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Cosmological Sovereignty and Epistemic Reparations: African Traditional Religious Frameworks in Climate Justice Discourse

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Abstract

In Africa, land is widely perceived as sacred. It is not simply property to be owned, bought, or sold. This perception shapes how many African communities relate to the natural world: land is bound up with ancestors, with spirits, and with obligations between the living and those who came before and those yet to be born. In Western discourse, however, land is treated mainly as a resource and an asset, something measured, divided, and compensated for in monetary terms when it is damaged. International climate reparations policy follows this Western pattern. Loss-and-damage frameworks count destroyed infrastructure, lost harvests, and flooded homes, but they have no language for the loss of a sacred relationship between a people and their land. African philosophy of religion, decolonial theory, and climate governance research have each addressed part of this problem, but none has brought the three together. This paper does that. Using a hermeneutical method, reading and interpreting existing scholarship and documented cases rather than collecting new data, it makes three arguments. First, African Traditional Religions (ATR) understand land as part of a moral community that includes ancestors, divinities, and future generations, not as inert property. Second, colonial dispossession of African land was not only an economic theft but what this paper calls cosmological violence, the destruction of a sacred relationship between a people and their land, visible in cases from South Africa's 1913 Native Land Act to the 2022 evictions of Maasai communities from Loliondo and the unresolved Ogiek case in Kenya. Third, repairing this harm requires epistemic reparations: the formal recognition of ATR environmental knowledge as authoritative, not decorative, in climate governance. Recent decisions at COP29 and COP30 show some progress, mostly in visibility rather than decision-making power. The paper concludes that taking ATR cosmology seriously in climate justice is a philosophical and political necessity, not a gesture of cultural sensitivity. The concepts proposed here, cosmological sovereignty, cosmological violence, and epistemic reparations, are new theoretical contributions offered for further research, not settled conclusions.

Keywords: *African Traditional Religions, cosmological sovereignty, climate reparations, decolonial ontology, epistemic reparations, indigenous governance, environmental justice*

Introduction

In June 2022, Tanzanian police and military entered Loliondo in the Ngorongoro district and began marking out 1,500 square kilometres of Maasai village land as a game reserve. Houses were burned, livestock was killed, and at least one man died in the confrontations that followed. About 700 people fled across the border into Kenya. Part of the land cut off was a site called Oltorotwa, where the Maasai had always gone in times of drought to offer sacrifices and pray for rain. A community member told Human

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Rights Watch that the area contains a sacred place used for these offerings, and that the drought then underway meant the offerings were needed more than ever, but the community could no longer reach the site (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The government called the evictions a conservation measure. The Maasai called it the severing of their covenant with the land.

That severing is the starting point for this paper. Later in 2022, the loss-and-damage fund agreed at COP27 was celebrated as a breakthrough after thirty years of advocacy (UNFCCC, 2022). It was a breakthrough, but it was built around losses that can be measured: wrecked infrastructure, failed harvests, flooded homes. It has no way of registering the kind of loss the Maasai named at Oltorotwa. Communities governed by African Traditional Religions do not experience land loss only as material loss. They experience it as a rupture in the bond between the living, the ancestral dead, and the land. That rupture cannot be measured in money, and it is not addressed by frameworks built without serious engagement with what ATR communities actually believe.

This paper has three objectives. The first, taken up in the section on ATR ontologies of land, is to explain what ATR traditions say about the relationship between people and the natural world, and why this matters for climate justice. The second, taken up in the section on colonial dispossession, is to argue that colonial land seizure was an act of cosmological violence whose wounds financial reparations cannot reach. The third, taken up across the sections on epistemic reparations and cosmological sovereignty, is to argue for epistemic reparations as a necessary companion to material claims, and to specify what this requires of international institutions. The conclusion returns to each objective in turn.

Three bodies of scholarship inform this argument: African philosophy of religion, decolonial theory, and climate governance research. Each has made real contributions, but none has fully addressed what is distinctively cosmological about ATR land ethics, or what this demands of the institutions currently failing to address it. This paper is conceptual in nature: it works hermeneutically, through reading and interpretation, rather than through original fieldwork. The cases discussed below, including Loliondo, are drawn from existing documentation rather than from data collected for this study. The full method, and its limits, are set out below.

Methodology

The method of this study is hermeneutical. This means the paper builds its argument by reading and interpreting existing texts and documented cases, rather than by collecting new data through interviews or fieldwork. Three bodies of literature are read together: African philosophy of religion, decolonial theory, and climate governance research. Each explains part of the problem this paper addresses, but none explains all of it on its own. Reading them side by side, alongside documented cases such as the Ogiek litigation, the Loliondo evictions, and recent UNFCCC decisions, makes it possible to see what each literature misses alone, and to build the three concepts proposed here: cosmological sovereignty, cosmological violence, and epistemic reparations.

This approach has a limitation that should be stated plainly. The paper relies on secondary literature, legal judgments, and documented case material. It does not include interviews or fieldwork with ATR communities. The arguments made here are theoretical proposals, not empirical findings, and they are offered for further testing through fieldwork conducted in partnership with ATR communities themselves.

Conceptual Clarification

African Traditional Religions (ATR). ATR is a plural term. It does not refer to one religion but to many related religious traditions across sub-Saharan Africa. These traditions share several features: belief in a Supreme Being, respect for ancestral spirits, belief in divine intermediaries, and a view of the natural world as a community of moral agents, not simply a collection of objects (Nche & Michael, 2024). These features appear differently across West, East, Central, and Southern Africa, and this diversity should not be flattened. But the shared idea that nature is alive with agency, rather than inert, is what matters for the argument that follows.

Cosmological Sovereignty. This is a concept proposed in this paper. It refers to the spiritual authority that ATR communities hold over land with which they have a sacred relationship. This authority does not come from state recognition or property law. It comes from a relationship between the living, the ancestors, and the land that existed before colonial law and that colonial law could not erase (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023; Metz, 2023; Molefe & Maraganedzha, 2023). This is a new theoretical proposal, not an established legal

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category, and it is offered here for further discussion rather than as settled doctrine.

Cosmological Violence. This is the term used in this paper for the harm done when colonial power severed the sacred relationship between an ATR community and its land. This harm differs from material loss. It includes the destruction of ancestral covenants, the loss of sacred sites, and the suppression of rituals that maintained a community's obligations to land and to the dead (Tarusarira, 2023; Shumbamhini & Chirongoma, 2024). It is related to, but different from, the epistemic violence described by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023): epistemic violence delegitimises a community's knowledge, while cosmological violence destroys the relationship that knowledge was about. Like cosmological sovereignty, this is a proposed concept, open to revision.

Epistemic Reparations. Climate reparations debates focus mostly on money: who owes how much to whom. This paper argues that financial reparations alone are not enough, because they leave untouched the loss of ATR knowledge systems. Epistemic reparations means recognising ATR environmental knowledge as authoritative in climate governance, not consulting it for appearance's sake, and investing in rebuilding what colonialism damaged. This builds on Sultana's (2025) account of climate coloniality, which distinguishes testimonial injustice, when a community's knowledge is wrongly treated as less credible, from hermeneutical injustice, when no concept exists to describe what has been lost. ATR communities experience both.

Loss and Damage. In UNFCCC usage, loss and damage refers to climate harms that adaptation and mitigation cannot prevent. The UNFCCC separates economic losses, measurable in money, from non-economic losses, such as cultural heritage (UNFCCC, 2013). The cosmological harm experienced by ATR communities does not fit neatly into either category. It is not simply a cultural loss; it is the loss of a sacred relationship, and it needs its own category. The 2022 loss-and-damage fund agreed at COP27 is an important step, but it does not resolve this conceptual gap (UNFCCC, 2022).

ATR Ontologies of Land

The Ogiek people of Kenya have spent decades in court trying to remain in the Mau Forest. For the Ogiek, the forest is not real estate. It is their ancestral home: the site of covenants with the dead, of sacred groves, and of ecological knowledge built up across generations. In 2017, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights ruled that Kenya had violated Ogiek rights by removing them from the forest (African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2017).

What happened next shows the limits of legal recognition. In 2022, the Court ordered Kenya to pay compensation, formally recognise the Ogiek as an indigenous people, and grant them title to their land (African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2022; OHCHR, 2022). By 2025, compliance hearings in Arusha showed that Kenya had still not carried out these orders. Ogiek representatives reported continuing evictions, while the government cited conservation concerns as grounds for delay (Pan African Lawyers Union, 2025). A court can recognise land rights in the language of property. It cannot, on its own, restore a sacred relationship that has been broken.

Nche and Michael (2024) describe what is at stake more broadly. In many ATR traditions, the natural world is a community of agents: the Supreme Being, ancestors, divinities, spirits, and the living, bound together by mutual obligation. Sacred groves are not simply meaningful places; they are believed to be inhabited, and this belief shapes how they are protected.

This belief has measurable effects. The sacred forests of the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria have protected biodiversity for centuries through taboos enforced by religious authority. A study in Ogun State found that Yoruba sacred groves contain significantly more plant diversity than unprotected land nearby, because ATR governance restricted extraction in ways secular regulation has rarely matched (Soewu & Adekanmbi, 2019).

Tarusarira and Maviza (2025) studied climate disruption in northern Mozambique and found something similar. Communities there do not see droughts and floods only as natural disasters needing technical solutions. They see them as disruptions in a relationship between people, ancestors, and land, disruptions that call for ritual response as well as practical action. Elders meet to work out which obligation has been broken and what repair is required.

Metz (2023) and Molefe and Maraganedzha (2023) make a related point in philosophical terms. In many ATR frameworks, the divine is understood as

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present within an ongoing network of relationships that includes humans, ancestors, divinities, and the environment. This generates obligations that differ from Western environmental stewardship: the duty is not to manage a resource well, but to maintain one's place in a moral community that includes the land itself.

The practical implication is that when colonial powers took African land, they took more than territory. They removed the ability of communities to meet their obligations to ancestors and to the land. Financial reparations cannot address this loss. The continuing Ogiek case shows why.

Colonial Dispossession as Cosmological Violence

In 1913, South Africa's Native Land Act confined Black South Africans to seven percent of the country's land. This law did more than redistribute property. It severed ancestral relationships, destroyed sacred sites, and dismantled the religious systems through which communities had managed their land for generations. The material effects are still visible in South Africa's land statistics today. The cosmological effects have never entered a reparations framework.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023) argues that colonialism was not only an economic and political project but an epistemic one. Colonial administrations delegitimised African knowledge systems, including ATR cosmology, and replaced them with European frameworks that treated indigenous belief as superstition. This was not incidental to land seizure; it made the seizure easier, because land redefined as profane was easier to take than land understood as sacred.

The consequences are measurable. Tarusarira (2023) shows that climate vulnerability in many African communities results partly from the destruction of indigenous environmental governance: sacred grove protection, ritual water management, and taboo-based conservation were sophisticated systems, and their loss has made communities more exposed to the climate disruption they now face.

The Tana River in Kenya illustrates this. Riparian communities once managed the river through sacred governance rooted in ancestral obligation. Colonial administration replaced this with centralised state management that did not understand the system it displaced. Today the Tana River Delta, once one of East Africa's most biodiverse ecosystems, is badly degraded, its forests reduced and its fish stocks collapsed (Maina et al., 2016), a continuing consequence of cosmological violence.

Shumbamhini and Chirongoma (2024) show that this loss has fallen hardest on women, who were often the main custodians of sacred ecological knowledge about food, medicine, and water. Colonial disruption stripped them of this role, concentrating knowledge loss in the communities most exposed to climate impacts today.

Tarusarira, Scartozzi, and Elnur (2025) make a related point: in religious African communities, natural resources are understood as spiritually significant, not only materially useful. Climate disruption of these resources is experienced as spiritual displacement as well as material loss. A reparations framework addressing only material loss leaves this dimension untouched.

Toward Epistemic Reparations

The 2015 Paris Agreement mentioned "indigenous, local and traditional knowledge systems" in its preamble, with no binding force and no institutional mechanism attached. A 2025 review of indigenous participation in UNFCCC governance found that climate frameworks still acknowledge indigenous knowledge in principle while failing to embed it in enforceable institutions (Ogar et al., 2025). This is not an oversight; it reflects the same hierarchy of knowledge that colonialism established.

There has been some progress. At COP29 in Baku in 2024, parties agreed to fully operationalise the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, and indigenous delegates pushed, with partial success, for direct representation on its board (Dupraz-Dobias, 2024). At COP30 in Belém in 2025, the Fund moved into active disbursement, and indigenous delegations had their largest presence yet at a UNFCCC conference (Mongabay, 2025). But the final text dropped language on critical mineral mining that indigenous groups had sought, and indigenous leaders described their role in fund governance as advisory rather than authoritative (Mongabay, 2025). Visibility has grown faster than decision-making power.

Epistemic reparations is the remedy this paper proposes: recognising ATR environmental knowledge as authoritative, with its own standards of

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validity and its own institutional representation, rather than treating it as supporting evidence for decisions made elsewhere. Lougheed, Molefe, and Metz (2024) show that ATR theological frameworks are rigorous philosophical systems capable of sustaining serious ethical claims about human obligations to nature. ATR knowledge is not raw material awaiting validation by science; it is a knowledge system with its own foundations and its own track record.

Lunkwitz (2025) argues that decolonising knowledge production means asking not only what is known, but who knows it and on whose terms. Applied to climate governance, this means co-designing climate frameworks with ATR communities as partners rather than consulted stakeholders, and investing climate finance in rebuilding the knowledge systems colonialism damaged. The IPBES Global Assessment of 2019 offers one institutional model, recognising indigenous knowledge as a distinct system with its own authorship criteria, though critics note it still subordinates this knowledge to scientific validation (IPBES, 2019). The UNFCCC has no equivalent mechanism, even after the progress at COP29 and COP30. Igboin (2025) argues that African religious studies remains shaped by frameworks defined outside Africa, which affects how ATR knowledge is judged as well as what is studied. Epistemic reparations requires changing the standard of judgement, not only the range of voices in the room.

Cosmological Sovereignty and the Limits of Liberal Climate Justice

Liberal climate justice has made real contributions. It established the principle that countries with greater historical emissions owe more to climate-vulnerable countries, and it built the political case for loss-and-damage funding. These achievements should not be dismissed.

The limit of liberal climate justice is not that it is wrong, but that its account of harm is too narrow. By focusing on distribution, measured in money, infrastructure, and physical security, it cannot describe what climate change destroys in ATR communities: sacred relationships, ancestral covenants, and cosmological governance systems. A justice framework adequate to this harm must address more than distribution.

Cosmological sovereignty names what the distributional framework misses: the spiritually grounded authority that ATR communities hold over land with which they have sacred relationships, an authority that does not depend on Western property law. This paper proposes the concept as a contribution to the literature on indigenous ontology and climate governance. It is not yet an established category, and it is offered for further discussion.

The Maasai communities of Kenya and Tanzania illustrate why this matters. They are among the most climate-vulnerable populations in East Africa. Standard climate finance addresses their vulnerability through drought insurance and livelihood programmes, which may help materially but does not address the dismantling of the sacred governance systems through which Maasai communities managed pastoral land, dismantling driven by both climate change and state land enclosures such as the 2022 Loliondo evictions (Goldman, 2011). Rebuilding these systems would require the cosmological recognition that climate finance is not designed to provide.

Ugba and van Klinken (2025) argue that African religious studies must engage seriously with the political and ecological dimensions of religious life. Cosmological sovereignty is one attempt to take this seriously within climate justice specifically.

A reasonable concern is that this risks romanticising ATR traditions, which are diverse, contested, and not always ecologically virtuous in practice. Cosmological sovereignty does not claim that ATR communities are inherently more virtuous than others. It claims that their sacred authority over their land deserves recognition, and that this recognition is necessary, though not sufficient, for an adequate climate justice framework.

Conclusion

This paper set out to do three things. First, to show that ATR ontologies understand land as part of a moral community bound by mutual obligation, an account that matters because it identifies something distributional justice cannot register. Second, to argue that colonial dispossession caused cosmological violence, a distinct injury visible in cases from the 1913 Native Land Act to the unresolved Ogiek proceedings. Third, to argue that taking ATR knowledge seriously requires epistemic reparations, not only rhetorical acknowledgement.

These arguments are theoretical proposals, built through reading and interpretation rather than

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fieldwork. They are offered for testing through future research conducted with ATR communities themselves, in a way that lets those communities control how their views are represented.

The Ogiek, the Maasai, the Yoruba custodians of sacred groves, and ATR communities in Mozambique are not waiting for scholars to theorise their experience. They are living it, in courts, in forests, and in negotiations where their voices are often advisory rather than authoritative. Scholarship's task is to make the case for changing that.

What is at stake is not only justice for ATR communities, though that matters and is urgent. It is the adequacy of climate governance itself. A framework that cannot recognise cosmological sovereignty cannot fully protect the ecosystems that sovereignty governs. Bringing ATR cosmology into climate justice discourse is not a gesture of cultural inclusion. It is what a genuinely universal account of justice requires.

Recommendations

Epistemic reparations requires institutional change, not only a change in disposition. The steps below are organised by actor and by time horizon: short term within two to three years, medium term three to seven years, and long term beyond seven years.

For the UNFCCC and Its Subsidiary Bodies

1. ***Short term, Years 1–2:*** African governments and civil society organisations should ask the UNFCCC's scientific body, SBSTA, to set up a working group on ATR and indigenous cosmological knowledge, following the example of IPBES, which gives indigenous knowledge its own authorship section in its assessments (IPBES, 2019).
2. ***Medium term, Years 3–7:*** this working group should write guidelines for checking whether national climate plans and Loss and Damage Fund decisions respect ATR cosmological sovereignty, reporting directly to the Fund's board. The COP29 and COP30 experience suggests that advisory status without budget power produces visibility without real influence (Dupraz-Dobias, 2024; Mongabay, 2025).
3. ***Long term, Years 7+:*** ATR and indigenous representatives should hold voting seats, not just observer status, on the Loss and Damage Fund Board and the Adaptation Fund Board.

For African Governments

1. ***Short term, Years 1–2:*** ministries of environment and land should work with human rights commissions and ATR communities to document the sacred governance systems disrupted by colonial land policy, starting where litigation has already created a public record, such as Kenya's Mau Forest and South Africa's former native reserves.
2. ***Medium term, Years 3–7:*** these findings should be added to national adaptation plans and loss-and-damage claims as their own category of harm.
3. ***Long term, Years 7+:*** governments should set up formal mechanisms, as serious as truth and reconciliation processes, for communities to seek redress for cosmological harm. The Ogiek case shows that litigation alone often does not produce compliance (Pan African Lawyers Union, 2025), so these mechanisms need independent monitoring and budget commitments.

For International Climate Finance Institutions

1. ***Short term, Years 1–2:*** the Loss and Damage Fund and bilateral donors should create a funding stream for rebuilding ATR environmental knowledge, separate from existing indigenous funding that mostly supports forest tenure and livelihoods.
2. ***Medium term, Years 3–7:*** ATR communities should control how this funding is distributed, using participatory grant-making models already used by some indigenous-led conservation funds.
3. ***Long term, Years 7+:*** the share of climate finance reaching ATR and indigenous communities directly should be tracked against a public target, since past pledges, such as the 2021 Glasgow indigenous-tenure pledge, were poorly tracked and reached communities slowly.

For Universities and Professional Training Bodies

1. ***Short term, Years 1–2:*** African universities should pilot courses on ATR cosmological ethics in law, environmental studies, philosophy, and religious studies departments.

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2. ***Medium term, Years 3–7:*** professional bodies for environmental lawyers and climate negotiators should require some training in ATR environmental frameworks.

3. ***Long term, Years 7+:*** this training should produce practitioners able to represent ATR communities in their own terms, rather than translating their claims into categories such as cultural heritage that this paper has argued cannot capture what is at stake.

For Scholars

The concepts proposed in this paper, cosmological sovereignty, cosmological violence, and epistemic reparations, are a research agenda, not a finished argument. Scholars in African philosophy of religion, decolonial theory, and climate justice should test these concepts against fieldwork conducted with ATR communities, revise them where the evidence warrants, and develop the legal and policy language needed to bring them into international governance.

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