

Soil and identity in the indigenous spirituality of the Ndaus of south-eastern Zimbabwe: Unlocking the potential for environmental sustainability in the 21st century

**Author:**Macloud Sipeyiye^{1,2} **Affiliations:**

¹Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR), College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Religious Studies and Ethics, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Midlands State University, Zvishavane, Zimbabwe

Corresponding author:

Macloud Sipeyiye,
sipeyiyem@staff.msu.ac.zw

Dates:

Received: 11 Oct. 2025

Accepted: 18 Dec. 2025

Published: 05 Mar. 2026

How to cite this article:

Sipeyiye, M., 2026, 'Soil and identity in the indigenous spirituality of the Ndaus of south-eastern Zimbabwe: Unlocking the potential for environmental sustainability in the 21st century', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47(1), a3685.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v47i1.3685>

Copyright:

© 2026. The Author.

Licensee: AOSIS.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Global climate change threatens both human and non-human lives due to unprecedented high temperatures and abnormal volumes of rain resulting in floods damaging the land and threatening livelihoods. This article employs the re-enchantment theory to engage the Ndaus' indigenous spiritual relationship with the soil with a view to promoting a framework that engenders an innovative and sustainable response to the threats of climate change in Zimbabwe in line with the vision of the Africa's Agenda 2063 and UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030. This theoretical article engages literature on Ndaus' spirituality in particular and African spirituality in general with a desire to finding out how elements of this spiritual heritage around soil can be adopted and harnessed in proffering lasting solutions to the crisis of regional climate change. It then filters the gathered data through document analysis. The findings underscore the importance of local and culturally centred soil knowledge in ensuring ecological health, combating the negative effects of climate-related hazards and improving the traditional livelihoods of the people.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article calls for a sincere integration of the indigenous spiritual heritage-based soil and natural resources conservation frameworks and the global scientific-based approaches in combating climate change.

Keywords: climate change; land and soil; Ndaus' spirituality; Sustainable Development Goals; Africa's Agenda 2063.

Introduction

The world is facing an unprecedented and urgent environmental crisis, marked by escalating temperatures and unpredictable rainfall patterns that swing between two extreme ends of erratic rainfall and abnormal and catastrophic amounts. The world's climate is, therefore, experiencing a large and continuing shift that threatens both human and non-human lives on earth (Lindsey & Dahlman 2020). While much of the global discourse on climate change focuses on technological innovation, policy reform and economic solutions, these approaches often fail to account for the deep-seated cultural and spiritual dimensions of humanity's relationship with the natural world. A dominant, secular worldview has often reduced the earth to a mere resource for exploitation, severing the spiritual ties that have historically fostered stewardship and respect. Thus, Manyevere et al. (2020) aver that indigenous cultures hold significant knowledge of soils, environments, conservation and sustainability attained by experience and tested through many generations of living close to the land. The article aims to find out how elements of the indigenous Ndaus' spiritual heritage around soil can be adopted and harnessed to proffer lasting solutions to the crisis of climate change. This article argues that a lasting and sustainable response to the climate change crisis requires a fundamental shift in perspective – one that re-engages with the soil not as an inert object but as a living entity with profound sacred value. This study explores the potential of the Ndaus' indigenous spiritual relationship with the soil to promote an innovative framework for environmental sustainability in Zimbabwe. Drawing on Watling's (2009) re-enchantment theory, which posits a return to a more sacred and holistic understanding of nature, the article investigates how Ndaus' spiritual beliefs – where the land is intrinsically linked to ancestral identity and community well-being – can offer a powerful counter-narrative to the

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Echoes of eco-discourses' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Wessel Bentley.

prevailing soil degradation. This article intends to do three things, that is to explore the key elements of the Ndaun indigenous spiritual relationship with the soil and the natural world, analyse how these spiritual beliefs can inform a sustainable and culturally resonant framework for addressing the threats of climate change in Zimbabwe and finally evaluate the potential of this framework to contribute to the visions outlined in Africa's Agenda 2063 Aspiration number 1 goal number 7 and Aspiration number 5 goal number 16 and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) number 15 and 12. This article is a theoretical exploration that relies on a document and content analysis of existing literature on Ndaun and broader African indigenous spiritualities. While acknowledging the diverse nature of African spiritual traditions, this study focuses specifically on the Ndaun to provide a detailed and grounded analysis. The article advances the wisdom of indigenous spiritual traditions as the basis for unlocking a new, culturally resonant path towards environmental preservation that is both effective and sustainable.

Theoretical framework

The article employs Watling's (2009) re-enchantment theory as a lens to analyse the environmental crisis caused by a secular, utilitarian relationship with the land. The re-enchantment theory counters the disenchantment theory that accuses religion of complicity in the degradation of the environment (Watling 2009). The disenchantment of nature theory has its origins traceable to Max Weber's late 19th and early 20th century analysis of modernity. Weber advanced the argument that the rise of scientific rationalism, bureaucracy and capitalism, gave rise to the disenchantment of the world (Weber 1992). He submitted that the modern age had stripped the natural world of its magical, spiritual and mystical qualities resulting in the understanding that portrays the world as no longer a mysterious cosmos to be revered. This modern Western world view reduces nature to 'material' without life or spirit. It portrays the natural world as a mechanism to be understood, predicted and controlled for human purposes. Premodern ways of perceiving it as alive, interdependent and sacred are replaced with a mechanical understanding, seeing it as a secular repository of resources to be exploited (Watling 2009). This secular and rationalist worldview is fundamental to the current environmental crisis for it created an attitude that treated nature and its resources as a passive, quantifiable object devoid of intrinsic value, subjecting it to unbridled exploitation. The re-enchantment theory holds that positive or negative attitudes for or against the environment are a result of a way of conceptualising the world that stimulates either constructive or destructive actions towards it. The re-enchantment theory, therefore, revalues nature and disenchant humanity and the modern world view, creating human moral and spiritual reorientation in relation to it and re-roots humanity in and revaluing nature, evoking a wider environmental identity.

The theory emphasises the need for new imaginations about nature that give it meaning, subjectivity and sacredness (Sipeyiye 2020). It is not a call for a return to pre-modern superstition but rather a profound shift in consciousness: a rediscovery of nature's sacred, non-utilitarian value that is owed to indigenous spirituality.

The theory helps in providing guidance on navigating the challenges of climate change through analysing the possible contribution of the intricate Ndaun-soil relationship. The theory has, of course, its grey side as it tends to downplay the utilitarian value of nature that realises the human need for food, shelter and energy. Nonetheless, its focus must be understood in terms of a give-and-take relationship between humankind and nature: 'We take care of the land and the earth also takes care of us' (Merchant 2005:85). The theory of re-enchantment provides the essential analytical tool for this study's investigation into the intricacy of soil and identity in the Ndaun's indigenous spirituality. The crisis of climate change, at its core, is a manifestation of a disenchanted worldview that has replaced traditional knowledge with a resource-centric mentality that is geared on amassing wealth through exploiting nature – what Watling (2009) has referred to as 'moneytheism'. The re-enchantment theory aids the appreciation of the Ndaun indigenous spiritual connection to the soil as a potent example of a re-enriched relationship with nature.

Conceptualising indigenous spirituality and climate change

The two concepts of indigenous spirituality and climate change used in this article need to be unpacked as the assumptions carried by certain terms can obscure relevant phenomena (Taylor 2010). Indigenous spirituality is rooted in a robust belief that all living beings, from flora to fauna, possess a spiritual essence, thereby advocating for a holistic worldview that prizes the fundamental interconnectedness of all life and nature (Sipeyiye 2020). The article deliberately avoids 'indigenous religion' because religion typically denotes organised and institutional belief, while 'spirituality' encompasses one's deepest moral values and most profound religious experience (Taylor 2010). While many predominant 'world religions' are often described as world-denying, concerned with transcendence or divine rescue, spirituality is viewed as a personal quest for growth, understanding of one's rightful place in the cosmos, and is intrinsically linked to environmental concern and action. Therefore, spirituality represents an effort to tap into the profound insights of indigenous communities, which include a deep reverence for the earth and its rhythms and a recognition of the sacred nature of the land and its inhabitants (Watling 2009). The indigenous spirituality perspective fundamentally prioritises sustainable living, dedicated environmental stewardship and a strong sense of responsibility to maintain the sustained balance of the earth's ecosystems (Daniel 1980). It is deeply embedded within the indigenous epistemologies, religious-cultural assets and traditional practices of indigenous

communities worldwide. Many indigenous communities operate at the grassroots and may lack sophisticated approaches for tackling complex challenges like climate change. However, they often rely on their indigenous knowledge systems, where spirituality remains the core foundation. This indigenous spirituality invariably embodies a land-based connection that emphasises a strong link to ancestral lands and acknowledges the spiritual significance of the natural world. Above all, it actively motivates a relationship of respect and reciprocity with nature, moving away from exploitation or domination (Matsapa 2023). Through prioritising life in harmony with the environment, indigenous spirituality encourages sustainability, resilience and community well-being, utilising key aspects such as ceremonies, rituals, storytelling, indigenous ecological knowledge and community-based practices (Datta et al. 2014).

Climate change comes in two types. One is natural climate cycles that cause wet and dry years and hot and cold seasons. These natural cycles have, over the years, caused flooding and droughts. The other and more dangerous type that this article focuses on is the human-induced or human-driven climate change (Modie-Moroka, Malinga & Dube 2024). Anthropogenic activities profoundly impact the natural environment, primarily triggering climate change through actions such as significant damage to vegetation and land cover, which in turn alters weather patterns. These changes inflict serious consequences upon rural communities manifesting as heat waves, cyclones, floods, landslides, soil erosion, earthquakes, droughts and diseases (Matsapa 2023). Moreover, the crucial soil microbes are washed away leading to poor soil quality that threatens communities with both food insecurity and diseases. This land degradation and the loss of quality agricultural soils often spark a 'land rush', causing people to disregard the precautionary indigenous environmental ethics and adopt suspect foreign farming methods intended to boost crop yields. Consequently, future generations within many indigenous communities are rendered more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than is often assumed.

Research methods and design

This theoretical article gathers data using a qualitative desktop approach. A qualitative desk research, also called secondary research, is a research method that involves using existing data (Cieden 2025). It is best understood as a data collection technique that is integrated into or enables a variety of formal qualitative research designs, most commonly those focused on historical analyses, case studies and content-based analyses. The rationale for adopting this approach was that the article is a case study of the indigenous Ndaui spirituality that uses abundant literature (both print and electronic documents) on the Ndaui indigenous spirituality. The article seeks to find out how elements of the said spiritual heritage around soil can be adopted and harnessed to proffer lasting solutions to the crisis of climate change, thus complementing and reinforcing the foci of

Africa's Agenda 2063 and the UN SDGs on sustainable management of natural resources. The gathered data were filtered through document analysis. Document analysis focuses specifically on the systematic examination of documents that may be written, visual or physical materials with a view to interpreting the meaning, structure, context and purpose of the document to derive insights. Thus, document analysis is predominantly a qualitative method, involving deeper interpretation of the document's context and authorial intent (Williams 2025). Its advantage is that it is a broader method that can employ various analysis techniques, including content analysis, thematic analysis or contextual analysis. The article used open-access literature including journal articles and books that are available on the Internet to single out common themes on the Ndaui indigenous spirituality and environmental consciousness. The use of various sources of secondary data ensured that the researcher had access to common and unique experiences of the Ndaui with their spirituality.

Findings

Soil and identity among the Ndaui

The search for the identity of the Ndaui can never be complete without reference to their indigenous spiritual relationship with the natural world and soil in particular. The name 'Ndaui' means not just a place, but a sacred geographical territory entwined with the Ndaui people's sacred history. Muyambo (2018) says that the Ndaui people have come to identify Chipinge and Chimanimani (formerly Gazaland) as their non-negotiable *ndaui* [places] and heritage. The mantra: *MuNdaui mundau yake* [a Ndaui in their birthright and bona-fide space] expressed this deep connection with their space (Musanga 2024:394). In Ndaui indigenous spirituality, the soil symbolises belonging, connectedness and continuity. Their spirituality inherently regards the soil as sacred, as a repository of ancestral spirits and as the bedrock of communal identity. The soil is not an innocent economic asset, but a spiritual inheritance to be protected. The soil is not just a substrate for crops; it is the physical manifestation of ancestors and the foundation of all life. It is for this reason that for the Ndaui, soil is priceless; it offers them an identity, a livelihood and it is sacred because it forms a close and enduring bond between the living and the dead (Mbiti 1969). The notion of the ancestral spirits among many African communities expresses the increased power of the dead in their role as the guardians of the soils and the people (Schoffeleers 1978). Ranger (1988) concurs when he avers that:

[A]frican religious ideas were very much ideas about relationships, whether with other living people or with spirits of the dead or with animals or with cleared bush or with the bush. (p. 687)

There is a litany of rituals at the level of the family that include new homestead marking, birth and burial rituals that express this deep connection. On a larger communal level, there are critical installation rituals for chiefs.

The new homestead marking ritual is done by the father or senior male elder of the family of the occupant-to-be, the son, on the new space (Pfukwa 2019). He performs the ritual in his capacity as the sacred practitioner by virtue of being the family head who communes with the spirit elders. Thus, the decision by the father to allocate some land and space is a sacred and inviolable resolution. He invokes the presence of the spirit elders through ritually driving a *hoko* [wooden peg] in the ground at the site, thus binding the new occupant with the soil, the ancestors and everything around the space. *Hoko* is an authoritative and powerful signal of presence and ownership of the soil and the space. It is a ritual that identifies the occupant with the soil, the ancestral spirits and the space. The soil is ordinarily sacred because it bears the remains of the ancestors. The peg is a symbolic physical and spiritual marker of the family's claim to the land and space (Pfukwa 2019). The same ritual is also done in marking the field boundaries in the distribution of land to households by the village head (see also Manyawu & Parichi 2018). A ritual of *doro rechiushi* [traditional brew to announce presence in a new space] follows after the construction of a structure on the site to officially announce the settlement on the space. Libations are poured onto the ground: firstly by the family head and secondly by the village head to demonstrate the binding of the soil, the family (occupant) and the ancestral spirits together (Taringa 2014).

Birth rituals include the ritual of disposing *chikumvu* [umbilical cord]. *Chikumvu* is buried in the soil on the ancestral home. This is a ritual that ties the people to the soil and the ancestral spirits. The ritual operates like a sacred agreement – a guarantee or a down-payment (a deposit) with the soil and the ancestral spirits on a commitment to the ultimate 'home' (grave) in the soil that will take place at death and burial. The ritual act symbolically links and spiritually identifies individuals with the soil, the family and the entire community (Amoah 2006: xviii). Thus, in most African indigenous spiritualities and cultural beliefs, and particularly among the Ndau, nature is intricately entwined with human life. For example, the Ndau take up soil type names in a practice that expresses this symbiotic relationship. Names such as Jiho (red soils), Mashapa (loam soils), Mavhu (soils), Dongo (clay soils), Majeche (sandy soils) and Musani (river sand) are common among the Ndau (see Nyamapfeni 1983). Names or descriptive words related to soil could have influenced naming traditions, such as referring to someone from a region known for a certain type of soil in much the same way people could be named after several specific geographic characteristics, for instance *VaDondo* (Maganga & Pfukwa 2022).

The burial of the young infants along riverbanks and valleys further demonstrates this close connection. Besides keeping the infant cool, the cool soils of the designated sites resemble or symbolise the body of the bereaved mother. They are believed to keep the mother of the infant wet – a metaphor for fertility (Shenjere-Nyabezi 2015). Burial in dry ground is believed to dry up the mother's fertility and makes the

deceased infant angry. In the event that a Ndau person dies away from home and no trace of their remains is possible, the Ndau collect soil from the presumed site of the disaster, wrap it in the garments of the deceased making a symbolic body that they lay to rest in their *mbatso* ['house'-grave] following appropriate burial ritual (Sipeyiye & Chigidi 2022). Bakare (1993:46) opines that for Africans, '[L]and (house) is a place of connection with mother earth, where one's umbilical cord has been buried, where one's ancestors are deposited, a place of connection and orientation'. So, the two, the burial of the umbilical cord and the ultimate burial of the body, combine to confer the birthright on the Ndau to the soil. This goes to show that among the Ndau, the soil is the people and the people are the soil. This philosophy encapsulates the central tenet of the Ndau belief system in particular and many African and global indigenous worldviews in general where identity, history and life itself are seen as inalienable from the soil, the earth. The Ndau worldview represents the view of the world as a living being, its totality including not only natural elements such as plants, animals and humans but also spiritual elements such as spirits, ancestors and future generations. In this view, nature does not belong to humans, but humans to nature. I have looked at this theme elsewhere in detail (see Sipeyiye 2020; Sipeyiye & Dube 2023). It expresses the deep, reciprocal relationship between the Ndau and their ancestral soils. The soil becomes the 'home', and therefore, the Ndau are organically tied to the soil in a metaphorical sense (Konyana & Sipeyiye 2015). This means that their spirituality is world affirming as opposed to world denying. As a result, the Ndau have a tapestry of rituals that are meant to protect the soils and the biodiversity.

The connection of the Ndau people and other Shona groups with the soil [*ivhu*] provides a healing and rejuvenating value, rooted in the ritual of walking barefoot on the ancestral homestead to connect with family spirit elders, particularly during times of hardship (Taringa 2014). This spiritual linkage is the source of the '*vana vevhu*' [sons and daughters of the soil] mantra, which was critically mobilised into a political philosophy by Ndabaningi Sithole (1959). Kunonga (1996) asserts that the land was a worthy cause for which to pay the ultimate price, transforming '*vana venhu*' into a powerful spiritual and political rallying cry during the rise of the Zimbabwean nationalism, effectively linking the struggle for independence to the historical and cultural identity of the African population (see also Bakare 1993).

On a communal level, the installation rituals for chiefs highlights a critical connection with the soil. Taringa (2014) notes the installation ritual among the Shona groups that is also like the Ndau where the chief, at installation, holds soil in clenched fist to show commitment to preserving the soil and everything that grows on it for it sustains humanity. To this end, the Ndau believe that they have a sacred duty to protect and work responsibly on the land and bequeath it to future generations in good shape. By employing the re-enchantment framework, this study sheds light on how

this traditional belief system offers a powerful and sustainable response to modern ecological threats. It pushes discourse beyond mere technical fixes to a deeper, more transformative solution rooted in a renewed spiritual appreciation for the soil.

Ndau indigenous spiritual beliefs about soil and the threats of climate change

The climate change confronting Zimbabwe and the rest of the world, manifesting through environmental challenges that include floods, global warming, heat waves and soil erosion, is not merely the result of inadequate policy or technology but also symptomatic of a broken relationship with the soil. The Ndau indigenous spiritual beliefs provide numerous sites for building a sustainable and culturally resonant framework for addressing the threats of climate change in Zimbabwe. Matsapa and Thelma (2025) observed among the Ndau of Chimanimani that their local soil knowledge is a prerequisite for water preservation strategy where the conservation concept is embedded within their local way of life. They aver that local knowledge and indigenous resource governance mechanisms generate water resource abundance and ecological stability. The Ndau's spiritual and cultural ceremonies, for example, are part of their soil resource management mechanisms that provide protection of their water sources (rivers, wetlands and streams) crucial for microbial diversity and human sustenance. Soil microbes act as primary agents in decomposing organic matter and a medium for nutrient transport. The water sources that thrive on successful soil management are the habitat for diverse beneficial microbes. Matsapa and Thelma (2025) cited the case of the Ndau communities in Rusitu valley in Chimanimani where local small-scale farmers abandoned their indigenous soil resource management mechanisms for the new foreign ones, overlooking their attendant consequences. There were increased cases of wanton degradation of the soil and vegetation through mining activities and clearing new farming spaces, mainly by the unemployed youth. These human activities impacted negatively on the communities' resilience to climate change leading to natural hazards such as cyclones. For example, local communities partly attributed Cyclone Idai, the cyclone that hit Chimanimani and Chipinge in 2019, to the shift from indigenous environmental ethics to foreign (often Western) attitudes towards nature (Chirongoma & Chitando 2021; Matsapa & Thelma 2025).

The neglect of local and culturally centred soil knowledge partly exposed the vulnerable indigenous communities to natural hazards that include cyclones, floods and landslides. Ecologists and Western trained scientists contend that these calamities cause the reduction of beneficial soil microbes such as *Sinorhizobium* and *Mesorhizobium* and nutrients through leaching and the washing away of the topsoil by floods, thereby disturbing sustainable farming practices. For example, cyclones Eline and Idai in February 2000 and March 2019, respectively, destroyed rivers causing them to widen abnormally. Climate change-related hazards exploit the vulnerability and environmental exposure of local

indigenous people. These hazards have a negative effect on the local people's crops, considerably disturbing their livelihoods as they subject the victims to hunger and diseases (see Sipeyiye & Dube 2023). Stream bank agriculture, over-application of synthetic fertilisers and herbicides cause climate-induced disturbances as they run contrary to the local indigenous knowledge base that emphasises the conservation of riverbeds, wetlands and the natural ecosystems used since time immemorial.

Discussion

Soil and identity among the Ndau as forming a strong heritage-based environmental conservation framework

The Ndau people's indigenous spiritual relationship with the soil is in sync with the tenets of the re-enchantment theory as it provides strong sites for developing a framework that engenders an innovative and sustainable response to climate change in Zimbabwe in line with the vision of the Africa's Agenda 2063 and UN SDGs 2030. The article, therefore, promotes a Ndau heritage-based soil conservation framework that seeks to integrate the Ndau indigenous spiritual heritage around the soil with modern soil preservation approaches. It calls for a shift from a colonial mindset that generally views the epistemologies of local indigenous communities as backward and lacking capacity to influence and inspire the current and future lives of their beholders. The envisaged framework aligns with the visions outlined in Africa's Agenda 2063 (Aspiration 1 Goal 7, Aspiration 5 Goal 16) and the UN SDGs 2, 12, 15 and 17. The Ndau beliefs about soil discussed previously play a crucial role in conserving biodiversity and preventing environmental degradation. The concept of *zvisikwa* [biodiversity] that thrives on the soil highlights the deep-seated symbolism and spiritual meanings rooted in the Ndau religio-cultural context, which guides the utilisation of natural resources in a systematic and rational way that acknowledges the soil's regenerative capacity. The sacred connection underscores a sense of mutual benefit and collective responsibility towards the soil and the entire environment, thereby promoting positive attitudes and communal existence. The framework is sustained by oral traditions, in the form of beliefs about soil, that are vital for soil and biodiversity stewardship across generations. It seeks to reduce the loss and damage caused by a wholesale embrace of anti-local knowledge approaches to soil and natural resource preservation. The framework pushes for an appreciation of the beauty, complexity and mystery of the soil and the entire natural world that inculcates a sense of wonder and awe. This approach inspires a protective and caring relationship that counters the emotional detachment advanced by scientific objectivity. The framework validates and legitimises non-Western, non-secular knowledge systems, particularly those of indigenous communities, and seeks to locate mutually benefiting synergies with the science perspectives (see Nyamapfene 1983). Thus, it advances the re-enchantment

of nature moving away from ecologically unfriendly disenchantment approaches. I concur with Awuah-Nyamkeye (2009) who, writing about the Akan of Ghana, argues that there must be an integration of the perspectives of science and indigenous spiritualities and culture to provide a lasting solution to climatic crises. The framework takes note of the fact that many indigenous societies have denigrated disenchantment and have, for many centuries, maintained a spiritual relationship with the soil that has enabled sustainable living.

There are profound and mutually reinforcing synergies between the Ndau's spiritual reverence for the soil and the UN SDGs on the preservation of inland resources. The former is rooted in indigenous spiritual beliefs and practice, while the latter is a global science-based framework. Regardless, both have a common objective of ensuring sustainable management and preservation of the land for the well-being of current and future generations. The Ndau's spiritual connection with the soil can motivate a strong sense of ethical responsibility towards the land and everything on it. The connection means that the soils are an inherited legacy that must be protected and honoured (see Pfukwa 2019). The belief retrieves a powerful sense of ethical responsibility that entrusts the good stewardship of the soil because neglecting and/or abusing the same is construed as disrespecting the ancestors, thereby jeopardising the well-being of the living. The spiritual connection inherently condemns harmful practices against the soil.

The other Shona sub-groups regard the earth as *musana* [the back] of the ancestors (Taringa 2014:48). In the same way, everything that grows on the ancestors' back is imbued with awesomeness that commands reverence. In this regard, the whole approach to the soils and other elements of the biosphere can be packaged in the Ndau anthropological belief system where any affront to the mother may court the wrath of the mother's *pfukwa* [avenging spirit]. So, understood this way, soil degradation in particular and the environmental degradation in general may demand *kuthwa chimuthwo* [rituals of appeasement and reconciliation] aimed at restoring the salient solidarity and relationship of reciprocity with nature (Daneel 2011).

The SDGs, especially Goal 15 (Life on land), are anchored on the premise of intergenerational equity that espouses that people have a responsibility to protect planet Earth for current and future generations. The motto 'protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems' is a clarion call to action based on a shared ethical obligation. The Ndau spiritual connection provides a powerful, culturally relevant motivator for these actions, which may be missing in a purely secular, policy-based approach. A communal or shared responsibility for the soils and other natural resources fosters a profound ecosophy that promotes the obligation for sustainable resource management to ensure it benefits the entire community without compromising the soil's ability to provide for the

future. The SDG 2 (zero hunger), aims to 'promote sustainable agriculture' and improve soil quality, and the SDG 15 seeks 'to combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil', and 'sustainably manage forests'. The Ndau's indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices proffer a tried-and-tested grassroots model for achieving these goals. Their methods are often simple and accessible, deeply entwined with the Ndau's understanding of their environment, culture and spirituality and above all, highly resilient to environmental shocks and adaptable to local environmental contexts. In short, their methods are culturally integrated and resilient, providing a valuable case study for the kinds of 'resilient natural resource management practices' referred to in the SDGs. The Ndau's perspective of communal existence sees the land and its resources as communal rather than individual property, thereby fostering a sense of collective responsibility for its care. The communal ceremonies and agricultural rituals reinforce the idea that the soil's bounty is a shared blessing that must be collectively nurtured. The communal approach prevents over-exploitation that can result from purely individualistic land use. This aligns with the SDG 17 (partnerships for goals that emphasise collaboration between governments, private sector and civil society). Achieving the SDGs requires community-based action. Thus, the Ndau's perception of the soil, which forms part of their tradition of communal action, provides a powerful model or template for how grassroots and local communities can organise themselves to achieve goals that include restoring degraded soils or ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns as enshrined in SDG 12 and Africa's Agenda 2063 Aspiration 1 Goal number 7.

The Ndau's holistic and integrated view of human-nature relationship implies that the issues regarding soils and natural resource are not just isolated problems resolvable by technology, but they are part of the larger part of the social and spiritual balance. The SDGs' perspective reflects an integrated framework as they state with clarity that, 'action in one area will affect outcomes in others' and that the development must balance social, economic and environmental stability. For example, land degradation (SDG 15) is linked to poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2) and a lack of clean water (SDG 6). The Ndau's holistic perspective can reinforce a cultural and philosophical underpinning for this integrated approach, demonstrating how these different goals are inseparable in practice.

Ndau indigenous spiritual beliefs, soil and climate resilience

The provided research findings suggest that the environmental challenges confronting Zimbabwe and other parts of the southern African region, such as floods, soil erosion and heat waves are not solely a matter of inadequate policy but are symptomatic of a broken relationship with the soil. That Ndau indigenous spiritual beliefs are vital for building a sustainable and culturally resonant framework for addressing the threats of climate change in Zimbabwe is a call

for re-enchantment. The goal is to motivate a change of course from a purely secular and extractive mindset to recentring the spiritual and cultural values that emphasise the land's integrity and protection (Watling 2009). Local knowledge on soil conservation informed by lived experiences of communities is a powerful strategy where the conservation concept is embedded within their local way of life. The Ndau's spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices around the soil form part of a practical example of re-enchanting resource management mechanisms that go a long way in proffering protection to the rest of the natural resources. A collective responsible action by indigenous communities leveraging their spirituality stand to proffer resilience to climate change. Some of the major insights that emerge from the data include the local soil knowledge as forming the foundation of sustainability and the dire consequences of abandoning the indigenous environmental ethics that are anchored on indigenous spirituality. These insights are in sync with the tenets and focus of the re-enchantment theory that makes a clarion call for the reimagination of nature.

Soil as the foundation of sustainability

The Ndau's spiritual beliefs embed local soil knowledge and conservation concepts within their way of life, which is considered a prerequisite for effective water preservation and ecological stability. In practice, spiritual and cultural ceremonies function as integral soil resource management mechanisms. These mechanisms serve to protect crucial water sources such as rivers, wetlands and streams, which, in turn, sustain both human communities and microbial diversity. Successful soil management is highlighted as essential for maintaining beneficial soil microbes that include *Sinorhizobium* and *Mesorhizobium* (Matsapa & Thelma 2025). These microbes are vital because they facilitate the decomposition of organic matter and the transport of nutrients, which together form the very foundation of sustainable farming.

Consequences of abandoning indigenous environmental ethics

A critical finding is the negative impact resulting from the abandonment of indigenous soil resource management in favour of new foreign methods. The consequences include, among others, soil and vegetation degradation, loss of resilience and increased climate hazard exposure. The cultural and practical shift led to an increase in the wanton degradation of soil and vegetation. This was primarily caused by unregulated mining activities and clearing land for new farming spaces, often by unemployed youth. This degradation has directly undermined the communities' resilience to climate change, thereby contributing to natural hazards. Local communities partly attribute disasters, such as Cyclone Idai in 2019, to this shift away from indigenous environmental ethics towards a less respectful attitude towards nature. The neglect of local, culturally centred soil knowledge has exposed vulnerable indigenous communities to a heightened risk of natural hazards, including cyclones, floods and landslides. These events, in turn, cause the diminishing of the beneficial soil microbes and the washing away of topsoil.

Challenges with indigenous spiritual heritage-based environmental conservation frameworks

The general complex organisation of communal lands and its attendant challenges do not spare the Ndau. This includes the overlapping jurisdictions among different authorities that include the traditional, spiritual and modern authorities. These organisational dynamics often disturb the local people's coordination of efforts aimed at conserving natural resources (Frost & Bond 2008). Closely related to this is the fact that, rural communities are differentiated by social standing based on, but not limited to, lineage, influence and relative wealth. These factors can make it more difficult to achieve consensus on the uptake and implementation of the indigenous approaches to conservation than often assumed. Furthermore, although households in communal areas have temporary rights (*usufruct* rights) over their arable lands, their collective rights on other areas invariably overlap with neighbouring communities resulting in competing interests. This can result in opportunistic use of resources that is counterproductive. The growing rural population in Zimbabwe has resulted in the increased demand for marginal land for subsistence agriculture and increased levels of poverty (Matsapa & Thelma 2025). These factors compel people to rely heavily on extracting natural resources for both subsistence and commercial purposes, forcing them to ignore the indigenous beliefs. This represents a trade-off between life-threatening poverty and survival. These challenges can be managed through the appreciation of the indigenous spiritual resources of local communities in the spirit of the priority areas of Aspiration 5 Goal 16 of the Africa's Agenda 2063. The priority areas include the quest for Africa with a strong cultural identity manifesting through sound cultural heritage, cultural values and African renaissance. A sustainable use of the environment can save communities from the crisis of climate change, as well as alleviating poverty through sustainable utilisation of natural resources of the land.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Ndau's sacred connection to the soils is not an obstacle to modern conservation efforts; it is a profound source of synergy. Challenges notwithstanding the indigenous spiritual heritage provides deep-seated cultural values, time-tested practices and a sense of collective purpose that, if promoted, can make an invaluable intervention to deal with the crisis of climate change. The mobilisation of the indigenous spiritual resources of local communities can make the ambitious targets of the Africa's Agenda 2063 and the UN SDGs 2030, particularly those related to the preservation of land and inland resources more achievable and enduring. The article indicates that the Ndau indigenous spiritual beliefs provide a robust and holistic framework for environmental stewardship. The findings underscore that ignoring local and culturally centred soil knowledge undermines ecological health, intensifies the negative effects of climate-related hazards and disturbs the traditional livelihoods of the people. In the final analysis, the experience of the Ndau people suggests that restoring a respectful and spiritual connection with the soil is key to building climate resilience in Zimbabwe.

It is, therefore, essential for policymakers to understand and sincerely integrate the indigenous spiritual heritage-based soil conservation framework and the global scientific-based one in combating climate change.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a conference paper originally presented at the South African Science and Religion Forum Seminar 2025, held in Pretoria, South Africa, on 17-19 September 2025. The conference paper, titled 'Soil and identity in Ndaun indigenous spirituality: Unlocking the potential for environmental sustainability' was subsequently expanded and revised for this journal publication. This republication is done with permission from the conference organisers.

The author would like to express their gratitude to the authors, dead and alive, whose work they accessed in producing the article.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

Macloud Sipeyiye: Writing – original draft. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, Macloud Sipeyiye, on reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's findings, and content.

References

Amoah, E., 2006, 'Preface', in I.A. Phiri & S. Nadar (eds.), *African women, religion and health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, pp. xvii–xxii, Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg.

- Awuah-Nyamekye, S., 2009, 'Salvaging nature: The Akan religio-cultural perspective', *Worldviews Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 13, 251–282. <https://doi.org/10.1163/136352409X12535203555713>
- Bakare, S., 1993, *My right to land in the bible and in Zimbabwe – A theology of land in Zimbabwe*, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Harare.
- Chirongoma, S. & Chitando, E., 2021, 'What did we do to our mountain? African eco-feminist and indigenous responses to Cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and Chipinge Districts, Zimbabwe', *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 27(1), 65–90.
- Cieden, 2025, *How to do desk research in 5 simple steps*, viewed 28 November 2025, from <https://cieden.com/how-to-conduct-effective-desk-research-in-3-easy-steps#>.
- Daneel, M.L., 2011, 'Christian mission and earth-care: An African case study', *International Bulletin on Missionary research* 35(3), 130–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693931103500304>
- Daniel, B., 1980, *Discordant harmonies: A new ecology for the twenty-first century*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Datta, R., Khyang, N.Y., Khyang, H.K.P., Kheyang, H.A.P., Khyang, M.C. & Chapola, J., 2014, 'Understanding sustainability education: A community-based experience', *Revista Brasileira de Pesquisa em Educação em Ciências* 14(2), 99–108.
- Frost, P.G. & Bond, I., 2008, 'The CAMPFIRE programme in Zimbabwe: Payments for wildlife services', *Ecological Economics* 65(4), 776–787. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2007.09.018>
- Konyana, E.G. & Sipeyiye, M., 2015, 'Complex moral dilemmas of large-scale projects: The case of Macdom-ARDA Chisumbanje ethanol plant project in Chipinge, south-eastern Zimbabwe', *International Journal of Sustainable Development* 18(4), 349–360.
- Kunonga, N., 1996, 'Roots of the Zimbabwe revolution: A biographical study of the Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole', DPhil thesis submitted to the graduate School of the Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.
- Lindsey, R. & Dahlman, L., 2020, *Climate change: Global temperature*, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, viewed 28 November 2025, from <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/understanding-climate/climate-change-global-temperature>.
- Maganga, A.T. & Pfuwa, C., 2023, 'From Nyakumba to Thiyeni: An onomastic survey of the Musikavanhu Dynasty in Dondo', *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 20(2), 10. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6549/12072>
- Manyawu, A. & Parichi, M., 2018, 'Hoko: Simon Chimbetu and the Pungweesque prolongation of ZANU-PF's Chimurenga discourse in post-independence Zimbabwe', in I. Muhwati, T. Charamba & C. Tembo (eds.), *Singing nation and politics: Music and the 'decade of crisis' in Zimbabwe 2000–2010*, pp. 1–20, Midlands State University Press, Gweru.
- Manyevere, A., Mkeni, P.N.S., Laker, M.C. & Muchaonyerwa, P., 2020, 'The use of indigenous knowledge systems in soil classification, appraisal and soil productivity rating for maize cropping: A case of the Xhosa speaking people in Raymond Mhlaba municipality, South Africa', *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 19(1), 96–109.
- Matsapa, W., 2023, 'Revitalising indigenous names in balancing environmental science: A case of ignored names of places in Rusitu Valley', in V.Z. Nyawo & M. Musengi (eds.), *Dzimbabwe Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, pp. 52–72, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo.
- Matsapa, W. & Thelma, C.C., 2025, 'Revitalizing beneficial soil microbes: Why indigenous soil knowledge and conservation practices in Africa still relevant to sustainable farming?', *Asian Soil Research Journal* 9(2), 100–114. <https://doi.org/10.9734/asrj/2025/v9i2183>
- Mbiti, J.S., 1969, *African religions and philosophy*, Heinemann, Johannesburg.
- Merchant, C., 2005, *Radical ecology: The search for a livable world*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London.
- Modie-Moroka, T., Malinga, T. & Dube, M., 2024, 'Environmental degradation and climate change as violence against the Earth: Associations with violence against women's bodies', *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* 9(3), 141–149. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.348>
- Musanga, T., 2024, 'Zimbabwe's post-2000 land reform programme, inter-ethnic hierarchies among "Black Zimbabweans" and the potential of resource conflict: The case of Chipinge District', *African Identities* 22(2), 388–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2022.2032591>
- Muyambo, T., 2018, 'Indigenous knowledge systems of the Ndaun people of Manicaland province in Zimbabwe: A case study of Bota Reshupa', Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, Pretoria.
- Nyamapfene, K.W., 1983, 'Traditional systems of soil classification in Zimbabwe', *Zambezia* 11(1), 55–57.
- Pfuwa, C., 2019, 'Pegging out claims in space and place: The theme of land redistribution in the music of Simon Chimbetu', in J. Kangira & A. Nhemachena (eds.), *Displacement, elimination and replacement of indigenous people: Putting into perspective land ownership and ancestry in decolonising contemporary Zimbabwe*, pp. 83–96, Langaa RPCIG, Bamenda.
- Ranger, T.O., 1988, 'African Traditional Religion', in S. Sutherland, L. Houlden, P. Clarke, & F. Hardy (eds.), *The World's Religions*, pp. 864–872, Routledge, London.
- Schoffeleers, J.M., 1978, *Guardians of the land: Essays on Central African territorial cults*, Mambo Press, Gweru.
- Shenjere-Nyabezi, P., 2015, 'Doro Rekufa and Tsvitsa: Beer, animals, and death rituals among the Ndaun of South Eastern Zimbabwe', *UTAFITI* 11(1/2), 2014–2015. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26836408-0110102002>

- Sipeyiye, M., 2020, 'Rethinking environmental sustainability through Ndau notion of communal existence', in N. Penxa-Matholeni, M. Manyonganise & K. Boateng (eds.), *Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African indigenous religions*, pp. 85–106, AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch.
- Sipeyiye, M. & Chigidi, W.L., 2022, 'Oliver "Tuku" Mtukudzi: Celebrating the spirituality of indigenous Africans through music', in E. Chitando, P. Mateveke, M. Nyakudya & B. Chinouriri (eds.), *The life and music of Oliver Mtukudzi: Reconstruction and identity*, pp. 207–218, Springer-Nature, Cham.
- Sipeyiye, M. & Dube, E.E.N., 2023, 'Of women leadership in African indigenous spirituality: A case of the Ndau of south-eastern Zimbabwe', in M. Manyonganise, E. Chitando & S. Chirongoma (eds.), *Women, religion and leadership in Zimbabwe, volume 1: An ecofeminist perspective*, pp. 147–166, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Sithole, N., 1959. *African nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town.
- Taringa, N.T., 2014, *Towards an African-Christian environmental ethic*, vol. 13, University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg.
- Taylor, B., 2010, *Nature, spirituality and the planetary future*, University of California Press, London.
- Watling, T., 2009, *Ecological imaginations in the world religions: An ethnographic analysis*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, NY.
- Weber, M., 1992, *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, Routledge, London.
- Williams, B., 2025, *Document analysis versus content analysis*, viewed 28 November 2025, from <https://insight7.io/document-analysis-vs-content-analysis-a-comparison/#>.