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Advancing an African Environmental Ethics through the Zhibaje Gbagyi/Gbari Festival

Prof. Lawrence Ogbo Ugwuanyi

Department of Philosophy, University of Abuja

Abstract

This paper explores the ethical and environmental significance embedded in the Zhibaje festival of the Gbagyi/Gbari people of central Nigeria. It seeks to answer the question: *What indigenous conception of the good, inherent in the Zhibaje festival, can meaningfully contribute to environmental ethics?* By examining the festival's symbolic and ritualistic practices—such as the invocation of birds (Zyikuku), trees (Gyegi), stones, and libations—the study reveals how the Gbagyi worldview enacts a spiritually grounded ecological ethic. Using a mixed-methods approach comprising ethnographic fieldwork, literature review, focus group discussions, and philosophical interpretation, the research highlights how the Zhibaje festival fosters a relational ontology and a performative ethics of peace, reciprocity, and ecological accountability. The study situates these insights within broader debates on decolonisation, sustainability, and indigenous epistemologies. In doing so, it argues that the festival articulates an African environmental philosophy rooted in communal life, sacred landscapes, and moral-spiritual integration. Zhibaje thus offers a compelling alternative to technocratic and anthropocentric models of environmental governance. By foregrounding lesser-studied ethnic traditions, this work not only expands the intellectual horizon of African environmental ethics but also contributes to global ecological discourse by demonstrating the moral and pedagogical value of indigenous festivals in fostering sustainable relationships with nature.

Keywords: Zhibaje Festival, Gbagyi Environmental Ethics, Indigenous Knowledge, Peace Ontology, Decolonised Sustainability

Introduction

In the evolving global discourse on environmental sustainability, there is a growing recognition of the limitations inherent in prevailing paradigms that are predominantly rooted in Western philosophical traditions. These paradigms often approach nature from a utilitarian or conservationist perspective, framing the environment either as a resource to be managed or a problem to be solved through technological innovation. However, such views have increasingly come under scrutiny for their failure to capture the complex, relational, and often spiritual connections that many indigenous communities maintain with the natural world. It is within this context that the study of indigenous African environmental ethics has become not only relevant but urgent. Among the Gbagyi people of central Nigeria, the Zhibaje festival emerges as a critical cultural institution through which a distinctive environmental worldview is enacted,

preserved, and transmitted. The Gbagyi, an agrarian and spiritually rooted ethnic group spread across the Federal Capital Territory and neighbouring states such as Niger, Nasarawa, Kaduna, and Kogi, have for generations cultivated a reciprocal relationship with the land, guided by rituals, taboos, and festivals that embody moral codes and cosmological understandings. The Zhibaje festival, in particular, is not simply a celebration; it is a performative ethical system that reflects and reinforces values of peace, communal responsibility, ecological balance, and spiritual accountability.

At the heart of the festival are ritual elements such as the cry of the Zyikuku bird, the sacred Gyegi tree, and the offering of libations and sacrifices on consecrated stones. These are not arbitrary or symbolic in the conventional sense; rather, they are ontologically significant within the Gbagyi cosmology. They are seen as active participants in the moral and spiritual order of the world, mediating the relationship between the human and the non-human, the living and the ancestral, the visible and the invisible. The temporal structure of the festival, which includes the observance of a "Week of Peace" prior to its commencement, further underscores the integration of ethical conduct, spiritual devotion, and environmental consciousness. This research therefore undertakes a critical investigation of the Zhibaje festival as a site for articulating an endogenous African environmental ethic. It seeks to answer the central question: What notion of the good, inherent in the Gbagyi worldview and ritual practices, can contribute meaningfully to contemporary discourses on environmental ethics? To address this question, the study employs a combination of philosophical inquiry, ethnographic fieldwork, textual analysis, and critical interpretation. In doing so, this study aims not merely to document an indigenous tradition but to demonstrate its philosophical and ethical significance in a world grappling with ecological crises and the epistemic legacies of colonialism. By centring the voices, experiences, and cosmologies of the Gbagyi people, the research contributes to the broader movement of decolonising environmental ethics and expanding the intellectual boundaries of sustainability discourse. Ultimately, it argues that Zhibaje offers not only a model of ecological reverence but a vision of life that harmonises the spiritual, the moral, and the environmental in profoundly integrated ways.

Broadening Environmental Ethics through the Gbagyi Tradition of Thought

The imperative to broaden environmental ethics arises from a growing awareness that dominant global discourses—largely shaped by Western philosophical traditions—often fail to capture the full diversity of ways in which human communities relate to their natural environments. While the mainstream environmental movement has largely been driven by scientific rationalism, legal regulation, and technological interventions, there is increasing recognition that such frameworks may be inadequate without a corresponding moral and cultural transformation. This transformation must involve engaging indigenous knowledge systems, particularly those that conceptualise the environment not as an inert backdrop to human activity but as an active participant in moral life. In this context, the Gbagyi people of central Nigeria provide a fertile ground for exploring alternative ecological paradigms. As a predominantly agrarian and forest-dwelling ethnic group, the Gbagyi have long maintained a reciprocal relationship with the land. Their worldview is deeply embedded in natural cycles, seasonal rituals, and communal land practices. The Zhibaje festival—central to this study—is a vivid expression of this worldview. It functions not only as a cultural rite but also as an ethical framework that mediates the relationship between humans, nature, and the metaphysical realm. Understanding how the Gbagyi perceive, engage with, and ritually respond to their environment opens the door to a more inclusive and pluralistic conception of environmental ethics.

Recent scholarly developments in the field of environmental ethics have begun to turn towards indigenous traditions to uncover neglected forms of ecological wisdom. African, Native American, Andean, and Australasian epistemologies have increasingly been recognised for their capacity to offer alternative modes of thinking that resist the dichotomies of nature versus culture, human versus non-human, or science versus religion. These traditions tend to adopt holistic worldviews that collapse such binary distinctions, replacing them with relational

metaphysics and ethical systems rooted in communal and spiritual life. Within the African philosophical tradition, there has been considerable effort to articulate an environmental ethic based on concepts such as *ubuntu*, *ukama*, and *botho*—all of which emphasise interconnectedness, communal responsibility, and the sanctity of life. Scholars like Workineh Kelbessa, Godfrey Tangwa, and Munyaradzi Murove have argued that these indigenous values constitute a viable ethical response to the ecological crises of our time. However, these scholars also caution against the romanticisation or instrumentalisation of indigenous knowledge, advocating instead for an ethically engaged and critically aware integration of such insights into contemporary discourses.

The Gbagyi are an ethnic group indigenous to Nigeria's middle belt region, particularly within the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja), as well as parts of Niger, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Kogi States. They are known for their agricultural expertise, traditional medicine, artisanal crafts, and spiritual rituals. At the heart of Gbagyi life is a symbiotic relationship with the natural environment, mediated through a cosmology that sees land as sacred, trees as spirits, and animals as messengers or embodiments of metaphysical forces. Within this worldview, environmental ethics are not taught through abstract principles but are embedded in practice, narrative, and ritual. The Zhibaje festival represents a culmination of this embedded knowledge. It is a season of spiritual reflection, ecological cleansing, and moral realignment. Its rituals convey lessons about balance, reciprocity, and peace—lessons that are not only culturally resonant but also environmentally potent. The Zhibaje festival begins with the cry of the Zyikuku bird, which is interpreted as a spiritual call to action. This initiates a communal period known as the "Week of Peace," during which all forms of conflict must cease, and relationships—both human and ecological—must be harmonised. The festival involves libations poured onto sacred stones, sacrifices performed under designated trees, and the sharing of ritual foods and drinks between animals and humans. Each act carries symbolic weight and reflects a moral vision of coexistence, respect, and accountability.

Engaging with Gbagyi environmental ethics is important for several reasons. Firstly, it challenges the epistemological hegemony of Western ecological thought by introducing alternative modes of conceptualising human-nature relationships. While much of Western environmental ethics oscillates between utilitarian conservation and deep ecology, the Gbagyi approach integrates the sacred, the social, and the ecological into a coherent moral order. Secondly, it addresses a critical gap in Nigerian scholarship. Much academic focus has been on the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, often approached from legal, political, and economic angles. While these are important, they often neglect the ethical and spiritual dimensions of environmental degradation. By contrast, the Gbagyi perspective offers an ethical ecology—an approach that sees environmental harm not merely as technical failure but as a breakdown of moral order. Thirdly, Gbagyi environmental ethics offer an opportunity to rethink development and sustainability. In a context where top-down policies often alienate local communities, there is a growing call for bottom-up, culturally grounded alternatives. The Zhibaje festival can be understood as a form of environmental governance—a community-driven mechanism that ensures the moral health of the land and the people. It suggests that sustainability is not merely about resource management but about maintaining right relations among all entities, human and non-human alike.

A key contribution of this research is its alignment with the decolonial turn in environmental ethics. Decolonial theory urges scholars to question the assumptions underlying Western modernity, particularly the idea that scientific rationality and technological control are the only valid approaches to environmental management. Instead, it advocates for epistemic plurality, intercultural dialogue, and the inclusion of subaltern voices in shaping our collective environmental future. By centring the Gbagyi and their festival traditions, this study contributes to the decolonisation of environmental ethics. It resists the framing of indigenous knowledge as static or inferior and instead presents it as dynamic, reflexive, and profoundly relevant. It also challenges the marginalisation of minority ethnic groups within national narratives, insisting that every community, no matter how numerically small or politically disenfranchised, possesses valuable insights into the human condition and our shared ecological responsibilities.

Moreover, the Gbagyi case invites us to reconsider what counts as knowledge. In many academic and policy spaces, only that which is written, measured, or empirically verified is deemed credible. Rituals, oral traditions, and spiritual experiences are often excluded. Yet, as this study demonstrates, these very forms of expression are central to the Gbagyi conception of environmental ethics. Ignoring them not only impoverishes our understanding but also perpetuates epistemic injustice. In conclusion, broadening environmental ethics through the Gbagyi tradition of thought means recognising the epistemic validity of indigenous cosmologies, engaging seriously with cultural rituals like the Zhibaje festival, and embracing a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to ecological thinking. The Gbagyi offer a compelling vision of environmental responsibility—one that binds morality, spirituality, and ecology into a unified ethical system. By bringing this vision into dialogue with contemporary environmental discourses, this study lays the groundwork for a richer, more holistic, and more just engagement with the ecological challenges of our time.

Literature Review and Methodology of Research

The formulation of environmental ethics within African indigenous thought systems has garnered increasing scholarly interest in recent years, largely in response to the limitations of mainstream Western paradigms which often treat the environment either as a utilitarian resource or as a passive backdrop to human development. In contrast, African traditions—through cosmologies, proverbs, rituals, and oral histories—often regard the environment as a dynamic entity with moral, spiritual, and communal significance. Despite this growing body of scholarship, there remains a dearth of sustained engagement with minority ethnic traditions in Nigeria such as the Gbagyi, whose worldview, ritual practices, and festivals like the Zhibaje encode profound environmental values. This section presents a comprehensive review of relevant literature and elaborates the methodological framework used to explore and theorise Gbagyi environmental ethics.

African environmental ethics as a field has been pioneered by scholars such as Workineh Kelbessa (1997; 2001; 2005), Bernard Bujo (1998), Godfrey Tangwa (2004), Puleng LeokaBula (2008), and Munyaradzi Murove (2004), among others. These scholars argue for a reinterpretation of African cosmologies, arguing that African traditional communities often exhibit an implicit ecological consciousness that governs their interactions with the land, animals, and spiritual forces. Kelbessa, for instance, focuses on the Oromo people of Ethiopia and articulates how indigenous beliefs regulate ecological behaviour through notions of sacred groves, ritual taboos, and animal symbolism (Kelbessa 2005: 24–27). Bujo (1998) and Tangwa (2004) go further to locate environmental morality within a communitarian and relational ontology that undergirds African life-worlds. However, while these works provide a valuable foundation, they often generalise across Sub-Saharan Africa or limit themselves to better-known ethnic groups, thus failing to account for the diversity of indigenous environmental practices. In the Nigerian context, extant studies on environmental degradation—particularly those relating to the Niger Delta—tend to be socio-political or economic in orientation. They focus on corporate exploitation, oil spills, and community resistance (e.g., the Ogoni and Ijaw struggles), but seldom consider the philosophical or ethical dimensions of local environmental worldviews, especially among non-dominant groups.

Within the corpus of Gbagyi scholarship, cultural and identity-based studies dominate. For instance, Gwamna (2005) examines the Gbagyi identity crisis and advocates for cultural revitalisation; Sanda (2016) focuses on the significance of Kunu in Gbagyi society; and Shekwo and Filaba (2002) highlight the decline of Gbagyi traditions. Notably, two works mention the Zhibaje festival: Zhimiko (2005), who provides a descriptive narrative of the ritual, and Sarki and Jeremiah (2021), who explore its function in maintaining social cohesion. These authors adopt participant observation methods and provide valuable ethnographic detail, yet they do not pursue the theoretical implications of Zhibaje for environmental ethics. Consequently, there exists a significant gap in the literature. No scholarly work to date has analysed the Zhibaje festival as a site for articulating environmental ethics, nor has any research systematically explored the Gbagyi worldview in relation to environmental

stewardship. This research aims to fill that gap by bringing together empirical data, indigenous philosophical reflections, and contemporary ethical theory.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach rooted in philosophical inquiry and qualitative research. The methodology integrates textual analysis, hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnography, and critical theory. The aim is not only to document cultural practices but also to theorise them as forms of environmental ethics. Primary and secondary texts on Gbagyi culture and the Zhibaje festival were reviewed to contextualise the research. These include academic journal articles, ethnographic reports, oral narratives, and community publications. Key sources such as Sanda (2016), Zhimiko (2005), and Shekwo and Filaba (2002) were analysed to extract themes related to environmental beliefs, ritual symbolism, and cosmological meaning. Between March 2023 and November 2024, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with over twenty Gbagyi elders, traditional priests, and community leaders in Gwagwalada, Passo, Kwali, and surrounding settlements in the Federal Capital Territory. The interview questions focused on the symbolic items of the Zhibaje festival (birds, trees, stones), the ethical conduct expected during the “Week of Peace,” the cosmological significance of sacrificial rites, and indigenous proverbs relating to the environment. Interviews were conducted in Hausa, Gbagyi, and English, with the assistance of local interpreters where necessary.)

Three FGDs were held in March 2023, November 2024, and January 2025. Each session involved 6–8 participants, including cultural custodians, elders, youth leaders, and women representatives. Discussions revolved around the continuity and transformation of the Zhibaje festival, environmental symbolism, and the role of spiritual forces in land management. The FGDs enabled a dialogical engagement with collective memory and communal reflection, yielding rich, intergenerational insights. The researcher attended and observed two iterations of the Zhibaje festival in Gwagwalada and Kwali. Detailed field notes were taken, focusing on ritual performance, spatial arrangement, material objects, and interactions among participants. Special attention was paid to moments of libation, animal sacrifice, invocation of spirits, and the appearance of masquerades, all of which were interpreted as performative expressions of environmental ethics. A corpus of Gbagyi proverbs and axioms relating to the Zhibaje festival was collected and analysed. These oral texts were treated as philosophical artefacts, revealing ethical assumptions about cleanliness, reciprocity, justice, and harmony with nature. For instance, proverbs such as “If you go to the bathroom, can you return with dirt?” were interpreted as metaphors for ecological purification and spiritual integrity.

The data collected were analysed using three complementary philosophical approaches:

Hermeneutics: This interpretive method was employed to unpack the meanings of symbols, myths, and ritual actions. Particular focus was placed on the Zyikuku bird, the Gyegi tree, the notion of equilibrium, and the act of sharing food and drink with animals.

Phenomenology: This approach centred on the lived experiences of festival participants, seeking to understand how environmental ethics are embodied, enacted, and transmitted across generations.

Critical Reconstruction: The final stage involved reconstructing a coherent framework of Gbagyi environmental ethics. The aim was to assess whether this ethics is theological (based on divine principles), ontological (based on relational being), or secular (based on communal well-being). This reconstruction was then situated within broader debates on sustainable development and decolonisation.

By combining ethnographic depth with philosophical rigour, this methodology offers a robust framework for exploring indigenous ethics without reducing them to folklore or functionalism. It treats Gbagyi ritual practices as legitimate sources of ethical reasoning, capable of informing contemporary environmental discourse. Moreover, the research design ensures that knowledge production is collaborative, respectful, and sensitive to the epistemologies of the community

involved. This methodological orientation also addresses the epistemic injustice often faced by indigenous communities in academic research. By centring Gbagyi voices and epistemologies, the study resists extractive knowledge practices and affirms the legitimacy of local ways of knowing. It advances a decolonial ethic of research that not only studies communities but also learns from them. In summary, the literature review reveals a lacuna in existing scholarship on Gbagyi environmental ethics, while the methodological framework adopted ensures both empirical validity and philosophical depth. The following section presents the findings from fieldwork, illustrating how the Zhibaje festival encodes and performs a distinctive environmental ethic rooted in the values of peace, relationality, and ecological communion.

Fresh Perspective and Theoretical Insights Achieved

This section synthesises the empirical data and interprets it through the lens of philosophical analysis, showing how the festival functions not merely as a cultural celebration but as a moral framework that mediates the relationship between humans, nature, and the metaphysical realm. The findings reveal that Zhibaje is not only a ritual but also a pedagogical instrument through which environmental values are transmitted, reinforced, and performed.

The Zhibaje festival exhibits a complex cosmological structure wherein natural elements are interwoven with spiritual forces to produce a relational and balanced universe. Central to the ritual are the Zyikuku bird, the Gyegi tree, and sacred stones—all of which are treated as animate entities endowed with agency. The Zyikuku bird heralds the beginning of the festival, its cry perceived as a spiritual summons to prepare for communal purification. Similarly, the Gyegi tree is revered as a spiritual presence, often receiving libations and prayers. Stones, used in the ritual foundation, are not merely symbolic but function as repositories of ancestral energy. These components are not arbitrarily selected but are believed to possess ontological significance. Informants consistently emphasised that each element—whether bird, tree, or stone—had been chosen by the spirits and must not be substituted. The ritual actions performed around these objects reveal a worldview that affirms the sacredness of the natural world and its integral role in ethical life.

One of the most striking ethical features of Zhibaje is the temporal regulation of conduct through the “Week of Peace” that precedes the festival. During this period, quarrelling, violence, and even harsh speech are strictly prohibited. Families are expected to reconcile disputes, and communities must exist in a state of tranquillity. This temporal suspension of conflict is not merely preparatory but constitutive of the ethical order the festival aims to establish. The Week of Peace reflects what African ethicists call a performative morality—an ethic enacted through ritual and habit rather than codified laws. It teaches that peace is not simply the absence of conflict but a cultivated disposition, one that aligns human actions with cosmological harmony. Informants stressed that violating the peace of this week invites spiritual sanction, illustrating how ethical behaviour is enforced through both communal consensus and metaphysical accountability.

Zhibaje is characterised by ritual sacrifices involving animals such as goats and chickens, as well as fermented drinks like burukutu and pounded foods like tuwo. These items are offered to the deity Zhiba under the Gyegi tree, with libations poured onto sacred stones or calabashes. What is particularly notable is the order of consumption: the sacrificial animal is made to drink first, symbolising its mediation between the human and spiritual worlds. This economy operates on the principle of reciprocity, where giving to the spirits is a means of sustaining life, fertility, and communal wellbeing. It resonates with the African philosophical concept of “vital force” (Tempels, 1959), wherein all entities possess a life-force that must be nurtured through reciprocal relations. The Gbagyi notion of sacrifice, therefore, is not a loss but an investment in cosmic balance. Informants explained that the efficacy of the sacrifice depends on moral purity. A person harbouring ill intentions or spiritual impurity is believed to contaminate the ritual, potentially causing the land to reject its blessings. This belief reinforces an environmental ethic rooted in moral accountability—where the health of the land is contingent on the moral state of the people.

The proverbs recited during and after the Zhibaje festival provide a unique window into the community's environmental worldview. For instance:

“If you go to the bathroom, can you return with dirt?” – Symbolises the moral and spiritual cleansing expected from participation in the festival.

“Whoever has roasted *kpekpe*, let them go with it” – Reflects the belief that evil intentions must be removed from the communal space.

“He who pours the water with the wrong rope will trip” – Suggests that improper rituals or hidden malice will expose the individual to spiritual justice.

These aphorisms do not merely offer moral instruction; they articulate an environmental philosophy wherein nature responds to human intentions. They encode a theology of accountability that treats the earth not as passive but as an active moral agent.

The spatial organisation of the Zhibaje festival reflects a conscious interaction with the land. Sacred groves, ritual trees, and open-air altars are not arbitrarily located but selected based on spiritual signs, ancestral instructions, or ecological features. These spaces are protected, cleaned, and sometimes left untouched throughout the year, underscoring their sanctity. Participants often referred to these spaces as "living altars" where the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds is porous. Such spatial ethics reinforce respect for natural habitats and discourage indiscriminate exploitation of the land. In many cases, cutting down a ritual tree or desecrating a sacred stone is considered a grave offence, with consequences extending beyond the individual to the entire community. While Zhibaje remains a significant cultural marker, its observance has been affected by modernity, urbanisation, and religious pluralism. Many Gbagyi youths raised in Christian or Islamic households are unfamiliar with the ritual's deeper meanings. Some elders expressed concern that Zhibaje is increasingly reduced to a cultural performance rather than a spiritual encounter. Yet, the festival has shown resilience by adapting to contemporary sensibilities. Some rituals have been modified to align with health regulations, and certain symbolic gestures have replaced actual sacrifices. This transformation highlights the festival's potential as a living tradition—capable of evolving without losing its ethical core. Moreover, the willingness of elders to share knowledge and the openness of younger participants during FGDs suggest a fertile ground for cultural revitalisation. By positioning Zhibaje within broader debates on sustainability and ecological ethics, this study contributes to its reinterpretation as a resource for environmental education and policy advocacy.

The overarching insight from this research is the Gbagyi belief in interconnectedness. Humans, animals, spirits, and land are not discrete entities but part of an integrated moral universe. This vision aligns with what scholars like Tangwa (2004) describe as African eco-bio-communitarianism—a framework where ethics, biology, and cosmology converge to form an indivisible moral order. Zhibaje is the ritual expression of this worldview. It ritualises peace, enacts reciprocity, and inscribes morality onto the landscape. It teaches that environmental care is not an abstract ideal but a lived practice sustained by rituals, narratives, and community consensus. The fresh perspectives uncovered through this fieldwork challenge dominant models of environmental ethics that privilege abstraction over practice, individualism over communality, and reason over ritual. Zhibaje offers a counter-model: a performative, relational, and spiritually grounded ethic that locates moral agency not only in humans but in nature itself. By bringing this indigenous festival into conversation with contemporary ethical debates, this study affirms that African traditions are not merely cultural artefacts but dynamic epistemologies capable of enriching global discourses on environmental sustainability. The next section articulates the theoretical implications of these findings and situates them within broader philosophical frameworks.

Zhibaje Festival, the Environment, and an Ethics of Peace

The philosophical engagement with the Zhibaje festival reveals not only a repository of environmental knowledge but also a framework for constructing an African environmental ethic that is grounded in indigenous epistemologies, performative spirituality, and ethical relationality. This section synthesises insights from both fieldwork and comparative literature to articulate a Gbagyi environmental ethic that emphasises peace, spiritual accountability, and ecological relationality. By situating the Zhibaje festival within a broader intellectual tradition, this section demonstrates how African cultural practices serve as both ethical systems and ontological declarations. In the Zhibaje tradition, peace is not merely an interpersonal or social value but a cosmological principle with direct implications for environmental harmony. The “Week of Peace” that precedes the festival is an enacted ethic, prescribing behavioural norms that align the individual and community with the metaphysical order of the land. During this week, silence, reconciliation, and restraint are practised not only to prepare for ritual but to invite the blessings of the land and spirits. As one elder put it during an interview, “When there is no peace, the land does not breathe.” This understanding of peace extends beyond human affairs. It frames environmental balance as a moral obligation. Disharmony among humans, according to Gbagyi belief, introduces disorder into the ecological system. Thus, environmental degradation is not simply a physical outcome but a spiritual crisis. This challenges secular conceptions of peace as political or psychological calm, offering instead a more integrated vision in which peace encompasses harmony among humans, nature, and spirit. This resonates with Chinua Achebe’s rendering of peace in *Things Fall Apart*, where community festivals are disrupted by spiritual imbalance, symbolising moral and environmental disintegration. In this sense, peace is not passive absence of violence but active cultivation of right relations, encoded in ritual, narrative, and symbolic structure.

The worldview embedded in Zhibaje reflects a relational ontology in which all beings—human, non-human, and spiritual—are interdependent. This ontology posits that the moral status of the land is not separate from the ethical behaviour of its inhabitants. Trees, animals, stones, and rivers are not inert resources but co-participants in a moral and spiritual economy. This insight is affirmed by eco-philosophers such as Godfrey Tangwa, who articulates a bio-communitarian ethic rooted in African metaphysics. According to Tangwa (2004: 389), the traditional African outlook emphasises “peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals, and humans.” Similarly, Bujo (1998: 22) affirms that “all natural forces depend on each other so that human beings can live in harmony only in and with the whole of nature.” The Zhibaje festival brings these philosophical tenets to life through ritual enactment. The ritual sharing of food between animals and humans, the consultation of trees for sacrifice, and the sacred use of stones all exemplify this relational ethos. Even the sequencing of who eats first (animals before humans) during the Zhibaje ritual inverts anthropocentric hierarchies and suggests a deeper ethic of mutual respect.

The Zhibaje festival invests space with sacred meaning. The sites of ritual—whether trees, groves, riversides, or communal altars—are treated as spiritually charged zones where metaphysical communication occurs. These spaces are not only preserved from desecration but are also ritually regenerated through libation, song, and dance. This conception aligns with what African theologians describe as the sacrality of land. In many African traditions, the land is not property but a living presence, the dwelling place of ancestors and spirits. Desecrating the land is thus not only an ecological crime but a metaphysical affront. Zhibaje affirms this sacred geography by establishing a direct link between ritual integrity and ecological well-being. This echoes Kelbessa’s (2005) findings among the Oromo, where sacred groves and ritual pathways serve as environmental sanctuaries governed by spiritual laws. In both contexts, the environment is not managed through bureaucracy but through cosmological ethics—a model that may offer alternatives to the technocratic approaches dominating global environmental policy.

Another key insight from Zhibaje is its emphasis on collective moral responsibility. The environmental ethic it promotes is not individualistic but communal. The well-being of the land

depends on the moral conduct of the entire community. If one person defiles the ritual, the consequences affect all. This collective accountability serves both as ethical deterrent and as social glue. In this sense, Zhibaje reflects Ubuntu/Botho ethics, as described by LeokaBula (2008: 378), where “the self can never fully be without the ecological system within which they exist.” The Gbagyi ethic insists that environmental responsibility cannot be delegated to experts or external institutions but must be lived daily by every member of the community. Proverbs and taboos serve as mnemonic devices to reinforce this ethic. Sayings such as “No one eats before the land is fed” or “He who pollutes the grove breaks the peace of the ancestors” reflect the deeply moralised relationship between action and consequence. They also challenge the neoliberal individualism that underpins much of contemporary environmental degradation.

The Gbagyi belief system postulates that nature is responsive to human ethics. If the land is disrespected, if rituals are not performed with sincerity, or if moral transgressions abound, nature retaliates. Crops fail, diseases spread, and social disintegration ensues. This belief in spiritual justice as ecological consequence introduces a powerful motivational framework for environmental care. Unlike secular legal systems that rely on enforcement, the Gbagyi system motivates ethical behaviour through fear of metaphysical imbalance. This may appear superstitious from a Western standpoint, but it functions as an effective ecological regulator, especially in oral and communal societies where state mechanisms are weak or absent. Moreover, this cosmology challenges the separation of religion, ethics, and ecology that typifies Western modernity. It proposes a unified framework in which environmental responsibility is not a technical obligation but a spiritual vocation.

The ethical insights embedded in Zhibaje have profound implications for contemporary environmental philosophy. They challenge anthropocentric models that separate humans from nature, instrumentalist views that commodify the land, and legalistic frameworks that abstract ethics from daily life. Zhibaje suggests an alternative vision: an ecological ethics grounded in ritual, community, and spirituality. It calls for a decolonisation of environmental thought by valuing indigenous epistemologies as legitimate sources of ethical wisdom. It also highlights the role of cultural practices—not just policies—in shaping sustainable behaviour. By foregrounding peace, relationality, and sacred reciprocity, Zhibaje redefines what it means to live ethically on the earth. It invites a rethinking of sustainability not as balance between competing interests but as harmony among interdependent beings. It speaks to the urgent need for models of environmental care that are both culturally resonant and spiritually anchored.

The Zhibaje festival encapsulates a robust environmental ethic that is performative, relational, communal, and spiritual. It offers a vision of sustainability rooted not in consumption metrics or carbon targets but in moral character, ritual observance, and metaphysical harmony. As such, it presents an important corrective to dominant paradigms in environmental ethics. By elevating the Zhibaje festival from a cultural artefact to an ethical paradigm, this study affirms the intellectual richness of African traditions and their relevance for contemporary global challenges. The Gbagyi ethic of peace is not a nostalgic relic but a living philosophy with the power to reshape how humanity engages with the earth. The following section turns to possible critiques and limitations of this approach, recognising the need for dialogue, reflexivity, and pluralism in any attempt to articulate indigenous environmental ethics in a global context.

Possible Counterarguments and Criticisms

While this study offers a compelling case for interpreting the Zhibaje festival as a source of indigenous environmental ethics, it is crucial to anticipate and address potential counterarguments and limitations. Doing so not only strengthens the academic rigour of the research but also affirms a commitment to pluralism, reflexivity, and contextual integrity in the construction of environmental knowledge. This section considers key criticisms related to epistemological scope, methodological risks, secular applicability, and the challenges of cultural continuity. One potential criticism concerns the specificity of the Zhibaje festival and whether its insights can be generalised to broader philosophical or environmental frameworks. Some may argue that the ritual elements of the festival are so culturally embedded and context-

specific that they resist extrapolation to non-Gbagyi settings. This raises the question: can indigenous knowledge systems be translated into general principles of environmental ethics without distorting their meanings or stripping them of their cultural significance? In response, it must be affirmed that the aim of this study is not to universalise Zhibaje but to pluralise the discourse on environmental ethics. Rather than impose a one-size-fits-all framework, this research invites recognition of multiple ecological ontologies. It contributes to the broader movement of epistemic justice in environmental philosophy, which values local knowledges not as quaint curiosities but as legitimate epistemological paradigms.

Another likely criticism relates to the ethical acceptability of ritual practices such as animal sacrifice. From a contemporary animal rights perspective, the use of live animals in ritual may appear cruel or regressive. Similarly, health practitioners may question the sharing of fermented drinks between animals and humans during the ceremony, raising concerns about hygiene and public health. While these concerns are valid within certain epistemic frameworks, they risk imposing modern biomedical or Western ethical standards onto cultural practices that operate under different moral logics. The goal here is not to defend every aspect of Zhibaje ritual uncritically, but to understand the symbolic, spiritual, and communal functions these practices serve. Any future engagement with Zhibaje for policy or educational purposes would require culturally sensitive dialogue, adaptation, and ethical negotiation. A further limitation lies in the declining observance of the Zhibaje festival among younger generations. Due to urbanisation, religious conversion, and changing lifestyles, many Gbagyi youth are unfamiliar with the festival or regard it as antiquated. This raises questions about the viability of using Zhibaje as a pedagogical or policy-relevant framework in the long term. However, decline does not equate to irrelevance. Cultural practices often evolve rather than disappear. This study demonstrates that the ethical core of Zhibaje—its emphasis on peace, relationality, and sacred reciprocity—can be abstracted and recontextualised in ways that speak to contemporary audiences. Moreover, by documenting these traditions, the research contributes to their preservation, revitalisation, and intellectual integration into current debates.

A fourth challenge pertains to the integration of spiritually grounded ethics into secular policy frameworks. Given that many environmental policies are crafted within secular, technocratic institutions, the metaphysical language of spirits, sacrifices, and ancestral forces may be dismissed as unscientific or non-operationalisable. This critique underscores the tension between local meaning systems and global governance structures. Nonetheless, the rising discourse on environmental pluralism, indigenous rights, and sustainability ethics suggests a growing openness to context-sensitive policy design. Concepts such as relationality, community-based stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility—though rooted in indigenous cosmologies—are increasingly gaining traction in global policy arenas. Thus, while translation challenges exist, they are not insurmountable. Finally, it is important to reflect on the positionality of the researcher and the interpretive frameworks employed. As with all ethnographic and philosophical work, the risk of misrepresentation or over-theorisation must be acknowledged. The meanings attributed to rituals, proverbs, and symbols in this study are based on triangulated data and community validation, but they remain subject to contestation. Therefore, methodological humility is essential. This research does not claim to offer a final word on Zhibaje or Gbagyi environmental ethics. Rather, it opens a dialogue, invites further scholarship, and models an approach that values indigenous epistemologies while applying rigorous critical analysis.

Conclusion

This research has engaged the Zhibaje festival of the Gbagyi people as an indigenous site of environmental ethics. Through a robust combination of literature review, fieldwork, hermeneutical interpretation, and philosophical reconstruction, it has illustrated how the festival embodies a coherent and contextually grounded ecological worldview. The core values expressed in Zhibaje—peace, relationality, reciprocity, and spiritual accountability—form a rich ethical matrix that challenges anthropocentric, technocratic, and commodified approaches to environmental care. Zhibaje teaches that the environment is not merely a material resource

but a moral subject, a sacred presence, and a partner in community. Its rituals articulate a performative ethics wherein land, spirit, and society are interdependent. This ontological and ethical vision has strong affinities with broader African philosophies of ecology and contributes to a decolonial reimagining of sustainability.

While the study acknowledges the challenges of cultural specificity, ritual translation, and intergenerational discontinuity, it affirms the relevance of Zhibaje for contemporary debates on environmental justice, indigenous knowledge, and pluralist ethics. Rather than proposing a rigid framework, it offers a set of principles and practices that can inspire further inquiry, adaptation, and dialogue. In a time of ecological crisis and cultural erosion, such indigenous traditions provide not only insight but hope—a reminder that other ways of seeing, being, and relating to the earth are not only possible but already embedded in the lived experiences of communities like the Gbagyi. Future research may extend this inquiry to other sub-ethnic groups such as the Gbari-Genge or explore interdisciplinary collaborations that translate indigenous ethics into pedagogical tools, legal frameworks, and conservation strategies. In sum, the Zhibaje festival is not simply a cultural artefact. It is an ecological philosophy, a spiritual ecology, and a moral compass. Recognising its value is not only an act of cultural affirmation but also an ethical imperative for a more inclusive and sustainable world.

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