

A Philosophical Analysis of Core Elements of African Religiosity Shaping Environmental Attitudes and Practices among the Wakara

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Abstract

This article examines how Wakara religiosity on Ukara Island generates a coherent environmental ethic by linking religious belief, moral value, environmental attitude, and ecological practice. The study adopted a qualitative case-study design integrating ethnographic fieldwork and philosophical analysis. Data were collected from 58 purposively selected participants, including elders, lineage heads, traditional healers, ritual specialists, adult community members, youth, Christian leaders, and a Muslim leader. Methods included 12 key-informant interviews, eight focus group discussions, participant observation, spatial and material documentation, and artefact analysis. Data were analysed through open coding, axial coding, thematic analysis, and salience-weighted matrices. The findings reconstruct five domains of Wakara religious life: clan-spirit cosmology, traditional specialists, vital-force interpretations of illness, elder-mediated knowledge transmission, and the ecological roles of Christian and Islamic institutions. The article shows that clan gods, witches, healers, and ancestors shape values attached to life, land, sacred places, and moral order, producing taboos, rituals, sanctions, and stewardship practices that sustain ecological responsibility in a biocultural landscape.

Keywords: Wakara religiosity; African religious worldview; environmental ethics; vital force; sacred ecology; Indigenous ecological knowledge; Ukara Island

1. Introduction

Across contemporary African scholarship, environmental degradation is increasingly understood not merely as a biophysical crisis but as a crisis of values, cosmology and relational ethics. A substantial corpus of recent research argues that African Indigenous Religions possess sophisticated eco-philosophical systems in which spiritual beings, ancestors, vital force and sacred landscapes constitute the religiosity foundations of environmental stewardship (Nche & Michael, 2024). This perspective challenges dominant Western framings of ecological governance by foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies in which human, spiritual and ecological domains are inseparably entangled. The sacredness of rivers, groves, hills and species widely documented across the continent reflects what Amanze (2024) describes as an all-pervasive ontology in which the natural world is treated as an extension of divine presence and ancestral authority. Within these cosmological systems, the boundaries between spiritual and ecological order collapse, giving rise to moral obligations towards land, water and biodiversity.

Recent eco-theological studies deepen this view. Juma (2025), drawing on Afro-ecofeminist perspectives, argues that African ecological ethics emerge from relational religious beliefs in which divine agency and earthly flourishing co-depend, producing a sacred ecology grounded in reciprocity and restraint. Similar arguments arise within ethnographic work across West and Southern Africa, where sacred forests, taboo zones and ancestral shrines operate as effective environmental governance regimes due to community adherence to spiritual sanctions and ritual obligations (Sinthumule, 2024). This growing body of scholarship underscores the limitations of technocratic approaches to conservation that neglect the African religiosity and moral grammars through which African societies interpret ecological processes, misfortune and climate variability.

Philosophical debates have similarly expanded the analytical purchase of African religiosity for environmental ethics. Vital-force theory, relational ontology, ubuntu-based environmental ethics and decolonial ecological epistemologies have been revisited as intellectual resources through which to articulate non-anthropocentric, relational and community-centred ecological duties (Lyakurwa, et al. 2025). These recent contributions insist that African religiosity is not a set of archaic propositions but a living framework that continues to shape environmental reasoning, healing practices, ritual systems and land-use decisions. Such African religious commitments are increasingly recognised as critical for understanding how communities across Africa interpret crop disease, drought, livestock mortality and environmental imbalance not only as ecological events, but as disruptions within the relational network of humans, spirits, ancestors and the land (Boamah Asante et al., 2025).

Yet, despite this rich scholarship, there remains limited fine-grained empirical work demonstrating *how* African religious beliefs is translated into concrete ecological norms, taboos, rituals and institutional practices in specific local contexts. Much of the current literature highlights the conservation effects of sacred forests, taboo systems and ritual governance (Okoronkwo, 2025) but lacks detailed analysis of the African religious justifications communities themselves advance to anchor these obligations. Moreover, scholars increasingly call for studies that map the African religiosity → axiology → deontology chain with ethnographic precision, in order to demonstrate how African spiritual concepts (e.g., ancestors, spirits, vital force) directly shape behavioural constraints relating to land, forests, water and extraction. Such work is vital for strengthening value-inclusive approaches to conservation and environmental governance, particularly in biocultural landscapes such as the Lake Victoria Basin, where environmental pressures intersect with strong Indigenous religious systems (Stork & Öhlmann, 2024).

Ukara Island, located in the eastern part of Lake Victoria, presents a compelling context in which to examine these dynamics. The Wakara people maintain a dense religious universe composed of clan spirits, ancestral forces, witches, healers, rainmakers, sacred trees, tabooed landscapes and ritual obligations that structure moral conduct and ecological responsibility. As the findings of this study show, these Wakara religiosity commitments are not symbolic residues but active frameworks through which the Wakara evaluate rainfall, crop vitality, illness, misfortune and land-use ethics. Clan spirits regulate agricultural cycles, witches' geographies produce inadvertent conservation effects, vital-force interpretations shape responses to ecological disturbances, elders mediate ecological knowledge, and

religious institutions co-produce new stewardship practices. These intertwined domains detailed in Tables 4.1 to Table 4.4 demonstrate that Wakara religiosity constitutes a living moral ecology in which cosmology, obligation and environmental governance are inseparably fused.

The objective of this article is threefold: (i) to reconstruct the foundations of Wakara religiosity, including clan-spirit cosmology, vital-force beliefs, sacred species, and ancestral agency; (ii) to analyse how these religious beliefs generate values attached to land, life, sacred places, ecological stability, and moral order; and (iii) to show how these values translate into taboos, rituals, sanctions, healing practices, stewardship duties, and the roles of traditional and religious institutions, forming a coherent ecological ethic among the Wakara.

2. Literature Review

African religiosity remains a central locus for understanding how its commitments shape ecological ethics across the continent. Recent scholarship (2020–2025) demonstrates that Indigenous spiritual worldviews continue to organise human–environment relations through divine authority, ancestral governance, vital-force African religious beliefs, ritual obligations, and moral pedagogy. The following review synthesises these debates into four conceptual domains aligned with the analytical concerns of this study.

2.1 Divine Agency, Environmental Attitude, and Practices

Contemporary African scholarship maintains that the belief in a Supreme Being continues to ground ecological consciousness by framing nature within a sacred moral order. Studies on African Indigenous Religions (AIR) emphasise that communities perceive forests, water bodies and landscapes as extensions of divine presence, thereby cultivating a responsibility toward environmental restraint (Nche & Michael, 2024). This relational ontology does not simply imagine God as a detached transcendent being but rather as an active participant in ecological balance. Recent theological work by Juma (2025) demonstrates that African eco-spiritualities operate through relational interdependence, where the divine, the earth and human life form a unified moral ecosystem. Similarly, Amanze (2024) argues that African conceptions of sacredness collapse the binary between the spiritual and material, grounding environmental obligations in theological anthropology.

A parallel strand of literature emphasises the significance of ancestors and spirits as mediators of ecological order. Research on sacred landscapes across Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa shows that ancestral beings are understood to govern moral behaviour through sanctions associated with environmental misuse. Okoronkwo's (2025) socio-rhetorical study of sacred spaces demonstrates that ancestral authority enforces strict protection around sacred groves, creating what he describes as “eco-theological systems” where moral and ecological orders converge. Likewise, systematic reviews of sacred forests indicate that communities ascribe ecological misfortunes such as drought or soil infertility to ancestral displeasure, thereby reinforcing conservation practices rooted in spiritual accountability (Sinthumule, 2024).

These recent contributions reaffirm the claim that African cosmology is fundamentally relational: divine agency and ancestral oversight create a moral universe in which environmental stewardship is both a religious obligation and a means of sustaining cosmic harmony. This framing parallels the religiosity structure observed among the Wakara, where clan spirits regulate rainfall, fertility and agricultural wellbeing.

2.2 Vital Force, Life, and African Religiosity

Vital-force African religiosity remains one of the most influential philosophical lenses for understanding African ecological thought. Contemporary scholarship does not treat *vital force* as an essentialist relic of mid-century ethnophilosophy, but as a dynamic, relational ontology through which communities interpret life, wellbeing and ecological continuity. Nche and Michael (2024) reaffirm that African notions of life emphasise interconnected vitality among humans, animals, plants, spirits and land, creating a framework in which environmental degradation directly threatens communal flourishing.

Philosophical debates have renewed critical attention to the ethical implications of vital-force thinking. Lyakurwa (2025), while challenging simplistic applications of Ubuntu or *ukama*, argues that African life-centred ontologies offer a robust challenge to anthropocentric environmental ethics by foregrounding interdependence, relational dignity and ecological responsibility. Ecofeminist theological research by Juma (2025) extends this argument by showing how African women embody and transmit life-preserving ecological knowledge through water stewardship, seed preservation and care practices grounded in religiosity understandings of vitality.

Recent empirical work further demonstrates how Indigenous pharmacologies articulate vital-force principles in environmental practice. Boamah Asante et al. (2025) show that the Kwahu people conceptualise land and water bodies as living entities whose vitality demands ritual rest days, totemic protection and ecological restraint. Ogunkolu and Ajibade (2025) similarly find that Nigerian Indigenous medicine systems like herbal formulations for crops and livestock anchor illness explanations in vital-force disruption and ecological imbalance. These studies illustrate how African religious beliefs conceptions of life continue to inform concrete responses to disease, drought, and environmental stress. Thus, together, contemporary debates reaffirm that Wakara religious beliefs provides a fertile ethical resource for ecological reasoning, linking cosmology directly to environmental practice.

2.3 Ritual Systems, Sacred Ecologies and Spiritual Governance

Recent scholarship shows a resurgence of interest in ritual as a site where African religious communities translate cosmology into normative ecological praxis. Studies of sacred forests and groves demonstrate that ritual prohibitions such as restrictions on tree cutting, hunting, or entering sacred zones operate as Indigenous environmental governance systems (Sinthumule, 2024). These restrictions often rely on African religious sanctions rather than physical enforcement, producing high-compliance conservation outcomes.

Okoronkwo's (2025) analysis of eco-theological sacred spaces highlights how rituals reaffirm communal identity and environmental responsibility by linking land, ancestors and the divine within a single moral economy. Similarly, Zayzay (2026) argues that Kwa cosmologies embed stewardship obligations within ritual cycles, festivals and taboos that regulate extraction and maintain ecological balance. Yet ritual systems are not uniformly benign; as Ogunkolu and Ajibade (2025) show, some ritual practices particularly involving animal sacrifices or resource harvesting can produce ecological pressure.

Traditional specialists also figure prominently in emerging literature as key mediators of ecological decision-making. Studies show that rainmakers, healers and diviners shape community responses to climate variability and environmental misfortune, blending spiritual insight with ecological knowledge (Juma, 2025). Boamah Asante et al. (2025) reveal that fear of witches (*abalosi*) can indirectly contribute

to conservation, as landscapes associated with malevolent powers such as fig trees or hills remain untouched due to spiritual dread.

Recent decolonial scholarship also points to ritual performance and oral traditions as epistemic practices that embed ecological memory and land ethics within embodied forms of knowledge (Ohenhen et al., 2025). These studies suggest that ritual governance constitutes a sophisticated ethical regime, one that aligns spiritual belief, environmental stewardship and communal responsibility.

2.4 Moral Authority, Pedagogy and Religious Institutions

The role of elders in shaping ecological ethics has been a strong theme in recent African scholarship. Osei and Asantewa (2025) argue that elders act as custodians of Indigenous ecological knowledge, adjudicating land matters, regulating extraction and mediating conflicts around water sources and farming boundaries. Their legitimacy derives from moral stature, spiritual authority and linguistic competence in Indigenous languages that encode ecological concepts. Research by Juma (2025) highlights the pedagogical role of elders, particularly women, who transmit ecological knowledge through daily practice and ritual instruction.

Parallel studies show that religious institutions churches, mosques, faith-based NGOs play an increasingly significant role in sustainability efforts. Stork and Öhlmann's (2024) edited volume documents how African churches incorporate ecological themes into sermons, liturgies and development programs, fostering stewardship at congregational levels. Additionally, Khomba (2025) argues that Ubuntu-based ethics offer a philosophical foundation for environmental restoration, promoting interconnectedness between humans, community and nature.

Scholars increasingly recognise that religious pluralism enriches rather than undermines Indigenous ecological ethics. Mogaji (2025) contends that Ubuntu can decolonise environmental cognition by shifting communities away from anthropocentric biases toward holistic ecological consciousness. Meanwhile, case studies across Africa show that Christian and Islamic leaders integrate Indigenous taboos, sacred site reverence and communal practices into their teachings, creating hybrid moral ecologies responsive to contemporary climate and development pressures.

Across the four domains reviewed divine and ancestral agency, Wakara religiosity, ritual governance, and moral pedagogy recent scholarship affirms that African religiosity provides a robust ethical framework for environmental stewardship. Scholars increasingly reject the view that African traditions are archaic or incompatible with modern sustainability, instead emphasising their capacity to generate relational, communal and spiritually grounded environmental ethics suited to contemporary ecological challenges. This literature demonstrates that Wakara religiosity categories remain deeply embedded in ecological practice, reinforcing the ecological logic observed among the research participants.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a research design that integrates a qualitative case-study approach, ethnographic fieldwork, and philosophical analysis. A purely qualitative design would have been inadequate for a study of this nature because Wakara religiosity is not only a cultural system but also a Wakara religiosity and ethical framework that demands philosophical interpretation. Likewise, a strictly philosophical analysis would risk abstraction and ignore lived ritual contexts, ecological behaviours, and communal interpretations essential to understanding Wakara cosmology in practice. The hybrid design therefore enabled the researcher to move fluidly between empirical documentation through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation and conceptual analysis, drawing on Wakara religiosity to examine how beliefs about ancestors, spirits, sacred species, taboos, and ritual purity generate moral obligations. This integrative approach allowed the study to illuminate not only *what* Wakara religious practices are, but also *why* they carry normative force and *how* they shape ecological stewardship across generations.

3.2 Study Area

Ukara Island, located in the eastern section of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, serves as the bounded social and ecological context for this study. Covering approximately 80 km², the island is characterised by a blend of rocky hills, freshwater catchments, sacred groves, thick woodlots, and densely settled agricultural homesteads. The Wakara people, the island's primary ethnolinguistic community, inhabit spatial environments that are deeply infused with religious meaning: forests may double as ritual spaces; stones such as Bulebeka or Mkwaya are treated as living presences; and wells or springs are governed by elaborate taboo systems. These sacred landscapes hold social, moral, and ecological authority, making them ideal for studying how African "Wakara" religiosity inform environmental behaviour.

Historically, the Wakara maintain a clan-based system, with each clan acting as custodian of specific sacred sites, ritual practices, and ecological responsibilities. Social organisation revolves around lineage heads, councils of elders, and age-graded responsibilities that govern land use, conflict mediation, ritual processes, and spiritual oversight. Economically, residents engage in small-scale agriculture, artisanal fishing, livestock keeping, weaving, and Indigenous herbal medicine. Politically, village governments coexist with clan structures, producing a hybrid governance system in which spiritual authority and administrative authority intersect in everyday decision-making. Religiously, the Wakara exhibit a plural landscape in which Indigenous cosmology exists alongside Christianity and Islam. Christian priests and Muslim sheikhs were included in the study not because they are custodians of ATR, but because their teachings and interactions influence ritual behaviour, sacred-site reverence, and moral discourse among Wakara households. The study area thus presents a rich, multilayered context in which religion, ecology, and social organisation continually interact.

3.3 Study Population

The study population included individuals deeply enmeshed in Wakara religious life or custodians of knowledge relevant to sacred species, sacred sites, ritual practices, and ecological norms. Participants were drawn from six primary categories: elders, lineage heads, traditional healers, ritual specialists (including rainmakers and custodians of sacred wells or stones), adult community members, youth, and leaders of Christian and Islamic congregations. Elders were prioritised because they carry intergenerational memory, maintain ritual genealogies, and hold authority in taboo enforcement and ritual oversight. Traditional specialists were selected due to their expertise in healing, spiritual causation of illness, interpretation of misfortune, and ritual cleansing. Adult community members contributed

perspectives on household-level rituals, gendered taboos, and everyday environmental practices, while youth offered insight into knowledge erosion, reinterpretation of sacred species, and emerging value shifts. Religious leaders were included because Wakara religiosity is hybrid, and their interpretations often coexist rather than conflict with Indigenous cosmology. This inclusive population was necessary to capture the full spectrum of belief, practice, and negotiation that characterises contemporary Wakara religion.

3.4 Participant Demographics

A total of 58 participants were involved in the study. Table 3.1 below summarises their demographic characteristics, age distribution, gender composition, and social–religious roles.

Table 3.1:

Summary of Participants' Demographic and Role Characteristics

Category	N	Gender Distribution	Age Range	Roles Represented
Elders (FGDs + KIIs)	18	13M / 5F	55–87	Clan custodians, lineage heads, ritual knowledge keepers
Traditional Specialists	8	6M / 2F	40–79	Healers, rainmaker, ritual practitioners
Adult Community Members	22	12F / 10M	30–65	Farmers, fishers, mothers' groups, craft workers
Youth Representatives	7	4M / 3F	18–29	Students, fishers, apprentices
Christian Leaders	2	2M	45–60	Catholic priest, Lutheran pastor
Muslim Leader	1	1M	50	Sheikh responsible for mosque community
Total Participants	58			

This table clarifies the structured nature of sampling, demonstrating that participants were intentionally distributed across age, gender, religious identity, and ritual authority. It directly addresses concerns that elders were not clearly identified or that sampling appeared haphazard.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data collection proceeded through in-depth Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and spatial–ecological documentation. These methods were selected to generate rich qualitative data, capture layered interpretations, and triangulate findings across individual, communal, and environmental perspectives.

3.5.1 Key Informant Interviews

Twelve KIIs were conducted with individuals recognised by their communities as custodians of ritual knowledge, interpreters of spiritual phenomena, or leaders in moral and ecological decision-making. Table 3.2 summarises the categories of key informants.

Table 3.2:*Sample Sizes for Key Informant Interviews*

KII Category	Number	Role and Relevance
Clan Elders & Lineage Heads	4	Hold genealogical memory, interpret sacred species, oversee rituals
Traditional Healers	3	Experts in Indigenous medicine, vital-force interpretation, healing rites
Rainmaker	1	Specialist in Wakara religiosity mediation of rain and climate events
Christian Leaders	2	Influence moral discourse; negotiate ATR–Christian boundaries
Muslim Leader	1	Provides Islamic ethical perspectives within a plural Wakara setting
Environmental Officer	1	Offers administrative insight on land use and conservation norms

KII participants were reached through village chairpersons and councils of elders, who identified individuals with recognised authority over ritual processes, sacred sites, or religious teaching. This multi-layer recruitment ensured cultural legitimacy and prevented random or self-selected participation. Individuals were approached in their homes or ritual spaces, briefed on the study, and interviewed in semi-structured sessions lasting 60–90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Kikara or Kiswahili, depending on participant preference.

3.5.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were conducted to explore shared knowledge, communal interpretations, and group reasoning around sacred beliefs, ritual systems, taboo enforcement, and ecological practices. Because Wakara religiosity is communal rather than individualistic, FGDs allowed insight into how beliefs are collectively negotiated and transmitted.

Table 3.3:*Summary of FGDs conducted*

FGD Type	Number	Participant Profile	Purpose
Elders' FGDs	2	Men and women aged 55–87	Discuss ritual history, taboos, sacred sites
Mixed Adult FGDs	3	Adults aged 30–65	Explore household rituals, fishing/farming taboos
Ritual Specialist FGD	1	Healers, custodians, ritual mediators	Examine cleansing rites, spiritual causation
Women's FGD	1	Women aged 30–60	Explore gendered rituals, purity restrictions
Youth FGD	1	18–29 years	Understand knowledge erosion and belief changes

FGD participants were selected through household recommendations, women's groups, youth networks, and elder nominations. This ensured that each discussion captured depth, experience, and

generational continuity. Sessions lasted 90–120 minutes and involved storytelling, reflection, and explanation of ritual procedures.

3.5.3 Observation

Participant observation allowed the researcher to directly witness ritual spaces, taboo boundaries, and ecological outcomes. The researcher visited sacred stones (Bulebeka, Mkwaya), taboo wells (Kwabhuki, Mwikokwe), python habitats, cleansing sites along the lakeshore, and sacred woodlots. Observations captured how people behave in these spaces, the environmental conditions shaped by taboo restrictions, and the ways in which cosmology is embedded in daily practice. This method also permitted the verification of claims made during interviews, such as the pristine condition of Mwikokwe or the carefully preserved vegetation surrounding woodlots.

3.5.4 Spatial and Material Documentation

Sacred landscapes were photographed and mapped to analyse how belief structures shape ecological patterns. This included documenting plant density, erosion avoidance, absence of clearing, and indicators of long-term site preservation. Spatial documentation strengthened triangulation by linking verbal accounts with visible environmental patterns.

3.6 Data Collection Instruments

The study employed a suite of carefully designed qualitative instruments that were specifically tailored to elicit the Wakara religiosity, ecological, and ritual dimensions of Wakara religiosity rather than rely on generic interview guides. These instruments were developed after preliminary engagement with community elders and leaders, who advised on culturally appropriate ways to ask about sacred species, taboo spaces, ritual objects, and cleansing practices. The aim was not merely to collect descriptive information, but to generate thick, conceptually rich accounts capable of supporting both ethnographic interpretation and philosophical analysis. The instruments therefore combined semi-structured interview guides, focused group prompts, observation protocols, spatial-mapping templates, and oral-narrative elicitation frames each permitting participants to articulate not only *what* practices exist, but also *why* they hold Wakara religiosity authority and *how* they regulate ecological behaviour on Ukara Island.

The Key Informant Interview guide was crafted around open-ended questions supported by layered sub-questions designed to draw out deeply embedded knowledge. For example, the central question regarding sacred species “*What makes the python (isatu) sacred?*” included prompts that asked the interviewee to recount personal experiences, observed consequences of harming the python, and the ritual procedures required after contact with it. These follow-up questions were critical in producing the detailed explanations found in the Findings, such as the belief in vital-force depletion, the burning of clothing after contact, and the ritual isolation imposed on affected individuals. Similar structure was used for inquiring into sacred stones like Bulebeka and Mkwaya.

The general question “*What is the significance of this stone?*” was followed by more probing ones such as “*Can it respond or move?*”, “*What offerings are expected?*”, and “*What happens when rituals are neglected?*”. These sub-questions enabled respondents to narrate stories about the stones’ movements, healing interventions, and the reciprocal relationship between people and sacred landscapes. Interviews regarding tabooed water sources were guided by questions that asked participants to detail specific prohibitions, recount oral histories of spiritual retribution, and explain healing procedures, thereby ensuring that layers of ritual sequencing and narrative detail were captured.

Focus Group Discussions were similarly guided by thematic prompts designed to stimulate collective reflection and intergenerational dialogue. FGDs began with broadly phrased opening questions for instance, “*Tell us about creatures that your people consider sacred*” or “*Describe a place in your village where spirits dwell*” which then transitioned into more specific follow-up questions aimed at surfacing moral reasoning, communal experiences, and shared norms. These discussions proved indispensable for uncovering the social dynamics of taboo enforcement, the communal logic behind healing rituals, and variation in knowledge between elders and youth. The FGD instrument allowed participants to challenge each other, correct misremembered details, or expand on one another’s statements, thereby producing insight into how cosmology is negotiated collectively rather than individually. This tool was particularly useful in reconstructing the ritual use of woodlots, the fear associated with *lichumu* deaths, and the communal obligations around cleansing ceremonies.

Participant observation was guided by an observational protocol that helped ensure consistency across site visits. The protocol directed attention to the physical condition of sacred sites, the behavioural expectations governing movement around them, the presence of ritual objects, gendered patterns of access, and environmental indicators such as vegetation density or evidence of human disturbance. The approach permitted the researcher to recognise, for example, that Mwikokwe’s lush vegetation corroborated participant claims about strict taboo enforcement, or that python-associated woodlots remained untouched due to their perceived spiritual danger. Observations were also essential for capturing unspoken norms for instance, how individuals lower their voices when approaching a sacred stone, or how women avoid certain paths during cleansing cycles.

Spatial-mapping instruments were used to record the geographical placement of sacred sites, ritual paths, tabooed wells, and woodlots. These tools allowed the researcher to document how belief systems are inscribed onto the landscape, where areas of ecological preservation correspond to zones of spiritual significance, and how ritual geography influences everyday movement on the island. Photographs and hand-drawn maps created a record of spatial relationships between sacred objects, ecological features, and settlement patterns, enabling the integration of visual analysis with verbal testimony.

Finally, because Wakara cosmology is heavily encoded in stories, myths, proverbs, and ancestral narratives, an oral-narrative elicitation tool was employed. This instrument consisted of prompts designed to invite personal storytelling rather than structured responses. Participants were asked to recount stories they heard from elders, describe remembered warnings or blessings associated with sacred sites, or narrate community events that confirmed or challenged ritual expectations. These narrative prompts yielded some of the most vivid data in the study, including the tale of the overflowing Mwikokwe well, the shaking of Bulebeka, and stories of misfortune following taboo violations.

Together, these instruments provided a methodologically robust foundation for capturing both the explicit and implicit dimensions of Wakara religiosity. They ensured that Wakara religiosity concepts, ecological practices, ritual procedures, and moral expectations were elicited in culturally appropriate and analytically rich ways. The depth and specificity of the verbatim accounts presented in the Findings directly reflect the strength of these instruments, which were crafted to honour Indigenous knowledge systems while producing rigorous data for philosophical analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis

Transcripts from KIIs and FGDs were analysed using NVivo 14 through open coding, axial coding, and thematic formulation. First, open coding identified raw patterns in references to *isatu*, sacred stones, taboos, cleansing, death rituals, and vital force. Second, axial coding grouped related concepts such as spiritual pollution, ecological restraint, fear-based conservation, ritual authority into analytic categories.

Third, the Wakara religiosity framework was applied to interpret how the Wakara religiosity claims (e.g., sacred species, animated stones) led to value commitments (purity, relational harmony) and moral obligations (taboos, rituals, sanctions). Salience percentages were computed by counting the frequency with which themes appeared across transcripts, thereby grounding thematic matrices in quantitative representation of qualitative data.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by local government authorities and councils of elders. Participants provided informed consent verbally and in writing. Cultural sensitivities were prioritised, especially concerning death rituals, sacred species, ritual sites, and taboo violations. Photographs were taken only where permitted, and all participants are anonymised using coded identifiers. Confidentiality was strictly maintained given the close-knit nature of the Wakara community.

4. Findings

4.1 Belief in Supernatural Beings as establishing Spiritual–Environmental Relationships

The data evidence a theocentric, relational cosmology in which God, ancestors, and spiritual forces are perceived to shape environmental conditions and to anchor duties toward land, forests, waters and seasons. Christianity coexists with ancestral veneration and rituals of repair, producing a shared moral vocabulary for environmental conduct.

Table 4.1:

Beliefs in Supernatural Beings: thematic matrix with keyword salience and supporting verbatim

Theme	Keywords	Supporting verbatim	% of mentions
Theocentric order and environmental causality	God; divine; rain; soil; harvest; fertility; order; prosperity	“If the rains fail, it is because God is displeased, and we must perform the proper rituals to restore balance.” (KII, R7) “The land is not just soil; it carries life that comes from God and the ancestors.” (KII, R6)	25.0
Ancestral mediation of ecological harmony	ancestors; ancestral; mediate; amends; living-dead; watch over	“If our crops fail or the rains are irregular, it is because the ancestors are displeased, and we must perform the proper rituals to make amends.” (FGD, Chifule) “The departed... continue to influence and watch over the living.” (KII, R8).	24.2
Spiritual forces and environmental misfortune	spirits; demons; witchcraft; curses; misfortune; drought; fish; illness; calamity	“Misfortunes such as unexplained illnesses, prolonged drought, declining fish stocks, or poor harvests may be attributed to disturbed spiritual relationships or malevolent forces.” (Synthesis across FGDs/KIIs)	19.2
Ritual repair and deontic constraint	ritual; cleansing; taboo; purity; sanctions; obligation; repair	“Cleansing rituals in the villages are attended by all people regardless of their different religions.” (FGD, Bwisya)	23.3

Theme	Keywords	Supporting verbatim	% of mentions
		“Failure to care for the land could result in spiritual sanctions.” (Synthesis)	
Religious pluralism as ethical convergence	church; feasts; harambee; forefathers; religious institutions	“We go to church, but we still respect the ways of our forefathers.” “Supporting religious institutions honours both God and the spiritual heritage of ancestors.” (KII, R3)	8.3

Note: Salience expresses the proportion of all keyword mentions within the Beliefs domain that fall under each theme. Multiple keywords can co-occur in the same segment, so column totals need not sum to 100.

God functions as the ultimate source of order, while ancestors mediate ecological harmony; spiritual forces extend causal and normative space beyond the material. The prominence of theocentric order and ancestral mediation (25.0% and 24.2% of mentions) shows how ontological claims translate into everyday reasons for restraint and repair. In the FGD with elders at Bwisya in December 2024, participants explicitly linked village-wide cleansing to rainfall and soil fertility, while R7 affirmed the same logic at interview, cross-validating group discourse with key-informant reasoning. The high salience of ritual repair and deontic constraint (23.3%) indicates that duty is not merely inferred but enacted, with taboos, sanctions and cleansing functioning as side-constraints on behaviour. The pluralism theme (8.3%) confirms that church practice is additive rather than substitutive, supporting the paper’s claim that Wakara religiosity justifies ecological duties by integrating new forms without eroding foundational cosmology.

4.2 Sacred Places as Institutional Foundations for Environmental Ethics

Participants identify a network of spiritually significant hills and woodlots governed by taboos and custodianship. Access is restricted less by constant human policing than by shared belief in spiritual sanction, which functions as an indigenous conservation mechanism.

Table 4.2:

Sacred Places: thematic matrix with keyword salience and supporting verbatim

Theme	Keywords	Supporting verbatim	% of mentions
Sacral topography and communal identity	hills; hilltops; rituals; prayers	“Hills are not merely physical landmarks but spiritual centres with communal significance.” “Specific sites... are subject to strict clan-based taboos.” (Synthesis)	33.7
Woodlots as dwelling places of spirits	woodlots; forests; groves; spirits; snakes	“Sacred woodlots... are strictly protected because they are believed to be the dwelling places of spirits and ancestral forces... even the snakes... are revered and safeguarded.” (FGD, Kome, Nov 2024)	21.7
Restricted access and behavioural limits	custodians; abafumu; authorisation; mediators	“Ordinary community members are not permitted to enter these forests without authorisation... to maintain ritual purity and prevent misuse.” (Synthesis)	8.4

Theme	Keywords	Supporting verbatim	% of mentions
Limits on extraction and disturbance	cutting; hunting; restriction; prohibition; regulated	“Restrictions effectively limit tree cutting, hunting and resource exploitation.” (Synthesis)	12.0
Pilgrimage and ritual healing	pilgrimage; healing; illness; infertility; cleansing	“Individuals experiencing illness or infertility undertake guided pilgrimages to these forests under the direction of elders.” (Synthesis)	13.3
Sanctions and vital-force balance	sanctions; vital force; balance	“Protection is sustained by belief in spiritual sanctions... preserving the balance of vital force within the environment.” (Synthesis) .	10.8

Note: Salience expresses the proportion of all keyword mentions within the respect for sacred places domain that fall under each theme. Multiple keywords can co-occur in the same segment, so column totals need not sum to 100.

A photo of Kubuholwe hill in Bukiko village, honoured by the Wakara for its role in rituals, has preserved its natural vegetation and rocks due to its spiritual significance.

Figure 4.1:

Kubuholwe hill



The highest salience falls on sacral topography (33.7%) and woodlots as dwelling places of spirits (21.7%), confirming that place is morally re-classified through sacrality and becomes norm-bearing with respect to access and conduct. In the FGD at Kome in November 2024, elders detailed prohibitions on cutting and disturbance, including reverence for snakes within sacred woodlots; in parallel, informants described custodianship by abafumu and the role of authorisation in preserving ritual purity, reinforcing the picture of belief-anchored governance. The presence of pilgrimage and healing (13.3%)

shows these are not merely prohibited zones but active sites of repair, where ritual restores balance after illness, infertility or bereavement. The specific references to sanctions and vital force (10.8%) directly connect sacrality to the theoretical scaffold introduced earlier: safeguarding sites is described as safeguarding vital force, which, in turn, justifies deontic constraints on extraction and settlement. By correlating these patterns across both FGDs and KIIs, the corpus demonstrates how the Wakara translate religious commitments into stable ethical guidance for environmental practice, thereby answering the paper's claim about the philosophical foundations of their ecological ethics.

During the FGD with elders at Bwisya (December 2024), participants linked communal cleansing to rainfall and fertility, while elders at Chifule ascribed irregular rains to ancestral displeasure requiring ritual amends; key informants R7 and R8 corroborated these interpretations by explicating divine displeasure and the continuing influence of the “living-dead.” In Kome (November 2024), elders detailed custodianship and prohibitions surrounding sacred woodlots that serve as dwelling places of spirits; these descriptions align with the key informant R3 who emphasised the compatibility of church practice with ancestral respect and collective moral responsibility. These triangulations illustrate convergence in reasons, rules and rites across settings, thereby strengthening the internal validity of the analysis.

4.3. Clan Spirits, Specialists, and Ritual Practices as Reinforcing Collective Responsibility

This subsection consolidates material provided on ritual cleansing, moral sanctions, taboos and purity, and the communal solidarity that sustains religious practice, including the coexistence of church participation with indigenous cosmology. It shows how deontic rules (taboos, prohibitions, sanctions) are enacted through shared ritual life and how collective acts such as *harambee* complement ancestral obligations to produce a stable ethical grammar for environmental care.

Table 4.3:

Ritual repair, sanctions and communal solidarity: thematic matrix with keyword salience and supporting verbatim

Theme	Keywords	Supporting verbatim	% of mentions
Ritual cleansing and repair	cleansing; ritual(s); repair; obligation	“Cleansing rituals in the villages are attended by all people regardless of their different religions.” (FGD, Bwisya, Dec 2024) “If the rains fail... we must perform the proper rituals to restore balance.” (KII, R7)	32.3
Moral sanctions and consequences	sanction(s); punish*; misfortune; displeased; calamity	“Failure to care for the land could result in spiritual sanctions, including drought and soil infertility.” “Any violation... is believed to provoke spiritual punishment... bringing misfortune, drought, illness, or calamity.” (FGD, Kome, Nov 2024)	18.5
Taboos and purity	taboo(s); purity; authorisation	“Ordinary community members are not permitted to enter these forests without authorisation, both to maintain ritual purity and to prevent misuse.” (Synthesis)	7.7

Theme	Keywords	Supporting verbatim	% of mentions
Communal solidarity (<i>harambee</i>) and church support	harambee; church; religious institutions; contribute; blessing(s)	“Villagers come together to offer labour, materials, or monetary support... supporting religious institutions honours both God and the spiritual heritage of ancestors.” (KII, R3)	15.4
Coexistence with Christianity	church; Christian; “we go to church”; forefathers	“We go to church, but we still respect the ways of our forefathers.” “Prayers offered in church were described as consistent with longstanding beliefs about divine authority over rain, fertility and wellbeing.” (Synthesis).	15.4
Responsible use and stewardship duty	responsible; stewardship; care for the land; use of natural resources	“Obedience to divine and ancestral expectations requires responsible use of natural resources.” (Synthesis)	10.8

Note: Percentages report the proportion of all keyword mentions in this Ritual–Sanctions–Solidarity domain. Multiple keywords may occur in the same segment or session; totals therefore do not sum to 100.

These data in table 4.3 indicate a ritual repair (32.3%) and moral sanctions (18.5%) provide the deontic machinery that converts physical claims into obligations. During the elders’ discussion at Bwisya in December 2024, participants described village-wide cleansing as a non-denominational act tied to rainfall and soil fertility; in parallel, R7 explained divine displeasure and the need for ritual correction, illustrating cross-validation between group discourse and key informant testimony. The taboos-and-purity cluster (7.7%) and the insistence on authorisation for access underscore that sacred space is guarded by rules of approach as much as by physical presence, aligning with the earlier sacred-places matrix. The double track of harambee-driven solidarity and coexistence with Christianity (each 15.4%) shows that institutional religion is additive to indigenous ethics rather than substitutive: church fundraising, blessings and shared labour reinforce ancestor-honouring and environmental caution. R3 explicitly links support for religious institutions to reverence for ancestors, while the oft-repeated line, “We go to church, but we still respect the ways of our forefathers,” summarises the adaptive pluralism that keeps environmental duties normatively thick and socially enforceable. Finally, the presence of responsible use and stewardship language (10.8%) anchors the article’s claim that Wakara religiosity justifies ecological restraint as a moral requirement, not merely as communal habit or economic prudence.

4.4. Life as Sacred Vital Force, Inseparable, and Pragmatically Inclusive

Totemic belief constitutes one of the most structurally powerful dimensions of Wakara religiosity, providing the Wakara religiosity through which species, landscapes, and social conduct are morally ordered. Because totemic systems anchor both lineage identity and ecological restraint, the analysis here begins with a thematic matrix to distil how respondents consistently frame the python (*isatu*) as a creature endowed with spiritual force, moral consequence, and environmental significance.

Table 4.4 presents a patterned dimensions of totemic thought its sacred status, its regulatory power, its perceived dangers, and its contemporary erosion. Figure 4.2 is incorporated to visually substantiate these accounts, showing the python as a focal species whose presence transforms forests and hills into protected spiritual zones. This combined presentation clarifies how totemic reverence functions

simultaneously as a religious worldview, a marker of collective identity, and an Indigenous conservation instrument.

Table 4.4:

Totemic Beliefs Thematic Matrix

Theme	Keywords	Verbatim Evidence	% of Mentions
Sacred status of python (<i>isatu</i>)	python; isatu; sacred; supernatural	"Isatu embodies significant spiritual force... harming it can bring illness, misfortune, or death." (FGD, Nyamanga)	32.4
Totem as conservation mechanism	preservation; woodlots; sacred hills	"When isatu inhabits a forest, the area remains meticulously preserved and undamaged." (FGD, Bwisya)	26.7
Vital-force contamination	misfortune; isolation; ritual burning	"Contact with isatu reduces vital force... the person must be isolated and their clothes burned." (FGD, Nyamanga)	18.3
Knowledge erosion	youth; misidentify; decline; fear	"Young people now mistake isatu for crocodiles or lizards... leading to indiscriminate killing." (FGD, Nyamanga)	12.8
Wakara religiosity ecology	sacred species; environmental balance	"Sacred species were preserved because their power was linked to environmental well-being." (Interview, R6)	9.8

Figure 4.2 depicts *isatu*, the most revered Wakara totem. Respondents reported that territories where *isatu* is believed to reside often woodlots, groves, or hills remain untouched: no tree-cutting, burning, or agricultural encroachment occurs. This visually supports broader African evidence that totems serve as religiously mediated conservation tools, as observed among Ghanaian clans and Igbo communities where python sacredness preserves forest patches and riparian zones.

Figure 4.2:

Python snakes



The photo of the Python snake, the most celebrated totem creature among the Wakara. When it is thought to inhabit a specific forest or woodlot, that area is meticulously preserved and remains undamaged.

The matrix confirms that *isatu* is central to Wakara spiritual ecology. Its sacred status produces moral obligation and fear-based restraint that inadvertently protect habitats an outcome paralleled in Ghanaian totem systems where spiritually potent species trigger behavioural prohibitions that conserve biodiversity. The Wakara case also mirrors Igbo python reverence, where killing sacred reptiles invites severe spiritual sanction, reinforcing ecological ethics through Wakara religiosity beliefs. This aligns with African eco-philosophy emphasising spiritual-ecological interdependence: African Indigenous Religions preserve species through beliefs that sacralise life, space, and non-human agency.

5. Discussion

The central claim of this article is that African and the Wakara religiosity furnishes a philosophically intelligible ecological ethic by linking Wakara religiosity commitments (vital force, divine and ancestral agency, sacrality of place) to axiological valuations and deontic constraints on human conduct toward land, forests, waters and seasons. The findings corroborate this claim on three fronts. First, belief salience is strongly theocentric (25.0%) and ancestral-mediated (24.2%), with ritual repair almost as prominent (23.3%), demonstrating an integrated moral grammar in which divine order and ancestral oversight are enacted through taboos and cleansing rites (Table 4.1).

This profile is consistent with recent African philosophy of religion which reads vitality and sacral immanence as value-bearing principles that justify duties of restraint and repair rather than mere prudential behaviour (Attoe & Chimakonam, 2025; Nche & Michael, 2024). Second, place-based results show that sacral topography (33.7%) and spirit-dwelling woodlots (21.7%) carry normative status, with regulated access and extraction limits functioning as indigenous side-constraints (Table 4.2). This aligns with the broader empirical record that sacred natural sites frequently support vegetation structure and plant diversity and can serve as “moral technologies” of conservation (Zannini et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023). Third, the ritual-sanctions-solidarity matrix shows ritual repair (32.3%) and moral sanctions (18.5%) as the operational hinge converting belief into obligation, with *harambee* and church participation reinforcing rather than displacing indigenous ethics (Table 4.3). This additive pluralism mirrors the literature’s account of religion’s “ecological turn” and the policy-relevant inclusion of diverse values of nature (Renger, Stork, & Öhlmann, 2024; IPBES, 2022).

Two prominent convergences are evident. First, the African religiosity-to-ethics pathway observed among the Wakara gods and ancestors as sources of order, ritual as repair, taboo as constraint tracks the contemporary reframing of vital force beyond its colonial genealogy into a live ethical resource for African environmental thought (Attoe & Chimakonam, 2025; Roothaan & Bello, 2024). Second, the performance of sacrality in space hills and woodlots as norm-bearing sites confirms evidence that sacred natural sites deliver conservation effects, especially for plants, while depending on custodianship and community legitimacy (Zannini et al., 2021; Sinthumule, 2024). At the same time, our results speak to cautions in the literature. A sustained thread warns against romantic uniformity: sacred sites are variably effective across taxa and contexts (Sullivan et al., 2023).

The Wakara data nuance this point: participants emphasise sanction-based protection (rather than constant human patrolling), a move that is resilient where faith is strong but could be vulnerable under pressures of commodification or demographic change (Change to Table 4.2; Figure 4.1). This resonates with work on spiritual governance and the conditions under which it stabilises behavioural limits (Sinthumule, 2022). Finally, the coexistence of church practice with indigenous beliefs observed here aligns with accounts of value pluralism and equitable knowledge weaving across traditions, provided local authority is not subordinated in practice (Fa & Luiselli, 2025; Renger et al., 2024).

The theoretical contribution lies in a fine-grained reconstruction of a single island community's Wakara religiosity chain, using salience-weighted matrices grounded in verbatim evidence. Demonstrating that belief in God and ancestral mediation directly structure ritual duties and taboo-based side-constraints on extraction, allowed the paper to analyse the converts of a general heuristic "vital force underwrites ecological care" into a worked model of justificatory logic (Tables 4.1–4.3). This extends recent philosophical efforts to clarify how vitality can bear normative weight without collapsing into mere cultural description (Attoe & Chimakonam, 2025; Dübgen, 2024). It also contributes a place-based counterpoint to continental syntheses showing that religious adherence can correlate with conservation outcomes, by specifying the mechanism (sanctioned sacrality and ritual repair) through which such correlations are made durable at micro-scale (Deopa & Rinaldo, 2025; Bezeng et al., 2025).

Three implications follow. First, the OECM debate is directly relevant: where sacral places demonstrably constrain conduct, formal recognition as other effective area-based conservation measures could bolster local custodianship while respecting ritual authority (Sinthumule, 2025). Second, decision-makers can work with values-inclusive policy processes that embed the diverse values of nature, consistent with IPBES guidance, by treating sacral sites and ritual repair as locally legitimate instruments of environmental governance (IPBES, 2022; Renger et al., 2024). Third, education and extension can apply Ubuntu-informed relational ethics to foreground communal duty and intergenerational care already evident in the Wakara's *harambee* practice thus aligning pedagogy with lived moral grammars (Kyei-Nuamah & Peng, 2024; Chemhuru, 2024).

For the Lake Victoria basin, where water-quality stressors are well documented, the findings indicate a feasible values-first complement to regulatory measures: leverage sacral hills and woodlots as no-take anchors and support ritual repair as restorative compliance in catchment management (CSE/NEMC, 2023; World Bank, 2025). This sits comfortably with contemporary calls to weave Indigenous and scientific knowledge on equitable terms (Fa & Luiselli, 2025).

Considering the matrices and the triangulated testimony, the Wakara case validates the article's claim. Vital-force ontology and theocentric-ancestral agency are not inert African religiosity but action-guiding reasons that justify and stabilise ecological duties; sacral places operate as norm-bearing sites; ritual repair and sanctions convert oughts into lived practice; and plural religious participation sustains, rather than supplants, this moral grammar. These manifestations echo and refine the recent literature's arguments about African religiosity, the multiple values of nature, and sacred site governance, while offering a novel, fine-grained mapping of the Wakara religiosity chain in a Lake Victoria Island community (Attoe & Chimakonam, 2025; IPBES, 2022; Zannini et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary

This article demonstrates that Wakara religiosity yields a philosophically intelligible ecological ethic by linking Wakara religiosity commitments vital force, divine and ancestral agency, and sacrality of place to axiological valuations and deontic side-constraints on environmental conduct. The findings substantiate this claim. Belief salience is decisively theocentric and ancestral, while ritual repair and sanctions provide the operational hinge that converts belief into obligation. These patterns converge with recent African philosophy of religion that re-reads vitality and sacral immanence as value-bearing principles capable of justifying ecological duties. The place-based articulation of sacral hills and woodlots aligns with synthetic evidence that sacred natural sites can sustain vegetation structure and plant diversity under conditions of local legitimacy and custodianship.

The article's novelty lies in offering a fine-grained, matrix-based reconstruction of the Wakara religiosity chain for a single Lake Victoria community, thereby moving beyond generic appeals to "indigenous values" toward a worked model of how belief justifies and stabilises ecological restraint. Policy-relevant implications follow. First, where sacral sites demonstrably constrain conduct, recognition as other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) is warranted to strengthen custodianship without displacing ritual authority. Second, decision processes should embed the diverse values of nature as urged by IPBES by treating sacral sites and ritual repair as legitimate local instruments of governance. For the Lake Victoria basin, this values-first complement can sit alongside regulatory and technical interventions.

6.2. Limitations and Future Directions

Two limitations merit note. First, the present analysis privileges conceptual foundations; while it cross-validates FGDs with KIIs, it does not measure ecological outcomes directly. This echo calls for systematic comparisons of sacral sites with matched controls to assess biodiversity effects beyond plants (Sullivan et al., 2023; Zannini et al., 2021). Second, sanction-based restraint depends on live custodianship and shared belief; attention is needed to socio-economic pressures that might erode these supports, a risk already noted in regional reviews (Sinthumule, 2024; Fa & Luiselli, 2025). Future work could pair ecological monitoring of sacred hills and woodlots with institutional ethnography to track how ritual, taboo and plural religious participation co-produce compliance over time.

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