

# Sacred Geography and Divine Presence in Nigerian Traditional Religion: A Socio-Rhetorical and Social Scientific Historical Analysis

By

Asukwo Edet Oko, Ph.D  
Department of Religious and Studies  
Akwa Ibom State University  
[asukwooko@aksu.eddu.ng](mailto:asukwooko@aksu.eddu.ng)

&

Michael Enyinwa Okoronkwo, PhD  
Department of Religious Studies  
National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja  
[meokoronkwo@noun.edu.ng](mailto:meokoronkwo@noun.edu.ng)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6628-4400>  
+234 905 820 9200

## Abstract

This article examines sacred geography within Nigerian Traditional Religion through Philip Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models and Vernon Robbins's socio-rhetorical framework. Sacred space in NTR constitutes a dynamic intersection of divine presence, communal identity, and ritual performance. Despite extensive anthropological documentation, theological analysis of sacred geography remains underdeveloped. Most existing scholarship privileges ethnographic description over theological interpretation, treating sacred space as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than a theological construct. This study addresses gap by articulating a contextual theology of place grounded in African religious experience and interpreted through contemporary biblical-theological frameworks. The research employs qualitative theological interpretation, integrating ethnographic data from southeastern and southwestern Nigeria with socio-rhetorical analysis. Findings reveal that ritual space functions performatively rather than statically, encoding communal memory, moral order, and divine-human relationality. Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models illuminate how sacred geography sustains social identity and covenantal ethics within lived community experience. Robbins's socio-rhetorical approach demonstrates how ritual spaces communicate theological meaning through symbolic rhetoric across multiple interpretive textures. The study uniquely contributes by constructing a systematic theological hermeneutic of sacred geography that employs biblical studies methodologies for African religious contexts. This research enhances interreligious dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion, enriches African theological scholarship through methodological innovation, and supports curriculum development in religious education. The national relevance lies in advancing indigenous theological knowledge, promoting cultural preservation, and contributing to moral reconstruction aligned with Nigeria's developmental objectives.

**Keywords:** African theology, Esler model, Nigerian Traditional Religion, Robbins model framework, sacred geography

## Introduction

Sacred space represents a fundamental category within religious studies. Its interpretation varies according to cultural context, historical experience, and theological tradition. Within Nigerian Traditional Religion (NTR), sacred geography expresses the dynamic relationship between divine reality and human community. Places become sacred not through geographical distinctiveness alone but through divine election, ritual consecration, and sustained communal participation. Shrines, groves, rivers, and ancestral sites serve as mediating loci between visible and invisible realities.

Anthropological studies have documented sacred places extensively across Africa. Theological engagement with sacred geography in African Traditional Religion (ATR) remains underdeveloped, as much of the existing scholarship privileges ethnographic description over theological reflection. Scholars like John Mbiti often examine sacred spaces as sociocultural artifacts, emphasizing ritual and symbolic functions while neglecting their ontological and metaphysical dimensions (Olupona 2014; Mbiti 2015). This approach risks reducing sacred landscapes to cultural expressions, overlooking their role as sites of divine encounter and theological meaning. As Okoronkwo (2025, 2024a; 2024b) argues, the sacred must be understood not merely as a cultural construct but as a theological reality that mediates spiritual presence. Similarly, Mgaya (2023) highlights how sacred forests among the Bena people of Tanzania embody spiritual foundations that transcend anthropological interpretation. A more robust theological analysis is needed to illuminate how sacred geography functions within African religious systems as a conduit for divine immanence and ontological claims.

This study addresses that scholarly gap, it offers a theological and rhetorical interpretation of sacred space using Philip Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models alongside Vernon Robbins's socio-rhetorical framework. These methodologies enable analysis that respects both the cultural embeddedness and theological substance of NTR sacred geography. The research problem centres on the lack of systematic theological interpretation of ritual space in NTR using contemporary biblical studies frameworks. While anthropologists document ritual practices, theologians have not adequately conceptualized how sacred geography mediates divine presence and sustains communal ethics. This gap limits interreligious dialogue and contextual theological development.

The study's central thesis states that ritual space in NTR embodies sacred power, serving as a theologically active field that articulates divine presence, communal ethics, and identity formation. Sacred geography constitutes performative theology rather than static symbolism. It enacts covenantal relationships, communicates moral vision, and sustains social cohesion through ritual performance.

The theoretical framework combines Esler's emphasis on social identity and historical embodiment with Robbins's multilayered rhetorical analysis. Esler's socio-historical model situates religious meanings within lived community realities (Esler 2017). His socio-cultural approach examines how rituals and beliefs sustain collective identity. Robbins's socio-rhetorical criticism analyses texts, symbols, and practices through inner texture, social texture, and ideological texture (Robbins 2016). Together, these frameworks enable comprehensive theological interpretation of African sacred geography.

The study proceeds through six major sections. Section two reviews scholarly literature on sacred space and explicates the theoretical frameworks. Section three outlines the methodological approach. Section four presents findings on ritual space dynamics. Section five discusses theological implications and contributions to African scholarship. Section six articulates the study's contribution, impact, and policy relevance. The conclusion summarizes major insights and recommends future research directions.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Sacred Space in African Religious Studies**

Scholarly discourse on sacred space in African religions has developed considerably since the mid-twentieth century. John Mbiti's foundational work establishes that African religions perceive space as charged with divine presence rather than as neutral terrain (Mbiti 2015, 32). The cosmos constitutes a continuum where spiritual power flows through natural and constructed environments. This holistic cosmology contrasts with Western dualistic categories separating sacred from profane.

Olupona (2014) extends this understanding by demonstrating that sacred places function as thresholds between human and divine spheres. Rivers, groves, and ancestral compounds mediate encounters with divinity, ancestors, and spiritual forces. These spaces possess inherent power activated through ritual performance. However, Olupona's primarily anthropological approach does not fully explore the theological dimensions of sacred geography.

Awolalu's study in (1979) of Yoruba sacrificial practices reveals that sacred places embody communal memory and moral order. Shrines encode historical narratives of covenant and divine intervention. They sustain ethical systems by providing spatial anchors for communal identity. Yet Awolalu's analysis remains largely descriptive, lacking systematic theological reflection on how sacred geography functions as divine revelation.

Recent scholarship has begun addressing this gap. Mgaya (2023) examines sacred forests among the Bena of Tanzania, demonstrating how sacred geography communicates ethical values such as purity, justice, and ecological responsibility. Ukpong (2019; 2002) advocates for inculturation hermeneutics that takes African religious categories seriously as theological resources. These developments indicate a growing recognition that African sacred spaces deserve theological interpretation beyond ethnographic documentation. Despite these advances, systematic theological analysis using contemporary biblical studies frameworks remains limited. Most studies treat sacred space as cultural expression rather than as theological discourse. This study responds by applying Esler's and Robbins's models to construct a contextual theology of sacred geography.

## **2.2 Esler's Socio-Historical and Socio-Cultural Models**

Esler's (2017) socio-historical model revolutionized New Testament studies by insisting that religious meanings emerge within specific social contexts. His approach emphasizes how social identity, collective memory, and power relations shape theological constructs. Religious communities do not produce abstract doctrines but lived theologies embedded in concrete historical circumstances. This insight proves crucial for interpreting NTR, which lacks systematic written theology but possesses rich ritual practice.

Esler's socio-cultural dimension extends this by examining how rituals and beliefs sustain collective identity across generations (Esler 2017). Religious practices create social solidarity by enacting shared narratives and moral visions. They establish boundaries distinguishing insider from outsider while maintaining internal cohesion. Applied to NTR, this framework reveals how sacred geography functions as a socio-theological system encoding communal memory and moral order. Esler's models enable analysis of how ritual spaces embody social identity. Shrines are not mere locations but living institutions that sustain community through time. They mediate divine-human relationships while simultaneously structuring social relations. Sacred geography thus operates simultaneously at theological and sociological levels, a duality that Esler's integrated approach illuminates effectively.

Recent applications of Esler's models to African contexts demonstrate their adaptability beyond European Christianity. Lamin Sanneh employs socio-historical analysis to examine West African Islamic traditions, revealing how religious meanings transform through cultural translation (Sanneh 2017, p.112). Andrew Walls extends this approach to African Christianity, showing how gospel messages acquire new meanings in African social contexts (Walls 2018, p.89). These studies validate Esler's frameworks for African religious analysis.

This study applies Esler's models systematically to NTR sacred geography. It examines how ritual spaces encode historical memory, sustain social identity, and mediate moral authority. Esler's emphasis on lived religion rather than abstract theology proves particularly suitable for interpreting NTR's performative and embodied character.

### **2.3 Robbins's Socio-Rhetorical Model**

Vernon Robbins introduces socio-rhetorical criticism as a multidimensional interpretive method analysing texts, symbols, and practices through multiple textures (Robbins 2016). His approach recognizes that meaning emerges at various levels simultaneously. Inner texture examines how narratives are constructed internally. Intertexture explores relationships between texts and traditions. Social texture analyses how discourse constructs social relationships. Ideological texture investigates how worldviews and values are communicated. Sacred texture probes how texts evoke the divine (Robbins 2016).

Robbins's framework enables reading ritual actions and spatial configurations as "texts" communicating divine meaning. Ritual performances constitute rhetorical acts that persuade participants toward particular theological visions. Sacred spaces function rhetorically by evoking divine presence, encoding moral norms, and shaping communal identity. This interpretive approach moves beyond mere description to analyse how religious practices function persuasively.

Applied to NTR, Robbins's model reveals how sacred geography communicates through multiple simultaneous modes. At inner texture level, shrine narrative's structure ritual performance and communal memory. At intertexture level, sacred sites dialogue with ancestral traditions and mythic patterns. At social texture level, ritual spaces construct hierarchies and mediate power relations. At ideological texture level, sacred geography communicates cosmological visions and ethical systems. At sacred texture level, ritual performance evokes divine presence and facilitates encounter.

Recent applications demonstrate Robbins's framework's versatility. His approach has been applied to analyse early Christian rituals, biblical narratives, and contemporary religious discourse. However, application to African Traditional Religion remains limited. This study extends Robbins's socio-rhetorical criticism to NTR sacred geography, demonstrating its utility for African religious interpretation.

### **2.4 Integrating Esler and Robbins for Contextual Theology**

Integrating Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models with Robbins's socio-rhetorical framework provides robust interpretive leverage for analysing ritual space. Esler situates sacred geography within lived communal history, emphasizing its role in sustaining social identity. Robbins interprets its symbolic communication and persuasive power, revealing how ritual spaces function rhetorically.

The integration addresses limitations in each approach individually. Esler's emphasis on social context might overlook symbolic and rhetorical dimensions. Robbins's focus on textual layers might underemphasize historical and cultural embeddedness. Combined, they enable comprehensive analysis respecting both cultural specificity and theological substance.

This integrated framework offers methodological innovation for African theology. It bridges anthropological data and theological meaning, providing contextual hermeneutic suitable for African religious studies. Rather than imposing Western theological categories, it enables African sacred geography to be interpreted on its own terms while engaging comparative frameworks from biblical studies.

The synthesis advances scholarly conversation in multiple directions. It demonstrates how biblical studies methodologies can illuminate African religious systems. It shows how African religious experience can enrich biblical interpretation. It models interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology, theology, and biblical studies. These contributions position the study within emerging trends toward contextual and decolonial theological scholarship.

### **3. Methodology and Hermeneutical Approach**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs qualitative theological-interpretive design combining ethnographic data, hermeneutical reflection, and rhetorical analysis. The approach is primarily theoretical and interpretive rather than empirical. It builds upon existing ethnographic studies while providing new theological interpretation. This design suits the study's objectives by enabling systematic theological analysis of cultural phenomena.

The research follows three integrated stages. First, it gathers data from documented ethnographic studies and field observations. Second, it applies Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural frameworks to analyse how sacred geography sustains communal identity. Third, it employs Robbins's socio-rhetorical method to interpret how ritual spaces communicate theological meaning. These stages occur iteratively rather than sequentially, allowing continuous refinement of interpretation.

### **3.2 Data Sources**

Data derive from multiple sources ensuring comprehensive coverage. Primary sources include documented ethnographic studies of NTR ritual practices from southeastern and southwestern Nigeria. These studies provide detailed descriptions of shrines, groves, ancestral compounds, and river sites. They document ritual performances, oral traditions, and symbolic architecture.

Secondary sources include theological interpretations of sacred space from African and global scholars. These provide comparative frameworks and theoretical resources. Recent sources (2015-2025) ensure engagement with current scholarly conversations. Classical sources establish historical context and theoretical foundations. Field-based observations supplement documentary sources. These include visits to ritual sites, participation in community discussions, and consultations with religious practitioners. Such engagement ensures interpretation remains grounded in lived religious experience rather than abstract theorizing.

### **3.3 Analytical Framework**

Analysis proceeds through Esler's and Robbins's complementary frameworks. Using Esler's socio-historical model, sacred geography is analysed as product of social identity and historical memory. Ritual spaces are read as socio-theological institutions embodying moral values and communal belonging. The socio-cultural dimension examines how sacred geography sustains collective identity across generations through ritual performance.

Robbins's socio-rhetorical approach guides interpretive reading of ritual actions as persuasive "texts." Inner texture analysis examines how ritual narrative's structure performance and encodes meaning. Intertexture analysis explores dialogue between sacred sites and ancestral traditions. Social texture analysis investigates how sacred geography mediates power relations and constructs hierarchies. Ideological texture analysis reveals cosmological visions and ethical systems. Sacred texture analysis interprets how ritual performance evokes divine presence.

### **3.4 Theological Hermeneutics**

The study employs contextual theological hermeneutics recognizing that meaning emerges within particular histories and cultures. Rather than imposing external categories, it reads NTR practices on their own theological terms while engaging comparative frameworks. This approach avoids reductionism and affirms

indigenous religious systems as legitimate theological expressions. Contextual hermeneutics requires epistemological humility. It acknowledges that theological truth manifests diversely across cultures. It resists universalizing particular cultural expressions while maintaining commitment to genuine encounter with transcendent reality. This balance enables respectful dialogue between Christian theology and African Traditional Religion.

The hermeneutical approach also incorporates critical reflection on power dynamics within knowledge production. It recognizes that Western theological categories have often marginalized African religious thought. Decolonial hermeneutics seeks to centre African religious experience as legitimate theological discourse deserving serious engagement.

### **3.5 Justification of Methodological Choice**

The chosen framework suits the study's objectives by balancing empirical observation with theological interpretation. Esler's model provides socio-cultural grounding, preventing abstract theologizing disconnected from lived experience. Robbins's method provides rhetorical depth, revealing how ritual spaces function persuasively. Together they enable integrated theological anthropology of sacred geography.

This methodology advances beyond purely anthropological or purely theological approaches. Anthropology alone might describe ritual practices without interpreting theological meaning. Theology alone might impose external categories without respecting cultural specificity. The integrated approach honours both cultural embeddedness and theological substance. The methodology also responds to contemporary research emphasis on contextual research addressing national development needs. By centring African religious experience and employing rigorous academic frameworks, it advances indigenous knowledge while maintaining international scholarly standards. This dual commitment positions Nigerian theological scholarship within global conversations while serving local contexts.

## **4. Results and Findings**

### **4.1 The Performative Dynamics of Ritual Space**

Analysis reveals that ritual space in NTR functions performatively rather than statically. Sacred power does not inhere passively in geographical locations. Instead, it is continually activated and renewed through ritual

enactment. Spaces such as ancestral groves, community shrines, and consecrated trees serve as "spiritual engines" energizing social ethics and cohesion (Olupona 2014).

Ritual performances re-enact primordial covenants between community and divine beings. These enactments ensure cosmic harmony and social order. The performative character distinguishes NTR sacred geography from merely symbolic interpretations. Sacred space does not merely represent divine presence but actually mediates encounter and transformation.

Esler's socio-cultural framework illuminates this performativity by emphasizing how rituals sustain collective identity through embodied practice (Esler 2017). Ritual enactment is not optional illustration of belief but constitutive practice creating and maintaining communal reality. Sacred geography provides stable spatial framework within which performative theology unfolds across generations.

Robbins's inner texture analysis reveals how ritual narratives structure these performances (Robbins 2016, 98). Each sacred site possesses narrative tradition explaining its consecration and specifying proper ritual protocols. These narratives function rhetorically, persuading participants that divine encounter genuinely occurs through prescribed actions at designated places.

#### **4.2 Sacred Geography as Communal Memory**

Findings demonstrate that sacred geography encodes and transmits communal memory. Each ritual site bears historical narratives of migration, covenant, or divine intervention. These narratives are not merely remembered but spatially embodied. Sacred places function as memory anchors making past events present and accessible (Esler 2017).

The sacred river Idemili among the Igbo illustrates this dynamic powerfully. The river symbolizes purity and justice, reinforcing moral order across generations (Okafor 2021, p.77). Its sacred status derives from narrative tradition recounting how the goddess Idemili established covenant with the community. Ritual performance at the river re-presents this founding covenant, making ancestral commitments binding upon contemporary generations.

Esler's socio-historical model demonstrates how such spatial memory functions socio-theologically. Sacred geography does not preserve history abstractly but embodies it within ongoing communal life. Past and present merge through ritual performance at consecrated sites. This temporal fusion sustains social identity by connecting present community with ancestral foundations.

Robbins's intertexture analysis reveals how sacred sites dialogue with broader mythic traditions (Robbins 2016). Individual shrines participate in larger narrative networks connecting multiple sites and traditions. This intertextual relationship creates rich symbolic field within which particular sacred places acquire meaning. Communal memory thus functions both locally and regionally, linking specific communities to wider cultural heritage.

#### **4.3 Ritual Space and the Mediation of Power**

Analysis reveals that sacred geography mediates complex power relations. Custodians of shrines occupy liminal positions between divine authority and communal governance. Priests and elders derive legitimacy from controlling access to sacred space and interpreting ritual protocols. This positioning grants them significant moral and political authority.

Robbins's social texture analysis illuminates how ritual performances legitimize social hierarchies by portraying them as divinely sanctioned (Robbins 2016). Ritual actions at sacred sites communicate implicit messages about proper social order. Those permitted to enter innermost shrine areas, perform certain rituals, or interpret divine communications occupy elevated status. Sacred geography thus becomes arena where power is both exercised and contested.

However, findings also reveal that sacred spaces serve as arenas for resistance and renewal. When communal leaders fail to maintain moral integrity, ritual spaces may become sites for challenging corrupt authority. The divine presence believed to inhabit sacred geography provides transcendent reference point against which human authority is judged. This dynamic prevents absolute consolidation of power.

Esler's socio-cultural analysis helps interpret this ambivalence. Sacred geography sustains social identity but does not guarantee static power structures (Esler 2017). Communities can reinterpret ritual traditions to address changing circumstances. Sacred space provides continuity while allowing adaptation. This flexibility enables NTR to remain relevant across changing historical contexts.

#### **4.4 Theology of Divine Presence and Immanence**

Theological analysis reveals that sacred spaces in NTR express profoundly immanent conception of divine reality. The divine presence permeates material reality rather than remaining transcendently distant. Ritual acts unveil this immanent presence rather than bridging absolute separation (Mbiti 2015, p.36). This theology challenges dualistic Western categories separating sacred from profane. NTR manifests holistic

theology of presence where divine power indwells cosmos. Sacred geography marks intensity points where divine presence becomes particularly accessible and efficacious. Yet divine reality is not confined to these spaces but pervades all existence. Robbins's sacred texture analysis interprets how ritual performance evokes divine presence (Robbins 2016, p.118). Specific ritual protocols open participants to encounter with spiritual realities. Sacred space provides optimal conditions for such encounter without restricting divine freedom. The theology balances divine immanence with transcendent otherness.

This understanding resonates with biblical conceptions of divine omnipresence while remaining distinctively African in performative orientation. Both traditions affirm God's presence throughout creation. However, NTR emphasizes ritual performance more centrally than many Christian traditions. Sacred geography becomes pedagogical space teaching encounter through embodied practice.

Esler's socio-historical framework situates this theology within lived community experience (Esler 2017, p.89). Divine immanence is not abstract doctrine but practical conviction shaping daily life. Sacred geography makes theological claims tangible and actionable. It transforms belief into embodied reality through spatial practice.

#### **4.5 Sacred Space and Moral Formation**

Further findings demonstrate that sacred geography sustains moral theology within NTR. Rules governing entry into shrines, ritual purity requirements, and behavioural norms reflect implicit theology of holiness. Sacred space demands ethical conformity from those who approach. Robbins's ideological texture analysis reveals how these norms persuade adherents toward communal ethics (Robbins 2016). Ritual requirements are not arbitrary but encode moral vision. Purity protocols teach reverence, self-discipline, and respect for divine reality. Behavioural norms at sacred sites shape character formation beyond ritual contexts.

Esler's socio-cultural reading demonstrates that sacred geography enacts covenantal morality (Esler 2017, p.93). Spatial sanctity anchors ethical responsibility in concrete place. Moral obligations are not abstract principles but commitments to specific divine presences inhabiting particular locations. This spatialization of ethics makes morality tangible and communally enforceable.

The moral dimensions of sacred geography also address social ethics. Rules protecting sacred groves often include ecological provisions preserving biodiversity. Prohibitions against violence near shrines create

zones of peace. Sacred geography thus promotes not only individual virtue but communal wellbeing and environmental stewardship.

## **5. Discussion and Interpretation**

### **5.1 Theological and Anthropological Integration**

This study demonstrates that sacred geography functions simultaneously as theological discourse and social institution. The anthropological significance of ritual space—its role in social cohesion—proves inseparable from theological import as manifestation of sacred power. Esler's and Robbins's frameworks enable analysis respecting both dimensions.

The integration challenges reductionist approaches treating religion as merely social construction or purely supernatural phenomenon. Sacred geography is irreducibly both. It mediates divine-human encounter while structuring social relations. It communicates theological truth while sustaining communal identity. This complexity requires integrated interpretive frameworks.

The theological substance of NTR sacred geography emerges clearly through this analysis. Ritual spaces do not merely symbolize beliefs but enact divine presence. They constitute performative theology where divine-human relationality becomes tangible. This insight elevates NTR beyond primitive superstition to legitimate theological system deserving serious academic engagement.

### **5.2 Sacred Space and Covenantal Theology**

Discussion reveals that sacred geography in NTR operates according to covenantal logic. Divine-human relationships are not abstract but embodied in specific places through specific practices. Sacred sites mark where covenant was established and provide ongoing space for covenant renewal. This covenantal structure parallels biblical theology while maintaining distinctive African character. Both traditions understand divine-human relationship as interactive and obligational rather than unilateral. Both spatialize covenant through sacred places. However, NTR disperses sacred geography more extensively than biblical temple-centred tradition.

Esler's socio-cultural analysis illuminates how spatial covenant sustains communal identity (Esler 2017). Communities define themselves through relationship to sacred places. Ritual performance at these sites enacts communal commitment to ancestral covenants. Sacred geography thus functions as charter for social order and moral life.

### **5.3 Rhetoric of Sacred Space**

Robbins's framework reveals that sacred geography functions rhetorically, persuading participants toward particular theological visions. Ritual spaces are not neutral but inherently argumentative. They make claims about divine reality, proper worship, and moral obligation.

The persuasive power operates through multiple rhetorical modes. Architecturally, shrine designs communicate cosmological order. Ritually, prescribed performances habituate participants into theological worldviews. Narratively, site histories establish divine legitimacy. Experientially, encounters at sacred places validate belief systems.

This rhetorical understanding enriches theological interpretation. Sacred geography does not merely reflect beliefs but actively shapes them through persuasive practice. Theology emerges from engagement with ritual spaces rather than preceding such engagement. This performative epistemology characterizes African religious thought broadly.

### **5.4 Contribution to African Theological Discourse**

This study extends African theology by articulating contextual theology of sacred geography grounded in indigenous religious experience. It demonstrates that NTR offers sophisticated theological grammar for understanding divine presence, moral order, and communal identity. Sacred geography constitutes legitimate theological discourse deserving recognition alongside Christian and Islamic theologies.

The study also advances methodological innovation. Applying Esler's and Robbins's frameworks to African Traditional Religion demonstrates their adaptability beyond biblical contexts. It models how biblical studies methodologies can illuminate African religious systems without imposing Christian categories. This methodological contribution enriches both African studies and biblical scholarship.

Furthermore, the research promotes interreligious dialogue. By articulating NTR theology in academic discourse accessible to Christian scholars, it facilitates conversation between traditions. Understanding sacred geography enables Christians to appreciate African religious insights while maintaining theological distinctiveness. Such dialogue serves both scholarly and pastoral purposes.

### **5.5 Implications for Theological Education**

Understanding sacred geography through these interpretive frameworks can enrich African theological education significantly. It promotes contextual hermeneutics valuing indigenous religious systems as

theological resources rather than obstacles to Christian mission. Such integration aligns with inculturation theology and supports authentic African Christianity. Theological curricula should include systematic study of African sacred geography using rigorous academic frameworks. This would train ministers and theologians to engage African religious contexts more effectively. It would also preserve indigenous theological wisdom threatened by rapid modernization.

The methodological approaches demonstrated here provide pedagogical models. Students can learn to apply socio-rhetorical and socio-cultural analysis to various African contexts. This develops critical thinking while respecting cultural particularity. This approach enriches theological and intercultural scholarship by integrating indigenous perspectives into current research practices, ensuring that knowledge production remains contextually grounded and globally responsive.

## **6. Contribution, Impact, and Policy Relevance**

### **6.1 Unique Contribution to Knowledge**

This study makes several unique contributions to theological scholarship. First, it constructs systematic theology of place rooted in African cosmology. While anthropologists have documented sacred spaces, this study provides theological interpretation. It articulates how sacred geography functions as divine revelation and moral pedagogy within NTR.

Second, the research demonstrates methodological innovation by integrating Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models with Robbins's socio-rhetorical framework. This synthesis creates replicable analytical approach for studying indigenous religions. The methodology bridges anthropological observation and theological interpretation, serving both disciplines.

Third, the study advances contextual theology by centring African religious experience. It demonstrates that African sacred geography offers legitimate theological discourse enriching global conversations about divine presence and human flourishing. This contribution supports decolonial theological scholarship.

Fourth, the research enhances interreligious understanding. By articulating NTR theology in academic discourse, it facilitates dialogue between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. This promotes mutual respect while maintaining theological distinctiveness. Such dialogue serves both scholarly and pastoral purposes in religiously plural Nigeria.

### **6.2 Theological and Ecclesial Impact**

The study impacts theological discourse by expanding understanding of how sacred space functions theologically. It challenges dualistic Western categories and promotes holistic theology of divine presence. African theology gains systematic articulation of indigenous insights often marginalized in Christian theological education.

For Christian churches in Nigeria, this research promotes more informed engagement with African religious contexts. Pastors and theologians can appreciate African sacred geography without abandoning Christian commitments. This understanding supports authentic inculturation rather than cultural imperialism. It also facilitates effective evangelism respecting African dignity.

The research validates African religious experience as theologically significant. This validation supports Christian Africans maintaining continuity with cultural heritage while embracing Christian faith. It addresses identity conflicts many African Christians experience between religious conversion and cultural belonging.

### **6.3 Policy Relevance for Theological Education**

Findings inform curriculum design in religious and theological education. Nigerian universities should incorporate systematic study of indigenous religions using rigorous academic frameworks like those demonstrated here. This goal can be strengthened through institutional support mechanisms such as targeted funding for curriculum development, faculty capacity building, and research publications.

Theological seminaries particularly need reformed curricula. Many currently neglect African Traditional Religion or treat it superficially. Systematic theological analysis of sacred geography and other NTR topics should become standard components. This would produce clergy better equipped for ministry in African contexts.

Policy recommendations include the establishment of research centres dedicated to African theology and religion. These centres would serve as hubs for preserving indigenous theological wisdom, training scholars in contextual and intercultural methodologies, and producing high-impact publications that advance African theological scholarship. Strategic national funding initiatives could catalyse such institutional development by supporting infrastructure, research dissemination, and collaborative networks across universities.

Additionally, interreligious dialogue initiatives should receive policy support. Government and academic institutions can sponsor conferences, publications, and collaborative research bringing together African

Traditional Religion practitioners, Christian theologians, and Islamic scholars. Such dialogue promotes national unity while respecting religious diversity.

#### **6.4 Contribution to National Development**

This research contributes to national development in multiple dimensions. Culturally, it preserves indigenous theological knowledge threatened by rapid modernization and cultural erosion. Documenting and interpreting African sacred geography sustain cultural heritage for future generations.

Morally, the study supports ethical reconstruction. By articulating indigenous moral theology, it provides resources addressing contemporary ethical challenges. African sacred geography communicates environmental ethics, communal responsibility, and respect for ancestral wisdom. These values support sustainable development and social cohesion.

Educationally, the research advances indigenous knowledge within higher education. It demonstrates how African religious thought can be studied with academic rigor equal to Western theologies. This supports decolonization of Nigerian education while maintaining international scholarly standards.

Politically, the study promotes interreligious understanding crucial for national unity. Nigeria's religious diversity creates potential for conflict. Academic research demonstrating theological sophistication across traditions reduces prejudice and promotes mutual respect. This contributes to peaceful coexistence.

#### **6.5 Recommendations for Further Impact**

To maximise impact, several actions are recommended. First, research outcomes should be widely disseminated through peer-reviewed publications, academic conferences, and open-access educational resources. Strategic funding support can facilitate the translation of key findings into major Nigerian languages, thereby making the knowledge accessible to diverse communities beyond academia and enhancing societal relevance.

Second, theological institutions should integrate findings into curricula at undergraduate and graduate levels. Faculty development workshops can train educators in socio-rhetorical and socio-cultural methodologies for African contexts.

Third, collaborative research networks should be established to connect scholars working on African religion and theology across Nigerian universities. Institutional support and sustainable funding

mechanisms can strengthen these networks, fostering interdisciplinary exchange and amplifying the national and global impact of indigenous scholarship.

Fourth, public theology initiatives should communicate findings to church leaders, government officials, and civil society. Academic insights must inform practical ministry and policy development to achieve full societal impact.

Fifth, international partnerships should be developed with global theological institutions. Publishing in international journals and participating in global conferences positions Nigerian scholarship within worldwide conversations while advancing local contexts.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study has examined ritual space and sacred power within Nigerian Traditional Religion through integrated application of Philip Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models and Vernon Robbins's socio-rhetorical framework. The analysis demonstrates that sacred geography in NTR constitutes living theology of place—a dynamic intersection of divine presence, social identity, and moral order.

The research establishes several key conclusions. First, ritual space in NTR functions performatively rather than symbolically. Sacred power is activated through ritual enactment, making divine-human encounter tangible. Second, sacred geography encodes communal memory, sustaining collective identity across generations through spatial embodiment of ancestral covenants. Third, ritual spaces mediate complex power relations while providing transcendent reference against which human authority is judged. Fourth, NTR manifests profoundly immanent theology of divine presence pervading material reality. Fifth, sacred geography sustains covenantal morality through spatial sanctity that anchors ethical responsibility.

The study's originality lies in providing systematic theological interpretation of African sacred space using contemporary biblical studies methodologies. Previous scholarship privileged ethnographic description over theological analysis. This research demonstrates that NTR sacred geography constitutes sophisticated theological discourse communicating divine agency, ethical vision, and communal solidarity.

Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models prove highly effective for analysing how sacred geography sustains community through lived practice. His emphasis on social identity and historical embodiment illuminates why ritual spaces remain vital across generations. Robbins's socio-rhetorical approach reveals how sacred geography persuades through multiple interpretive textures simultaneously. Together, these

frameworks enable comprehensive theological anthropology respecting both cultural embeddedness and theological substance. The theological significance extends beyond NTR specifically. Understanding African sacred geography enriches global theological discourse on divine presence, sacramental theology, and ethics of place. It challenges Western dualisms while resonating with biblical themes. This dialogue advances both African theology and global theological conversations.

Contextually, the research serves Nigerian development objectives. It preserves indigenous theological knowledge, promotes interreligious understanding, and supports cultural heritage. It advances higher education by demonstrating rigorous academic engagement with African religious thought. It provides ethical resources addressing contemporary moral challenges.

Future research should explore several directions. Comparative theological studies examining African sacred geography alongside biblical temple motifs would enrich understanding of both traditions. Analysis of how Christian sacred space functions in African contexts would illuminate inculturation processes. Study of urban sacred geography as African societies modernize would address contemporary transformations. Regional comparative studies across West African religious systems would identify broader patterns.

Methodologically, future research should continue developing socio-rhetorical and socio-cultural approaches for African contexts. Application to other indigenous religions would test framework adaptability. Interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology, theology, and religious studies would advance comprehensive understanding.

By affirming sacred geography as legitimate theological category, this study contributes to decolonization of African theology. It centres African religious experience as authoritative source for theological reflection rather than object requiring external interpretation. This repositioning promotes scholarly equity and contributes meaningfully to global theological discourse.

The study ultimately demonstrates that Nigerian Traditional Religion offers sophisticated theological wisdom deserving serious academic engagement. Sacred geography communicates profound insights about divine presence, communal belonging, and moral responsibility. These insights serve both scholarly understanding and practical application in religiously diverse Nigeria.

As Nigeria navigates modernization while preserving cultural heritage, theological understanding of sacred geography becomes increasingly vital. This research provides theoretical and practical resources for that navigation. It affirms indigenous wisdom while engaging contemporary scholarship. It respects tradition

while addressing present challenges. This balance positions the study to contribute meaningfully to Nigeria's cultural and moral renewal aligned with national development objectives.

The integration of Esler's and Robbins's methodologies establishes replicable framework for future African theological scholarship. Researchers can apply these approaches to diverse indigenous contexts, producing rigorous academic work that honours cultural specificity. This methodological contribution may prove the study's most enduring legacy.

In conclusion, sacred geography in Nigerian Traditional Religion embodies performative theology where divine presence, communal identity, and moral vision converge. Understanding this convergence through socio-rhetorical and socio-cultural analysis enriches African theology, promotes interreligious dialogue, and supports national development. The research affirms that African religious experience constitutes legitimate and sophisticated theological discourse deserving central place in global conversations about humanity's encounter with the divine.

## References

- Awolalu, J. O. (1979). *Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites*. London: Longman.
- Esler, P. F. (2017). *The early Christian world* (2nd ed.). London & New York: Routledge.
- Mgaya, E. S. (2023). The meaning, spiritual foundation, and mythology of African sacred landscapes. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 53(3–4), 289–316.
- Mbiti, J. S. (2015). *African religions and philosophy* (3rd ed.). Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Okoronkwo, M. E. (2024a). Negotiating the sacred: A socio-historical and cultural critique of sacred spaces in Markan Christianity and African traditional religion. *Icheke Journal of the Faculty of Humanities*, 22(2), 171–198.
- Okoronkwo, M. E. (2024b). Sacred geographies: Decolonizing the comparative study of sacred spaces in Lukan Christianity and African traditional religion. *African Journal of Biblical Studies*, 39, 281–306.
- Okoronkwo, M. E. (2025). Sacred spaces in Matthean Christianity and African traditional religion: A socio-historical and cultural comparative analysis. *International Journal of Arts, Communication and Pedagogy*, 4(1), 142–165.
- Olupona, J. K. (2014). *African religions: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robbins, V. K. (1996). *Exploring the texture of texts: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Sanneh, L. (2016). *Beyond jihad: The pacifist tradition in West African Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ukpong, J. S. (2002). Inculturation hermeneutics: An African approach to biblical interpretation. In M. W. Dube (Ed.), *Reading the Bible in the global village: African perspectives* (pp. 17–32). Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.

Walls, A. F. (2002). *The cross-cultural process in Christian history*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.