



Perichoresis as Prophetic Ecology: A Trinitarian theological response to environmental injustice in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how the Christian doctrine of *perichoresis*, the eternal mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, can serve as a theological framework for confronting environmental injustice caused by illegal mining in Africa. It addresses the gap between Trinitarian theology and ecological ethics by recovering *perichoresis* not as a merely doctrinal construct but as a prophetic resource for ecological restoration. The study employed a constructive theological methodology grounded in doctrinal retrieval and reappropriation. It excavates the classical doctrine of *perichoresis* from patristic sources and from the Trinitarian theology of Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, reconstructing this vision in dialogue with African communal philosophies of *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*. The approach integrates theology, ethics, African thought, and ecological analysis, and includes a theological-ethical critique of illegal mining in Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria. The article demonstrates that the relational ontology embedded in trinitarian life demands that creation be characterized by mutuality, interdependence, and justice rather than exploitation. The study concludes that illegal mining constitutes a theological vandalism that ruptures the relational communion constitutive of divine life, and that the African church is called to a prophetic ecological response rooted in divine communion. The article offers a novel synthesis of Edwards and Barth with African communal philosophies for ecological ethics, advancing the emerging field of African trinitarian ecotheology.

Keywords: Perichoresis, Prophetic Ecology, Trinity, Edwards, Barth, Illegal Mining, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is facing an environmental crisis of a magnitude never before seen, with illegal mining practices being the most prominent contributor to ecological devastation: the degradation of land, pollution of water bodies and displacement of marginalized communities. Millions of people in countries like Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nigeria live in toxic conditions as a result of unregulated gold and other precious minerals extraction; ecosystems have been devastated and sacred lands desecrated.¹ This represents a true disconnection between humanity and the land, between the people and ultimately between creation and the

¹ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heineman, 1969).

creator, experienced as a rupture that not only leaves things broken, but is increasingly caused by a frenzy of businessmen, a euphoria of producing more and better, driven in large part by short-term economic incentives and the demands of globalized markets.²

This article argues that the Christian doctrine of *perichoresis*, which is the mutual indwelling of the three hypostases of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, offers an attractive theological lens for reimagining African ecological relationships.³ *Perichoresis* is the way of understanding the relationality and mutuality of shared life as essential to what it means to be a divine being.⁴ As such, it can offer a paradigm for how human communities may dwell in harmony with creation. This article explores the potential for a theology of *perichoresis* to critique the exploitative logic of illegal mining and constitute an ethic of environmental stewardship in part by drawing on the Trinitarian theology of Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, two significantly nuanced literary representations of divine relationality.⁵

In addition, the article contextualizes this theological vision in African cultural paradigms of *ubuntu* (“I am because we are”) and *ujamaa* (communal economics), which echo perichoretic ideals.⁶ These indigenous philosophies already witness to interdependence and mutual care as bases for communal living and may be retheorized under Trinitarian theology to promote a robust ecological ethic.⁷ By providing a theological framework for undertaking such a task, this study both shows that traditional African worldviews have not outlived their usefulness and urges prophetic theological engagement with environmental injustices created by illegal mining.⁸ It begins with theological reflections on *perichoresis* and relational ontology to examine the theological roots of *perichoresis* and what they entail for relational ontology. The article assesses the ecological implications of illegal mining within particular African contexts, a Trinitarian ecological narration of creation, and an engagement with African communal thought. The article concludes with a theologically grounded critique of the practice of environmental exploitation and a constructive vision for ecological ethics rooted in the divine communion of the Triune God.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a constructive theological methodology grounded in doctrinal retrieval and reappropriation. It unearthed the classical doctrine of *perichoresis* from patristic sources and from the works of modern Christian thinkers, Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, as a foundation for a relational ontology. The study then reconstructs this Trinitarian vision in dialogue with African communal philosophies, especially *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*, employing a contextual theological lens that weaves together ecological models to create an ethic of communion in God. The approach also includes a theological-ethical critique of illegal mining in Ghana, Nigeria, and the DRC, on the grounds that environmental degradation constitutes a transgression against the relational order inscribed in divine life. Ultimately, this study develops a Trinitarian ecological ethic that speaks to ecclesial engagement, public theology, and sustainable justice, reflecting the perichoretic nature of God. The study adopted an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating theology, ethics, African thought, and ecological analysis.

DISCUSSION

Perichoresis and Relational Ontology

The doctrine of *perichoresis* has for centuries been the most widely used rubric for understanding the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit without confusion between the persons. Emerging from the theology of

² Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Fortress Press, 1993).

³ John of Damascus, “De Fide Orthodoxa,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, ed. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan. Grand Rapids, vol. 9 (Translated MI: Eerdmans, , 1899).

⁴ Karl Barth, “Church Dogmatics I/1. Translated by G. T. Thomson” (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936).

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity*, ed. Paul Helm. Phillipsburg (NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003).

⁶ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (Random House, 2000), 85.

⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Orbis Books, 1997), 34.

the Cappadocian Fathers — Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus and later systematized by John of Damascus, *perichoresis* asserts that the persons of the Trinity experience perfect communion, fully together yet personally distinguished.⁹

This classical vision has been recovered in contemporary theology not merely by Edwards and Barth, but also by Colin Gunton, Catherine LaCugna, Jürgen Moltmann, and John Zizioulas, who connect *perichoresis* to creation, relationality, and ecology.¹⁰ This divine relationality, however, is far from an abstract metaphysical principle; it provides the ontological ground for a Christian understanding of community, mutuality, and love. Christian anthropology and ecological ethics have deep implications from this vision of divine relationality. To say that God exist as a relationship is to say that relationality is not contingent, but rather essential to divine being. It also implies that creation, made in the likeness of and for the glory of this Triune communion, is by nature relational.¹¹ The ecological crisis is therefore not simply a violation of natural systems, but a betrayal of the relational ontology embedded within creation's source and purpose.

Perichoresis, in Edwards' view, is the Holy Spirit, the personal bond of divine love bridging the Father and the Son in an eternal reciprocal *perichoresis*.¹² In his *Essay on the Trinity*, Edwards conceptualizes the Spirit as the shared joy and delight between the divine persons, a unifying presence that constitutes God's ecstatic self-communication. For Edwards, divine being is an ecstatic act of self-giving love, with the persons eternally encountering and expressing themselves to one another.¹³ This sense of God's life understood as perichoretic love helps to guide a theological template of relational wholeness in human and ecological life. As love itself, the Spirit's role suggests that all true relationality, including the relation between humanity and creation, must be modeled on self-giving, reciprocal communion.¹⁴ In view of this, Edwards' vision can help ground ecological ethics in doxology where creation shares in divine joy, which is why ecological destruction involves both an environmental and a theological rupture.¹⁵

However, Edwards' aesthetic framework requires careful reappropriation for ecological contexts. While his identification of divine beauty with relational harmony provides a powerful resource, it risks reducing nature to an aesthetic object rather than recognizing the land as an active participant in communion. McClymond and McDermott note that Edwards' emphasis on beauty as "diffusive and communicative" can be co-opted by a contemplative quietism that observes nature's beauty without challenging the structural violence that destroys it. For an African ecological ethic, Edwards' vision must be supplemented by the more activist pneumatology found in theologians like Kaoma, who insists that the spirit's presence in creation demands prophetic resistance, not merely aesthetic appreciation.

Less radical in his metaphysical language, Karl Barth also preserves the importance of *perichoresis*. He emphasizes the nature of God as one and three, as displayed in God's acts, especially in the history of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Spirit.¹⁶ In *Church Dogmatics I/1*, Barth describes *perichoresis*, not as a speculative doctrine, but as an attribute of the self-disclosure of the Triune God as dynamic life. The Father sends the Son; the Son obeys the Father; the Spirit unites us to the Son; thus, this mutual movement reflects the inner life of God and undergirds the divine mission.¹⁷ Barth's relational Trinitarianism is grounded not in metaphysical speculation but in the Christ event, making divine relationality both epistemologically accessible and ethically urgent. For Barth, the divine *perichoresis* becomes a pattern for the right relationship within God and, by analogy, within human society. It is this Christocentric pattern enabling *perichoresis* to

⁹ John of Damascus, "De Fide Orthodoxa, 47-49."

¹⁰ Colin E Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life," San Francisco, Ca, 1991. Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*; Jean Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

¹¹ Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*.

¹² Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity*.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1 (Banner of Truth Trust, 1834).

¹⁴ Paul S Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Michael J McClymond and Gerald R McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 348-352.

¹⁷ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*. (Wiley Online Library, 2017).

challenge social and ecological domination, climate exploitation and any other extractive economies that break communion.¹⁸

The implications for relational ontology in the light of *perichoresis* are thus twofold. First, it reveals a divine life in which otherness and unity cohere without domination.¹⁹ Second, it also affirms that the shape of reality, based in the Triune God, is relational, not individualistic or hierarchical.²⁰ To dwell in this ontology is to refuse the exploitative relation that rends communion between persons as much as between humanity and the earth. Thus, *perichoresis* provides not only a theological grammar of divine life but also a critical lens for discerning the moral shape of human and ecological relations. African theologians like Kombo, Sakupapa, Kaoma, and Conradie emphasize that this is to be expressed in African contexts, where *perichoresis* is not speculation but a resource for resistance to domination, promotion of justice, and imagination of ecological solidarity.²¹

Barth's Christocentric approach provides a robust safeguard against the naturalistic reduction of theology, yet it also poses a challenge for African ecological theology. If divine relationality is mediated exclusively through the Christ event, the pneumatological dimension, the Spirit's indwelling presence in creation itself, risks marginalization. This is where African theologians offer a critical corrective. Kaoma argues that the spirit, as the giver of life to all creation, holds human beings, the land, and non-living creatures together in a community of life that precedes and exceeds christological categories. Similarly, Sakupapa contends that any trinitarian theology worthy of the African context must seriously consider the ongoing reality of neo-colonial exploitation and argue for a praxis-oriented trinitarianism that enables communities of resistance. Barth's framework, therefore, while indispensable for grounding *perichoresis* in historical revelation, requires supplementation by African pneumatological and contextual voices to achieve its full ecological potential.

The Ecological Crisis in African Mining Regions

The massive and pervasive practice of illegal mining in Africa, which, under the official definition, can also be known as artisanal or small-scale mining (ASM), operates beyond the boundaries of regulation and oversight and has emerged as one of the most visible and destructive drivers of ecological destruction across the continent.²² These unregulated extractive operations, spurred by poverty, lack of oversight, and international demand, have resulted in tragic environmental, social and spiritual consequences in countries including Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Nigeria.²³ While these illegal mining activities may offer some sort of short-term economic relief to deprived communities, the long-term environmental repercussions are enormous and irreversible. Forests are razed, water bodies polluted, farmland depleted, and entire ecosystems destabilized by practices driven more by economic desperation and global market pressures than by sustainable stewardship.²⁴

In Ghana, the term *galamsey* refers to informal gold mining activity, which has exploded in rural areas and is often outside the law. The operations make use of mercury and cyanide to recover gold, leading to extensive pollution of major rivers, including the Pra, Ankobra and Offin.²⁵ Farmlands have been ruined, water bodies made poisonous, and biodiversity badly depleted. This degradation of the environment is done

¹⁸ Ernst Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology* (African Sun Media, 2006).

¹⁹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*.

²⁰ Mowry LaCugna, "God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life."

²¹ James Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought: The Holy Trinity, Theological Hermeneutics, and the African Intellectual Culture* (Brill, 2007); Kennedy Owino Sakupapa, "Trinitarian Theology in African Contexts: Ecological and Postcolonial Perspectives," *Scriptura* 116, no. 1 (2017): 1–15; Kopya J Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu* (Kachere Series, 2014); Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology*.

²² Thomas Hentschel, "Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining: Challenges and Opportunities," 2003.

²³ Roy Maconachie and Gavin Hilson, "Artisanal Gold Mining: A New Frontier in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone?," *The Journal of Development Studies* 47, no. 4 (2011): 595–616.

²⁴ Obiora Ike, *Environmental Justice and Climate Change: Theological and Ethical Perspectives*, ed. Norbert Hintersteiner (New York: Lexington Books, 2017).

²⁵ Clement Boateng Ampiah, "Galamsey Menace: The Need for Urgent Reforms," *Ghana Journal of Geography* 2, no. 2 (2017): 120–32.

without care for those who rely on it, which are typically the rural communities.²⁶ Similarly, in the DRC, conflict minerals, including coltan, gold and tantalum, many of which feed into global electronics, have emerged as flashpoints for both ecological disaster and human rights abuses. Mining pits often devastate forested regions and contaminate surrounding ecosystems, and the fight over mineral control drives violent conflict and displaces indigenous people.²⁷ In Nigeria's Niger Delta and central states, mineral and oil extraction has devastated once-lush environments. Spills and runoff have degraded rivers, farmlands, and forests, threatening the sustainability of traditional livelihoods.²⁸

The crisis is not just ecological but also spiritual and relational. As the African theologian Jesse N. K. Mugambi argues, the destructive treatment of the environment on the African continent is a moral failure — a failure to maintain the right relation between human beings and creation, between human beings and God, and between human beings and one another.²⁹ Laurenti Magesa writes that within African spirituality, creation — particularly land and rivers is considered a sacred gift entrusted to humanity by God and the ancestors, who are therefore generations into a covenant of responsibility with the past and future. To deface land and rivers through mining is, therefore, not just environmental vandalism, but also theological sacrilege, affronting the identity of the community itself.³⁰ Benezet Bujo, for example, reaffirms that the ethic of Africa understands community to include both the living and the ancestors, future generations and creation itself. In this ethical worldview, ecological attention is not an optional good but the fundamental requirement for a good human life. Such extractive endeavors that lay waste to forests, rivers, and soils are violations of the ethical web of life, rupturing the communion that holds African societies together.³¹ A parochial irreality of violent rupture, imposed by illegal mining, stands in stark contrast to the perichoretic vision of mutual indwelling: where communion is, there is consumption; where mutual flourishing, exploitation.

The ecological crisis, then, cannot only be understood in economic or political terms but in theological terms. It indicates a breakdown of the relational ontology affirmed by *perichoresis*. If God's life is one of self-giving, interdependent love, then the violation of creation is not a peripheral issue but a theological contradiction. An effective response to this crisis must embrace more than new legislation; rather, it requires a theological reorientation that reclaims the sacredness of creation in God's economy. The global church has taken the same stance. The World Council of Churches, among others, has insisted that extractivism is not just an economic practice but “a denial of God's gift of creation” and continues to be an injustice that causes harm to people and ecosystems.³² The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) has called on our member churches to act in solidarity with communities affected by mining, understanding the role of the church as both pastoral and prophetic, providing accompaniment and advocacy.³³ Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, carries this argument even further, designating extractivism a “structural perversion” that values profit over the poor and insists that the cries of the earth and the poor cannot be separated.³⁴ His appeal for an “ecological conversion” places ecological concern at the centre of Christian discipleship.³⁵

In addition, these ecological disruptions disproportionately impact the poor and marginalized — groups whose subsistence and spirituality are most intimately connected to the land. Now, within this context, theological engagement should transcend criticism to become active construction. It must draw down a creative vision that is imbued with divine communion and something of the sense that the earth, like humanity,

²⁶ Samuel Ntewusu and Joseph Awetori Yaro, “Environmental Impacts of Small-Scale Mining in Ghana,” *African Review of Economics and Finance* 4, no. 1 (2012): 45–60.

²⁷ John F Clark and Séverine Autesserre, “The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 (2011): 902.

²⁸ Uwem Ite, “Multinational Corporations and Environmental Justice: Lessons from the Niger Delta, Nigeria,” *Geoforum* 35, no. 4 (2004): 557–73.

²⁹ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003).

³⁰ Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?: African Spirituality* (Acton Publishers, 2014).

³¹ Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006).

³² World Council of Churches, *Statement on Extractive Industries and Ecological Justice* (WCC Central Committee: Geneva, 2017).

³³ All Africa Conference of Churches, *Churches in Solidarity with Communities Affected by Mining* (Nairobi: AACC, 2019).

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015).

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*.

is part of the sacramental life of God.³⁶ Illegal mining is thus not just an environmental issue; it is a spiritual affront and a social injustice that requires the prophetic voice of the church.

A Trinitarian Ecology: *Perichoresis* and Creation

Beyond its implications for intra-divine relationality, the doctrine of *perichoresis* provides a formational framework for understanding the relationship between God, humanity, and creation. Thus, the Christian theological tradition, particularly in its Trinitarian articulations, affirms that creation is not an external sunset, an incidental horizon outside the life of God; rather, it is a finite world within God's providential purposes and loving embrace. This perspective finds biblical witness where creation is constantly described as belonging to God (Ps. 24:1) and groaning for redemption (Rom. 8:19–22).³⁷

From a perichoretic perspective, Creation participates in the dynamic communion of the Triune God. Jürgen Moltmann, in his ecological theology, argues that the indwelling Spirit of all life is precisely the presence of God in creation, summoning all to divine communion.³⁸ The Spirit is there, in the breath of God, and is present in the groaning of creation (Rom. 8:22) and always pulls it toward salvation and eschatological fulfillment. Moltmann's ecological doctrine of creation grounds *perichoresis* not merely within a divine "intrusion," but rather through a revision of the interdependence of creation within an ontology. Leonardo Boff also offers creation as the "first sacrament" of God's self-revelation, inviting reverence and relational care.³ These insights embody a theology of creation that is neither mechanistic nor anthropocentric, but profoundly relational and sacramental. The land is not merely "used" but "encountered" as holy ground.

Jonathan Edwards' theology of divine love and beauty as an additional resource for a perichoretic ecology. For Edwards, the glory of God "is diffusive and communicative," wanting to spill out into creation.³⁹ The Spirit, the love between the Father and the Son, radiates from the needed conformation of the cosmos. Nature is not just the setting for human history in this view, but a participant in divine joy and communion. Edwards develops this vision by framing the creation as the overflow of God's intra-trinitarian delight. For him, beauty is not merely aesthetic but ontological, meaning it is in the ordered beauty of creation that the pattern of divine life is reflected. Ecological ruin is, in other words, not just the wasteful misuse of resources, but an abomination of divine beauty, a disruption of creation's calling to reflect God's glory. This is because Edwards' cruciform Christology is the universality of the mediativity of communication as divine generosity; this means all creaturely being participates in God as God's communicative self-giving love; when this harmony is drawn to violence, creation groans in alienation from divine joy.⁴⁰

Edwards' doxological vision is compelling in its claim that ecological destruction is not merely practical mismanagement but theological sacrilege. However, its applicability to the African context requires qualification. Edwards wrote within a New England Puritan framework where nature was often perceived as a theatre for divine display rather than a relational partner. African communal philosophies, by contrast, understand the land not as an aesthetic object to be admired but as a covenantal partner to be respected. Magesa emphasizes that within African spirituality, creation is considered a sacred gift entrusted to humanity by God and the ancestors, generations into a covenant of responsibility. Edwards' framework gains ecological power when supplemented by this African relational cosmology, transforming his aesthetic theology into a prophetic ethic of covenantal stewardship.

On the other hand, Karl Barth deepens this vision in his doctrine of creation by anchoring it in Christological and Trinitarian categories. Creation is for the covenant, and the covenant is the reason the world was created.⁴¹ Barth places strong emphasis on the fact that the world is not autonomous from God but rather exists in a permanent relation to its Creator. In this sense, *perichoresis* is a theological foundation for ecological ethics: Just as the divine persons of the Trinity exist in mutuality without structures of

³⁶ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 30–35; Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 47–50.

³⁷ Psalm 24:1; Romans 8:19–22.

³⁸ Moltmann, *God In Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, 9–15.

³⁹ Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity*, 122–124.

⁴⁰ McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 321–28.

⁴¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1*, 94–102.

domination, so humanity should exist in harmony with creation without exploitation or coercion. In addition, Barth argues that the meaning of the world is revealed solely in Jesus Christ, the covenant partner. This Christocentric creation theology, in turn, opposes both secular naturalism and exploitative economism by affirming that the cosmos is there for reconciliation, not for domination. The Spirit's work of knitting creation to Christ for Barth is indicative of how the relations of creation are emphatically not marginal but central to the salvation-work of God. In other words, the exploitation of creation is not a neutral thing, but a renunciation of that for which creation was brought into existence in covenantal fashion.⁴²

This finds powerful echoes in African theological voices. Kennedy Owino Sakupapa contends that any Trinitarian theology worthy of salvaging in Africa is one that seriously considers the ongoing reality of neo-colonial exploitation on the continent, particularly of its natural resources. He critiques theologies that can't shake off abstract metaphysics and argues instead for a praxis-oriented Trinitarianism that enables communities of resistance to systemic generations of domination. For Sakupapa, *perichoresis* does indeed offer just such a framework with a vision of communion that disrupts extractive economies and reimagines African sociality as mutually relational rather than predatory.⁴³ Also, Kapya Kaoma constructs an eco-theology of *ubuntu* in which the Spirit, the giver of life to all creation, holds human beings, the land and non-living creatures together into a community of life. He reveals how missionary Christianity was also complicit in accommodating extractive economies and in desacralizing the African understanding of land. In contrast, Kaoma argues ecological care has to transcend mere technocratic problem-solving and be rooted in Spirit-centred relationality. From this point of view, damage to the earth is damage to the Spirit that enlivens all beings, and it also makes its redemption a spiritual and communal responsibility, not just an environmental one.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the South African ecological theologian, Ernst Conradie, underlines *perichoresis* as a model for dependence and sustainability in an ecological-theological sense. He criticizes anthropocentric theologies that posit humanity in a privileged position above creation, arguing that dualistic frameworks only add to ecological devastation. Instead, Conradie appeals to the Trinity to claim that real life is communion without domination — an organic patterning we can observe in ecosystems where interdependence nourishes the whole. For him, a Trinitarian ontology requires human beings to perceive themselves as participants in a community of creation, which means a response of restraint, humility, and stewardship.⁴⁵

The unregulated extraction and ecological destruction in the name of the cry for wealth from illegal mining is a direct rupture of what is offered here in rentless *perichoresis*. It fractures the relationship between land, people, and God into a web of commodity instead of communion. A perichoretic Trinitarian ecology affirms the sacredness of the earth, the dignity of earth's communities, and the moral imperative to steward rather than to dominate. It demands ecological justice as a systemic imperative, not only as a policy question, but also as a theological imperative founded in the very nature of God. Here African eco-theologians insist that the doctrine of creation cannot be limited to natural processes or legal arrangements but reclaimed as God's economy of life—resisting commodification and demanding the church's prophetic advocacy.⁴⁶

African Communal Thought and Environmental Ethics

African traditional philosophies have long emphasized the interrelation between life, land and community. Central to this worldview is the belief that personhood is achieved in relationship-built communities and that the land is not simply property but a sacred trust between ancestors, the living, and future generations.⁴⁷ *Ubuntu* in Southern Africa, *ujamaa* in East Africa, and traditional cosmologies throughout West Africa are a reminder that human identity is not individualistic but connected in a web of relationships with others, with nature, and the divine. These indigenous frameworks resonate with the perichoretic view of relational interdependence and provide rich soil from which to cultivate an African theology of ecological ethics.

⁴² George Hunsinger, "Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth," *Pro Ecclesia* 10, no. 4 (2001): 493–94.

⁴³ Sakupapa, "Trinitarian Theology in African Contexts: Ecological and Postcolonial Perspectives."

⁴⁴ Kaoma, *God's Family, God's Earth: Christian Ecological Ethics of Ubuntu*.

⁴⁵ Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology*, 214–20.

⁴⁶ Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 41–44.

⁴⁷ Laurent Magesa, "African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life. Orbis Books: New York. 1997."

The Zulu word *ubuntu*, usually translated as “I am because we are,” expresses a philosophy about life in which the individual is realized only in association with other people.⁴⁸ This guideline promotes hospitality, mutual care, and the seeking of collective well-being from a moral point of view. In ecological terms, *Ubuntu* means we have to be responsible for everything that keeps us all alive as the littoral ground of being. Environmental degradation, including that due to illegal mining, is not merely a technical or legal issue. Rather, it is a rupture in communal life and harmony.⁴⁹ Michael Battle argues that *ubuntu* demands accountability not just for one’s neighbor, but for the earth that nourishes the people.⁵⁰ Desmond Tutu also conceptually links *ubuntu* to justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation, which ecologically suggests that the healing of right relations among people cannot be fully realized without bringing right relations between humanity and the Earth back into balance.⁵¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye also reads *ubuntu* through a feminist lens, arguing that ecofeminism necessarily considers how women, the earth, and the marginalized suffer together from ecological devastation.⁵² When juxtaposed within the constellation of *perichoresis*, *ubuntu* can be seen as a concrete cultural embodiment of Trinitarian life—mutual indwelling, shared life, and relational wholeness.

In Tanzania, *ujamaa*, the Swahili word for “familyhood” popularized by Julius Nyerere, focuses on cooperative economics and the idea of shared resources.⁵³ Born of a traditional African socialism, *ujamaa* offers a counter to the extractivist logic of world capitalism that buttresses such dispossessive mining economies. Nyerere’s actually politically contested project represented a moral vision of an economy bound to the community rather than to market forces and of land as sacred inheritance rather than as a commodity.⁵⁴ Combined with *perichoresis*, *ujamaa* lent itself to a model of eco-stewardship that prioritizes solidarity and justice over profit and consumption. It reorients economic activity to the flourishing of the whole community, including the ecosystem. According to African cosmologies, Land is not only a resource, as it is deemed in some Western discourses, but also sacred.⁵⁵ Land is inherited from ancestors, shared among the living, and entrusted to generations yet to come. It is the locus of divine presence, communal memory and moral obligation. Laurenti Magesa emphasizes throughout his work that this relational cosmology informs a spirituality of limitation and reverence,⁵⁶ whereas Benezet Bujo maintains that a morality of life in Africa cannot be divorced from an ecology of life, because the community is not only among human beings but also between land, rivers, and non-human creation.⁵⁷ These beliefs echo the Trinitarian vision of creation as participatory in divine life. If the divine persons indwell one another in mutual love, then, for *perichoresis*, so too ought human beings to dwell with the land in reverence, restraint, and relational reciprocity.

African communal thought and Trinitarian theology can inspire a potent ecological ethic. It offers an alternative to the individualism, consumerism and domination that so often drive environmental degradation. Rather, it demands a relational worldview rooted in a synthesis of indigenous wisdom and Christian dogma. Such a synthesis dares African churches and theologians to craft an ecological theology that is both authentically African and Trinitarian to its core, confronting the devastation of illegal mining, envisioning environmental justice as a communal vocation grounded in divine communion.

A Theological Critique of Illegal Mining

Illegal mining is more than a violation of environmental law; it is a theological crisis that turns upside down our understanding of divine-human-creation relationships. This is because illegal mining ruptures this relational harmony of divine life; from the Trinitarian perspective, especially when approached through the

⁴⁸ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 35–39.

⁴⁹ Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 42.

⁵⁰ Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (Church Publishing, Inc., 2009).

⁵¹ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 34–36.

⁵² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, vol. 3 (Ocms, 2002).

⁵³ Julius Kambarage Nyerere, “Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism,” (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press), 1968.

⁵⁴ Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, 4–12.

⁵⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 167–170.

⁵⁶ Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 120–24.

⁵⁷ Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2001).

lens of *perichoresis*, it constitutes a crime against the essence of the divine. It severs communion, turns creation into a commodity, and makes monsters of those who inflict and suffer ecological damage.

Ultimately, illegal mining expresses a logic of domination over land, people and resources. This domination is done in opposition to the mutuality, reciprocity and co-inherence seen in the Triune God.⁵⁸ In this teaching of *perichoresis*, there is no competition, no subjugation, and no exploitation in God, but rather eternal giving to the other, receiving of the other, and delight in the other. Applying this framework to environmental ethics, then, illegal mining is a theological scandal: a systematic disfigurement of the order God intended.

Jonathan Edwards' concept of divine love as inherently diffusive and generous brings to light how the Trinity itself exemplifies a life of shared abundance.⁵⁹ That is the opposite of illegal mining, which is motivated by greed, short-term gain and destructively rapacious extraction, where the earth is plundered rather than revered. The Spirit is recognised as the bond of love between the Father and Son, directed outward toward creation.⁶⁰ The desecration of land through unregulated mining is not only ecologically tragic but also a spiritual betrayal of this divine love. Edwards' doxological vision of creation as participating in divine joy sharpens the assertion that ecological devastation is not simply a sin against creation but a rejection of creation's vocation to glorify God.⁶¹

Barth's theology deepens the critique. For Barth, the doctrine of reconciliation is inseparable from the doctrine of creation. The world has been reconciled to God in Christ, not just humans, but all of creation.⁶² Barth, however, reaffirms a divine will for justice, peace, and communal life in God's self-revelation to us all in Christ. His creation theology of a Christocentric deity makes 'ecological destruction' a blasphemous contradiction of covenant, for the gifts of creation are meant to share in reconciled life. As such, the economic systems and power formations behind illegal mining are to be exposed to the prophetic light of the gospel, which calls for system change.⁶³

What emerges from placing Edwards and Barth alongside African ecotheologians is a richer, multi-layered critique of illegal mining. Edwards provides the aesthetic and doxological register: ecological ruin as affront to divine beauty. Barth provides the covenantal and christological register: ecological destruction as rupture of God's reconciling purpose. But Magesa and Bujo add what neither Edwards nor Barth fully articulates, namely, the communal and ancestral dimension of ecological sin. In African cosmology, the desecration of land is not merely a violation of divine beauty (Edwards) or covenantal order (Barth); it is also a rupture of the ethical web of life that connects the living, the ancestors, and future generations. This threefold critique, doxological, covenantal, and communal, constitutes the paper's central contribution to the theology of *perichoresis* and ecology.

Moreover, the spiritual damage wrought by illegal mining is especially acute in African contexts where the land is not only material but ancestral, not only economic but sacred.⁶⁴ When forests are razed, rivers poisoned and communities displaced, it is not merely ecosystems that are at stake but communal memory, ritual identity and spiritual continuity. The degradation of land tears at African cosmological foundations in which ancestors dwell, and in which the living connect with the divine using nature. With this in mind, the devastation caused by illegal mining can be described as theological vandalism. Laurenti Magesa cautions that the desecration of the land is sacrilege against God and the ancestors,⁶⁵ while Benezet Bujo emphasizes the moral community that includes creation itself.⁶⁶ Hence, the church must find its prophetic voice again because it cannot afford to treat environmental degradation as a mere ancillary issue, nor to relegate ecological ethics to the province of secular environmentalism. The church must reaffirm that

⁵⁸ LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 270–274.

⁵⁹ Edwards, *Discourse on the Trinity*, 119–122.

⁶⁰ Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of The Trinity*, 29.

⁶¹ McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 324–28.

⁶² Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, 94–99.

⁶³ Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 112–15.

⁶⁴ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 51–53.

⁶⁵ Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 51–53.

⁶⁶ Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 102–7.

creation is a theological category, the earth is God's, and the human vocation is to "till and keep" (Gen. 2:15), not pillage and profit.⁶⁷ Such a perichoretic theology requires this witness. Just as divine persons dwell in each, even while never dominating the other, so must humanity learn to dwell in creation, in mutuality, and in reverence.

African theologians like Jesse N. K. Mugambi have long argued that theology in Africa must confront the continent's socio-political and ecological realities.⁶⁸ He calls for a "reconstruction theology" that challenges both the legacy of colonialism and economic exploitation. Illegal mining, prompted by both global demand and local disenfranchisement, is a part of this legacy. A perichoretic Trinitarian critique grounds Mugambi's call and challenges the bounds of the call, grounding ecological and economic justice not in ethical ideals, but in God's very being.

Recent literature has also emphasized the urgency of theological or ethical engagement with illegal mining. Studies point to both the gravity of the response and the theological task, such as Richmond Yeboah's study of the threat to ecotourism in Ghana and INTERPOL's investigation in 2025 into the environmental and human costs of unregulated mining in West Africa.⁶⁹ In Nigeria and the DRC, AP News and The Guardian have documented pollution, child labor, and violent exploitation associated with illicit extraction.⁷⁰ In the meantime, scholars such as Workineh Kelbessa and others are continuing to highlight the importance of African traditional values and biodiversity-centered ethical frameworks that can be useful for developing sustainable and locally grounded responses to ecological injustice.⁷¹

Therefore, a theological critique of illegal mining must be ethical and doxological. It has to uncover the idolatry of resource extraction that puts profit before people and place. And it must re-order worship and discipleship around a God who calls humanity into communion with God, with each other and with the earth. Churches and theologians and faith communities are thus called to prophetic action, thus to educate, advocate and embody an alternative of training leaders who are theologically rooted and ecologically awake; it must condemn policies and powers that license environmental extraction; and it must nurture communities that embody divine communion in sustainable and righteous relationships with the earth. In doing so, the church lives out its identity as a perichoretic people — a people called into the life of the Triune God and sent out to bear witness to that life in all creation.

Toward a Perichoretic Environmental Ethics

To critique illegal mining is simply to respond constructively to the ecological devastation that it wreaks and to present a theological vision capable of engendering ethical praxis. A perichoretic environmental ethic, one rooted in the relational life of the Triune God, provides this vision—one of mutuality, dignity, and reparative justice. This ethic is not an abstract, doctrinal matter but has concrete implications for policy, ecclesial life, and socio-economic reform. Essentially, a perichoretic ethic recasts human interaction with creation in terms of participation rather than domination. As the divine persons dwell among one another in mutual indwelling without hierarchy, so human communities would engage the earth with reverence, reciprocity, and restraint.⁷² This means going from exploitative extractivism to a stewardship model aimed at the flourishing of all human and non-human. Such a framework resonates with the biblical mandate of Genesis 2:15 to "till and keep" the garden, not to plunder and ruin it. The just economic order is grounded in the ontological existence of the Trinity, where the Father as Creator hands over the world as a gift, the Son reconciles the universe in his covenant lordship and reconciles it; the Spirit makes alive and renews the earth's

⁶⁷ Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World* (SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2016).

⁶⁸ Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 67–69.

⁶⁹ Richmond Yeboah, "Environmental Impacts of Illegal Gold Mining and Its Threat to Ecotourism Development in the Amansie South District," *International Journal Of Hospitality* 9, no. 1 (2025): 40–48.

⁷⁰ AP News, "In Nigeria's Lithium Boom, Many Mines Are Illegal and Children Do Much of the Work," December 2024. The Guardian, "Polluted Rivers, Uprooted Farmland and Lost Taxes: Ghana Counts Cost of Illegal Gold Mining Boom," November 25, 2024.

⁷¹ Workineh Kelbessa, "African Worldviews, Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development," *Environmental Values* 31, no. 5 (2022): 575–98.

⁷² Miroslav Volf, "After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity," *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 1 (2000): 112–14.

generations (Ps. 104:30; Rom. 8:19–22). A perichoretic ethic places human stewardship into consonance with the Triune economy of creation, redemption, and consummation.⁷³

Translating this ethic into a practical framework requires a community-led ecological policy-making process based on sustainability and traditional knowledge, with clear accountability measures in the mineral sector,⁷⁴ such as enforcing environmental protection legislation, allowing communities to decide how their natural resources are used, and overseeing transparency in how mineral riches are managed. Local governance mechanisms can, supported by networks at the level of the church and civil society, act as a platform for resisting illegal mining and promoting alternative livelihoods.⁷⁵ Especially in mining-affected areas, churches and religious institutions can serve as hotbeds of environmental activism by doing public theology, linking with environmental NGOs, and galvanizing their congregants for reforestation and clean water projects.⁷⁶

In ecclesial life, the church has a prophetic vocation. It must condemn the sin of ecological injustice and demonstrate alternative forms of economic and social life that will be in consonance with God's creation. Waiting in hope is a restive call to congregational activity that includes ongoing attention to environmental theology, seasonal liturgical practices of creation celebration, and public witness that stands against exploitative structures. Preaching and teaching need to weave the gospel of reconciliation into ecological restoration, so Christians can see their faith as inclusive of care for the earth.⁷⁷

Theological education needs to be reimagined so that responsibility for the earth becomes integral to Christian formation. We must include modules on eco-theology, African ecological wisdom and environmental justice in the curricula of seminaries and theological colleges in Africa. Theological education must be reconceived in a way that responsibility for the earth is part of the Christian formation package. Modules on eco-theology, African ecological wisdom and environmental justice must be integrated into the curricula of seminaries and theological colleges across Africa. Fulata Mbano-Moyo and Musimbi Kanyoro remind us that ecological ethics must be gender-sensitive, as women suffer the greatest share of the consequences of land degradation, water shortage and displacement.⁷⁸ The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has demonstrated how eco-feminism is also related to the recovery of land and body as sacred in God's creation.⁷⁹ These teachings can also be contextualized with the help of resources such as those developed by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the All Africa Conference of Churches, which need to be circulated widely and included in pastoral training. Liturgically, the church needs to reclaim a sacramental imagination that understands creation to be the sign of God's presence and a co-worker in divine praise. Psalm 148 summons all of creation to worship: mountains, rivers, trees, and animals. This vision of worship needs to guide how African churches pray, sing, gather, and understand Scripture. Weaving local icons, agrarian cycles, and ecological motifs into the church calendar can offer congregations ways of embodying a place-rooted, land-oriented, creaturely spirituality.⁸⁰

So, in the end, to live perichoretically is to live in solidarity with God, with one another, and with the earth. This solidarity demands a response that calls us to repentance, restoration, and resistance: a repentance for complicity in an economy of ecological sin; the restoration of the broken ecological and community fabric; and resistance to an economic and political system that perpetuates ecological injustice. A perichoretic environmental ethic calls the church in Africa to become a sign of hope amidst ecological crisis and to bear witness to God whose love holds everything together in justice and peace. The gathering of such a witness

⁷³ Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*.

⁷⁴ Asante, "Mining, The Church, and Community Engagement in Ghana," *The Ecumenical Review* 72, No. 3 (2020): 401–412.

⁷⁵ Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 67–69.

⁷⁶ Ezra Chitando, "African Theology and Ecological Concerns: A Reformed Agenda," *Scriptura* 116, no. 1 (2017): 1–12.

⁷⁷ Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Orbis Books, 2006).

⁷⁸ Fulata Lusungu Moyo, "Ecofeminist Theology in African Perspective," in *The Earth Story in the African Context*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 132–45.

⁷⁹ Rachel Angogo Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

⁸⁰ Psalm 148:1–14.

is not marginal to the mission of the church but is actually at its very center: proclaiming a gospel that heals, that reconciles, that renews all of creation.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the doctrine of *perichoresis*, with its emphasis on mutual indwelling, love and relational integrity, offers a compelling theological basis for confronting the ecological destruction caused by illegal mining in Africa. By engaging the Trinitarian theology of Jonathan Edwards and Karl Barth, who respectively emphasize divine love as participatory communion and the ethical implications of God's self-revelation in Christ, this article has shown that environmental exploitation is a profound crisis. It violates not only creation but the very communion that constitutes divine being. When viewed through this theological lens, illegal mining is not merely an environmental or economic concern; it is a relational rupture that contradicts divine order. Drawing on African communal philosophies such as *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*, the study has proposed an integrative vision of ecological justice rooted in Trinitarian relationality and African ethics. African Theologians such as Sakupapa, Kaoma, Conradie, Magesa, Bujo, Oduyoye and Tutu argue that ecological justice in Africa should fight against neocolonial exploitation, should be organized around Spirit-centered community, and also should include moral responsibility toward the entire creation. Churches, theologians, and faith communities in Africa are therefore called to embody this perichoretic life to serve as witnesses to a God who dwells in communion and not dominion. In doing so, the African Church becomes a prophetic voice and a redemptive presence amidst ecological crisis, offering witness to a new creation marked by sustainability, justice and sacred interdependence. Living in *perichoresis* means refusing ecological sin, working to repair shattered communities, and centering worship on the God whose love holds creation together. This is not the periphery but the center of the gospel — the work of reconciliation of all things in Christ (Col. 1:20).

This article contributes to scholarship by synthesizing Edwards and Barth with *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*, introducing "theological vandalism" as a category for critiquing extractive practices, and proposing a perichoretic environmental ethic that integrates doxological, covenantal, and communal registers. Further research could extend this framework to other African ecological crises beyond mining, explore additional indigenous ethical traditions in comparative perspective, and examine how churches and seminaries translate this theology into concrete public action.

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