



**LEOPOLD'S LAND ETHIC AND SACRED GROVES IN YORUBA COMMUNITIES:
INVESTIGATING HOW ALDO LEOPOLD'S ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY
ALIGNS WITH TRADITIONAL YORUBA CONSERVATION PRACTICES**

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Abstract

In this paper, the connection between the Land Ethic proposed by Aldo Leopold and the sacred groves of the Yoruba community conservative practice of southwestern Nigeria is examined. Even though these philosophies appear to be dissimilar in time and space, they have striking similarities in how they relate human and nature, community-based conservation ethics, and actual outcomes of biodiversity protection. The biotic community notion by Leopold is similar to the Yoruba cosmological notions of interrelated spiritual ecological networks and both share the thoughts that human beings are not lords over nature systems but rather members of the same. According to the statistics of biodiversity of the sacred groves of Yoruba such as the World Heritage site Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) systems achieved the success of preserving more than 400 species of plants and mammals. As revealed and explained in this paper, native African ecological ethics have significant value to contemporary conservation as well as to stipulate the failures of the Western-centric environmental philosophy, including valuable examples of community-based conservation efforts applying Leopoldian extended ethical community visions.

Keywords: Land ethic, Yoruba, sacred groves, environmental philosophy, traditional ecological knowledge, biodiversity conservation.

Introduction: Indigenous Knowledge And Environmental Philosophy

Over the last decades, western theoretical ideologies have taken over in environmental philosophy, but indigenous knowledge systems all over the world exhibit high-level ecological understanding and efficient conservation practices stretching back thousands of years (Berkes, 2012). The Land Ethic of Aldo Leopold (1949), published in A Sand County Almanac, was radical change of the Western environmental philosophies based on the ecological ethics, according to which people were not conquerors and citizens of nature but were simply organic components and members of biotic communities (Leopold, 1949). At the same time, ancient African societies have worked out complex environmental philosophies and conservation measures based on the use of an institution such as sacred grove forest areas under the guarded intent with powerful spiritual and cultural significance (Verschuuren et al., 2010).

Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria are one of the most studied cultural groups in Africa, and their environmental practices are a good example of biodiversity knowledge and good stewardship of the environment (Adeyanju et al., 2022). Yoruba sacred groves still have primary high forest with cultural identity and spiritual practices in Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage site (UNESCO, 2005). The systems of old conservation operate by complicated taboo systems, spiritual beliefs and systems of community government that are remarkably like Leopoldian views of ethical human-land relations.



In this paper, rationality is discussed between the environmental philosophy proposed by Leopold and the traditional conservation practice of Yoruba people in the light of theory and conservation practice. The analysis addresses major missing links in environmental philosophy by demonstrating how indigenous African environmental ethics can be applied in any part of the world in attempting to understand human-nature interactions as well as offer feasible models to use in contemporary efforts in conservation (Diawuo & Issifu, 2017).

Leopold's Land Ethic: Philosophical Foundations

The Ethical Sequence and Biotic Community

Leopold hypothesized that environmental ethics was the third reiteration in the chains of evolution which ranged among the ethics between individuals, then ethics between individuals and society (Leopold, 1949). The Land Ethic is the moral consideration of human beings but goes further to the biotic community as Leopold described it as an interdependent web of soils, waters, plants and animals (Leopold, 1949, p. 204). It is a system that challenges the anthropocentric thought modes by believing that human beings have to regard themselves as a community and citizens of ecological communities rather than their masters (Leopold, 1949).

Leopold referred to the maxim that says a thing is right when it is geared towards keeping the biotic community in terms of integrity, stability and beauty. It is not right when it bears an inclination the contrary to that" (Leopold, 1949, p. 224-225). This principle alters the priorities of ethics whereby the health and the functioning of the ecosystem are given priority as compared to the health of individual organisms, focusing on the intrinsic value of ecological whole (Nelson, 1998). The Land Ethic is thus an ecocentric approach, as environmental philosophers refer to them; an approach that includes intrinsic worth in natural processes and systems (Callicott, 2014).

Community and Intergenerational Responsibility

One of the most relevant concerns of the Leopold philosophy is the enlarged community concepts that involve the human and non-human community members in the course of time (Millstein, 2024). The Land Ethic focuses more on the long-term orientation and responsibility to future generation since the long term impacts of human activity far exceed the interest of human beings on the short term (Leopold and Schwartz, 1987). The time dimension shows that Leopold is aware of the fact that ethical behavior implies limitation of human freedom in the common interest of the communities (Leopold, 1949).

The other characteristic of the ethical value growth technique of Leopold is the dependency on the individual experience and personal experience with nature order as the ethical growth foundation (Aldo Leopold Foundation, 2024). He contended that experience and observation build up environmental values and environmental conservation requires intimate familiarity with the local ecosystems and ecosystem functioning.

Philosophical Analysis: Yoruba Sacred Groves And Conservation Philosophy

Cosmological Foundations and Spiritual Ecology

The most significant characteristic of the environmental philosophy of Yoruba is the cosmological interpretation of the environment with the inclusion of the spiritual and material worlds (Olodumare as the supreme god, orisha as mediator spirits) into the integrity of ecology (Babalola, 2022). The Yoruba tradition does not separate the spiritual (orun) and material (aye)



worlds and views the natural objects, forests, rivers, trees, animals as manifestations of spiritual forces and homes of gods (Yusuf, 2016).

These spiritual-ecological system is a concentration area of sacred groves (igbo-orisha, forest of gods) (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 2005). They can be used in different ways: these protected forest areas are considered places of worship and rituals, traditional ecological knowledge, biodiversity conservation, and cultural identity (Verschuuren et al., 2010). The best example of this combined practice is Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, which is evidence of worship of Osun the goddess of fertility and rivers and has more than 40 shrines, sculptures and sacred places within a 75 hectares of preserved forest (UNESCO, 2005).

Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Conservation Mechanisms

The Yoruba conservation systems are founded on the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) systems that are at the interface between scientific observation and spiritual belief systems (Onyekwelu & Olusola, 2014). The majority of the significant conservation systems involve taboos and prohibitions in which draconian culture taboos regulate the access and utilization of sacred groves. Hunting, cutting trees, fishing, and harvesting are not allowed unless under some ritual circumstances (Babalola, 2022). These are put in place by fear of Godly punishment and punishment of the community.

Groves are sacroiliated using ritual and ceremonial practices such as the yearly Osun-Osogbo Festival, which gives the community a chance to learn the importance of conservation values (Vučković, 2024). Community governance is the practice of responsible custody of the sacred groves by kings (oba) and priests and elders who make decisions concerning access, use and protection of the groves (Adeyanju et al., 2022). Transference of knowledge intergeneration takes place when the environmental knowledge and conservation behavior is transferred via oral traditions, narrations, proverbs, and direct participation in ritual actions (Kosoe et al., 2019).

Biodiversity Conservation Success

Scientific studies have been carried out on Yoruba sacred groves with high levels of conservation of biodiversity success. Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove is home to more than 400 plant species, which is one of the last primary high forests in southern Nigeria (Yusuf, 2016). According to recent ecological census, core zone had approximately 300 monkeys, including endangered white throated monkeys (*Cercopithecus erythrogaster*) that were regarded as messengers of Osun goddesses (Adeyanju et al., 2022).

Comparative research of sacred groves has shown that groves possess larger species diversity and act as the shelters of rare and endangered species than the adjacent landscapes (Onyekwelu & Olusola, 2014). Sacred groves contain 87.8 to 231.85 t ha⁻¹ and 43.9 to 115.9 t ha⁻¹ biomass and carbon stock respectively, which implies that they could be utilized in mitigating climate change by sequestration (Onyekwelu et al., 2024).

Alignments Between Leopold and Yoruba Philosophy

The Land Ethic by Leopold and Yoruba environmental philosophy reject anthropocentric world views in which human beings are disengaged or superior in nature. Leopold says that humans are expected to be mere biotic community members and citizens whereas Yoruba cosmology



entails human beings being a part of spiritual-ecological networks with natural features playing the role of deity and ancestor abodes (Leopold, 1949; Babalola, 2022).

This widespread perception finds its way in real conservation practices that address a mutualism between human beings and natural systems. The concept of think like a mountain by Leopold is similar to the concept of landscapes as natural agents and spiritual beings with agency and cognitive ability in Yoruba (Leopold, 1949). Both systems recognize the needs of the sustainable human-environment relationships to be respectful, humble, and appreciative to the interdependence.

The ethical consideration of Leopold extended to include soils, waters, plants and animals similar to the spiritual agency extended in natural systems in Yoruba thought (Leopold, 1949). Yoruba sacred groves do not merely preserve particular species of plants and animals but entire ecosystems as components of spiritual-ecological communities, as part of Leopoldian ecosystem-level conservation efforts.

The two schools focus on the community in conservation. Leopold advocated environmental management via the democratic processes whereas the system of Yoruba conservation was under the rule of kings, priests, elders and community (Adeyanju et al., 2022). Top-down conservation models share these participatory approaches as they allow local communities to be custodians of the environment.

The Land Ethic by Leopold emphasizes the interest in the future generations and long-term health of ecological communities (Leopold, 1949). In the same way, Yoruba conservation makes sure that holy groves stay alive and used by the generations through the knowledge of intergenerational passing and continuity of the culture (Babalola, 2022). Both models have accepted that meaningful conservation has to be continuity in terms of time and outlook that well beyond the experiences of individual people.

The nature of Yoruba spirituality as an ancestral spirit is what, in particular, provides remarkably good comparisons to intergenerational ethics as developed by Leopold. Sacred groves are also characteristically ancestral burial sites and significant places of transition between past, present, and future (Yusuf, 2016). The time feeling gives conservation terms more power because protecting the environment is linked to the ancestral responsibility and the welfare of the future generations.

The Land Ethic by Leopold and the environmental philosophy of the Yoruba share similarities of value systems: aesthetic, spiritual, ecological, and practical and conservation strategies (Leopold, 1949; Verschuuren et al., 2010). The famous maxim of Leopold is on the criteria of integrity, stability, and beauty as one of the elements of the ethical assessment, which is also united in Yoruba sacred groves, integrating spiritual, cultural, ecological, and economic spheres.

Contemporary Challenges and Applications

Both Leopold Land Ethic and Yoruba sacred groves have great contemporary challenges. The sacred groves are threatened in Nigeria by urbanization, agricultural expansion, religious conversion, and disruption of the traditional authority system (Chima, 2014). A study of the Abia State found out that 97% of sacred groves were destroyed since 1989, and the Christian reform and social change were revealed to be the dominant ones (Chima, 2014).



Similarly, the ecological consciousness as expounded by Leopold in the contemporary world has not been actualized in the majority of the contemporary society as economic demands and inertial thinking continue to destroy the environment (Nelson, 1998). The two frameworks have difficulties in making sure they are relevant and effective in the dynamic social, economic, and political environment.

Integration with Modern Conservation

Recent conservation works have demonstrated possibilities to unite the old and new approaches. Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove enjoys the advantage of collaborative management that consists of the traditional authorities, government and international conservation agencies (UNESCO, 2005). This model demonstrates that it is possible to put on-scale existing traditional conservation systems without putting cultural systems at a disadvantage.

Similarly, the Land Ethic by Leopold has influenced contemporary conservation biology, ecological administration and environmental administration by providing philosophical foundations of conservation and adaptive managerial approaches of landscapes (Nelson, 1998). With incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge in the current conservation science, there are avenues that both can be used in the current environmental issues.

Sacred groves possess great potential of carbon storage and biomass is equal or even higher than the managed forests (Onyekwelu et al., 2024). Sacred groves are provided with community-based systems of governance which provide paradigms of participatory climate change adaptation and mitigation measures. Considering ecology as an ecosystem scale and emphasis on ecological integrity that Leopold promoted can be considered through the prism of modern climate change as systemic problems that require landscape-scale solutions. Both frameworks address the requirements in terms of ecological resilience through the maintenance of biodiversity and maintenance of good human-environment relations.

Conclusion

Through this study, there is a tremendous overlap of the Land Ethic by Leopold and the traditional conservation practices of the Yoruba even in different cultural and time settings. Both schools reflect human beings as a part of the ecological communities, community-based morality and intergenerational accountability, experience-oriented knowledge, and place-based cognition, and integrate a number of value systems in comprehensive conservation endeavors.

The effectiveness of traditional environmental ethics is practical because the success of biodiversity conservation of Yoruba sacred groves (more than 400 species of plants and significant biosauna wildlife populations in Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove) is demonstrated. These findings are in line with the Leopold conservation vision because the long ecological consciousness and moral community and the importance of indigenous knowledge systems to the current conservation concerns.

The comparison of Leopold and Yoruba environmental philosophies defies the traditional Western based environmental ethics and conservation approaches. Rather than viewing traditional ecological knowledge as primitive or outdated, the analysis contends that indigenous paradigms in philosophy offer alternatives to mainstream conservation paradigms that are complex and offer solutions to the modern environmental issues.



There is need to undertake further research on parallel comparisons of western environmental philosophy with other African traditional knowledge systems, how to integrate traditional and modern conservation techniques, and generalize the possibilities of community-based conservation forms. The intersection of Leopold Land Ethic and Yoruba environmental philosophy provide a chance that would develop more inclusive, culturally-based, and ecologically useful environmental conservation approaches in the times of global environmental changes.

With global challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change, wisdom surrounding Leopold's Land Ethic and Yoruba Sacred grove traditions promises creating sustainable relationships among human communities and nature. Sacred grove conservation and ecological conscience growth are complementary approaches to the same basic problem: learning how to be moral subjects of biotic communities as wholes supporting all planetary life.

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