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THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE: A HUMANISTIC VIEW FROM SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract
Discussions about environmental crisis in Nigeria often center on science, technology, and policy reform. While these are necessary, they rarely engage the cultural knowledge systems that have shaped how communities have lived with their environments for centuries. This paper turns to the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria to examine how indigenous ecological knowledge continues to offer practical and ethical guidance for sustainability. In the Yoruba worldview, the environment is not a lifeless resource but a living presence deserving respect. Ecological values are carried in stories, proverbs, rituals, festivals, and everyday practices. Rivers such as Ọ̀ṣun and sacred landscapes like the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove are not only spiritually significant; they also function as protected ecological spaces. Traditional farming methods, seasonal observances, and divinatory consultations reflect close attention to soil health, rainfall patterns, and biodiversity. In these ways, spirituality, morality, and environmental care are closely intertwined. The paper argues that Yoruba indigenous knowledge contributes dimensions of sustainability such as ethical commitment, communal responsibility, and symbolic meaning that are often missing from technocratic environmental discourse. Yet these traditions face serious pressures from colonial legacies, formal education systems that emphasises more on Western epistemologies, religious change, and rapid urbanisation. Adopting a humanistic perspective, the study calls for a more inclusive approach to sustainability in Nigeria one that recognises indigenous knowledge not as folklore, but as living intellectual heritage. It suggests that meaningful ecological renewal will require engaging and revitalising the cultural frameworks that have long guided harmonious relationships between people and the natural world in Yoruba society.
Keywords: Environmental Consciousness, Indigenous Knowledge, Oral Tradition, Sustainable Environmental Practice

Introduction

Environmental degradation is no longer a distant concern; it is a lived reality of the twenty-first century. Across the globe, climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, water pollution, and land degradation are steadily undermining the ecological systems that sustain human life (Ali & Rahman, 2024). While scientific innovation and technological advancement have provided important tools for addressing these crises, it is becoming increasingly clear that the problem is not merely technical. At its core lies a deeper cultural and ethical rupture of a widening gap between human societies and the natural world they depend upon (Beery *et al*., 2023). This realisation has prompted renewed interest in the humanities and in indigenous knowledge systems as valuable sources of insight into more sustainable ways of living (Guto, 2020).

Indigenous knowledge systems are not accidental or simplistic traditions; they are carefully developed bodies of understanding shaped by generations of close interaction with specific environments. They integrate ecological observation, moral values, spirituality, and practical resource management strategies into coherent ways of life (Desta & Smithson, 2010). In Southwestern Nigeria, the Yoruba people offer a compelling example of such ecological wisdom. Yoruba cosmology does not treat nature as a passive storehouse of raw materials. Rather, it understands the natural world as animated, relational, and morally ordered (Olaleye, 2022). Rivers, forests, animals, and land itself are seen as carriers of spiritual significance and communal responsibility, woven into social life through rituals, taboos, festivals, and oral traditions.

The reverence for rivers such as Ọ̀ṣun, the preservation of sacred groves, and the careful observance of agricultural cycles guided by lunar rhythms and divinatory systems reflect this deeply rooted ecological consciousness (Adeyanju *et al*., 2022). These practices are not merely symbolic expressions of belief; they function as practical systems of environmental regulation. They shape patterns of

resource use, protect biodiversity, and reinforce communal accountability in managing land and water.

Yet, despite their enduring value, indigenous ecological systems have often been sidelined in modern environmental governance. Colonial legacies and the dominance of Western scientific frameworks have contributed to policies that gave more recognition to formal technical expertise while overlooking local epistemologies (Adeyanju *et al*., 2022). Additionally, formal education, rapid urbanisation, and economic globalisation have weakened traditional mechanisms for transmitting ecological knowledge across generations.

This paper therefore examines Yoruba indigenous knowledge as a vital resource for sustainable environmental practice, approached from a humanistic perspective. The paper argues that Yoruba ecological principles that are expressed through language, spirituality, cultural institutions, and communal ethics offer meaningful contributions to contemporary sustainability debates. Drawing on environmental humanities, cultural ecology, and decolonial thought, the paper explores the philosophical foundations of Yoruba environmental ethics and situates them within current sustainability discourse.

Using examples from culturally significant towns such as Osogbo, Ile-Ife, Oyo, and Ado-Ekiti, the paper illustrates how practices like sacred forest protection, ritual engagement with water bodies, and indigenous agricultural systems embody long-standing principles of ecological balance. It further considers how oral narratives, festivals, folklore, and moral instruction sustain and reinforce these environmental values within communities. This paper contends that meaningful sustainability in Nigeria cannot emerge solely from imported policy models or technocratic solutions. Rather, it requires the thoughtful integration of indigenous ecological knowledge into environmental policy, education, and conservation strategies. Yoruba traditions should no longer

be seen as remnants of a fading past; rather they should be seen as representing living frameworks for understanding the relationship between humans and nature.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Sustainability: A Humanistic Perspective

For many years, conversations about sustainability have been dominated by the language of science, technology, and economics. We measure carbon emissions, calculate resource efficiency, design policies, and engineer solutions. These efforts are important and necessary. Yet, the problem of environmental degradation persists. This is because environmental crises are not only technical problems; they are also moral and cultural ones. They reflect how human beings see themselves in relation to the earth. A truly sustainable future requires more than better data and smarter machines. It requires a deeper reflection on meaning, responsibility, identity, and belonging. This is where indigenous knowledge systems and the humanities become indispensable.

Indigenous knowledge systems are not random fragments of tradition; they are carefully accumulated bodies of wisdom built through generations of intimate engagement with particular landscapes. They grow out of lived experiences such as farming the soil, fishing rivers, observing seasons, honoring forests. Unlike modern Western science, which often searches for universal laws that apply everywhere, indigenous knowledge is rooted in place. It is shaped by memory, transmitted through stories, rituals, proverbs, taboos, and daily practices. Within these cultural forms are embedded ecological insights and moral instructions about how to live well within the natural world.

The strength of indigenous knowledge lies not only in what it knows about the environment, but in how it teaches people to feel about it. It cultivates reverence, restraint, and responsibility. In many African cultures, including among the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria, nature is not viewed as something separate from humanity. It is part of an interconnected web of

existence. For instance, rivers are not seen as just water channels that could be diverted at will; according to the Yoruba belief, they carry spiritual meaning. Also, forests are not seen as just timber reserves; they are rather seen as living spaces associated with ancestors and deities. Land is not seen simply as property; rather it is seen as identity, memory, and sacred inheritance. When people see nature this way, their behaviour towards it changes. Environmental care becomes a moral duty rather than a regulatory requirement.

The humanistic understanding of nature also informs practical environmental behaviour among the Yoruba people. For instance, traditional agricultural practices, such as crop rotation, fallowing, and mixed cropping, are not just ecologically sound but are also guided by cultural rituals and taboos that prevent overexploitation and preserve soil fertility (Ojo, 2010). Sacred groves provide another powerful example. These protected forest areas, often linked to spiritual beliefs, function in practical terms as biodiversity sanctuaries. They preserve rare species, regulate local climates, and protect water sources (Omobola & Lawal, 2018). This implies that long before the language of "conservation biology" became common, these communities were practicing forms of ecological preservation grounded in belief and tradition. Another equally significant nature sustainability practice among the Yorubas is the use of proverbs and oral traditions which repeatedly emphasize the duty to preserve the earth for those yet unborn. For instance, the saying *"ilé ayé là ń gbé, ká tó dé ọ̀run"* (one must live properly in this world before departing to the world beyond) carries with it an ethic of accountability which implies that one's life is measured not only by personal success but by the condition in which one leaves the community and its environment.

The perspectives expressed above stand in sharp contrast to the extractive mindset that characterises many modern economies, where land is valued primarily for its immediate economic yield. When profit becomes the dominant

measure of worth, the moral and spiritual dimensions of environmental care are easily pushed aside.

The environmental humanities offer a helpful bridge in this regard. By drawing on philosophy, literature, religion, and cultural studies, they explore how human beings narrate and imagine their relationship with nature. They remind us that environmental problems are also stories about progress, ownership, development, and human superiority. When these stories go unchallenged, they shape policies and behaviours in powerful ways (Heise, 2017). Recognising indigenous worldviews as legitimate sources of knowledge helps to broaden this narrative space. It challenges the long-standing assumption that only Western scientific frameworks are valid for understanding and managing the environment. In Nigeria and many other postcolonial societies, the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge did not happen by accident. During colonial rule, local practices were frequently dismissed as backward or superstitious. Western models of agriculture, forestry, and planning were imposed as superior alternatives. Over time, this produced not only ecological disruption but also cultural dislocation. Communities were separated from their ancestral systems of environmental management, and younger generations were taught that indigenous knowledge was inferior (Agrawal, 1995; Mignolo, 2011). The consequences of that epistemic displacement are still visible today. Environmental policies often rely heavily on imported models that do not fully align with local realities. Meanwhile, indigenous practices that once sustained ecosystems are treated as relics of the past rather than living resources for the present.

Reclaiming indigenous knowledge, therefore, is a necessary step toward intellectual and environmental justice. It involves restoring confidence in local wisdom, creating space for indigenous voices in policy discussions, and fostering genuine dialogue between global science and community-based knowledge systems. Such dialogue must be respectful and collaborative, not extractive.

Indigenous knowledge should not be mined for useful data and then discarded; it should be engaged as a dynamic and evolving way of understanding the world. For sustainability efforts in Southwest Nigeria to succeed, they must grow from the cultural soil of the people. Yoruba indigenous knowledge provides a deeply human model of environmental care that binds spirituality, morality, and social cohesion to ecological responsibility. These traditions are not frozen in time. They have always adapted to changing circumstances, and they can continue to evolve in response to contemporary environmental challenges.

The Yoruba Worldview and Ecological Ethics

The Yoruba worldview carries within it a quiet but powerful ecological wisdom. It does not approach nature as an object to be studied from a distance or controlled for profit. Rather, it understands life as a web of relationships between humans, the land, the ancestors, and the unseen spiritual forces that animate the universe. In this worldview, existence itself is relational. Nothing stands alone. Everything is connected. At the heart of Yoruba cosmology is the belief that the universe contains both visible and invisible dimensions. Human beings share the world not only with animals and plants, but also with ancestors and the orișa (divine forces often associated with elements of nature). These are not distant or abstract deities. They are encountered in rivers, forests, hills, thunder, and earth (Abiodun, 2001; Dopamu, 2006). Nature, therefore, is never merely physical matter; it carries presence, meaning, and agency.

A good example of the above is the revered deity, Ọ̀ṣun, the river deity associated with fertility, beauty, and nourishment. She is believed to dwell in the Ọ̀ṣun River at Osogbo, and her sacred grove remains one of the most carefully preserved forest spaces in the region. That grove, now internationally recognised as a heritage site, has survived not because of modern conservation laws alone, but because generations treated it as sacred (Ogundiran, 2018). What environmental policy might struggle to enforce, reverence has quietly sustained.

When a river is seen as divine, it is not easily polluted. This spiritual sensibility naturally shapes moral behaviour. Among the Yoruba, the concept of *iwa* (good character) lies at the center of ethical life. A person's worth is measured not simply by wealth or status but by moral integrity. Importantly, this moral integrity extends beyond human relationships to include the environment (Adekola, 2008). A person of *iwa rere* (good character) does not recklessly destroy forests, poison streams, or kill animals without reason. Such acts are not viewed as mere environmental missteps; they are moral failures that disturb the cosmic balance.

Everyday language reinforces these values. Proverbs, stories, and songs quietly carry ecological insight from one generation to the next. When elders say *"Omi l'ẹmi"* water is life they are expressing more than a biological fact. They are affirming water as sacred and indispensable. When it is said, *"A kì í jogún igbo kó fi mọ́ igbo ṣe erè"* one does not inherit a forest only to exploit it for profit it serves as a warning against greed. These sayings shape attitudes long before formal education does. They cultivate restraint and responsibility.

Balance is another key principle. Yoruba thought emphasises harmony between humans and the rest of creation. One does not simply take from the earth without acknowledgment or replenishment. Traditional farming practices often followed seasonal rhythms, allowing land to rest. Rituals and festivals reaffirmed gratitude and dependence on natural cycles. Even taboos, sometimes misunderstood today, functioned as protective mechanisms. By declaring certain forests or rivers off-limits, communities unintentionally created conservation zones long before the term existed. Closely connected to this sense of balance is the idea of *ase* the vital force that flows through all things. *Ase* is the power that enables existence and action. It resides in humans, but also in trees, rivers, stones, and animals. To harm the environment carelessly is to violate the *ase* within it (Olupona, 2014). This belief fosters a profound respect for non-human life. The Yoruba ecological outlook is therefore not strictly human-centered. It recognises

that other beings possess their own integrity and significance within the cosmic order.

Environmental responsibility is also woven into social structure. Elders, priests, herbalists, and hunters traditionally served as custodians of ecological knowledge. They understood seasonal patterns, medicinal plants, animal behaviour, and sacred boundaries. Certain groves were declared inviolable. Hunting seasons were regulated. Sanctions existed for violations. In this way, environmental ethics were not left to individual choice alone; they were reinforced by communal institutions and collective memory (Ayorinde, 2009). When viewed alongside contemporary environmental philosophy, many of these indigenous principles feel strikingly relevant. Modern ecological movements speak of interdependence, intrinsic value, and the need to move beyond exploitative attitudes toward nature. Yet these ideas have long been embedded in Yoruba cosmology. The difference is that within Yoruba culture, such ideas are not confined to academic debate; they are lived, narrated, sung, and ritualised (Shiva, 2005).

In recent time, urbanisation, religious shifts, economic pressures, and climate change have altered how many communities relate to these traditions. Sacred groves are sometimes encroached upon. Younger generations may not fully grasp the meanings behind older practices. But traditions are not static relics. They adapt, reinterpret, and respond to new realities. The challenge is not to hold on to the past, but to discern what enduring wisdom it offers for the present. The Yoruba worldview ultimately challenges the modern tendency to separate nature from culture, spirit from matter, and morality from ecology. It reminds us that environmental care is not only a technical responsibility but also a moral and spiritual one. To protect the land is to protect community, memory, and identity.

Case Illustrations of Environmental Stewardship from Yoruba Communities in Southwest Nigeria.

It is one thing to speak about indigenous knowledge in theory; it is another to see how it actually shapes everyday life. Across towns and villages in Southwest Nigeria, Yoruba environmental ethics are not abstract ideas. They are lived practices expressed through sacred landscapes, farming methods, festivals, and communal rules. These practices often existed long before modern environmental policies and, in many cases, continue to protect ecosystems in ways that formal regulations struggle to achieve.

The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove

Perhaps the most well-known example is the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove on the outskirts of Osogbo, Osun State. Stretching along the banks of the Ọ̀ṣun River, the grove covers over seventy hectares of dense forest. It is regarded as the spiritual home of the river deity Ọ̀ṣun and contains shrines, sculptures, and altars nestled within rich vegetation. What is remarkable about the grove is not only its spiritual importance, but its ecological health. Hunting, logging, fishing, and farming within its boundaries are traditionally forbidden. These restrictions are not enforced primarily by government agencies, but by community belief and moral commitment. Priests, priestesses, and elders act as custodians, ensuring that the sacred character of the forest is respected (Omobola & Lawal, 2018). Every year, during the Ọ̀ṣun Festival, thousands gather to celebrate, pray, and reconnect with the river. The festival is not just a religious event; it is also a public reaffirmation of the community's bond with its environment. In 2005, the grove received global recognition when it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site (UNESCO, 2005). It should be noted however that the preservation of the grove began long before international acknowledgment.

The Oke-Itase Grove

In Ile-Ife, often described as the spiritual heartland of the Yoruba, the Oke-Itase Grove serves as a central site for Ifá divination. The grove houses shrines and ritual spaces where babalawo (diviners) and priests perform ceremonies and

consult the oracle. Like Osun-Osogbo, Oke-Itase functions as a protected ecological space. Certain sections are considered spiritually restricted and remain untouched by farming or construction. The grove is not fenced off by modern barriers; its boundaries are maintained by shared understanding (Olupona, 2014). Each year, practitioners from across Yorubaland and the diaspora gather at the grove for the World Ifá Festival. These gatherings are moments of spiritual, cultural, and ecological renewal. Knowledge about ritual practice, sacred boundaries, and respect for natural forces is passed from elders to younger initiates. In this way, environmental stewardship is woven into religious continuity.

Sacred Trees and Forest Patches in Ekiti and Ondo

Beyond famous heritage sites, smaller but equally meaningful examples can be found in rural communities. In parts of Ekiti and Ondo States, particular trees are regarded as sacred because of their association with ancestors or significant historical events. In Ijero-Ekiti, for example, a large *Igi Odan* tree is believed to embody ancestral presence. It is neither cut nor damaged. People leave offerings at its base, and stories circulate about the misfortune that follows disrespect. Whether one interprets these stories spiritually or symbolically, their effect is clear: the tree survives (Fadipe, 1970; Akinnaso, 1983). Similarly, forest areas such as Igbo Olodumare in Akure or Igbo Owa in Idanre are preserved because they are tied to origin stories and sacred memory. These groves serve as quiet sanctuaries for plant and animal life. Though they may lack formal legal protection, they endure because the community sees them as more than timber reserves.

Indigenous Farming Practices in Oyo State

Environmental stewardship is not confined to sacred forests. It is also visible in agricultural life. In many farming communities across Oyo State, traditional methods continue to reflect ecological sensitivity. Intercropping

practice such as planting maize, cassava, okra, and other crops together helps maintain soil nutrients and reduce pests naturally. Land is rotated and sometimes left fallow, allowing it to regenerate. Such practices are based on long observation of soil behaviour, rainfall patterns, and plant compatibility. In some areas, farmers consult Ifá diviners before planting, seeking guidance on timing and location ((Ojo, 2010). While this may appear purely spiritual, it also embeds agriculture within a moral and seasonal rhythm that discourages reckless exploitation. Water bodies are treated with similar care. For instance, the Osun River and Ogun River are believed to be inhabited by water spirits. As a result, pollution and overuse are socially discouraged. These beliefs function as protective frameworks for freshwater ecosystems that support both human and animal life.

Festivals and Ecological Memory in Ijebu and Epe

In the Ijebu region of Ogun State and in Epe communities in Lagos State, annual festivals serve as moments of environmental remembrance. Events such as Agemo festival, Ojude Oba and Kayokayo include processions that move through historic routes, passing rivers, shrines, and sacred landmarks. These festivals are often associated with communal cleaning exercises and, in recent times, tree planting initiatives (Dopamu, 2006). Even where modernisation has altered ritual meaning, the symbolic connection between celebration and environmental renewal remains strong. The land is not forgotten in the midst of festivity; it is honoured.

Women as Custodians of Life and Land

No account of Yoruba environmental stewardship would be complete without acknowledging the role of women. Priestesses associated with Ọ̀ṣun, Yemoja, and Olókun act as guardians of rivers and aquatic spaces. Their responsibilities extend beyond ritual leadership to include helping safeguard ecological boundaries (Omobola & Lawal, 2018). Market women and herbalists also play crucial roles. Through the selective harvesting and trade of medicinal

plants, they manage biodiversity in practical ways. Knowledge of herbs, roots, and seasonal cycles is often transmitted through apprenticeship and family lines. In this sense, environmental knowledge is not only communal; it is deeply gendered and intergenerational.

The examples explored above reveal something important. It shows that Yoruba ecological practices are not isolated customs frozen in the past. They form a living network of beliefs, rules, stories, and communal actions. Elders, priests, farmers, women, and youth all participate in sustaining them. Modernisation, urban expansion, and climate change undoubtedly pose serious challenges. Some sacred spaces have been encroached upon; some traditions have weakened. Yet many of these systems endure, adapting quietly to new realities.

Challenges to Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Practices

For all its depth and resilience, Yoruba indigenous environmental knowledge is not untouched by change. It is under pressure; sometimes quietly, sometimes dramatically; from forces reshaping contemporary Nigeria. These pressures are social, economic, religious, political, and environmental. Together, they are altering the spaces, institutions, and beliefs that once sustained traditional ecological practices.

One of the most visible challenges is urban expansion. Cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, Akure, and Osogbo are growing rapidly. Housing estates are gradually replacing farmlands while highways cut through forests. Industrial layouts occupy what were once communal lands. In the process, sacred groves and culturally significant landscapes are encroached upon or cleared entirely (Adeyemi, 2015). When such spaces disappear, the loss is not only ecological. Ritual pathways are disrupted, festivals are relocated, and collective memory is weakened. A forest that once carried spiritual meaning becomes just another plot of land.

Closely linked to this is a gradual cultural drift between generations. Many younger people today are shaped more by digital culture, global media, and formal Western-style education than by oral tradition. Proverbs are no longer quoted as frequently; folktales are less often told at moonlight gatherings. Practices once transmitted through apprenticeship and ritual are now viewed by some as outdated or irrelevant (Ikeke, 2013). As elders pass on without structured systems for preserving their knowledge, important ecological insights risk disappearing with them. The loss is subtle but profound.

Religious transformation has also played a complicated role. The growth of Christianity and Islam has reshaped spiritual landscapes across Yorubaland. In some communities, indigenous religious expressions have been labeled as idolatrous or incompatible with newer faith traditions. Sacred groves may be neglected or even deliberately dismantled. Shrines fall into disrepair while festivals once central to communal identity are sometimes discouraged. In certain cases, churches or mosques now stand on lands that were once ritually protected (Adedibu, 2015). Whatever one's religious commitments may be, the ecological consequence is clear: when the spiritual logic that protected a forest weakens, the forest itself becomes vulnerable.

In the opinion of Nkomo and Folami (2010), another challenge lies in formal governance. Environmental regulation in Nigeria tends to rely heavily on Western scientific models and compliance frameworks. Agencies such as National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency focus primarily on statutory enforcement. While such mechanisms are important, they often overlook the role that traditional authorities, community custodians, and indigenous practices have historically played in managing ecosystems. The result is a disconnection between state-led environmental policy and grassroots knowledge systems. In many cases, local custodians are not meaningfully included in decision-making processes that directly affect their lands.

Market pressures and globalisation further complicate matters. Forest resources, medicinal plants, sand deposits, and farmlands are increasingly viewed through commercial lenses. Export-driven agriculture, mechanised farming, and the widespread use of synthetic chemicals have displaced some traditional techniques that once prioritised soil regeneration and biodiversity (Adebayo & Alao, 2012). Illegal logging and sand mining in parts of Ogun and Ondo States illustrate how economic incentives can override cultural restraint. Where profit becomes the primary measure of value, inherited ecological ethics struggle to compete.

Land tenure issues add yet another layer of vulnerability. Akinola (2007) observes that many sacred groves and communal forests are protected by custom rather than formal documentation. Under modern legal frameworks that emphasise individual ownership and commercial development, such lands can be reclassified, acquired, or sold. Customary systems that once regulated access collectively are gradually eroded. Without clear legal recognition, communities may find it difficult to defend spaces that are culturally sacred but legally ambiguous.

Climate change presents a different kind of challenge. Ajayi and Mafimisebi (2014) explain that farmers in parts of Oyo and Ekiti States increasingly speak of unpredictable rainfall and shifting planting seasons. Traditional ecological calendars, built on generations of observation, are harder to rely on when weather patterns grow erratic. As uncertainty increases, some farmers turn more heavily to external technologies and chemical inputs, which may further distance them from indigenous systems of environmental interpretation.

Still on the challenges facing indigenous environmental practices, Olupona (2014) identifies documentation as a serious challenge. According to him, much Yoruba environmental knowledge lives in memory, performance, and practice. It

resides in the expertise of herbalists, the stories of elders, the ritual knowledge of priests, and the seasonal instincts of farmers. When such knowledge is not systematically recorded or when it is recorded without sensitivity to context, it risks distortion or disappearance. Although scholars and cultural organisations have made important efforts, these initiatives are often fragmented and under-resourced.

Conclusion

The need to tackle Nigeria's environmental challenges such as deforestation, unstable rainfall, polluted water, and disappearing biodiversity are growing more urgent. Yet sustainable solutions cannot come from technical expertise alone. Policies, regulations, and global frameworks are important, but they are not sufficient if they ignore the cultural foundations of how people relate to land, water, and community. Any lasting response must draw from knowledge systems that are rooted in lived experience. In this regard, Yoruba indigenous environmental knowledge remains an underappreciated resource.

Yoruba cosmology does not treat the environment as lifeless material to be exploited. Rivers, forests, and farmlands are woven into spiritual and moral life. The reverence shown to deities such as Ọ̀ṣun and Olókun, and to sacred landscapes like the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, has historically fostered restraint and care. Sacred groves, taboos, festivals, farming rhythms, and oral traditions have functioned as community-based systems of environmental governance long before such language became common in policy circles.

Yet this heritage is under strain. Urban expansion is swallowing communal lands. Religious tensions have, in some places, weakened the spiritual structures that once protected sacred sites. Younger generations, shaped by global culture and digital life, are often distant from the oral traditions that carried ecological wisdom. At the policy level, indigenous actors are rarely given meaningful space in environmental planning. If this knowledge disappears, the loss will not be

cultural alone; it will also narrow the range of locally grounded solutions available for sustainability.

Recommendations

Reclaiming Yoruba environmental knowledge does not mean rejecting science or romanticising the past. It means broadening the conversation. Legal protection of sacred sites, inclusion of traditional custodians in environmental governance, integration of indigenous ecological insights into school curricula, and better documentation of oral knowledge are practical steps forward. Cultural renewal through language preservation, intergenerational dialogue, and youth engagement is equally vital. If all these are done, Yoruba indigenous environmental knowledge would no longer be seen as a relic, but as a living heritage. With thoughtful adaptation and genuine respect, it can stand alongside modern science as a partner in addressing ecological crises. In listening again to the wisdom embedded in sacred groves, proverbs, and communal practices, Nigeria may rediscover culturally grounded pathways toward a more resilient and harmonious future.

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