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Article

Religion and Nature: Examining the Role of Religious Values on Environmental Protection

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Abstract

Nature is often understood as a purely physical or biological entity governed by scientific laws and economic utility. In contrast, perspectives associated with *dark green religion* draw attention to how nature itself can be regarded as sacred and morally significant, revealing the cultural and ethical dimensions through which humans can relate to the environment. In this context, this paper examines religion as a symbolic and narrative system through which nature is socially constructed as a moral domain. Focusing on Indigenous Ijaw communities in the Niger Delta, this paper explains how rivers, creeks and wetlands are embedded within religious value systems that emphasize moral responsibility, respect and restraint in human-environment relations. Within this worldview environmental harm is understood not only as ecological degradation but also as a moral and spiritual transgression with consequences for communal well-being.

Keywords: nature; morality; values; cosmology and green religion

Introduction

Nature is often understood as a purely physical or biological domain governed by scientific laws and economic utility. Sociological scholarship however, has long emphasized that nature is also socially constructed, shaped by cultural meanings, moral values and symbolic frameworks through which societies interpret and interact with the natural world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Castree, 2001). One indication of this cultural mediation is found in what Taylor (2010) terms as “dark green religion”: a moral orientation in which nature itself is treated as sacred and deserving of ethical responsibility. This perspective highlights how religious-style values can shape environmental attitudes beyond personal belief systems. Building on this insight, the present paper examines how religious values can shape attitudes towards nature by providing narratives, symbols and moral vocabularies that define what nature represents, how it should be treated, and what responsibilities humans hold toward it. As such this paper treats religion as a social institution that produces collective representations shaping both social life and human-nature relationships. Through rituals, myths and symbolic narratives, religion offers coherent explanations for misfortune, harmony and disorder; thereby influencing how societies morally evaluate the natural world (Durkheim, 1995).

In recent times, there has been a growing scholarly interest in examining how religious values influence attitudes toward nature (Ariel et al. 2021; Berry, 2013). However, many of these studies have largely focused on doctrinal teachings and individual attitudes in Euro American Christian contexts, thereby leaving comparatively little work on how indigenous religious cosmologies in extractive frontiers construct nature as a moral domain (Boyd, 1999; Ariel et al., 2023; Jenkins et al., 2018; Kirchoff, 2024). Likewise, scholarship on the social perception of nature has rarely engaged systematically with religious classifications and ritual practices, while studies of the Niger Delta have focused more on oil politics and conflict than on Ijaw religious understandings of rivers, creeks and mangroves. This article addresses this gap with Ijaw cosmology; by examining how religious

narratives and rituals in the Niger Delta construct nature as a morally ordered space under conditions of colonial rule and capitalist interests.

Central to this paper is the argument that moral values embedded in religious narratives influence not only social norms and laws, but also how societies define and value natural properties of the environment. Religious meanings often frame nature as sacred or morally charged: thus shaping attitudes toward stewardship, responsibility, and exploitation (Guidotti, 2015; Ives et al., 2024). These symbolic perception demonstrate that nature is not merely a material reality but a socially interpreted one: which is structured through religious narratives that guide human-environment relations (Klaus, 1996; Markwell, 2004; Robin et. al., 2014). As such, this paper examines religion as a narrative and symbolic force to show how such interpretations of nature are embedded within broader systems of social order and moral meaning.

Religion

Durkheim asserts that "then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence" (1968, p.3). As such, each religious system exists in its unique manner, providing responses to the inherent conditions of human existence. From this perspective, religions constitute meaningful responses to the conditions of human existence by providing shared frameworks through which societies interpret morality and order. This functional orientation is particularly important for analyzing religion's role in the social perception of nature, as it emphasizes that meanings attributed to the world, including the natural environment are socially produced rather than inherent.

While Durkheim emphasizes religion as an agent of integration in society, Weber (2002) on the other hand, examines how religious worldviews motivate conduct and rationalize everyday practices. In his analysis of the Protestant ethic, Weber demonstrates how religious ethics transformed attitudes toward labor and discipline and in similar context it has the potential to reframe nature as a resource to be rationally managed rather than ritually revered (Vogel, 2002; Foster & Holleman, 2012). This perspective complements Durkheim by showing how shared moral meanings are translated into patterned forms of action that reshape human-nature relations.

On one hand, Marx's and Asad's critiques expose a limitation in Durkheim's framework by highlighting how religion can reinforce domination rather than merely social cohesion, Mary Douglas (1966) on the other hand, builds on Durkheim's sacred-profane distinction to refine the analysis of symbolic classification. Here Douglas goes on to argue that concepts of purity, pollution and taboo are central to maintaining social order and are deeply embedded in religious symbolism. These classifications extend beyond ritual into everyday life, shaping how societies morally evaluate bodies, spaces and elements of the natural world. Her work reinforces Durkheim's insight into classification while making explicit how religious symbolism organizes environmental meaning; which thereby marks certain aspects of nature as dangerous, sacred or morally regulated.

Religion, Reality and Nature

Mehan and Wood's (1983) treatment of reality provides a crucial socio-psychological bridge between religious belief, narrative meaning and the social perception of nature. Their central claim is that reality is not simply discovered but is reflexively produced and sustained through interaction. By conceptualizing "reality as a reflexive activity," Mehan and Wood emphasize that what people take to be real depends on the continual use of shared knowledge, interpretive frameworks and social practices. As such, religion is especially significant within this framework because it offers durable narratives through which uncertainty, misfortune and the natural world itself are rendered meaningful. The Azandes of Central Africa are employed by Mehan and Wood precisely because their religious system offers a clear and analytically rich illustration of how a socially constructed reality operates when taken on its own terms. The Azande case shows how religious belief functions as a lived reality through which uncertainty, misfortune and everyday decisions are rendered

intelligible, including interpretations of events in the natural world. A similar case is also observed among the Ijaws, an Indigenous people of the Niger Delta whose religious worldview is closely tied to rivers, creeks, and wetlands.

Religious Views of Nature in Ijaw Cosmology

The Ijaw case provides a concrete illustration of how a religious “reality,” in Mehan and Wood’s sense, organizes environmental meaning by embedding rivers, creeks, and wetlands within a cosmology of spirits, ancestors, and taboos. While in the case of the Azandes, their religious practices illustrate how reality is narratively constructed and sustained, Ijaw religious traditions on the other hand, reveal how this same process extends to human relationships with the environment, where natural spaces are understood as morally significant and spiritually inhabited. In this context, religious narrative and ritual do not merely explain the world but organize ethical relations between communities and the landscapes they inhabit.

Traditional Ijaw religion centers on water spirits (owuamapu) and ancestors, with rivers and creeks understood as inhabited by powerful beings who demand respect and offerings (Ariye, 2013). Annual festivals and everyday practices such as the setting up of shrines on riverbanks, the offering of food in canoes and taboos on certain forms of fishing express and reinforce the idea that water bodies are not inert resources but morally charged spaces in which human actions have spiritual consequences. In this cosmology, pollution, overfishing, or violation of taboos can be interpreted as offenses that provoke misfortune, storms or sickness, making environmental harm simultaneously a spiritual and material issue. Among the Ijaw, religious belief is thus tightly intertwined with the natural environment, especially water bodies, which are understood as spiritually inhabited and ethically significant (Alagoa, 1999; Horton, 2012). Rivers, creeks, and wetlands are not approached as neutral ecological resources but as spaces embedded within cosmological and moral frameworks that shape how environmental relations are understood (Asante & Mazama, 2009). Within this worldview, water is associated with spiritual entities and ancestral presence, making the natural environment a site of moral responsibility rather than merely a site of economic utility.

Religious rituals associated with water serve both symbolic and regulatory functions. These practices are not solely concerned with maintaining spiritual balance but also operate as mechanisms through which appropriate human conduct toward the environment is defined and reinforced (Watson 2018; Itu et al. 2024; Wachukwu & Kii, 2025). Activities such as fishing, navigation, or interaction with waterways are embedded within moral expectations shaped by religious narratives. When environmental harm occurs, such as pollution, overexploitation or desecration of water bodies, these acts may be interpreted not only as ecological or economic disruptions but as moral transgressions with spiritual implications, particularly within the context of indigenous environmental ethics in the Niger Delta (Nwokoye, 2020).

From a sociological perspective, what is significant is not the empirical accuracy of spiritual claims but the role these beliefs play in organizing environmental meaning. Similar to Mehan and Wood’s argument that reality is reflexively produced through shared interpretive frameworks, the Ijaw case illustrates how nature becomes meaningful through religious narrative and ritual practice. Water does not “speak” for itself; its significance is constructed through stories, rituals, and moral expectations that guide collective understanding (Ingold, 2000). Thus nature in this sense is constructed as a morally ordered domain shaped by cultural interpretation (Descola, 2013). This interpretive system also demonstrates how religion stabilizes environmental values by embedding them within collective memory and social obligation. Ritual repetition reinforces shared understandings of appropriate environmental behavior, while moral narratives link ecological conditions to communal well-being. Through these processes, religion contributes to the social perception of nature by transforming the environment into a space of ethical concern, responsibility, and meaning.

Building on this interpretive account, Robert K. Merton’s distinction between manifest and latent functions further clarifies the social significance of religious rituals among the Ijaw. While the manifest purpose of water-related rituals may be to appease spiritual entities or restore balance

within the cosmological order, their latent function lies in reinforcing collective belief, moral consensus and social cohesion within the community (Merton, 1957). Even if such rituals do not “work” in a scientific or ecological sense, they succeed sociologically by sustaining a shared interpretive framework through which environmental uncertainty, misfortune, and responsibility are collectively understood.

Through repeated ritual engagement with rivers, creeks, and wetlands, the Ijaw reaffirm shared moral expectations regarding appropriate conduct toward the environment. Much like rain dances that may not necessarily lead to rain but strengthen communal bonds, Ijaw water rituals help stabilize social relations and reinforce collective values tied to the natural world. These practices embed environmental conditions within moral narratives, ensuring that environmental changes are not experienced as random events but as meaningful occurrences linked to communal well-being and ethical obligation.

Consistent with Mehan and Wood’s argument, apparent contradictions or failures in ritual outcomes do not undermine the authority of the religious system but instead serve to reinforce it. Environmental harm or misfortune may be explained through references to ritual lapses, moral transgressions or spiritual imbalance rather than as evidence against the religious worldview itself. In this way, religious interpretation absorbs disruption while preserving coherence, allowing nature to remain a morally ordered domain. These explanations rely on what Mehan and Wood describe as “incorrigible propositions,” statements that adherents would never admit to be false regardless of circumstances. Such propositions are compatible with any conceivable outcome and thus function as narrative safeguards that protect the coherence of the religious reality. Rather than weakening belief, contradiction becomes a resource for reaffirming it. At the same time, Mehan and Wood emphasize that realities are inherently fragile. Because reality depends on the continual reflexive use of shared knowledge in interaction, it can be disrupted if these processes are interrupted or delegitimized. This insight is essential for understanding the role religion plays in influencing attitudes toward nature. Religious interpretations of nature may be internally coherent and socially reinforced but they remain vulnerable to external forces that challenge their legitimacy. This vulnerability becomes especially visible in the context of colonial interests.

Conclusion

The social perception of nature through religion is continually exposed to contestation, displacement and redefinition through relations of power. Religious “realities” that organize how communities understand land and water can be remarkably resilient in everyday life, yet they remain vulnerable when confronted with external authorities seeking to impose alternative ontologies, classifications, and moral orders. Nowhere is this more evident than under colonial rule, where imperial projects did not simply extract resources and reorganize political authority but also worked to delegitimize indigenous ways of knowing, including religious interpretations of nature. In this context, Frantz Fanon’s (1952) insights provide ample illustration of how colonial regimes systematically portrayed African religious worlds as irrational, primitive or heathen, thereby undermining the very frameworks through which colonized peoples made sense of themselves, their environments and their place in the cosmos. The Ijaw and the broader Niger Delta region epitomize this scenario, particularly where indigenous cosmologies confront the interests of the petrochemical industry. Colonial ordinances and later postcolonial legislation, notably the Mineral Oil Ordinance and the Land Use Act, progressively centralized control over land and subsurface resources in the state, effectively reclassifying rivers, creeks and mangrove swamps from communal, spiritually inhabited territories into extractable “resources” for concession and profit (Ekhatior, 2016; Ojakorotu, 2008). The expansion of the oil industry intensified this process: pipelines, flow stations and repeated spills not only alter the biophysical environment but also encroach spaces previously marked as morally and spiritually charged, revealing how corporate and state power can undermine, ignore or instrumentalize indigenous religious orders when they conflict with extractive priorities (Fentiman, 1996; Fentiman & Zabbey, 2015).

Among the Ijaw, religious narratives and ritual practices embed rivers, creeks and wetlands within moral frameworks that organize meaning, responsibility and communal life. Through these interpretive systems, environmental conditions are understood not merely as material states, but as morally significant relations shaped by spiritual obligation and collective memory. At the same time, the vulnerability of these religious interpretations under external pressures, including environmental degradation and political authority, highlights how power influences which understandings of nature are recognized or dismissed as legitimate. In this way, the Ijaw religious values towards nature demonstrate that nature is not simply a physical environment but also a socially constructed moral domain that can be informed by religious narratives and values, influencing collective understandings of environmental responsibility in Nigeria.

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