

Environmental Ethics in African Traditional Alcohol Spaces through a Consolationist Lens



Evans Taabu Okumu



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Abstract

This article argues that African traditional alcohol spaces function as indigenous environmental institutions where communities negotiate tensions between livelihood needs, social continuity, and ecological sustainability. Drawing on Ada Agada's Consolationism, the article examines how communities develop practical but imperfect responses to environmental challenges. The article pursues three objectives: examining the dialogical character of alcohol spaces, analysing livelihood–ecological tensions in brewing, and evaluating communal responses to these pressures. Using qualitative document analysis of eleven African-focused studies, the paper finds that traditional brewing supports livelihoods and social cohesion while depending on limited resources, including grain, water, and fuelwood. Communities respond through taboos, sacred-forest protection, adaptive techniques, and mutual-aid practices. The paper demonstrates that Consolationism explains how communities manage ecological tensions without fully resolving them, revealing both the ethical value and vulnerability of communal environmental practices when social conditions change, and community institutions weaken through commercialisation and declining transmission of indigenous ecological knowledge.

Keywords: African urbanism; beauty; civic formation; infrastructure; political philosophy; urban aesthetics; human flourishing

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation is one of the defining challenges of the contemporary world. Biodiversity loss, climate change, deforestation, and the depletion of water sources have encouraged scholars to look beyond formal regulation for locally grounded approaches to environmental responsibility. Community-based environmental ethics is one such approach, as it examines how communities generate, transmit, and enforce environmental norms through everyday social institutions and practices (Guan & Lin, 2025; Shah & Yang, 2023). African societies provide important contexts for this inquiry because indigenous institutions have long preserved environmental knowledge through customary land rules, sacred groves, communal resource-sharing arrangements, and other largely informal systems. This article focuses on one such institution that remains insufficiently examined: the traditional alcohol space. The article claims that African traditional alcohol spaces can function as indigenous environmental institutions in which communities develop imperfect but meaningful practices to manage the unresolved tension among livelihood needs, social continuity, and environmental conservation.

Traditional alcohol spaces take various forms across Africa, including busaa drinking circles in Kenya, palm-wine gatherings in West Africa, dolo and pito cabarets across the Sahel, banana-beer gatherings in East Africa, and settings associated with the production and consumption of umqombothi in South Africa. These are not merely sites of alcohol production or consumption. They are also socially embedded gathering places in which community members interact, exchange knowledge, reinforce social relationships, and negotiate matters of shared concern, including questions relating to access to land, grain, water, fuelwood, and other resources (Muzingili et al., 2025; Rogerson, 2019; Sangster et al., 2019; Sawadogo-Lingani et al., 2021). The environmental significance of these spaces, however, should not be assumed from their social character alone. It must be established through a critical examination of the relationships among communal dialogue, brewing practices, resource use, and locally developed responses to ecological pressures.

Existing scholarship on African traditional alcohol has concentrated primarily on public health, economic livelihoods, gender relations, regulation, and cultural heritage. Sangster et al. (2019), for example, examine unrecorded alcohol in Kenya largely as a public-health and regulatory concern, while Dumbili (2024) investigates the gendered politics surrounding drinking and leisure spaces in Nigeria. Other works show that traditional brewing is socially and economically embedded in African communities, particularly through women's livelihoods, mutual-aid arrangements, ritual practices, and community gatherings (Muzingili et al., 2025; Rogerson, 2019; Sawadogo-Lingani et al., 2021; Willis, 2002). Nevertheless, the literature rarely brings these findings together to explain whether and how traditional alcohol spaces contribute to communal reflection on resource use and environmental responsibility. It also gives insufficient attention to how practices associated with these spaces acquire ethical force rather than remaining customary habits. This article addresses that conceptual and interpretive gap.

Three concepts play a critical role in the article. First, a traditional alcohol space refers to a recurring social setting organised around the production, distribution, or consumption of an indigenous fermented beverage, including a cabaret, dolodrome, clan gathering, brewing household, or communal beer gathering. Second, a dialogical space is a social setting in which community members exchange views and experiences and, through that interaction, shape shared understandings and communal responses. Third, consolatory ethics refers to the practical yet necessarily imperfect moral responses that communities develop when a problem's complete resolution is unattainable. In this article, the concept describes practices that help communities reduce or manage environmental harm without claiming to eliminate the underlying conflict between ecological conservation and material survival.

To explain this conflict, the article draws on Agada (2022) Consolationism. Consolationism is particularly relevant because it understands human existence as involving a continuing tension between the aspiration for a better or more harmonious world and the limitations imposed by material reality. Applied to environmental ethics, this perspective directs attention away from the expectation of perfect ecological solutions and towards the imperfect practices through which communities manage unavoidable conflicts between human needs and environmental sustainability. Section 2 presents a fuller critical account of the relevant Consolationist concepts.

This article does not apply every principle within Consolationism. It concentrates on the conversational or dialogical platform, tragic teleology, consolation, rational spirituality, creative struggle, and complementarity. The conversational platform helps explain how shared meanings and communal responses are negotiated. Tragic teleology illuminates the conflict between the aspiration for ecological flourishing and the material demands of survival. Consolation explains the incomplete but practically significant responses developed to manage that conflict. Rational spirituality concerns the interaction between practical reasoning, indigenous knowledge, and spiritually grounded customary authority. Creative struggle and complementarity further explain how communities adapt to scarcity and attempt to accommodate competing livelihood and conservation values. These concepts are introduced here only to identify the article's philosophical orientation; they are defined, examined, and critically applied in the theoretical framework. Guided by this framework, the article pursues three objectives:

- i. To examine the dialogical character of African traditional alcohol spaces and identify the environmental concerns associated with them.
- ii. To analyse traditional alcohol production as a site of tension between livelihood needs and ecological sustainability.
- iii. To evaluate how communal responses associated with traditional alcohol spaces contribute to a consolatory framework for environmental ethics.

The article proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 develops the theoretical framework and critically explains the selected concepts of Consolationism. Section 3 describes the qualitative document analysis, including the selection, extraction, and thematic coding of the literature. Thematic coding refers to the systematic identification and grouping of recurring ideas, practices, and relationships in the selected documents. Section 4 presents the findings in relation to the three objectives. Section 5 discusses their implications for African philosophy and communitarian environmental ethics, while Section 6 presents the conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Origins of Consolationism

Agada developed Consolationism partly as a response to the long-running debate in African philosophy between universalism, which treats philosophical truth as culturally neutral, and particularism, which insists that African thought must be understood strictly on its own terms. Agada (2021) sought a middle path. He argued that African thought possesses genuine philosophical content that can be critically engaged alongside other philosophical traditions, but that its distinctive contribution lies in treating tragedy and hope together rather than claiming a wholly separate philosophical logic. As Ben (2022) notes in his review of the book, Agada positions Consolationism as a bridge between comparative philosophy and a specifically African account of existential struggle.

2.2 Selected Tenets

Although Consolationism comprises several interconnected ideas, this study uses only those that directly illuminate the environmental dynamics of traditional alcohol spaces. The table below sets out each selected tenet, its meaning in Agada's system, and its interpretation for this study.

Table 1*Selection of Consolationist tenets*

Tenet	Meaning in Consolationism	Interpretation for this study
Dialogical / conversational platform	Truth and communal harmony are negotiated in shared spaces, not discovered in isolation.	Traditional alcohol spaces are read as informal public spheres where ecological concerns are raised and negotiated.
Tragic teleology	Humans strive for a perfect, life-sustaining existence but are bound by an imperfect physical world.	Communities want healthy forests and rivers yet must cut wood and draw water to brew and to live.
Consolation	Because perfection is unreachable, communities build imperfect, compromise-driven ethical responses.	Taboos, sacred woodlots, and processing techniques are read as consolations, not solutions.
Rational spirituality	Reason and ancestral belief operate together, rather than in opposition.	Ecological rules justified through ancestral spirits or taboos are treated as reasoned ecological knowledge, not superstition.
Creative struggle	People respond to existential limitation through inventive, adaptive practice.	Selective harvesting, seasonal brewing, and mutual-aid labour-sharing are read as creative adaptations to scarcity.
Complementarity	Competing values must be balanced rather than treated as mutually exclusive.	Livelihood and conservation are negotiated together within the alcohol space, not resolved in favour of one or the other.

2.3 Applicability to Environmental Ethics

Mainstream environmental ethics often seeks a resolvable balance between human needs and ecological preservation, whether through stewardship, rights-based conservation, or market instruments. Consolationism offers a different starting point. It does not assume a resolvable balance is available. It assumes the tension is permanent and asks instead how communities live well within it. This shifts the analytical question from 'has the problem been solved?' to 'how has the tragedy been made bearable, and what does that response reveal about communal ethics?' This reframing suits traditional alcohol spaces particularly well, since none of the practices reviewed in this paper eliminate environmental cost. Each merely reduces or manages it.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

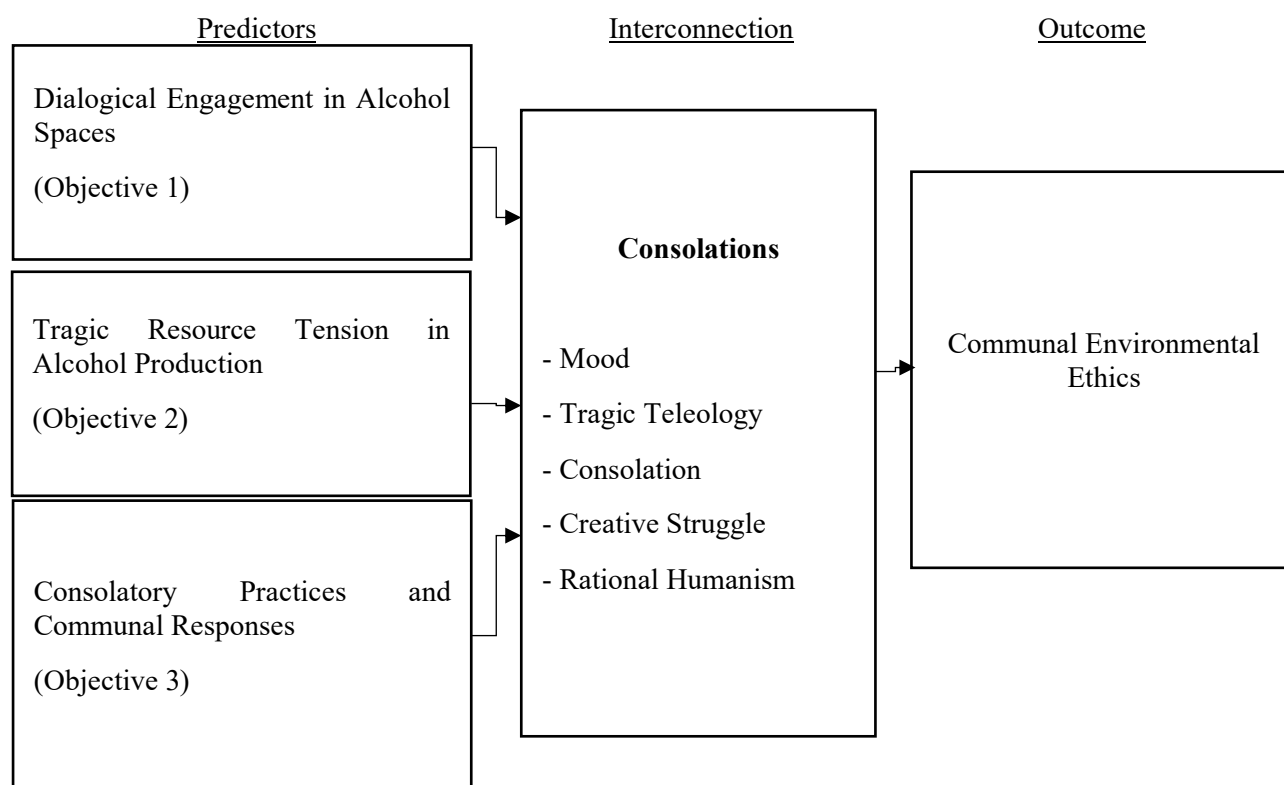
The analytical logic of the paper can be summarised as a simple sequence: traditional alcohol spaces generate dialogue; dialogue surfaces environmental conflict, chiefly around wood, water, and land; this conflict is interpreted through Consolationism as tragic teleology; and communities respond with imperfect, practical measures that together form a consolatory framework for communal environmental ethics.

This logic can also be expressed as a conceptual framework linking three independent variables, each corresponding to one research objective: (1) dialogical engagement within traditional alcohol spaces, which examines how communal discussions generate environmental awareness; (2) tragic resource tensions in traditional alcohol production, which captures the conflict between livelihood needs and

ecological sustainability; and (3) consolatory practices and communal responses, which identify the adaptive strategies communities develop to manage environmental pressures. These three variables are interpreted through Consolationism, the theoretical lens that explains how they contribute to the dependent variable: communal environmental ethics. Figure 1 presents this structure.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework linking the predictor action to communal environmental ethics through Consolationism.



Read from left to right, the three variables correspond directly to the three objectives: dialogical engagement within alcohol spaces (Objective 1), the tragic resource tension inherent in traditional brewing (Objective 2), and the consolatory practices communities build in response (Objective 3). Consolationism sits between these variables and the outcome, not as a fourth variable to be measured, but as the interpretive lens that explains why dialogue, tension, and consolation combine to produce the dependent variable: communal environmental ethics. The dashed feedback arrow indicates that this is not a one-way, one-off process. Because consolations are, by definition, imperfect, the ethics they produce are continually revisited within the same dialogical spaces that gave rise to them, feeding back into further negotiation rather than settling the matter once and for all.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis (QDA) design to examine how African traditional alcohol spaces contribute to environmental ethics through the philosophical lens of Consolationism. Qualitative document analysis is appropriate because it enables the systematic examination and interpretation of existing documentary evidence to generate new conceptual understanding, rather than

merely summarising previous findings (Bowen, 2009). Unlike a conventional literature review, which describes existing knowledge, qualitative document analysis treats published literature as empirical data that can be coded thematically and philosophically interpreted to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships.

This design suits the present study because the aim is to reinterpret existing empirical studies on African traditional alcohol spaces, rather than generate new field data. Traditional alcohol spaces have been documented extensively across African societies through ethnographic, anthropological, sociological, environmental, and public-health research (Willis, 2002; Sangster et al., 2019; Rogerson, 2019; Sawadogo-Lingani et al., 2021; Muzingili et al., 2025). However, these studies have generally examined traditional alcohol practices from disciplinary perspectives concerned with issues such as social organisation, public health, livelihoods, gender relations, cultural identity, or economic transformation. They have rarely been analysed collectively as evidence of how communities negotiate environmental responsibilities through these spaces.

In this study, the selected literature is therefore treated as a documentary dataset rather than simply as secondary background material. Qualitative document analysis allows the researcher to identify recurring meanings, practices, and relationships across different sources and contexts. Through systematic extraction and thematic coding, the study examines how traditional alcohol spaces function as sites of environmental dialogue, how brewing practices generate ecological tensions involving resources such as water, grain, and fuelwood, and how communities develop adaptive responses to these pressures. The purpose is not to claim that existing studies explicitly investigate environmental ethics, but rather to reinterpret documented social and ecological practices through the philosophical lens of Consolationism. In this way, the method bridges empirical evidence and philosophical interpretation by revealing the ethical meanings embedded in everyday communal practices.

3.2 Philosophical Orientation

The analysis is guided by Consolationism, an African philosophical system developed by Ada Agada (2021). Rather than functioning as a predictive theory that seeks to establish universal causal relationships, Consolationism is employed in this study as an interpretive framework for understanding how communities respond to unavoidable tensions between human needs and environmental limitations. Its relevance to this study lies in its emphasis on the practical ways communities negotiate imperfect conditions rather than seeking complete solutions to problems that may be impossible to eliminate.

Five central tenets of Consolationism are operationalised in this study: mood, tragic teleology, consolation, creative struggle, and rational spirituality. These concepts are not treated as measurable variables but as interpretive categories through which the environmental practices documented in the selected literature are analysed.

Mood refers to the shared emotional and existential condition that allows communal understanding and ethical reflection to emerge. For Agada, human beings do not encounter existential problems as isolated individuals; rather, they experience their struggles within social relationships and shared conditions. Applied to traditional alcohol spaces, mood explains why gatherings around brewing and consumption can become environments where concerns about resources, obligations, and community survival are discussed.

Tragic teleology captures the tension between human aspirations and the limitations of material existence. Communities seek social wellbeing, economic security, and ecological stability, but scarcity

often constrains these goals. In the context of traditional alcohol production, this concept explains the unavoidable conflict between livelihood dependence on brewing and the ecological pressures created through the use of grain, water, and fuelwood.

Consolation refers to the practical and ethical responses communities develop when complete resolution of a problem is impossible. Consolations are not perfect solutions; rather, they are adjustments that reduce suffering and enable meaningful social life within difficult conditions. In this study, practices such as sacred-forest protection, resource taboos, and adaptive processing techniques are interpreted as consolatory responses because they manage environmental pressures without eliminating them entirely.

Creative struggle describes the human capacity to respond imaginatively to limitations through adaptation and innovation. It highlights that communities are not passive victims of environmental challenges but active agents who develop locally appropriate strategies for survival. Within traditional alcohol spaces, selective resource use, technological adjustments, and cooperative labour arrangements represent forms of creative struggle.

Rational spirituality explains the relationship between practical reasoning, indigenous knowledge, and spiritually grounded customary authority. Agada's approach does not treat indigenous beliefs as irrational explanations of nature; instead, it recognises that moral obligations toward the environment may be expressed through cultural and spiritual systems. In this study, taboos, ancestral authority, and customary restrictions are examined as forms of ecological governance embedded within community values.

These five tenets provide the philosophical lens through which the empirical themes identified through qualitative document analysis are interpreted. They do not replace evidence from the reviewed studies; rather, they help explain the ethical meanings underlying documented practices and relationships between communities, resources, and environments.

Agada develops Consolationism most comprehensively in *Consolationism and Comparative African Philosophy* (2021), where he presents it as a philosophical response to the persistent tension between human aspirations and the limitations of existence. Agada challenges approaches that assume human problems can always be resolved through perfect knowledge or ideal solutions. Instead, he argues that human beings live within conditions marked by uncertainty, suffering, and limitation. His concept of *Homo melancholicus* describes humans as beings who pursue higher ideals while remaining aware of the imperfections of their circumstances. However, this awareness does not lead to despair. Rather, it encourages the creation of "consolations": practical, ethical, and socially meaningful responses that enable communities to continue living despite unresolved difficulties.

3.3 Data Sources

The study draws exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and book chapters addressing African traditional alcohol, indigenous environmental governance, environmental ethics, community resource management, and Consolationism. Literature was identified through Crossref and cross-checked where possible against Google Scholar and publisher platforms, including Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library, chosen for their coverage of philosophy, anthropology, environmental studies, and African studies.

Eleven African-focused studies met the eligibility criteria set out in Section 3.5 and form the core evidence base analysed in Section 4. Seminal work by Ada Agada and subsequent scholarly discussion of Consolationism was purposively included to establish the theoretical foundation of the study but was not treated as empirical data. A small number of non-African studies on premodern Indian drinking

houses and on the global craft-brewing industry were retained as comparative literature. These are used in the Introduction and Discussion to sharpen the analysis by contrast and are clearly distinguished throughout from the African case-study evidence.

3.4 Search Strategy

A structured search strategy combined keywords using Boolean operators. Search strings included: "African traditional alcohol" AND environment; "traditional beer" AND community dialogue; "palm wine" AND indigenous knowledge; "traditional brewing" AND environmental sustainability; "traditional alcohol spaces" AND governance; "indigenous environmental ethics" AND Africa; "customary resource management" AND Africa; Consolationism; Ada Agada; and "African environmental philosophy".

Additional searches targeted specific traditional beverages, including busaa, chang'aa, muratina, mnazi, dolo, pito, tchapalo, palm wine, sorghum beer, and banana beer. Backward and forward citation tracking was then used to identify further relevant studies not retrieved through the initial database searches, which is how several of the comparative and supporting sources cited in the Introduction were located.

3.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they examined traditional African alcoholic beverages or drinking spaces; discussed indigenous community practice, governance, or environmental interaction; focused on an African country; were peer-reviewed; were published in English; carried an identifiable DOI where one existed; and provided evidence relevant to at least one study objective.

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on commercial alcohol industries without an indigenous cultural context; concentrated solely on biomedical or clinical alcohol misuse; addressed modern bars or urban drinking establishments without an indigenous dimension; lacked empirical content; or were conference abstracts, newspaper reports, or unpublished manuscripts.

Table 1

Inclusion criteria for selected literature.

Criterion	Description
Geographic scope	African countries (comparative non-African sources retained separately; see Section 3.3)
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and book chapters
Language	English
Subject focus	Traditional alcohol, indigenous governance, environmental ethics, Consolationism
Publication quality	Indexed academic sources with verifiable bibliographic information
Relevance	Addresses one or more of the three study objectives

3.6 Data Extraction

After screening, eligible studies were entered into a literature matrix built specifically for this study. Rather than extracting only bibliographic information, each article was examined for concepts relevant to the three objectives: author(s) and year; country; traditional beverage studied; environmental issue discussed; evidence of community dialogue; conservation practice identified; livelihood implications;

and the objective(s) each study speaks to. This systematic extraction kept the later thematic coding consistent across a diverse set of sources.

Table 2

Literature extraction matrix (abridged).

Study	Country	Traditional alcohol	Environmental issue	Community dialogue	Conservation practice	Objective(s)
Willis (2002)	East Africa	Various brews	Land and resource access under regulation	Yes labour and ritual gatherings	Not specified	1
Sangster et al. (2019)	Kenya	Chang'aa, busaa, muratina	Unrecorded production; regulatory tension	Yes cultural and community events	Not specified	1
Charman & Govender (2020)	South Africa	Informal drinking venues	Contested use of informal urban space	Yes reclaiming shared space	Adaptive, informal self-regulation	1 & 3
Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021)	West Africa	Dolo, pito, tchapalo	Sorghum-crop diversion; cyanide hazard	Yes dolodrome/tchapalodrome networks	Manual degermination	1, 2 & 3
Hoffman et al. (2015)	Tanzania	Household fuel context	Firewood and charcoal demand	Not specified	Efficient-stove dissemination modelling	2
Njiti & Kemcha (2003)	Cameroon	Household fuel context	Fuelwood extraction	Not specified	Not specified	2
Byers et al. (2001)	Zimbabwe	Sacred-forest context	Deforestation from population and cotton pressure	Yes traditional leadership platform	Sacred-forest taboo protection	1 & 3
Muzingiri et al. (2025)	Zimbabwe	Traditional beer	Resource scarcity; commercial pressure	Yes mutual-aid networks	Cooperative labour and savings	2 & 3
Rogerson (2019)	South Africa	Sorghum beer	Commercial displacement of community production	Not specified	Eroding under formalisation	3

3.7 Data Analysis

Analysis followed the principles of thematic qualitative document analysis. Each selected study was first read repeatedly to build familiarity with its content. In a second stage, relevant information was coded according to recurring environmental and social concepts. Codes with similar meaning were then grouped into broader analytical themes corresponding to the three study objectives.

Unlike conventional thematic analysis, however, the final stage involved philosophical interpretation through Consolationism. Rather than stopping at identifying recurring environmental practices, the analysis asked why these practices emerge and what ethical significance they carry within the communities concerned. Empirical themes were accordingly interpreted using the five tenets outlined in Section 3.2.

Table 3

Coding framework used in the analysis.

Initial code	Analytical theme	Objective	Consolationist tenet
Community meetings	Environmental dialogue	1	Mood
Indigenous knowledge	Ecological governance	1	Rational spirituality
Firewood harvesting	Livelihood–ecosystem tension	2	Tragic teleology
Water and grain extraction	Resource dependence	2	Tragic teleology
Community conservation	Ethical adaptation	3	Consolation
Sacred forests / taboos	Indigenous regulation	3	Rational spirituality
Selective harvesting / processing	Sustainable adaptation	3	Creative struggle
Collective decision-making	Community environmental ethics	3	Consolation

3.8 Research Validity

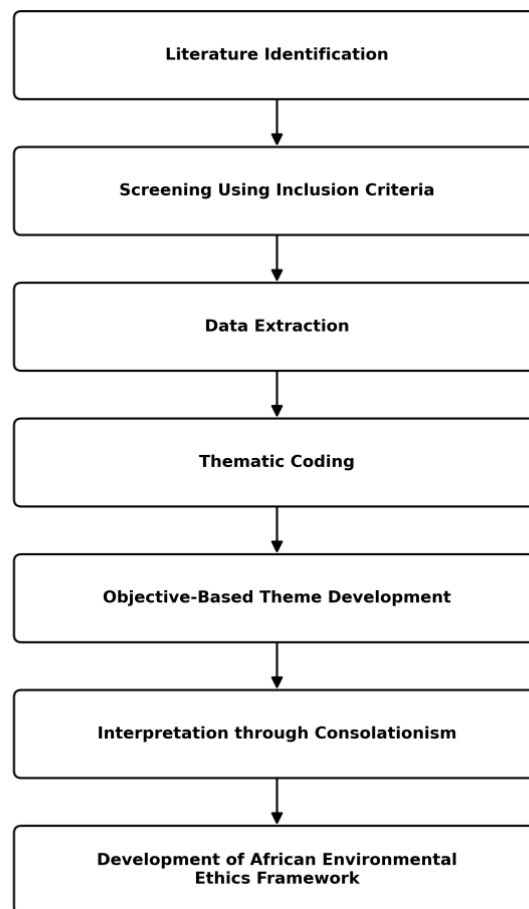
Several strategies were used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. First, studies were purposively selected from reputable peer-reviewed sources, so that the documentary evidence itself was reliable. Second, transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied consistently throughout the screening process. Third, thematic coding followed a structured framework linked directly to the study objectives and the selected tenets of Consolationism, thereby keeping the interpretation consistent across a wide range of source material. Finally, interpretations were grounded in empirical evidence from the reviewed studies, rather than in speculative philosophical reasoning, so that the theoretical analysis remained close to documented African experience throughout.

3.9 Analytical Framework

Figure 2 illustrates the overall analytical procedure adopted in this study. Literature identification leads into screening against the inclusion criteria, followed by data extraction and thematic coding. Codes are then developed into themes organised according to the study objectives. These empirically derived themes are subsequently interpreted through Consolationism, which functions as an explanatory philosophical lens rather than as a source of predetermined findings. The analysis therefore remains grounded in the evidence extracted from the reviewed studies while using Consolationism to illuminate the ethical meanings and implications of the identified patterns, culminating in the African environmental ethics framework presented in the Discussion.

Figure 2

Analytical (procedural) framework of the study.



The subsequent section presents findings according to the three research objectives. Rather than describing individual studies in sequence, evidence from the selected literature is synthesised into thematic categories and interpreted through the relevant tenets of Consolationism. This approach allows the study to move beyond a descriptive literature review toward a philosophical account of how African traditional alcohol spaces function as indigenous institutions for environmental dialogue, negotiate tragic ecological tensions, and generate communal environmental ethics.

4. Findings

4.1 Traditional Alcohol Spaces as Dialogical Environmental Institutions

Willis (2002) traces how East African brewing has, for over a century, been connected with labour, ritual, and community organisation, demonstrating that these spaces have historically functioned as more than sites of alcohol consumption. Similarly, Sangster et al. (2019) show that beverages such as chang'aa, busaa, muratina, and mnazi in Kenya are embedded within cultural events and community relationships rather than existing solely as informal alcohol markets. In West Africa, Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021) describe dolodromes and tchapalodrômes as social and economic networks where farmers, traders, transporters, and female brewers interact around traditional beer production. Research from Southern Africa further illustrates the institutional character of these spaces. Rogerson (2019)

demonstrates how sorghum beer production historically operated through localised community systems before undergoing transformations caused by regulation and commercialisation, while Muzingili et al. (2025) highlight the continuing importance of traditional beer brewing for rural livelihoods, mutual aid, and social support in Zimbabwe.

Together, these studies demonstrate that African traditional alcohol spaces function as socially embedded institutions shaped by economic exchange, cultural practice, gender relations, and community organisation. However, existing literature has generally examined these spaces through historical, sociological, economic, or public-health perspectives rather than asking how they operate as sites where communities negotiate environmental responsibilities. The present study extends this scholarship by interpreting these documented practices through the lens of Consolationism.

Table 4

Traditional alcohol spaces and their connection to dialogical environmental institutions

Source	Setting	Traditional alcohol	Evidence of dialogue	Environmental concern raised
Willis (2002)	East Africa (regional)	Various brews	Brewing tied to labour and ritual gatherings across generations	Land, labour, and resource access under changing regulation
Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021)	West Africa (Burkina Faso and region)	Dolo, pito, tchapalo	Dolodromes and tchapalodrômes bring together farmers, brewers, and traders daily	Sorghum crop allocation and grain scarcity
Sangster et al. (2019)	Kenya	Chang'aa, busaa, muratina, mnazi	Homebrew production and consumption embedded in community and cultural events	Regulatory tension and unrecorded production
Byers et al. (2001)	Zimbabwe (Shona communities)	Not alcohol-specific; sacred forest context	Shona religion functions as a platform for sociopolitical discussion, led by traditional leaders	Sacred-forest boundaries and land distribution

The communal character of these gatherings can also be interpreted through Agada's concept of mood, which emphasises the shared existential conditions that make collective reflection possible (Agada, 2021). In traditional alcohol spaces, the social atmosphere created through repeated interaction, shared consumption, and communal participation provides the relational context within which community concerns and obligations may be negotiated. Studies of African brewing traditions similarly demonstrate that these spaces are embedded in collective practices rather than isolated acts of consumption (Willis, 2002; Sawadogo-Lingani et al., 2021; Sangster et al., 2019).

4.2 Tragic Teleological Tensions in Traditional Brewing

A second, sharper pattern emerges once the material costs of brewing are examined. Traditional alcohol production depends on multiple ecological inputs, including agricultural crops, water, and energy sources required for processing. Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021) report that roughly three-quarters of Burkina Faso's sorghum harvest is diverted to dolo production to serve most of the population,

illustrating the tension among food security, livelihoods, and beverage production. Energy use represents another important environmental dimension. Traditional brewing processes often require substantial heat for activities such as cooking and preparation, and in rural contexts, this energy demand occurs within broader patterns of biomass dependence. Hoffmann et al. (2015) document increasing pressures on firewood and charcoal consumption in western Tanzania, while Njiti and Kemcha (2003) identify sustained fuelwood extraction in the Sudano-Sahelian region of Cameroon. Although these studies examine household biomass use more broadly rather than brewing alone, they illuminate the ecological context in which traditional brewing occurs communities rely on the same limited forest resources needed for everyday survival and beverage production. The environmental nexus, therefore, lies in the unavoidable relationship between livelihood practices, energy dependence, and ecosystem pressure. Muzingili et al. (2025) similarly show that rural Zimbabwean brewing remains economically vital while facing increasing pressures from resource scarcity.

Table 5

Connection between tragic teleological tensions and traditional brewing

Source	Livelihood benefit	Environmental cost	Tragic teleological tension
Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021)	Food and income security for the majority of the population	75% of national sorghum harvest diverted to brewing; toxic cyanide released during sprouting	Nutritional survival requires a process that is simultaneously resource-intensive and biochemically hazardous
Hoffmann et al. (2015)	Household cooking and brewing energy	Rising firewood and charcoal demand, projected to increase through 2030	Population growth and survival needs outpace sustainable forest yield
Njiti & Kemcha (2003)	Fuel for household and small-scale production	Sustained fuelwood extraction across the Sudano-Sahelian region	Everyday subsistence needs conflict with forest regeneration in a semi-arid zone
Muzingili et al. (2025)	Informal income, mutual aid, and food security for marginalised women	Resource scarcity and commercial pressure on brewing inputs	Economic necessity collides with a shrinking resource base

These findings support Agada's (2021) account of tragic teleology, which describes the condition in which human beings pursue legitimate aspirations while remaining constrained by the material world's limitations. In this sense, tragedy does not refer to deliberate wrongdoing but to situations in which competing goods cannot be fully achieved simultaneously. The communities examined in this study do not engage in traditional brewing with the intention of degrading their environments. Rather, they pursue essential social and economic objectives, including food security, income generation, cultural continuity, and communal solidarity. However, achieving these objectives requires dependence on ecological resources such as grain, water, and fuelwood, thereby creating unavoidable pressure on the very environments that sustain community life.

This tension is central to understanding traditional brewing through a Consolationist lens. A purely preservationist approach might evaluate these practices primarily according to whether they eliminate environmental harm. Consolationism, however, directs attention to how communities negotiate circumstances in which complete ecological and social harmony is unattainable. The ethical question is

therefore not whether brewing produces environmental costs—it clearly does—but how communities respond to those costs, reduce their effects, and maintain meaningful forms of social life despite ecological limitations.

The comparison with industrial brewing demonstrates that this tension is not unique to African traditional alcohol production or a consequence of inadequate local knowledge. Serviss et al. (2026), examining modern brewing systems, show that even technologically advanced breweries continue to face significant resource demands, including substantial water consumption and associated lifecycle emissions. Similarly, Hoalst-Pullen (2025) highlights the energetic limitations inherent in brewing processes, in which transforming raw materials into finished products necessarily entails resource expenditure and energy loss. These examples reveal that brewing, regardless of scale or technological sophistication, exists within ecological constraints.

Therefore, the environmental pressures associated with traditional African brewing should not be interpreted simply as evidence of unsustainable cultural practices. Instead, they represent the broader human condition identified by Agada: communities must continuously negotiate between competing necessities. Traditional brewing sustains livelihoods, cultural relationships, and social institutions, yet it simultaneously depends on finite ecological resources. The tragic element lies precisely in this unresolved tension the impossibility of securing every human and environmental good at the same time. Consolation emerges not from eliminating this conflict, but from the practical adaptations communities develop to make continued life possible within these limitations.

4.3 Consolatory Environmental Ethics

The third objective asks how communities respond to this tension, not whether they resolve it. Byers et al. (2001) provide the clearest evidence. In their Zimbabwean case study, forest loss in areas designated sacred was consistently lower than in non-sacred forests, even as population pressure and cotton farming drove overall deforestation sharply upward. Non-sacred patches were almost entirely cleared, while sacred forests, protected by taboo and overseen by traditional leaders, retained significantly more cover. Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021) report a comparable, more technical consolation: the manual removal of rootlets during sorghum malting, explained locally as a matter of taste, has been shown to cut toxic cyanide content by up to three-quarters, turning a hazardous plant into a food the FAO recognises as nutritionally significant. Muzingili et al. (2025) describe mutual-aid networks' labour-sharing, cooperative savings, and funeral contributions built around brewing that cushion households against poverty, even as they warn that this safety net is eroding under commercial pressure and the loss of intergenerational knowledge.

Rogerson (2019) supplies a fourth, cautionary case. Using archival sources and industry press, the study traces the sorghum-beer (*umqombothi*) industry in South Africa through two historical phases of commodification. In the first phase, colonial and municipal authorities took direct control of production through licensed municipal beer halls, a monopoly authorised under Natal legislative provision from 1908, which drew brewing out of household and community hands and into a regulated urban system. In the second phase, from the 1980s, the industry contracted sharply: political unrest, the stigma of association with apartheid-era municipal schemes, and aggressive marketing of clear malt beer by South African Breweries pushed sorghum beer out of the formal economy. Across both phases, Rogerson shows a steady shrinking of the spaces in which sorghum beer was produced, as the industry moved from small, localised, women-led brewing toward concentrated production for wider regional and national markets, and finally into open struggle over ownership and control.

Read through Consolationism, this is not a case of consolation succeeding but of consolation being displaced. The informal, women-led brewing economy that Rogerson documents functioned, before commodification, in much the same way as the mutual-aid networks described by Muzingili et al. (2025): a locally controlled, low-cost social and economic buffer. Municipal and later corporate control did not abolish sorghum beer, but it did strip communities of authorship over the practice, replacing an informal consolation with a formal, profit-driven system answerable to distant owners rather than to the community that once managed it. This matters to the paper's wider argument: consolations are not permanent achievements. Where Byers et al. (2001) and Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021) show consolation holding ecological and biochemical tragedy at bay, Rogerson (2019) shows what happens when the institutional conditions for consolation — local control, informal governance, women's authority over production are removed. The tragedy is not resolved by commodification; it simply loses its buffer.

Table 6

Implications for Consolatory environmental ethics

Source	Community response	Environmental / social practice	Outcome	Consolationist tenet
Byers et al. (2001)	Sacred-forest designation, enforced by traditional leaders	Restricted clearing and controlled use of designated woodlots	Markedly lower deforestation in sacred forest than in non-sacred forest	Consolation; rational spirituality
Rogerson (2019)	Municipal, then corporate, control of sorghum-beer production	Shift from localised, women-led household brewing to centralised commercial manufacture	Progressive shrinking of community-controlled production spaces; loss of local environment stewardship over the capitalist practice	Erosion of consolation
Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021)	Manual degermination during malting	Removal of rootlets before mashing	Up to 74% reduction in toxic cyanide; grain reclassified as a nutritious food	Creative struggle
Muzingili et al. (2025)	Mutual-aid networks among brewers	Labour-sharing, cooperative savings, funeral contributions	Household financial resilience, though weakening under commercial pressure	Complementarity; consolation
Colding & Folke (2001)	Resource and Habitat Taboos (comparative concept)	Informal, voluntary restrictions on species or habitat use	Non-costly compliance that can outperform formal state conservation	Rational spirituality

None of these responses eliminates environmental cost. Sacred forests still lose some cover; degermination reduces but does not remove cyanide; mutual aid softens but does not remove economic

precarity. This is precisely what Agada's notion of consolation predicts: not solutions, but adjustments that make continued, meaningful communal life possible within an imperfect world.

5. Discussion

5.1 Traditional Alcohol Spaces as Indigenous Environmental Public Spheres

The findings support treating traditional alcohol spaces as indigenous public spheres in the fullest sense. They are recurring, accessible, and socially legitimate venues where environmental concerns are raised without a formal agenda or state involvement. This matters because much environmental governance literature assumes that meaningful deliberation requires formal institutions, councils, committees, NGOs. The evidence reviewed here suggests otherwise. Charman and Govender (2020), writing on informal drinking venues in a Cape Town settlement, show that such spaces can adapt with striking agility to regulatory pressure while continuing to serve as sites where residents reclaim and organise shared social space. That resilience, read alongside Byers et al. (2001) and Sawadogo-Lingani et al. (2021), suggests the dialogical function of drinking spaces is not incidental to their environmental role. It is the mechanism through which that role operates.

5.2 Consolationism and the Ethics of Ecological Survival

Consolationism reframes environmental degradation associated with traditional brewing as not being the fault of the brewer. The wood cut, the water drawn, and the grain diverted are not necessarily evidence of ecological disregard; rather, they reflect the condition Agada describes through the concept of *Homo melancholicus*. This term refers to human beings as creatures who pursue ideals such as flourishing, harmony, and meaningful existence while remaining aware that their lives are constrained by suffering, scarcity, and material limitations (Agada, 2021). For Agada, this tension does not lead to resignation but motivates the creation of “consolations” practical and ethical responses that allow communities to continue meaningful life despite unresolved difficulties. Applied to traditional brewing, *Homo melancholicus* captures the position of communities that depend on ecological resources for livelihood, cultural continuity, and social cohesion while simultaneously confronting the environmental consequences of that dependence.

Comparative literature underlines the point. Jones (2018) shows that Western craft brewers also negotiate tensions between sustainability ideals and practical production realities, often resisting highly formalised approaches to environmental measurement in favour of community-based norms. Serviss et al. (2026) and Hoalst-Pullen (2025) further demonstrate that even industrial brewing systems, despite having greater technological capacity, remain dependent on substantial water, energy, and material inputs. If highly resourced global industries cannot completely eliminate these ecological tensions, it is unrealistic to expect resource-constrained rural communities to achieve perfect resolution. What communities can do and what the evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates is to develop adaptive practices that reduce harm and sustain collective life. This is precisely Agada's distinction between consolation and solution: consolation does not remove tragedy but provides practical ways of living meaningfully within unresolved conditions.

5.3 Toward an African Communitarian Environmental Ethics

The findings support a communitarian environmental ethic in which ecological responsibility emerges through collective relationships rather than primarily through individual action or formal regulatory systems. This ethic differs from approaches that locate environmental responsibility primarily in individual stewardship, private ownership, or market-based mechanisms to correct ecological harm. In the traditional alcohol spaces examined in this study, environmental practices are embedded within networks of social obligation, customary authority, shared labour, and collective memory. The environment is not treated simply as an external resource to be managed, but as part of the social world within which communities sustain livelihoods, identities, and relationships.

The evidence suggests that environmental governance within these spaces operates through informal institutions rather than through formal legal structures alone. Colding and Folke's (2001) concept of Resource and Habitat Taboos helps explain this mechanism. Such taboos function as socially embedded forms of regulation because compliance is maintained through shared beliefs, communal expectations, and moral obligations rather than external enforcement. Within African contexts, practices such as sacred-forest protection, restrictions on resource use, and customary rules regarding access to ecological resources illustrate how communities develop locally legitimate systems of conservation. These practices do not represent complete solutions to environmental degradation; rather, they constitute consolatory responses that enable communities to balance survival needs with ecological responsibilities.

Traditional alcohol spaces are particularly important within this framework because they serve as locations where knowledge, norms, and responsibilities are reproduced. Brewing practices are often transmitted across generations, and the social relationships surrounding production create opportunities to maintain collective understandings of resources and appropriate behaviour. Muzingili et al. (2025), for example, demonstrate that traditional beer brewing in rural Zimbabwe functions not only as an economic activity but also as a system of mutual support that involves labour-sharing, cooperative practices, and social assistance. These networks illustrate that environmental and social resilience are interconnected: the same institutions that support livelihoods can also sustain forms of ecological responsibility.

However, this communitarian environmental ethic is vulnerable when the social structures supporting it are weakened. Rogerson (2019) demonstrates that the formalisation and commercial reorganisation of South Africa's sorghum-beer industry progressively displaced older community-controlled systems of production. Similarly, Muzingili et al. (2025) identify pressures associated with commercialisation and declining intergenerational transmission of knowledge. These cases show that the effectiveness of indigenous environmental practices depends not only on the existence of ecological knowledge but also on the institutions through which that knowledge is maintained and applied.

Through a Consolationist interpretation, this communitarian environmental ethic should not be understood as a perfect ecological alternative. Communities do not eliminate environmental pressures associated with brewing; rather, they develop practical arrangements that make continued social life possible amid scarcity and uncertainty. The ethical significance lies in these ongoing negotiations between livelihood, culture, and conservation. Where traditional leadership, communal authority, and intergenerational knowledge remain strong, consolatory practices can continue to function as forms of environmental governance. Where these foundations erode, both the social safety networks and the environmental responsibilities embedded within them become increasingly fragile.

6. Conclusion

This paper sought to understand African traditional alcohol spaces not as marginal cultural curiosities but as working environmental institutions. Read through Ada Agada's *Consolationism*, and three things become clear. First, these spaces are genuine dialogical platforms where communities discuss and negotiate ecological concerns, forest access, water scarcity, and soil fertility, informally yet seriously. Second, the material production of traditional alcohol sits inside a tragic teleological tension: it sustains livelihoods precisely by consuming the resources on which long-term ecological health depends, a tension confirmed even in well-resourced industrial brewing elsewhere. Third, communities respond to this tension with imperfect, practical consolations, such as sacred forests, processing techniques, mutual aid, and informal taboos that reduce, without eliminating, ecological and social harm.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in showing that *Consolationism*, developed as a general philosophical system, has direct explanatory power over a concrete, understudied domain of African social life. The practical implication is equally direct. Policy and conservation interventions that ignore traditional alcohol spaces are ignoring a functioning, if imperfect, environmental governance system. Interventions are more likely to succeed if they work with these spaces, support traditional leadership, reinforce intergenerational knowledge transfer, and respect existing taboo systems rather than replace them with formal structures that lack local legitimacy.

Future research should extend this document-based analysis with primary fieldwork, particularly in West and Southern Africa, to test whether the dialogical and consolatory patterns identified here hold under direct observation. Comparative work with non-African drinking institutions, briefly touched on in this paper through India and the global craft-brewing industry, would also help clarify what, if anything, is distinctively African about the consolatory ethic described here.

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