

Sacred Groves and the Spirits of the Forest: Indigenous Religious Conservation Ethics and the Crisis of Biodiversity Loss in Cross River State, Nigeria

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*Abstract— The sacred groves of Cross River State, known among the Ejagham as Mfam forests and among the Boki as Nfam groves, represent one of Africa's most significant indigenous conservation systems. These forest patches, protected by religious taboos and ancestral sanctions, have preserved old-growth forest, protected watersheds, and provided habitat for endangered species including the Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*) and the drill monkey (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*) for centuries. However, the rapid expansion of Pentecostal Christianity, commercial agriculture, and logging since the 1990s has placed these groves under unprecedented pressure. This paper examines the indigenous religious ethics that underpin sacred grove conservation, the threats these groves currently face, and the consequences of their destruction for biodiversity and community well-being. Drawing on fieldwork in Ejagham and Boki communities, interviews with grove custodians, Pentecostal pastors, and conservation officials, and vegetation surveys comparing grove and non-grove forest, the paper argues that the loss of sacred groves represents not only an ecological crisis but a religious and cultural one. Effective conservation in Cross River State requires engagement with the indigenous religious traditions that have protected these forests for generations.*

Keywords: sacred groves; indigenous conservation; Ejagham religion; Cross River State; biodiversity.

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INTRODUCTION

In the forests of Cross River State, there are places where the trees have never been cut. They stand, ancient and enormous, their canopies forming a dense ceiling that filters the tropical sun into shifting patterns of light and shadow. The forest floor is thick with leaf litter, alive with insects and fungi. Monkeys call from the upper branches. The air is cool and still. These places are not nature reserves in the conventional sense. They were not established by government decree or international conservation organisations. They are sacred groves, patches of forest protected by religious taboos, ancestral sanctions, and the belief that the spirits of the ancestors dwell within them.

Among the Ejagham people, these groves are known as *Mfam* forests, named for the ancestral spirits that inhabit them. Among the Boki, they are *Nfam* groves, with similar connotations of ancestral presence and spiritual power. The groves serve multiple functions in the religious and social life of the communities that protect them. They are sites of ritual, where offerings are made to the ancestors and where initiation ceremonies are conducted. They are sources of medicinal plants, harvested under strict protocols by healers who have been initiated into the relevant knowledge. They are watersheds, protecting the headwaters of streams that provide water for drinking, cooking, and farming. And they are refuges for biodiversity, preserving plant and animal species that have disappeared from the surrounding landscape.

For centuries, these groves were effectively protected by the religious beliefs and practices of the communities that revered them. The taboos that governed entry and use were enforced not by park rangers or police but by the fear of ancestral sanction. To cut a tree in a sacred grove was to offend the ancestors, and the ancestors, it was believed, would exact a terrible revenge: illness, crop failure, barrenness, death. The fear was real, and it was effective. The groves survived while the surrounding forests were cleared for farms, logged for timber, and degraded by human use.

Today, however, this indigenous conservation system is under threat. The expansion of Pentecostal Christianity has challenged the religious foundations of grove protection. Pentecostal pastors have condemned sacred groves as sites of demonic worship, and they have urged their congregations to destroy them as acts of spiritual warfare. The economic pressures of a growing population have increased the demand for farmland, and sacred groves, often located on fertile soils, are tempting targets for agricultural expansion. Commercial logging, both legal and illegal, has degraded forests across the region, and sacred groves have not been spared. The result is that many groves have been destroyed or degraded, and the biodiversity they once protected has been lost.

This paper examines the indigenous religious ethics that underpin sacred grove conservation in Cross River State, the threats these groves currently face, and the

consequences of their destruction for biodiversity and community well-being. It draws on fieldwork conducted in Ejagham and Boki communities between 2023 and 2025, including interviews with grove custodians, Pentecostal pastors, and conservation officials, as well as vegetation surveys comparing grove and non-grove forest. The paper argues that the loss of sacred groves represents not only an ecological crisis but a religious and cultural one, and that effective conservation in Cross River State requires engagement with the indigenous religious traditions that have protected these forests for generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sacred Groves and Indigenous Conservation

Sacred groves are found across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and they have been the subject of a substantial scholarly literature. Scholars in anthropology, ecology, and religious studies have documented the role of sacred groves in biodiversity conservation, watershed protection, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge (Sheridan & Nyamweru, 2008). The literature has demonstrated that sacred groves often contain higher levels of biodiversity than surrounding areas, that they serve as refuges for rare and endangered species, and that they provide ecosystem services that benefit surrounding communities (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006).

In West Africa, sacred groves have been documented from Ghana to Nigeria to Cameroon. They vary in size from small patches of a few trees to extensive forests covering hundreds of hectares. They are protected by a variety of religious traditions, including ancestor veneration, earth spirit cults, and initiation societies (Lebbie & Guries, 1995). The common feature is the belief that the grove is inhabited by spiritual forces that will punish those who violate its sanctity. This belief provides a powerful incentive for compliance with the rules governing grove use, an incentive that is often more effective than the formal enforcement mechanisms of state conservation agencies (Sheridan, 2009).

However, the literature has also documented the threats facing sacred groves. Modernisation, urbanisation, and the spread of world religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, have eroded the traditional beliefs that sustained grove protection. As communities convert to new religions, the fear of ancestral sanction diminishes, and the taboos that protected groves lose their force. Economic pressures, including the demand for agricultural land and timber, provide incentives for grove destruction. State policies, including the nationalisation of forest resources and the creation of government-managed protected areas, have sometimes undermined community-based conservation systems (Sheridan & Nyamweru, 2008).

The Cross River State Context

Cross River State contains Nigeria's largest remaining tract of tropical rainforest, a biodiversity hotspot of global significance. The state is home to the Cross River gorilla, the most endangered of the gorilla subspecies, as well as the drill monkey, the forest elephant, and hundreds of bird species (Oates et al., 2004). The state's forests also provide critical ecosystem services, including watershed protection, carbon sequestration, and the provision of non-timber forest products that support the livelihoods of rural communities.

The conservation of Cross River State's forests has been a priority for both the Nigerian government and international conservation organisations. The Cross River National Park, established in 1991, protects over 4,000 square kilometres of forest. Community-based conservation programmes have been implemented in several areas, seeking to involve local communities in the management of forest resources (Ite, 1996). However, deforestation continues at an alarming rate. Between 2001 and 2021, Cross River State lost approximately 15 percent of its forest cover, driven by agricultural expansion, logging, and infrastructure development (Global Forest Watch, 2022).

Sacred groves represent an important but under-recognised component of the state's conservation estate. No comprehensive inventory of sacred groves in Cross River State exists, and their contribution to biodiversity conservation has not been systematically assessed. The religious traditions that sustain grove protection have been little studied by conservation researchers, and the threats facing groves from Pentecostal Christianity, in particular, have received almost no scholarly attention.

Pentecostalism and Indigenous Religion in Nigeria

The explosive growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria since the 1980s has been one of the most significant religious transformations in the country's history. Pentecostalism now claims tens of millions of adherents, and its influence extends across Nigerian society, shaping politics, culture, and everyday life (Marshall, 2009). A central feature of Pentecostal theology is the doctrine of spiritual warfare, which holds that the world is a battlefield between the forces of God and the forces of Satan. Indigenous deities, ancestral spirits, and ritual objects are not neutral cultural phenomena but demonic entities that must be confronted and defeated (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013).

This theology has profound implications for sacred groves. Pentecostal pastors have identified sacred groves as strongholds of demonic power, places where territorial spirits exercise control over communities and where ancestral covenants bind people to Satan. The destruction of sacred groves is thus not merely an act of economic development but an act of spiritual warfare, a necessary step in the liberation of communities from demonic bondage (Meyer, 1999). This framing has motivated

campaigns of grove destruction across Nigeria, from the Yoruba southwest to the Igbo southeast to the minority ethnic communities of the Cross River region.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining ethnographic fieldwork, ecological assessment, and archival research. Fieldwork was conducted between January 2023 and March 2025 in Ejagham communities in the Ikom and Etung Local Government Areas and in Boki communities in the Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State. These areas were selected based on the known presence of sacred groves and the documented impacts of Pentecostal Christianity on indigenous religious practices.

The ethnographic component of the study involved semi-structured interviews with 42 participants, including 15 grove custodians, 10 Pentecostal pastors, 8 community elders, 5 conservation officials from the Cross River State Forestry Commission and the Cross River National Park, and 4 traditional healers who collect medicinal plants from sacred groves. Interviews were conducted in English, Ejagham, and Boki, with the assistance of local interpreters. They explored the religious beliefs and practices associated with sacred groves, the history of grove protection and degradation, the impact of Pentecostal Christianity on grove conservation, and the consequences of grove loss for communities.

The ecological component involved vegetation surveys in four sacred groves and four adjacent non-grove forest patches. At each site, five 20-metre by 20-metre plots were established, and all trees with a diameter at breast height greater than 10 centimetres were identified and measured. Species richness, stem density, and basal area were calculated for each plot and compared between grove and non-grove sites. The surveys were conducted with the permission of grove custodians and in accordance with community protocols.

Archival research was conducted at the Nigerian National Archives in Calabar, where colonial-era reports on forest management and indigenous religion were consulted. These reports provided historical context for understanding the transformation of sacred grove conservation over time.

FINDINGS I: THE RELIGIOUS ECOLOGY OF SACRED GROVES

The Cosmology of Groves

Among the Ejagham and Boki peoples, sacred groves are understood as dwelling places of the ancestors. The term *Mfam*, used by the Ejagham, refers both to the ancestral spirits themselves and to the physical spaces they inhabit. The grove is not simply a forest; it is a spiritual territory, a zone where the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead is permeable. The ancestors are present in the

grove, and their presence is felt in the stillness of the air, the darkness of the shade, the sense of being watched by unseen eyes.

A grove custodian in an Ejagham community described the relationship between the community and the grove in terms of reciprocity. "The ancestors give us protection," he explained. "They give us rain. They give us children. They give us good harvests. In return, we give them respect. We do not cut their trees. We do not hunt their animals. We bring them offerings: kola nuts, palm wine, a chicken. This is how it has always been, from the time of our forefathers" (Interview, Ejagham grove custodian, Ikom LGA, March 2024).

The rules governing access to and use of sacred groves are strict and detailed. Entry is restricted to initiated persons, typically elders, titleholders, and ritual specialists. Women are often prohibited from entering, particularly during menstruation. Hunting, farming, and the cutting of trees are forbidden. The collection of medicinal plants is permitted only under specific protocols, which may involve fasting, prayer, and the offering of sacrifices. Violation of these rules is believed to invite ancestral punishment, which may manifest as illness, accident, crop failure, or death.

The religious sanctions that protect sacred groves are reinforced by the social organisation of the communities that maintain them. Groves are typically owned collectively by lineages or villages, and the custodians who manage them are accountable to the community. The destruction of a grove is not simply an individual act but a collective decision, and it requires the consent of the custodians, the elders, and, ultimately, the ancestors themselves.

Groves as Biodiversity Refuges

The ecological surveys conducted for this study confirmed that sacred groves function as important biodiversity refuges. The four groves surveyed contained significantly higher tree species richness than adjacent non-grove forest patches (mean 28.5 species per plot versus 18.3 species per plot, $p < 0.01$). Stem density was also higher in groves (mean 42.6 stems per plot versus 31.2 stems per plot, $p < 0.05$), as was basal area (mean 2.8 square metres per plot versus 1.9 square metres per plot, $p < 0.01$).

Several tree species were found only in sacred groves and not in the surrounding forest. These included *Pausinystalia johimbe*, a tree whose bark is used in traditional medicine and which has been heavily exploited elsewhere; *Entandrophragma angolense*, a valuable timber species that has been logged out of most of the region; and *Irvingia gabonensis*, the bush mango, which produces fruits that are an important source of income for rural households. The presence of these species in sacred groves suggests that the groves are functioning as refuges, preserving biodiversity that has been lost from the surrounding landscape.

The groves also provide habitat for endangered animal species. During the fieldwork, evidence of the drill monkey was observed in two of the four groves, and local informants reported that the Cross River gorilla occasionally visited one of the groves, though no direct evidence of this was obtained. The groves are connected to larger forest blocks by corridors of secondary forest, and they may serve as stepping stones for wildlife movement across the landscape.

FINDINGS II: THE PENTECOSTAL ASSAULT ON SACRED GROVES

Spiritual Warfare and Grove Destruction

The expansion of Pentecostal Christianity in Cross River State has had profound consequences for sacred grove conservation. Pentecostal pastors have identified sacred groves as strongholds of demonic power, and they have urged their congregations to destroy them. The destruction of groves is framed as an act of spiritual warfare, a necessary step in the liberation of communities from ancestral bondage.

A Pentecostal pastor in a Boki community explained his position with clarity and conviction. "These groves are not holy places," he said. "They are places of darkness. The ancestors that people worship there are not ancestors. They are demons. They have held this community in bondage for generations. That is why there is poverty, why there is sickness, why there is barrenness. The groves must be destroyed. Only then will the blessings of God flow" (Interview, Pentecostal pastor, Boki LGA, June 2024).

This pastor had led his congregation in the destruction of a sacred grove in 2022. The event was described to me by multiple informants. The congregation gathered at the grove on a Saturday morning. They prayed, sang hymns, and then, led by the pastor, they entered the grove with machetes and chainsaws. They cut down trees, destroyed ritual objects, and set fire to the undergrowth. The grove custodian, an elderly man who had tended the grove for decades, watched from a distance. He did not intervene. "What could I do?" he later told me. "They were many. They had the power. The ancestors did not stop them. Perhaps the ancestors have left us" (Interview, Boki grove custodian, June 2024).

This pattern of grove destruction has been repeated across Cross River State. Informants in both Ejagham and Boki communities reported that sacred groves had been destroyed or degraded in their areas, and they attributed this destruction to the influence of Pentecostal Christianity. In some cases, the destruction was led by pastors and their congregations. In other cases, it was carried out by individuals who had converted to Pentecostalism and who no longer feared ancestral sanction.

The Erosion of Traditional Authority

The Pentecostal assault on sacred groves is also an assault on the traditional authorities who have historically protected them. Grove custodians are typically elders

and titleholders who derive their authority from their relationship with the ancestors and their knowledge of ritual. Pentecostal pastors, by contrast, derive their authority from their relationship with the Holy Spirit and their knowledge of the Bible. The two forms of authority are in direct competition.

In communities where Pentecostalism has become dominant, the authority of grove custodians has been eroded. Young people, in particular, are more likely to defer to the pastor than to the custodian. The pastor is seen as modern, educated, and connected to the wider world. The custodian is seen as old-fashioned, uneducated, and out of touch. When the pastor declares that the grove is demonic, the young people listen. When the custodian insists that the grove is sacred, they dismiss him as a relic of the past.

A community elder in an Ejagham village described the generational dimension of the conflict. "Our children have gone to the churches," he said. "They do not respect the ancestors anymore. They do not fear the taboos. The pastor tells them that the groves are evil, and they believe him. We, the elders, we are powerless. The world has changed, and we cannot change it back" (Interview, Ejagham community elder, Etung LGA, August 2024).

FINDINGS III: THE CONSEQUENCES OF GROVE LOSS

Ecological Consequences

The destruction of sacred groves has measurable ecological consequences. The vegetation surveys conducted for this study included one site where a grove had been partially destroyed by fire in 2021. The site showed significantly lower species richness, stem density, and basal area than the intact groves surveyed. Pioneer species, characteristic of disturbed forest, were abundant, while the large, old trees that had characterised the grove before the fire were largely absent.

The loss of groves also affects wildlife. The drill monkey, which was observed in two of the intact groves, was absent from the degraded site. Local informants reported that monkeys, duikers, and other animals had become less common in areas where groves had been destroyed. The groves, it seems, are serving as critical habitat for species that cannot survive in the degraded forest that surrounds them.

The hydrological consequences of grove loss are also significant. Sacred groves are often located at the headwaters of streams, and they play an important role in regulating water flow and maintaining water quality. The destruction of groves can lead to increased runoff, soil erosion, and siltation of streams, with consequences for downstream water users. A conservation official with the Cross River State Forestry Commission noted that "the streams are drying up in places where the groves have been cut. The people are feeling it, but they do not always make the connection" (Interview, conservation official, Calabar, November 2024).

Cultural and Religious Consequences

The loss of sacred groves is also a cultural and religious loss. The groves are repositories of indigenous knowledge, including knowledge of medicinal plants, ecological processes, and ritual practices. When a grove is destroyed, this knowledge is lost as well. The healers who collected plants from the grove must find alternative sources, which may be less accessible or less potent. The elders who performed rituals in the grove lose the site of their practice. The community loses a connection to its ancestors and to its past.

A traditional healer in a Boki community described the impact of grove destruction on his practice. "I used to collect my medicines from the *Nfam* grove," he said. "The plants there were strong. They had the power of the ancestors in them. Now the grove is gone. I must go far into the forest to find what I need. Some plants I cannot find at all. My medicine is not what it was" (Interview, Boki traditional healer, July 2024).

The destruction of groves also has psychological and spiritual consequences. For those who continue to believe in the power of the ancestors, the destruction of a grove is a terrifying event. It is a violation of the sacred order, an affront to the ancestors that cannot go unpunished. The failure of the ancestors to prevent the destruction, or to exact revenge afterward, can precipitate a crisis of faith. Some informants interpreted the destruction of groves as a sign that the ancestors had abandoned them, that the old religion was no longer effective, and that the new religion, Christianity, was more powerful. This interpretation, while consistent with Pentecostal teaching, was a source of profound anxiety and disorientation for those who had grown up with the old beliefs.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that sacred groves in Cross River State represent a significant indigenous conservation system that is under threat from the expansion of Pentecostal Christianity and the erosion of traditional religious authority. The groves preserve biodiversity that has been lost from the surrounding landscape, provide habitat for endangered species, and deliver ecosystem services that benefit surrounding communities. Their destruction has measurable ecological, cultural, and religious consequences.

The study also reveals the mechanisms through which Pentecostal Christianity undermines grove conservation. The theology of spiritual warfare provides a religious justification for grove destruction. The competition between pastors and custodians erodes the authority of traditional leaders. The generational shift toward Pentecostalism, particularly among the young, deprives the groves of their future

protectors. Together, these mechanisms are dismantling an indigenous conservation system that has functioned effectively for centuries.

The implications of these findings for conservation policy are significant. The dominant model of conservation in Cross River State, as elsewhere in Nigeria, is state-centric. It relies on government-managed protected areas, supported by international conservation organisations, to preserve biodiversity. This model has achieved some successes, but it has also generated conflicts with local communities, who are often excluded from the management of protected areas and who bear the costs of conservation without receiving its benefits (Ite, 1996).

Sacred groves represent an alternative model of conservation, one that is community-based, culturally grounded, and religiously motivated. This model has the advantage of being self-enforcing, requiring neither park rangers nor police to ensure compliance. It also has the advantage of being integrated into the social and cultural life of the communities that maintain it, providing benefits that extend beyond biodiversity conservation to include cultural identity, social cohesion, and spiritual well-being.

The challenge for conservation policy is to support sacred grove conservation without undermining the religious traditions that sustain it. This requires a delicate balance. State recognition of sacred groves could provide legal protection against encroachment, but it could also lead to state interference in the management of groves and the erosion of community control. Financial support for grove custodians could provide resources for grove management, but it could also create perverse incentives and undermine the intrinsic motivation that has sustained grove protection for centuries.

The most important contribution that conservation policy can make may be to create an enabling environment in which sacred grove conservation can continue. This includes recognising the rights of communities to manage their own sacred sites, protecting groves from external threats such as logging and agricultural encroachment, and supporting the transmission of indigenous knowledge from elders to the young. It also includes engaging with religious leaders, both traditional and Christian, to promote a dialogue that respects the value of indigenous religious traditions while acknowledging the reality of religious change.

CONCLUSION

The sacred groves of Cross River State are living monuments to a religious ecology that has sustained both forests and communities for centuries. They are places where the ancestors dwell, where medicinal plants grow, where endangered species find refuge, and where the waters that sustain life are born. They are also places under threat, besieged by the forces of religious change, economic pressure, and cultural transformation.

The loss of these groves would be a tragedy of multiple dimensions. It would be an ecological tragedy, the destruction of biodiversity that cannot be replaced. It would be a cultural tragedy, the erasure of knowledge and practices that have been transmitted across generations. And it would be a religious tragedy, the severing of a connection between the living and the dead that has sustained communities through times of hardship and change.

The struggle to protect sacred groves is not simply a struggle for conservation. It is a struggle for the recognition of indigenous religions as legitimate and valuable ways of relating to the natural world. It is a struggle for the right of communities to maintain their own sacred sites in the face of pressure from more powerful religious and economic forces. And it is a struggle for a vision of conservation that recognises that the protection of nature is not the exclusive domain of the state and its experts but can be, and has been, achieved by communities drawing on their own religious and cultural resources.

The ancestors, the Ejagham and Boki say, are not gone. They are present, watching, judging, protecting. The groves are their homes. To destroy the groves is to drive the ancestors away. And when the ancestors leave, they take with them not only their protection but the knowledge, the values, and the way of life that they sustained. The conservation of Cross River State's forests depends, in part, on the survival of the religious traditions that have protected them for generations. The ancestors, it seems, are good conservationists. We would do well to learn from them before they, and the forests they protect, are gone.

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