

PROPERTY, PROVIDENCE, AND THE NIGER DELTA: A COMPARATIVE REFLECTION ON PSALM 24:1–2 AND THE ETHICS OF INTEGRAL ECOLOGY IN NIGERIAN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW*

Abstract

This article undertook a sustained exegetical and doctrinal exposition of Psalm 24:1–2 as a scriptural foundation for African environmental ethics and professional formation, and placed that exposition in critical dialogue with Nigeria's constitutional and statutory environmental law architecture. The article contended that the bipartite theological argument of Psalm 24:1–2 – that the earth belongs to God because God created it – generated a doctrine of stewardship whose normative logic was both anticipated by, and imperfectly realised within, Nigerian environmental law. Drawing upon close philological exegesis of the Hebrew text, including the psalm's liturgical setting and its Ancient Near Eastern background, the lexical distinction between 'āreṣ and tēbēl in verse 1, and the verbal aspect of verse 2, and upon a critical analysis of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, the Land Use Act, the Environmental Impact Assessment Act, the NOSDRA Act, and the Petroleum Industry Act 2021, the article traced the structural convergences and the persistent gaps between prophetic theology and positive law. It argued, further, that the professional formation of the African jurist, cleric, physician, and engineer must be grounded in an integrated framework that reads Scripture, indigenous ethical traditions, and national law as complementary resources for a stewardship ethic adequate to the scale of Africa's ecological crisis.

Keywords: Psalm 24:1–2, Ownership and Stewardship, Nigerian Environmental Law, Integral Ecology; Land Use Act; *Gbemre v Shell*

1. Introduction: A Text in Conversation with a Wounded Continent and its Laws

A colleague, returning from fieldwork undertaken in the Ogoniland region of Rivers State, Nigeria, brought back photographs of the affected terrain: ground saturated with crude petroleum, watercourses bearing a persistent hydrocarbon sheen, and mangroves blackened by chronic contamination. Upon presenting the photographs, she asked a question of deceptive simplicity: what does Scripture say of this? That question is, with increasing urgency, also a legal one. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 provides, at section 20, that the State shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air, land, forest, and wildlife of Nigeria.¹ Section 44(3) further declares that the entire property in, and control of, all minerals, mineral oils, and natural gas is vested in the Government of the Federation.² These are claims to ownership. They resonate with, and press upon, the claim asserted in Psalm 24:1 – 'The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.'³ The question is not whether ownership is claimed, for both texts claim it, but whose title generates the stronger stewardship obligation, and whether the courts have begun, in practice, to enforce it.

The article proceeds in ten parts. It begins with a close exegesis of Psalm 24:1–2, attends to the psalm's liturgical setting and its Ancient Near Eastern background, and thereafter places that exegesis in critical dialogue with Nigeria's constitutional and statutory environmental law framework, its indigenous ethical resources, and the framework of integral ecology. The governing thesis is that Psalm 24:1–2 supplies the theological grammar of a stewardship ethic whose legal articulation within Nigerian law is genuine but incomplete, and whose fuller realisation requires an integrated professional formation that neither the law faculty nor the theological seminary presently supplies in isolation.

2. Exegetical Analysis of Psalm 24:1–2

Literary Structure, Liturgical Setting, and Ancient Near Eastern Background

Psalm 24 is most plausibly understood as an entrance liturgy (*Einzugsliturgie*), associated with a procession of the Ark into the Jerusalem temple, its *Sitz im Leben* connected to the traditions preserved at 2 Samuel 6. Sigmund Mowinckel's foundational analysis identifies a tripartite liturgical structure: the cosmic ownership claim (vv 1–

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¹Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 20.

²ibid s 44(3).

³Psalm 24:1–2 (NRSV). All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

2), the entrance Torah (vv 3–6), and the royal advent of Yahweh as King of Glory (vv 7–10).⁴ This liturgical frame carries real exegetical weight: the ownership claim of verses 1–2 is not a free-standing theological abstraction but the foundation on which both the ethical demand of the middle section and the doxological climax of the final section are built. Phil J Botha's structural analysis demonstrates that the couplet is metrically arranged to place emphasis upon the divine name at its opening and the creative act at its close.⁵

The cosmological imagery of verse 2 participates in the wider Ancient Near Eastern tradition of the *Chaoskampf*, the divine subjugation of primordial waters attested within the Ugaritic Baal cycle and the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. Against that background, Yahweh's founding of the earth 'upon the seas and upon the rivers' asserts creative authority over the forces of chaos, and not merely dominion over physical topography.⁶ The river systems of the Niger Delta are, within this cosmological register, not merely hydrological features but divinely constituted safeguards against chaos; their systematic degradation is, on the psalm's own terms, a reassertion of chaos against divinely instituted order.

The entrance Torah of verses 3–6 supplies the ethical corollary of the ownership claim: 'Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts.' Within the environmental context, the professional whose conduct despoils that which God owns fails precisely this threshold test. The liturgical sequence; ownership, ethics, worship encodes a coherent moral logic: knowledge of the earth's true owner (vv 1–2) generates the ethical demand (vv 3–6) that alone renders genuine worship possible (vv 7–10). A professional ethic grounded in Psalm 24:1–2 is not, therefore, a detour from worship but its precondition.

Psalm 24:1: The Hebrew Text, Grammar, and the 'Āreṣ/Tēbēl Distinction

laYHWH hā'āreṣ ūmēlō'āh tēbēl wēyōšēbē bāh

'To Yahweh belongs the earth and its fullness, the inhabited world and all who dwell in it.' The prepositional phrase *laYHWH* foregrounds the divine name through the possessive *lamed*, a grammatical assertion of priority: God does not follow the earth within the verse's logical sequence but precedes it as its owner. The construction recurs at Deuteronomy 10:14 (*lēYHWH 'ēlōhēkā haššāmayim*), a consistent scriptural formula for asserting divine legal title over creation.

Verse 1 deploys two distinct nouns that much scholarship collapses, unhelpfully, into a single category. The first, *'āreṣ*, denotes the physical earth, the material substance of creation. The second, *tēbēl*, denotes the inhabited, civilised world. The term *tēbēl* recurs at Psalms 9:8, 96:13, and 98:9 in explicitly judicial contexts in which Yahweh judges the *tēbēl* with righteousness. Its inclusion within Psalm 24:1 extends Yahweh's ownership claim beyond physical creation to encompass the civilised social order, legal and governmental systems included. Constitutional claims to resource ownership under section 44(3) CFRN 1999 fall, on this reading, within the scope of Yahweh's ownership of the *tēbēl*. They are derivative claims, answerable to a prior title.

Psalm 50:10–12 supplies the canonical parallel that confirms this ownership pattern: 'Every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills... the world (*tēbēl*) and its fullness (*mēlō'āh*) are mine.'⁷ Psalm 50 thereafter indicts the covenant community for substituting ritual observance for authentic ethical accountability to the divine owner. The canonical pattern is thus consistent: divine ownership generates accountability, and departure from that accountability constitutes covenant breach. It is this pattern that the courts began to enforce, under Nigerian constitutional law, in *Gbemre v Shell*.

Psalm 24:2: Verbal Aspect, Cosmological Foundation, and Legal Title

kī hū' 'al-yammīm yēsādāh wē'al-nēhārōwṭ yēkōnnēhā

'For he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers.' The causal conjunction *kī* is the hinge on which the entire theological argument turns: Yahweh owns the earth (v 1) *because* Yahweh created it (v 2). Both verbs of verse 2 are Qal perfect forms: *yēsādāh* (he founded it, from *yāsad*) and *yēkōnnēhā* (he established it, from

⁴Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Abingdon Press 1962) vol 1, 5–6. On the *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 24 as an entrance liturgy, see further Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 1: A Commentary on Psalms 1–50* (Fortress Press 2003) 201.

⁵Phil J Botha, 'Answers Disguised as Questions: Rhetoric and Reasoning in Psalm 24' (2009) 22(3) *Old Testament Essays* 535, 537.

⁶On the *Chaoskampf* tradition and its presence within the Psalter, see John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (CUP 1985) 21–25. The Ugaritic Baal cycle and the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* attest the wider Ancient Near Eastern cosmological background within which Psalm 24:2 asserts YHWH's creative authority.

⁷Psalm 50:10–12 (NRSV). The verbal parallel with Psalm 24:1 is exact: *tēbēl ūmēlō'āh*. Psalm 50's indictment of ritual observance divorced from ethical accountability confirms the canonical pattern: divine ownership generates accountability, and failure to live within that accountability constitutes covenant violation.

kûn).⁸ The Qal perfect presents each act as a completed divine deed. This verbal aspect carries theological weight: the foundations of the created order are not processes open to renegotiation but accomplished facts. The river systems of the Niger Delta were established by a completed divine act; their degradation is not the reversal of an ongoing process but an assault upon an accomplished creation. The true owner, the one who laid the foundation, holds title on the basis of a creative act that no constitutional provision can override.

3. From Divine Ownership to Human Stewardship: The Ethical Bridge

The move from divine ownership to a human duty of stewardship requires an interpretive step that the article makes explicit: ownership does not, by itself, generate a duty of stewardship; the character of the ownership relation determines the character of the obligation it produces. The *laYHWH* theology of Psalm 24:1 implies a specific kind of human-earth relation: the trust relation familiar from equity law.⁹ In a trust, the trustee holds property not for personal benefit but for the beneficiary, subject to duties to preserve the trust corpus, to manage it prudently, and to account for it when required. The human occupant of the earth holds it in trust for the divine owner, answerable at the rendering of accounts for the condition in which the corpus is returned. This trust logic is the interpretive step that converts the premise ‘God owns’ into the conclusion ‘humans must steward carefully.’

Berry argues that the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28, frequently misread as licence for exploitation, must be read through the lens of Psalm 24:1–2: because the earth belongs to God, human dominion is necessarily delegated and accountable.¹⁰ Boiliu argues, further, that this theological vision, when consistently embedded within professional formation, can reshape the moral imagination of the next generation of African professionals.¹¹ Three exegetical claims sustain this bridge: derivative ownership generates trust obligation; the *mēlō ‘āh* is a trust corpus to be preserved; and the trustee is accountable to the Owner who’s founding and establishing verse 2 records as an accomplished act.

4. The Nigerian Constitutional and Statutory Framework

Constitutional Environmental Provisions: Justiciability and Its Limits

A threshold qualification must be entered before the constitutional framework can be applied accurately. Section 20 of the Constitution sits within Chapter II (Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy). Section 6(6)(c) expressly removes the jurisdiction of any court to pronounce upon whether an organ of government has acted in conformity with Chapter II.¹² The State’s environmental protection obligation under section 20 is accordingly *non-justiciable*: it functions as a policy directive but cannot be enforced directly in court. This is not a minor qualification. It means that the primary constitutional basis for environmental protection in Nigeria is not directly enforceable through litigation. The court in *Gbemre v Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd* reached its landmark outcome not through section 20 but through the justiciable fundamental-rights provisions: sections 33(1) and 34(1) of the Constitution, guaranteeing the rights to life and to the dignity of the human person.¹³ This is the doctrinally creative route that Nigerian environmental counsel have used to secure outcomes that section 20, on its own, cannot compel: showing that environmental degradation amounts to a violation of the fundamental right to life. Ngwaba identifies this as the emerging doctrine of environmental constitutionalism in Nigeria, built on justiciable rights rather than unenforceable directive principles.¹⁴ Section 44(3) vests ‘the entire property in and control of all minerals, mineral oils and natural gas’ in the Government of the Federation. The theological critique drawn from Psalm 24:1–2 applies here with equal force: the State’s ownership claim, itself a derivative claim, implies a stewardship obligation owed to the prior Owner. Section 17(3)(f) of the Constitution, providing that State policy shall protect children and young persons against

⁸On the force of the Qal perfect and its use to present completed action, see Bruce K Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Eisenbrauns 1990) ch 30. The two perfect forms of Ps 24:2, *yēsādāh* (from *yāsad*, ‘to found’) and *yēkōnnēhā* (from *kûn*, ‘to establish’), present the founding and establishing of the earth as completed divine acts rather than as an ongoing or repeatable process.

⁹The trust analogy is drawn from equity law. A trustee holds property not for personal benefit but for the beneficiary, subject to fiduciary duties to preserve the trust corpus, to manage it prudently, and to account for it when required. The *laYHWH* theology implies this same structure: the human occupant of the earth holds it in trust for the divine owner. This is the interpretive step that converts the premise ‘God owns’ into the conclusion ‘humans must steward carefully.’

¹⁰R J (Sam) Berry, ‘The Biblical Basis of Creation Care’ (John Ray Initiative Briefing Papers, No 8).

¹¹Esti Regina Boiliu, ‘Ecotheology as a Paradigm for the Renewal of Christian Religious Education in Building Ecological Ethics and Responsibility’ (2026) *Pharos Journal of Theology*.

¹²Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 6(6)(c). The subsection provides that no court shall have jurisdiction to pronounce upon whether any organ of government has acted or is acting in conformity with the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy.

¹³*Gbemre v Shell* (n 26 below) per Nwokorie J. The court held that continued gas flaring violated ss 33(1) and 34(1) CFRN 1999. This outcome was reached through the justiciable fundamental-rights provisions, s 20 being non-justiciable by virtue of s 6(6)(c).

¹⁴Uchenna Ngwaba, ‘Constitutional Environmental Rights in Nigeria: Justiciability and Enforcement’ (2020) 12 *Nigerian Journal of Law and Practice* 33, 38.

exploitation and material neglect,¹⁵ reinforces the intergenerational dimension of that obligation: the earth is held in trust not for the present generation alone but for those who will inherit it.

The Land Use Act and the Ownership Parallel

The Land Use Act, Cap L5 LFN 2004, vests all land within the territory of each State in the Governor, held in trust for the use and common benefit of all Nigerians.¹⁶ Section 2 grants the Governor power to grant rights of occupancy.¹⁷ The Act embodies a form of delegated ownership that structurally mirrors the psalm's theology of ownership: no individual holds land absolutely; it is held in trust from a superior sovereign. But where the psalm locates the ultimate sovereign in Yahweh, whose ownership generates an obligation of preservation, the Land Use Act locates that sovereign in the State, whose historical practice has frequently favoured revenue extraction over conservation. Oyewo shows that the Act has been more effective at concentrating State control than at putting into practice the trust obligation its language implies.¹⁸ This is the institutional repetition of exactly the failure Psalm 24:2 identifies: claiming ownership of what was founded upon the waters without accepting the preservation obligation that founding necessarily entails.

Environmental Enforcement Architecture: EIA, NESREA, NOSDRA, and the Mining Act

The Environmental Impact Assessment Act, Cap E12 LFN 2004, establishes a prior assessment requirement for activities likely to have significant environmental effects.¹⁹ The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency Act 2007 creates the institutional architecture for environmental enforcement.²⁰ The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (Establishment) Act 2006 supplies the main operational mechanism for oil spill detection, containment, and remediation within the petroleum sector.²¹ The Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act 2007 extends the regulatory framework to solid minerals, so that the *mēlō'āh* of Psalm 24:1 is governed across every form of mineral extraction.²² The Petroleum Industry Act 2021 represents the most significant recent development, mandating Host Community Development Trusts through which oil companies must contribute three per cent of annual operating expenditure to the benefit of host communities.²³ Duruigbo describes this as a partial statutory recognition of the stewardship obligation implied by the State's section 44(3) ownership claim.²⁴ A candid qualification must nevertheless be entered: enforcement of the EIA Act has been widely documented as inadequate within the petroleum sector, where impact assessments are routinely circumvented in practice.²⁵ The gap between statutory provision and implementation is precisely the ecological dimension of the professional-formation problem that this article addresses.

The Courts as Environmental Conscience: Key Cases

The most significant Nigerian judicial contribution to the stewardship argument is *Gbemre v Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd*, decided by the Federal High Court, Benin Division, on 14 November 2005.²⁶ Nwokorie J held that the continued flaring of gas within the Iwerekani community of the Niger Delta violated the applicants' fundamental rights to life and dignity under sections 33(1) and 34(1) of the Constitution. The decision was, in theological terms, the court's first serious enforcement of the stewardship obligation implicit within any claim to ownership: those who hold the earth must account for what they do with it. In *Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd v Tiebo VII*, the Court of Appeal had earlier engaged with environmental liability within the petroleum sector, supplying important precedent for the stewardship-accountability line of cases.²⁷ In *Centre for Oil Pollution Watch v Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation*, the Court of Appeal

¹⁵Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), s 17(3)(f).

¹⁶Land Use Act, Cap L5 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, s 1.

¹⁷*ibid* s 2.

¹⁸Jeremiah Olaitan Oyewo, 'The Land Use Act and Environmental Management in Nigeria: A Critical Appraisal' (2018) 6 *Covenant University Journal of Politics and International Affairs* 45, 48.

¹⁹Environmental Impact Assessment Act, Cap E12 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, s 2.

²⁰National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (Establishment) Act 2007, s 7.

²¹National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (Establishment) Act 2006, ss 1–3. NOSDRA is the primary institutional mechanism for oil spill detection, containment, and remediation, and directly operationalises the environmental stewardship obligation within the petroleum sector.

²²Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act 2007. The Act extends the stewardship regulatory framework to solid minerals, so that the *mēlō'āh* of Psalm 24:1 is governed across all forms of mineral extraction, not only petroleum.

²³Petroleum Industry Act 2021, ss 235–238.

²⁴Emeka Duruigbo, 'Community Rights and the Exploitation of Natural Resources in Nigeria: An Analysis of the Petroleum Industry Act 2021' (2022) 14 *Journal of African Law* 73, 79.

²⁵On the documented inadequacy of EIA enforcement within the Nigerian petroleum sector, see Jerome Wogu, *Environmental Law and Practice in Nigeria* (Malthouse Press 2018) 89–95; Duruigbo (n 25 above) 80.

²⁶*Gbemre v Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd* FHC/B/CS/53/05 (Unreported, Federal High Court, Benin Division, 14 November 2005).

²⁷*Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd v Tiebo VII* [1996] 4 NWLR (Pt 445) 657 (CA).

affirmed that NNPC owed a duty to remediate oil spills within affected communities.²⁸ Earlier still, *Seismograph Services (Nigeria) Ltd v Eyuafe* established the principle that environmental damage carries liability in tort.²⁹ And *Attorney-General of Ondo State v Attorney-General of the Federation* addressed the contested question of resource control under the constitutional framework.³⁰ Jerome Wogu argues that the gap between these judicial developments and effective environmental protection reflects a systemic failure of professional formation: the lawyers, engineers, physicians, and policy-makers engaged with these questions lack an integrated ethical framework adequate to their complexity.³¹

5. Africa's Ecological Wounds: Despoiling what was Founded and Established

The UNEP Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland (2011) found that hydrocarbons contaminate drinking water within Ogoni communities at levels up to nine hundred times WHO guidelines, and that some areas will require twenty-five to thirty years of sustained remediation.³² This is the Ogoniland that Psalm 24:2 must confront: a landscape *founded upon waters, established upon rivers*, now systematically destroyed. The environmental justice dimension of this crisis deserves to be named directly. Nnimmo Bassey documents that the communities bearing the environmental cost of petroleum extraction are, with striking consistency, precisely the communities that have received the fewest economic benefits from it: ecological harm is disproportionately concentrated among already-marginalised ethnic communities of the Niger Delta.³³ This is not incidental; it is structural. The environmental justice analysis connects the theology of divine ownership in Psalm 24:1–2 to the social justice traditions of African theology: the very communities whose land was ‘founded upon the waters’ by the creating God have been least protected by the derivative ownership claims of the Nigerian State. The pattern extends beyond Nigeria. Lake Chad has shrunk by more than ninety per cent since the 1960s, threatening tens of millions across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The forest cover of the Congo Basin is being reduced at a similarly alarming rate. These are not geological accidents; they are the consequences of extraction pursued without stewardship, of derivative ownership exercised without accountability to the prior Owner whose *yēsādāh wēyēkōnnēhā* the psalm records as an accomplished act.

6. African Indigenous Ethical Traditions as Stewardship Resources

Ubuntu and the Relational Earth: The philosophy of Ubuntu, expressed in the maxim, ‘*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*’, reflects a relational ontology that African philosophical tradition has extended toward ecological, and not only social, dimensions. Ramose's analysis of Ubuntu as ontological relatedness suggests that the well-being of persons is shaped by their ecological context, not only through relation to other persons.³⁴ Metz's relational ethics, while cautious about extending Ubuntu to non-human moral subjects without further argument, accepts that relational well-being necessarily includes the environmental conditions within which human community becomes possible.³⁵ This is the Ubuntu grounding of stewardship: to degrade the earth is to degrade, at the same time, the conditions of communal human flourishing.

The Igbo Ala: Earth as Ethical Arbiter: The Igbo cosmological figure of Ala, the earth deity who is simultaneously custodian of morality and the ground of communal life, represents Africa's most developed indigenous framework for earth stewardship. Nwoye observes that in Igbo cosmology, the earth is not simply a resource but a moral presence whose violation is a category of wrongdoing, sanctioned by the earth itself.³⁶ This closely resembles the Psalm 24:1–2 claim: the earth has a divine owner, and violation of the earth is a violation of the owner's rights.

Islamic Stewardship: Khilāfa and Amāna: The Quranic concept of *khilāfa* (Quran 2:30): ‘I will create a vicegerent on earth’) presents human beings as God's stewards, not owners, and the concept of *amāna* (Quran 33:72: the trust which the heavens and earth declined and human beings accepted) grounds environmental

²⁸Centre for Oil Pollution Watch v Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation [2019] LPELR-47357(CA).

²⁹*Seismograph Services (Nigeria) Ltd v Eyuafe* [1976] 9–10 SC 135.

³⁰*Attorney-General of Ondo State v Attorney-General of the Federation* [2002] 9 NWLR (Pt 772) 222 (SC).

³¹Jerome Wogu, *Environmental Law and Practice in Nigeria* (Malthouse Press 2018) 112.

³²United Nations Environment Programme, *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland* (UNEP, Nairobi 2011) 9.

³³Nnimmo Bassey, *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and Climate Crisis in Africa* (Pambazuka Press 2012) 67, 89. Bassey documents the environmental-justice dimension of extraction: the communities bearing the environmental cost of petroleum activity have received the fewest corresponding economic benefits, so that ecological harm is disproportionately concentrated among already-marginalised populations.

³⁴Mogobe B Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Mond Books 1999) 49.

³⁵Thaddeus Metz, ‘Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa’ (2011) 11 *African Human Rights Law Journal* 532.

³⁶Chinwe M A Nwoye, ‘Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider's Perspective’ (2016) 2(9) *African Journal of Philosophy and Religious Studies* 1, 6.

stewardship in a cosmological covenant.³⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr's analysis of the Islamic response to the environmental crisis demonstrates that *khilāfa* and *amāna* together form an Islamic environmental ethic with direct relevance to Nigerian resource governance, particularly within states where Islamic jurisprudence informs professional conduct.

7. Integral Ecology, Nigerian Law, and African Bioethics: A Synthesis

The convergence of Psalm 24:1–2, Africa's indigenous stewardship traditions, and Pope Francis's framework of integral ecology supplies the intellectual basis for a distinctively African contribution to bioethics scholarship. *Laudato Si'* para 138 observes: 'We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us.'³⁸ Gerard Magill and Jordan Potter identify four connected dimensions of integral ecology: environmental integrity, social justice, economic equity, and cultural respect.³⁹ All four dimensions are present within the Nigerian framework: the EIA Act and NESREA address environmental integrity; the PIA's Host Community Development Trust addresses economic equity; *AG Ondo State v AG Federation* engages resource control and economic equity; and the Land Use Act's trust language gestures toward cultural respect for indigenous land relationships. Western professional-ethics frameworks, including the four principles articulated by Beauchamp and Childress, were developed for clinical medicine rather than for the governance of shared natural resources.⁴⁰ While they can be extended to encompass ecological subjects and future generations, they do not, in their original formulation, ask whose the earth is or what that ownership requires. Chike Anyigbo argues that integral ecology is 'a call to a transformed way of inhabiting the earth as a sacred trust,'⁴¹ which is close to the content of *laYHWH* in Psalm 24:1 and of the trust language in the Land Use Act: both frameworks locate the ultimate ground of obligation beyond the individual occupant, in a sovereign whose claim generates accountability.

8. Implications for African Professional Formation

Obijekwu and Obiesili argue that ethics and values education must be grounded in the specific moral traditions of the communities being formed, and that imported frameworks produce professionals who are technically trained but ethically unanchored.⁴² The integration of Psalm 24:1–2's trust theology with the constitutional framework, the Land Use Act, the NOSDRA Act, and the Petroleum Industry Act offers an integrated framework that is at once biblical, indigenous, and legally operative.

The Law Faculty and the Stewardship Curriculum: Nigerian law faculties are producing graduates who can litigate the provisions of the VAPP Act and argue constitutional cases with technical skill. They produce far fewer graduates who understand that environmental law, resource law, and land law are branches of a single stewardship obligation grounded in the trust logic that Psalm 24:1–2 encodes. Environmental law clinics within Nigerian law faculties should integrate *Gbemre v Shell*, the NOSDRA Act, and the non-justiciability analysis of section 20 with the psalm's exegesis and the Igbo concept of *Ala*, producing lawyers whose professional identity is shaped by the trust obligation that runs through all three traditions. The Council of Legal Education should consider making environmental ethics a core, rather than elective, component of the vocational curriculum.

Medical and Engineering Formation: Medical professionals within the Niger Delta treat patients whose illnesses are direct consequences of the stewardship failure that *Gbemre v Shell* began to address: respiratory disease from gas flaring, water-borne illness from contaminated rivers, malnutrition from degraded agricultural land. The clinician who understands the patient as a casualty of a violated trust has an ecological conscience that clinical training alone cannot supply. Engineers who design extraction infrastructure without internalising the trust obligation of Psalm 24:1–2 build structures whose environmental consequences are, in the psalm's own terms, assaults upon what God has founded and established.

Religious Institutions as Partners in Formation. Africa's religious institutions carry a moral authority that no university curriculum can match. The theological argument advanced in this article is that Psalm 24:1–2 grounds

³⁷Quran 2:30 (*khilāfa*: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth') and 33:72 (*amāna*: the trust which the heavens and earth declined and human beings accepted). See further Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (ABC International Group 1997) 95–97. For the Nigerian context, see Hakeem Ijaiya and others, 'Islamic Law and Environmental Protection in Nigeria' (2014) 6 *Journal of Sustainable Development Law and Policy* 20.

³⁸Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Liberia Editrice Vaticana 2015) para 138.

³⁹Gerard Magill and Jordan Potter (eds), *Integral Ecology: Protecting Our Common Home* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2018) 14.

⁴⁰Tom L Beauchamp and James F Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (8th edn, OUP 2019) 14. While the four principles can be extended to encompass ecological subjects and future generations, they were developed for clinical medicine, not the governance of shared natural resources, and do not in their original formulation ask whose the earth is or what that ownership requires.

⁴¹Chike Anyigbo, 'Laudato Si's Integral Ecology: The Heart of the Ethics of Spiritan Mission and the New Political Movement in Nigeria' (2023) 20 *Spiritan Horizons* 1, 9.

⁴²Matthew Ike Obijekwu and Anthony O Obiesili, 'Ethics and Values Education: A Panacea for Sustainable Development' (2022) 3 *Evaia: International Journal of Ethics and Values* 1, 2.

an inescapable trust obligation upon every professional who extracts from, builds upon, or governs the earth is a message that Nigerian churches and mosques should preach with the same urgency ordinarily reserved for matters of personal morality. The Igbo *igba boi* apprenticeship system, as Udoka Helen Chukwu and colleagues show, treats professional practice as moral practice, exercised upon ground that belongs to another.⁴³ This is Psalm 24:1–2 expressed in indigenous institutional form.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

Psalm 24:1 declares: ‘To Yahweh belongs the earth and its fullness, the inhabited world (*tēbēl*) and all who dwell in it.’ Psalm 24:2 explains: ‘For he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the rivers.’ The Qal perfect verbs present the founding and establishing as completed divine acts. The causal conjunction *kī* makes the creative act the basis of the ownership claim. And the trust logic of the *laYHWH* construction makes human occupancy derivative and accountable.

Nigeria's Constitution makes its own ownership claims. Section 20 sets out a stewardship obligation that, as section 6(6)(c) reveals, remains judicially unenforceable. Section 44(3) vests mineral ownership in the Federation without an equally explicit stewardship obligation. The courts in *Gbemre v Shell* and *Centre for Oil Pollution Watch v NNPC* have begun, through the creative use of justiciable fundamental rights, to enforce the stewardship obligation that any genuine ownership claim implies. The NOSDRA Act, the Petroleum Industry Act 2021, and the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act extend that obligation across the full range of resource extraction. The gap between these legal provisions and the lived reality of the Niger Delta, Lake Chad, and the Congo Basin remains wide, and it is a gap that law alone cannot close. Africa's professionals, its lawyers, physicians, engineers, and policy-makers, are stewards, not owners. The earth they govern, extract from, and build upon was founded and established by an accomplished divine act. The integrated professional formation proposed in this article, grounded at once in Psalm 24:1–2, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, and the indigenous ethical traditions of Ubuntu, Ala, and Islamic *khilāfa*, is the formation capable, over time, of closing the distance between the law's promise and the earth's reality.

On the basis of the foregoing exegetical, doctrinal, and comparative legal analysis, the article advances the following eight recommendations, addressed respectively to the legislature, the judiciary, the academy, and the religious and professional communities of Nigeria.

Constitutional entrenchment of environmental rights: The National Assembly should initiate a constitutional amendment moving the substance of section 20 from the non-justiciable directive principles of Chapter II into the justiciable fundamental rights provisions of Chapter IV, removing the bar effected by section 6(6)(c) and giving direct judicial enforceability to the State's environmental protection obligation.

Codification of a stewardship standard in resource legislation: Future amendment of section 44(3) CFRN 1999, and of related provisions within the Land Use Act, the Petroleum Industry Act, and the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act, should expressly codify a stewardship standard binding upon the State as trustee of the nation's mineral and land resources, including enforceable duties of preservation, prudent administration, and periodic accounting.

Institutional strengthening of EIA enforcement: NESREA and the relevant sectoral regulators should be given stronger investigative and sanctioning powers, and dedicated budgetary allocation, sufficient to address the documented weakness of Environmental Impact Assessment enforcement within the petroleum sector.

Integration of environmental ethics into legal and theological curricula: The Council of Legal Education, the National Universities Commission, and the accrediting bodies of Nigeria's theological seminaries should require, as a core rather than elective component of professional formation, a combined module in environmental law, biblical and theological ecology, and indigenous ethical traditions such as Ubuntu and Ala.

Establishment of interdisciplinary environmental law clinics: Nigerian law faculties should establish, in partnership with theological faculties and schools of medicine and engineering, clinical programmes through which students engage directly with Niger Delta communities affected by extractive degradation, applying the stewardship framework set out in this article to live disputes and remediation efforts.

⁴³Udoka Helen Chukwu, Ugochukwu Remigius Ihezue and Njoku Marilyn, 'Igbo Apprenticeship System in the Modern World: Challenges and Prospects' (2024) 23(1) *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 1, 4.

Judicial consolidation of the environmental-constitutionalism doctrine: The superior courts of record should build on and extend the approach taken in *Gbemre v Shell*, using the justiciable rights to life and dignity as a consistent route for enforcing environmental protection pending constitutional amendment.

Religious mobilisation around stewardship theology: Christian, Muslim, and indigenous religious institutions across Nigeria should incorporate the stewardship theology of Psalm 24:1–2, together with the related concepts of *khilāfa*, *amāna*, and *Ala*, into teaching and preaching, so as to build an ecological conscience among the professional laity.

Strengthened host-community accountability mechanisms: The Host Community Development Trusts established under the Petroleum Industry Act 2021 should be subject to independent audit and transparent public reporting, so that the statutory recognition of stewardship obligation translates into real, verifiable benefit for the communities bearing the disproportionate ecological cost of extraction.