



## The Influence of Traditional Religious Beliefs on Public Attitudes Toward Environmental Conservation in Rivers State, Nigeria

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**Abstract.** This study investigates how traditional religious beliefs shape public attitudes toward environmental conservation in Rivers State, Nigeria. Grounded in environmental sociology and cultural ecology theories, the research explores the association between indigenous belief systems and community engagement in environmental practices. Using a structured questionnaire administered to 400 respondents across three senatorial zones, data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests (mean scores and independent t-tests). Findings revealed that traditional beliefs significantly influence environmental perceptions and behaviors, with variations across religious adherence and demographic categories. The study concludes that integrating cultural values into conservation strategies can enhance public engagement and sustainability efforts.

**Keywords:** Traditional Beliefs, Environmental Conservation, Public Attitudes, Indigenous Knowledge, Rivers State, Nigeria

### 1. Introduction

Environmental degradation in Nigeria manifested through deforestation, oil spills, biodiversity loss, and climate-related disruptions poses significant threats to ecological sustainability and public health. In response, state and federal agencies have implemented regulatory frameworks and community-based conservation programs. However, these interventions often overlook indigenous knowledge systems and cultural worldviews that influence how local populations perceive and engage with the environment (Onwuka & Ebeku, 2017). Among the most culturally embedded influences are traditional religious beliefs, which in many African societies, including those in Rivers State, define nature as sacred and spiritually governed (Okonkwo & Ijeoma, 2021). Traditional religious beliefs often dictate taboos, rituals, and norms that function as environmental protection mechanisms. For instance, sacred forests, spiritual

water bodies, and seasonal restrictions on land use have historically served as indigenous conservation tools (Guzmán et al., 2020). These practices are not only symbolic but also regulate access and exploitation of natural resources, thus promoting biodiversity preservation and ecosystem balance (Ayantunde et al., 2018). In the Niger Delta, where environmental damage is most acute due to industrial activities, understanding the intersection between spiritual beliefs and ecological practices is crucial for designing culturally resonant conservation strategies.

While studies have explored the role of Christianity and Islam in shaping environmental ethics in Nigeria (Adesina & Egunjobi, 2020), few have examined the influence of indigenous religious systems that predate colonial-era religions. Given that many rural communities in Rivers State still adhere to traditional belief systems, either wholly or syncretically, their attitudes toward environmental conservation are likely framed by ancestral cosmologies and spiritual practices. As such, this study seeks to empirically assess how traditional religious beliefs shape public perceptions and conservation behaviors. By integrating local spirituality into environmental discourse, the findings aim to enrich culturally grounded conservation policies in Nigeria's unique ecological and sociocultural landscape.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Despite increasing awareness of environmental degradation in Rivers State, public participation in conservation efforts remains limited. Previous interventions have largely excluded indigenous knowledge and spiritual systems, undermining their relevance in environmental discourse. There is a need to empirically examine how traditional religious beliefs influence attitudes and behaviors toward environmental preservation. This study addresses this gap by investigating the cultural-religious underpinnings of environmental attitudes

in a context where spirituality and ecological consciousness often intersect.

## 1.2 Aim and Objectives

- To examine the extent to which traditional religious beliefs influence public perception of environmental conservation.
- To assess the relationship between the strength of traditional religious adherence and participation in environmental conservation practices.

## 1.3 Research Questions

- How do traditional religious beliefs shape perceptions about environmental conservation among residents of Rivers State?
- What is the relationship between individuals' adherence to traditional religious beliefs and their involvement in conservation activities?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Traditional Religious Beliefs and Environmental Stewardship

In many African societies, traditional religious beliefs are not peripheral to environmental discourse; rather, they constitute a central framework through which people perceive, interpret, and interact with the natural world. Unlike the mechanistic worldview often associated with Western environmental paradigms, indigenous African cosmologies perceive nature as a living, sacred entity that exists in a dynamic relationship with humans. Rivers, forests, mountains, and animals are not merely ecological resources but are imbued with spiritual essence frequently regarded as the abodes of deities, ancestors, and nature spirits who must be appeased or honored through ritual observance (Mbiti, 1991; Okonkwo & Ijeoma, 2021). This cosmological orientation fosters a sense of reverence, responsibility, and moral obligation toward the environment, creating a spiritual ecology in which environmental ethics are deeply entrenched in religious practice.

Within this framework, traditional ecological taboos and rituals serve as regulatory mechanisms for environmental stewardship. Practices such as restricting access to sacred groves, forbidding the hunting of certain totemic animals, and performing seasonal rituals before engaging in farming or fishing are more than cultural artifacts they are enforceable norms that promote sustainability. Sacred groves, in particular, represent biocultural refuges where human activity is limited by spiritual

decree; the prohibition against cutting trees or hunting within these areas reflects not only the community's desire to honor spiritual forces but also a practical strategy for conserving biodiversity and maintaining ecosystem integrity (Ayantunde et al., 2018).

Empirical evidence across various African contexts supports the view that these spiritual practices are not merely symbolic but carry tangible ecological benefits. In a study conducted in southwestern Nigeria, Adebayo and Ojo (2019) observed that communities with stronger adherence to indigenous belief systems exhibited significantly higher levels of compliance with conservation-oriented taboos, suggesting that traditional religion functions as a viable institutional framework for ecological governance. Similarly, Asare (2018) documented that sacred natural sites in Ghana serve as informal but highly effective conservation areas, where ecological balance is maintained not through state regulation but through cultural sanctions rooted in spiritual authority. Such findings reinforce the idea that traditional ecological knowledge when mediated through spiritual belief systems constitutes an important, albeit often underrecognized, component of community-based environmental conservation.

### 2.2 Environmental Attitudes and Behavioral Outcomes

Public attitudes toward environmental conservation are shaped by a confluence of interrelated factors, including but not limited to level of education, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, and prevailing cultural norms (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). These variables influence how individuals perceive environmental risks, assign responsibility, and engage in conservation behaviors. While environmental psychology has traditionally focused on cognitive and affective predictors such as environmental awareness, perceived control, and emotional connectedness to nature scholars are increasingly recognizing the pivotal role of deeply embedded cultural and religious worldviews (Stern, 2000). In particular, belief systems rooted in spiritual traditions provide normative frameworks that define what constitutes moral or immoral environmental behavior.

In the context of the Niger Delta, where environmental degradation resulting from oil exploration has led to severe ecological and health consequences, public perceptions of environmental responsibility are notably complex and multifaceted. Many communities have developed nuanced understandings of conservation that blend practical survival concerns with religious interpretations of stewardship and divine accountability (Onwuka &

Ebeku, 2017). Within this milieu, traditional African religions play a unique role in shaping ecological consciousness. For instance, belief in ancestral punishment or spiritual retribution for violating natural laws serves as a moral deterrent, guiding individuals to respect and protect their natural surroundings (Okonkwo & Ijeoma, 2021). Such beliefs act as internalized enforcement mechanisms, akin to legal or policy sanctions in formal governance systems.

However, this culturally rooted environmental ethic is increasingly threatened by modernization, rapid urbanization, and the expansion of global religions that often delegitimize indigenous belief systems. As Christianity and Islam continue to supplant traditional African religions, especially among younger populations and in urban settings, there is a noticeable erosion of spiritual taboos and practices that once regulated environmental conduct (Adesina & Egunjobi, 2020). This shift underscores the urgency of integrating cultural perspectives into environmental policy and education to preserve the positive ecological functions of traditional beliefs while fostering inclusive sustainability models.

### 2.3 Religious Syncretism and Conservation Practices

In many Nigerian communities, religious syncretism the blending and coexistence of traditional African spirituality with the doctrinal frameworks of Christianity or Islam creates a complex but potentially valuable context for environmental conservation. This intersection of belief systems results in a religious landscape where individuals often simultaneously draw upon indigenous cosmologies and Abrahamic teachings to interpret their relationship with nature. Such hybridity presents both analytical challenges and strategic opportunities in environmental discourse. On one hand, many mainstream religious leaders particularly those in evangelical and reformist circles have historically dismissed indigenous environmental practices as idolatrous or superstitious, thereby contributing to the erosion of traditional ecological ethics (Ukpong, 2021). This delegitimization weakens the spiritual authority of environmental taboos and rituals that once served as powerful tools for regulating resource use and protecting biodiversity.

On the other hand, a growing body of religious leaders and faith-based organizations has begun to adopt an inclusive theological stance that recognizes the ecological wisdom embedded in indigenous traditions. These actors are increasingly integrating environmental stewardship into sermons, doctrines, and community outreach programs, drawing conceptual parallels between biblical or Qur'anic

teachings and African spiritual principles that emphasize harmony with the earth (Ukpong, 2021). In this emerging syncretic model, religious teachings function not only as moral imperatives but also as pragmatic instruments for conservation awareness and action. Moreover, this dual-faith identity offers a hybrid cultural framework through which environmental advocacy can be both culturally resonant and theologically justified. By framing environmental responsibility as both a divine commandment and an ancestral obligation, syncretic religious expressions can potentially broaden the constituency for ecological initiatives. Thus, while syncretism complicates traditional categorizations of environmental behavior, it also creates fertile ground for innovative conservation messaging that bridges spiritual legacies and contemporary ecological concerns.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a dual-theoretical framework that draws from Cultural Ecology Theory and the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory, offering a multidisciplinary lens through which the influence of traditional religious beliefs on environmental attitudes can be critically examined. The Cultural Ecology framework, first conceptualized by Julian Steward in the mid-20th century, emphasizes the dynamic relationship between human societies and their environments, mediated through cultural practices, belief systems, and adaptive strategies (Steward, 1955). It posits that cultural institutions including religious rituals, taboos, and cosmologies emerge, in part, as functional responses to ecological constraints and opportunities. Within this framework, traditional religious beliefs are not merely symbolic expressions of worldview but serve as regulatory instruments for managing natural resources, preserving ecological balance, and ensuring intergenerational sustainability. Sacred groves, seasonal restrictions, and ritualized land-use practices in many African societies are thus interpreted as culturally embedded mechanisms of environmental management.

Complementing this anthropological perspective is the Value-Belief-Norm Theory, developed by Paul Stern and colleagues within environmental psychology. The VBN model theorizes that environmentally significant behavior is influenced by a chain of psychological variables: foundational personal values shape ecological worldviews, which in turn inform beliefs about environmental consequences and activate personal norms internalized moral obligations that guide pro-environmental action (Stern, 2000). Within the context of this study, individuals who uphold traditional cultural values are more likely to

maintain biospheric value orientations, viewing the natural world as intrinsically valuable and spiritually animated. This worldview strengthens personal norms such as the belief that harming nature constitutes a moral transgression, thereby motivating behavior that aligns with conservation principles.

The integration of Cultural Ecology and VBN Theory allows for a holistic interpretation of the research problem. While Cultural Ecology situates traditional beliefs within their sociocultural and environmental contexts, VBN Theory elucidates the psychological processes by which these beliefs translate into conservation-relevant attitudes and behaviors. Applied to Rivers State, this dual framework enables a nuanced exploration of how deeply rooted indigenous spiritual systems inform not only how people conceptualize their environment but also how they act to protect it. It also highlights the potential of culturally sensitive conservation policies that recognize and build upon existing belief structures rather than displacing them.

### 5. Results

**Table 1:** Influence of Traditional Beliefs on Perception of Environmental Conservation (N = 400)

Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Nature is sacred and should not be abused	4.35	0.81	Strongly agreed
Trees and rivers are inhabited by spirits	4.12	0.93	Agree
Traditional taboos help protect the environment	4.08	0.87	Agree
Environmental destruction angers ancestral spirits	4.20	0.84	Strong agree
Community rituals support environmental harmony	3.95	0.92	Agree

**Interpretation:** Respondents strongly believe in the spiritual essence of the environment, indicating that traditional beliefs play a significant role in shaping perceptions of conservation.

**Table 2:** Correlation Between Religious Adherence and Conservation Practices

Variable	r	p-value
Traditional religious adherence vs. conservation behavior	0.42	<0.01

**Interpretation:** A moderate positive correlation was observed, suggesting that individuals with stronger traditional religious adherence are more likely to participate in environmental conservation practices.

### 6. Discussion

The findings from this study offer robust support for the underlying hypothesis that traditional religious belief systems function not merely as symbolic or ceremonial constructs, but as practical, community-embedded instruments of environmental governance. The empirical evidence points to the continued relevance of sacred groves, ritual taboos, and spiritual sanctions as longstanding indigenous mechanisms for regulating human interactions with the natural world. These culturally enforced systems historically controlled access to ecologically sensitive areas, prohibited the overexploitation of specific species, and imposed spiritual consequences on those who violated communal environmental norms. Such practices effectively maintained

### 4. Methodology

**Study Design:** This was a cross-sectional empirical study using quantitative methods.

**Study Area:** Rivers State, Nigeria, comprising diverse ethnic communities and religious traditions.

**Population and Sample Size:** A multistage sampling technique was used to select 400 participants (133 from each senatorial zone). Participants were adults aged 18 years and above who identified with or were knowledgeable about traditional religious practices.

**Instrumentation:** A 25-item structured questionnaire was designed based on the research questions, covering beliefs, practices, perceptions, and demographic variables. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

**Data Analysis:** Responses were analyzed using SPSS. Mean scores and standard deviations addressed descriptive questions, while Pearson correlation and independent t-tests tested associations between beliefs and practices.

ecological balance in the absence of formal environmental legislation, highlighting the deep interdependence between cultural traditions and natural resource management.

The statistically moderate but meaningful correlation observed in this study between adherence to traditional religious beliefs and pro-environmental behaviors implies that reviving or sustaining these indigenous practices could provide a culturally congruent pathway toward environmental sustainability. In contexts where state-enforced regulations are weak, inconsistent, or poorly enforced as is often the case in many parts of Nigeria traditional belief systems can serve as alternative or complementary conservation frameworks that are both locally legitimate and

socially internalized. These findings therefore underscore the potential of culturally grounded environmental strategies that do not merely tolerate indigenous spirituality but actively integrate it into the design of conservation policies and programs. Moreover, the present results align with a growing body of comparative research across sub-Saharan Africa. In Ghana, Asare (2018) documented that sacred groves and spiritually protected landscapes play a critical role in preserving biodiversity by restricting access and fostering communal accountability. Similarly, in Kenya and Uganda, Mwinzi and Karanja (2020) found that indigenous knowledge systems often mediated through religious belief have been instrumental in forest conservation and the protection of endangered species. These cross-national parallels reinforce the conclusion that indigenous religious practices are not relics of a pre-modern past but living cultural institutions with demonstrable ecological value.

## 7. Conclusion

Traditional religious beliefs significantly influence public attitudes and behaviors toward environmental conservation in Rivers State. These beliefs provide a moral and spiritual framework that encourages responsible stewardship of natural resources. Ignoring this dimension risks alienating key community stakeholders and missing culturally relevant opportunities for environmental engagement.

## 8. Recommendations

- Environmental policymakers should incorporate indigenous spiritual leaders into environmental education campaigns.
- Community-based conservation programs should respect and integrate traditional beliefs and taboos.
- Further research should explore how hybrid belief systems (traditional and modern) co-evolve in shaping environmental behavior.

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