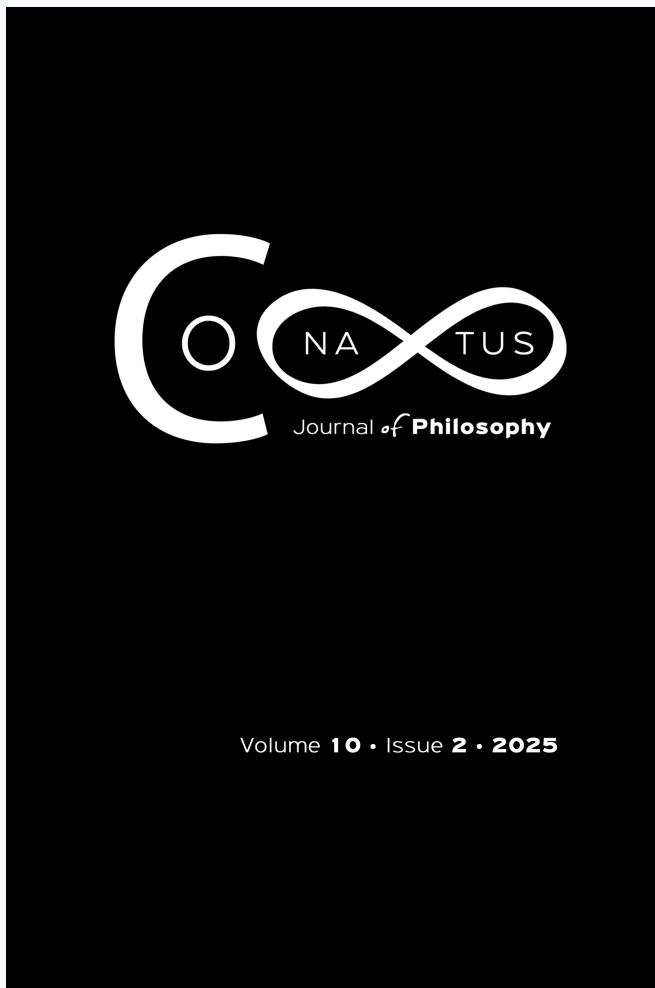


Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 10, No 2 (2025)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



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doi: [10.12681/cjp.39998](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.39998)

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To cite this article:

Esan, O. D., & Awe, S. K. (2025). The Yoruba Concept of Alajobi as a Panacea for Africa's Environmental Crises. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10(2), 9–34. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.39998>

The Yoruba Concept of Alajobi as a Panacea for Africa's Environmental Crises

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Abstract

This research centers on environmental issues in Africa. By environmental issues, we mean human actions that threaten the collective existence of all living beings on the Earth's surface. Present reality and research indicate that the ongoing abuse of the environment is not only harmful to nature but also impacts human health and prosperity. According to the World Health Organization, a quarter of all deaths worldwide are now linked to environmental misuse and carelessness towards nature. Incidents such as Ebola and Coronavirus outbreaks should remind humans of the severe and destructive effects that can occur when the environment is exploited without regard and caution. Many lives and properties have been lost globally due to nature's retaliation in events like earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and other natural and human-made disasters. In addressing these issues, this paper discusses how the Yoruba concept of 'alajobi,' meaning 'kinship,' can be vital in reorienting Africans to see themselves and other beings in nature not just as co-tenants (ajogbe) but as relatives originating from the same ontological source – 'the earth.' The paper examines two core values essential for the sustainability of alajobi: moderation (iwontunwonsi) and contentment (itelorun). These values can serve as a paradigm to tackle environmental crises. Ultimately, this paper aims to reinforce the importance of interconnected, interdependent, and harmonious relationships between humans and nature as a sustainable solution to prevent further and impending environmental crises in Africa.

Keywords: *Alajobi; environmental crises; Ajogbe; Yoruba; earth; health; moderation (iwontunwonsi); contentment (itelorun)*

I. Introduction

This paper focuses on the trajectories of environmental crises within the African continent. By environmental crises, we mean human activity that threatens the collective and harmonious existence of all entities on the Earth's surface. Present reality and scholarly research are pointers to the fact that the continuous abuse and degenerating use of nature are not just injurious to nature but also affect the health and wealth of humans. According to the World Health Organization, one-quarter of all deaths worldwide are now attributed to environmental abuse and recklessness towards nature.¹ The outbreak of diseases such as Ebola and Coronavirus ought to serve as a constraint on humans due the terrible and devastating effects that may occur when the environment is not properly taken care of. While a lot of lives and properties have been lost across the globe as a result of the revolt of nature in the form of earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and other human-induced disasters. The International Panel on Climate Change predicts that

greenhouse gases will increase global temperatures by 3.6 degrees F by 2100 – a rise unprecedented over the past 10,000 years. What might the world look like as we approach that point? Wetlands will disappear. Floods, hurricanes, and droughts will become progressively more severe. Infectious diseases will increase in virulence and range. Montana's famed glaciers may all but disappear within 30 years. A quarter of species may vanish by 2050 (sic).²

Even more disturbing is the possibility that human activities in the environment could weaken human genetic defenses and increase vulnerability. In an article published by Scott Solomon, he asserts that:

As climate change brings rising temperatures, droughts, shifting patterns of precipitation, and longer growing seasons, plants and animals are evolving to keep pace. Biologists have observed squirrels and salmon developing at an accelerated pace, causing them to reproduce at a younger

¹ Scott Solomon, "Climate Change could Affect Human Evolution," *NBC News*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/climate-change-could-affect-human-evolution-here-s-how-ncna907276>.

² "Do Genes Respond to Global Warming?" *PLoS Biology* 2, no. 10 (2004): e338.

age. Earlier summers have caused some flowers to bloom earlier in the year. And corals are forging new relationships with microscopic algae to survive in warmer, more acidic seas. As the planet continues to warm, evolutionary changes are expected in other species as well – including *Homo sapiens*. Climate change will alter the internal workings of our bodies in subtle but significant ways and will likely cause a noticeable shift in our appearance. A warmer climate means malaria, West Nile virus, and other diseases long confined primarily to the tropics will spread into temperate zones. As a result, people living in the U.S. and other developed nations will be exposed to these illnesses, and our immune systems will be forced to evolve new defences. That, in turn, could cause other, noninfectious diseases.³

The need for humans to be environmentally responsive and responsible has given rise to several studies in the field of environmental ethics and philosophy. Ethical reflection on human relations with the non-human world is not new. Concern about the environmental impact of human practices and humane treatment of animals was found in ancient Greece. Jeremy Bentham and John Muir are both still influential in environmental ethics. Also, Aldo Leopold and *Country Almanac's* seminal work in the field, with its essay on land ethics, which was published in 1949, is a good reference point. However, the modern field of environmental ethics emerged in the 1970s. From the 1980s, much research, publications, and teachings in environmental ethics rapidly expanded. As environmental ethics continued to grow in the twenty-first century, it diversified.⁴ Environmental ethics encompasses a range of divergent perspectives regarding the core issues within the field, such as, how to approach these problems, and how environmental ethical theory relates to pressing practical environmental issues. Addressing these issues has given birth to several theories that are non-African, such as anthropocentrism, ecologism, biocentrism, and deep ecology (land, air, and water). However, the concern of this paper is not to regurgitate and reiterate the findings of scholars using different environmental approaches and theories to resolve and restrain the excessive use of non-human and natural resources in the environment. The concern of this paper is an attempt to domesticate and locate the solutions

³ Solomon.

⁴ Palmer Clare, Katie McShane, and Ronald Sandler, "Environmental Ethics," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 39 (2014): 421.

to Africa's environmental crises within the African value system and principles, which will help to resolve environmental crises in Africa and beyond, thereby making the attainment of environmental sustainability achievable. As such, this paper adopts the Yoruba concept of *alajobi* as an ethical framework and foundation for broadly applicable environmental principles to preserve and conserve the environment against abuse and overexploitation. Indigenous epistemologies, when substantiated through pragmatic interaction with health and environment, demonstrate that local ethical lexicons can be employed to tackle urgent crises.⁵ They do not just represent things; they shape how people act every day to prevent problems, care for the environment, and be responsible.⁶ However, it is essential to note that the adoption of *alajobi* as a culturally significant value is not meant to serve as a universal projection, suggesting that the use of *alajobi* will inherently lead to environmental sustainability throughout Africa. Instead, the use of *alajobi* is construed in the following senses: First, it mainly talks about local communities, where traditional values and kinship norms still have a lot of moral weight. Second, it applies to policy framing and moral education, indicating that policymakers and educators can utilize culturally significant concepts such as *alajobi* to enhance environmental sustainability. Third, it adds to philosophical discourse by providing an indigenous framework for environmental ethics that goes against models that are only based on people or that come from other cultures.

II. The trajectories of African environmental crises: Philosophers' perspectives

In an attempt by African scholars to look beyond the inadequacies of the Western environmental ethics in addressing Africa's environmental problems, the works of existing African environmental scholars can be broadly categorized into two. The first strand of African literature on environmental issues consists of works that describe the interconnectedness between humans and non-humans as grounded in either culture or religious beliefs and values. Under these categories are the works of scholars like Workineh Kelbessa, Godfrey Tangwa, Ademola Fayemi, and Ogunade Raymond, to mention a few. The second category consists of scholarly work that has either used virtues inherent in people's way of life, devoid of any metaphysical connection, or adopted con-

⁵ Cyril Emeka Ejike, "COVID-19 and Other Prevalent Diseases in Africa: A Pragmatic Approach," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*

cepts that address human relationships in combating environmental challenges. Scholars in this category include Segun Ogungbemi, Thaddeus Metz, and Lawrence Ogbo Ugwanyi. While the latter have been studied by a limited number of scholars, whereas the majority of the existing literature in African environmental ethics has focused on the former. Most notable among the African scholars who have contributed immensely to the discourse on African Environmental crises is Workineh Kelbessa. In his earliest work titled “Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought,” he describes the interconnectedness and bonds shared between the Oromo people of Ethiopia and nature. According to him, in the Oromo worldview, the concepts “*Waaqa*” (God), “*Ayyaana*” (spirit), “*uuma*” (the physical world), and “*safuu*” (an ethical principle) provide the metaphysical underpinning of an environmental ethic. They underlie environmental attitudes to nature and society.”⁷ He points out that “*Ayyaana* is a refraction of *Waaqa*. *Uuma* is the physical thing. *Saffuu* mediates between the *Ayyaana*, which is the ideal, and *uuma*, which is the physical that needs to be regulated. The three, according to him, are interconnected and interrelated, and as such, each concept cannot be understood independently of the other.”⁸ He better describes the Oromo worldview thus:

The Oromo people value different natural entities, as they are created by *Waaqa*. Hence, the valuing of *Waaqa* underpins belief in the values of living beings. Different natural entities have different roles and statuses. God allowed human beings to use other natural entities, but they cannot overexploit them as they wish. They are given a special role with responsibility. The point to be stressed here is that the Oromo people do not consider nature as a storehouse from which to rob resources. *Safuu* governs the relationship between different entities and the use of resources. It would be wrong to overexploit fellow human beings and natural resources. This shows that in the Oromo worldview, human beings are not placed at the top of the ladder to dominate everything below without any restriction. Human beings are an equal part of a vibrant, interconnected whole. The Oromo see themselves as within nature, not as subjects

⁷ Workineh Kelbessa, *Indigenous and Modern Environmental Ethics: A Study of the Indigenous Oromo Environmental Ethic and Modern Issues of Environment and Development in Ethiopian Philosophical Studies I* (Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2011), 213.

⁸ *Ibid.*

detached from it. For the Oromo, nature is essential for survival, production, and protection. Thus, the Oromo worldview promotes responsible resource management.⁹

However, this position of Kelebssa might not be able to go past the Oromo tribe in Ethiopia because it is strictly rooted in the metaphysical and religious beliefs of the Oromo people and since various communities within the African world view have different divinities or mythological beliefs, it will require anyone who wants to subscribe to the Oromo ethics to first understand the divinity structure of the Oromo people. Hence, Lawrence Ogbo Ugwanyi advocates for an African environmental philosophy that divorces environmental morality from purely religious foundations.¹⁰ Perhaps Kelbessa sees the limitation in his environmental philosophy; hence, in his recent works, he questions why human relational concepts such as *ubuntu* were neglected in addressing environmental issues in Africa.

Godfrey B. Tangwa, a Cameroonian philosopher, describes the traditional African environmental ethics as eco-biocommunitarian, which is the metaphysical recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful co-existence between earth, plants, animals, and humans. According to him,

This metaphysical worldview involves the “recognition and acceptance of inter-dependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals, and humans.” This metaphysical outlook underpinned the ways, manners, and cosmic relations between humans and their fellow humans. It is also responsible for why traditional Africans were more cautious in their attitude to plants, animals, and inanimate things, and the various invisible forces of the world. Tangwa noted that traditional Africans were more disposed towards the attitude of ‘live and let live.’¹¹

Joseph Nkang Ogar and Samuel Akpan Basset affirm that the foundation of Tangwa’s eco-bio-communitarianism is “the slim and flexible

⁹ Workineh Kelbessa, “Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought,” *Environmental Ethics* 40, no. 4 (2018): 316.

¹⁰ Philomena A. Ojomo, “Environmental Ethics: An African Understanding,” *African Journal of Environmental Science and Technology* 5, no. 8 (2011): 572.

¹¹ Godfrey B. Tangwa, “Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu, 387-395 (Blackwell, 2004), 389.

line that exists between plants, animals, and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and the spirit, the communal and the individual. It is in line with this metaphysical framework that one can consistently and coherently situate the people's belief in transmigration of the soul into animals, plants, or into forces such as the wind."¹² Based on this metaphysical understanding of nature and the nature of man, Tangwa says such a mindset has very significant implications for the way nature is approached and treated by traditional Africans. However, according to Ojomo, the problem with Tangwa's exploration of an African environmental ethics is "that it is an ethno-philosophical defense of indigenous African treatment and management of the environment. He never recognized the ways and manners by which traditional Africans contributed to the segregation of the environment."¹³ The point of Ojomo is valid because several African environmental ethicists do not offer a thorough critique of events in indigenous African societies despite the interconnectedness with nature.

Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, in his study on environmental sustainability within the Yoruba purview, affirms the interconnectedness of Africans with nature. According to him:

Ritual is the principal tool used to approach that world of felt but unseen forces in a way that will rearrange the structure of the physical world and bring about ecological equilibrium. The rationale here is that there is a metaphysics of force permeating everything in the environment, and this explains the connectivity and interdependence of all things, humans, plants, and animals, along with inanimate entities.¹⁴

However, the problem with Fayemi's position is that the ritual practices are becoming far too insular, and some of them even constitute environmental degradation or abuse. For instance, putting up sacrifices at T-junctions has been perceived not to be hygienic for society because so many items used for these rituals are being left to rot and decay in public because of people's fear of touching or going near them. Moreover, some of these rituals have lost their epistemic relevance in the

¹² Joseph Nkang Ogar and Samuel Akpan Bassey, "African Environmental Ethics," *RAIS Journal for Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2019): 80.

¹³ Ojomo, 577.

¹⁴ Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, "African Environmental Ethics and the Poverty of Eco-Activism in Nigeria: A Hermeneutico-Reconstructionist Appraisal," *Matatu* 48, no. 2 (2016): 377.

sense that many young generations are not aware of some of these practices, as a result of westernization and globalization.

Ogunade Raymond also alludes to the interrelatedness of the Yoruba people with nature. He posits that the “Yoruba concept of environment is all-embracing – humans, animals, plants, and the non-living beings form the entire human society or community.”¹⁵ He expresses the fact that within the indigenous Yoruba traditions, there are values rooted in oral traditions that speak of the need to care for and preserve nature. Supporting his view are several taboos cited in the works of Bolanle Wahab that express the need for proper hygiene and a good environment among Africans. These proverbs include:

A cup placed on a water pot must not be used for drinking;
 one should bring one’s personal cup or bowl for drinking.
 A menstrual woman must not prepare meals.
 Housewives must not cook with their heads uncovered.
 Cooking with the head uncovered will cause a headache.¹⁶

However, the problem with some of these proverbs is the fact that epistemic enlightenment has made so many of them meaningless and obsolete. People no longer see the need to obey them because enlightenment has allowed people to see that the dangers attached to some of these taboos are not actually real. For instance, the above taboo that a housewife must not cook while the head is uncovered so as to prevent a headache has been found to be untrue; rather, the reason why a housewife needs to cook with her head covered is to prevent the hair strands from dropping into the pot unknowingly while cooking. In a nutshell, scholars have tried to underscore an African environmental philosophy from the spiritual and religious perspective, which has not been able to address the problem holistically. Nevertheless, we also have scholars who are trying to engage the issue from a humanist perspective.

For Segun Ogungbemi, the notion of traditional philosophy is what he calls the “ethics of care.” He believes this is derived from the relationship that exists between Africans with natural constituents like water, land and air. He affirms the need to keep sanity while interacting with nature. However, Ogungbemi soon diverged from this philosophy to what he tagged as the ethics of nature-relatedness. In his words:

¹⁵ Raymond Ogunade, “Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion: Implication for Leadership and Society in Nigeria,” *Science and Religious Global Perspectives* 3 (2005): 4.

¹⁶ Bolanle Wahab, “African Traditional Religions, Environmental Health and Sanitation in Rural Communities,” *The Environscope: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 1, no. 1 (2004): 6.

Ethics of nature-relatedness asserts that our natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions [...] The ethics of nature-relatedness can be succinctly stated as an ethics that leads human beings to seek to co-exist peacefully with nature and treat it with some reasonable concern for its worth, survival, and sustainability. The ethics of naturerelatedness has three basic elements: reason, experience, and the will. It does not attribute natural resources to a spiritual nature, nor does the creation of natural resources have any religious affinity. With this new ethical thinking, our present reckless use of nature can be curtailed.¹⁷

Here, Ogungbemi notes that “natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions. Rather, humans need to seek to co-exist with nature peacefully for its own survival, sustenance, and worth.”¹⁸ As much as this may sound true, it is not, because both biology and African ontology agree on the interdependence of humans and nature. According to Ojomo, “Ogungbemi’s alarming recommendation that nature should invariably apply its brake through volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and other events is reflex of the disconnection of his ethics of nature relatedness and African ontology.”¹⁹

Thaddeus Metz tries to establish a sort of African environmental philosophy based on the Afro-communal virtue ethics. It must be noted that the Afro-Communal ethics of Metz are rooted in the concept of *ubuntu*. For Metz, two principles were integral to his Afro-Communal Ethics: shared identity and togetherness (solidarity). The first emphasizes that an individual is strictly a member of a community and does not exist in isolation. Hence, he has a responsibility towards others. The second principle enacts the coming together of people to achieve similar goals for the betterment of humanity. Metz’s work can be summed up in three theses as explained by Samuel and Fayemi:

Thesis 1: An action is right just insofar as it promotes shared identity among people grounded on goodwill; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to do so and tends

¹⁷ Segun Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” in *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, ed. Louis J. Pojman, 330-337 (Wadsworth Publishing, 1997), 333.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁹ Cf. Ojomo, 577.

to encourage the opposites of division and ill-will.

Thesis 2: An act is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationship, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another; otherwise, an act is wrong.

Thesis 3: An act is wrong insofar as it degrades a person's special ability to enter into a mutual relationship of identity and solidarity... With those who must be treated with respect in virtue of their capacity for them.²⁰

Metz's theory of Afro-Communal Ethics is relational because they are interconnected. That is, when the flourishing of one has far-reaching implications for the others and vice versa. Metz's Afro-Communal Ethics is in tune with environmental issues because, within the African settings, Metz granted moral status to nonhuman entities; hence, rationality is nonhuman inclusive.²¹ Hence, the above theses are non-human inclusive. Metz's view could be seen as non-anthropocentric in nature and could be a viable tool for looking into trans-generational environmental concerns since Africans, by and large, believe in the ontology that metaphysically links the living, the unborn, and the dead.²²

However, the issue with Metz's relational ethics is the fact that Metz, for one, did not take the conflict of interest into consideration, which we have identified as one of the major causes of environmental crises in Africa. Even within African societies, there are issues of conflict of interest where a community will wage war against another community at one point or another. The fundamental question that needs to be raised is to what extent solidarity can be maintained when it comes to issues that pertain to the sustenance of human life. The Yoruba proverbs will say: *omo eni o le sedi berere kafi 'leke s' idi omo elomiran* – meaning one's child may not be qualified (to receive a benefit), and one would give his/her entitlement to an outsider. This proverb explains a lot about issues in relational ethics. To what extent can one

²⁰ Cf. Olusegun S. Samuel and Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, "Afro-Communal Virtue Ethic as a Foundation for Environmental Sustainability in Africa and beyond," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2019): 85. For original texts, see Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321-341; Thaddeus Metz, "Human Dignity, Capital Punishment, and an African Moral Theory: Toward a New Philosophy of Human Rights," *Journal of Human Rights* 9, no. 1 (2010): 81-99; Thaddeus Metz, "African Values and Human Rights as Two Sides of the Same Coin: A Reply to Oyowe," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 14 (2014): 306-321.

²¹ Cf. Samuel and Fayemi, 79-95.

²² *Ibid.*

remain faithful to a good course when it contradicts one's personal goals? How do I think not to harm the environment in the face of serious hunger and starvation?

Damford Chibvongodze, in alluding to Metz's position, also emphasizes the fact that *ubuntu* is not only about humans but the entire socio-sphere. According to him, there are linguistic imprint that shows Africans' connection with non-human entities. For instance, he claims that the announcement of the death of late Nigerian Literary Giant, Chinua Achebe, was like the fall of an *Iroko* tree.²³ He asserts that clan names in Africa are pointers to Africans' interconnectedness with nature. He further posits that the use of proverbs and taboos is a viable means through which environmental virtues and ethics are imparted to Africans.²⁴

Lastly, Kelbessa sums up the majority of existing African environmental ethics literature to express a harmonious relationship with the natural world. He said, "African environmental ethics and philosophy emphasize that life is relational. Different cultural concepts, including *Ubuntu*, *Saffuu*, *Ukama*, and others, have been used to promote African relational ethics and our ethical obligations towards future humans and nonhuman generations."²⁵ The ontological interconnectedness of humans with nonhuman entities stands at the baseline of most environmental ethics theories originating in Africa. However, despite this interconnectedness, reckless abuse and exploitative use of nature persist, which makes the continent the leading continent in terms of environmental degradation and abuse. And at this point, one needs to ask "why?" Joseph Nkang and Samuel Akpan, confirming this contradiction, note that:

The relationship between the African people and their environment is much like the two sides of a coin – inextricably connected yet in constant opposition. The people, one aide of the coin, live in close dependence on the service value of natural resources. On the other side of the coin is the environment: the land, climate, and water resources, which are so intimately connected in a physical and meta-physical sense to the African people. This interdependence

²³ Danford Tafadzwa Chibvongodze, "Ubuntu is not only about Humans! An Analysis of the Role of African Philosophy and Ethics in Environment Management," *Journal of Human Ecology* 53, no. 2 (2016): 157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

²⁵ Kelbessa, "Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought," 316.

manifests itself in a love-hate relationship; love- because the land and the people are connected in a historical song-dance, meshed in the traditions that make the people “African” and identify the land as African soil; hate – because the intimacy of the relationship and connectedness of the African people, their economies, their politics, their religion, to their natural environment brings to the fore the inadequacies of the dominant partner, embroiling the couple in moral wars labeled “slash-and-burn” soil erosion, farming and deforestation.²⁶

In addressing the reason behind this African predicament, Ogungbemi contends that,

there is a shift in African’s perception of the natural world. He maintains that the modern usage of our land by society does not reflect a similar degree of awareness of the importance of forests and trees for maintaining environmental values. The drive to develop has led to wholesale abandonment of traditional practices [...] As if development and modernization were incompatible with the conservation of forests and the protection of trees. The consequences of this have been a breakdown in environmental stability [...].²⁷

Plumwood, complementing Ogungbemi’s view, argues that “the subjugation of Africans and their nature by European power, dependent on the anthropocentric rationality which viewed humans as beings separate from nature, has further contributed to the pitfall of existing literature in addressing the issue.”²⁸

Existing literature is insufficient to address the rising environmental challenges in Africa, due to conflicts of interest. Most African countries are developing and, as a result, finding it challenging to balance their traditional connection to nature with the pursuit of advancement. Also, there is a need to continually develop concepts that resonate with people’s environmentally inclusive beliefs, to address human and non-human relationships. It is upon this theoretical gap that this research seeks to address the African environmental problem by adopting a concept that is not just integral to the belief system of the Yoruba

²⁶ Cf. Ogar and Basse, 80.

²⁷ Cf. Ogungbemi, “An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” 332.

²⁸ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002), 21.

people, but also a useful tool in combating continual social change, which has created the tension of conflict of interest between humans and non-human entities. The next section of this paper will elaborate on the concept of *alajobi* in Yoruba traditional thought as a pragmatic and viable theory to resolve the problem of environmental crises in Africa, particularly in Nigeria.

III. Conceptual clarification: *Alajobi*, *Ajogbe*, and related African traditional concepts

To avoid conceptual confusion, it is crucial to distinguish *alajobi* from similar or intersecting categories within African thought. In Yoruba ontology, *alajobi* signifies kinship or familial bonds rooted in a shared ontological origin – the earth. It involves not just cohabitation, but profound family responsibilities supported by ethical duties, communal sanctions, and metaphysical accountability. Conversely, *ajogbe* means “co-tenancy” or “mere cohabitation,” representing a less strict social bond that does not carry the permanent obligations of kinship. Akinwowo argued that modernization and social conflict have weakened *alajobi*, leading to relationships resembling *ajogbe*.²⁹ This paper disputes the claim of its disappearance: kinship bonds may be fragile, yet they remain central to Yoruba identity and continue to underpin moral frameworks for human and nonhuman interactions.

In a comparative sense, *alajobi* shares similarities with other African relational concepts, such as *ubuntu* (which emphasizes communal solidarity in Southern Africa) and *Safuu* (the Oromo moral principle of balance). However, *alajobi* is distinct in its familial framework: it positions humans, nonhumans, and the earth itself as siblings sharing a common mother (*ile*). *Ubuntu* emphasizes unity, *Safuu* focuses on balance, and *alajobi* centers on family responsibilities, justice, and the inescapable ties to the earth.

Regarding wider applicability, the claim is not that *alajobi*, as a culturally specific concept, can be wholly transferred into non-Yoruba contexts. The underlying logic of kinship obligation and moderation embodied in *alajobi* offers a transferable ethical perspective: sustainability requires viewing the environment not merely as an external resource but as a relative to whom responsibilities are owed. Policymakers and educators can adapt the principle of *alajobi* – by framing environmental responsibility within kinship or familial metaphors – without

²⁹ Akinsola A. Akiwowo, *Ajobi and Ajogbe, Variations on the Theme of Sociation* (University of Ife Press, 1983), 19.

needing to adopt Yoruba rituals or metaphysical beliefs. In this way, *alajobi* functions both as a culturally rooted ethical framework and as a foundation for broadly applicable environmental principles. The Yoruba concept of *alajobi* resonates with other cultural terms, such as *mmadu* which in Igbo means relational ontology, *safuu* means balance among the Oromo people and *ubuntu* means solidarity and interconnectedness in Southern Africa.³⁰

IV. The Yoruba concept of *Alajobi* and the imperative of environmental sustainability in Africa

Amidst all continuous social change, there is something that remains central and pivotal to an African person – ‘familyhood.’ Culture may be eroded or diluted, people may reject being a part of a community, people can stop believing in myth, taboos, and the worship of deities, but no one exists without a family, either biological or adopted. It is on this ground that one can adopt the values that exist among the family or kinship bond as a way of re-orientating humans’ ideas towards nature. According to the Yoruba historical sociology and ontology, both humans and other entities in nature are family and children of the same mother (earth). Hence, Akinwowo’s concept of *ajobi* becomes instrumental in addressing African environmental problems for two basic reasons.

First, *alajobi* expresses the ontological connection that exists between humans and non-human entities in the world as being from the same source. The ontological relations are further emphasized by Stavros Karageorgakis and Konstantina Lyrou that nature should be understood beyond constructivist or instrumentalist paradigms. Like *alajobi*, they contend that dialectical naturalism perceives the human-nonhuman relationship as internally mediated, resulting in ecological ethics that arise from relational processes rather than external imposition.³¹ This framework has consequences for how African communities can establish environmental governance based on ontological perspectives of the earth as kin. Second, *alajobi* possess rich sociological values within the Yoruba tradition that can be adopted in addressing issues of conflict of interest between humans and nature. Although, Akinwowo claims that there is no longer *alajobi*, due to various conflicts that

³⁰ Anayochukwu Kingsley Ugwu, “An Igbo Understanding of the Human Being: A Philosophical Approach,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2024): 135-181.

³¹ Stavros Karageorgakis and Konstantina Lyrou, “The Essence of Nature and Dialectical Naturalism,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2023): 185-200.

break up family members today,³² but rather what exists is *alajogbe* (co-tenant) but we disagree with him on this very point because even when one fights and rejects his family, one cannot deny the fact that he has or belongs to a family, not taking cognizance of them does not deny their existence. The existence of a family is axiomatic. Friendship or a co-tenant bond cannot substantiate a family bond. The Yorubas have a way of placing kinship bonds alongside deities and divinities. These can be seen in the traditional hunters' song of the Yoruba-*Ijala*.

B'gun ba gbeni, akobi f'egun
b'orisa bagbeni, akobi f orisa
b'alajobi ba gbeni, akobi f'ara eni

This is translated to mean:

If masquerades favor one, one gives masquerades, kolas,
If a deity favors one, one gives a deity kolas.
If kin favor one, one gives kin kolas.³³

The Yoruba place significant emphasis on kinship bonds. It is believed that these bonds are both sociological and ontological. It is also believed that even when one tries to break away from this bond by doing what is wrong or evil to one's kin, there is always a metaphysical justice force that oversees the justice system. This justice force is Mother Earth, from whom one cannot run away. One cannot deny the existence of a mother, regardless of feelings of animosity towards her. Just as the Yorubas place motherhood as per with deities by saying *Orisha bi iya o si*, meaning that a deity like a mother does not exist. Likewise, such reference is being accorded to 'Mother Earth,' who happens to be a mother to all entities. It is believed that the Earth serves as a regulator and a force of justice for all activities in the universe. The Yoruba say that, *kaka ki ile ku, ile a sa*, which means that the earth does not die; it will rather lose value than die. The same way a mother can lose value in the eyes of her children. A proverb expresses this aptly:

*Ore kitikiti, iyekan katakata,
ojo ore kitikiti ba ku, iyekan
katakata ni o gbesin*

³² Akiwowo, 23.

³³ Omowoyela Oyekan, *Yoruba Proverbs* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 421.

This is translated to mean:

Intimate friends, intimate maternal siblings;
The day an intimate friend dies,
It is the intimate siblings who will bury him³⁴

The above shows that a kinship bond cannot substitute friendship or a co-tenant bond. Also, just as the existence of kinship and familyhood is a priori, as is the existence of both human and nonhuman entities. One can fight with a co-tenant and pack one's load and relocate to a different settlement, never to meet that tenant again, but one cannot get offended by nature, or one cannot recklessly abuse nature and relocate to another place, never to meet nature again. The way the universe was structured is that, just as family members are interdependent, in the same way, humans and non-humans are. The Yorubas believe that even when you do wrong to your siblings and run away, never to meet again, there is a metaphysical force that enacts justice. Hence, the Yoruba say that *alajobi a da*, meaning the kinship bond will judge. They believe that this bond serves as a cosmic law of justice. Similarly, the role of the earth pertains to all forces present in the universe. The earth serves as a cosmic law of justice. Hence the Yoruba's say *eni ba da ile, a ba lle lo*. Meaning he who betrays Mother Earth will die by Mother Earth. Mother Earth here has a sort of denotative meaning. The earth is seen as a metaphysical force that oversees all entities of her children. Hence, if two persons make vows towards another and one betrays the other, it is believed that the other will face the consequences of the betrayer, which will be inflicted by Mother Earth, who regulates the actions of all her children. Nonetheless, it is important to see how some of the features of *alajobi* resonate with the human-nonhuman relationship.

It must be noted that since Akinwowo's usage of the concept *alajobi*, several scholars have reacted for and against his usage based on human relationships, peaceful co-existence, and conflict resolution. Yunusa Salami adopted the concept of *asuwada* in addressing inter-tribal conflict in Nigeria.³⁵ Likewise, Ayokunle Olumuyiwa and Olayinka Akanle have used the concept of *asuwada* epistemology in addressing human relationships as well.³⁶ However, no one have used these

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Yunusa Kehinde Salami, "Asuwada Principle and Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria," *Yoruba Studies Review* 3, no. 1 (2018): 139-152.

³⁶ Ayokunle Olumuyiwa Omobowale and Olayinka Akanle, "Asuwada Epistemology and Globalised Sociology: Challenges of the South," *Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2017): 43-59.

concepts in addressing human-non-human relationships, surprisingly, considering the fact that the origin of the concept itself in the Yoruba oral tradition encompasses not just human-human relationships, but the entire entity of the cosmos. With the interconnectedness of the Yoruba with nature and the metaphysical component of the universe, it seems to us that adopting a concept like this in addressing and reorienting Africa's attitude towards nature, is not out of place. Needless to say, it does not seem out of place while we consider how a concept like *ubuntu* was used to address human-non-human attitude by Danford Chibvongodze, which is also echoed by Wolkinah Kelbessa in his later work on climate change. Hence, it seems beneficial to examine some of the features that exist among *alajobi* (kinship among the Yorubas) in reorienting people's attitude towards nature.

Alajobi is significant on the premise that, within the relationship that exists among the Yorubas, the concept of *alajobi* already includes some virtues that are environmentally friendly and principles that support environmental responsiveness. For instance, the Yorubas believe that one should not consciously step on the little ants to kill them, first because one cannot create them, and second because they are believed to bring good luck.

*Yi ese re si apakan,
Ma se te kokoro ni
Kokoro ti iwo ko naani ni
Olorun lo le da a*

This is translated to mean:

Side step your feet
Do not kill that insect
That insect you do not regard
God also created.³⁷

The above explains the ontology of *ihuwasi* (behavioral patterns), which have been identified as qualities needed in successful *alajobi* (consanguinity). This shows the values the Yoruba hold towards nature, as they consider the little ant valuable.

In addition, one could also affirm that one of the basic constituents that enhances *alajobi* among the Yoruba is *iwa* (good character). Good character is said to be summed up in the Yoruba concept of *omoluabi*.

³⁷ Cf. Raymond, "Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion," 5.

Among the Yorubas, it is the joy of each family to have all members as *omoluabi*. According to J. F. Odunjo, one of the qualities of *Omoluabi* is *Imototo* (Cleanliness). Odunjo, in fact, categorically emphasizes making sure one has good, proper waterways that allow used water waste to be taken care of without both damaging the environment and affecting the public.³⁸ This implies that an *Omoluabi* is only complete when one also gives due diligence to taking care of the environment, because the environment is seen as not completely different from who one is. This point is emphasized with the Yoruba proverb that says:

Afínjúú Ààrè; ó fi àkísà dí orùbà; ó ñwá
ẹ̀niire-é bá sù epo.

Translation and meaning:

Fashionable woman of Ààrè, she cocks her
oil jar with a rag, and she expects good
people to buy oil from her. (Never compromise
on cleanliness and good character.)³⁹

The above proverb explains that among the Yorubas, great credence is given to cleanliness, and it is set at par with good character. The Yoruba will say, *obun obirin ni ohun's o ni ori oko* – meaning, a dirty woman claims she does not have good fortune to attract a husband. Esan and Awe (2023), in another article, identified some values that exist among the Yoruba people that could be used as a paradigm to address the problem of environmental crises in Africa. These values include – corporate responsibility towards others (*ajumose*), principle of non-maleficence (*ire gbogbo*), respect (*ibowofun*), and love and care (*ife ati itoju*).⁴⁰ This paper identified two other virtues that are integral to the Yoruba concept of *alajobi*, thereby promoting environmental responsiveness – moderation (*iwontunwonsi*), and contentment (*itelorun*).

Moderation (*iwontunwonsi*) – The Yoruba people hold moderate-ness, which is translated in Yoruba as *iwontunwonsi*, as an esteemed

³⁸ Joseph Folahan Odunjo, *Alawiye: Iwe keta* (Learn Africa Plc, 1975), 50.

³⁹ Oyekan, 157.

⁴⁰ For more discussion on Yoruba values that are essential and viable to resolve environmental crisis in Africa, see Oluwatobi D. Essan and Solomon K. Awe, "The Yoruba Concept of the "Okun Omo Iya" as a Critique of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" and the Quest for Environmental Sustainability," *Dialogue and Universalism* 33, no. 2 (2023): 233-253.

virtue worthy of praise. The Yorubas believe that a person who lives a moderate life does not put himself/herself into trouble. The reason for this is predicated by the notion that a moderate person is not covetous and greedy and does not engage in any unlawful and selfish actions in order to acquire material wealth. This presupposes that a moderate person lives according to his ability and within his limits. On the contrary, Akinwowo, in his inaugural lecture, accentuates the traits and personality of those who aspire to live beyond their limits and, as a result, cause irreparable damage to family bonds (*alajobi*). Akinwowo remarks that the result of lack of moderation led to “slavery, or the seizure and forcible sale of a relative, fellow villager, or townsman... unbridled lust for money led to indiscriminate kidnapping of children who were sold into slavery.”⁴¹ This shows that covetousness is characterized by different inimical and criminal attitudes that are detrimental to the development of society as well as the well-being of humans and the rest of the environment. Moderation, therefore, is an integral value and virtue that holds and sustains love, unity, solidarity, cooperativeness, cohesion, and harmony among family members. The virtue of moderation is highly echoed in the ethics and philosophy of Aristotle. A virtuous act, according to Aristotle, is that which strikes a balance between two extremes (vices) – excess and defect.⁴² This is what Aristotle calls the “doctrine of the mean.” A human performs well when he/she avoids extremes and chooses the mean in actions and feelings. Now, how do we use the virtue of moderation to solve environmental crises in Africa?

The virtue of moderation advises humans against the overexploitation, misuse, and excessive abuse of the resources in the environment. Just as a Yoruba proverb warns that *bí ilùú bá dún àdúnjù, yó fàya* (if a drum makes too much noise, it breaks),⁴³ the same applies to the use of the environment, such that if resources in the environment are excessively and covetously used, the environment suffers irreparable damage. For instance, the felling of trees to use in the production of wood, paper, furniture, and so on improves the quality of human existence. However, the felling of trees without planting others is detrimental to the environment and threatens human existence. Also, moderation emphasizes control and restraint in human actions towards non-human entities. In other words, humans should not treat the rest of the environment as mere objects of exploitation for the satisfaction of their

⁴¹ Akiwowo, 18-19.

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a-b.

⁴³ Oyekan, 158.

needs.⁴⁴ Simply put, one should not act like a Yoruba proverb that says *agúnbàje ni tolódó* (Pounding-until-it-is-ruined is the habit of the owner of the mortar). Just as family members learn to live moderately so as not to damage or break family bonds, humans should also learn to exploit and use the environment moderately and responsibly in order not to break the harmonious relationships that exist between humans and non-human entities.

Contentment (*Itelorun*) – This is a derivative of the virtue of moderation discussed above. The Yorubas place a premium on the virtue of contentment, such that a contented person is highly respected and accorded high status in society. A person who lives within his limit is content with what he has, regardless of how much or little it is. The Yorubas believe that contentment is the basis and foundation of all human character. A Yoruba proverb that says *itelorun baba iwa* (contentment is the father of all) corroborates this assertion and clearly points to the fact that *itelorun* is the basis of all characters (*iwa*). It suffices to say that anyone who imbibes the virtue of contentment is the master of all good characters. However, Yoruba detests and condemns lack of contentment or covetousness. A covetous person is likened to a thief and a greedy person who stares at another person's possessions. This is shown in the Yoruba proverb that says “*Òkánjúwà baba olè; àwòrònsòsò wo ohun olóhun má séjú*” (The covetous person is the most senior thief; a bug-eyed greedy person stares at another person's possession without blinking).⁴⁵ Another proverb also expresses the same information: “*Òkánjúwà pèlú olè, déédé ni won jé*” (greed/covetousness and stealing are the same).⁴⁶ The point to note here is that greed, covetousness, immodesty, and avarice are vehemently condemned among the Yoruba people. The relevance of this discourse to environmental issues is that in relating and interacting with the environment, a contented person does not exploit the environment beyond what he needs to satisfy his desires. In addition, following Kant's submission that rejects using humans as means to an end, a contented person should not objectify the environment so that the environment is used as a means to an end. The way a contented person will treat his family members as an end in themselves should also be extended to the

⁴⁴ Kelvin G. Behrens, “Toward an African Relational Environmentalism,” in *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*, eds. Elvis Imafidon and John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji (Lexington Books, 2013), 61.

⁴⁵ Mohammed Ayodeji Ademilokun, “Yoruba Proverbs and the Anti-Corruption Crusade in Nigeria,” *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2014): 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

rest of the environment. As contentment prevents conflict, unhealthy competition, rivalry, and clashes in the family, it also prevents clashes between humans and the rest of the environment. When humans are content in the use of the environment, they act in such a way that the environment is preserved, conserved, and protected against damage, degradation, and destruction. What is gleaned from the two virtues discussed above is that they are intricately linked together, and as such, they are essential to solving the quagmire of environmental crises in Africa.

Now, what are the mechanisms by which cultural values influence behavior? *Alajobi* values affect behavior through enforcing social norms, reinforcing rituals, and punishing people in the community. In Yoruba and broader African contexts, kinship principles influence not only interpersonal relationships but also resource allocation, conflict resolution, and collective accountability (*ajumose*). In ecological contexts, these principles act as moral and practical checks on overexploitation. For instance, proverbs that discourage greed or encourage moderation (*iwontunwonsi*) turn into everyday habits of self-control, and the praise of cleanliness (*imototo*) affects how people think about trash and sanitation. Anthropological evidence substantiates these connections: Kelbessa (2011, 2018) illustrates the role of Oromo relational ethics in resource management via *safuu*, whereas Chibvongodze (2016) demonstrates the impact of *Ubuntu*-inspired taboos and rituals on land utilization and forest conservation.⁴⁷ In the same way, Ogunade (2005) talks about Yoruba proverbs and taboos that protected the environment in communities before colonization.⁴⁸ This paper does not claim that cultural virtues alone guarantee broad policy success. Instead, it argues that virtues like moderation and contentment, when embedded in education, community activities, and governance, can boost ecological responsibility and gradually advance environmental sustainability.

V. Conflicts of interest, pressures for modernization, and the limits of cultural norms

This paper advocates *alajobi* as a way to recalibrate human-nature relations; however, it is crucial to recognize that cultural ethics alone are not enough to counteract the structural drivers of environmental crises in Africa. Modern African societies are deeply involved in glob-

⁴⁷ Kelbessa, "Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought;" Kelbessa, *Indigenous and Modern Environmental Ethics*; Chibvongodze, "Ubuntu is not only about Humans."

⁴⁸ Ogunade, "Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion," 1-9.

al markets, extractive state policies, and modernization pressures that often result in the overexploitation of natural resources. For instance, land acquisitions by multinational corporations, government support for cash-crop monocultures, or the demand for minerals and timber in international markets often replace local ecological norms. In these situations, the *alajobi*-based values of moderation (*iwontunwonsi*) and contentment (*itelorun*) may not weigh as heavily as the need to survive, the pressures of poverty, or the lure of financial gain.

Conflict of interest is especially evident when communities face the dilemma of conserving their environment versus ensuring immediate economic survival. Ogungbemi⁴⁹ and Ogar Joseph Nkang, and Bassey Samuel Akpan⁵⁰ have observed that the pursuit of development and modernization frequently leads to abandoning traditional limits on environmental exploitation. Similarly, globalization has diminished the significance of taboos and oral traditions, reducing their effectiveness in regulating behavior. This paper proposes a dual approach that combines cultural ethics with legal and institutional reforms to enhance the relevance of *alajobi* amidst these pressures. Land tenure reforms and community-based forestry schemes could embed *alajobi*-like communal responsibility into law by granting local groups enforceable rights over their natural resources. Secondly, economic incentives such as payments for ecosystem services or subsidies for sustainable farming can align market practices with the values of moderation and contentment. Thirdly, integrating *alajobi* principles into school curricula and civic education can preserve their importance among younger generations, helping to counteract the decline of traditional authority. By situating *alajobi* within a comprehensive framework of cultural, legal, and economic measures, the ethic of kinship is not isolated in competition against the formidable structural forces of environmental degradation. Instead, it can serve as an additional moral underpinning that reinforces initiatives for environmental sustainability that are both culturally relevant and backed by institutions.

In conclusion, taking an extract from the *Ifa* literary corpus that charges man with the higher responsibility of preserving the environment, one *Odu Ifa* says:

*Otoro! Aiye ja
Ogbara! aiye la kanle!
Bi aiye ba ti owo eni baja
Aimo 'wahu wa ni*

⁴⁹ Ogungbemi, "An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 330-337.

⁵⁰ Ogar and Bassey, "African Environmental Ethics."

This is translated to mean:

Otoro! The world has flown off its hook into space
Ogbara! The Earth is rent asunder to its core
If the world becomes unlivable in our time
It is because we no longer know how to behave.⁵¹

The above extraction does not serve as an anthropocentric ground, but rather, humans are seen as the eldest of the siblings of *Olodumare*; hence, they are charged with such responsibilities, just as the Yoruba task the eldest to look after the well-being of the younger ones. This suggests that the elders should treat the younger ones with respect, love, and care. The care for the younger ones includes, among others, protecting them against any harm, showing them love and care, and doing things that will make them flourish and prosper. These attitudes should also be extended to non-human entities and nature, such that every human's actions should promote the flourishing of the environment and protect it from harm, misuse, abuse, degradation, and depletion. The result of this approach is evident in the Yoruba proverb that says *Irorun igi ni irorun eye* (the peace of the tree is the peace of the bird).

Acknowledgments

We presented the first draft of this paper at the international conference, organized in honor of Emeritus Prof. Wande Abimbola by the Institute of Cultural Studies and the Department of Linguistics and African Languages, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; which held from 12 to 15 July, 2023.

Author contribution statement

Both authors have contributed equally to the conception and design of the work, the drafting and revising of the manuscript, and the final approval of the version to be published.

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⁵¹ Cf. Akiwowo, 30.

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