

# AYÍKÁ

ISSN: 2664-3030 (Print)  
2664-3022 (Online)

**JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENT AND  
POLITICS IN AFRICA**

AYIKA: JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENT AND POLITICS IN AFRICA

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.69778/2664-3022/2026/8.1/EN>

### **Editorial Note**

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue.

Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

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## EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE: TRANSBOUNDARY CONSERVATION'S SUBJUGATION OF BASUBIYA ECO-MISSIOLOGY AND RIVERINE AGENCY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper elucidates an argumentative discussion of the transboundary conservation sanctioned by the Botswana and Namibia and its apophatic impact on BaSubiya Eco-Missiology. It places an emphasis on the geopolitical complexity of the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), in which the authors contend that the model of state policies emphasizes a "Fortress Conservation" that acts as a weaker form of neo-colonial exclusion. Based on the African philosophies of wholeness in the cosmos (vital force), the paper will show how the bi-national policies are interfering with the symbiotic relations between the BaSubiya and their water world. By transforming the usual subsistence efforts into a crime of poaching, the state apparatus weaponizes nature and in a systematic way of taking away the identity of BaSubiya as the God sent custodians of the earth. Employing desk research methodology with mixed method design, the article argues that this form of degradation of indigenous ecological care amounts to a theological crisis, which replaces holistic African Eco-Missiology with a western, dualistic preservationism that unnaturally separates humanity and nature. A scathing analysis of border defence laws and conservation laws shows that allegedly green policies can be defined as a kind of structural violence of the imago Dei in the Chobe area. Lastly, the authors suggest a decolonised Eco-Missiological approach that will reclaim that sovereign right of the BaSubiya to manage their ancestral riverine knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *Eco-Missiology, Transboundary Conservation, Fortress, BaSubiya, Green Violence, Imago Dei, Indigenous Agency, Chobe River, Environmental Theology,*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

#### ***The Geopolitics of Exclusion In The Chobe Enclave***

The Chobe River does not just serve to demarcate geopolitically the Botswana/Namibian border, but for the

BaSubiya people the river is actually an ontological artery, vital force, which gives life to the BaSubiya people and their spirituality. With the introduction of the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), this shaped space of ancestral belonging has been altered into a hard theatre of a

securitized and neoliberal exclusivity of the state. According to the current paper, the existing conservation paradigm at work in KAZA can be understood through the concept of epistemic violence introduced by Gayatri Spivak (2023) in his analysis whereby the indigenous systems of knowing, in this case, BaSubiya Eco - Missiology are taken to silence and marginalise through a systematic silencing and delegitimization of hegemonic Western conservationist discourse.

Introduction of the concept better described by William Adams (2004) and Brockington et al. (2008) in the Chobe region, namely, the imposition of the concept of Fortress Conservation, which implies the primacy of biodiversity over the indigenous human population, is a continuum of neo-colonialism. As Maano Ramutsindela (2014) points out, nature conservation in Southern Africa tends to populate the frontiers making ecological corridors into surveillant spaces that make local communities lose touch with their homeland, local culture. To the BaSubiya, notes Christian Williams (2013), whose history cannot have been imagined apart from the floodplains of these bi-national policies not only curtail the movement, but are also what Thomas Resane (2010) refers to as the theological crisis: they disrupted the symbiotic bond between the people and their aquatic environment.

This paper takes a critical, multidisciplinary paradigm that combines political ecology, post-colonial theory, and African Eco-Theology in an attempt to challenge the role of purportedly green policies as

structural violence. The article suggests that nature is a weapon of the state by examining how the subsistence practice has been criminalised, as well as, militarisation of the Chobe waterfront by Luregn Lenggenhager and Emmanuel Mogende (2025). This kind of weaponisation dominates over BaSubiya agency into being hopeless and irrelevant in terms of modern law.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### ***2.1. Research Design***

This paper espouse the method of critical case study that incorporates policy analysis, theological reflection and the missiology. Placing the BaSubiya at the locus of Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) propounds it with a strict interrogation of the operation of transboundary conservation policies as the apparatuses of epistemic and structural violence. As Nick Moore (2006), concurs critical case study is pertinent in this instance because it enables us to delve into a specific socio ecological situation and thus to shed more light on more generalized theoretical issues like epistemic violence, coloniality and eco theology.

The study is concomitantly established within a multidisciplinary approach that hinges on the political ecology, African eco -theology and decolonial theory. This participatory methodology allows the query to go beyond descriptive analysis and progress to an ideological critique of the existing conservation paradigms, especially, the ideologies underlying Fortress Conservation. In this perspective, the BaSubiya eco-missiological practices are placed in an

overarching framework of the *missio Dei*, thus highlighting the theological implications of the environmental exclusion Kunhiyop (2019; Daniel et al. (2021).

## **2.2.Data Collection Method: Document Analysis.**

This study implores the document analysis as the fundamental approach to synthesize information about the BaSubiya. Document analysis, notes Glen Bowen (2009) is simply a methodical examination and judicious interpretation of surviving textual information, it offers an outlet through which significant meanings can be derived, theoretical approaches to divine and empirical data can be compiled. This approach was chosen as a result of the research paradigm being theory-oriented and policy-oriented as it requires us to consult archival sources, policy laws, and literature on ethnography and theology than to perform empirical work.

Document analysis would be desirable particularly where the communities like the BaSubiya have already been widely documented in scholarly, historical and policy writing. In Barbara Bassot's (2022) view it allows researchers to critically question the ways in which these texts formulate the indigenous knowledge, indigenous identity and ecological practices. Moreover, it fosters to conduct a comparative and interdisciplinary synthesis of sources, which is vital to the analysis of epistemic violence inherent in conservation discourse.

## **2.3.Data Sources**

This study utilizes multilayered, interdisciplinary, and critically edited data in facet to include the epistemological, theological, and socio-political multifacetedness of the BaSubiya in the KAZA. Since this study aims not only as a theoretical project, but also as a policy commentary, the data collection involves more than just a descriptive account of information to a critical reconstitution of knowledge systems, especially those that remain marginalised in the mainstream discourse of conservation.

### **2.3.1. Primary Policy Documents**

Central to the corpus of data are primary policy and legislative documents dealing with transboundary conservation leadership in Southern Africa. These include KAZA agreements, national conservation policies of Botswana, Namibia, and legislative policies that govern the wildlife management, protected areas, and access to the natural resource by the communities. These documents cannot be ignored because it is the official voice of the state and the power of the institutions, which shows how conservation is conceptualised, legitimised and operationalised Jones (2008); Linell et al. (2019).

These policy texts are never conceived as being neutral devices but as discursive artefacts full of ideological presumptions. They encode a given account of nature that is often based on some Western scientific rationality and preservationist paradigm, which implicitly or explicitly overlooks indigenous ecological knowledge systems. Therefore, observed Imbwa et al. (2023) through the interpretation

of these texts, the paper questions the formation of such legal language categories as the protected areas, poaching, and resource use, and further redefines indigenous livelihoods in juridical and often criminalised terms. Against this background, policy documents can serve as both regulatory frameworks and control mechanisms of epistemic authority and determine what is deemed as legitimate knowledge and practice.

### **2.3.2. *Secondary Academic and Historical Sources***

In addition to the policy analysis, there is a significant use of secondary academic literature, mainly ethnographic, historical, and sociological writing on the BaSubiya. The materials document BaSubiya lifeworld through detailed descriptions of their river-based identity, social organization, food acquisition methods and cultural traditions. Primarily, historic records of the beginnings and socio-political relationships of the BaSubiya can be found in the works of Lenggenhager and Mogende (2025), and Chris Maritz (1996), whereas the analysis of linguistic, symbolic and cultural representations, which are disguised in day-to-day practices, can be found in the article of Ndana et al. (2016).

It is a body of literature with which one may rebuild what can be referred to as the subjugated knowledge of the BaSubiya epistemologies that have historically been marginalized or discredited in the main academic and policy development. As an example, the study on riverine livelihoods and fisheries by Inge Tvedteen (2002) shows that BaSubiya ecological

practices cannot be arbitrary and exploitative since they involve complex systems of indigenous regulation, seasonality, and community morality. These results disprove the existing conservation discourse that presents local people as a danger to the biodiversity.

In addition, these sources accommodate a diachronic analysis by which the relationships of BaSubiya with land and water have changed over the years, especially the years of colonial and postcolonial rule. Understanding the historical background of struggles against land dispossession and knowledge-based discrimination helps to explain current conservation policies which protect nature since these practices have continued throughout time.

### **2.3.3. *Theological and Missiological Literature***

It is quite remarkable that one of the peculiarities of the given research is a close interaction with theological and missiological literature; the latter is thoroughly used to interpret BaSubiya cosmology in the context of African eco-theology. Scholarly work of Waje Kunhiyop (2019) and Tonghou Ngong (2010) provide a valuable critical understanding of how the African Christian conceptualization of creation, relationality, and the latest connection of life address theoretical interpretations of how theological viewpoints can be aligned with the BaSubiya lifestyles. Specifically, these sources emphasize the vision of the community of the river as an emblem of divinity and source of life and not just as a natural resource, and this places the

river in a paradigm of divine generosity and ecological purity.

Moreover, the work of Daniel et al. (2021) and Chilongozi (2020) append to an inchoate debate about eco-missiology, which foregrounds the necessity to entail ecological stewardship in the church mission. Utilizing this literature, the study will situate the BaSubiya ecological practices in the broader substantive of *missio Dei*, thus re-energizing the meaning of indigenous involvement with the environment as theologically fundamental instead of primitive or utilitarian.

#### ***2.4.Source Selection and Analysis***

Palinkas et al. (2002) described purposive sampling as the intentional selection of information-rich instances in order to allocate scarce resources effectively as part of the qualitative inquiry. As a result, the authors used purposive sampling approach, where relevance, credibility and interdisciplinarity are of primary concern. The articles, archives, policy reports, and theological treatises peer-reviewed were included to build a complete and comprehensive set of data. Preference was made on sources that addressed directly the BaSubiya, transboundary conservation, indigenous knowledge systems, and African eco-theology.

The analytical process set out to follow two complementary strategies. Firstly, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) was put into action to question the manner in which conservation laws and academic discourse make and authorize indigenous knowledge and practices. Bowen (2009) observes that CDA

ameliorates to reveal how language and institutional rhetoric marginalizes other epistemologies and unfreezes power regimes. CDA was useful in this inquiry to discover affordances through which BaSubiya ecological practices are reshaped as illegal or irrational through regulatory pathways.

Secondly, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns that were immediate in the corpus. The research used systematic encoding methods to examine the riverine ontology themes and the ecological stewardship practices and the criminalization of subsistence activities and the theological rupture. This analytical two-pronged approach, in line with Bassot (2022), allowed assisting in the conceptual reorientation in the more descriptive approach to the interpretation and critical evaluation, which reveals epistemic hierarchies manifested in the conservation discourse and predetermines indigenous eco-missiological views.

#### ***2.5.Positionality and Researcher: Community Relationship***

The propinquity of the authors to the BaSubiya community is also achieved through contextual interaction and not the traditional intensive ethnography. By conducting their research in Kazungula and Kasane, the researchers interrelated with the BaSubiya groups in Botswana and Namibia, and thus enabled them to recognize the transcriptura nature of the community and they dissuade its familial, cultural and spiritual ties through national boundaries.

The presented interactions of the authors revealed that there has been a

common narrative of dispossession and frustrations by the field especially the failure of the BaSubiya to continue their livelihoods through ancestral riverine resources that falls under the KAZA policy regimes. Though the authors are not BaSubiya, the engagement in this practice came up with critical experiential understanding into the living conditions of the imposed conservation restrictions.

This positionality is cognizant of both proximity and weakness: proximity as manifested in relational work and limitation as a lack of long ethnographic work. Based on this, the research is reflexive in nature since it acknowledges the need to present the views of BaSubiya with epistemic humility and critical sensitivity.

## ***2.6.Validation of Interpretations***

Triangulation, theoretical grounding, and contextual coherence were the means to validate the interpretations of the BaSubiya theology and worldview. Using document analysis as a major method in the research, the authors made the study valid through cross referencing of various types of sources such as ethnographic reports, historical analysis and theological materials. This type of triangulation, according to Bowen (2009) enhances interpretive reliability by eliminating overreliance on one narrative or disciplinary approach.

On the one hand, there are ethnographic and historical sources, which provided the initial information about BaSubiya cosmology, especially that they are the people of the river and that they depend on aquatic ecosystems (Maritz 1996; Ndana et al. 2016). Such stories

continually reaffirm the importance of river in the formation of social organization, spirituality and ways of livelihood.

Secondly, theological justification was done by contextualizing BaSubiya beliefs to the wider theological domains of Africans Christianity. The contributors to this include African theology with its relational ontology, interconnection and sacredness of creation- as notions that are reminiscent of BaSubiya's eco-missiological practices (Kunhiyop 2019; Ngong 2010). The connection between BaSubiya cosmology and the wider theological tradition demonstrates that BaSubiya cosmology exists beyond its cultural boundaries.

Thirdly, policy and environmental literature had been utilized to put into perspective how conservation frameworks have an effect on indigenous practices. The KAZA Initiative and transboundary governance studies illustrate the conflicts between conservation goals and local livelihoods and, thus, validate the arguments of the study on the epistemic and structural violence (Imbwae et al. 2023; Linell et al. 2019).

Lastly, theoretical consistency improved on interpretive validity. Adaptations like epistemic violence, coloniality and eco allogenic defined the entire analysis in a systematic manner so that the interpretations did not become arbitrary and instead were based in the pre-existing scholarly frames. This integrative validation method will ensure that the conclusions of the study are empirically informed and are also theoretical.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AND GREEN MILITARIZATION**

#### **3.1. *The Architecture of Epistemic Violence***

Epistemic violence as defined by Spivak (2023) and expanded by Mignolo (2011) refers to the methodological suppression, depreciation, and annihilation of non-Western epistemologies by the hegemonic modes of knowledge. Epistemic violence does not just fail to recognize other epistemological approaches, it actively makes them irrational, illegible or inferior in institutions and policy. In the context of the Kavango–Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), epistemic violence is operationalized through the routine dismissal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) related to riverine management and ecological stewardship. Frantz *et al.*, (2025) observe that Western conservation science, which is based on Cartesian dualisms where “man” is distinguished as independent of a “nature”, is becoming the only relevant and reasonable model of governing the environment. The ecological knowledge of Jessica Milgroom and Priscilla Claeys (2025) in this paradigm is characterized very violently, both technically and quantitatively and externally validated, and local epistemologies are not involved in decision making processes. Accordingly, relative to them, BaSubiya cosmologies, which approach to the river as an individual that is considered to be alive and

spiritually animate and thus requires some kind of care, both as a result, are perceived as domain of superstition, folklore, or even cultural belief and are often dismissed altogether.

The concept of this dynamic by Mignolo (2011) can be called as the darker face of Western modernity, or the survival of colonial logic that continues despite the end of the formal colonial domination. This coloniality can be observed in the conservation activities that assume the local communities are just deaf and dumb and irresponsible towards the environment and their lack of ability to handle the environment in a rational manner. As a result, contends Ross et al. (2016) authority over land, water, and wildlife is transferred to external experts, technocrats, and institutions, while indigenous communities are positioned as objects of management rather than epistemic subjects. This process results in situations that substantially desolate indigenous peoples of their intellectual credibility, moral agency and their right to determine their own environmental destinies.

#### **3.2. *Green Violence and the Militarization of Nature***

This epistemic hegemony does not exist in an abstract or discursive way, but it is afforded materializing via physical force. Other theorists, including Bram Büscher and Maano Ramutsindela (2016) describe such a dynamic as a type of “green violence”, meaning coercion, in which moral reasons about the necessity to protect the environment are used to justify a form of punitive (and even at times ferocious) executed by the state. Conservation with violence has become an instrument of

normalising and making ethically invisible violence in the guise of preserving biodiversity as it happens to be the case with Ramutsindela *et al.*, (2022). In the contemporary crusade to safeguard the so-called “peace parks” of Southern Africa, a de facto war has been declared against those whose livelihoods, identities, and survival are historically entangled with these landscapes. Subsistence hunters, fishers, and riverine communities inclusive of BaSubiya, are reconstituted as threats to nature, rather than as custodians of complex ecological knowledge systems.

Elizabeth Lunstrum (2014) elaborates on this criticism by pointing at the so-called phenomenon of green militarisation where the conservation spaces are gradually established through the terms of military logics, technologies, and imaginaries. The anti-poaching forces embark on combat conditioning, high calibre firearms and air patrol, and counter-insurgency strategies hence eroding the line between environmental protection and military action. The daily presence of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) and the Namibian security patrols in the Chobe region makes the river to be no longer a common ecological sustenance source, but a militarised borderland and warzone. The so-called shoot to kill (policies), which are widely implicitly approved of or implicitly condoned by conservation discourse, is an example of what Ramutsindela *et al.*, (2022) call the violence of conservation.

Such militarised conservation regime renders a state of exception whereby the legal and moral rights to the BaSubiya are *Lexus Post Positivum* suspended to the alleged rights of the elephants and

rhinos. These practices reveal a very fundamental ethical infraction at the core of the conservation movement worldwide, where the non-human life has been prioritized at the expense of the expendable human lives.

#### **4. THE BASUBIYA AND THE RIVER: AN ONTOLOGICAL SYMBIOSIS**

##### **4.1. *The River as Vital Force***

To even begin to fathom the excessive violence raised by KAZA conservation policies, they first must comprehend BaSubiya worldview within the context of its complete cultural, theological, and cosmological concept. As Williams (2013) note, people who refer to themselves as the BaSubiya refer to themselves as “*People of the River*”, a name, significantly, that implies more than geographical proximity or economic interdependence. The river is the major axis of BaSubiya life that determines the identity and social structure, modes of livelihood, and spiritual imaginative. Thus according to Nchindo Mbukusa (2015), life among the BaSubiya is structured around the seasonal rhythms of the Chobe and Zambezi rivers, whose annual flooding patterns determine patterns of movement, settlement, fishing, cultivation, and ritual observance. This connection to the river is quite utilitarian and materialistic contrary to the presumptions of mainstream conservation discourses.

According to Kaoma (2015), Neeta (2016), and the rest of the African theologians, water is perceived as a divine channel of divinity and life, which is the fundamental power that unites God, ancestors, the living

community, and future generations. It embodies what many African cosmologies describe as *vital force* the dynamic life-energy that flows between God, the ancestors, the living community, and generations yet unborn. Bosire *et al.* (2022) argue that permanence, fertility, healing and moral order are all critical to water, which connects the world of the visible and the world of the invisible. The river therefore cannot be seen as an object that is dead, outside, but as a part of the sacred economy of existence, a participant in life.

Consequently, the BaSubiya do not conceive of the river as a “natural resource” to be extracted, commodified, or managed through technocratic regimes, nor as a “wilderness” to be cordoned off for conservation elites and tourist imaginaries. Lenggenhager and Mogende (2025) prize that regarding the river, it is viewed as a feast, a place of generosity, sustenance, and mutual abundance, and at the same time, a temple, a place of divine presence and of familiarization with its ancestors. Riverine spaces are characterized by rituals of thanksgiving, mourning, initiating and healing, which strengthen the fact that the river is not a private or state-owned property, but an object of sacred commons.

Nande Neeta (2016) also notes that the theology of water determines the access to a river as a divine and ethical right and not a negotiable privilege in space of the Zambezi basin. The deprivation of societies of water interferes with cosmic order, breaks social order and separates the intergenerational covenant between ancestors of the present and the future. It is also on this

background that KAZA policies of movement restriction, criminalization of subsistence, and the creation of closed riverine spaces possess are not only the enactment of violence of administration and ecological violence but of a radical theological rapture and missiological cataclysm. Furthermore, according to Mason *et al.*, (2018), such policies introduce alien ontology that desacralizes the river and erases the indigenous epistemologies and makes the spiritual basis of the BaSubiya life effete.

The detailed interpretation of this worldview is hence necessary in understanding the extent of the dispossession and moral severity of the conservation induced violence in Zambezi-Chobe region.

#### **4.2. Indigenous Agency and Stewardship**

The BaSubiya have historically embodied a form of what may be described as Eco-Missiology long before the concept emerged within academic and theological discourse. Within their observations, notes Cooper *et al.*, (2016), their daily activities were not just economic activities; they were very moral and spiritual activities towards the environment. Old methods of fishing, reed cutting, and farming on the floodplains were governed by complex systems of taboos, seasonal and totemic associations which acted as indigenous systems of control. Gamage *et al.*, (2023) believe that these systems allowed avoiding overexploitation, securing the breeding cycle, and the intergenerational sustainability of these systems. We therefore argue that ecological restraint was not imposed in the outer world but developed within

the community using communal ethics, cosmology, and ritual responsibility. Despite the realization of nature as an animate companion instead of a dead resource, the humanity inhabiting earth could not exist without taking care of the environment.

The connection of the BaSubiya and the riverine environment can be perceived as a missional identity of the maintenance of life and its blossoming. In this meaning, Vincent Brennan (2023) assigns mission not to the missionary and doctrine mission, but rather to practices of caring, stewardship, and equilibrium. For Brennan, the holistic conservation of the earth circumscribing land, water, animals, and human communities is entrenched within cultural identity and social organisation. Such indigenous *Eco-Missional* phenomenal impugnments modern epistemological stance that ecological ethics are neoteric or externally derived, revealing instead a long-standing African paradigm of environmental guardianship.

Nevertheless, contemporary conservation strategies as they are applied in Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) do not give due attention to this historical heritage of sustainable coexistence. The state-established conservation regimes, Lenggenhager and Mogende (2025) argue, render a model historically fluid, dynamic, heterogeneous in territory, and compromising the ecological rationality of existence of the BaSubiya. It is interesting to note that rivers, floodplains, and wetlands lack fixed cartographic boundaries, whereas the logic of KAZA control presupposes

exactly the opposite rigidity. Thus, it invalidates what Abbott *et al.*, (2007) terms “riverine agency” the capability of river-dependent communities to elucidate, reciprocate, and ethically marshal the rhythms of aquatic ecosystems.

The expert knowledge of the BaSubiya in floods, fish migrations with poised seasonal alternation of ecological diversity is systematised peripheralized. Massarella et al. (2023) show that such a system is not only ecologically counterproductive but also epistemically violent due to the bureaucratic quotas and technocratic model of conservation with imposed no-go zones on them. More so, according to Rainer Bruchmann (2000), these policies are an eradication of the historical presence of the BaSubiya on the landscape. The process of indigenising a person by excluding the indigenous custodians in decision-making processes indefinitely reorganizes them into conservation hazards as opposed to conservation agents. As a result, what is introduced as environmental protection is introduced as a kind of cultural displacement machine which cuts off the tie of the peoples to land, memory and identity. In this regard, the regulatory framework used by KAZA can be deemed as not only a demonstration of a bad environmental management, but also a blatant disregard of the indigenous *Eco-Missiological* history

## 5. FORTRESS CONSERVATION: THE NEOCOLONIAL ENCLOSURE

### 5.1. *The Myth of the “Pristine” Wilderness*

The leading paradigm of “*Fortress Conservation*”, which was highly criticised by Bill Adams (2013) is based on the highly Western environmental ontology the myth that nature is only truly such when left to itself (without human action). For Adams, this dualistic perspective, which conceptually separates humanity from the wilderness, was historically imported from the American “Yellowstone model” of National Parks. In the African context, our view thereof is that this model acts as a mechanism of dispossession by requiring the systematic eviction of indigenous residents to create a pristine, uninhabited landscape that serves as a playground for the leisure of international tourists. It is not only ecological domination, but a highly ideological one that places the ancestral territories of the local peoples under the status of exclusionary zones where the presence of indigenous peoples are criminalized in the name of protection.

Furthermore, this conservation model has no stand-alone functions, it is strictly connected with the processes of the world market. According to Brockington *et al.* (2008), the contemporary conservation is so much intertwined with capitalism that the biodiversity is a consumable spectacle. In this neoliberal paradigm, the environment has been appreciated as an ability to generate capital but not with regard to its natural or spiritual significance to the local residents.

Contrarily, commodification of the Chobe fortress conservation is quite observable, whereby the scene has been rearranged to a commercialized area to conduct high-end photographic safaris. In this context, the place is packaged as the tourist gaze, and it brings a lot of income to the state and also the foreign tour operators. Conversely, as noted by Joseph Mbaiwa (2011), the local communities, who traditionally act as custodians of these riparian systems are displaced to the periphery and they are deprived of the economic rewards of the tourism industry besides being physically displaced of their riverine heritage.

The socio-politic consequences of such omission are vehement. The Botswana Gazette (2023), touches on the heart of the matter by inquiring, Who are the beneficiaries of the wildlife corridors with a pungent interrogative, Who benefits? The fact on the ground is that the local communities seldom get the benefits. Although transboundary projects like Kavango -Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) are commercially sold as progressive observed Ramutsindela (2014), community-based projects, the reality on the ground resembles neo-colonial exclusion incidents. Rather than leading to true connectivity on both sides; wildlife and people, these corridors can often reinforce the state grasp on far-off regions and place the concept of moving wildlife, rather than lives of BaSubiya and other local populations, first.

Lastly, the governance systems that were developed to curb these inequalities have not been quite enough. According to Jones (1999) and Galvin *et al.*, (2018), despite its strong

and seemingly democratic concept Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), in reality, continues to fail to transfer the real power to the grassroots. The decentralization of decision-making to locals, according to these scholars, tends to leave the locals having centralized control, and communities being passive recipients of small cash transfers instead of striving to become custodians of their land. Finally, the dominant conservation architecture practices a colonial structure of knowledge where local epistemic agents are subordinate to the demands of international conservation NGO and the tourist economy.

## **5.2. The Criminalization of Subsistence**

The Chobe Enclave is home to the most immediate and extreme depiction of epistemic violence, i.e. the reorganization of native survival measures as crimes. Manga Fombad and Nico Steytler (2024) argue that this change is not only a legal change of direction, but a total confrontation of ontological levels at which the state apparatus enlists legal tools to reform the identity of the BaSubiya people. As an example, when a BaSubiya fisherman throws his net into ancient waters that have been controlled by his family over the centuries, he risks being declared a poacher after the name of that region being declared a conservation zone, which generates a deep erase of epistemic nature. Such a language change is merely a powerful tool of narration, devoid of cultural, spiritual, and subsistence legitimacy to the act of fishing. Nixon (2011) continues to claim that this reframing through language is hardly innocent, it

makes the poor either unseen, or villainous consequently eliminating the historical service they have provided to stewardship and abetting models of exclusionary management. Therefore, by controlling the language, the state controls the reality, determining who belongs in the landscape and who is an intruder.

Furthermore, Duffy *et al.*, (2019) the state apparatus utilizes the label of “poacher” to legitimise the deployment of extreme, militarised force against civilian populations. This propound a dangerous rhetorical climate whereby the human-environmental interactions are simplified down to a simple friend-enemy dichotomy. Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016) caution that the escalating war over peace parks has created a moral dichotomy in which the state and conservation organizations are positioning themselves as ideal saviours of our natural world, and the locals are demonised as adversaries of nature. Through this dualistic justification shoot-to-kill and strong-arm policing arise where the worth of wildlife is given a higher priority than the lives of Black Indigenous people. Thus, the BaSubiya are not only controlled; they are securitised and perceived by a criminalist prism and not by rights-based approach.

This act of criminalisation is not just limited to game hunting, it spans right to the simple and the routine of life. These activities are outlined by Lenggenhager and Mogende (2025) which include reed gathering (roofing), wild fruit harvesting and sourcing of river water to rear cattle; all these activities form the structure of BaSubiya domestic economy. According to a correspondent of

Mmegi (2018), the process itself turns the normal daily practices into a set of what is referred to as acts of illegitimacy and the resulting ontological insecurity is that the people enjoy their stay at their dwellings in fear of being arrested just because they are living in their lawful surroundings. Such a systematic denudement of rights is what Duffy et al. (2019) refer to as a notion of green territoriality, a process that empowers states and sovereignty over their periphery at the cost of the human dignity. By claiming global environmental protection, the state expands its sovereignty and turns the Chobe River into a spectacle of exclusion so that it can act as a way of banishing the BaSubiya out of the ecosystem that forms its structure.

## 6. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION: THE RUPTURE OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

### 6.1. *The Ecological Sin of Separation*

The forced separation of the BaSubiya people from the Chobe River constitutes a profound theological crisis, in which Ernst Conradie (2013) clearly articulates as an “ecological sin”. In Conradie’s view this concept moves beyond the secular understanding of environmental mismanagement to identify a spiritual rupture; it is a breach of the covenantal relationship between humanity, the Creator, and the created order. On the contrary, Ross *et al.*, (2016) further notes that by systematically severing the historical and spiritual connection between the indigenous people and their ancestral land, the state imposes a rigid dualism that creates a dichotomy between humanity and nature. This

dichotomy is essentially foreign to African Christian theology that has traditionally seen the cosmos as an interdependent system of living and not a set of separated resources that need management or being fenced off.

In addressing this rupture, Phemelo Marumo (2016) advocates for a revitalised ecological future that is predicated on a robust dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR). This dialogue is essential because it challenges the Westernised, anthropocentric interpretation of dominion that has often justified the exploitation or exclusion of nature. Marumo goes to argue, further, that the *imago Dei* cannot be restricted to some solitary, human bound definition; the Image of God is inexplicably relational, that is, existing in *koinonia* (fellowship) with all of creation. The river in this worldview is more than an object of preservation; it is an object of communion; BaSubiya identity cannot exist out of the riverine ecosystem and the two cannot be separated spiritually.

Nevertheless, by place literal fences around its boundaries, setting up patrols, updating borders by militarising them, the state goes beyond limiting movement; as Marumo (2019) observes, these attempts obstruct this sacred *koinonia* in a violent way. Marumo would make out of this a theological proposition, that the Body of Christ in the Chobe area is not just based on the human family flock assembled in a church building, but on the river and fish, the vegetation and humans, as a single biotic community. Therefore, to destroy one of these components of this society by depriving the inhabitants with access to the river

is to attack the whole universe. This is an attack on the cosmic Christ who is all-pervasive.

Supervenient, there is a structural violence of current conservation policies which are based on the need to preserve nature in its purity, without any human intrusion into it. This fortress conservation paradigm ignores agency of the BaSubiya and sacrifices sacramental aspect to their association with the river Chobe. The constant violation of the wholeness of life by the state which enforces limits that turn the people into strangers in their own land destroys the very *koinonia* on which African eco -theology endeavours to construct.

### **6.2.The Loss of Missiological Vocation**

As Mbukusa (2015) observed, the BaSubiya have an ontological vision of the world that goes beyond the traditional approach of managing the environment since they view their existence as being inseparable to the Chobe River and its floodplains. In the view of Mbukusa, the community does not see itself as someone who just watches nature going on but instead, they see themselves as earth-keepers ordained by God; the duty of looking after the environment becomes a sacrament. Consequently, their administration of the land is understood as a command of God, which could not be separated with their spirituality. Simangalisso Kumalo (2020) contrarily, concludes that in the case where a transboundary conservation legislation involves the state taking of these ancestral lands and waters through legalization, the community loses not just access to the resources but also

experiences a spiritual displacement. Therefore, such estoppel against the land is as though an acquiescence against the divine that is thought to lodge in the riverine landscape making their religious practice incomplete.

The necessity to make a paradigm shift in the missiological thinking is highlighted by this tension. Neil Darragh (2010) criticizes the traditional missionary models, citing such notions as hazardous missions and changing paradigms, and argues that missionaries today have to struggle with ecological realities in order to be relevant. In this respect, the perilousness of mission is to challenge the political and legal conservation apparatus, de-franchising segment of indigenous people. In the case of the BaSubiya, water is not just a specific substance that belongs within a bloc of hydrology, but rather a place of divine speech; as a result, the river plea invoked by Tshepang Basupi (2024) is not a meaningless metaphor of idleness, but on the contrary, the problem of a real pneumatical invite. This summons acts as a missionary invitation that makes the subjects obedient. To ignore the river is to ignore the voice of God, yet state-imposed conservation forbids them from answering this call.

In Adams' (2013) view, the root of this conflict lies in the epistemic violence of the "Fortress" conservation model, which imposes a "Western, dualistic preservationism". Evidentially, this model operates on a Cartesian dichotomy that views nature as a pristine wilderness that must be protected from human interference, thereby telling the BaSubiya that they are separate from, and dangerous to, nature. Thus, such external imposition creates a jarring contradiction to the

indigenous theology of the region. Kaoma (2017) proposes African eco theology as based on the idea of the cosmic wholeness where the creator, the creation and the human species are seen as participants of a continuous, mutually maintaining web of being. This inherent unity is weakened by the Fortress model which caused separation by physical means and punishment.

Moreover, Basupi (2024) argues that such an upheaval creates a major theological crisis such that they are no longer close to the very source of their liberation: the river. Accordant with Basupi, therefore, our construal is that if the river is the sanctuary where the BaSubiya encounter the divine, then barring access to the river effectively excommunicates them from their own spirituality. The conservation efforts, though perhaps well-intentioned in a Western paradigm, function as a barrier to the BaSubiya's salvation history, stripping them of their agency and creating a missiological void that the church is currently struggling to fill.

## 7. TOWARDS A DECOLONIZED ECO-MISSIOLOGY

### 7.1. Reclaiming Indigenous Agency

In order to successfully address the widespread epistemic violence of existing transboundary conservation these two-fold responses are necessary: abandon rhetoric and instead suggest an alternative constructive, restorative form: a decolonized Oiko-missiology paradigm. Lukwikilu Mangayi (2023) asserts that Oiko-missiology is an ecological aspect of mission and expands traditional missiology to include the wellbeing of all the

occupants of the earth, both human and non-human; in the conceptual meaning of the *oikos* (*household* or *home* in Greek). It calls for mission and missiology to sustain the whole web of life on earth, fostering solidarity, interdependence, and communal sustainability, thereby reimagining mission praxis as integral to God's mission (*missio Dei*) in the context of the global ecological crisis.

Therefore, the decolonized Oiko-missiology proposes framework which serves as a radical departure from the top-down management styles that have historically marginalized indigenous populations. It begins by non-negotiating the sovereign rights of the BaSubiya people to handle, interpret and regulate their ancestral heritage. This does not just touch on ownership of land but intellectual/spiritual sovereignty. As the UNESCO (2025) report on *The Indigenous Experience of Water in Africa* asserts, acknowledging "riverine agency is a fundamental human right". It means that depriving the river of agency and by extension the BaSubiya of a relational agency to the river would be a defiance of fundamental human rights, which will break the ontological connection between the people and their surroundings.

In this sense, therefore, Mignolo (2011) notes that the decolonization process requires the methodological shift, which is called *epistemic disobedience*. He claims that knowledge decolonization needs an intentional severing of the so-called rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality, which place Western epistemology in the role of the universal truth. *Epistemic disobedience* as applied to the Chobe

context means that conservation policies should undergo re-write not only in a single language of western science, but in a strong, egalitarian conversation that accommodates indigenous spirituals. This method is opposed to silencing of local systems of knowledge.

Against this background, the Abitana Hachamba (2018) argues that the policy formulation has to directly interact with the Theology of Water. According to Hachamba, one should not commodify water and turn it into a chemical compound ( $H_2O$ ) to keep it intact to be exploited in the future, but water is an element of the Divine that orientates the communication between the living people, ancestors and the Divine. In this way, a decolonized paradigm incorporates this theology and makes the spiritual wellbeing of the river constantly tied to its *ecological* welfare.

This ideological translocation should be supported with real changes in the governance systems. The BaSubiya chieftaincy as Keoreng (2018) notes and religious leaders must be recognized not merely as “stakeholders” a neoliberal term that dilutes their authority by placing them on par with tourists, Non-Government Organizations, and foreign investors but as the “primary custodians of the Chobe”. Keoreng argues that custodianship implies a pre-colonial, ancestral mandate that supersedes modern statutory limitations. By restoring the BaSubiya to this position of primary custodianship, the management of the Chobe transforms from a bureaucratic exercise in resource restriction into a sacred duty of eco-missiological care, thereby dismantling the structures of epistemic violence.

## 7.2.From Fortress to Fellowship

The vocation of the church can be re-conceptualised, based on the theology of *koinonia*, as is the argument of both Phemelo Marumo (2019) and Jan De Beer (2019), but this time in terms of a participatory communion, rather than institutional advocacy towards the *imago Dei*. In this paradigm, the church is an example of reconciliatory community wherein humanity, creation, and God are again restored to relationship harmony. Thus, however, the church has become an agent of transformation in the contentious transboundary conservation landscapes by promoting inclusive ecological stewardship based on relational justice as opposed to the exclusionary one. The *ecclesia* carries out the *missio Dei* through its incarnational form among communities dwelling on the land through dialogue, restoring dignity, and provoking a contradiction between conservation paradigms that disintegrate communal sense of belonging and communal involvement in the flourishing of creation.

Contextually, Ikechukwu Kanu (2021) presents a theological and hermeneutical praxis of re-reading and reclaiming the river that is mediated by the prism of African eco-theology. For Kanu, African Eco-Theology is an African prophetic voice, which calls to protect and preserve human life, the earth, and the universe, which is produced on the basis of the African paradigm of interconnection between humanity and nature. Therefore, this concept extends beyond mere environmental management; it signifies a restoration of the river’s ontological status as a life-giving subject rather than a passive object of colonial

extraction. For the church, “re-reading” the river implies deconstructing the colonial borders that have turned waterways into barriers, and “reclaiming” it involves acknowledging the spiritual and ancestral significance these waters hold for indigenous communities.

Therefore, a decolonised Eco - Missiology needs to be born to promote a conservation model that is fully grounded in the Ubuntu paradigm of African philosophy. Whereas Western conservation tends to function based on dualistic assumptions that distinguish humanity and nature in the endeavour to safeguard the latter, Thulisile Bhuda and Phemelo Marumo (2022) maintain that Ubuntu stresses the inseparable interdependence. In this paradigm, the welfare of the human community is ontologically fused with the well-being of the environment. Therefore, an eco-missiology informed by Ubuntu rejects exclusion in favour of holistic integration. This position opposes the mentality of fortress conservation that has seen the indigenous population as a threat to the biodiversity.

Rather, such theological strategy aims to replace the so-called Green Wall of the state with the so-called Green Fellowship as it is metaphorically explained by Conradie (2011). The green wall is symbolic of militarised liminal edges, fences, and legal restrictions on displacement of local populations and their natural heritage and to Conradie it is an instrument of ecological oppression authorized by the state. In contrast, the Green Fellowship looks forward to having a community of liturgy and ethics that unites the rightful needs of man and those of the ecological integrity. Reflectively, the

fellowship promotes a stewardship paradigm whereby, the community is the first custodian of the land, and the community is reconstructed using the principles of spiritual and not the punitive approach.

To attain this Green Fellowship, a radical change of operation is required, instead of a paternalistic mode of saving the people out of nature, there is the participatory mode of saving nature with the people. Conservation histories of conservation areas like the Kavango -Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA) have often demonized domestic subsistence. The World Wildlife Fund (2022) report, however, proposes that the only sustainable way out of conservation goals and the community livelihoods is doing a balanced trade. According to the report, alienation leads to resistance and inclusion leads to responsibility.

However, this cannot be relieved until the epistemological principles behind KAZA that are still colonial are redone. Where the historical logic of conservation carries on Western scientific hegemony against native riverine agency, then any form of inclusivity program is only a simulation. True sustainability would presuppose the breaking of the cycle of epistemic violence which stifles local knowledge and would mean that the reappropriation of the river would not be just a change of a policy and would not give place to degradation of human dignity and identity of those peoples that depend on water.

### **7.3. Complexities and Counterarguments**

Although the current analysis has provided a substantive critique of transboundary conservation as a site of epistemic violence on the governance of BaSubiya ecologic-missio-logical knowledge, it must also be mindful of the conceptual and practical complexity that defines conservation governance. Those who believe in

Transfrontier measures argue that this system is essential in addressing the loss of biodiversity, human-wildlife conflict and ecologically vulnerable areas (Jones, 2008; Linell et al., 2019). In this perspective, the limitations on the utilization of local resources cannot be considered the acts of domination but can be interpreted as the ecological interventions that have to be undertaken in the face of progressive environmental destruction.

In addition, some scholars like Arun Agrawal (1995) caution of the romanticisation of the systems of indigenous knowledge and note that these systems are dynamic and contested without being beyond internal hierarchies or ecological forces. This criticism predicts urgent queries about to what extent the ecological practices of BaSubiya can be in a thoughtless manner exalted as naturally sustainable, or universally even-handed. Furthermore, Mignolo (2011) observed that the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the formal conservation systems presents insurmountable epistemology especially the process of adapting plural ontologies of nature in policy contexts fashioned through Western scientific paradigms.

All these counter arguments do not nullify the main argument of the study; instead, they are the enrichment of the analysis hegemony. They foreground the need to have a dialogical and reflexive model of conservation that does not absolutize state power, and idealise indigenous systems rather establishes a just epistemic coexistence created through mutual recognition and ethical responsibility.

## 8. CONCLUSION

There is an appalling lack of imagination breadth and strength in its current form, ethically and theologically, the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area. The constructive element of the western dualism of Fortress Conservation adopted by Botswana and Namibia is the application of an epistemic violence on the BaSubiya people. Such violence is not entirely theoretical but real and is at work, in the form of physical, economical, and spiritual repression making the innocent become criminals, the tranquil into soldiers, and the spiritual linking vein between Creator and the Chobe River to be fractured.

This neocolonial paradigm cannot be ensued in an African *Eco-Missiology*. It is urgent that BaSubiya agency be restored, owing to an authentic conservation should be one that is just. The river in the BaSubiya theology does not belong to the state, but the river, the people and the Divine is one entity. Until KAZA policies reflect this “*vital force*”, they remain instruments of oppression rather than preservation.

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