

AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION OF EVO, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND GOVERNANCE ETHICS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI), the Evo Indigenous Religion of the Ikwerre people, and governance ethics in Rivers State, Nigeria. As AI technologies increasingly influence public administration, there is a pressing need to examine their compatibility with indigenous ethical systems that have historically guided local governance. The Evo religion, rooted in ancestral reverence, communal accountability, and spiritual authority, continues to shape governance practices among the Ikwerre. Using Afrocentric Theory by Kete Asante (1980) as the theoretical lens, this research re-centers African cultural values and spiritual epistemologies in discussions of modern governance and technological integration. Afrocentricity provides a framework for understanding the Evo worldview as a legitimate source of ethical governance, challenging the dominance of Eurocentric models that often marginalize local traditions. The study finds that aligning AI applications with the moral codes and communal structures of the Evo religion could enhance governance legitimacy, public trust, and culturally grounded policy implementation in Rivers State. This calls for a hybrid governance model that respects indigenous knowledge while embracing technological innovation.

Key words: AI, Indigenous Evo religion and Governance ethics

Introduction

The intersection of technology, traditional belief systems, and governance is an emerging area of interest in contemporary African scholarship. As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to shape global socio-political landscapes, its implications for indigenous cultures and ethical governance in Africa demand critical attention. This study explores the potential influence and interaction between AI, the African Indigenous Religion of Evo, rooted in the cultural heritage of Rivers State, Nigeria, and the ethical frameworks guiding governance in the area. Evo, like many indigenous religions in Africa, is deeply intertwined with the social, moral, and political structures of its adherents. It promotes community cohesion, accountability, and a sense of spiritual oversight, all of which influence traditional leadership and decision-making processes. However, the integration of modern technological systems like AI into these settings introduces both opportunities and challenges, particularly in terms of preserving cultural identity, reinforcing ethical norms, and ensuring just governance.

In Rivers State, where governance issues are often complicated by ethnic diversity, economic inequality, and political instability, understanding how AI can be ethically applied in ways that respect and potentially harmonize with indigenous religious values is crucial. This research therefore seeks to investigate how the principles of the Evo religion might inform governance ethics in the age of AI, and how AI systems can be developed or adapted to align with local ethical paradigms.

Despite the increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in governance systems worldwide, there is limited scholarly engagement on how such technologies interact with African

indigenous belief systems, particularly in local governance contexts. In Rivers State, Nigeria, the Evo religion plays a significant role in shaping ethical norms, social accountability, and leadership legitimacy. However, the rapid adoption of AI tools in governance, often driven by Western models, risks marginalizing indigenous ethical frameworks, potentially leading to cultural disconnection, governance failures, and resistance from local communities. This study seeks to address the gap by examining how AI can be ethically integrated into governance in Rivers State in a way that respects and harmonizes with the values of the Evo religious tradition.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated at the intersection of African indigenous epistemologies, governance ethics, and emerging AI technologies. The research adopts a multidisciplinary theoretical approach built upon Afrocentric Theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Ethical Governance Theory, and Responsible AI Frameworks, supported by scholarly reviews that strengthen the theoretical foundation.

Afrocentricity, as articulated by Molefi Kete Asante (1991), advocates for a worldview in which African culture and philosophy are dominant to understanding African realities. It challenges Eurocentric dominance in knowledge production and calls for a re-centering of African values in academic and practical discourse. Asante suggests that African traditions, including religion and ethics, must be analyzed within their own cultural contexts to preserve authenticity and relevance. In the context of Evo religion in Rivers State, Afrocentric theory enables a culturally grounded analysis of how traditional beliefs inform moral standards and communal governance. Scholars like Mazama (2001) argue that Afrocentricity offers not only a cultural reclamation but also a legitimate philosophical base for development and governance. Thus, this framework is vital in interpreting the ethical codes and

spiritual authority of Evo as a valid system of governance.

Another aspect of the theory is the indigenous knowledge systems, this provides a valuable lens for understanding the role of religion and traditional belief systems in shaping social behavior and governance. According to Battiste and Henderson (2000), IKS are all-inclusive, social, and community-based, offering ecological and spiritual dimensions to knowledge. In Nigeria, scholars such as Odumuyiwa (2014) and Ekanem (2012) have emphasized how indigenous belief systems contribute to ethical leadership, social order, and conflict resolution. Hence, Evo religion, with its ancestral reverence, oaths, and spiritual enforcement of moral behavior, represents a robust IKS that supports communal accountability. Its influence on local governance structures in Rivers State underscores the need to integrate traditional ethics in any framework involving external technologies like AI.

Thirdly, ethical governance theory was also considered in this paper, it is rooted in public administration and political science which according to Denhardt & Denhardt, (2000), it promotes values such as accountability, transparency, justice, and inclusiveness.. This framework highlights the ethical dimensions of leadership and policy implementation. In African contexts, scholars like Ake (1996) and Ekeh (1975) have noted the tension between imposed colonial governance models and indigenous ethical systems. This study examines how Evo religion provides an indigenous ethical compass for governance, through taboo enforcement, communal consensus, and spiritual checks, and how these can interface with modern governance principles in Rivers State, especially in the age of digital decision-making. As AI increasingly becomes embedded in governance systems, the importance of ethical frameworks that guide its design and deployment is paramount. Scholars such as Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena (2019) have identified core global AI ethics principles, including fairness, accountability, privacy, and transparency.

However, these principles often reflect Western liberal values and may not fully align with indigenous moral systems.

Nweke and Mhlongo (2021) argue for the inclusion of African philosophies and communal ethics in AI governance to ensure cultural relevance and avoid digital colonialism. In this light, the Evo religion's emphasis on community, ancestral authority, and spiritual justice could serve as a culturally specific guide for localizing AI ethics in governance systems in Rivers State.

The synergy of Afrocentric theory, IKS, ethical governance, and responsible AI frameworks offers a holistic lens through which to examine the potential integration of AI into the ethical and spiritual fabric of indigenous communities like those practicing Evo in Rivers State. These theoretical tools allow for a culturally sensitive, ethically grounded, and technologically informed analysis that respects local traditions while engaging with global innovation.

Evo Ikwerre Religion of Rivers State

The Evo religion is a traditional spiritual belief system practiced among the Ikwerre people of Rivers State, Nigeria. As one of the major subgroups within the Ikwerre ethnic nationality, the Evo people possess a rich religious heritage that blends spirituality with community governance, ancestral reverence, and moral order. The Evo religion, like other African Traditional Religions (ATR), is not compartmentalized; it is deeply woven into the social, political, and cultural life of the people. At the heart of Evo spirituality is the belief in a Supreme Being (Ehie), alongside a pantheon of lesser deities (Rewun), ancestral spirits, and natural forces. These entities are believed to guide, protect, and discipline the living. The ancestors, in particular, are central to community ethics and governance, serving as custodians of justice and order. Through rituals, festivals, libations, and totems, the living maintain communion with the spiritual realm to seek blessings, guidance, and protection.

One of the distinct features of Evo religion is the practice of communal oaths and spiritual sanctions. Individuals who violate community norms or engage in corruption may be subject to ritual exposure or divine judgment, reinforcing a culture of accountability. The fear of ancestral wrath and supernatural consequences helps regulate behavior where formal legal systems may be weak or distrusted.

Religious specialist, elders, and community leaders serve as intermediaries between the people and the spiritual world. They play key roles in conflict resolution, land disputes, inheritance issues, and communal decision-making. Religious festivals like the *Osudiali nu ndiche* (ancestral festival) are not only spiritual celebrations but also serve political and judicial functions, reinforcing unity and the moral expectations of the society. In terms of governance, the Evo religion upholds inclusive consultation, respect for hierarchy, and spiritual legitimacy. Leadership positions, such as village heads or community chiefs, are often conferred through both lineage and spiritual endorsement, blending indigenous political thought with sacred authority. Thus, in the contemporary era, while Christianity and modern governance structures have influenced Evo communities, traditional religion still plays a vital role, particularly in rural areas. Its enduring presence shapes values, conflict mediation, and local leadership legitimacy. As such, any engagement with governance reform or technological innovation (such as AI) in Rivers State must consider the religious-cultural dynamics of the Evo Ikwerre people to ensure community acceptance and sustainability.

Evo Indigenous Religion and Governance

The Evo indigenous religion, practiced by the Ikwerre Evo-speaking people of Rivers State, Nigeria, is a deeply rooted spiritual system that extends beyond religious observance into social organization, conflict resolution, and governance. As with many African traditional religions, Evo beliefs emphasize the

interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical realms, where the ancestors, deities (or spiritual forces), and community elders play crucial roles in guiding behavior and maintaining order. Governance in the Evo worldview is intrinsically moral and communal. Leadership is not merely a political role but a sacred duty, often validated through ritual, ancestral approval, and spiritual sanction. According to oral traditions and ethnographic accounts, chiefs and community leaders in Evo society are expected to uphold truth, justice, and fairness, as violations are believed to invoke spiritual consequences. These religious values serve as informal systems of checks and balances that enforce accountability.

Customary laws are enforced through oaths, taboos, and rituals, and offenders may be subject to not only social sanctions but also spiritual retribution. This creates a governance culture that emphasizes integrity, consensus, and restorative justice. As Ekanem (2012) notes in his study of African ethics and governance, indigenous systems often reflect a form of “theocratic democracy,” where decisions are made collectively but under the moral oversight of spiritual traditions.

In Evo communities, public trust is maintained through transparency, collective deliberation, and reverence for elders and ancestors. Governance structures such as the council of elders or age-grade systems function as advisory and judicial bodies, maintaining harmony through dialogue and tradition. This stands in contrast to modern governance systems that are often hierarchical and bureaucratic, leading to disconnect and distrust among rural populations. As AI and other modern technologies begin to influence public administration in Rivers State, understanding the governance role of the Evo religion becomes critical. Rather than displacing traditional structures, there is a need for integrative approaches that respect the spiritual and ethical authority of indigenous systems. A culturally informed governance

model, which harmonizes AI systems with Evo religious principles, can foster trust, enhance legitimacy, and improve policy compliance at the grassroots level.

AI and Governance Ethics

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming governance systems across the globe, introducing tools for decision-making, service delivery, surveillance, and policy analysis. However, the integration of AI into public governance raises significant ethical questions related to fairness, accountability, transparency, and cultural relevance. Governance ethics according to Denhardt & Denhardt, (2000) refers to the moral principles and standards that guide the behavior of public institutions, emphasizing values such as justice, inclusion, and responsibility.

AI systems, when applied to governance, can support efficiency and objectivity, but they also risk amplifying biases, marginalizing vulnerable groups, and eroding public trust if not ethically guided. Scholars like Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena (2019) have mapped global AI ethics guidelines, identifying key principles such as fairness, explainability, and human oversight. Yet, these frameworks are often developed in Western contexts and may not reflect the cultural or moral priorities of African societies. In areas like Rivers State, Nigeria, where indigenous belief systems such as the Evo religion still shape public morality and community leadership, ethical governance cannot be divorced from cultural traditions. Indigenous governance ethics prioritize communal accountability, spiritual sanction, and moral integrity, values that may not be directly encoded in standard AI systems. Hence, Nweke and Mhlongo (2021) argue for a decolonized approach to AI in Africa, emphasizing the need to embed local cultural ethics into AI design and governance policy.

Therefore, responsible AI in African governance must not only meet technical standards but also align with the ethical values of local communities. In Evo an Ikwerre speaking areas of Rivers State, this is a means of respecting traditional systems of authority, incorporating communal decision-making processes, and acknowledging spiritual dimensions of governance. Thus, failure to do so may result in public resistance, ethical conflicts, and ineffective governance outcomes.

Challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

While Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents transformative opportunities for governance, development, and decision-making, it also introduces a range of complex challenges, technical, ethical, cultural, and socio-political. These challenges are particularly pronounced in contexts where governance intersects with indigenous knowledge systems, such as in parts of Africa, including Rivers State, Nigeria.

1. Bias and Discrimination

AI systems are only as unbiased as the data they are trained on. If historical or systemic inequalities exist in the data, AI can replicate and even amplify them. According to Buolamwini and Gebru (2018), facial recognition systems, for example, have shown significant racial and gender biases due to underrepresentation of African features in training datasets. This can lead to unfair treatment in public services, policing, or resource allocation.

2. Lack of Cultural Context

Many AI systems are developed based on Western epistemologies and value systems. As such, they may fail to capture or respect indigenous cultural ethics, traditional governance norms, or local belief systems. This disconnect risks rendering AI tools ineffective or even offensive in communities like those practicing the Evo religion in Rivers State.

3. Data Privacy and Surveillance Risks

AI-enabled surveillance tools, including facial recognition and predictive analytics, raise serious concerns about privacy and human rights. In regions with weak legal frameworks or low public awareness, AI can be misused by authorities for mass surveillance, political control, or targeting dissenting voices.

4. Transparency and Accountability

Many AI systems operate as "**black boxes**," where decisions are made through complex algorithms that even developers may not fully understand. This lack of explainability poses a significant challenge for democratic governance, where public trust and accountability are paramount.

5. Digital Divide and Infrastructure Deficit

In much of sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, the necessary digital infrastructure to support ethical and inclusive AI deployment is lacking. Poor internet connectivity, unreliable electricity, and limited digital literacy among the population can hinder effective implementation and create inequalities in access to AI benefits.

6. Ethical Governance and Regulation

Many African countries lack robust regulatory frameworks for AI. Without strong legal and ethical guidelines, AI deployment may be driven by foreign interests, leading to digital colonialism and the undermining of local governance models.

7. Loss of Human Oversight and Indigenous Knowledge

Over-reliance on automated systems may lead to the marginalization of traditional knowledge systems and human-centered decision-making. In places like Rivers State, where indigenous religion and communal leadership still play vital roles, the introduction of AI must be harmonized with these systems to avoid cultural erosion and community resistance. Addressing these

challenges requires a culturally grounded, ethically guided, and locally inclusive approach to AI governance, one that recognizes indigenous religious frameworks, such as the Evo system, as legitimate ethical partners

This study explored the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI), indigenous religion, specifically the Evo tradition of the Ikwerre people, and governance ethics in Rivers State, Nigeria. It highlighted the importance of Afrocentric Theory as a lens for analyzing how AI can be integrated into African governance systems without eroding local cultures and values. The Evo religion, rooted in ancestral reverence, moral accountability, and communal leadership, offers a robust ethical framework that continues to influence governance practices. However, the integration of AI technologies presents significant challenges, including cultural misalignment, bias, lack of transparency, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems.

AI systems must be culturally sensitive and aligned with indigenous ethical values. Developers and policymakers should engage traditional institutions and religious leaders (such as Evo priests and elders) in designing and deploying AI tools that reflect community values. Africa-specific AI guidelines should be developed using Afrocentric theory, ensuring that moral codes, social values, and indigenous perspectives are embedded in AI ethics frameworks. These standards should complement global norms without replicating colonial structures. National and state-level governments should establish inclusive legal frameworks for AI governance that recognize the legitimacy of indigenous institutions and promote public trust through transparency, accountability, and participatory policy-making.

Community education and capacity-building initiatives should focus on AI literacy, especially in rural and indigenous communities. This empowers people to understand, influence, and

co-create AI systems that affect their lives. A balanced model that merges digital governance tools with traditional governance structures should be promoted. For example, AI systems for local administration could incorporate Evo conflict-resolution values and traditional justice systems to gain community legitimacy.

Conclusion

The integration of AI into governance in Rivers State must not ignore the ethical, spiritual, and cultural frameworks already in place, such as those embodied in the Evo religion. Rather than viewing indigenous religion as a barrier, it should be seen as a resource for guiding the ethical deployment of technology. Through an Afrocentric approach, AI can be localized to support transparency, justice, and inclusive development, while safeguarding cultural identity and indigenous wisdom. If properly integrated, AI and indigenous governance ethics can coexist to produce a more just, accountable, and culturally rooted model of governance in Rivers State and across Africa.

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