agro-ecological methods like terracing; and (3) Mutual Influence is embodied in beliefs that sacralize nature, fostering a conservation ethic. While this theory provides a vital macro lens, it often lacks specificity on cultural mechanisms. This research, therefore, seeks to deepen its application by detailing the precise practices of Central Kenyan communities, thereby exploring a community's tangible capacity for environmental preservation – a dimension the theory acknowledges but seldom elaborates.

Indigenous African Cultural Practices for Preservation of the Environment

Indigenous religious beliefs and practices are the values, customs, laws, symbols, and rituals that members of a particular community uphold and pass down from one generation to the next. They include aspects of religious beliefs that are visible and aspects that are hidden from conscious awareness [Hans & Neil, 1992]. It is in this sense that nature is never only "natural" for a religious person; since nature is a sacred creation of the gods, it is imbued with religious significance. It is in this regard that [Francis, 2015] alluded that:

> **"Efforts to promote a sustainable use of natural resources are not a waste of money, but rather an investment capable of providing other economic benefits in the medium term. If we look at the larger picture, we can see that more diversified and innovative forms of production, which have less impact on the environment, can prove very profitable. It is a matter of openness to different possibilities which do not involve stifling human creativity and its ideals of progress, but rather directing that energy along new channels."**

The gods accomplished more than just communicating sacrality, as in the case of an object consecrated by the divine presence; they exhibited the various modalities of the sacred in the world's structure and cosmic process. The world presents itself in a way that helps the religious person learn about the various ways of being holy and in contemplation. The planet appears to be the creation of the gods and has orderly structures free from disorder. The various facets of the divine are organically revealed by these cosmic works. For instance, [Wanjohi, 1997] noted that the ground takes on the role of a mother and nurse, while the sky demonstrates the transcendence of the divine. The modes of being and sacrality are revealed by the cosmic rhythm that makes harmony, permanence, and order evident.

Historically, there are numerous instances of diverse communities' religious beliefs and practices closely related to their environment. The United Nations [2017] Conference on Environment and Development identified the contribution of indigenous knowledge as beneficial and urgently needed for the protection of the ecosystem. Due to enormous potential for environmental conservation for sustainable living and as a reaction to global environmental deterioration and climate change, the protection, management, and security of ecological and sacred sites have recently attracted attention on a global scale. The local people and the environment have a symbiotic relationship, and maintaining such sites is usually tied to conserving local culture, religious beliefs, and practices [Francis, 2020].

In the 19th century, the move towards environmental conservation came from elite hunting communities in North America and the United Kingdom. This was the result of a notable decrease in game animals, which ushered in the "age of preservation." Following this, the idea of conservation began to encompass not only preventing animal hunting but also the duty of humans to preserve the environment [Ladle & Whittaker, 2011]. The idea of nature encapsulated the importance of contemplation and beauty in nature as an essential component of many people's cultural legacies. This was followed by the construction of natural monuments throughout Europe and other continents. These spots were guarded and kept off limits as "fortress conservation." This led to a number of ideas that humans are to blame for the devastation of nature and that human activity is responsible for almost all biodiversity loss.

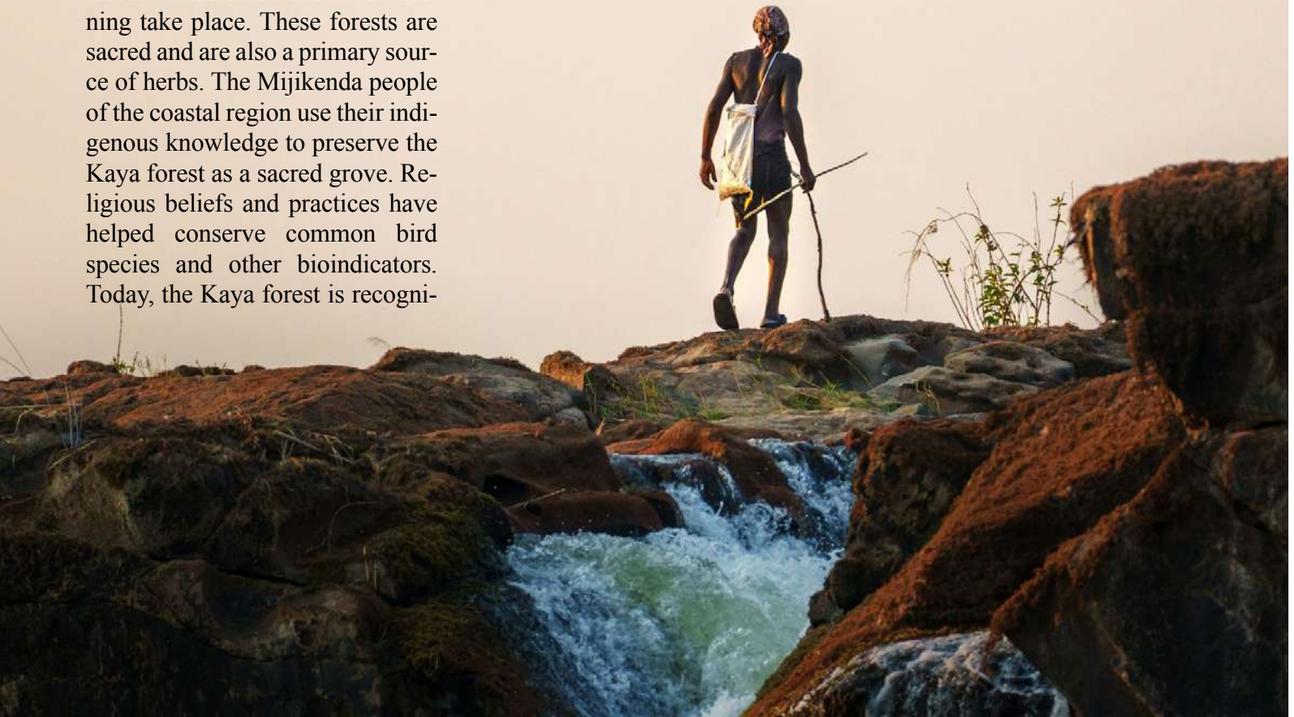
Diverse societies, through indigenous religious beliefs and cultural practices, have varied insights, beliefs, and practices concerning the use of water, land, and wildlife resources. The Awa people of the Amazon rainforest consider the jungle to be sacred and their source of food; hence, they forbid any human activity in the reserved forest areas. In India, Jharkhand is statistically undisputed to be the most biodiverse region globally [Devis & Choyal, 2024]. It is associated with extraordinary tribal inhabitants who share a harmonious union with the environment. These communities live harmonious lives in close connection with the environment and rely on it for survival. To protect and maintain the environment and natural resources, their religious taboos and beliefs have evolved. Due to totemism among many cultural communities, most plant and animal species in India have been safeguarded.

The majority of African civilisations prohibit the improper use and ingestion of specific environmental products. African communities believe that gods, goddesses, or spiritual beings reside in areas that are protected from utilisation, entrance, exploitation, and agricultural activities. The Igbo society has preserved old religious practices that are ecologically friendly. For example, they accept a causal relationship between the natural set-

ting and the moral state of its inhabitants, which predicates that the environment is sacred. The Shona belief system can be leveraged to increase agricultural production and environmental preservation in modern society. The indigenous cultural beliefs and knowledge are pivoted on a holistic philosophy that views and advocates for unity between humanity and the environment [Mehta, 2017]. The harmony between the environment and humankind inspires the Shona community to use natural resources sustainably and encourages the preservation of the environment.

In Kenya, most traditional communities have their lives punctuated by many rituals at every stage of life. The spiritual, ethical, and environmental principles that promote ecological protection are typically incorporated in rituals [Wanjohi et al., 2020]. For instance, young males in the Rendile, Bukusu, and Maasai undergo a period of seclusion in the jungle during the circumcision ceremony to acquire skills pertaining to family obligations. The communities, therefore, respect and protect the forest where those rituals or training take place. These forests are sacred and are also a primary source of herbs. The Mijikenda people of the coastal region use their indigenous knowledge to preserve the Kaya forest as a sacred grove. Religious beliefs and practices have helped conserve common bird species and other bioindicators. Today, the Kaya forest is recognised as a World Heritage Site for vulnerable species and traditional methods of caring for species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

These African cultural and religious beliefs and practices that foster environmental management and preservation are eroded by modernisation. This calls for an urgent need to reconsider the strategies and principles of African indigenous religious cultural practices to reinvigorate the preservation and management of natural resources.



Local tribesman fishing with a net on a stick at the top of Victoria Falls during sunset, Zimbabwe. Photo by Ed Wingate on Unsplash.

Adoptable Traditional Religious Practices

Like other African societies, people in Central Kenya maintain a worldview that has a religious character, which informs their relationship to the natural environment. God is the creator, sustainer, provider, protector, and nourisher. God penetrates all His creatures with His presence. Therefore, we must not treat creatures—animals, plants, etc.—recklessly but deal with them sensitively, with empathy and reverence. Whoever commits a fault against creatures commits a fault against God, the Creator Himself [Bujo, 1988]. For an African, the environment has both religious and physical dimensions [Mbiti, 1991]. Therefore, there exists a thin distinction between the religious and physical world in African ontology [Mtetwa, 1996].

The sacredness of the environment is not only because God created it, but also because of its ontological sacredness and significance. Among the Agikuyu, nature is seen as the abode of spirits and deities manifested through preserving sacred groves (forests, hills, riverbanks, and water catchment areas) [Mbiti, 1991]. Setting aside places shows deep environmental reverence for their ontological sacredness. They designate such areas for religious ceremonies like oaths, appeasing evil spirits, and cleansing members believed to have committed serious crimes. They also consider places inhabited by clan gods and spirits, where cosmic energies or forces converge to enable communication with ancestors. There was an excellent mutuality between nature and humanity.

The forest was viewed as a weather regulator. Giant trees pull the rain from the skies [Gathogo, 2013]. This explains why prayers and sacrifices for rain were either done in the forest or under a big tree. Some trees were viewed as windbreakers, sources of habitat for other animals, and hideouts for human beings during inter-ethnic or inter-clan disputes. Children, women, older people, and animals were hidden in the forest during raids by enemies. For this reason, no paths were allowed in the forest. Africans are notoriously eco-friendly.

The Agikuyu people also practised traditional enclosure, which helps combat land degradation and pastoral mobility as a proper grazing system [Wanjohi, 1997]. Closer within the context of the Agikuyu meant that after farming or grazing in a piece of land for a duration of time, they would leave that area bare for some time in order to recuperate or regain its fertility. This exhibits a profound presence of indigenous knowledge for the preservation of biodiversity and management of rangelands.

There was a concerted effort among the Agikuyu aimed at preserving some rare species of animals and plants. For instance, there were construction-related taboos that surrounded building, from site selection to the materials used in construction. In this context, the community was prohibited from eating lazy animals such as snails due to a belief that they transmitted laziness. These animals were also perceived to be helpless, and if eaten, they might be easily wiped out of an ecosystem [Kenyatta, 1938]. Scare trees species are those that take a long time to mature and are not used for firewood or construction for outstanding environmental lessons. A building could not be erected where a fig tree grew, as the sacred tree could never be planted. The tree is considered sacred and is protected based on its potential to attract all sorts of animals, birds, and insects beneath it [Amutabi, 2017].

Conclusion

The introduction of Christianity, Islam, and the paradigm of scientific modernity to Africa instigated profound changes in the cultural perception of the ecosystem. This shift fostered a dichotomous worldview that increasingly objectified the environment, stripping it of its inherent sacredness and reducing it to a mere resource for exploitation.

In contrast, African traditional religions and cultural practices are anchored in a holistic ethos that cultivates mutual respect and reciprocity with the natural world. Through taboos, totems, and the sacralization of places, these systems encoded an environmental ethic—exemplified by the Agikuyu community of Central Kenya—that mandated conservation and sustainable use. This framework shaped not only behaviour but also indigenous architecture and land-use patterns, ensuring that human activity remained integrated within ecological limits.

Central to this philosophy is the recognition of the environment as a subject, not an object. While economic and religious use of natural resources is permitted, it is governed by normative constraints that prevent exploitation. The preservation of sacred forests and species-specific taboos is are prime example of regulations that cultivated a conscientious African attitude toward environmental stewardship.

A critical finding of this work is that contemporary environmental degradation, notably from unchecked construction and infrastructure development, starkly contrasts with indigenous planning principles. African societies did not erect buildings randomly; sacred sites and critical habitats were protected from disruption. This wisdom urgently calls for the integration of similar ecological consciousness into modern urban and regional planning.

Ultimately, the environmental crisis in Central Kenya and beyond demands a reevaluation of this inherited wisdom. The knowledge embedded in African indigenous practices is not a relic of the past but a vital resource for the present. It advocates for a return to personal and communal responsibility, offering a culturally-grounded blueprint for sustainability. As supported by the vision of Laudato Si', the path forward requires policies and mindsets that once again see the natural world as a sacred trust, imperative for the well-being of all creation.

References

Amutabi, M., 2017. *African Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Management*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications.

Bujo, B., 2009. *Is There a Specific African Ethics? Towards a Discussion with Western Thought*, ed. Munyaradzi Murove, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press: 113–128.

Candlish, Stewart, 2007. *The Identity Theory of Truth*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2007 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2007/entries/truth-identity/

Devis, H.C., Choyal. G., 2024. "Conservation Practices of Plants Within the Socio-Religious Context of the Meiteis in Manipur," *Naturalista Campano* 28/2: 188–195.

Gathogo, J., 2013. *Environmental Management and African Indigenous Resources: Echoes from Mutira Mission*, Kenya, Nairobi: Acton Publishers.

Hans, H., Smelser, N.J., 1992. *Social Change and Modernity*, University of California Press.

Ingold, T., 1992. *Culture and the Perception of the Environment*, Routledge.

Kenyatta, J., 1938. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu*, Heinemann.

Ladle, R.J., Whittaker, R.J., eds., 2011. *Conservation Biogeography*, Blackwell Publishing.

Mbiti, J., 1991. *Introduction to African Religion and Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Heinemann.

Mehta, S., 2017. "Role of Traditional Practices in Conserving the Environment: A Case of Manesar Village, Gurgaon," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 22/11: 45–52.

Mtetwa, S., 1996. "African Spirituality in the Context of Modernity," *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* 3/1: 12–20.

Nyandika, O., 2024. *Environmental Crisis in Central Kenya*, URL = <search?q=Environmental+crisis+in+central>.

Pope Francis, 2015. *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, Nairobi: Publications Africa.

Wanjohi, G.J., 1997. *The Wisdom and Philosophy of the Agikuyu Proverbs: The Kihooto World-View*, Pauline Publications.

Wanjohi, G.J., 2020. *Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Conservation*, Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.