

REFLECTIONS ON RUMI'S *MATHNAWI* AND ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY: INTRODUCING AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The *Mathnawi*, a thirteenth-century mystical poem by Jalal al-Din Rumi, is traditionally associated with Islamic spirituality, characterized by its rich imagery, metaphors, stories, and analogies. Despite its primary mystical and didactic nature, discernible elements reflecting a nature-centric worldview are evident within its verses. This article explores the extent to which ecological spirituality themes are present in the *Mathnawi*. Employing a qualitative analysis approach, it investigates how Rumi and his work are integrated into contemporary conversations surrounding ecological concerns, with a specific lens on Nigeria. Drawing from practical examples, the study explores the portrayal and utilization of Rumi's insights within the context of Nigeria's ecological landscape. Furthermore, it incorporates reflections on insights gleaned from indigenous Nigerian philosophical and cultural traditions, enriching the discourse on ecological spirituality. The inquiry contemplates the potential for incorporating perspectives from other African cultures and Islamic scholars into this dialogue. Ultimately, the analysis suggests that embracing an African perspective can deepen and broaden Rumi's ecological conceptualizations of the universe, offering new insights and avenues for understanding and addressing contemporary ecological challenges.

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Khulasah

Mathnawi, sebuah koleksi puisi mistik abad ke-13 karya Jalal al-Din Rumi, secara tradisional dikaitkan dengan spiritualiti Islam, yang dicirikan oleh banyaknya gambaran, metafora, cerita, dan analogi. Walaupun bersifat mistik dan didaktik, elemen-elemen yang mencerminkan pandangan dunia berpusatkan alam semula jadi dapat dilihat dalam ayat-ayatnya. Makalah ini meneroka sejauh mana tema spiritualiti ekologi wujud dalam *Mathnawi*. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis kualitatif, ia mengkaji bagaimana Rumi dan karyanya diintegrasikan ke dalam perbincangan kontemporari mengenai isu-isu ekologi, dengan tumpuan khusus di Nigeria. Berdasarkan contoh-contoh praktikal, kajian ini meneroka bagaimana pandangan Rumi digambarkan dan digunakan dalam konteks landskap ekologi Nigeria. Selain itu, makalah ini menggabungkan refleksi tentang wawasan yang diperoleh daripada tradisi falsafah dan budaya pribumi Nigeria yang memperkayakan lagi wacana mengenai spiritualiti ekologi. Kajian ini turut menyelidiki potensi untuk mengintegrasikan perspektif daripada budaya Afrika lain dan sarjana Islam ke dalam dialog ini. Akhirnya, analisis ini mencadangkan bahawa penerimaan perspektif Afrika dapat memperdalam dan memperluas konseptualisasi ekologi alam semesta oleh Rumi, menawarkan wawasan dan jalan baharu untuk memahami serta menangani cabaran ekologi kontemporari.

Kata kunci: Rumi; *Mathnawi*; ekologi; spiritualiti Islam; Afrika.

Introduction

The contemporary environmental crisis necessitates comprehensively reevaluating humanity's relationship with the natural world. Religious and spiritual traditions emerge

as significant sources of ecological wisdom, with Islam providing a rich heritage and profound insights within its theological and mystical dimensions. Rumi's *Mathnawi*, a seminal work, stands out as a repository of spiritual wisdom addressing fundamental questions about human existence and the interconnectedness of all life.

Recognizing the relevance of Rumi's *Mathnawi* to ecological spirituality, scholars such as Clarke and Mokrani have explored its intricate tapestry, uncovering layers of meaning resonating with ecological consciousness¹. This research aims to contribute to the broader conversation on spirituality and sustainability by examining *Mathnawi* through the lens of Islamic ecological thought.

To contextualize Rumi's ecological insights, the study explores the broader landscape of Islamic ecological thought, drawing on the works of scholars like Nasr.² Nasr's works provide a foundation for understanding how Islamic spirituality fosters a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world. Harmala's work sheds light on the practical dimensions of Islamic

¹ L. Clarke, "The Universe Alive: Nature in the Masnavi of Jalal Al-Din Rumi," in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2003); Adnane Mokrani, "Islamic Ecological Reflections in Dialogue with Laudato Si," *Islamochristiana* 43 (2017), 115-122.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (South Africa: ABC International Group, 1997), 1-151; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Answers to Some Questions Posed about Religion and the Environment," *Transcendent Philosophy: An International Journal for Comparative Philosophy and Mysticism* 13 (2012), 7-20; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Ecological Problem in the Light of Sufism: The Conquest of Nature and the Teachings of Eastern Science," in *Sufi Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 152-163.

ecological principles, showcasing the potential for religious traditions to inspire tangible, eco-friendly solutions.³

Rumi's *Mathnawi*, described as a spiritual epic, transcends cultural and religious boundaries, offering universal insights into the human condition. Building on Clarke's examination of nature in the *Masnawi*,⁴ this study explores specific verses embodying ecological wisdom, emphasizing Rumi's call for environmental stewardship and ethical responsibility.

While Islamic ecological thought has received attention, the study introduces a novel dimension by incorporating African perspectives. Agofure's work provides a framework for understanding how African philosophical traditions engage with environmental challenges.⁵ The research aims to identify commonalities, divergences, and synergies between Islamic and African perspectives, contributing to a holistic understanding of ecological spirituality.

Employing a multidisciplinary approach, the research combines literary analysis, theological inquiry, and comparative studies to unravel the ecological dimensions of Rumi's *Mathnawi*. Incorporating African perspectives enriches the discourse on ecological spirituality, fostering a more inclusive and interconnected understanding of humanity's relationship with the environment.

This study is significant because it contributes to the ongoing dialogue on the intersection of spirituality and ecology, expands the discourse's geographical and cultural scope, and provides practical implications for

³ Inga Viola Härmälä, *Transformative Islamic Ecology-Beliefs and Practices of Muslims for Sustainable Agriculture and Permaculture* (Master's thesis, Lund University, 2014), 1–151.

⁴ Clarke, "The Universe Alive."

⁵ Joyce Onoromhenre Agofure, "African Philosophy: The Questions of Climate Change and the Environment," *Cross-Currents: An International Peer-Reviewed Journal on Humanities & Social Sciences* 4(5) (2018), 118-122.

contemporary ecological practices and policies. As the world grapples with pressing environmental challenges, synthesizing spiritual wisdom and ecological consciousness becomes imperative for a sustainable and harmonious future. Through this exploration, the research aspires to contribute to academic scholarship and foster a deeper, more interconnected relationship between humanity and the living earth.

The Idea of Eco-spirituality in African and Islamic Perspectives

Eco-spirituality, a term that fuses ecological concerns with spiritual dimensions, has gained significant attention in recent years as societies grapple with environmental challenges. African eco-spirituality is deeply rooted in the continent's rich cultural tapestry, as highlighted in the works of Onebunne and Chijioke, and Kanu.⁶ Onebunne and Chijioke emphasize the significance of African sacral beliefs in shaping eco-spirituality, indicating a profound connection between the sacred and the ecological. The concept of Igwebuike, as discussed by Kanu, exemplifies an indigenous African response to contemporary ecological crises. Igwebuike, an Igbo term signifying communal strength, reflects a communal approach to environmental issues, emphasizing collective responsibility and resilience in the face of ecological challenges.

Moreover, Ojebode's study on the myths surrounding the Erin-Ijesha Waterfalls in Nigeria Kanu illuminates how African eco-spirituality intertwines with myths and

⁶ Jude I. Onebunne & Nmesoma I. Chijioke, "African Sacrality and Eco-Spirituality," *Ochendo: An African Journal of Innovative Studies* 3(1) (2022), 83–96; Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, O.S.A., "African Eco-Spirituality: An Igwebuike Indigenous Response to Modern Ecological Crisis," *To Be Légé: Augustinian Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 4(1) (2022), 1–32.

narratives.⁷ These narratives often carry ecological wisdom, emphasizing the importance of sustainable relationships with nature. The worship of sacred trees, as explored by Ifeakor and Ndubisi,⁸ reveals another facet of African eco-spirituality, emphasizing a harmonious coexistence with the natural world. The article contends that understanding the philosophical underpinnings of these practices is crucial for appreciating the depth of eco-spirituality in African cultures.

Nkama et al. contribute to the discourse by examining eco-preservation through the lens of Igbo beliefs and practices.⁹ Their work reflects a re-imagining of ecological preservation informed by indigenous knowledge systems. The study underscores the need to integrate traditional beliefs into contemporary environmental conservation efforts. Further, Ifeakor and Ndubisi's philosophical investigation into worshipping sacred trees emphasizes Nigeria's interconnectedness between spiritual practices and environmental ethics.¹⁰ By critically examining the philosophical foundations of these rituals, the authors reveal the inherent ecological wisdom embedded in African traditions.

Islamic eco-spirituality, as explored by scholars such as Asmanto, and Siregar and Rangkuti, offers a unique lens through which to understand the relationship between

⁷ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, O.S.A., "African Mythologies and Eco-Spirituality," in *African Ecological Spirituality*, ed. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, O.S.A., (Umunya: Augustinian Publications, 2021), 111–126.

⁸ Chinedu Ifeakor & Francis Okenna Ndubisi, "A Philosophical Investigation on the Worship of Sacred Trees and Eco-Spirituality in Nigeria," *Nnadiesube Journal of Philosophy* 6(1) (2023), 77–84.

⁹ Chinyere Lilian Nkama, "African Traditional Religious Practices as Social Regulatory Mechanism: The 'Ulo Ubu' Example in Amasiri, Nigeria," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 51(3–4) (2022), 263–282.

¹⁰ Chinedu Ifeakor & Francis Okenna Ndubisi, "A Philosophical Investigation on the Worship of Sacred Trees and Eco-Spirituality in Nigeria," *Nnadiesube Journal of Philosophy* 6(1) (2023), 77–84.

humanity and the environment.¹¹ Asmanto's ethnographic studies in East Java, Indonesia, provide insights into the values of Islamic sustainable development, particularly in the context of local shrimp farming practices. The study suggests that Islamic principles can guide environmentally responsible practices within economic activities.

Asmanto et al. explore the inner dimensions of eco-spirituality within the context of green Islamic business. Their critical ethnography sheds light on new praxes that align with the ecological teachings of Islam. Integrating spirituality and environmental consciousness is seen as fostering sustainability within economic endeavors. Furthermore, Siregar and Rangkuti present a perspective grounded in *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, elucidating how Islamic eco-spirituality is based on the higher objectives of Islamic law. This approach advocates for protecting the environment as one of the essential goals of *Shari'ah*, emphasizing the interconnectedness of ecological well-being with the broader ethical framework of Islamic jurisprudence.

In a transcultural exploration, Sayem discusses Seyyed Hossein Nasr's eco-religious teachings and their applicability in Bangladesh. As examined by Sayem, Nasr's eco-philosophy resonates with the broader Islamic perspective on environmental stewardship.¹² Drawing

¹¹ Eko Asmanto, "Eco-Spirituality Values and Islamic Sustainable Development: Ethnographic Studies of Local Culture at Shrimp Farmers in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia," eds. Mashitoh Yaacob, et al. (Proceedings of the ASEAN Community Conference 2015, Islamic Civilization in ASEAN Community: Challenges and Hopes, Bangi, Malaysia: Institute of Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2015), 48; Ibrahim Siregar & Suheri Sahputra Rangkuti, "Eco-Spiritual Based on *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*: The New Relationship of Man with the Environment," *Al-Tahrir* 23(1) (2023), 83–101.

¹² Md Abu Sayem, "The Eco-Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr," *Islamic Studies* 58(2) (2019), 271–95; Md Abu Sayem, "Eco-Religious Teachings and Environmental Sustainability: An Analysis of Workability of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's 'Eco-Spirituality' in the

parallels, this section reflects on Rumi's *Mathnawi*, introducing an African perspective to the discourse.

The reflections on Rumi's *Mathnawi* in the context of African eco-spirituality add a unique layer to the discourse. While Nasr's teachings primarily emerge from an Islamic context, Rumi's poetry transcends religious boundaries, offering a more inclusive perspective. Rumi's *Mathnawi* provides a common ground for African and Islamic eco-spirituality with its profound ecological metaphors and spiritual insights.

In the *Mathnawi*, Rumi often uses nature as a metaphor to convey spiritual truths. The interconnectedness between human experience and the natural world in Rumi's poetry resonates with African eco-spirituality, where nature is not merely a resource but a living entity with which humans share a symbiotic relationship. The emphasis on love and unity in Rumi's poetry aligns with the communal ethos present in African eco-spirituality, as exemplified by the concept of *Igwebuiké*.

Exploring eco-spirituality within African and Islamic perspectives reveals rich cultural and spiritual wisdom tapestries. Drawing on diverse sources, from Igbo beliefs in Nigeria to *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* in Islam and culminating in reflections on Rumi's *Mathnawi*, this article underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge and spiritual traditions in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. As the globe contends with ecological crises, these perspectives offer holistic and interconnected approaches that integrate spirituality, culture, and ethics into sustainable practices. The cross-cultural dialogue between African and Islamic eco-spirituality invites a deeper understanding of humanity's role as earth stewards, fostering a sense of collective responsibility for the planet's well-being.

Context of Bangladesh," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 6(3) (2021), 69–83.

Eco-Spirituality from the Islamic Perspective

Eco-spirituality, the intersection of ecological consciousness and spiritual beliefs, manifests uniquely across cultures, each influenced by its historical, geographical, and cultural context. In Islam, eco-spirituality manifests through a rich tapestry of theological principles, ethical injunctions, and mystical traditions. This article not only engages with Islamic perspectives on environmental stewardship but also seeks to understand how these beliefs intersect with the myths and legends of Africa, reflecting the diverse cultural landscapes within the Islamic world. Central to this exploration are concepts like *'urf* (custom) and the principles (*dawabit*) of *'aqidah* (theology), which shape Islamic thought and practice and inform the integration of indigenous African spiritualities.

Islamic eco-spirituality emerges from foundational Islamic teachings emphasizing the interconnectedness between humanity, nature, and the Divine. The Qur'an frequently references nature as signs (*ayat*) of God's existence and power, inviting believers to reflect upon the natural world and recognize their role as stewards (*khalifah*) entrusted with its care. Verses such as "And He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth - all from Him. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought" (al-Jathiyah 45:13) show the spiritual significance of nature in Islam.

Furthermore, Islamic tradition, embodied in the sayings and practices of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), emphasizes principles of environmental conservation, resource management, and compassionate treatment of animals. The Prophet's injunctions to avoid wastefulness (*israf*), conserve water, plant trees, and show kindness to all living beings exemplify the ethical dimension of Islamic eco-spirituality.

Integrating Islamic eco-spirituality with African traditions offers a fascinating glimpse into the dynamic

interplay between religious traditions and cultural heritage. Africa's diverse ecosystems and indigenous spiritualities have shaped local understandings of the natural world, often imbued with traditional beliefs and reverence for ancestral spirits.

In regions where Islam encountered indigenous African cultures, syncretic forms of spirituality emerged, blending Islamic teachings with pre-existing mythologies and ritual practices. For instance, in West Africa, the *waqf* (endowment) concept has been interwoven with traditional practices of land conservation and community stewardship, reflecting a harmonious integration of Islamic principles with local customs.¹³ Similarly, the water motif, central to Islamic rituals like ablution (*wudu*) and African spiritual traditions, symbolizes purification, renewal, and vitality across diverse cultural contexts. The Nile River, for instance, holds profound spiritual significance in Islamic and African traditions, embodying themes of fertility, sustenance, and divine blessing.¹⁴

The *'urf* (custom) concept is crucial in navigating the interface between Islamic beliefs and local cultural practices. Recognizing the diversity of human experiences and expressions, Islamic jurisprudence acknowledges the validity of customs that do not contradict foundational Islamic principles. This flexibility allows for adapting religious norms to local contexts, facilitating the

¹³ Ahmad Bello Dogarawa, "Poverty Alleviation through *Zakah* and *Waqf* Institutions: A Case for the Muslim Ummah in Ghana" (Paper presented at the First National Muslim Summit, Al-Furqan Foundation, Tamale, Ghana, October 3, 2009), 1-27, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1622122> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1622122> 2009; Habeebah Simisola Fayusuf, Saheed Abdullahi Busari & Bilkis Lawal Shuaibu, "Waqf Effectiveness in Nigeria: Problems and Solutions," *Journal of Islamic Finance* 10(2) (2021), 79-89.

¹⁴ Terje Oestigaard, "Christianity and Islam as Nile Religions in Egypt: Syncretism and Continuity," in *Water, Culture and Identity* (n.p: n.p, 2009), 141.

harmonious coexistence of the Islamic faith with indigenous traditions. Moreover, the principles (*dawabit*) of 'aqidah (theology) provide a framework for discerning the essential tenets of Islamic belief amidst cultural diversity. While Islam affirms the universality of its theological truths, it also accommodates diverse cultural expressions and interpretations, emphasizing the unity of faith (*tawhid*) while respecting the plurality of human experiences.

Exploring eco-spirituality from the Islamic perspective necessitates a nuanced understanding of Islamic theology, ethical principles, and their integration with local customs and cultural narratives. Engaging with African traditions, this study unravels the intricate tapestry of spiritual meanings embedded within diverse ecological landscapes, fostering a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of faith, nature, and culture through the lens of 'urf and the principles of 'aqidah, one glimpse the rich potential for dialogue and mutual enrichment between Islamic spirituality and the indigenous wisdom of Africa, forging pathways towards ecological harmony and spiritual renewal.

Analytical Methods for Exploring Rumi's *Mathnawi*

Rumi's *Mathnawi*, a profound Persian literary masterpiece, has intrigued scholars for centuries with its rich spiritual and philosophical content. Exploring this text demands a nuanced approach that combines literary analysis, cultural understanding, and spiritual interpretation. Literary analysis is at the core of understanding Rumi's *Mathnawi*, where scholars dissect its language, themes, symbols, and narrative structures. This study uncovers the layers of meaning embedded within Rumi's poetic verses through this lens. The *Mathnawi*'s intricate use of metaphor, allegory, and symbolism often requires a close reading to decipher its spiritual and ecological messages. This article employs close textual analysis, comparative literature

studies, and stylistic examination to unravel the complexities of Rumi's poetic expression.

Understanding Rumi's *Mathnawi* necessitates grasping its historical and cultural context. Situating the text within the socio-political milieu of 13th-century Persia provides invaluable insights into Rumi's influences and the societal issues he addressed. Moreover, considering Rumi's cultural background and interactions with diverse religious and philosophical traditions enriches the interpretation of his work. From an African perspective, this study draws parallels between Rumi's themes and African spiritual traditions, highlighting universal spiritual truths that transcend geographical boundaries.

Rumi's *Mathnawi* reflects a syncretic blend of Islamic mysticism, Sufi philosophy, and universal spirituality. This article engages in comparative religious studies to elucidate the intersections between Rumi's teachings and another religious tradition, drawing parallels and identifying shared motifs. Hence, this study uncovers the universality of Rumi's message and its relevance to diverse cultural and religious contexts.

One of the emerging areas of scholarship regarding Rumi's *Mathnawi* is its ecological spirituality. This article examines Rumi's reverence for nature, ecological metaphors, and insights into humanity's relationship with the natural world. From an African perspective, this entails exploring connections between Rumi's ecological ethos and indigenous African ecological philosophies, which often emphasize harmony with nature, respect for biodiversity, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. Through this lens, this article uncovers ecological wisdom embedded within Rumi's poetry, offering insights into contemporary environmental challenges.

Central to the study of Rumi's *Mathnawi* is spiritual hermeneutics, which involves interpreting the text through a spiritual lens. This article engages in contemplative

reading and mystical reflection to access the deeper spiritual truths encoded within Rumi's verses. From an African perspective, this involves integrating Rumi's teachings with African spiritual cosmologies, fostering a dialogue between diverse spiritual traditions, and deepening one's understanding of the human experience and connection to the divine.

Exploring Rumi's *Mathnawi* requires a multidisciplinary approach encompassing literary analysis, historical contextualization, comparative religious studies, ecological interpretation, and spiritual hermeneutics. From an African perspective, this endeavor enriches one's understanding of Rumi's timeless wisdom, fosters cross-cultural dialogue, promotes ecological awareness, and cultivates spiritual enrichment. By employing these analytical methods, this work continues to unravel the profound insights of Rumi's poetic masterpiece, inviting readers to embark on a transformative journey of spiritual awakening.

Ecology and Rumi

Rumi believes that nature is not subject to any necessary mechanical law. This is why he asks the question:

“What is (the meaning of) this (word) ‘cause’ (*sabab*) in Arabic?”¹⁵

He responds thus:

“Say: ‘cord’ (*rasan*). This cord came into this well (the world) by (Divine) artifice. The revolution of the water-wheel causes the cord (to move), (but) not seeing the mover of the water-wheel is an error. Beware, beware! Do not regard these cords of causation in the world

¹⁵ Reynold A Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi: Commentary Volume I & II* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2006), 1: 847.

as (deriving their movement) from the giddy wheel (of heaven)."¹⁶

Strikingly enough, Nicholson, in his commentary on the verse, states that "[t]he literal signification of *sabab* (secondary cause, means) is a rope (Arabic *rasan*) by means of which a bucket is let down into a well to draw water". Here the poet likens the world to a well and all phenomenal causation to the bucket rope on a water wheel; the rope appears to be moved by the rotation of the wheel, but the wheel itself is moved by the ox or ass harnessed to it. No less unreal is the supposed influence of the celestial sphere, fortune's wheel, on human affairs.¹⁷

Rumi's understanding of nature is not just about natural, tangible, or organic things; it constitutes everything around us. It is harmonious, purposive, and pleasing. Directly opposed to this view is the Greek philosophy, which imagines the order of the cosmos as mechanistic, to the point of being mathematically calculable. What do I mean by this? Greek philosophy is understood as having a cosmic legacy representing a mathematical tradition; one focused on developing mathematical models with predictive power. Hetherington opines that Greeks' attempt to explain celestial phenomena in natural terms and to avoid supernatural or divine intervention is a common theme linking many otherwise disparate scholarly studies.¹⁸ In his discussion of ancient Greek philosophy, Graham writes the following:

"From the Presocratics to the Hellenists, there is a preference for reason, whether it is used to find truth or tranquility. The Presocratics prefer

¹⁶ Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi: Commentary Volume*, 1: 847-849.

¹⁷ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, 72.

¹⁸ Norris S. Hetherington, "Early Greek Cosmology: A Historiographical Review," *Culture and Cosmos* (1997), <https://doi.org/10.46472/cc.0101.0205>.

reason or reasoned accounts to mythology, sometimes to find physical explanations for the phenomena all around us, to think more clearly about the gods, or sometimes to find out truths about our own psychology."¹⁹

However, it is important to consider the historical context of Western intellectual traditions and how they have evolved. For example, while some forms of Greek philosophy may have emphasized a mechanistic worldview, other schools of thought within Hellenistic philosophy, such as Neoplatonism, may have had a more mystical or spiritual orientation.

How can one overcome this preference for the reason that Graham has shed light on? A glimpse into Rumi's cosmos serves as a legitimate starting point to delineate the order of the universe, which is moral and beyond calculation and directly depends on the grace and mercy of a living God. Why is the universe considered to be moral and beyond calculation? This article focuses on how Rumi attempts to shed light on the world and its harmonious and purposive connections. He writes:

"Air and earth and water and fire are (His) slaves: with you and me they are dead, but with God they are alive. Before God, fire is always standing (ready to do His behest), writhing continually day and night, like a lover. If you strike stone on iron, it (the fire) leaps out: 'tis by God's command that it puts forth its foot."²⁰

Simply put, nature is perspicuous. The reality of this truth is not to be questioned, even though it is hidden from the doubter. The discourse of nature is consistent and

¹⁹ Jacob N. Graham, "Ancient Greek Philosophy," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/ancient-greek-philosophy/#H7>.

²⁰ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. I, 838-840.

multidirectional. A portion of this discourse is carried out between the regular things themselves, showing that the cycles of nature, a long way from being mechanical, are intrinsically dynamic, a series of epiphanies, and unpredictable.

Continuing in the same line of thought, one can argue that it is not only that they are subordinate to God to some extent best communicated through representation, but it is also that they are made for a specific reason in as genuinely a sense as any of the glaring truths of this world. However, this clear truth is stowed away from those without the requisite profound understanding, which comes not from cynicism but from idealism and the ability to believe. Thus, the writer frequently censures the scholar and cynic who rely solely on their intellectual acumen instead of their heart and cannot see.

In any case, a predominant part of such discussions is the discourse between nature and God. In Rumi's words,

"The doing of God towards all the particles of the world is like the words (spells) breathed by enchanters. The Divine attraction holds a hundred discourses with the effects and secondary causes, without (uttering) a word or (moving) a lip. Not that the production of effects by the Divine decree is not actual; but His production of effects thereby is inconceivable to reason."²¹

The import of the hundred talks of God with nature becomes clear when we recall the position of the word of God in Islam as a disclosure. Consequently, we could think that everything gets disclosed in its mode; everything conveys its truth. Furthermore, it becomes obvious that nature has its specific insight.

²¹ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. V & VI, 6: 1070-1072.

Accordingly, through God's immediate mediation, nature sees and witnesses and possesses moral agency. In Rumi's ecology, nature additionally notices and recalls the deeds of mankind to act, as it is said in the Qur'an itself, as an observer on the Day of Judgment. All that nature does, by the by, has an ethical sense.

One of the central themes in Rumi's poetry is the idea that nature is a reflection of the divine. He saw the natural world as a source of inspiration and a reminder of the beauty and majesty of the divine. He emphasizes that everything in the universe is interconnected and that we should see ourselves as part of nature rather than separate from it. He believed the natural world could help us develop a deeper sense of gratitude and compassion. Its movement in this world is not programmed; it is purposive and significant. For nature to have this quality, it must have the option of connecting it with the ethical show here on the planet. Furthermore, to relate, it should be percipient; it should, in a real sense, see and hear.

Thus, it does, by the order of God - in the very same manner and no less so than we do. From the mountains to the breeze to the stones, all aspects of nature pronounce: "(They all say)", "We have hearing and sight and are happy, (although) with you, the uninitiated, we are mute." (1.1019). It is only an unenlightened psyche that envisions the eye to be the essential organ of sight that would believe nature to be unseeing. The eye is not, truth be told, the organ of sight by any means. Rather, it is God alone who empowers sight.

Rumi reminds one of the facts that nature is a model most importantly because it submits completely to the Divine Will. So, additionally, it would be advisable for human beings to surrender their own will, to become like fire, "standing ready to do God's behest, writhing continually day and night, like a lover" (1.839). Yet, a man over and over again neglects to arrive at the norm of the

regular world (even though his true capacity is far more prominent). Hence Rumi compares the 'universals' (*kulliyat*) to a ball that prostrates itself before God's polo hammer, and afterward, he suggests the conversation starter:

"How should you, O heart, you who are but one of these hundred thousand particulars, not [also] be in restless movement at His decree?"²²

Spiritually, this point is well articulated by the awareness of the components of nature which, in contrast to human cognizance, is never redirected from their Lord. Accordingly, the components, Rumi says, are unacquainted with us, yet familiar with God, while we (human beings) know about things other than God, yet are indiscreet of God and the numerous Prophets He has sent us.²³ Truth be told, it was because the components did not wish to upset this ideal relationship that they were hesitant to accept the trust that mankind accepted: "They said, 'We are averse to this life - that one should be living in relation to created beings and dead in relation to God.'"²⁴

Then again, the components and heavenly bodies will not be compensated by God for this submission, since it does not include choice. Rumi's poetry highlights the importance of a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. He believed that nature has an ethical sense and that humans have a responsibility to care for the environment. Rumi saw nature as a reflection of the divine, a teacher, and a source of inspiration. His poetry continues to inspire people around the world to appreciate the beauty and majesty of nature and to live in harmony with the environment.

²² Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. V & VI, 6: 926-27.

²³ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, 2: 2371.

²⁴ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, 2: 2373.

Rumi's mystical thought and African ecological perspectives may seem unrelated at first glance, but some connections can be made between the two. Rumi was a 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic whose works have had a profound impact on Islamic spirituality and Persian literature. His poetry often explores themes of love, spirituality, and the search for truth.

One of Rumi's key ideas is the concept of 'Beloved', which refers to the divine presence that is present in all things. For Rumi, everything in the universe is connected and imbued with this divine energy, and the purpose of life is to recognize and connect with this energy. Similarly, many African ecological perspectives also emphasize the interconnectedness of all things in the natural world. For example, in many African societies, the health of the environment is seen as directly linked to the well-being of the community. This is reflected in many traditional practices, such as communal land management and conservation efforts ²⁵.

Furthermore, many African cultures have a deep spiritual connection to the natural world, with beliefs and practices that honor the spirits and energies present in the environment. This can be seen in the traditional practices of many African religions, such as the use of sacred trees and other natural landmarks in religious ceremonies ²⁶. Thus, while Rumi's mystical thought and African ecological

²⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990); Denise Martin, "Pan African Metaphysical Epistemology: A Pentagonal Introduction," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2(3) (2008), 209–227; Munamoto Chemhuru, *African Environmental Ethics* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Gloria Emeagwali & George J. Sefa Dei, *African Indigenous Knowledge and the Disciplines* (New York: Springer, 2014).

²⁶ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2015); Jude Emeka Madu, *Fundamentals of Religious Studies* (Nigeria: Franedoh Publishers Limited, 1996); Nkama, "African Traditional Religious Practices," 263.

perspectives may come from different cultural traditions, they both emphasize the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of recognizing and honoring the divine energy present in the natural world.

In addition, both Rumi's mystical thought and African ecological perspectives have relevance in our modern world. With the increasing awareness of the interconnectedness of global systems and the impact of human activity on the environment, there is a growing need for a holistic understanding of our place in the world. Rumi's emphasis on recognizing the divine energy present in all things can provide a framework for cultivating a sense of reverence and respect for the natural world. Similarly, African ecological perspectives can provide insights into sustainable practices and community-based approaches to environmental conservation.

By drawing on these perspectives, we can cultivate a deeper sense of connection to the natural world and work towards creating more sustainable and harmonious relationships with our environment. Furthermore, recognizing the interconnectedness of all things can also foster greater compassion and understanding toward other people and cultures, which is especially important in our increasingly globalized world.

In addition, both Rumi's mystical thought and African ecological perspectives emphasize the importance of spiritual practice and inner reflection as a means of connecting with the divine and achieving a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. For Rumi, this inner journey involves cultivating a sense of mindfulness and awareness, as well as developing a deep sense of love and compassion towards all living beings. Similarly, many African spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of meditation, prayer, and other forms of spiritual practice as a means of connecting with the divine

and gaining insight into the natural world.²⁷ By engaging in these practices, we can cultivate a greater sense of awareness and compassion, which can help us to navigate the complexities of our modern world with greater wisdom and understanding. Ultimately, the connections between Rumi's mystical thought and African ecological perspectives remind us of the importance of recognizing and honoring the interconnectedness of all things and the need for a more holistic and compassionate approach to the world around us.

The Nature of Ecological Trends in the *Mathnawi* and an Indigenous Nigerian Worldview

Is Rumi's *Mathnawi* ecological worldview equivalent to the eco-spirituality of the indigenous Nigerian people? This is an important question, especially when considering the underlying accentuation of life, relationships, congruity, and co-existence support in Rumi's *Mathnawi*. While environmental concern is central to ecological spirituality, the concept transcends many apparently incommensurate spiritual worldviews. Any treatment of ecological spirituality that fails to situate the place of the environment in social, moral, aesthetic, and religious concerns is bound to collapse.

On that note, looking at what Rumi in his *Mathnawi* has to offer regarding contemporary trends in ecological spirituality is appropriate. This study is particularly interested in the notion of life, relationship, congruity, and the support of co-existence, which is central to many indigenous Nigerian peoples' ecologies. Rather than simply condemning one perspective or the other, it may be more

²⁷ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); Edward Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1954); Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

productive to engage in a nuanced and critical dialogue about the strengths and limitations of different ecological theories and practices, and work towards a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to ecological conservation and sustainability that accounts for the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world.

In the eco-spirituality of the indigenous Nigerian peoples' thought, nature is considered something to be cared for and treated with respect and awe. One cannot separate nature from the divine as if they are antithetical to each other in their ecology. The philosophy behind this may not necessarily be religious, but it remains a natural means by which the environment can be preserved. The support of concurrence is vital for the indigenous Nigerian people's comprehension of natural security and preservation. Ecological spirituality, then, for the indigenous Nigerian people, is the awareness of and relationship with the spiritual. This awareness of and relationship with that which is spiritual becomes a reason for a dependable and humane relationship with and managing the environment.

For the eco-spirituality of the indigenous Nigerian people, connections between nature and people, as well as spirit and nature are not dichotomized or compartmentalized but are incorporated into an associated arrangement of presence that is integrated through spiritual communications. Hence, as noted by Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu:

“... eco-spirituality packages the understanding [*sic*] that the human person is a steward not master of the earth; reciprocity between land, plants and humans makes life on earth possible; symbiotic relationship with the earth; and being aware of the impacts of one's actions in the use

of the environment on the present and future generations."²⁸

This point is further buttressed by Anthony Raphael Etuk, who writes:

"... eco-spirituality not only presumes the sacredness of the ecosystem; it also considers the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system of spiritual connectedness."²⁹

Again, both Onebunne and Ifeanyi Okeke agree that, "... people have strong belief in the love and respect for the spirit of nature, as reflected in their lifestyle and wisdom."³⁰

This love and respect for nature are deeply associated with their worship of God. While this is not equal to an idealization of God as being resident, the Indigenous Nigerian people's ecological worldview associates God with natural objects and phenomena. It is generally assumed that God created heaven and earth. Because of this, one can argue for a spiritual renaissance of Indigenous Nigerians by re-sacralizing their perspective following the Indigenous Nigerian eco-spirituality to save Nigeria from environmental breakdown.

Among the Ibos of Eastern Nigeria was the understanding of ecology, where the earth was viewed as a mother possessed by spirits. Ecological awareness, for Ibo

²⁸ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "African Eco-Spirituality: Nature and Sources," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* (2021), 6.

²⁹ Anthony Raphael Etuk, "African Cosmivision and Eco-Spirituality: Healing the Ecological Crisis in Africa," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* (2021), 34.

³⁰ Onebunne & Chijioke, "African Sacrality and Eco-Spirituality," 67; Ifeanyi J. Okeke, "The Human Person, Trees and Spirituality in Igbo Cosmology," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* (2021), 90.

man/woman, was not that the environment should be exploited or overused; instead, with this concept of the earth as a spiritual mother, the earth was treated as though human beings had lived within her (mother earth) and as such must be respected. To go against the relationship between children and their mothers by exploiting nature reveals the absence of respect, love, and solidarity.

Human harmony with the environment and all that it contains shapes ecological life. Reciprocally, when the community is ecologically conscious, there is harmony, and when there is harmony, it means the community is ecologically conscious. Rather than focus on what makes one exploit nature, the indigenous Nigerian people's ecological worldview focuses on the understanding that nature has not been created for humans' control and double-dealing. The eco-spirituality of the indigenous Nigerian people accepts that nature deserves admiration, reverence, and even -sometimes- love, to the extent that spirits, which rank higher than individuals in the order of creatures, reside in it. Yet, such a conception of ecology does not involve the separation of the human and spiritual worlds from each other. It is tied to the notion that the presence of spirits in the home of man breeds and intensifies their regard for nature.

Among the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria, the question of agency is a universal one that pervades not just the domain of humans but also animals, plants, and other entities in nature, including the streams, rivers, seas, oceans, wind, clouds, rainfall, sunlight, etc. Such a holistic reflective view of the uni/multiverse requires cognitive respect for all things, which leads to care and attention to what is revealed through the agencies in entities surrounding our spaces.³¹ This is based on the belief that

³¹ John Ayotunde Işola Bewaji, *Yorùbá Values and the Environment*, (Gainesville, FL: Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida, 2022), <https://news.clas.ufl.edu/yoruba-values-and-the-environment/>.

[t]he supernatural has obligations of respect and responsibility, and the natural have obligations of attention and respect toward that which makes life happy and meaningful. Hence, [t]he ultimate goal of life in [the] Yoruba society is mutual survival. When you tap the palm tree for wine, you do it respectfully without cutting the shoot, even though it would have brought you more juice. It is the height of abomination to uproot the palm tree, set fire to it at the bottom, and drain the juice from the top, even though what you get will be instantly more.

Again, Kanu notes that they "...understand the organization of their universe, but also suggest patterns by which they try to maintain the balance and the harmony of the world".³² These enduring notions of harmony and balance in the eco-spirituality of the indigenous Nigerian peoples' thoughts are best captured in the words of Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu. He writes:

"... worldview is web-like in nature, connecting the human world, the spirit world, and the world of the deities and Supreme Being as complementary. In the area of ecology, these three worlds interact for the preservation of the environment".³³ Put simply, "[t]he view of the world as sacred has been a culture upheld by the African since time immemorial; in fact, the ancient African man worshiped the earth and its inhabitant (this, though, isn't encouraged) and this has set them well above other continents in natural richness."³⁴

³² Kanu, "African Mythologies and Eco-Spirituality," 111.

³³ Ikechukwu A. Kanu, "The Implications of Igbo-African Eco-Bio-Communitarian Spirituality for Global Concerns," *African Perspectives on Global on Global Development* (2018), 88.

³⁴ Jude I. Onebunne, "African Trado-Medicine and Eco-Spirituality," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* (2021), 134.

The explorations in this research have, so far, revealed some fundamental similarities between the ecological spirituality of indigenous Nigerian society and Rumi's *Mathnawi* in terms of their experience and perception of the world around us. These similarities can be seen in how Rumi's *Mathnawi* exudes positivity and awe concerning nature, especially regarding the divine relationship with nature. In addition, as human beings, we are not alone in the world; nature is our companion, for all its parts are living exactly as we are; and if we are correctly attuned to them, they speak to and instruct us - and may, indeed, - speak more truthfully than our kind.

In the indigenous Nigerian eco-spirituality, as explored in previous sections, the notion of ecology is a universal one that pervades not just the domain of humans but also that of animals, plants, and other entities in nature, including the wind, streams, rivers, seas, oceans, clouds, rainfall, sunlight, etc. Such a holistic reflective view of the uni/multiverse requires cognitive respect for all things, which leads to care and attention to what is revealed through the agencies in entities surrounding our spaces.³⁵ Thus, while the Indigenous Nigerian ecological worldview establishes a very strong spiritual connection between human beings and the environment, Rumi, in his *Mathnawi*, re-mythologizes nature, so we recapture the feeling of a world brimming with characters who have their own specific, even emotional, relations with one another and with us. According to Rumi:

"The heart is eating a (particular) food from every single companion; the heart is getting a (particular) excellence from every single (piece of) knowledge."

³⁵ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, *African Ecological Spirituality: Perspectives in Anthroposophy and Environmentalism a Hybrid of Approaches* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2022).

"Every human being's (outer) form is like a cup; (only) the (spiritual) eye is a percipient of his (or her) reality."

"You eat (receive) something from meeting with any one, and you carry away something from conjunction with any associate."

"When planet comes into conjunction with planet, the effect appropriate to them both is assuredly produced."

"As (for example) the conjunction of man and woman brings to birth the human being, and (as) sparks arise from the conjunction of stone and iron."

"And (as) from the conjunction of earth with rains (there are produced) fruits and greenery and sweet herbs."³⁶

Nature is entwined with our world, even though it possesses morality and judges us. Rumi wrote extensively about nature and its relationship with humans. In his poetry, Rumi viewed nature as a manifestation of the divine and emphasized the importance of a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. He believed that nature has an ethical sense and that humans are responsible for protecting and caring for the environment. This researcher believes that these are things that we feel instinctively, even in this time and age, when we stand alone with nature. Hence, those feelings are obscured by the notion that our relations with nature must be scientific and efficient.

It is as if we have become shy about discussing our relationship with nature. Paying cognitive attentiveness and respect to nature cannot lead to arrogance, nor does it

³⁶ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, 2: 1089-1094.

translate into the transposition of the intuitive nature of things that do not speak our language or that seem to be of lower rank. This is because if everything were to be uniform, the world would have been impossible to live in, and things would not have had all the systemic interdependence that enables everything to continue working together for good and ill. It is in this sense that Rumi acknowledges that we have a spiritual affinity with and yearning for our spiritual origins. Rumi has written extensively about human yearning for their spiritual origins. Rumi often uses nature as a metaphor for spiritual longing and the quest for union with the divine in his poetry. For example, in one of his poems, Rumi writes:

"Come, come, whoever you are, Wanderer,
worshipper, lover of leaving, Ours is not a
caravan of despair. Even if you have broken
your vows a thousand times, Come, come again,
come."³⁷

Here, Rumi invites people to reconnect with their spiritual origins, much like a wandering bird returning to its nest. Rumi also uses other natural elements, such as the ocean, the wind, and the sun, to symbolize the different aspects of human spirituality and the journey toward enlightenment. Rumi's poetry is rich with metaphors that reflect the human yearning for their spiritual origins in nature and the search for deeper spiritual meaning in life.

In addition, many of his works, including his poems, letters, and prose writings, reflect this idea of reconnecting with one's spiritual origins. For example, *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, a widely acclaimed collection of Rumi's poems, explores love, spirituality, and nature. In this collection, one finds several poems that reflect on the human yearning for nature and the ethical

³⁷ Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 26.

sense of the natural world³⁸. Also, in Rumi's *Mathnawi*, a collection of poems that tells stories and teaches moral lessons, several passages reflect nature and its relationship to human ethics. One example is the following verses:

"Wherefore (was it), pray, that heaven was rent asunder? Because of one (spiritual) eye that an earthly creature opened.

Earth, from its grossness, settles beneath water; (but) see how earth has sped beyond the empyrean!

Know, then, that the subtlety (of water) is not (derived) from the water: 'tis only the gift of the Bounteous Originator.

If He make air and fire low (in place), and if He let the thorn surpass the rose, He is the Ruler and (the One who said) God doeth what He willeth: from the very self of pain, He raises the remedy."³⁹

Also:

"For that reason, I am laying my head (humbly) on the earth, so that she (the earth) may be my witness on the Day of Judgement.

On the Day of Judgement, when she shall be made to quake mightily, this earth will bear witness to all that passed (in and from us);

For she will plainly declare what she knows: earth and rocks will begin to speak.

The philosopher, in his (vain) thought and opinion, becomes disbelieving: bid him go and dash his head against this wall!

The speech of water, the speech of earth, and the speech of mud are apprehended by the senses of them that have hearts (the mystics).

³⁸ C. Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995).

³⁹ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, 2: 1615-1619.

The philosopher who disbelieves in the moaning pillar is a stranger to the senses of the saints.

He says that the beam (influence) of melancholia brings many phantasies into people's minds.

Nay, but the reflexion of his wickedness and infidelity cast this idle fancy of scepticism upon him.

The philosopher comes to deny the existence of the Devil, and at the same time he is possessed by a devil.

If thou hast not seen the Devil, behold thyself: without diabolic possession there is no blueness in the forehead."⁴⁰

In the words of Rumi:

“(’Twas as though) a fish parched (for want of water) fell into the sea, (or) a caravan that had lost its way struck the right road.

If the words which the Prophet addressed (to him) at that moment should fall upon (the ears of) Night, it (Night) would cease from being night;

Night would become day radiant as dawn: I cannot express (the real meaning of) that mystic allocution.

You yourself know what (words) a sun, in (the sign of) Aries, speaks to the plants and the date-palms;

You yourself, too, know what the limpid water is saying to the sweet herbs and the sapling."⁴¹

Rumi's *Fihi Ma Fihi* (In It What Is in It), a collection of lectures and discourses, also contains several passages

⁴⁰ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, 1: 3275-3285

⁴¹ Al-Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, 6: 1065-1069.

reflecting nature and its relationship to human spirituality and ethics⁴². Rumi's *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, a collection of poems dedicated to his spiritual mentor, Shams Tabrizi, also contains several poems reflecting the relationship between human beings and nature.⁴³ Rumi's works are rich with references to nature and its relationship to human ethics and spirituality. By exploring his poems, letters, and prose writings, we can gain a deeper understanding of the human yearning for nature and the ethical sense of the natural world that Rumi so eloquently expressed.

Nigeria is home to diverse peoples and cultures, each with unique beliefs and traditions. However, some common threads of eco-spirituality can be observed across many Nigerian indigenous peoples' thoughts. One aspect of eco-spirituality in Nigerian indigenous thought is the belief in a close connection between humans and the natural world. Many Nigerian indigenous people view the natural world as a sacred entity and believe all living things, including humans, are interconnected and interdependent. This belief is reflected in various cultural practices and beliefs, such as using natural materials in religious rituals, the belief in ancestral spirits that protect and guide the community, and the reverence for certain animals and plants considered to have spiritual significance.

For instance, Tanure Ojaide, a well-known poet from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, wrote in his poem *In the Omoja River*:

"In the Omoja River we washed body and tools.
As we crossed from the farm after the day's
task.
There too, young, we listened to muimuring
water.

⁴² Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Fihri Ma Fihri: Discourses of Rumi*, trans. A.J. Arberry (London: Anqa Publishing, 2011).

⁴³ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, ed. Badiozzaman Forouzanfar (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1994).

Before taking tracks into the forest to pick
fruits;
The sun wriggled between leaves whose
shadows.
Danced on water; a spectacle of
correspondence."⁴⁴

In Tanure Ojaide's poem, the Omoja River imagery serves as a nexus for exploring the intersection of human activity, nature, and spirituality. The act of washing both bodies and tools in the river suggests a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment, where the river is a physical resource and a spiritual conduit. The river becomes a space for communal rituals, a place of purification and renewal after the day's labor.

The reference to listening to the 'murmuring water' evokes a sense of reverence and attentiveness to the natural world, hinting at a deeper spiritual connection to the river and its surroundings. Furthermore, the imagery of the sun filtering through the forest canopy, casting shadows on the water, portrays a harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, a spectacle of interconnectedness and correspondence. Through these evocative images, Ojaide conveys a perception of ecological spirituality rooted in reverence for the natural world and recognizing humanity's place.

Another aspect of eco-spirituality in Nigerian Indigenous thought is the belief in the importance of stewardship and environmental responsibility. Many Nigerian cultural traditions believe that humans are responsible for caring for and protecting the natural world and that neglecting this responsibility will have negative consequences for both humans and the environment. This belief is reflected in various cultural practices, such as using

⁴⁴ Tanure Ojaide, *In the Omoja River* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1995), 42.

traditional ecological knowledge to manage natural resources, sustainable agriculture and fishing, and conservation practices to protect wildlife and natural habitats. These can be seen in the following lines:

"But they brought affliction to the cheerful river;
They brought flames of fear to the marvellous forest:
They pissed and pissed barrels of arsenic into the current
Until it was no longer the ageless river but a cesspool."⁴⁵

The poem above poignantly portrays ecological degradation and its profound impact on nature's spirituality. The imagery of the 'cheerful river' and the 'marvellous forest' evokes a sense of reverence and vitality that once characterized these natural landscapes. However, the introduction of pollution, symbolized by 'the barrels of arsenic', disrupts this harmony, transforming the pristine river into a 'cesspool'.

Through this vivid imagery, Ojaide conveys the desecration of nature's sanctity at the hands of human greed and negligence. Moreover, the word 'affliction' suggests a deep spiritual wound inflicted upon the environment, highlighting Ojaide's perception of nature as physical and imbued with a sacred essence. Thus, the poem underscores Ojaide's belief in the interconnectedness between ecological health and spiritual well-being, emphasizing the urgent need for ecological stewardship to restore harmony between humanity and the natural world.

The eco-spirituality of Nigerian indigenous peoples' thought is characterized by a deep respect for the natural world and a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things. This belief is reflected in various cultural practices

⁴⁵ Ojaide, *In the Omoja River*, 43.

and beliefs and underscores the importance of environmental stewardship and responsibility. For instance, in the poem *The Call of the River Nun* by Gabriel Okara, he notes:

“Many harmattans have since come and gone,
passed by.
But the River Nun with its tortured phantoms
continues its languid,
flow South with a muffled sigh.
With faith and patience of an ancient angler
who changes his bait.
Each fruitless day for the next to befool the
unwary catfish.
Which may haplessly swim by.
And I, like the River Nun, turn tired eyes at the
alluring promise.
Of the beginning with a sigh.
A beginning presaging a joyous today, yet to be:
For our canoe is floating, rudderless, the
paddlers listless.
Because they have become disoriented by the
thick harmattan fog,
Of their own arrogant wants and desires.”⁴⁶

In the poem, the River Nun (a well-known river in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria) becomes a potent symbol of ecological spirituality, embodying both resilience and lamentation. The recurring motif of the harmattan, a dry and dusty wind characteristic of West Africa, underscores the passage of time and the enduring presence of ecological challenges. The river's 'tortured phantoms' evoke a sense of haunting, perhaps representing the ecological scars inflicted upon it by human activity. Yet, amidst this melancholy, a subtle hope is embedded in the river's

⁴⁶ Gabriel Okara, *The Call of the River Nun* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 45.

continuous flow, reminiscent of the cyclical nature of life and regeneration. The angler's patient persistence in changing bait parallels humanity's need to adapt and evolve harmoniously with nature.

However, the poem's conclusion reveals a lament for the present disorientation and disillusionment. The rudderless canoe and listless paddlers symbolize humanity's loss of direction, ensnared by the fog of materialism and self-interest. Okara's portrayal suggests that reconnecting with ecological spirituality is essential for navigating the uncertain waters of modern existence and finding a path toward a more sustainable and harmonious future. Also, Basseby in his poem, showed the connection between ecology and spirituality. He states thus:

"I will not dance to your beat
If you call plantations forests
I will not sing with you
If you privatize my water
I will confront you with my fists
If climate change means death to me but
business to you
I will expose your evil greed
If you don't leave crude oil in the soil
Coal in the hole and tar sands in the lands
I will confront and denounce you
If you insist on carbon offsetting and other do-
nothing false solutions
I will make you see red
If you keep talking of Reed and push forest
communities away from their lands
I will drag you to Climate Tribunal
If you pile up ecological debt
And refuse to pay your climate debt [...]
I will not dance to your beat
Unless we walk the sustainable path

And accept real solutions and respect Mother
Earth
Unless you do
I will not and
We will not dance to your beat."⁴⁷

In the poem above, the intertwining of ecological activism and spirituality creates a powerful narrative of resistance against environmental exploitation. Bassey vehemently rejects the commodification and exploitation of nature, symbolized by the mislabeling of plantations as forests and water privatization. His refusal to comply with these practices is a defiance against environmental degradation and an assertion of spiritual connection to the earth.

Bassey's use of imagery, such as leaving crude oil in the soil and coal in the hole, underscores the need for a profound shift in our relationship with the environment. His call for real solutions and respect for Mother Earth reflects an indigenous perspective that views nature as sacred and deserving of reverence. By refusing to dance to the beat of those who prioritize profit over the planet, Bassey advocates for a sustainable path guided by ecological spirituality. This poem serves as a rallying cry for environmental justice, demanding accountability for the harm inflicted on the earth and its inhabitants.

The indigenous Nigerian world, with varied ethnic groups and languages, has several mythologies that show how the divine gives unique places to animals and plants to show that they are significant to ecological spirituality. For example, in the Nri Igbo myth, when the offspring of Eri, the proto precursor, passed on, Yam grew up from where the child was covered, and plantain and cocoyam from where the girl was covered. The growing up of these plants

⁴⁷ Nnimmo Bassey, *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2011), 45.

where these people were covered represented the reawakening of Eri through the offspring. In this manner, when the Igbo observe the New Yam festival, it is a celebration of life, reawakening, and the existence of Eri's primary child.⁴⁸

In addition, strict taboos are used as tools for ecological purposes in the Yoruba sacred orature. For instance, Yoruba sacred orature-inflected morality allows one to regard nature as a living entity with life, existence, and being. Hence, taboos on killing or eating certain insects, reptiles, birds, and mammals, cutting off certain trees, and the consequences of flouting them as contained in the sacred orature help to ensure eco-justice. These, among others, can be a gigantic wellspring of African eco-spirituality when reflected upon.

Conclusion

The discussion in this article has generated rather unusual comparisons. Some may not be comfortable with suggesting that Rumi's ecological outlook or *Mathnawi*'s ecological values can be given African cultural interpretation. However, such a disposition will only mask the fact that the concept of ecological spirituality existent in the world is central to most African environmental mindfulness, and this is visible in the indigenous Nigerian people's way of looking at the inner spiritual realm and nature. Seeing ecology in an all-encompassing manner gives the sense of concurrence sought in ecological spirituality. This research adopts the word 'African' not to make bogus speculation but rather to perceive a few pervasive patterns in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa. Thus, the study opines, as many Nigerian and some other African scholars have done, that the notion of the

⁴⁸ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, O.S.A., "African Eco-Spirituality: Nature and Sources," in *African Ecological Spirituality*, ed. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, O.S.A., (Umunya, Anambra State: Augustinian Publications, 2021), 1–20.

maintenance of concurrence is at the heart of an indigenous Nigerian/African ecology.

Consequently, a case is being made in this work to enrich Rumi's ecological notions of the universe by including the African perspective. The notion of ecological spirituality in the world is central to most African hypotheses of ecological awareness. Thus, African philosophical and cultural notions of ecology, as a constitutive aspect of what it means to be in concurrence with the inner spiritual realm and nature, are relevant to understanding the profound theological and spiritual message embedded in Rumi's *Mathnawi*. Finally, the African understanding of ecology and spirituality must permeate human relationships with nature. Such a relationship helps preserve a spirit-based philosophy for safeguarding the environment in an African sense.

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