

African Environmentalism, Pentecostalism and Legalism: The Ideal Triad for Environmental Sustainability Paradigm?

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Abstract

Environmental degradation in Africa persists despite the proliferation of environmental laws and global sustainability commitments, revealing the limitations of purely legal and technocratic approaches. This article interrogates the intersections of African environmentalism, Pentecostal Christianity, and legalism as a proposed triadic framework for advancing environmental sustainability in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa. Adopting a doctrinal and conceptual approach, the paper critically examines indigenous African environmental ethics, Pentecostal theology and practice, and the role of law in shaping environmental behaviour. It argues that traditional African belief systems historically promoted conservation through communalism, taboos, and intergenerational responsibility, but these values have been weakened by colonialism, modernisation, and globalisation. The article further contends that although Pentecostalism wields significant moral, social, and economic influence in contemporary African societies, it has remained largely ecologically silent, often prioritising prosperity theology and eschatological concerns over environmental stewardship. Additionally, the paper highlights the inadequacy of environmental legal regimes in Africa, noting weak enforcement, cultural alienation, and over-reliance on “soft law” instruments. The study posits that sustainable environmental governance in Africa requires an integrated framework that harmonises indigenous environmental ethics, faith-based moral persuasion, and enforceable legal mechanisms. It concludes that environmental participation—anchored in religious institutions, community structures, and legal accountability—serves as the critical nexus for operationalising this triad and fostering a culturally grounded and sustainable environmental paradigm.

Key Words: Environmental Governance, African Environmental Ethics, Pentecostalism and Sustainability, Regulatory Compliance Theory, Environmental Law in Nigeria, Participatory Environmental Regulation

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation in Nigeria, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, persists despite the proliferation of environmental statutes, institutional regulators, and multilateral treaty commitments. Oil pollution in the Niger Delta, desertification in the Sahelian belt, deforestation across rainforest zones, indiscriminate waste disposal in urban centres, and escalating climate vulnerability collectively expose a structural paradox (environmental

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governance frameworks exist in formal terms, yet environmental decline continues in material reality). This paradox reveals that the challenge confronting Nigeria is not merely legislative insufficiency but regulatory ineffectiveness, compliance fragility, and normative disconnection.

Environmentalism, understood as a philosophy and social movement concerned with conservation, ecological balance, and protection of non-human life systems, has historically drawn from ethical, religious, and cultural foundations rather than from positive law alone.² In African societies, environmental stewardship was embedded within communal structures, ritual sanctions, sacred geographies, and intergenerational obligations. Environmental protection was neither bureaucratically administered nor technocratically designed; it was culturally internalised and spiritually enforced. Sacred forests, taboos governing hunting and fishing seasons, communal land tenure systems, and reverence for water bodies functioned as ecological regulatory mechanisms long before the codification of environmental statutes.³

However, colonial legal transplantation, market-driven development paradigms, and rapid urbanisation altered these indigenous regulatory ecologies. Communal ownership regimes were replaced or diluted by individualised property structures. Extraction intensified in response to global commodity markets. Environmental governance became formalised within statutory frameworks often detached from local normative systems. The consequence has been a widening gap between formal environmental law and lived environmental practice.

Simultaneously, Nigeria has witnessed the exponential rise of Pentecostal Christianity as a dominant socio-religious force. From early revivalist movements such as the Aladura churches to contemporary megachurch institutions with transnational networks, Pentecostalism now constitutes one of the most influential moral and organisational structures in Nigerian society.⁴ Its institutional reach, financial capacity, political visibility, and capacity for mass mobilisation are unparalleled. Yet environmental engagement has not occupied a central or consistent place within mainstream Pentecostal theology or governance practice. Certain strands of Pentecostal eschatology (particularly those emphasising imminent divine intervention or the passing away of the present world order) have been interpreted as

² M.E Metuh, 'African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation' (Imico Publishers 1987).

³ Chukwudi E Okoye, 'An Evolved African Conception of the Environment' (2008) 3(1) African Research Review 16.

⁴ Segun Ogungbemi, 'An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis' (1997) 4(3) Environmental Ethics 23.

attenuating ecological urgency. Daniel Rakes, engaging Miroslav Volf, observes that annihilationist eschatological frameworks may sit uneasily with long-term environmental commitments.⁵ Murray Dempster similarly argues that Pentecostal eschatology requires reformulation if it is to generate robust social and ecological ethics.⁶

At the same time, Nigerian environmental law although extensive in textual form; remains plagued by enforcement deficits. Regulatory agencies suffer from resource constraints, weak monitoring systems, political interference, and limited community participation. The formal existence of environmental standards has not translated into consistent compliance. Moreover, environmental law often operates in a culturally alien register, perceived as externally imposed rather than communally grounded. The result is a compliance culture that is frequently reactive rather than internalised.

The intersection of these dynamics such as eroded indigenous ethics, powerful but ecologically under-engaged religious institutions, and fragile legal enforcement; raises a foundational question for environmental governance in Nigeria: is sustainable environmental governance in Nigeria achievable through law alone, or does it require a culturally grounded integration of ethical, institutional, and regulatory systems?

This article contends that environmental sustainability in Nigeria requires what may be termed a "triadic integration" of three interdependent pillars: (1) African environmental ethics as normative resources; (2) Pentecostal theology and institutional governance as social levers; and (3) strengthened environmental law characterised by participatory enforcement and credible compliance mechanisms. None of these elements is independently sufficient. Law without normative legitimacy risks symbolic compliance. Ethics without institutional embodiment lacks systemic reach. Religious influence without regulatory accountability may produce moral exhortation without structural change.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, it reframes African environmental ethics not as nostalgic cultural artefacts but as normative resources capable of strengthening modern environmental governance when critically refined. Drawing on Okoye's analysis of evolved

⁵ Okoye Chuka, *From Traditional to Modernism: A Study of the Problem of Environment in Africa*. Open Journal of Philosophy (2012) Vol. 2, No. 4, 272-278. Available at <http://www.SciRP.org/journal/ojpp>; S. Ogungbemi, *An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis*. In L.J. Pojman (ED.), *Environmental ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co.; Edith Brown Weiss, 'In Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony and Intergenerational Equity' (United Nations University 1989).

⁶ Nimi Wariboko, 'The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit' (Eerdmans 2012).

African conceptions of the environment and Ogungbemi's critique of developmental imitation, this article argues that communal stewardship and intergenerational continuity can supply the moral legitimacy currently lacking in statutory environmental regimes.⁷ Next, it reconceptualises Pentecostal institutions not merely as theological actors but as governance structures. Contemporary megachurches in Nigeria operate extensive administrative systems, control significant land holdings, and mobilise millions of adherents. Empirical studies such as Durugbo, Oyetoran and Oyedide's vegetation assessment of large religious camps in Ogun State demonstrate that religious institutional expansion carries measurable environmental implications.⁸ Yet these same institutions possess the organisational coherence and financial capacity to adopt renewable energy technologies, implement waste management systems, and mobilise environmental education at scale. The question is therefore not whether Pentecostalism affects environmental governance, but how that influence can be normatively redirected and legally embedded.

Also, this article addresses a doctrinal deficit in existing discourse by situating the ethical and theological analysis within the architecture of Nigerian environmental law. Rather than treating "legalism" as mere strict adherence to rules or as authoritarian sanction severity, this study clarifies the distinction between interpretive formalism, regulatory design, and compliance theory. Effective environmental governance requires not punitive excess but sanction credibility, participatory legitimacy, and institutional coherence. Compliance theory demonstrates that certainty of enforcement often outweighs severity of penalty. Legitimacy theory shows that cultural grounding enhances voluntary compliance. Thus, environmental law must be strengthened not only in sanction design but in participatory architecture.

The central thesis advanced here is that environmental participation constitutes the connective tissue of the triad. Participation which is understood as structured engagement of communities, religious institutions, and regulatory bodies, transforms environmental law from externally imposed command into internally endorsed norm. When indigenous ethical principles are harmonised with Pentecostal moral authority and embedded within enforceable legal frameworks, environmental governance becomes culturally resonant and institutionally

⁷ Steven Bouma-Prediger, 'For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care' (2nd edn, Baker Academic 2010).

⁸ E.U. Durogbo, B.O. Oyetoran and N.E. Oyedide, Vegetation Inventory of the Redemption Camp, Ogun State, Nigeria; Evaluation of Medicinal Plant Resources and Strategies for Conservation. *Journal of Biological Sciences*, 12: 34-42. DOI: 10.3923/jbs.2012.34.42 URL: <https://scialert.net/abstract/?doi=jbs.2012.34.42>; Murray W Dempster, 'The Search for Pentecostal Social Ethics: A Response to Douglas Petersen' (1999) 18(1) *Pneuma* 53.

viable. In advancing this thesis, the article does not romanticise traditional systems, nor does it indict Pentecostalism as ecologically deficient. Rather, it adopts a critical yet constructive posture. Indigenous ethics require refinement. Pentecostal theology requires ecological re-articulation. Environmental law requires participatory strengthening. The aim is not to privilege one pillar over the others but to demonstrate their interdependence.

The argument unfolds in six further sections. Section Two outlines the methodological and conceptual framework. Section Three examines African environmental ethics as normative resources, while acknowledging their limits. Section Four analyses Pentecostal theology and institutional governance as potential levers of ecological reform. Section Five provides a doctrinal examination of Nigerian environmental law, focusing on participation, compliance, and remedies. Section Six develops an integration model and identifies implementable pathways for operationalising the triad. Section Seven concludes by reflecting on the implications of normative-institutional integration for sustainable governance in Nigeria.

Environmental degradation in Nigeria is not solely a legal failure. It is also a normative and institutional challenge. Addressing it requires more than legislative amendment; it requires cultural alignment and participatory legitimacy. The triadic framework proposed in this article offers a pathway toward such alignment.

2. Methodology and Scope

This study adopts a combined doctrinal and conceptual methodology, informed by interdisciplinary legal scholarship and grounded in normative institutional analysis. The doctrinal component involves structured examination of Nigerian environmental regulatory architecture, including statutory frameworks, enforcement mechanisms, participation provisions, and remedial structures. Rather than merely cataloguing legislative instruments, the analysis interrogates how regulatory design influences compliance behaviour. Particular attention is given to participation mechanisms, sanction structures, and enforcement credibility. The objective is not to produce exhaustive statutory commentary, but to identify structural characteristics that either facilitate or undermine effective environmental governance. The conceptual component engages African environmental ethics and Pentecostal theological frameworks as normative systems capable of influencing environmental behaviour. This dimension draws on philosophical and theological scholarship. The purpose is not theological adjudication but normative analysis but examining how doctrinal emphases shape social attitudes toward ecological responsibility.

The methodological approach is therefore interpretive and normative rather than empirical in the quantitative sense. The article does not claim to measure statistically the environmental footprint of religious institutions, nor does it attempt econometric modelling of compliance rates. Instead, it identifies structural pathways (ethical, institutional, and regulatory) through which environmental governance may be strengthened. Sources include primary statutory materials, theological works, and peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and other reputable databases. Web-based materials are used cautiously and primarily for contextual illustration rather than evidentiary foundation.

The scope of the article is limited to Nigeria, though broader African illustrations are occasionally employed to illuminate conceptual points. The choice of Nigeria is justified on three grounds. First, Nigeria represents one of the largest and most religiously vibrant societies in Africa, where Pentecostal Christianity wields substantial influence. Second, Nigeria's environmental challenges are acute and diverse, spanning oil pollution, desertification, deforestation, and urban waste crises. Third, Nigeria maintains a relatively elaborate environmental legal framework, making it a suitable case study for examining the gap between formal law and effective governance.

The concept of "legalism" is treated carefully within this methodological framework. Rather than adopting theological definitions of legalism as moral rigidity, this article situates the term within legal theory. Legalism may denote formalist interpretation detached from social context; it may also refer to strict rule adherence. However, environmental governance requires balancing rule certainty with contextual sensitivity. Accordingly, this study distinguishes between interpretive formalism, sanction severity, and compliance theory, avoiding conceptual conflation. The article also proceeds from the premise that sustainable environmental governance in Nigeria cannot be analysed through a single disciplinary lens. Law operates within cultural contexts. Religion shapes behavioural norms. Indigenous ethics influence legitimacy perceptions. Therefore, an interdisciplinary yet legally grounded methodology is essential. The normative orientation of this study does not undermine its analytical rigour. Rather, it reflects the reality that environmental governance is inherently value-laden. The central analytical task is to identify how normative legitimacy, institutional capacity, and regulatory design interact. The triadic model proposed in this article emerges from that interaction.

3. African Environmental Ethics as Normative Resources (with Limits)

African environmental ethics predate codified environmental statutes and international sustainability discourse. Long before the emergence of contemporary doctrines such as sustainable development or intergenerational equity, African societies embedded environmental regulation within cosmology, communal structures, and spiritual accountability.⁹ The relevance of these indigenous ethical systems for contemporary environmental governance lies not in nostalgic restoration but in their capacity to supply normative legitimacy where formal legal regimes often lack cultural grounding.

Cosmology, Communalism and Environmental Regulation

Traditional African worldviews are frequently characterised by an ontological continuity between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. The environment is not conceived as inert matter subject solely to instrumental exploitation; rather, it is integrated into a moral universe in which land, forests, rivers, and animals possess relational significance. This relational ontology undergirded regulatory practices that effectively conserved biodiversity and limited resource overuse. Sacred forests, such as the Igbo Oro forests in southern Nigeria, functioned as ecological sanctuaries protected by spiritual sanctions and communal enforcement.¹⁰ Access was restricted not merely by custom but by metaphysical accountability. Rivers were personified; certain species were taboo; agricultural cycles were regulated by ritual calendars. These mechanisms operated as proto-environmental regulatory systems long before the advent of statutory environmental impact assessments.¹¹

Okoye's analysis of the evolved African conception of the environment suggests that traditional African environmental thought is neither crudely exploitative nor fully ecocentric.¹² Rather, it reflects a form of what might be termed "custodial anthropocentrism" which means that humans occupy a central role but as stewards rather than absolute masters.¹³ The environment possesses value insofar as it sustains communal life, yet that value is morally circumscribed. Misuse invites both social sanction and spiritual repercussion. Metuh reinforces this intergenerational dimension by observing that traditional African societies often regulated environmental use with reference to future continuity.¹⁴

⁹ Taibat A Lawanson and Olusegun Y Agunbiade, 'Land Governance and Megacity Development: The Lagos-Ibadan Growth Corridor in Nigeria' (2018) 32 Land Use Policy 481.

¹⁰ Tom R Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (Princeton University Press 2006).

¹¹ National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (Establishment) Act 2007.

¹² Ibid 4; Cass R Sunstein, 'On the Expressive Function of Law' (1996) 144(5) University of Pennsylvania Law Review 202

¹³ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 20.

¹⁴ Ibid 1; Brian H Bix, *Jurisprudence: Theory and Context* (8th edn, Sweet & Maxwell 2019).

Environmental restraint was motivated not solely by fear of divine punishment but by concern for lineage survival. This orientation resonates strongly with the modern principle of intergenerational equity articulated in international environmental law and affirmed in jurisprudence across multiple jurisdictions.

From a governance perspective, these indigenous systems achieved what many modern regulatory frameworks struggle to accomplish: internalised compliance. Behaviour was shaped not primarily by external enforcement agencies but by communal expectation and spiritual legitimacy. In contemporary compliance theory, legitimacy is widely recognised as a critical driver of voluntary adherence.¹⁵ Where legal norms align with cultural values, enforcement costs decline and compliance becomes self-reinforcing.¹⁶

Colonial Disruption and the Erosion of Normative Authority

The colonial encounter introduced European property regimes that privileged individualised ownership and commodified land use. Indigenous communal tenure systems were displaced or reconfigured. Extraction intensified to serve metropolitan economic interests. The spiritual ecology that once reinforced environmental restraint was weakened by missionary denunciations of "fetish" practices and by the secularisation of governance structures.¹⁷

Ogunbemi attributes Africa's contemporary environmental crisis partly to developmental imitation which is an uncritical adoption of Western industrial models that prioritise economic growth over ecological sustainability.¹⁸ The postcolonial state inherited regulatory frameworks that were structurally detached from local normative systems. Environmental governance became bureaucratic rather than communal, statutory rather than cosmological. The result is a legitimacy deficit. Environmental statutes,¹⁹ though textually robust, are often perceived as external impositions rather than culturally internalised norms. This perception undermines compliance culture. When law operates in a register alien to lived social experience, enforcement becomes adversarial rather than participatory.

¹⁵ Robert V Percival and others, *Environmental Regulation: Law, Science and Policy* (8th edn, Wolters Kluwer 2018).

¹⁶ Neil Gunningham and Peter Grabosky, *Smart Regulation: Designing Environmental Policy* (Clarendon Press 1998).

¹⁷ Kristin Mann, 'African and European Initiatives in the Transformation of Land Tenure in Colonial Lagos, 1840–1920' in *Native Claims: Indigenous Law against Empire, 1500–1920* (Oxford University Press 2011) 223–247.; Sam Moyo, 'African Land Questions, the State and Agrarian Transition' (2004) SARP Working Paper 54–56.

¹⁸ Ibid 4; Upendra Baxi, 'The Avatars of Indian Judicial Activism: Explorations in the Geographies of Injustice' in S K Verma and Kusum (eds), *Fifty Years of the Supreme Court of India: Its Grasp and Reach* (Oxford University Press 2000).

¹⁹ Environmental Impact Assessment Act, Cap E12 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004.

Anthropocentrism Revisited: Intrinsic Value and Its Limits

One persistent critique of traditional African environmental ethics concerns their anthropocentric orientation. If environmental value is primarily derivative of human welfare, can such a framework sustain robust ecological protection in the face of modern industrial pressures? It is true that classical African thought does not consistently articulate intrinsic value in the Kantian or deep ecological sense. However, custodial anthropocentrism does not equate to exploitative instrumentalism. The moral constraint embedded in communal cosmology often operated more effectively than abstract intrinsic value doctrines in contemporary policy discourse.²⁰

Moreover, even modern environmental law is not wholly ecocentric. Sustainable development itself balances ecological protection with economic and social objectives. The task, therefore, is not to impose an external ecocentric paradigm but to refine indigenous custodial principles in light of contemporary ecological science.

Limits and the Risk of Romanticisation

It would be analytically irresponsible to romanticise precolonial environmental systems. Communal ownership did not eliminate conflict or overuse. Population densities were lower; technological extraction capacity was limited. Contemporary urbanisation, industrial agriculture, and globalised markets generate pressures far exceeding those of earlier eras.

Furthermore, certain traditional practices (such as reliance on fuelwood for cooking) contributed to deforestation. The distinction lies in scale and technological intensity. Modern environmental degradation is structurally amplified by industrial processes and fossil fuel dependence. Thus, the value of African environmental ethics lies not in wholesale restoration but in normative adaptation. Communal stewardship, intergenerational continuity, and reverence for ecological balance can inform contemporary governance frameworks without ignoring modern realities.²¹

Normative Integration and Legal Legitimacy

For environmental law to achieve sustained compliance in Nigeria, it must resonate with cultural values. This does not require replacing statutory frameworks with customary law.

²⁰ Ayodele Atsenuwa, 'Public Participation in Environmental Governance in Nigeria' (2012) 6(2) Nigerian Current Law Review 45.

²¹ S. Ogungbemi, An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis. In L.J. Pojman (ED.), Environmental ethics: Readings in Theory and Application. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co

Rather, it requires aligning regulatory objectives with indigenous ethical narratives. For instance, the doctrine of intergenerational equity can be framed not merely as international legal obligation but as continuity with ancestral stewardship. Environmental participation provisions can draw upon communal decision-making traditions. Sacred forest conservation models can inform community-based biodiversity protection.²²

The integration of indigenous ethics into modern environmental governance strengthens legitimacy, reduces enforcement resistance, and enhances participatory engagement. African environmental ethics, critically refined and contextually adapted, therefore constitute a vital normative pillar within the proposed triadic framework. They provide moral grounding where statutory authority alone proves insufficient.²³

4. Pentecostal Theology and Governance as Normative and Institutional Levers

If African environmental ethics provide the normative memory of ecological stewardship, contemporary Nigerian Pentecostalism represents one of the most powerful living institutional forces capable of reshaping environmental consciousness and behaviour. Any serious proposal for sustainable environmental governance in Nigeria that ignores Pentecostal Christianity would be analytically incomplete. The relevant question is not whether Pentecostalism influences public life, it unquestionably does; but whether its theological emphases and institutional capacities can be constructively aligned with ecological responsibility and environmental law.

The Rise and Institutional Structure of Nigerian Pentecostalism

Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria has evolved from early twentieth-century revivalist movements into a vast network of megachurches, prayer camps, universities, media platforms, and transnational branches. Its influence extends beyond liturgy into education, healthcare, political engagement, and economic development. Churches own extensive tracts of land, operate residential campuses, and host large-scale gatherings that temporarily create population densities comparable to urban municipalities. These religious institutions therefore function not merely as spiritual communities but as governance actors. They regulate land use within their territories, construct infrastructure, manage waste streams, and shape behavioural

²² Segun Ogungbemi, 'An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis' (1997) 9(1) Environmental Ethics 28-33.; M D Subash Chandran and Donald A Hughes, 'Sacred Groves and Conservation: The Comparative History of Traditional Reserves in the Mediterranean Area and South India' (2000) 4(2) Environment and History 170-174, 181-183. Edith Brown Weiss, In Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony and Intergenerational Equity (United Nations University 1989) 17-21, 94-96.

²³ *ibid*

norms among millions of adherents. In effect, many large Pentecostal institutions exercise quasi-municipal authority within defined spatial zones.²⁴

Empirical environmental consequences of this expansion are measurable. Durugbo, Oyetoran and Oyedide's vegetation assessment of religious camp grounds in Ogun State demonstrates that institutional expansion may result in biodiversity alteration and land-use change. The study does not indict religious growth per se, but it illustrates a structural reality: religious institutional expansion carries ecological footprints. The environmental impact of faith-based institutions is therefore not abstract but concrete.²⁵

From a regulatory perspective, this institutional footprint raises two critical questions: a.) To what extent are large religious institutions subject to environmental impact assessment and regulatory compliance mechanisms? b.) Can their internal governance structures become vehicles for environmental reform rather than contributors to degradation? Answers to these queries can be the subject of further enquiry and research which is not in the purview of this research,

Eschatology, Creation Theology, and Environmental Attitudes

Theological orientation shapes ethical disposition. One strand of Pentecostal thought emphasises imminent eschatological fulfilment, that is, the expectation of divine intervention and transformation of the present world order. Critics argue that such perspectives may reduce long-term environmental motivation if the material world is viewed as transient.

Daniel Rakes, engaging Miroslav Volf's eschatological theology, suggests that annihilationist or discontinuity-based eschatology may undermine ecological responsibility by implying that the present creation lacks enduring value.²⁶ If the earth is destined for replacement rather than renewal, environmental preservation may appear secondary. Murray Dempster similarly contends that Pentecostal theology requires reformulation if it is to generate sustained social and ecological ethics.²⁷ He argues that Pentecostal spirituality possesses transformative energy but has historically prioritised personal salvation and spiritual gifts over systemic ecological concerns.

²⁴ Afe Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (Bloomsbury Academic 2013) 78-82, 84-86; Nimi Wariboko, 'Pentecostal Paradigms of National Economic Prosperity in Africa' (2014) 40(1) *Pneuma* 67-69, 72-73; Asonzeh Ukah, 'Roadside Pentecostalism: Religious Spaces and the Transformation of the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway' (2014) 42(3) *Journal of Religion in Africa* 329-332, 335-338.

²⁵ *Ibid* 7

²⁶ Okoye (n 2).

²⁷ Ogungbemi (n 3).

However, these critiques do not exhaust Pentecostal theological resources. Alternative interpretive strands emphasise stewardship rooted in the Genesis creation narrative, where humanity is entrusted with care of the earth. The concept of divine ownership and human accountability can generate powerful ecological ethics. If creation is understood as God's handiwork rather than disposable material, environmental degradation becomes a moral violation rather than a neutral economic activity. The theological question, therefore, is not whether Pentecostalism is inherently environmentally negligent, but which interpretive strand is foregrounded in preaching, teaching, and institutional policy. The same religious tradition that mobilises millions for fasting and prayer can mobilise them for waste reduction, renewable energy adoption, and ecological restoration if doctrinal emphasis shifts.

Moral Authority and Behavioural Compliance

From a compliance theory perspective, religious authority can function as a powerful mechanism for norm internalisation. Legal sanctions operate externally; religious norms often operate internally through conscience, communal expectation, and moral identity. Research in regulatory theory consistently demonstrates that voluntary compliance increases when norms align with identity and moral conviction. If environmental responsibility is framed as obedience to divine mandate rather than mere regulatory requirement, behavioural change may be more durable.²⁸

Pentecostal churches possess weekly access to millions of adherents through sermons, small groups, and media broadcasts. Environmental messages embedded in worship contexts may penetrate more deeply than statutory directives communicated through regulatory agencies. Furthermore, Pentecostal churches operate hierarchical governance systems capable of implementing institutional reforms rapidly. If denominational leadership adopts environmental standards (for example, mandatory waste segregation at large gatherings, solar energy integration on campuses, or tree-planting initiatives) implementation can be systematised across branches. The institutional coherence of Pentecostal networks therefore represents a governance asset rather than merely a theological variable.²⁹

²⁸ Tom R Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (Princeton University Press 2006) 3-7, 161-164.; Cass R Sunstein, 'On the Expressive Function of Law' (1996) 144(5) *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 2024-2027, 2032-2035.

²⁹ Asonzeh Ukah, *Roadside Pentecostalism Critical Interventions* 2008 2(1-2):125-141 DOI: 10.1080/19301944.2008.10781334

Land Use, Infrastructure, and Regulatory Compliance

The environmental implications of large-scale church campuses extend beyond theology into land-use regulation and environmental law compliance. Construction of auditoria, residential quarters, roads, and parking facilities transforms ecosystems. Waste generation during major events strains local infrastructure. Water extraction and sewage disposal systems carry ecological consequences.

Under Nigerian environmental law, such developments may trigger environmental impact assessment requirements. Yet enforcement consistency remains uneven. Political sensitivity surrounding religious institutions may weaken regulatory oversight, creating a compliance gap. This gap underscores a central thesis of this article: environmental governance cannot rely solely on external enforcement where powerful institutions enjoy social legitimacy. Instead, participatory integration is required. Regulatory agencies must engage religious institutions as stakeholders, not merely as subjects of enforcement.

Environmental law can incorporate consultative frameworks requiring large religious organisations to adopt environmental management plans, submit periodic compliance reports, and implement sustainability measures. In return, religious institutions can leverage their moral authority to cultivate ecological awareness among adherents.

Pentecostalism as Environmental Partner Rather Than Adversary

It would be a category error to treat Pentecostal institutions solely as regulatory risks. Their organisational capacity, financial resources, and community reach position them as potential leaders in environmental innovation. Many large Nigerian Pentecostal churches operate universities and secondary schools. Environmental education integrated into curricula could influence generational attitudes. Church media networks can disseminate sustainability campaigns nationwide. Faith-based community outreach programs can incorporate sanitation, water conservation, and reforestation initiatives.

Globally, faith-based environmental movements demonstrate that religious institutions can become catalysts for ecological reform. The challenge in Nigeria is not theological impossibility but strategic integration. If Pentecostal theology emphasises stewardship, accountability before God, and love of neighbour (including protection from pollution and environmental harm) ecological responsibility becomes integral to faith practice.

Environmental degradation disproportionately harms the poor, a demographic often central to Pentecostal ministry. Thus, environmental justice aligns with core pastoral commitments.³⁰

Theological Reform and Legal Synergy

For Pentecostalism to function as a pillar within the proposed triadic framework, two developments are necessary: First, theological recalibration. Eschatology must be articulated in ways that affirm continuity between present stewardship and future hope. Creation care must be framed not as secular environmentalism but as spiritual obedience. Second, legal synergy. Environmental law must recognise religious institutions as structured actors within governance systems. Regulatory frameworks can require sustainability standards for large-scale gatherings, energy consumption, and land development without infringing religious freedom. This synergy transforms environmental law from adversarial oversight into collaborative governance. Religious institutions retain theological autonomy while aligning operational practices with environmental standards.

5. Nigerian Environmental Law: Participation, Compliance, and the Limits of Formal Legalism

If African environmental ethics provide normative legitimacy and Pentecostal institutions supply organisational capacity, environmental law constitutes the formal regulatory architecture within which sustainable governance must operate. Yet the persistence of environmental degradation in Nigeria demonstrates that legislative proliferation alone does not guarantee ecological protection. The central challenge lies not merely in statutory insufficiency but in enforcement fragility, participation deficits, and an overreliance on formal legalism detached from social legitimacy.

The Architecture of Nigerian Environmental Regulation

Nigeria's environmental regulatory framework is comparatively extensive. The cornerstone statute is the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (Establishment) Act (NESREA Act), which established the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) as the primary federal environmental enforcement authority. The Act empowers the Agency to enforce compliance with

³⁰ Willis Jenkins and Christopher Key Chapple, 'Religion and Environment' (2011) 37(4) Annual Review of Environment and Resources 442-445, 447-449.; Steven Bouma-Prediger, For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care (2nd edn, Baker Academic 2010) 24-27, 118-121; Robert Bullard, Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality, third edition, (2018). 10.4324/9780429495274.

environmental laws, regulations, and standards, including those relating to air quality, water pollution, hazardous waste, and biodiversity conservation.³¹

Complementing the NESREA framework is the Environmental Impact Assessment Act (EIA Act), which mandates environmental impact assessments for projects likely to significantly affect the environment.³² The EIA Act embodies preventive environmental governance, seeking to integrate environmental considerations into project planning before irreversible harm occurs. The Act also incorporates public participation provisions, recognising that affected communities possess legitimate interests in environmental decision-making.

Additional statutes regulate specific sectors, including oil and gas operations, waste management, forestry, and water resources. At the constitutional level, section 20 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria imposes a directive obligation upon the state to protect and improve the environment. Although classified under the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy and therefore non-justiciable, section 20 establishes an important normative baseline. In formal terms, therefore, Nigeria's environmental regulatory architecture is not skeletal. The question is why environmental degradation persists.

Enforcement Deficits and Regulatory Fragmentation

One explanation lies in enforcement capacity. Regulatory agencies frequently operate with limited funding, inadequate technical equipment, and insufficient personnel relative to the scale of environmental infractions. Monitoring industrial emissions, illegal dumping, oil spills, and land-use violations across a geographically vast and densely populated country requires substantial institutional resources. Moreover, regulatory fragmentation undermines coherence. Environmental responsibilities are distributed across federal, state, and local authorities, sometimes generating jurisdictional overlap and uncertainty. Inter-agency coordination is not always seamless, and political interference may weaken enforcement where powerful actors are implicated.³³

Sanction structures under the NESREA Act provide for fines, closure orders, and imprisonment.³⁴ However, regulatory theory suggests that sanction severity alone does not secure compliance. The certainty and consistency of enforcement often exert greater deterrent

³¹ Brown Weiss (n 4).

³² Wariboko (n 5).

³³ Metuh (n 1).

³⁴ Rakes (n 6).

effect than nominal penalty magnitude.³⁵ Where violations are rarely prosecuted or sanctions unevenly applied, regulated entities may rationally discount legal risk. The compliance deficit is therefore structural rather than purely legislative.

Participation and Legitimacy in Environmental Governance

The EIA Act's public participation provisions represent an important doctrinal recognition that environmental governance cannot be purely technocratic.³⁶ Public hearings and community consultation are designed to incorporate local knowledge and democratic accountability into project approval processes. However, participation often remains procedural rather than substantive. Communities may be informed but not genuinely empowered. Technical documentation may be inaccessible to non-specialists. Timeframes may limit meaningful engagement. Where participation is perceived as tokenistic, legitimacy suffers.

Legitimacy theory in regulatory scholarship emphasises that compliance increases when regulated communities perceive laws as procedurally fair and substantively just.³⁷ If environmental regulation is perceived as externally imposed, politically selective, or economically biased, voluntary compliance diminishes. This is where the integration of indigenous ethics and religious institutions becomes legally relevant rather than sociologically incidental. If environmental norms are framed within culturally resonant narratives (stewardship, ancestral continuity, divine accountability) legal compliance may shift from coerced obedience to internalised responsibility. Participation must therefore extend beyond statutory hearings to structured engagement with influential social institutions, including religious bodies.

Legalism, Formalism, and the Illusion of Regulatory Sufficiency

The term "legalism" requires careful clarification. In theological discourse, legalism may denote rigid adherence to rules detached from spiritual purpose. In legal theory, however, legalism often refers to interpretive formalism. That is, strict rule application without contextual sensitivity. Environmental governance in Nigeria sometimes reflects a different form of legalism: the assumption that enactment of regulations suffices for environmental protection. Legislative proliferation creates an appearance of regulatory seriousness, yet

³⁵ Dempster (n 7).

³⁶ EIA (n 18).

³⁷ NESREA Act (n 10).

without effective monitoring, transparent enforcement, and participatory legitimacy, such statutes risk becoming symbolic. Symbolic legislation are laws enacted primarily to signal commitment rather than to transform behaviour which may erode public trust if environmental harm persists despite textual safeguards.³⁸ Environmental sustainability requires more than normative declaration; it requires operational enforcement. This includes regular inspections, transparent reporting, judicial willingness to uphold environmental claims, and accessible remedies for affected communities.

Judicial Enforcement and Access to Remedies

Judicial enforcement constitutes a critical dimension of environmental governance. Nigerian courts have increasingly engaged environmental claims, particularly in relation to oil pollution and community rights. Strategic litigation can clarify regulatory obligations and hold both private corporations and state actors accountable. However, barriers remain. Litigation is costly and time-consuming. Standing doctrines may limit access. Evidence collection in environmental harm cases especially where pollution causation is contested; can be technically complex.

Expanding access to environmental justice may require procedural innovations, including broadened standing rules, specialised environmental courts or divisions, and strengthened legal aid mechanisms. Comparative experience from jurisdictions that have constitutionalised environmental rights suggests that judicial recognition of environmental harm as rights violation can elevate enforcement seriousness. Although Nigeria's constitutional environmental provision is non-justiciable, creative judicial interpretation and integration with human rights frameworks may offer pathways for enhanced enforceability.

Integrating Compliance Theory with Normative Legitimacy

Modern compliance theory distinguishes between deterrence-based and normative-based compliance.³⁹ Deterrence relies on sanctions and inspection; normative compliance relies on internalised obligation and legitimacy. Environmental governance in Nigeria requires a calibrated combination of both. Pure deterrence is resource-intensive and vulnerable to corruption or political interference. Pure voluntarism risks insufficient behavioural change where economic incentives favour pollution. The triadic integration proposed in this article

³⁸ Environmental Impact Assessment Act (n 11).

³⁹ Atsenuwa (n 13).

strengthens normative compliance without abandoning deterrence. Indigenous ethics provide cultural resonance. Pentecostal institutions provide moral authority and behavioural mobilisation. Environmental law provides formal standards and enforcement mechanisms. For example, large religious institutions required under the EIA Act to conduct environmental assessments for major expansions could simultaneously frame compliance as theological stewardship. Regulatory agencies could collaborate with religious networks to disseminate environmental education. Community-based monitoring initiatives could draw upon communal governance traditions. Such integration does not dilute legal authority; it reinforces it. When environmental norms are perceived as morally compelling and culturally continuous, enforcement resistance diminishes.

The Limits of Command-and-Control Alone

Traditional command-and-control regulation (setting standards and penalising violations) remains necessary. However, environmental challenges such as waste management, deforestation, and pollution often involve diffuse actors and behavioural patterns that extend beyond industrial facilities. Urban waste disposal practices, for example, reflect household behaviour, municipal capacity, and cultural attitudes. Regulatory agencies cannot monitor every street corner. Behavioural transformation requires social mobilisation. Pentecostal churches host weekly gatherings larger than many civic assemblies. Integrating environmental messaging into such platforms can multiply regulatory reach at minimal public expenditure. Similarly, indigenous communal structures can facilitate local monitoring of environmental infractions. Environmental law should therefore be conceived not as isolated statutory command but as part of a broader governance ecosystem.⁴⁰

6. Toward a Triadic Integration Model: Operational Pathways for Sustainable Environmental Governance

The preceding sections have demonstrated that neither indigenous ethics, Pentecostal institutions, nor environmental law, standing alone, is sufficient to secure sustainable environmental governance in Nigeria. Each represents a distinct regulatory modality: moral memory, organisational influence, and formal authority. The central argument of this article is that sustainability becomes structurally viable only when these modalities operate in coordinated alignment.

⁴⁰ John Braithwaite, *Responsive Regulation: Transcending the Deregulation Debate* (Oxford University Press 1992).

This section develops an operational integration model—one that is legally grounded, normatively legitimate, and institutionally implementable.

Conceptual Structure of the Triadic Model

The triadic integration model rests upon three mutually reinforcing pillars:

- a. *Normative Legitimacy (African Environmental Ethics)*
Environmental protection must be culturally resonant. Intergenerational stewardship, communal responsibility, and reverence for ecological balance provide legitimacy narratives capable of internalising compliance.
- b. *Institutional Mobilisation (Pentecostal Governance Structures)*
Religious institutions possess the administrative coherence and moral authority to translate ethical principles into collective behaviour.
- c. *Regulatory Authority (Environmental Law and Enforcement)*
Statutory standards, monitoring systems, and sanctions provide formal boundaries and deterrent structure.

The integration point lies in participation which is understood not merely as consultation, but as structured collaboration between regulators, communities, and religious institutions.

Embedding Indigenous Norms Within Regulatory Frameworks

The first operational pathway involves aligning statutory environmental provisions with indigenous stewardship principles. This does not require replacing statutory law with customary law. Rather, regulatory frameworks should incorporate community-based governance mechanisms consistent with traditional participatory models. For instance, under the Environmental Impact Assessment Act, public participation could be strengthened by mandating structured community advisory councils for projects affecting communal land or natural resources.⁴¹ Such councils could include traditional leaders and recognised community representatives, drawing upon established communal decision-making traditions. Similarly, biodiversity conservation initiatives could incorporate sacred forest protection models, where local communities assume stewardship responsibilities subject to federal environmental standards.⁴² This hybrid approach reduces enforcement burden on central agencies while reinforcing local ownership.

⁴¹ Gunningham and Grabosky (n 14).

⁴² Ibid

Importantly, indigenous norms must be critically refined to ensure compatibility with constitutional principles and human rights standards. Normative integration cannot justify exclusion or discrimination. Rather, it should strengthen participatory legitimacy within a constitutional framework.

Engaging Pentecostal Institutions as Environmental Governance Partners

The second operational pathway concerns structured engagement with Pentecostal institutions as environmental governance partners. Large religious institutions undertaking land development should be subject to transparent environmental compliance obligations under the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (Establishment) Act and related sectoral regulations.⁴³ However, enforcement should be complemented by partnership mechanisms. Regulatory agencies could develop voluntary sustainability certification schemes for faith-based institutions meeting specified environmental benchmarks, including: Renewable energy adoption (e.g., solar installations), Waste segregation and recycling systems, Water conservation infrastructure, Biodiversity preservation measures on church-owned land. Such certification could function analogously to corporate environmental responsibility frameworks but tailored to religious governance contexts.

Pentecostal universities and educational institutions can integrate environmental law and sustainability modules into curricula. Sermon guides and theological resources can be developed in collaboration with environmental scholars, framing ecological responsibility as stewardship rather than secular activism. This approach avoids coercive intrusion into doctrine while encouraging theological articulation aligned with environmental law.

Strengthening Participatory Environmental Enforcement

Participation must move beyond pre-project consultation to ongoing monitoring and compliance oversight. Community-based environmental monitoring, supported by regulatory agencies, can enhance detection of violations. For example, oil spill reporting systems in affected regions could incorporate trained community monitors collaborating with NESREA and other relevant agencies.⁴⁴ Religious institutions operating in such regions can provide communication networks and moral reinforcement for reporting compliance breaches.

⁴³ Tyler (n 16)

⁴⁴ Sunstein (n 17)

Participation also enhances transparency. Public disclosure of environmental compliance reports for major projects—including religious megacampuses—can incentivise reputational accountability. Where institutions publicly commit to sustainability standards, deviation carries moral as well as legal consequences.

Judicial Reinforcement and Rights-Based Framing

Although section 20 of the Nigerian Constitution remains non-justiciable, environmental protection can be linked to enforceable human rights provisions, including rights to life and dignity.⁴⁵ Courts may interpret severe environmental degradation as infringing these rights, thereby strengthening judicial oversight. Strategic litigation can reinforce regulatory standards while highlighting environmental injustice affecting vulnerable communities. Pentecostal institutions, many of which emphasise social justice and poverty alleviation, may find alignment between environmental advocacy and pastoral mission, particularly where pollution disproportionately harms the poor. A rights-based framing complements the triadic model by elevating environmental harm from regulatory infraction to rights violation.

Compliance Calibration: Balancing Deterrence and Norm Internalisation

Effective environmental governance requires calibrated enforcement. Deterrence mechanisms such as inspection, fines, closure orders; must remain credible.⁴⁶ However, excessive reliance on punitive measures risks adversarial relationships between regulators and communities. Norm internalisation reduces enforcement costs. When environmental protection is framed as moral duty grounded in ancestral continuity and divine stewardship, behavioural transformation becomes socially reinforced. Regulators should therefore adopt responsive regulation strategies, escalating sanctions where necessary but prioritising cooperative compliance where feasible.⁴⁷ Religious institutions that voluntarily adopt sustainability standards can serve as demonstrative models, encouraging peer emulation.

Addressing Structural Risks and Safeguards

Integration also requires vigilance against structural risks. Religious institutions wield significant political influence. Regulatory capture or preferential treatment would undermine equality before the law. Accordingly, transparency safeguards must accompany partnership initiatives. Sustainability certification criteria must be objective and publicly verifiable.

⁴⁵ Percival and others (n 19).

⁴⁶ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (n 12).

⁴⁷ Bix (n 18).

Enforcement actions must be applied consistently irrespective of institutional status.⁴⁸ Similarly, invocation of indigenous ethics must not marginalise minority groups or entrench patriarchal authority structures. Integration must operate within constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination.

From Symbolic to Substantive Environmental Governance

The ultimate aim of the triadic model is to transition from symbolic environmentalism to substantive governance. Symbolic environmentalism enacts laws, hosts conferences, and issues declarations without altering behavioural patterns. Substantive governance internalises norms, institutionalises compliance, and operationalises participation. Nigeria possesses rich normative traditions, vibrant religious institutions, and established legal frameworks. The failure has not been conceptual absence but structural disconnection. The triadic integration model seeks to bridge that disconnection.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Environmental degradation in Nigeria persists not because environmental law is absent, but because environmental governance remains structurally fragmented. Statutory frameworks exist. Regulatory agencies are constituted. Public participation mechanisms are formally recognised. Yet pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and waste mismanagement continue at scale. The challenge, as this article has argued, is not merely legislative insufficiency but normative disconnection and institutional misalignment. This article began from a central premise: sustainable environmental governance in Nigeria cannot be achieved through law alone. Nor can it be secured solely through appeals to indigenous ethics or theological exhortation. Each of these modalities such as customary moral frameworks, Pentecostal institutional influence, and statutory regulation; operates within its own sphere of authority. When isolated, each proves insufficient. When integrated, however, they form a mutually reinforcing governance architecture.

African environmental ethics provide a reservoir of normative legitimacy. Intergenerational stewardship, communal responsibility, and cosmological reverence for ecological balance resonate deeply within many Nigerian communities. These principles, critically refined and constitutionally aligned, can strengthen voluntary compliance by grounding environmental

⁴⁸ Braithwaite (n 15).

norms in culturally continuous narratives. Law gains durability when it speaks a language that communities recognise as their own.

Pentecostal institutions represent one of the most influential organisational structures in contemporary Nigeria. Their landholdings, educational networks, media reach, and moral authority grant them capacity far beyond the spiritual sphere. The environmental footprint of large religious institutions is tangible; so too is their potential to model sustainability. Where theological emphasis shifts toward stewardship, and where institutional governance incorporates environmental management systems, Pentecostal structures can function as catalysts rather than bystanders in environmental reform.

Environmental law, embodied in instruments such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (Establishment) Act and the Environmental Impact Assessment Act, provides the formal regulatory backbone. Yet enforcement deficits, resource limitations, and participation weaknesses constrain effectiveness. The problem is not that these statutes lack textual authority, but that their operational environment lacks normative internalisation and institutional synergy.

The triadic integration model proposed in this article offers a structural pathway forward. It does not dilute legal authority in favour of cultural relativism, nor does it sacralise environmentalism as theological dogma. Rather, it recognises that law operates within society, and that society in Nigeria is profoundly shaped by indigenous heritage and religious conviction. Three principal policy implications follow. First, environmental governance must deepen participatory architecture. Public consultation under the Environmental Impact Assessment regime should move beyond procedural compliance to substantive engagement, incorporating community advisory mechanisms that reflect communal governance traditions. Participation strengthens legitimacy, and legitimacy enhances compliance. Next, structured engagement with religious institutions should be institutionalised. Regulatory agencies can develop sustainability certification frameworks tailored to faith-based organisations, incentivising renewable energy adoption, waste management systems, and biodiversity conservation within religious campuses. Such engagement must be transparent and non-preferential to avoid regulatory capture. In addition, enforcement credibility must be strengthened. Deterrence remains indispensable. Inspection regimes, sanction certainty, and judicial oversight are necessary to ensure that environmental norms carry practical

consequence. However, deterrence must be complemented by normative mobilisation. Compliance becomes durable when reinforced by moral identity and communal expectation.

Environmental governance in Nigeria therefore requires a recalibration from symbolic legalism to substantive integration. The enactment of statutes, while necessary, is insufficient if environmental norms remain culturally external and institutionally fragmented. By harmonising indigenous ethical memory, Pentecostal institutional capacity, and statutory regulatory authority, Nigeria can move toward an environmental governance model that is not merely legally defensible but socially embedded and institutionally resilient. The broader implication extends beyond Nigeria. In many plural societies, environmental sustainability will depend upon the integration of formal law with culturally resonant moral systems and influential social institutions. The Nigerian case illustrates that sustainable governance is not solely a technical challenge but a normative and institutional one.

In this sense, the future of environmental protection lies not only in legislative reform, but in alignment. Alignment between law and legitimacy, between theology and stewardship, and between communal memory and regulatory modernity. Where such alignment is achieved, sustainability ceases to be aspirational rhetoric and becomes operational reality.