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African ecologies: literary, cultural, and religious perspectives – introduction

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an introduction to the special section about the theme of 'African Ecologies: Literature, Culture and Religion'. It explores the current interdisciplinary field of scholarship on ecology, environment, and climate change in Africa, mapping contributions from across the Humanities and the Social and Environmental Sciences. The article positions this special section in this ever-expanding body of literature, specifically deploying the notion of 'African ecologies' as a heuristic lens to examine how the relationship and interaction between living organisms, including humans, and the natural environment is conceived. It argues that social, cultural, literary, and religious ecology provide vital perspectives to enrich and expand the understanding of African ecologies, thereby expanding inventories of possibilities as climate change response pathways. (This article is published in the thematic collection 'African ecologies: literary, cultural and religious perspectives', edited by Adriaan van Klinken, Simon Manda, Damaris Parsitau and Abel Ugba.)

Keywords Africa, ecology, environment, climate change, religion, culture, literature

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The current Anthropocene epoch shows that the consequences of global warming and climate change have a profound impact on African natural environments and landscapes, including the possibilities of life for humans and other living species therein (Hamann *et al*. 2020). The point has often been made, but is worth repeating, that the life-threatening effects of the environmental crisis are hitting the African continent and other parts of the Global South hard, even though these regions contributed relatively little to the causes of this crisis. African decolonising perspectives to the Anthropocene foreground the long-standing and ongoing histories of colonial and capitalist modernity that have shaped the particular vulnerabilities of the African continent to changes in ecosystems and natural environments as a result of anthropogenic activities (Brownell 2022; McEwan 2021; Odada *et al*. 2020; Peša 2022). The centrality of these advances points to environmental politics, commodification, and dispossession of African resources and heritage.

It has been argued that, in the face of the realisation that 'the environmental crisis is immediate and threatens life, not just on some nebulous thing called "the planet" but more concretely in particular and local communities in Africa', as humankind we are presented with a 'kairotic moment' (Antonio 2012: 141). This phrase, derived from the ancient Greek word *kairos*, meaning 'critical moment' or even 'moment of truth', underlines the urgency of the current crisis

and the need to be creative and innovative in the quest for knowledges that can help us understand, address, and possibly find solutions for the major environmental challenges on the continent. As part of this quest, scholars in African environmental studies have engaged a myriad of disciplinary perspectives and methodologies (Fraser *et al.* 2024). In the Humanities this includes environmental history and historical ecology, deploying historical methods to examine how the relationship between human communities and natural environments has evolved over time and has been defined: for instance, by coproduction and adaptation (Oba 2014). Literary and cultural studies explore how African cultural production and literary texts represent and engage with questions of ecology and environmental change, using critical concepts such as ecopoetics and ecocriticism (Aghoghovwia & McGiffin 2024; Caminero-Santangelo 2014; Iheka 2018). In philosophy, traditions in African thought that contain ecological wisdoms and that can motivate an ethics of environmental justice are being scrutinised (Chemhuru 2022). Religious studies draw attention to how African religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are intricately connected to the natural environment, often attaching sacred significance to the latter, as reflected in various forms of ecospirituality (Antonio 2012; Olupona 2006), as well as identifying and mobilising religious resources that are useful in addressing climate and environmental change (Chitando *et al.* 2022; van Klinken 2022). Combined, these and other perspectives have formed an emerging discourse of African environmental humanities, which has been institutionalised through networks such as the African Network of Environmental Humanities (Agbonifo 2014).

In the Social and Environmental Sciences, African environmental studies have included perspectives such as anthropology and sociology, examining the social and cultural epistemologies through which local communities understand and respond to climate change (Ahrens & Halbmayer 2023). Social geography focuses on the rural and urban geographies of climate change adaptation (Cobbinah & Addaney 2019) and the manifestations of climate change in natural, agricultural, and social landscapes (Homewood 2018). Development studies assess and strengthen the resilience of local communities in the face of environmental and climate change, and putting climate change adaptation and climate risk management at the heart of the policy and practice of sustainable development on the continent (Mikulewicz & Taylor 2020; Manda & Mukanda 2023; Moyo 2024). Political studies investigate the local, national, and international politics concerning climate change, and the political economy of natural resources and environmental conflicts (Addaney *et al.* 2023; Ani *et al.* 2021). Law and human rights studies explore the legal issues and human rights implications relating to climate change and environmental policies in African contexts (Ashukem & Sama 2023, 2024).

Clearly, there is an ever-expanding body of scholarship on issues of environment and climate change in African contexts. This special section builds on, and contributes to, this body of literature, by specifically focusing on the notion of 'African ecologies' as a heuristic lens to examine how the relationship and interaction between living organisms, including humans, and the natural

environment is conceived (Allaby 2010). As Katherine (Homewood 2018) points out, 'To natural scientists, ecology is the study of the interactions between an organism or species and its environment and is an inherently apolitical pursuit.' However, as she continues, 'the environment itself is politicized', and, we would add, is also shaped by social and cultural epistemologies: that is, systems of knowledge and meaning that mediate the ways in which humans relate to other living organisms and inhabit the natural environment. As a result, ecology is not only an object of study of the environmental sciences, but also for the humanities and social sciences. In the light of fundamental critiques of Western ecologies that have brought about the current Anthropocene crisis, it is more important than ever to draw attention to indigenous and African-centred knowledges, as these open up new and alternative ways of understanding and relating to the natural environment (Cooper & Morrell 2014; Ebhuoma & Leonard 2022). Social, cultural, and religious ecology provide us with vital perspectives to enrich and expand the understanding of African ecologies, thereby expanding inventories of possibilities as climate change response pathways.

Although sometimes a distinction is made between 'Science' and 'science', creating a hierarchy between different forms of knowledge production in environmental studies, we consider such a distinction problematic and argue that climate change responses present very difficult political and economic choices to be negotiated socially and culturally (e.g. see Milbank *et al.* 2021). Our starting point in this special section is that ecological justice can only be achieved through epistemic justice, which includes a decentring of Eurocentric knowledges and a privileging of knowledges from the Global South, including Africa, as part of a decolonising move in scholarship and policy-making (Ndlovu-Gathseni 2018). Drawing on conceptual tools rooted in epistemologies, indigenous knowledges and creative forms of activism from the African continent allows for generating productive and genuinely global ways of understanding and reinterpreting contemporary ecologies (Maathai 2009; Ogude & Mushonga 2022). How can diverse African spiritual and philosophical traditions of intergenerational justice better inform our climate planning (van Klinken 2022)? How can the arts, literatures, religions, and cultures of African societies better attune us to the human toll of climate injustice, as well as to ways of responding to this (Iheka 2018, 2021)? How can the lessons of history, anthropology, and politics proffer knowledge about our everyday choices and their environmental impact, as well as about the (in)ability of local communities, social institutions, and political structures to address these with creativity, resilience, and criticality (Spinage 2012)? Crucially, we ask: how can we generate and translate African and global knowledges from across the broadest range of humanities and social sciences to support global efforts to generate effective responses to ecological change, both in Africa and worldwide?

The articles presented in this special section engage with the above questions in various ways. Drawing from literary texts, photographs, interviews, and ethnographic observation, they each contribute novel insight and deepen our understanding of African ecologies in their complexity and diversity. The first

article, by Zaynab Ango, discusses the environmental thinking of two African women writers and activists (each of them being also a Nobel Prize Laureate), Nadine Gordimer (from South Africa) and Wangari Maathai (from Kenya). Reading two selected texts by these writers, Ango adopts the lens of post-colonial ecocritism to elucidate how Gordimer and Maathai critically represent African natural environments as being devastated by the histories and ongoing effects of colonialist and capitalist exploitation of natural resources. She further highlights how both writers also foreground alternative ways of relating to the natural environment, rooted in Africanist worldviews that promote harmony and balance, thus decentring Western-oriented development models. In the second article, Emmanuel Edafe Erhijodo also takes a literary approach, but focusing on ecopoetry that has emerged from the Niger Delta in Nigeria, a region widely associated with long-term oil pollution and subsequent environmental degradation. Erhijodo's insightful analysis of selected poems by two poets, Tanure Ojaide and Stephen Kekeghe, illuminates how poetic language captures the trauma of communities living in this region. He argues that this trauma is both of an ecological and spiritual nature, exactly because the natural environment is considered as sacred in indigenous ecologies. The article can be seen as an intervention in solution-based approaches to environmental degradation, as it underlines the need to attend to the long-term and complex trauma of human and natural communities that is one of the legacies of the Anthropocene. The third article, by Ibukunolu Isaac Olodude, is a highly original contribution to this special section, as it focuses on the sound of the cockcrow as a resource of ecological knowledge. Building on a renewed interest in indigenous knowledges and their ecological resonance and significance, Olodude's intriguing discussion unpacks the ecospiritual implications of the sounds of the cockcrow in rural dwellings of the Yoruba people in West Africa. At one level, the article exemplifies how humans and other creatures lived together in harmonious and interdependent ways. At another level, it presents the wisdom of Yoruba ancient practices that depend on nature to negotiate everyday challenges as an alternative to modern science and technology, which tend to instrumentalise and exploit natural resources. Finally, the fourth article, by Noela Kinyuy Banla, is an empirically rich study of the indigenous religious practices of the Nso' people of Cameroon. Drawing methodologically on the concept of ecology of religion, and on the notion of photography as an ecological memoir, Banla analyses selected photographs of traditional religious rituals through which the Nso' seek to understand, deal with, and respond to changes in the climate and its effect on their natural environment. Interestingly, despite the processes of social change that came with colonial and post-colonial modernity, Banla shows how these indigenous practices are preserved to date, thus demonstrating the ongoing vitality of African indigenous religions and their relevance for current ecological challenges.

The articles were first presented as papers at a workshop on African Ecologies, convened by the editors of this special section, which took place on 29–31 July 2023 at the British Institute for Eastern Africa, in Nairobi, Kenya, in collaboration with the Leeds University Centre for African Studies.

The workshop was funded under a British Academy Writing Workshop grant. At the workshop, the participants—early-career researchers from different parts of the continent—presented draft papers and received feedback from their peers as well as from senior academics and journal editors. They also received training in important academic skills, such as interdisciplinarity, peer review, and grant application. Revised versions of the papers were subsequently also presented at a conference of the African Association for the Study of Religions, in panels on 'Religion, Culture and Ecology in Africa', which took place at the University of Nairobi, 2–4 August 2023. This themed section of the *Journal of the British Academy* presents a first selection of the workshop papers, with another selection intended for publication in a later issue of the same journal. During the Nairobi workshop, as conveners and participants, we were reminded of the legendary work of the late Kenyan environmental activist, Wangari Maathai, with the trees she planted in Freedom Corner of Uhuru Park, in central Nairobi, still standing strong. The articles in this special section can be seen as a response to Maathai's call for African communities to 'deepen their sense of self-knowledge and realise that to care for the environment is to take care of themselves and their children—that in healing the earth they are healing themselves' (Maathai 2009: 170). Critically, the African self-knowledge presented in these articles offers important insights into environmental care and responsibility beyond the continent, too, as the wisdoms contained herein are universally significant.

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