



Research Article

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African Initiated Churches and Ecological Sustainability: An Empirical Exploration

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Abstract: While African Initiated Churches are increasingly recognized as actors of social development, little research has thus far elucidated their role regarding ecological sustainability. Responding to this gap, we explore African Initiated Churches' views on ecological sustainability and their reaction to environmental destruction and climate change. We analyse to what extent environmental concerns are considered relevant, explore emerging environmental concepts and theologies, and highlight environmental actions taken. The analysis is based on a diverse set of qualitative and quantitative data focusing on leaders of African Initiated Churches from across Sub-Saharan Africa: interviews and focus groups, public lectures, and online survey data. The findings show an ecological turn in African Initiated Christianity. Unlike in mainline Christianity, where ecological engagement is often embedded in elaborated eco-theologies, African Initiated Churches' engagement with ecological sustainability seems to be primarily driven by the increasing adverse effects of environmental degradation and climate change in their communities.

Keywords: African Initiated Churches, Christianity, sub-Saharan Africa, ecology, sustainable development, environment

1 Introduction¹

The consequences of climate change increasingly jeopardize the integrity of environmental systems and human lives across the globe. The African continent is among the world regions that experience the most devastating impact of climate change and environmental degradation, in the form of floods, droughts, reduced harvests, or climate-sensitive diseases.² These effects are predicted to worsen in the coming decades if CO₂ mitigation measures remain low.³ Due to its “low adaptive capacity,” Africa is seen as “highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change” by the United Nations Environment Programme.⁴

¹ Minor parts of this text have been previously made available in the report “*Religious Communities as Actors of Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*” (Stork and Öhlmann 2021), the policy brief “*Ökologische Nachhaltigkeit in African Initiated Churches*” (Stork and Öhlmann 2019) as well as the introduction to the edited volume “*Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*” (Stork and Öhlmann 2024). This article puts the earlier texts in a wider context, complements it with new empirical material and provides a new and more comprehensive analysis.

² Trisos et al., “Africa.”

³ Engelbrecht et al., “Projections of Rapidly Rising Surface Temperatures over Africa under Low Mitigation,” 1.

⁴ UNEP, “Global Environment Outlook,” 16.

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Meanwhile, successful climate change adaptation is not only dependent on advances in technologies and natural sciences and adequate national and global policy frameworks but also conditional on the transformation of mindsets and values.⁵ The climate crisis, as Sponsel phrased it, has to be understood essentially as “a spiritual and moral crisis.”⁶ In this situation, religious communities hold great potential for the promotion of effective climate change adaptation. As we have pointed out elsewhere:

Religious communities are crucial stakeholders for achieving these paradigm shifts, particularly in those areas of the world where religion is highly relevant in individual and public life. ... Most importantly, religion shapes social imaginaries and people's values. In this context, religious communities have the ability to act as agents of social, cultural, economic, political and ecological change and to function as sources of knowledge.⁷

Therefore, the specific attitudes fostered, and actions implemented in areas of environmental sustainability, such as climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as environmental protection, are highly important – especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where religion features as an important factor in most people's lives.

However, the role of religion with respect to ecology has been contested. Perhaps, the most prominent critical perspective – specifically on the role of Christianity – was already brought forward in 1967 by Lynn White in his essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”⁸ White argued that “Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”⁹ Since then, the debate has moved on considerably and an inter- and transdisciplinary field of research on religion and ecology has emerged.¹⁰ Moreover, questions of ecological sustainability have recently also gained more prominence in the context of the religion and development debate.¹¹

Ecological engagement in religious traditions around the globe has led Gottlieb to postulate that “world religion has entered into an ‘ecological phase’ in which environmental concern takes its place alongside a more traditional religious focus on sexual morality, ritual, helping the poor and preaching the word of God.”¹² Indeed, there are ecological initiatives in many of the world's religious traditions¹³ – for example, the *Laudato Si'* movement in the Catholic Church, the *Kairos for Creation* in the Ecumenical Movement, the Islamic *Al-Mizan* movement, and the Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change.¹⁴ However, despite these prominent initiatives and the burgeoning literature on religion and ecology, recent reviews have brought to the fore more ambiguous results. The hypothesis that religions are becoming “green,” i.e. that environmental concerns are becoming a major focus of their theologies and actions (Taylor's “greening-of-religion hypothesis”),¹⁵ has been questioned, as recent empirical studies have painted a more ambivalent picture.¹⁶

While it might not be justified to speak of substantial “greening of religion” in the sense that ecology is becoming part of religions' core doings and ideologies, there seems to be an “ecological turn” across many religious communities, i.e. “increased ecological awareness without this becoming a central element in theological tenets and religious activities” [and which] “varies across religions and world regions.”¹⁷ According to Taylor, van Wieren, and Zaleha, “more, rigorous, mixed-methods research” is necessary “to determine

⁵ Parry, *Climate Change 2007*; Sponsel, “Introduction to Religious Environmental Activism in Asia.”

⁶ Sponsel, “Introduction to Religious Environmental Activism in Asia,” 1.

⁷ Stork and Öhlmann, *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*, 22–3.

⁸ White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1205.

¹⁰ Tucker, “Religion and Ecology.”

¹¹ Öhlmann and Swart, “Religion and Environment.”

¹² Gottlieb, “Introduction,” 6.

¹³ Cf. Chaplin, “The Global Greening of Religion.”

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'*; Andrianos et al., *Kairos for Creation*; UNEP, “Al-Mizan;” One Earth Sanga, “The Time to Act Is Now.”

¹⁵ The “greening of religion hypothesis” was first developed in Taylor, “Editor's Introduction.”

¹⁶ Carr et al., “The Faithful Skeptics;” Haluza-DeLay, “Religion and Climate Change;” Taylor et al., “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two).”

¹⁷ Öhlmann and Swart, “Religion and Environment,” 312.

whether and under what circumstances and through what sorts of communicative strategies religious perceptions and beliefs ... can most effectively promote ecologically and socially adaptive biocultural systems.”¹⁸ One emerging indication in the literature, however, is that there seems to be particular potential of traditional religious communities for environmental conservation. As Taylor, van Wieren, and Zaleha find in their review, “indigenous traditions often foster pro-environmental perceptions. This finding suggests that indigenous traditions may be more likely to be pro-environmental than other religious systems and that some nature-based cosmologies and value systems function similarly.”¹⁹ This potential of traditional religious communities is also supported by the chapter on Africa in the 2022 IPCC report on climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emphasizes the pro-environmental nature of indigenous and local knowledge, which their authors connect with “African traditional beliefs” that “place great value on the natural environment.”²⁰ The IPCC report even finds that: “such [local and indigenous] practices record higher evidence of climate risk reduction compared to practices influenced by other knowledge types.”²¹

This article approaches the topic of a “greening of religion” or an “ecological turn,” as defined above, in religious communities with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa, a region in which 89% of the population state that “religion is very important in their lives.”²² Within this context, the article focuses on African Initiated Christianity, a growing and influential religious movement. We follow Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräßl’s wide definition of African Initiated Christianity, who consider

African Initiated Churches as all those Christian religious communities that have their origins in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa (Anderson 2000, 2001). We draw on the original typology by Turner (1967, 17) to refer to churches that are ‘founded in Africa, by Africans, and primarily for Africans’ without ‘missionary Godfathers’ as Pobee and Ositelu (1998, 55) pointedly added. Their key feature is that they were founded by Africans and did not directly emerge from the European and North American mission initiatives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This closely relates to the definition used by the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), which ‘understands an AIC to be a church that acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has separated by seceding from a mission church or an existing African independent church, or has been founded as an independent entity under African initiative and leadership’ (Gichimu 2016, 810). To emphasise this overarching common characteristic of being initiated in Africa by Africans, we deliberately use the term African Initiated Churches instead of other commonly used interpretations of the ‘I’ in AIC such as Independent, Indigenous, and International (see Venter 2004a for an overview).²³

Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräßl identify three main waves in the emergence of African Christianity: (1) Independent/Nationalist Churches that seceded from mission churches and can hence be seen as an ecclesiastic independence movement, (2) Independent/Spiritual Churches constituting an indigenous form of Christianity marked by the incorporation of elements of African traditional belief systems and of the early Pentecostal movement, and (3) African Pentecostal/Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches with close relations to the global Pentecostal

¹⁸ Taylor et al., “Lynn White Jr. And the Greening-of-Religion Hypothesis,” 1007.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1000.

²⁰ Trisos et al., “Africa,” 1331.

²¹ Ibid., 1330. In the IPCC report, African traditional beliefs are subsumed under the more general category of local and indigenous beliefs. It is noteworthy at this point that the terminology around African Traditional Religion(s) has been subject to much scholarly debate. While it is used in past and current scholarly writing (e.g., Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*; Amanze, *African Traditional Religions and Culture*; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*; Olúpòṅà, “Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society;” Chitando, “Ecotheology in Africa”), the term has been criticised, for example by Oduyoye and Okot p’Bitek to reproduce a Western imaginary image of a uniform and anti-modern religion (Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*; and or P’Bitek, *African Religions and Western Scholarship* as well as the elaborate discussion of this debate in Jahnel, “Hybrid Authenticity as Subversive Practice”). In this article, we therefore decided to use the descriptive term “African traditional religious beliefs and practices” to denote traditional and indigenous religious and cultural beliefs and practices specific to African contexts. We chose to retain the term “traditional” because it emphasizes that African traditional religious beliefs and practices are part of lived religion that relies on actual oral traditions which are handed down from generation to generation and honoured as an important knowledge and practice in the communities following these diverse religious beliefs and practices (cf. Shaw, “The Invention of ‘African Traditional Religion,’” 342; Bahr, *Indigenous Religions*, 38).

²² Pew Research Center, *The Age Gap in Religion around the World*, 52.

²³ Öhlmann et al., “Introduction,” 4.

movement and an emphasis of the power of the Holy Spirit and a gospel of prosperity.²⁴ While it is acknowledged that African Initiated Christianity constitutes a highly heterogeneous religious movement, three overarching characteristics applying to a majority of African Initiated Churches are identified by the authors: “first, a history of institutional and financial independence from the historic European and North American Christian confessions, ... second, contextuality, a common origin and rootedness in colonial and postcolonial Africa ... [and] third, a spiritual worldview.”²⁵ We acknowledge that such an overarching definition inevitably comes with a loss of precision in each individual case belonging to this category. Following Öhlmann, Gräß, and Frost, we recognize the diversity of African Initiated Christianity as a religious movement but base our empirical exploration on the assumption that there are sufficient common characteristics across the different churches and contexts within Sub-Saharan Africa to merit this overarching perspective, particularly in relation to issues of ecological sustainability and sustainable development.

Within the African religious landscape, African Initiated Churches have a high demographic significance, representing roughly a third of African Christianity.²⁶ They originate from and are embedded in local contexts and can therefore be considered grassroots actors in their respective communities.²⁷ The Organization of African Instituted Churches (Oaic), an umbrella organization of African Initiated Churches – which, significantly, includes churches of all the three aforementioned waves –, describes this contextuality as follows:

[African Initiated Churches] are homegrown African churches, founded originally during the colonial period, that have developed indigenous forms of worship, theology and social organization, all deeply inspired by a vision that is both Christian and African. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to respond with conviction to the challenges, such as entrenched poverty, ill health and the breakdown of African cultural and social systems, that require groups to organize themselves in order to confront these obstacles.²⁸

This self-description shows how deeply interwoven Christian belief and contextual social action are in African Initiated Churches. This is reflected in their manifold social activities. Church-based childcare institutions, schools or hospitals, educational scholarships, or agricultural trainings attest to the churches' role as contextually embedded development actors reacting to the social needs in their communities inspired by their beliefs.²⁹ African Initiated Churches have therefore increasingly been recognized by international development agencies and by academics as actors of *social* development. Considering the ecological situation in sub-Saharan Africa, it seems that they are in a similar way ideally situated to be actors for *ecological* sustainability as well. Moreover, they share a spiritual worldview with African traditional religious beliefs and practices, and particularly the strand of independent/spiritual churches (second wave African Initiated Churches) often incorporates elements thereof in their belief systems³⁰ – which the literature has argued to foster care for the environment as we have seen above.³¹ The question arises as to whether such pro-environmental attitudes are also emerging in the context of African Initiated Christianity.

So far, however, only little empirical research has been done on African Initiated Churches as actors for ecological sustainability. This article therefore seeks to investigate how African Initiated Christianity reacts to climate change and environmental degradation. It elucidates environmental knowledge, theologies, and actions emerging in the churches and the motivations in which these are grounded. It emerges that African Initiated Churches show increasing concern about the environment in their local communities. Their

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ Ibid., 7. For further reflections on and motivations of this definitory framework of African Initiated Christianity in the study of this religious movement's role for sustainable development, refer to Ibid., 4–8.

²⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁷ Cf. Ibid.

²⁸ Organization of African Instituted Churches, “About Us,” http://www.oaic.org/?page_id=51.

²⁹ Cf. Öhlmann et al., “African Initiated Churches' Potential as Development Actors;” Öhlmann et al., *Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development*.

³⁰ Amanze, “Christianity and Ancestor Veneration in Botswana;” Biri, *African Pentecostalism, the Bible, and Cultural Resilience*.

³¹ Amanze, “From ‘Dominion’ to ‘In Communion’;” Olúpòná, “Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society;” Taringa, “How Environmental Is African Traditional Religion?.”

environmental theological reactions range from unique eco-theologies to arguments on creation conservation as found in the ecumenical movement. At the same time, their environmental action focuses on the local level and the immediate context, including wider perspectives on global climate change and calls for political action against it only in some instances.

2 The Role of Ecology in African Christianity

Several scholars contributed to the emergence of eco-theologies in African Christianity, which illustrates a growing engagement with ecological sustainability. Examples thereof are the comprehensive works by Conradie and Kavusa.³² Interestingly, a number of scholars draw on African traditional religious thought for their development of African eco-theologies. Sakupapa argues that

the African notion of vital force opens up avenues for reflection on the cosmic breath of the Spirit given its emphasis on life and relationality. ... In fact, in African cosmology, the sacredness of nature is derived from nature's relationship with the creator whose vital force has animated nature. Humans are therefore in an ontological relationship with nature given their common descent from the creator. ... As such, one of the ways in which to respond to the ecological crisis in the African context lies in the recovery of the African notion of vital force with its underlying idea of God's pervading presence in the whole of creation. The notion of vital force can therefore be exploited for the development of an ecological ethos based on reverence for the whole of life.³³

Maluleke in his liberation theological approach in the South African context connects the theological engagement with environmental justice to issues of social justice. Drawing on both Christian theology and African tradition, he highlights the vision of a society in which

the African men and women ... together with white men and women, were *with the land*, to which they belonged, together with the forests, the lakes, the rivers and fellow animals. And *the Bible* was with all of them, to guide them and help them to walk *with God*.³⁴

*Mpofu argues that the ecological crisis presents a 'disharmony between nature and humanity', which theology needs to address. In his view, 'the concept of unity between "self and the entire Kosmos" in African worldview presents a potentially constructive African theology of ecology.'*³⁵

A particular dynamic seems to unfold in recent approaches to African eco-theology with respect to the reception and inclusion of elements of African traditional religious beliefs and practices.³⁶ It appears that there is a wide-spreading consensus among scholars of African traditional religious beliefs and practices that these world views foster care for the environment and ecological preservation in manifold ways, thereby echoing Taylor, van Wieren, and Zaleha's and the IPCC's results that traditional religions foster pro-environmental attitudes. In this vein, Amanze opines that the "relationship between nature and human beings in most African societies is one characterized by being 'in communion' with nature and not dominating nature."³⁷ Amanze sees the reason for this in the interconnectedness of the material and spiritual worlds, which entails a very close relationship between humans and the natural environment, based on African traditional religious worldviews: "Many of the traditional unwritten laws that are used to protect the environment are based on

³² Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology*; Conradie, *The Earth in God's Economy*; Conradie, "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology;" Kavusa, "Ecological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Biblical Texts Yesterday, Today and Onwards;" Kavusa, *Water and Water-Related Phenomena in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature*.

³³ Sakupapa, "Spirit and Ecology in the Context of African Theology," 428.

³⁴ Maluleke, "Black and African Theologies in Search of Comprehensive Environmental Justice," 19.

³⁵ Mpofu, "Pursuing Fullness of Life through Harmony with Nature," 1.

³⁶ See also Asamoah-Gyadu, "The Earth Is the Lord's;" Chitando, "Ecotheology in Africa."

³⁷ Amanze, "From 'Dominion' to 'In Communion'," 11.

traditional religious beliefs African peoples' spiritualities can help communities to conserve natural resources."³⁸ He concludes that

the African people in their traditional settings endeavour to conserve and preserve natural resources ... [which] is achieved through African traditional religions which contain beliefs and practices in the form of taboos and prohibitions that ensure the environment is not degraded despite the introduction of modern capitalist economies.³⁹

In a similar vein, Olúpòṅà highlights:

The environment and nature are infused in every aspect of African traditional religions and culture. This is largely because cosmology and beliefs are intricately intertwined with the natural phenomena and environment. All aspects of weather, thunder, lightning, rain, night, day, moon, sun, and so on may become amenable to control through the cosmology of the African people.⁴⁰

Anim, on the other hand, sees this traditional worldview as a thing of the past, disrupted by Christian notions of human dominance over creation:

In the past traditional religious beliefs and cultural practices had values and principles that ensured the preservation of the environment and natural resources. The value and respect given to nature found expression in the myths and metaphors that described the earth in human terms such as 'mother', and other natural elements such as the vegetation and rivers also assumed a divine nature which called for reverence and preservation. The people in the past, by indigenous wisdom, understood that humanity was dependent upon the ecology for its own survival and that treating the environment with respect and dignity was a form of worship to God who in his wisdom created them. Thus African traditional people saw themselves as stewards of God's creation and by respecting the handiworks of God one showed respect to God.⁴¹

Taringa emphasizes the relevance of the African concept of Ubuntu with respect to the environment, which

presupposes a worldview where there is a seamless interconnection between the divine, human and natural worlds. Ubuntu stresses what has been described as an anthropo-cosmic worldview. At the heart of Ubuntu is an animistic relational epistemology. Divine-human relations are not considered more important than the relationship between humans and the natural. Ubuntu is, therefore, dark green; meaning Ubuntu considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worth of reverent care. Ubuntu expresses and promotes an ethic of kinship between human beings and other forms of life; plant and biological. Ubuntu turns attention to we-ness. Ubuntu, therefore, appreciates that humans share the local environment with other beings and emphasizes we-ness, echoed at the heart of Ubuntu's, 'I am because we are; because we are therefore I am'. Both the 'I' and the 'we' should be interpreted to also refer to nature.⁴²

African Initiated Churches are rooted in the same spiritual cosmology as African traditional religious beliefs and practices.⁴³ From this, we hypothesize that they might in a similar way position themselves positively towards the environment and we aim to find out whether they ground any eco-theological approaches equally in concepts such as ubuntu and the notion of the vital force as we have seen above for African traditional religious beliefs and practices and African mainline churches' eco-theologies.

Moreover, they are important grassroots social development actors.⁴⁴ Against this background, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to their role with respect to ecology. Not much literature exists

³⁸ Ibid., 14–5.

³⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁰ Olúpòṅà, "Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society," 261.

⁴¹ Anim, "Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice," 118.

⁴² Taringa, "The Potential of Ubuntu Values for a Sustainable Ethic of the Environment and Development," 388. Several Christian theologians have adopted the concept of Ubuntu in their eco-theologies. For instance, Bujo, "Ecology and Ethical Responsibility from an African Perspective;" Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth*; Murove, "An African Environmental Ethic Based on the Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu."

⁴³ Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost*; Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*; Öhlmann et al., "Introduction;" Sakupapa, "Spirit and Ecology in the Context of African Theology."

⁴⁴ Bompani, "Religion and Development from Below;" Öhlmann et al., "African Initiated Churches' Potential as Development Actors;" Öhlmann et al., *Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development*; Öhlmann et al.,

on African Initiated Christianity and ecological sustainability. The most prominent scholar in this field is Daneel. He has written extensively on environmental activism in the context of African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe, and activism in which he himself was involved as well. Daneel highlights the connection of the care for the environment and the struggle for liberation, in the form of a new struggle for the “liberation of creation”:

Under the auspices of the Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation, two religiously distinct movements—the Association of Zimbabwean Traditionalist Ecologists and the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches—joined forces to wage a new *chimurenga*, a struggle for the liberation of creation, particularly the rehabilitation of the degraded environment of Zimbabwe’s overcrowded communal lands, under the banner ‘war of the trees.’⁴⁵

Others are more doubtful of African Initiated Churches’ positive engagement with the environment. Especially those African Initiated Churches that have included a “prosperity gospel” approach into their practices are criticized for this in light of environmental protection. Golo writes that the churches do not fulfil their potential for environmental care, firstly because of their theological emphasis on saving souls in the afterlife and thereby neglecting this physical world and secondly by an emphasis on prosperity gospel that saves people from physical suffering and poverty but that results in materialist lifestyles.⁴⁶ Maseno and Mamati attest to a similar criticism of the prosperity gospel in their empirical study of an African Initiated Church in Kenya.⁴⁷ However, there are approaches to remedy these challenges by creating new African Pentecostal eco-theologies.⁴⁸

Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb, in their study of African Initiated Churches in South Africa, do not find ecological concerns to be among the top priorities in the churches surveyed in 2016, even though they “operate within contextual belief systems of spiritual world views.”⁴⁹ However, the authors identified the substantial potential of African Initiated Churches to implement ecological sustainability: “Due to their ability to culturally embed and promote new values, mind sets and concepts of life, they have the potential to create a consciousness for the limitations of natural resources as part of their comprehensive vision of transformation.”⁵⁰

It might be that this potential is starting to be utilized now, a few years later, as shown by the example of the Church of Pentecost in Ghana. While Anim argues “that many African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians have bought into the dominion theology of the Prosperity Gospel, which presents the most anthropocentric approach to religion and faith and thereby have changed their attitudes to what was considered a ‘sacred’ environment and sustainable development,” he describes a recent shift exemplified by action taken by the Church of Pentecost in Ghana, which “has launched an extensive campaign in the country to address the problem of sanitation and environmental care.”⁵¹

3 Methodology and Data

In a mixed-methods approach, this article draws on empirical material from two research projects conducted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin between 2017 and 2022. The article makes use of (1) qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with leaders of African Initiated Churches, (2) lectures held by church leaders at conferences

African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development; Turner, “African Independent Churches and Economic Development.”

⁴⁵ Daneel, “African Initiated Churches as Vehicles of Earth-Care in Africa.”

⁴⁶ Golo, “The Groaning Earth and the Greening of Neo-Pentecostalism in the 21st Century Ghana.”

⁴⁷ Maseno and Mamati, “An Appraisal of Pentecostal Eco-Theology.”

⁴⁸ For instance, Tallman, “Healing for a Sick World.”

⁴⁹ Öhlmann et al., “You Need to Change the Whole Person’ – African Initiated Churches and Sustainable Development,” 308, 321.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁵¹ Anim, “Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice,” 109.

held in the context of the research projects,⁵² and (3) data from the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey. While the data from the first and second strands of material are qualitative, the survey data (third strand) are quantitative. The interview data and the survey data were collected separately and do not come from exactly the same countries or churches (although there is substantial overlap). While data collection of the qualitative and quantitative data were separate processes, both emerged from the Research Programme RCSD and are undergirded by the same notion of African Initiated Christianity.⁵³ The data are complementary in that they provide different angles on African Initiated Christianity and ecological sustainability. The different strands of material are employed here to facilitate an empirical exploration that is as comprehensive as possible. Of course, the use of three different datasets raised the question of the data's commensurability, which we acknowledge. While the datasets are not commensurable in a strict sense, they provide a way of methods triangulation and thereby elucidate the role of ecological sustainability from different angles. In the following, each of the three different strands of empirical material are presented.

3.1 Qualitative Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

The first strand of empirical material used in this article is 13 semi-structured interviews and 6 focus group discussions with church leaders of African Initiated Churches between 2017 and 2019. They are a subsample of 93 interviews and 112 focus group discussions that were conducted in total from Burkina Faso (seven interview/three focus group discussions), Ghana (18/15), Kenya (13/19), Nigeria (23/22), Uganda (8/9), South Africa (13/25), and Tanzania (11/19), conducted in the framework of the research project "Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development" conducted by the Research Programme RCSD at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.⁵⁴ Respondents were identified in cooperation with colleagues in the respective countries according to the criteria that they should represent the diversity of African Initiated Christianity (representing churches of different sizes, of all three waves of African Initiated Christianity and in rural and urban areas). Within this framework, a convenience sampling approach was applied. The subsample used here includes all those interviews and focus groups in which respondents mentioned the environment, nature, agriculture, or ecological sustainability on their own account. This was the case in 4 interviews in Burkina Faso, in 1 interview in Ghana, in 3 interviews and in 2 focus group discussions in Kenya, in 2 interviews and 1 focus group discussion in Nigeria, in 1 interview and 1 focus group discussion in South Africa, in 1 interview and 0 focus groups conducted in Uganda and in 1 interview and 2 focus groups in Tanzania resulting in data from 13 interviews and 6 focus groups.⁵⁵ Specific questions about the environment and ecological

⁵² We provided a detailed outline of the contributions to these conferences and an analysis of their implications in our recently published volume: Öhlmann and Stork, *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*. We are drawing on some of this material here. The novelty lies in bringing it into conversation with the interview material and with the survey data, which allows for deeper insights and the investigation of our hypothesis of an ecological turn in AICs. While our earlier edited volume focussed on different religious traditions, the novelty of this article also lies in its in-depth focus on AICs and ecological sustainability.

⁵³ Öhlmann et al., "Introduction," as outlined above.

⁵⁴ Öhlmann et al., *Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development*, for an overview of the project and its key results. In accordance with the project's grounded-theory-guided approach, the sample was deliberately diverse, including rural and urban churches, churches of different sizes and churches of different theological orientations. This included African Independent as well as African Pentecostal Churches (cf. Öhlmann et al., "Introduction"). Full informed consent was obtained from all interviewees; interviewees were given the choice between remaining anonymous and being cited by name. Accordingly, they are cited in this article anonymously or by name in accordance with their preference.

⁵⁵ The churches and church networks that form the subsample are the following: African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA) (Kenya); Assemblée de Dieu Boulmiougou (Burkina Faso); Association Évangélique d'Appui au Développement (Burkina Faso); Bophelong Bible Church (South Africa); Christ's Disciples Church (Uganda); Christian Mission Ministry (Kenya); Church of Christ in Africa (Kenya); Church of Pentecost in Ghana (Ghana); Dini ya Roho Mafuta Pole (Kenya); Faithway Gospel Ministry (Nigeria); Mission Apostolique (Burkina Faso); Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (Nigeria); Redeemed Christian Church of God Nigeria (Nigeria); Tabernacle Gospel Church (Tanzania). The number of churches varies from the number of interviews as

sustainability were not included in the interviews, so the 13 cases are instances in which church leaders mentioned the environment or nature without prompting. The fact that this theme emerged multiple times in the interviews at the respondents' initiative indicates that it is a topic of relevance for the interviewed church leaders. A second set of six interviews within the same research project focused specifically on the environment and climate change.⁵⁶ Those six interviews were part of a project component entailing an in-depth study on African Initiated Churches in South Africa. Within this framework, six leaders of African Initiated Churches were interviewed multiple times on different topics. One of the interview rounds focused on ecological sustainability and the interviewees were asked the following questions: "How would you describe the situation of nature in South Africa/in your context?" and "Would you say you are affected by climate change?." In these interviews, hence, the themes of nature and climate change were introduced into the conversation by the researchers to specifically explore the church leaders' perspectives. In total, the qualitative data set used for this article thus includes data from 19 interviews (13 interviews from the first cohort spanning different African countries plus 6 interviews from South Africa) and 6 focus groups.

The relevant sequences were analysed using qualitative content analysis according to Mayring.⁵⁷ Analytical categories were developed from the material in an inductive manner with the research objective as a leading criterion. Qualitative content analysis identifies and conceptualizes certain aspects of a material and systematically describes them in categories.⁵⁸ In accordance with the method, we developed a system of categories. The following categories were developed from the material: agriculture, air pollution, church action, climate change, drought, education, garbage/plastics, land, medicine, rain, renewable energy, trees, and water.

3.2 Public Lectures by African Initiated Church Leaders

The second strand of data used in this article are lectures by African Initiated Church leaders, Bishop B.E. Lekganyane, Apostle Emmanuel Anim and Apostle Mangaliso Matshobane, and the general secretary of the Organization of African Instituted Churches, Rev. Nicta Lubaale, which they held at the conference "Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability" at the University of Pretoria in October 2019 and the webinar "Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa" held in September 2020. Both events were co-hosted by the Research Programme on RCSD at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.⁵⁹

3.3 Quantitative Data from the Religious Leaders Perspectives on Corona Survey

The third strand of data is a subsample of the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona survey, a global online survey during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶⁰ The survey, conducted from May 2020 to May 2021, included two items relating to the environment. The survey was widely circulated online. Of the 1,223 global responses, 160 came from the realm of African Initiated Christianity. In accordance with the definition of African Initiated Christianity outlined in the introduction, this includes respondents who indicated any country in Sub-

focus group and interview participants overlapped partially and not in every church that participated in the focus groups did someone mention the environment in an individual interview as well.

⁵⁶ The names of the churches in this subsample from South Africa are: Bophelong Bible Church; Covenant House Family Church; Gilgal Bible Church; Lutheran Bapedi Church; Redeemed Christian Church of God South Africa; St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission.

⁵⁷ Mayring and Fenzl, "Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse."

⁵⁸ Schreier, "Varianten qualitativer Inhaltsanalyse," 5.

⁵⁹ The lectures at the two conferences were held publicly and are available online with the consent of the speakers. <https://www.youtube.com/@rcsdberlin5902/videos> to find the lectures online. See Öhlmann and Stork, *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*, for more information on these events.

⁶⁰ Öhlmann and Sonntag, "The Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey" for a comprehensive discussion of the survey methodology and key results.

Saharan Africa as their place of residence and “Christian: African Independent” or “Christian: Pentecostal, Charismatic” as their religious tradition.⁶¹ Table 1 shows the country distribution.

4 Findings – Environmental Concepts and Actions of African Initiated Churches

In accordance with the research objectives motivating this article, we structure the findings into three sections: (a) environmental interest and knowledge, (b) environmental concepts, and (c) environmental actions.

4.1 Environmental Interest and Knowledge

Our data show that African Initiated Church members and leaders have an interest in the natural environment. One of the questions in the Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona Survey was “What will be important after the pandemic?” One of several statements whose importance respondents could rate on a five-point Likert scale from “extremely important” to “not important at all” was the statement “Strengthen environmental protection.” Among leaders and members of African Initiated Churches, 58% of the respondents indicated that this post-pandemic priority was extremely important (35%) or quite important (23%) to them ($N = 158$).⁶² “Strengthen environmental protection” was thereby rated the second most important of all options (second only to “Increase international cooperation” with 68% considering it extremely or quite important).

In an agree/disagree statement in the survey, the participants were asked to rank the statement “Environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus” with Likert-scale responses ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Some 44% of the participating African Initiated Church members and leaders chose “strongly agree” (15%) or “agree” (29%) as their responses ($N = 156$).⁶³ The survey was running in 2020 and 2021 during the height of the pandemic and of the sometimes very drastic pandemic prevention measures. The result that close to half of the respondents from African Initiated Churches ranked the importance of environmental destruction higher than the acute pandemic is remarkable and shows that they put substantial value on the importance of environmental protection.

In the qualitative interviews, a concern by African Initiated Church leaders about their immediate environment is clearly visible as well. They worried about the environment particularly where the immediate neighbourhood and community were directly affected by climate change consequences or natural disasters. Church leaders spoke about changing rain patterns which they observed in their communities and the consequential droughts and decrease in agricultural production, and they described air and waste pollution in their congregations’ neighbourhoods. Changing rain patterns, soil degradation, and small harvests were the problems that church leaders observed and experienced most often in connection to the environment. One of the church leaders in Nigeria explained:

So, we are talking about agricultural enlarging of the farm, expanding the farm, so as to bring about supply and food security and provide employment to people and so and so. And we also thinking boreholes, now the, the rains are about to go, [...] the waters on the upper levels, table levels are gone. (A church leader, Faithway Gospel Ministry, Nigeria 2017)

⁶¹ To account for religious hybridity, the survey allowed for the selection of multiple categories of religious traditions. Of the 160 respondents from the two categories “Christian: African Independent” and “Christian: Pentecostal, Charismatic,” 36 (21%) selected both of these categories, indicating a substantial overlap. This further motivates the use of African Initiated Christianity as overarching category including both the African Independent and the African Pentecostal/Charismatic strand.

⁶² The difference in the mean response values between African Independent and African Pentecostal is not statistically different (t -test p -value: 0.96).

⁶³ The difference in the mean response values between African Independent and African Pentecostal is not statistically different (t -test p -value: 0.29).

Table 1: Responses from African Initiated Christianity in the Religious Leaders' Perspective on Corona Survey – by Country

Angola	4
Benin	3
Botswana	8
Burkina Faso	1
Cameroon	2
Central African Republic	1
Comoros (the)	11
Congo (the)	1
Democratic Republic of the Congo	1
Eswatini	6
Ethiopia	6
Gambia	1
Ghana	5
Guinea-Bissau	9
Kenya	11
Lesotho	5
Liberia	4
Malawi	12
Mali	1
Mozambique	1
Namibia	6
Nigeria	33
Sierra Leone	1
South Africa	7
South Sudan	7
Sudan (the)	1
Togo	3
Uganda	6
United Republic of Tanzania	2
Zimbabwe	1

This church leader was focused on the consequences for agriculture and the adaptation mechanisms to the decreasing rains in his area that the congregation planned to install. Indeed, the majority of African Initiated Church leaders did not connect their extensive observations of climate change consequences with the global phenomenon of climate change. The terms climate change and global warming were mentioned by only 3 out of the 13 interviewees who mentioned environmental concerns on their own account and in 0 of the focus groups. In the additional set of interviews in South Africa, in which respondents were asked explicitly whether they felt that their communities were affected by climate change, one church leader responded: “they were telling us how these (power stations) affect our nature and all that... so, but the worst thing is you know in our places we do fires; we burn the trees...so they affect a lot!” (Apostle Ngobese, Gilgal Bible Church, South Africa 2018). This church leader knew in principle about climate change and that a connection with power stations existed. Still, the more visible burning of trees in his surroundings that caused smoke and polluted the air in the immediate neighbourhood came to his mind when asked about climate change.

This observation that climate change was barely conceptualized as a global phenomenon coincided with the observation shared during the webinar “Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa”⁶⁴ that little systematic environmental education on climate change was provided in public education and in the education that African Initiated Churches themselves offered to their members. Instead, during the conference “Churches in Southern Africa as Civil Society Actors for Ecological Sustainability” as well as during

⁶⁴ Cf. Öhlmann and Stork, *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*.

the interviews, weather phenomena were described, and the lack of rain in particular was seen as a driving factor of poverty in the communities. This is illustrated by a church leader from the Mission Apostolique in Burkina Faso. He stated in 2017 that:

Natural resources are dwindling and declining. When I say natural things, I am talking about rain, I am talking about soil yield. Because if it rained well and the soil was profitable, man would not suffer. But all this is going down, weakening. So, poverty is growing in man's life. (Jean-Pierre Tapsoba, Mission Apostolique, Burkina Faso 2017, translated from the French original)

How changing rain patterns caused decreasing agricultural harvests and poverty in their communities was also emphasized by Nicta Lubaale, the general secretary of the OAIC, who spoke about sustainable agriculture during the webinar in 2020. He described the desperate situation of many members of African Initiated Churches in Kenya, who depend to a large extent on subsistence agriculture. Soil degradation and unexpected rains and droughts made their survival increasingly difficult, he said. Lubaale described how the OAIC disseminates knowledge about sustainable agriculture to adapt to the changing environmental conditions (see below). Changing rain patterns and problems in land degradation and deforestation were described by African Initiated Church leaders as local problems afflicting their local communities.

Francis Oweka, an African Initiated Church leader from Uganda, formulated in an interview in 2018: "Apart from that, our environment has been destroyed. The trees have been destroyed. People are looking for money and so they cut down these trees and use it for charcoal and sell it" (Francis Oweka, Christ's Disciples Church, Uganda 2018).

As mentioned above, these accounts were in many instances not connected to a globally changing climate. Consequently, there were few political arguments and demands for national or international policies or calls for global solutions, as they are frequently raised in other environmental discussions for example by climate activists in sub-Saharan Africa.⁶⁵ The engagement with ecological questions, land degradation, and the effects of climate change seems to be centred around practical and local-level environmental actions, such as local waste collection, support of sustainable farming, or tree-planting.

The Zion Christian Church, Southern Africa's largest African Initiated Church, stood out when the church's leader, Bishop Lekganyane, gave a speech at the University of Pretoria in 2019 on "Ecological Sustainability as a Topic of Redemption within the Theology of the Zion Christian Church."⁶⁶ With a clear appeal for environmental action, he indirectly referred to the famous definition of sustainability as described in the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report)⁶⁷ when he said:

Therefore, it becomes clear that the use of natural resources needs to be limited by our current needs as much as by the requirement for the future generations to be able to attain their own needs. The environment and the earth need to be preserved to meet those future needs in whatever form they become, because we must accept that needs are dynamic.⁶⁸

With Lekganyane's fundamental theological speech on ecology, the Zion Christian Church stands out from the rest of the churches in our data and poses an important case study for environmental theologies in African Initiated Churches meriting further research.

4.2 Environmental Concepts

Environmental theological reasoning of African Initiated Churches in the sample varies between a uniquely developed eco-theology explicitly aiming at the African context and theological arguments on creation

⁶⁵ The Climate Change Charter South Africa (<https://cjc.org.za/the-charter/en#goals>) and particularly their goal 5 as one example of secular climate activism in South Africa with strong political demands.

⁶⁶ Cf. the detailed analysis in Stork and Du Toit, "Finding Ubuntu in the Bible."

⁶⁷ The definition of sustainability in the Brundtland Report reads: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" and is thus resembled by the wording of Lekganyane; cf. WCED, *Our Common Future*.

⁶⁸ Lekganyane, "Ecological Sustainability as a Topic of Redemption within the Theology of the Zion Christian Church."

conservation building on Genesis 2:15 in the Bible. The above-mentioned speech by Zion Christian Church's leader Bishop Lekganyane serves as an intricate example of a unique eco-theology. Lekganyane refers to the biblical references of Numbers 35:33–34; Ezekiel 34:18 and Leviticus 26:3–4 in the Old Testament and connects these Christian references with the African cultural/philosophical concept of Ubuntu. He explains that the protection of the environment as a gift and command by God is a prerequisite for the church members' redemption: "Our redemption," he argues, "is dependent on our ability to show that we can take care of what God has entrusted upon us."⁶⁹ He further elaborates that, as by the concept of Ubuntu, everything is connected and that humans can only thrive when their communities thrive – communities which include plants and animals as well as other humans. He states that climate change is depriving the church members of their possibility of redemption because it deprives them of the possibility of being whole and in a community with everything. The destruction of the environment, according to Lekganyane, makes believers fail God's command to protect it in the described community-enabling sense. Lekganyane finishes his speech with a clear message for action that environmental protection has to be implemented by all parts of society including his church and church members. The Zion Christian Church's eco-theology draws on a variety of themes from African traditional religious beliefs and practices, the natural sciences, and Christianity. It does not refer to "classic" references such as Gen 2:15 in the context of eco-theologies. Instead, Lekganyane derives an ethical imperative to be respectful to the environment from an Ubuntu-based concept of universal co-dependence and co-responsibility. He describes this principle of Ubuntu to be installed by the Christian God. Lekganyane's eco-theology resembles eco-theologies as found in the literature on African mainline eco-theologies. However, his idea of ecological care as relevant for personal redemption adds a new dimension to the eco-theological discourse. Lekganyane also adds a historic dimension to his eco-theology by explaining that it was the historic injustices of the resettlement programmes during the era of apartheid that destroyed people's connection to their land of origin and thus their connection to nature and by implication their possibility to be fully human, i.e. to live and be in harmony with their natural environment.⁷⁰ This highly context-relevant and embedded eco-theology can serve as an outstanding example of a theoretically developed eco-theology in an influential African Initiated Church. An interesting question for future research is to what extent this eco-theological engagement will lead to environmental action programmes in the Zion Christian Church.

Another eco-theological approach is presented by Apostle Mangaliso Matshobane, leader of an Independent Pentecostal Church in South Africa.⁷¹ He concentrates on an understanding of apocalyptic eschatology which interprets the apocalypse as a transformation of the current world into the new heavens and earth. This interpretation favours ecological preservation as a holy eschatological exercise in accordance with God's plans for the redemption of the world. Salvation is presented by him as multidimensional and as affecting the material, social, cosmic, and eschatological spheres over and above an individualistic, personal salvation. Just like Lekganyane, Matshobane chooses to approach his eco-theological thoughts via the topic of redemption. Instead of focusing on personal redemption (as Lekganyane does as the leader of an African Initiated Church of the second wave), Matshobane, with his background in African Pentecostal theology, rather emphasizes the redemption of the whole earth as the moment in which environmental protection would pay out. Both these approaches, however, have in common that they focus on eschatological thoughts. This does not mean that environmental protection is postponed and regarded as an issue of the future. In difference to Christian mainline churches, eschatology and salvation are understood to have direct implications for the present in African Initiated Christianity. Redemption is experienced as a question of today's welfare in the believer's life. This corresponds to the observation that African Initiated Churches perceived climate change consequences as current problems of their immediate surroundings. The eco-theologies presented by Lekganyane and Matshobane react to this experience of climate change consequences in the "here and now" by stating that church members will experience redemption of (environmental) misfortunes only through environmental protection.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 9.

⁷¹ Matshobane, "Climate Change and Ecological Sustainability."

⁷² Lekganyane, "Ecological Sustainability as a Topic of Redemption within the Theology of the Zion Christian Church," 11.

In addition to these explicit eco-theological thoughts, our data also revealed implicit eco-theological concepts in African Initiated Churches. One of the conceptual findings was that the environment served as a point of connection in interreligious dialogue. In an interview at the Christian Mission Ministry in Kenya in 2018, a church leader mentioned that the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC) had held an interreligious meeting about a coal plant the government had wanted to build in Kenya. The church leader described that the interreligious group worked constructively together to define their voice as “religious leaders and custodians of the people” (Titus Makusi Ingaboh, Christian Mission Ministry Kenya, Kenya 2018) against the coal plant building plans. Supporting this account, Maseno describes how the topic of environmental degradation is currently the most important and uniting interreligious theme in Kenya.⁷³

During the interviews, two further arguments of eco-theological reasoning were found. In one instance during an interview in Uganda, an African Initiated Church leader explained:

As a church, we want our people to know that there are three categories of farming. The first category is short term crops which is determined by God, because if there is too much rain, everything in the garden is finished, and if there is too much sunshine, the same. So, we do not want our people to be stranded on these seasonal crops. (Francis Oweka, Christ’s Disciples Church, Uganda 2018)

In this account, God is described as the source of weather and as the decisive power determining the outcome of the crops on the field. Pastor Oweka evokes an image of a God that is directly involved in every succeeding or failing harvest. Such thinking evokes the image of a good God who is providing too little or too much rain or sun according to his own plan. This could further be pursued as a biblical argument based on Joel 2:23–26,⁷⁴ which underlines that natural disasters as well as fortunate and unfortunate weather events are sent by God as demonstrations of his power and as punishment for their sins. Although these biblical accounts would suggest that God has good reasons for sending “too much rain,” Pastor Oweka does not want his people to be “stranded on these seasonal crops.” Instead of calling for a moral life that would result in no necessity for God to send destructive rains, Pastor Oweka suggests that “his people” should rather rely on more resilient crops which are less weather-dependent.

Another interesting theological concept was given by an African Initiated Church leader in Tanzania in 2018:

So, when I look at things like the environment, there foundation is the Bible. Because it explains that when the children of Israel were on the journey, they were warned not to cut down trees, even about latrines they were asked to dig holes and cover. This means that God was an environmentalist. And when he gave human beings fruits with seeds, it meant that as they eat the fruits and throw away the seeds, the fruits continue to grow. So, I really like it that way. (Pastor Owesmo Wilson Mollé, Tabernacle Gospel Church, Tanzania 2018)

Pastor Mollé derived his conviction that God generally cared for the natural environment from Biblical accounts about the people of Israel who were warned by God to treat specific natural sights well. He also draws on the nature of fruits which were created by God with seeds to recreate themselves after they are eaten, which highlights a belief in a self-sustaining ecosystem designed for human benefit. This perspective aligns with theological arguments that humanity has a duty to be stewards of creation rather than exploiters. Mollé’s sources for his eco-theological thoughts are the Bible stories – without mention of a specific Bible quote – and the way in which nature is “designed.” The designation of God as an “environmentalist” seems to parallel other theological descriptions of God such as shepherd, healer, king, redeemer, etc. but was not explained further by Pastor Mollé. Positioning God as an environmentalist suggests that the Bible inherently promotes sustainable practices and respect for nature. We can thus infer that his experiences as well as his

⁷³ Maseno, “Ecotheology.”

⁷⁴ Joel 2:23-26 reads: Rejoice, you people of Jerusalem! Rejoice in the LORD your God! For the rain he sends demonstrates his faithfulness. Once more the autumn rains will come, as well as the rains of spring. The threshing floors will again be piled high with grain, and the presses will overflow with new wine and olive oil. The LORD says: “I will give you back what you lost to the swarming locusts, the hopping locusts, the stripping locusts, and the cutting locusts. It was I who sent this great destroying army against you. Once again you will have all the food you want, and you will praise the LORD your God, who does these miracles for you. Never again will my people be disgraced.” (Jusu, *Africa Study Bible*).

reading of the Bible lead him to the belief that God cares about the environment like “environmentalists” do – giving people certain rules of behaviours to protect the environment.

4.3 Environmental Actions

Our data show that there are various forms of environmental action in African Initiated Churches. One of the actions named most often was tree-planting as a measure against deforestation and soil degradation. Tree-planting as part of a liturgical ceremony in the church movement was first described by Daneel for Zimbabwe.⁷⁵ In our data, tree-planting occurred as a communal activity of the churches outside of their church services. A leader from the Christ’s Disciples Church in Uganda, for example, reported that their tree-planting programme had been successfully overachieving by planting 11,000 trees in just two years instead of 10,000–12,000 trees in a five-year period as had been planned (Francis Oweka, Christ’s Disciples Church, Uganda, 2018).

Another important area of environmental action in our data was waste collection and recycling. Pastor Makumbani from South Africa told us about the littering education in his community:

Because, as I have told you, change will begin with just one person touching another person, touching another person. If I see somebody littering, I indicate to them: ‘Look, you can’t do that. Please take that and put it there, this is not how it’s supposed to be.’ If that is how education have to be then education will run and when we start to enjoy the environment together. Then we can say you see this is the results of what you have been doing, you’ve been taking care of things and now the environment is responding towards it positively, you know. It’s all about educating our people, I will say. (Don Makumbani, Covenant House Family Church, South Africa 2018)

The pastor himself was passionate about cleaning the direct environment in his community and tried to set an example. His aim was to educate his church members individually about correct waste disposal, but he had not installed any environmental programmes at his church. Instead, he believed in environmental responsibility as primarily an educational issue. By teaching others – whether through direct conversations or leading by example – society could gradually develop a shared respect for nature. Makumbani suggested that when people took care of their surroundings, nature reciprocated with visible improvements. This reflects spiritual and ethical views that emphasize harmony between people and the environment.

One of the major actors in this regard has been the large Church of Pentecost in Ghana, which launched its “Environmental Care Campaign” in November 2018. The Church of Pentecost partnered with the Ghanaian government in a clean-up campaign with regular cleanings of public spaces and distribution of bins to all church houses and workplaces of members in 2018⁷⁶ and has since also initiated week-long sanitation or anti-littering campaigns that focussed on the cleaning of neighbourhoods as much as on environmental education in 2019 and 2020. In a local news portal interview, a district pastor for the Church of Pentecost, Pastor Evans Annaba Mensah, stated that the clean-up campaigns were part of the five-year strategic mission plan “Possessing the Nations” of the church, which aims to “transform every sphere of society with values and principles of the Kingdom of God.”⁷⁷ He explained:

The Bible said when the Lord created the whole garden of Eden, he entrusted it into the hands of Adam to work, keep and clean the garden. Adam is no longer there, and we have to see to it that the environment God has given us is clean.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Daneel, “African Independent Churches Face the Challenge of Environmental Ethics;” Daneel, “African Initiated Churches as Vehicles of Earth-Care in Africa.”

⁷⁶ The Church of Pentecost. 22.11.2018. “‘Environmental Care Campaign’ Launched.” <https://thecophq.org/news/environmental-care-campaign-launched/>.

⁷⁷ The Church of Pentecost. 2018. “Vision 2023. Executive Summary.” <https://thecophq.org/vision-2023/>.

⁷⁸ Duncan, Jude. 29.02.2020. “North Kaneshie Church of Pentecost embarks on environmental care campaign.” <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/02/north-kaneshie-church-of-pentecost-embarks-on-environmental-care-campaign/>.

Here, Mensah drew the direct line to his congregation that has to take the place of Adam and that is addressed by God as much as Adam was addressed in Genesis 2:15. The described “Vision 2023” plan of the Church of Pentecost also contains one distinct sentence on the environment:

We seek to contribute to a God-fearing society with hardworking and committed citizens; ... a transformed society that is very concerned about the environment, keeping it clean and prompting others within the society to do same [...] ⁷⁹

The Church of Pentecost connects concern about the environment with keeping the environment clean and showing thereby their understanding of environmentalism consisting of *cleaning* the environment of litter.

In our interviews, African Initiated Church leaders in Kenya mentioned agricultural training to protect the environment, such as a hunger and poverty prevention programme conducted by the OAIC (Joel Komozowa, Dini ya Roho Mafuta Pole, Kenya 2018; Archbishop Fredrick Wang’ombe, African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa, Kenya 2018). The OAIC offers training in sustainable agriculture as a means for increasing production and sustaining livelihoods, seeking to improve people’s livelihoods in areas where soil degradation and unpredictable rainfalls have decreased harvests.⁸⁰ These programmes might be perceived as a climate change *adaptation* strategy because in the context of subsistence farming, sustainable agriculture schemes are an improvement to livelihoods before they are considered to support environmental protection. The environmental protection these programmes provide is an essential basis for the survival of farmers and their families as it betters their harvests. This is also reflected in the OAIC’s mission, which is more focused on people’s livelihoods than on environmental preservation as an aim in itself:

The OAIC Livelihoods program seeks to help member churches understand the key causes of poverty at personal, community, national and continental levels with the aim of advancing policy and programmatic actions that best respond to the realities of AIC communities. By promoting policies that assist subsistence farmers to improve their production, as well as increase public investment to aid agricultural production at sustenance level, the OAIC works to strengthen the ability of local communities to produce, access and afford food in sufficient quantities and quality.⁸¹

Sustainability here is an issue of poverty reduction and is therefore immediately connected to and important for local communities. This connection between poverty reduction and environmental protection was also supported in an interview with an African Initiated Church leader in Burkina Faso in 2017:

We also support the community in protecting the environment. Especially with climate change, to produce better. To get something out of it better. To improve the soil so that we can get something back from the soil. (A church leader, Asociación Evangélique d’Appui au Développement, Burkina Faso 2017, translated from French)

In this interview, environmental protection was presented to aim at producing better and more for the farmers. The quote suggests that protecting the environment is a practical duty, particularly in regions vulnerable to climate change. It presents ecological sustainability as a reciprocal relationship where protecting the environment also means better agricultural yields and long-term benefits for the community.

5 Discussion

With the exception of Daneel’s case of the African Earthkeeping Churches in Zimbabwe,⁸² there has until very recently been little research that would evidence engagement with issues of ecological sustainability in African

⁷⁹ The Church of Pentecost. 2018. “Vision 2023. Executive Summary.” <https://thecophq.org/vision-2023/>.

⁸⁰ For a more comprehensive outline of the work of OAIC in this field from the perspective of the organization’s staff members leading its work, see also the discussion in Stork and Öhlmann, *Religious Communities and Environmental Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*, 51–4, as well as Gichimu, “The Organization of African Instituted Churches.”

⁸¹ Organization of African Instituted Churches. “Livelihoods.” https://www.oaic.org/?page_id=83.

⁸² Daneel, “African Initiated Churches as Vehicles of Earth-Care in Africa.”

Initiated Churches. While most of the research on African Initiated Churches shows them to be actors of social development as well as economic and political empowerment, issues of ecological sustainability seemed not to constitute a major concern for them and to be secondary to social, economic, and spiritual issues.⁸³ Based on interview data collected in 2016, Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb⁸⁴ find that ecological sustainability is not a priority for African Initiated Churches in South Africa and is secondary to social and economic issues. As the authors elaborate:

When investigating development priorities of African Initiated Churches, it emerged that issues related to ecological sustainability play a marginal role. ... Moreover, when asked about their opinion on what constituted the major problems in people's lives, a long list of issues emerged, from unemployment and teenage pregnancies to the need for theological education However, not a single item was mentioned relating to ecological sustainability or broader environmental issues.⁸⁵

Our results on the other hand, which are based on more recent data, point in a somewhat different direction. Our study contributes to the thus far small, but corpus of recent research indicating a shift in this regard.⁸⁶ Our results indicate that there seems to be a significant ecological turn in African Initiated Christianity similar to the ecological turn in many mainline churches.⁸⁷ This is not to say that environmental issues suddenly take a position in African Initiated Churches as a singular priority issue dominating social and economic concerns. Rather, the intention is to highlight that there is a turn from previously close to no engagement with ecological sustainability to some form of engagement and the recognition of the issue as being important. In this vein, several African Initiated Church leaders in our sample emphasize the importance of environmental sustainability for their communities. In church leader interviews and focus groups, several respondents mentioned environmental issues without this constituting a specific question. In the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey, close to half of the respondents from African Initiated Christianity considered environmental degradation a more important problem than COVID-19 – even at the height of the pandemic. Environmental protection was ranked among the highest priorities for the time after the pandemic.

However, rather than being the result of theological deliberation, we interpret this ecological turn to be a consequence of the increasing existential pressure that African Initiated Churches are under because of the effects of climate change, which in the very recent have been particularly aggravating globally and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular. Increasing ecological challenges, such as the loss of biodiversity, environmental degradation, and the increasingly perceivable effects of climate change, seem to place environmental concerns as a relevant issue in African Initiated Christianity. The recent interest by African Initiated Churches in environmental problems seems to be particularly driven by observed changes in the natural environment and their negative consequences for the livelihoods *in their own communities*. And while African Initiated Christianity might have had a special connection to nature even before the current increasing environmental destruction due to its rootedness in African spiritual worldviews, the current interest in the acute consequences of climate change and environmental destruction has a very different focus. It is the intersectionality of economic, social, and environmental issues for the members of African Initiated Churches that is driving the environmental actions in the churches.

Consistent with the environmental interest that focusses on their neighbourhoods and congregations, the environmental actions of the churches focus on the alleviation of immediately perceived and visible environmental problems. In contrast, global environmental factors, global climate justice, and political environmental

⁸³ Cf. Bompani, "Religion and Development from Below;" Oosthuizen, *African Independent Churches and Small Businesses*; Oosthuizen, "African Independent Churches (AICs);" Turner, "African Independent Churches and Economic Development;" Golo, "The Groaning Earth and the Greening of Neo-Pentecostalism in the 21st Century Ghana."

⁸⁴ Öhlmann et al., "You Need to Change the Whole Person."

⁸⁵ Ibid., 308–9.

⁸⁶ For instance, the recent studies by Manyonganise and Matutu, "Religion, Water and Climate Change," as well as Kabongo and Stork, "African Initiated Churches and Environmental Care in Limpopo, South Africa."

⁸⁷ Cf. for instance Omona, "The Mainline Churches and Climate Change in Uganda;" Mkandawire, "Youth and Climate Change in the United Church of Zambia;" Nche, "Beyond Spiritual Focus;" Nche, "The Church Climate Action;" Mash, "Responding to the Fifth Mark of Mission – The Green Anglicans Movement."

engagement do not seem to play a prominent role. This emphasis on local-level environmental challenges is coherent with the description of AICs as locally and contextually embedded churches in the literature. In a pragmatic approach, their leaders connect environmental and economic problems with each other, especially where people depend on (subsistence) farming for their livelihoods. This resulted in an emphasis on agricultural problems and practices in the environmental accounts in our data. Additionally, it held true even in other settings, where subsistence farming was not a dominant form of income, that where African Initiated Church leaders described environmental concerns, they typically mentioned the consequences for their communities and emphasized the resulting poverty. Consequently, their biggest environmental concerns were changing weather patterns, soil degradation, water shortages, and waste pollution.

These findings mean that African Initiated Churches might not have been concerned with aiming to protect nature for its own sake, as similarly, Taringa has pointed out for African traditional religious beliefs and practices. Taringa criticises that practitioners of African traditional religious beliefs and practices might only protect the environment because they are afraid of the consequences of a broken taboo or an angered spirit and not because they see any value in nature itself.⁸⁸ This criticism, it seems, could also be directed at African Initiated Churches. Indeed, African Initiated Churches in our sample had a great interest in the environment and negative environmental impacts where these had immediate negative consequences for their communities – while a deeper motivation, relating to an intrinsic value of environmental protection, is only visible in a few instances (for instance, in the lectures by Legkanyane and Matshobane).

The crucial question, however, is how the motivation to engage with the environment actually affects the environmental activities in African Initiated Christianity. In our view, it is secondary whether or not the African Initiated Churches have an interest in protecting the environment for its own sake or whether environmental engagement is propelled by the interest to preserve people's livelihoods. The important result is that the churches do indeed engage in environmental protection activities.

Unlike mainline churches that often develop elaborate eco-theologies, AICs exhibit a more implicit theological engagement with ecology. Eco-theological reasonings in African Initiated Churches, such as the ones presented by Legkanyane and Matshobane, remain exceptions. Interestingly, these theological reasonings did not seem to lead to environmental actions as directly as the environmental constraints in the communities did. While a study on the Nigerian context suggests that for instance eschatological theological schemata influence climate change perceptions,⁸⁹ such effect of theological reasonings on environmental actions seems to be relevant in only a small minority of the African Initiated Churches included in our study. Interestingly, theological reasoning appeared to follow rather than precede environmental action. Rather than deriving ecological commitment from doctrine, many African Initiated Churches engaged with environmental issues first and then integrated theological interpretations retrospectively.

The current literature on ecological theologies in African Christianity shows an increasing reception of the ecology–spirituality connection inherent in African traditional religious beliefs and practices and culture.⁹⁰ Even though African Initiated Churches are embedded in African spiritual worldviews, there seems to be little explicit reference to traditional spirituality and culture in their engagement with environmental issues. There is currently no broad reception of the ecological implications of the nexus of spirit, humans, and nature highlighted *inter alia* in the works of Olúpòná, Amanze, and Taringa.⁹¹ Why did the majority of African Initiated Churches in our sample not incorporate environmentally friendly elements of African traditional religious worldviews into their theologies? We assume that this is the case firstly because *theological* engagement in African Initiated Churches with the environment seems to be relatively scarce overall. Instead, practical engagement with the negative consequences of climate change and environmental destruction has so far been in the foreground. Secondly, many African Initiated Churches position themselves apart from

⁸⁸ Taringa, “How Environmental Is African Traditional Religion?”

⁸⁹ Nche, “The Religion-Environment (Climate Change) Connection.”

⁹⁰ Maluleke, “Black and African Theologies in Search of Comprehensive Environmental Justice;” Mpofo, “Pursuing Fullness of Life through Harmony with Nature;” Sakupapa, “Spirit and Ecology in the Context of African Theology.”

⁹¹ Amanze, “From ‘Dominion’ to ‘In Communion’;” Olúpòná, “Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society;” Taringa, “How Environmental Is African Traditional Religion?”

explicit African traditional *religious* beliefs and practices for their own believers⁹² and accept explicitly only *cultural* similarities with traditions that are *inter alia* preserved in African traditional religious beliefs and practices. The relationship between African Initiated Churches and African traditional religious practices and beliefs is complex and dynamic. The fact that there does not seem to be much incorporation of environmental elements from African traditional religious worldviews in the environmental approaches of African Initiated Churches might be part of the demarcation of a boundary between Christianity and African traditional religious practices and beliefs on the part of the churches. Thirdly, it is important to note that in the academic discourse on how and whether to incorporate African traditional religious beliefs and practices in African Initiated Churches' theologies, reference is made by scholars to a supposedly authentic past, in which nature was preserved by the rules of African traditional religious beliefs and practices that everyone followed seemingly easily until Christianity came into the picture.⁹³ However, critical perspectives on these arguments have been voiced. For instance, Milton questions the idealization of indigenous ecological knowledge as a "myth of primitive ecological wisdom" and dissects the political interests behind the idea that indigenous and traditional communities are traditionally environmentally friendly: "Environmentalists cling on the image of non-industrial peoples as paragons of ecological virtue because it forms part of their most cherished arguments, particularly for the environmentalist critique of industrialism."⁹⁴ Similarly, there might be aspects of other agendas behind the discourse on the historical environmental-friendliness of African traditional religious beliefs and practices. Janel interprets this as a conscious reappropriation of an imagined pre-colonial history by scholars from African contexts for descriptions of their own traditions. The current discourse on African traditional religious beliefs and practices and the environment is in her view thus connected with a post-colonial reinterpretation of the romanticizing narrative on the supposedly authentic ecological role of African traditional religious beliefs and practices.⁹⁵ Taking this one step further, this might potentially lead to an overemphasizing of the positive relationship between African traditional religious beliefs and with the environment. Hence, the finding that African Initiated Churches do not explicitly refer to African traditional religious beliefs and practices in their ecological reasoning and actions might on the one hand be due to a perceived need to demarcate the boundary between Christianity and African traditional religious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, the relevance of environmental protection and ecological awareness in African traditional religious beliefs and practices might not be as pronounced as some of the recent literature assumes it to be.⁹⁶

However, in the wake of the general trend of practice-based, reactive ecological commitment in African Initiated Churches, there are some instances of more comprehensive theological engagement within African Initiated Churches. One significant example is the emerging eco-theology of the Zion Christian Church,⁹⁷ which indeed draws on African traditional religious beliefs and connects biblical imperatives for the care for creation with African principles such as Ubuntu. It will be interesting to see how eco-theological engagement further unfolds both in the Zion Christian Church as well as in African Initiated Churches in general, particularly in its reception and interpretation of ecological values coming from African traditional religious beliefs and practices and culture. Where elaborate eco-theological reasonings, like the one by Lekganyane, were presented, African Initiated Church leaders made use of extensive natural scientific knowledge about climate change. This intricate link between scientific knowledge about climate change and eco-theologies should be investigated further in future empirical research.

⁹² Stork and Du Toit, "Finding Ubuntu in the Bible."

⁹³ For instance, Anim, "Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice."

⁹⁴ Milton, *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory*, 109.

⁹⁵ Janel, "Hybrid Authenticity as Subversive Practice."

⁹⁶ Another possibility is that the recent literature on the inherent ecological friendliness of African traditional religious beliefs and practices by scholars such as Amanze, Olúpòná, Taringa, and others is itself the expression of an emerging African traditional religious eco-theology.

⁹⁷ Lekganyane, "Ecological Sustainability as a Topic of Redemption within the Theology of the Zion Christian Church;" cf. Stork and Du Toit, "Finding Ubuntu in the Bible."

Notwithstanding the differences between African Initiated Churches of the first, second, and third founding waves regarding their history, worship styles, or global networks, they did not differ in their outlooks on the environment along these lines of the founding waves. At first glance, this might seem surprising given some of the theological differences between the churches of the different founding waves, for instance the anthropocentric emphasis on financial prosperity in some charismatic churches of the third wave. In our view though, this finding underlines the significance of the embeddedness in a spiritual worldview which all the African Initiated Churches share despite the differences in how they are officially relating to African traditional religious beliefs and practices. Anderson emphasized that African Initiated Churches of the third founding wave are accepting the *reality* of a “spirit-filled world” as it is shaped by African traditional religious beliefs and practices exactly by rejecting these spirits.⁹⁸ Although these churches might *appear* to be less inclined towards African traditional religious beliefs and practices than the independent churches of the second founding wave, the embeddedness in their cultural and religious contexts should not be underestimated. Our data show that the African Initiated Churches of the different founding waves did not differ in the extent to which they related (or rather, did not relate) to the environmental attitudes of African traditional religious beliefs and practices. Additionally, they did not differ along these lines in the extent to which they engaged with the environment in practice. Our interpretation is that this is due to the high importance that all African Initiated Churches give to their own communities. If a community is severely affected by climate change, the churches will react to this negative impact because of their shared interest in social service activities. Environmental theology and action in African Initiated Churches, hence, seems to be driven primarily by the impact of climate change and environmental degradation in their communities and not primarily by their relationship to African traditional religious beliefs and practices.

Finally, the approach of the current study has its limitations. We use three different types of data from research projects not primarily focused on ecological sustainability. While on the one hand, this provides the advantage of a methods triangulation and different perspectives on the role of ecological sustainability in African Initiated Christianity, the data are not commensurable in a strict sense, a limitation that needs to be acknowledged when assessing the generalizability of the results. The same is the case for the selection of the sample of churches, which is not a random sample, but rather a convenience sample in all three datasets used in this article. Some countries or regions might be overrepresented, while others might be underrepresented. As the title of our article suggests, the aim is to provide an empirical exploration into the role of ecological sustainability in African Initiated Christianity beyond studies focusing on specific countries, sub-categories of African Initiated Christianity, or individual churches. The results hence provide important first insights into this topic on a wider scale. Rather than being conclusive, they aim to spark further and even more comprehensive research on the topic.

6 Conclusion

While until recently in most cases environmental concerns have not played a central role in African Initiated Christianity, our analysis indicates that there seems to be an ecological turn. Issues of ecological sustainability seem to be increasingly recognized by leaders of African Initiated Churches: environmental issues emerged as topics in the interview and focus group discussions and our survey data shows African Initiated Church leaders consider environmental issues to be of high importance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

African Initiated Churches engage in many different practical and local activities to adapt to climate change, stretching from training in sustainable agriculture to tree-planting and waste collection. These activities are an expression of what is needed in practice in local communities to adapt to climate change and the consequences of environmental destruction. Moreover, we currently seem to see the early stage of African Initiated Churches’ eco-theological engagement. African Initiated Christianity is thus currently taking an

⁹⁸ Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World*.

ecological turn in their interest in, actions on, and partly also in their theology on ecology, but not because of their close relations with African traditional religious beliefs and practices as our hypothesis had been, but because of the immediate needs arising from climate change consequences. In summary, we find that some African Initiated Churches are local actors for environmental sustainability, which recently started to engage with environmental concerns, and which recognize environmental sustainability as a very important field. The community-embedded African Initiated Churches have a great potential to become involved in environmental protection even more in the future, as they have effective local networks and a great interest in the topic.

While this article provides important first insights into the role of ecological sustainability in African Initiated Christianity, its scope is necessarily shaped by the nature of the data it draws upon. Drawing on interview material not specifically targeted to questions of ecology, it brings to the fore that environmental issues constitute an important topic for African Initiated Churches leaders, who mentioned this theme on their own initiative. However, more subtle references to and implications for the nexus of theology, traditional spirituality, and ecology might stay below the surface. Uncovering them necessitates further research specifically geared to exploring this nexus in greater depth. This is an important avenue for further research.

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