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HUMANITIES RESEARCH, ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURES, AND THE PURSUIT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Chukwuemeka Agbo, Chisom Uchendu, and Philip Adah Idachaba

Alex Ekwueme Federal University, University of Nigeria, and Federal University of Lafia

editor.jahrd@ahrdc.academy

“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic
community.”
—Aldo Leopold

The publication of Volume 3 of the *Journal of African Humanities Research and Development (JAHRD)* comes at a defining moment in both the intellectual history of Africa and the global search for sustainable futures. Across the world, environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, rapid urbanisation, resource depletion, food insecurity and widening socio-economic inequalities have emerged as some of the most urgent challenges confronting humanity. Although these challenges are frequently presented as scientific or technological problems, they are equally historical, political, ethical and cultural questions. They concern not merely the condition of the natural environment but also the ways societies understand nature, organise political authority, construct systems of production and consumption, define justice, and imagine the future. Consequently, meaningful responses require far more than scientific innovation. They demand sustained engagement with the humanities and social sciences, disciplines that illuminate the ideas, values, histories and institutions shaping human interaction with the environment.

This reality explains the growing prominence of the environmental humanities as one of the most dynamic interdisciplinary fields of contemporary scholarship. Rather than treating environmental crises solely as ecological phenomena, environmental humanities scholars argue that they are deeply embedded within culture, politics, religion, economics, language, literature, philosophy, and historical memory. Environmental degradation is therefore inseparable from questions of power, identity, justice, and ethics. As Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann observe, the environmental humanities seek to understand how cultural narratives, social institutions and historical experiences influence environmental thought and action while simultaneously offering new frameworks for imagining more sustainable futures.¹

The urgency of this intellectual intervention has become even more pronounced in what many scholars describe as the Anthropocene—a geological epoch in which human activities have become a dominant force shaping the Earth’s ecosystems.² Although the concept remains contested, it has generated important debates concerning humanity’s collective responsibility for environmental

¹ Michael Gibbons et al., *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1994).

² Our Common Future, World Commission on Environment and Development (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

transformation and the unequal distribution of environmental risks across regions and populations. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that climate change has fundamentally altered the relationship between natural history and human history, compelling scholars in the humanities to rethink long-established assumptions about politics, culture, and historical agency.³ For Africa, whose contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions remains comparatively small yet whose societies bear disproportionately severe environmental consequences, these debates acquire particular significance.

Indeed, Africa today stands at the intersection of multiple environmental transitions. Accelerating urban growth has intensified waste generation beyond the capacities of many municipal authorities. Climate variability increasingly threatens agricultural productivity, food security and rural livelihoods. Deforestation, oil pollution, desertification, coastal erosion, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable extraction of natural resources continue to undermine both ecological integrity and human well-being. These developments are further complicated by persistent poverty, weak environmental governance, political instability and the enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to influence patterns of resource ownership and environmental policy. Addressing these interconnected challenges therefore requires analytical approaches that transcend disciplinary boundaries and place equal emphasis on scientific evidence, public policy, historical experience, cultural values, and ethical reflection.

Within this broader intellectual landscape, African humanities scholarship has assumed renewed importance. For much of the twentieth century, environmental discourse concerning Africa was often dominated by external narratives that portrayed African societies either as principal agents of ecological degradation or as passive recipients of international conservation initiatives. Such perspectives frequently overlooked indigenous systems of environmental governance, local ecological knowledge, and community-based conservation practices that had sustained human-environment relations for centuries. More recent scholarship has sought to correct these distortions by recovering African intellectual traditions and demonstrating that environmental sustainability cannot be divorced from indigenous knowledge systems, customary institutions, and local cultural practices.⁴ The decolonisation of environmental knowledge has therefore become an important scholarly project, one that challenges epistemic inequalities while affirming Africa's capacity to generate solutions rooted in its own historical experiences and cultural realities.

Equally significant is the growing recognition that environmental questions are inseparable from issues of justice. Rob Nixon's influential concept of "slow violence" reminds us that environmental destruction often unfolds gradually and invisibly, disproportionately affecting the poor, politically marginalized, and environmentally vulnerable.⁵ Environmental degradation rarely occurs in isolation from broader structures of inequality. Rather, it frequently reflects unequal political power, unequal access to resources and unequal exposure to environmental risks. Consequently, environmental justice has emerged as an indispensable framework for understanding the social

³ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

⁴ Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁵ United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015).

dimensions of ecological crises, particularly within postcolonial societies where histories of exploitation continue to shape patterns of development.

These developments reaffirm the enduring relevance of the humanities. Far from being peripheral to sustainable development, disciplines such as history, philosophy, literature, religious studies, archaeology, linguistics, cultural studies, and the arts provide essential insights into the moral imagination, historical consciousness, and cultural values necessary for building environmentally responsible societies. Martha Nussbaum rightly argues that democratic societies require citizens capable of critical reasoning, ethical judgement, and empathetic engagement—capacities cultivated principally through humanistic education rather than technical training alone.⁶ Similarly, Bruno Latour reminds us that environmental crises demand new ways of understanding humanity's relationship with the earth, relationships that cannot be adequately explained through scientific expertise without corresponding reflection on culture, politics and ethics.⁷

The intellectual developments outlined above provide the broader context within which this volume of the *Journal of African Humanities Research and Development (JAHRD)* should be situated. They reaffirm not only the continuing relevance of the humanities in addressing contemporary global challenges but also the necessity of strengthening African-centred scholarship capable of engaging those challenges from historically informed, culturally grounded and interdisciplinary perspectives. It is precisely this conviction that has guided the vision of the African Humanities Research and Development Circle (AHRDC) since its inception. Through *JAHRD*, the AHRDC provides an international platform for rigorous scholarship that advances knowledge production on Africa while contributing meaningfully to wider scholarly debates concerning development, governance, culture, identity, sustainability and social transformation. In an era when universities increasingly face demands to demonstrate measurable societal impact, the humanities bear an important responsibility not merely to interpret society but also to contribute actively to its transformation. Volume 3 embodies this commitment by bringing together contributions that demonstrate both the diversity of contemporary African humanities research and its capacity to illuminate pressing public issues through critical, interdisciplinary inquiry.

Overview of the Contributions

The intellectual concerns outlined above find concrete expression in the individual contributions assembled in this volume. While the articles approach environmental sustainability from diverse disciplinary, theoretical and methodological perspectives, they are united by a shared commitment to advancing knowledge that is both academically rigorous and socially relevant. Collectively, they demonstrate the capacity of African humanities scholarship to interrogate contemporary environmental challenges, recover indigenous knowledge systems, critique dominant paradigms and propose contextually grounded pathways towards sustainable development. The brief analytical

⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986); Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

⁷ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 9–15.

summaries that follow highlight the principal arguments, methodological approaches and scholarly contributions of each article, illustrating how the individual studies collectively enrich current debates within the environmental humanities and the broader field of African studies.

The article Udo Okugbe and Chisom Uchendu re-examines the widely held claim that Christianity is inherently responsible for environmental degradation by arguing that such criticism rests on a misinterpretation of biblical anthropocentrism. Through theological analysis and engagement with environmental ethics, particularly the stewardship tradition and Robin Attfield's ethical reflections, the authors contend that the biblical mandate of dominion is better understood as responsible stewardship rather than exploitative domination. The study further situates this reinterpretation within Nigeria's environmental challenges, advocating the mobilisation of Christian institutions as agents of ecological sustainability and climate action. By bridging biblical theology, environmental ethics, and sustainability discourse, the article makes a significant interdisciplinary contribution to scholarship on religion and ecology. It challenges reductionist readings of Christian anthropocentrism while offering a constructive theological framework that positions faith communities as important partners in advancing environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Chukwuebuka Omeje examines the environmental consequences of transnational agribusiness expansion in Nigeria since the 1980s, arguing that large-scale land acquisitions have transformed patterns of land ownership while undermining ecological sustainability and rural livelihoods. Drawing on the Transnational World Food Regime framework, he analyses major case studies—including Wilmar International, Okomu Oil Palm Company, Shonga Farms, Dominion Rice Farms, and Lee Group—to demonstrate how land grabbing has contributed to deforestation, biodiversity loss, soil degradation, water depletion, and the displacement of local communities. The study makes a valuable contribution by integrating political economy with environmental history, linking corporate land acquisition to ecological justice, neoliberal reforms, and indigenous land rights. It further enriches scholarship by situating Nigeria's experience within broader global debates on transnational investment, sustainable development, and environmental governance while advocating stronger regulatory safeguards and community-centred land governance.

This article Chinedu Mbalisi and Nnaedoziem Nwaiwu offers an original postcolonial reinterpretation of waste management by arguing that waste is not merely a technical or environmental problem but also a product of colonial histories, cultural transformations, and unequal power relations. Drawing on social constructivism, historical analysis, and contemporary sustainability frameworks, it demonstrates how colonial rule disrupted indigenous African waste management systems that had long promoted ecological stewardship through communal ethics, spirituality, and local knowledge. The paper's principal scholarly contribution lies in its decolonial synthesis of environmental history, indigenous knowledge systems, and circular economy models. Rather than romanticising precolonial practices or rejecting modern technology, it advocates an integrated framework that combines indigenous environmental values with contemporary innovations such as Integrated Waste Management and Circular Integrated Waste Management Systems. In doing so, the study advances environmental humanities scholarship by positioning decolonised waste governance as both an ecological and social justice imperative for sustainable development in Africa.

Makepeace Deorji's article makes a valuable contribution to the growing scholarship on sustainable urban waste management by examining the prospects and constraints of implementing a zero-waste model in Nsukka, Nigeria. Moving beyond conventional waste disposal approaches, it situates zero-waste principles within the broader framework of the circular economy and demonstrates how policy reforms, institutional strengthening, technological innovation, community participation, and public-private partnerships can transform waste into an economic and environmental resource. Drawing on international best practices while remaining grounded in the realities of Nsukka, the study provides practical, context-sensitive policy recommendations for improving waste governance. Its principal contribution lies in bridging global zero-waste discourse with local implementation challenges, thereby offering a realistic pathway for sustainable urban development, environmental protection, and climate change mitigation in Nigeria.

Ononiwu Oparah and Ihuoma Anyiam's article examines the prospects and challenges of waste-to-energy (WTE) technologies as sustainable responses to Nigeria's growing waste management and energy crises. It argues that WTE offers significant environmental, economic and energy-security benefits, including waste reduction, renewable energy generation, job creation and support for a circular economy, while identifying major obstacles such as inadequate infrastructure, weak policy frameworks, financial constraints, limited technical capacity and low public awareness. The study contributes to scholarship by synthesising existing knowledge on WTE technologies within the Nigerian context and providing a comprehensive assessment of their practical feasibility. It advances debates on sustainable development by integrating waste management, renewable energy and public policy into a unified analytical framework, while offering policy recommendations that emphasise regulatory reform, public-private partnerships, institutional capacity building and citizen participation as prerequisites for successful WTE adoption.

Christopher Uhere offers a rich historical reconstruction of indigenous environmental governance in traditional Afikpo society between 1900 and 1967, demonstrating that waste management, sanitation, water conservation, and ecological stewardship were embedded within communal institutions, age-grade systems, customary law, and spiritual beliefs. Drawing on oral evidence and historical analysis, it argues that environmental sustainability was sustained through collective responsibility, cultural norms, and indigenous knowledge long before the advent of modern environmental policies. The study makes an important contribution to scholarship by challenging assumptions that effective environmental management is exclusively a modern or Western innovation. Instead, it advances the growing literature on indigenous environmental governance, decolonial environmental history and sustainable development by showing how traditional ecological knowledge can inform contemporary waste management policies and community-based conservation initiatives in Nigeria and across Africa.

Matthew Ndiribe's article argues that effective environmental governance in Nigeria requires communication strategies rooted in indigenous languages and community participation rather than exclusively top-down policy approaches. Adopting a "bottom-top" framework, it contends that environmental awareness, legislation, and climate advocacy become more meaningful when communicated through local languages that resonate with grassroots populations. The paper further highlights the environmental consequences of deforestation, pollution, poor waste disposal and weak

enforcement of environmental laws, while advocating stronger collaboration among traditional institutions, local governments, and state actors in promoting environmental stewardship. It contributes to environmental communication and sustainability studies by foregrounding indigenous language as a critical yet underexplored instrument for environmental governance in Nigeria. It extends existing debates by integrating legal, linguistic, and community-based perspectives, offering a culturally grounded framework that links grassroots participation with more effective environmental policy implementation and public engagement.

The article by AbdulRasaq Yusuf and Waheed Owoade examines how contemporary sculpture challenges conventional perceptions of waste by transforming discarded materials into aesthetically compelling installations that advance environmental sustainability. Through qualitative visual analysis of works by El Anatsui, Ibrahim Mahama, and Waheed Owoade, the authors argue that waste materials possess artistic, symbolic, and ecological value rather than representing mere refuse. By situating these installations within environmental aesthetics and contemporary art discourse, the study demonstrates how sculpture can promote environmental consciousness, encourage creative recycling, and redefine the relationship between beauty and waste. It further contends that waste-based art contributes to environmental education, cultural sustainability, and circular economy principles by reshaping public attitudes towards consumption and disposal. The article enriches scholarship by integrating environmental humanities, visual culture, and sculpture studies, offering an original African-centred perspective on how artistic practice can serve as a medium for ecological advocacy, environmental justice, and sustainable development.

Beatrice Onuoha's paper offers a fresh ecocritical interpretation of *The Killing Swamp* by demonstrating how the play transforms the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine into a powerful representation of the interconnected destruction of both human life and the Niger Delta environment. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and Cajetan Iheka's notion of nonhuman agency, the study argues that the swamp functions not merely as a backdrop but as an active witness to petro-violence, environmental injustice and state repression. The article makes a significant contribution to scholarship by addressing a notable gap in African literary studies: the limited ecocritical engagement with Niger Delta drama. It shifts attention beyond the play's familiar political and biographical readings to reveal how dramatic form, ecological symbolism, and the aesthetics of death converge to expose the human consequences of environmental degradation. In doing so, it expands postcolonial ecocritical scholarship, enriches the study of African drama, and demonstrates theatre's capacity to advance debates on environmental justice, cultural memory, and petro-imperialism.

Egodi Uchendu and Peremoboere Egbe's essay provides a comprehensive annotated bibliography of scholarship on Nigeria's democratic experience, synthesising more than seventy-five key publications on elections, political parties, ideology, ethnicity, religion, godfatherism, judicial intervention, security, gender, power rotation, and democratic governance. Rather than merely cataloguing existing literature, it critically analyses each work by identifying its research questions, theoretical orientation, methodology, principal findings, and policy implications, while organising the literature into coherent thematic sections. Its principal contribution lies in offering one of the most systematic historiographical and bibliographical surveys of Nigeria's democratic experiment. By

integrating decades of interdisciplinary scholarship into a single analytical reference, the study identifies major debates, recurring explanatory themes, and gaps requiring further investigation. It will serve as an indispensable resource for scholars, postgraduate students, and policymakers seeking a comprehensive understanding of the evolution, challenges, and future prospects of democracy and elections in Nigeria.

Taken together, the studies reviewed above reveal several important patterns that define the intellectual character of this volume. Although they investigate different subjects and employ diverse methodologies, they converge on the proposition that environmental challenges cannot be understood solely through scientific or technological frameworks. Rather, they demonstrate that sustainable development is equally dependent upon culture, ethics, governance, history, language and indigenous knowledge. These shared concerns illustrate the distinctive contribution that the humanities make to contemporary debates on Africa's environmental and developmental futures.

Viewed collectively, the articles summarised above reveal several important characteristics of contemporary African humanities scholarship. First, they demonstrate the growing interdisciplinarity of environmental research, bringing theology, history, literary studies, engineering, communication, art history and political economy into productive conversation. Secondly, they show that sustainable development cannot be reduced to technological innovation alone but depends equally upon ethical reflection, indigenous knowledge, institutional reform and cultural transformation.

Another recurring theme throughout this volume is the importance of indigenous knowledge systems. Contemporary development discourse increasingly recognises that sustainable solutions cannot simply be imported through universalised policy frameworks detached from local realities. Rather, effective environmental governance requires meaningful engagement with indigenous epistemologies, community practices and culturally embedded systems of environmental stewardship. The articles addressing traditional waste management practices, indigenous language use in environmental communication and community-based ecological knowledge demonstrate that African societies possess rich intellectual traditions capable of contributing significantly to contemporary sustainability debates.

The volume also foregrounds the ethical and political dimensions of environmental responsibility. One contribution revisits anthropocentric interpretations within Christian theology and questions inherited assumptions regarding humanity's relationship with nature, thereby contributing to wider debates on religion and environmental stewardship. Others examine land grabbing, environmental governance and waste management policies, illustrating that ecological degradation is frequently inseparable from unequal power relations, weak institutions and competing political interests. Collectively, these studies underscore that sustainable development requires not only technological innovation but also accountable governance, equitable resource distribution and inclusive public participation.

Beyond its thematic coherence, Volume 3 also illustrates the methodological diversity that characterises contemporary African scholarship. Contributors employ historical analysis, literary criticism, qualitative inquiry, policy analysis, technological review, philosophical reflection and cultural

interpretation. Such methodological pluralism enriches scholarly understanding by demonstrating that complex environmental and social problems require equally diverse analytical approaches.

The geographical focus of many articles on Nigeria should not obscure their broader significance. Nigeria frequently functions within African scholarship as a microcosm through which larger continental dynamics become visible. Issues surrounding environmental governance, urban waste, indigenous knowledge, ecological justice, religious ethics and sustainable development transcend national boundaries and resonate across numerous African societies. Consequently, the empirical findings presented here contribute not only to Nigerian scholarship but also to wider debates concerning Africa's developmental future.

Perhaps most importantly, this volume reflects the continuing maturation of African scholarship itself. Increasingly, African researchers are producing theoretically sophisticated work grounded in local realities while simultaneously engaging international academic debates. Rather than merely applying external theoretical frameworks, many contributors critically adapt, reinterpret or challenge dominant paradigms through African experiences. Such scholarship advances the broader project of epistemic decolonisation by repositioning African knowledge systems as legitimate contributors to global intellectual discourse rather than passive consumers of externally generated theories.

Collectively, the articles published in this volume remind us that sustainable development is ultimately a profoundly human endeavour. Environmental preservation, democratic governance, technological innovation, cultural continuity and social justice cannot be pursued independently of one another. Instead, they constitute interconnected dimensions of a broader developmental project that demands interdisciplinary collaboration, intellectual openness and sustained public engagement.

As Editors, it is our hope that the studies assembled in this volume will stimulate further scholarly debate, inspire innovative research agendas and inform evidence-based policymaking across Africa and beyond. We equally hope that the conversations initiated here will encourage stronger collaborations among scholars, policymakers, practitioners and civil society actors working towards more just, inclusive and environmentally sustainable societies.

The Editorial Board expresses its sincere appreciation to all contributors, anonymous peer reviewers and members of the editorial team whose commitment has made this volume possible. We also acknowledge the continued support of the African Humanities Research and Development Circle in advancing rigorous scholarship and strengthening Africa's research ecosystem. We therefore commend Volume 3 of *JAHRD* to our readers with the confidence that its contributions will enrich contemporary scholarship, stimulate new conversations across disciplinary boundaries, and reaffirm the indispensable role of the humanities in advancing environmentally sustainable, socially just and intellectually vibrant African societies. We trust that the scholarship assembled in this volume will not only advance academic debate but also contribute to the wider pursuit of environmentally sustainable, socially just and intellectually vibrant societies across Africa and beyond.