

Towards a cross-cultural methodological approach to environmental sustainability research

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**Abstract**

This study examined how cross-cultural methodological approach can improve research on environmental sustainability in Africa. What is considered as the traditional methodological approaches to environmental sustainability in the continent are based on siloed traditions and revelation/intuition, and therefore low in creativity. Worse still, whereas ideas from other cultures could infuse new perspectives, creativity, and innovation, many scholars in areas studies insist on methodological monism because of a deeper interest in preserving cultural identity of the regions they study. This approach negatively affects area studies in general and African studies in particular. Thus, two questions guided this study: (i) how can cross-cultural approach to the study of the environment improve its sustainability in Africa; and (ii) to what degree do traditional approaches to knowledge enhance creativity and innovation to environmental sustainability in Africa? To answer these questions, this study adopted, qualitative research methods. Data for the study were generated from secondary sources and analysed using phenomenological, hermeneutic, and critical philosophical approaches. This study argues that insistence on methodological monism is a disservice to environmental sustainability around the world. The study also demonstrates that exploring and incorporating ideas from non-African – particularly modern scientific frameworks – will be beneficial to the continent.

Keyword: Environmental sustainability research, cross-cultural, African studies, methodological issues, area studies

Introduction

Every part of the global human society suffers from the devastating impacts of the global environmental crises. The unprecedented heat is global in nature and spread; the resulting floods and/or droughts are global too. The displacement that results from these and more are reported from all parts of the world. Besides, the impacts of the rising sea levels and the reduction of available land for agriculture include food insecurity, shortage of other resources, and deepening poverty are all felt around the global. Earth.Org (2024) explained that food waste and loss account for approximately one-quarter of greenhouse gas emissions annually. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP 2024), around 3.2 billion people or 40 percent of the global population, are adversely affected by land degradation; development is putting animals and humans in closer contact increasing the risk of diseases like COVID-19 to spread; about 60 percent of human infections are estimated to have an animal origin; 100-300 million people are at increased risk of floods and hurricanes because of coastal habitat loss.

These imply that the issues at stake are complex in nature; they have a global spread and effect. What seems like the most reasonable response from the human family would have been to address these issues with joint actions, involving collaborations from/in all possible fronts. The nature of the crises and reasonability of the need for collaboration, informed the many international declarations and meetings wherein governments from all regions of the world gather with their environmental experts to suggest how to address the issues, as well as commit to relevant agreements to ensure joint solutions and actions. These are the bases for such global gatherings as the Conference of the Parties (COP) for countries that signed that United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The last of the COP gatherings was in 2023, known as COP 28, and held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The good news is that human society has been interconnected in manners that a sneeze in one location vibrates into every other region. Humans have never been so closely linked to each other. Despite this fact, and the increased possibilities for global collaboration to confront these crises, many scholars in area studies in general, and environmental sustainability research in Africa, in particular, insist on articulating what they describe as ‘African environmental ethics’, ‘African environmental philosophy’, and so on, as solution to this global problem. By taking this route, they insist on a brand of methodological monism. They are therefore yet to come to terms with the global nature of these aspects of contemporary human condition.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine how a cross-cultural methodological approach can improve research on environmental sustainability in Africa. This is derived from the fact that what is considered as traditional methodological approaches to environmental sustainability in the continent are based solely on siloed traditions and revelation/intuition, and therefore are low in creativity.

Worse still, whereas ideas from other cultures could infuse new perspectives, creativity, and innovation, many scholars in area studies insist on forms of methodological monism because of a deeper interest in preserving cultural identity, heritages, and marks of uniqueness of the regions they study. This methodological approach negatively affects area studies in general and African studies in particular. Thus, this study will be guided by two questions: (i) how can cross-cultural approach to the study of the environment improve its sustainability in Africa; and (ii) to what degree do traditional approaches to knowledge influence creativity and innovation to environmental sustainability in Africa? To answer these questions, this study adopted qualitative research methods. Data for the study were generated from secondary sources and analysed using phenomenological, hermeneutic, and critical philosophical approaches. This study argues that insistence on methodological monism is a disservice to the project of enhancing environmental sustainability in Africa and around the world. The study also demonstrates that exploring and incorporating ideas from non-African – particularly modern scientific – frameworks will be beneficial to the continent.

To achieve its goals, this paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, the paper explores various understandings of environmental sustainability, both as a concept and as an issue of global concern. In the second, it highlights the predominant structure and content of environmental sustainability research in Africa. Specifically, this paper underscores the priorities that have defined several contributions in that aspect of African studies research. It also assesses the limitations of these priorities and how they amount to methodological monism. Distinctions between methodological monism and cross-cultural methodologies define the focus in the third section. There, the paper demonstrates how methodological monism misses out in the unlimited creative human resources at the species level. It also argues that the nature of the global environmental sustainability crises requires new thinking and approach that are nonconventional and innovative; moving from value neutrality of the researchers involved towards finding solutions that have real-world relevance.

Understanding environmental sustainability

Scholars define environmental sustainability from various perspectives. According to Morelli (2011:1) one of the earliest and broadest definitions of the term refers to it “as the maintenance of natural capital.” It is one of the three components of the general idea of sustainability, the other two being social and economic sustainability. These three make up what is described as a three-legged model of sustainability, although the other two depend on environmental sustainability. The fact is that “a sustainable environment need not be dependent on the existence of either society or economy... and can stand alone as a sustainable system” (Morelli 2011:4). Despite these initial clarifications, Morelli thought that there are difficulties and slow progress in defining the concept. A more recent definition captures environmental sustainability as meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them. More specifically, it is “a condition of balance, resilience, and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversion” (Morelli 2011:6).

The use of the term ‘environmental sustainability research’ here includes all engagements that focus on how to explain environmental sustainability, how to ensure it is achieved, and what to do to revert some of the damages already incurred. This includes reflections on what specific practices result in specific degenerating consequences;

what activities can lead to even more detailed measurable articulation of the indices of the crises, and so on. The aim of any such research, driven by these clarifications, is to ensure that the resultant findings, post-research recommendations, and policies, will result in concrete and impactful real-life changes, or at least serve as catalysts towards new perceptions to the crises as well as more rewarding policies to improve human existence around the world. Within this broad description of environmental sustainability research, this paper explains in the following section how this conception has been articulated to appear different in the context of African studies.

Environmental sustainability research in the context of African studies

African studies is a sub-field of what is generally described as area studies. It focuses on addressing issues relating to Africa(ns); or addressing other general issues from the perspective of what some Africanist scholars consider to be peculiarly African. Ajah and Akah (2022) explained that this field of study has been wrongly driven by identity concerns, with attendant negative impacts on self-reflexivity and expected concrete developmental outcomes. For this and even more reasons, Ajah, Aseigbu and Akah (2023) argued for the need to re-ground that field of study, from identity concerns to a prioritisation of self-efficacy of Africans. This invitation is like Agbakoba’s (2019) view for a shift from identitarian concerns to developmentarian ones. In the context of environmental sustainability research, available data reveals how identity concerns have diverted activities in this area. Hence, as shown in the following paragraphs, some scholars in African studies are eager to show how unique traditional practices amount to easily adoptable and laudable sustainable environmental practices in the 21st century.

According to Owolabi (1996), contemporary environmental sustainability research and practices need to be modelled with the traditional society in mind. He thought that aspects of African culture can be re-articulated to develop a new environmental ethic. The supposition is that only an ethic that is derived from the indigenous culture of the people can appeal to Africans. He explained that this ethic can be derived from norms and values from traditional eras and cultures. These norms, he held, derive from two beliefs that are significant and common to all African cultures, namely, communalism and supernaturalism. The first implies a framework whereby everything relates in interconnection. Within this logic, the ancestors who are the living dead and members of the community of the living in Africa, are the guardians of their communities’ moral norms, including the norms for the preservation of the environment. The second is the assumption that nature is foundationally characterized by supernatural powers. It implies a follow-up assumption that Africans are highly religious and therefore offer spiritual explanations to events in their experiences. According to Owolabi, these beliefs structure the frameworks that ensure environmental sustainability. Two other tools are useful in this regard, namely, myths and taboos. These two, Owolabi explained, “often engender fear” (Owolabi 1996:13) and are therefore employed to sustain the same beliefs that inform them. This connection will be evaluated later.

The crucial place of these explanations, Owolabi held, is that they form the bases for developing a system of moral values that enhance environmental sustainability in Africa. The values they engender have undergirded environmental preservation in Africa. Among other things, then, Owolabi recommended that since tools like myths and taboos served to preserve the environment during the traditional eras, they could also be reintroduced to forestall situations of abusing natural resources. Ultimately, Owolabi’s view is that it is necessary to reconstruct the positive and environmentally protective norms in traditional African societies to meet the present challenges regarding the environment. But, how exactly and in what detailed ways can these translate to concrete

environmental protection practices? How does reference to norms attend to the contemporary concrete need to counter the specific and measurable impacts of specific volumes of carbon emission to the environment on daily basis?

In a language like that of Owolabi (1996), Tosam (2019) explained that contrary to the views of many scholars, environmental ethics in traditional African societies were not man-centered. Instead, it is holistic, relational, and all-embracing. He described this as holistic approach to the environment, which defines metaphysical, religious, and moral worldviews of Africans about nature. Again like Owolabi (1996), Tosam held that their approach to environmental sustainability derives from what they consider as Africans' perception of nature. The perception of nature by various societies determines how each of them relates to nature. The latter can either enhance or degrade the health of the environment. More specifically, Tosam explained that "If we perceive nature as something which we (humans) are an integral part of, and as equal partners, with whom we share a common habitat, then we may treat it with respect... But, if we regard nature as something inferior to us, we may treat it without respect." Similar to these words, Ikuenobe (2014:4) had summed that values, practices, and ways of life in traditional Africa were geared towards conserving what nature. These values and the resultant practices, according to authors like Tosam and Ikuenobe, were destroyed by Africa's encounter with the West. These views led Tosam to insist on a need to critically reappraise environmental practices adopted during the traditional times, and where possible, return to them. To make this even more possible, he recommended that governments in Africa need to return to practices that help to conserve the environment. This, he argued, will reduce the negative impacts of climate change, and enhance sustainable development in Africa.

Similarly, Kelbessa (2022) explained that traditional cultures and the derivative experiences embody knowledge and practices that enhance environmental protection in Africa. Their practices had promoted sustainable resource management over a very long period of time. According to him, Africans regard nature as sacred and divine; the physical and spiritual constituents of reality are interdependent entities. Aspects such as rivers, streams, mountains, forests, trees, and rocks are believed to be the repository and dwelling places of spirits. Kelbessa added that some of the major ethical principles embodied in different African traditions which enhance environmental conservation are interdependence and interconnectedness, mutual dependence, intra- and inter-generational justice, and environmental justice. Others are communitarianism, generosity, do no harm, reciprocity, promote life and avoid killing, a live and let live attitude, humanness, deep concern for future generations, etc. For these reasons, he recommended among other things, that the custodians of environmentally friendly practices should be included in the formulation and implementation of environmental policies in Africa.

Tosam, citing the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), admitted that there is low level of strategy and interest in Africa, for managing its natural resource base (UNECA 2012). Tosam added that many countries on the continent have neither relevant institutional framework nor laws that ensure environmental protection. Even where these exist, they are either extremely weak, completely dysfunctional, and/or mired by corruption. It is worrisome, therefore, how after acknowledging these facts, researchers on environmental sustainability from the continent will rather focus on a return to traditional environmental conservation practices. How exactly does the logic of the traditional contexts take care of the current concerns that require more coordinated management practices, multi-lateral governmental efforts, more

accountability, better evidence-based policy processes, and so on? This and related questions will engage us in the next section. The question hints on a problem of insisting on addressing issues from the angle of single, traditional method. It is the problem of methodological monism.

Methodological monism versus cross-cultural methodological approach

This paper uses the term 'methodological monism' here to mean any one or a combination of the following:

- a. insistence on explaining global social issues from the perspective of a single knowledge system or a single orientation to reality,
- b. an insistence on gaining knowledge from one source, particularly when the preferred option is intuition and/or revelation,
- c. any claim that traditional knowledge systems are superior and more reliable than more contemporary and verifiable forms of knowledge,
- d. any outright disregard of traditional knowledge systems as if they offer no insight towards improved and more holistic understanding of reality,
- e. any insistence on one form of logical inference [induction or deduction] with outright disregard for the other.

This definition is based on a more primary definition of methods as ranging "from techniques and approaches to designing alternative worldviews" (Hartz-Karp and Marinova 2017:307). This means, in the views of this paper, that methods go deeper than core physical activities and observable practices. They derive more fundamental meanings and defining orientations from the assumptions and convictions of those who adopt them. This is why articulation of methodological monism at the beginning of this section includes orientation to reality, sources of knowledge, form of logical inference, and so on.

The arguments in the second section above suggest that the authors are recommending a new methodology for environmental sustainability research in Africa. The essence of a new methodology is that it implies and consolidates the process of "framing...a new thinking" (Hartz-Karp and Marinova 2017:307). This paper holds that any good new method for addressing any aspect of the global environmental crises, needs to be cross-cultural. Bearing in mind that "there is no limit to human creativity and innovation in how to make a transition to a better and optimistic future" (Hartz-Karp and Marinova 2017:308), this paper argues that more cross-cultural methods will better enable us to focus on shared problems and use the unlimited resource available to the human species, namely, the boundless human creativity, and their capacity for innovation. This position is necessary because the focus of area studies on unique methodologies implies the imposition of limitations on these unlimited resources. The views of the authors of this paper are related to those of Stocker and Burke (2017:95) who highlighted the dangers of "siloe domains" and exclusive boundaries of knowledge. This means that to refer to traditional knowledge systems and practices as the source of solutions to all contemporary challenges in Africa implies describing that knowledge system as having an exclusive boundary. And as evident in the second section above, many Africanists describe knowledge systems in Africa as siloe domains of knowledge that have no connection with other domains of knowledge. This, in the views of this paper, is faulty.

Another crucial aspect of a rejection of approaches to traditional cultures and methods derives from the need to debunk the supposition of value neutrality in the study of such cultures and knowledge systems. This is related to McManners's (2019:1) call on the research

community to embrace an active role in sustainability research in such a manner that their activities and assumptions enable them to move “above and beyond neutral observer, to become actively engaged as catalyst for change.” This call is rooted on the need to strike a balance between real-world relevance and academic rigour inside the research process. In his view, “[A] conventional approach is to behave as an independent and neutral observer according to strict academic methods, which is robust and rigorous” (McManners 2019:2). In line with the views in this paper, McManners explained that “[T]he special nature of sustainability, and the urgency to make progress, is the reason to consider changes to the research process. What is needed is an incisive, uncompromising analysis to expose the dilemma(s) which usually sit(s) at its core” (McManners 2019:3).

Within area studies research, there are those who consider themselves as stakeholders and guardians of knowledge systems. Many of these insist on methodologies and ideas that sustain the type of reflections that retain the relevance of area studies. They therefore ignore methodologies and ideas that have more prospects of having real-world impacts. In view of this, whereas the authors have argued elsewhere for the relevance of self-efficacy in driving area studies (see Ajah, Asiegbe and Akah 2023; Ajah and Akah 2022), the views here are connected to those of McManners who described a new methodology from the perspective of “action research” (2019:3). In his view, “[T]he rationale of action research is to have direct impact, with an expectation of an immediate result as a consequence of the research” (see also Gustavsen 2008). The targeted impact or efficacy should be driven by the society’s receptivity to change, not just by the type of research. More specifically, McManners(2019:7) noted that “Adopting the methodology of action research is not sufficient to ensure impact, but... it frames the research in a way which is more likely to cut through assumptions and push past stakeholder resistance to get to the heat of the matter.” The heat of the matter in the context of environmental sustainability research is that the crises is global. The most promising approach should be based on collaboration and interaction among stakeholders from knowledge systems, with guide from evidence-based findings, from the state-of-the-art research.

As already indicated, Owolabi (1996) had noted that the global environmental crisis has made human societies to engage in collective actions, at different levels and intensity. However, in faithfulness to the demands of identity-driven research rather than problem-solving one, Owolabi reverted that since environmental crisis is global in character, it warrants that humanity recognizes the need to explore moral resources from local communities around the globe to articulate positive moral dispositions that help to sustain the larger human societies. How, exactly, does a problem that is global in nature necessarily imply a recognition of the resources of a local, not even resources from the *many* local units of the whole?

Only a few supporters of what is termed traditional environmental ethics or sustainability admit that what they are recommending in the 21st century has limitations. Kelbessa (2022) is one of those few. According to him, among other things, their [indigenous] technologies and practices are not universally applicable. He also added that the knowledge system in most indigenous communities lack the epistemic resources to understand and contribute to the global environmental problems. This implies, therefore, the need to complement such knowledge systems with knowledge from more scientific systems. Other striking limitations of indigenous/traditional knowledge involves utter resistance to disseminate specialized knowledge in traditional societies. Traditional healers in such societies, for example, refuse to transmit their knowledge to others other than their preferred children and relatives who they adjudge as

having certain degree of interest to preserve the traditions they inherited (Kelbessa 2022). One way to get around some of these limitations, according to the author, is *by creating powerful globalised alliances and networks of solidarity*. This awareness of the need to complement indigenous knowledge with scientific knowledge, is better than Tosam’s (2019) negative comment against the same form of knowledge. It resembles the position of this paper for a cross-cultural approach to research efforts for the solutions to the problems at stake.

Three things here are at the heart of the matter in area studies. One is that its focus on identity diverts energy away from real-world challenges and changes. The second is that the traditional knowledge systems that are appealed to by Africanist scholars as a consolidation of African studies have little or no room for creativity and innovation. The third, which is derived from the first and the second, is that to a high degree, methodological monism and the effort to carve area studies into silos, block massively insightful ideas and resources from intercultural and cross-cultural contexts and systems. The resultant problem is that most findings from area studies are merely conventional: they respect strong academic rigour, encourage neutral observer status of the researchers, but then, they tend towards being superficial. Their proposals easily aim only at marginal improvements since they produce only what McManners (2019:9) described as “convenient findings.” But the type of findings required to effect real-world impacts and catalyse social changes do not need to be convenient. Thus, methodologies for studies that can yield such results also do not need to be convenient and conventional. McManners (2019:8) was therefore right to have stated that whenever the aim of any research is to go beyond observation and analysis, to become catalyst for change, the research methodology should be designed in a manner that enables it to achieve this objective. These are research with purpose. And beyond being a type of method, they imply an orientation to knowledge (Akah and Ajah 2022), to inquiry (McManner 2019), and to reality in general (Akah and Ajah 2024).

The refusal to collaborate is reflected in many research reports from Africa. Tosam (2019), for instance, argued that the huge scientific and technological progress in the West made them to be largely arrogant in terms of knowledge about life generally, and human development, in particular. They assumed the place of masters in relation to others outside their region, as though they now have the task to enlighten others. Instead of acknowledging the massive progress in scientific knowledge from the global West and imagining how researchers from Africa can contribute to these and/or learn from them, Tosam prefers to judge the region as ‘masters.’ This disposition to knowledge hinders collaboration. It is even more worrisome that such judgment is coming from a region whose scholars always know how to appeal to their past, as if they have nothing to contribute to their era. To worsen it, Tosam suggests that the West had imposed some form of silence on ecological knowledge in Africa, resulting in various degrees of injustice against knowledge systems from outside that region of the world.

Since environmental sustainability is a global problem and complex in its multiple faces, research processes and engagements on the issues around it need not be treated either as if these issues are simple or as if they have special manifestations in specific areas. This is the reason this paper argues for the validity of cross-cultural approach to sustainability research, and the weaknesses of methodological monism. The authors stated at the beginning of this paper that they will be guided by two questions. Let us recall them: (i) how can cross-cultural approach to the study of the environment improve its sustainability in Africa; and (ii) to what degree do traditional

approaches to knowledge influence creativity and innovation to environmental sustainability in Africa?

In the second section above, this paper had referred to Owolabi's (1996) position that the primary reason environmental sustainability research needs to be modelled with the traditional society in mind is that aspects of African culture can be articulated to create an environmental ethic that is African. He held that only an ethic that is rooted in indigenous African cultures can resonate with Africans and result in appropriate positive engagements. Africanists like Owolabi seem to forget that what is required in the search for sustainable environment around the globe is not just what appeals to people, but what provides evidence of the lethal problem facing humanity, with the relevant solution. Achieving these does not necessarily need to depend on traditional knowledge systems. Elsewhere, Owolabi listed two beliefs as the foundation of environment conserving values in traditional societies, namely, communalism and supernaturalism. These same beliefs, he hoped, can form the basis for the development of a new environmental ethic. It is however hard to see how these beliefs provide answers about the microscopic biological, physical, chemical, and other features of the relationships that exist in nature. The supernatural explanations do not answer, for instance, how CO₂ is responsible for greenhouse gases and climate change, and how exactly humans give CO₂ to plants and receive O₂ from them in return.

One of the key technologies in the fight against the negative impacts of climate change is known as carbon capture and storage (CCS). This technology derives from the importance of carbon accounting and management. Carbon accounting, on its part, is the process/technique of assessing the quantity of greenhouse gas emitted by organisations, and how each organisation's volume of emitting impacts on the climate. Available data indicate strongly that any realistic path toward positive climate change actions will necessarily include CCS. All these point to the relevance of data and measurability in combatting climate change and environmental sustainability. Yet, when issues of environmental crises and sustainability are mentioned among many scholars in Africa, they refer to traditional methods of environmental management. As already explained, some continue to explore the religious roots/foundations of environmental sustainability. But of what relevance is this approach to such issues? Part of what the CCS technology helps humanity to do is to remove historical CO₂ from the atmosphere. As of 2022, the CCS technologies operating around the world had a cumulative capacity of nearly 40 million tons per annum, the equivalent of taking nearly 8 million cars off the road. As of 2023, this capacity has increased by 48%, amounting to about 361 million tons per annum. Again, how do traditional methods of environmental conservation achieve this contemporary need of removing historical CO₂?

Instead of clarifying how to provide evidence-based solutions to contemporary environmental crises, many Africanist authors focus on what they describe as 'moral values' in African societies. They are not talking about how new technologies can help solve the problems at stake, not about new ideas, not even about creative values. Authors like Owolabi (1996) hoped that the idea of ancestors can inform new value systems. It remains unclear how a people who define all they do from the perspectives of what is approved by their dead forefathers, who also guard the moral norms, will find the mental space for any creative response to their experiences in the here and now. Put another way, there is no space for creativity within the traditional knowledge system. It is therefore baseless to hope that such a system can form a basis for creative systems of values. The world is in a mess already regarding the deadly consequences of the global environmental crises. So how exactly do moral values turn to

technical ideas and knowledge to resolve, correct, and prevent the problems surrounding environmental sustainability?

Owolabi had also recommended that since tools like myths and taboos served to preserve the environment during the traditional era, they could also be used in contemporary era to reduce abuse of natural resources. Let us imagine that these tools were as useful in the traditional era as Owolabi suggests. Focusing on the functions of myths in the 21st century while ignoring their nature and origin is not a good move. The authors of the paper assume that it is also relevant to assess the nature and origin of myths, and therefore assess the degree of their sustainable reliability, as means of solving social and global problems. A thorough reading of the positions of many Africanists on the question of environmental sustainability reveals a lot of emphases on morality, moral norms, moral orientation, and so on. Nothing substantial is being said about knowledge and/or innovative ways of responding to new problems being shared with others outside the African community being described. These are some of the huge limitations of these recommendations. They are reductionist ways of exploring the issues at stake. And, borrowing the language of Stocker and Burke (2017:97) although in a different context, models as these are too linear and "cannot adequately represent complex issues." They do not shed impressive light on the emergent properties of the problem of environmental crises facing humanity. Another feature of reductionism that suits the description of what is termed African environmental sustainability studies in this paper can also be derived from the views of Stocker and Burke. According to these authors, reductionist models "are also not inclusive of other ways-of-knowing and forms of knowledge" [p.98]. Although these authors used this distinction to argue for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems, this paper holds that the same argument applies for the approach of Africanists. Considering the ripple effects and complex nature of the global environmental crises, exploring solutions from merely theoretical, traditional, and normative angles is not promising. Doing so by emphasising 'solutions' during traditional contexts without thinking through how exactly such solutions contribute to the issues that manifest in the current era, is rather a distraction to the search for solutions.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how a cross-cultural methodological approach – rather than a methodologically monistic approach - can improve research on environmental sustainability in Africa. This is derived from the fact that what is considered as traditional methodological approaches to environmental sustainability in the continent are based solely on what can easily be qualified as siloed traditions and revelation/intuition, and therefore are low in creativity. The authors also tried to demonstrate that, on the one hand, ideas from other cultures could infuse new perspectives, creativity, and innovation, into various human engagements. Yet, many scholars in areas studies insist on forms of methodological monism because of a deeper interest in preserving cultural identity, heritages, and marks of uniqueness of the regions they study. This methodological approach negatively affects area studies in general and African studies in particular. Based on these issues, authors of this study tried specifically to answer two questions, namely, (i) how can cross-cultural approach to the study of the environment improve its sustainability in Africa; and (ii) to what degree do traditional approaches to knowledge influence creativity and innovation to environmental sustainability in Africa? This study demonstrated that insistence on methodological monism is a disservice to the project of enhancing environmental sustainability in Africa and around the world. The paper also demonstrated that exploring and incorporating

ideas from non-African – particularly modern scientific – frameworks will be beneficial to the continent.

Conflict interest(s)

The authors declare that they have no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

The authors declare that this article was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and principles for research.

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