



Indigenous Framework for Peace, Security, and Sustainable Development through Biblical Theology and African Traditional Religion

Abstract

This paper develops an indigenous framework for peace, security, and sustainable development in Africa by reading biblical theology and African Traditional Religion (ATR) together as compatible traditions rather than treating one as a foreign import layered over the other. Drawing on scholarship published between 2021 and 2026, much of it written by African theologians and social scientists from within the communities they study, the paper argued that both traditions ground peace in restored relationship rather than the mere absence of violence, ground security in the wellbeing of the whole community rather than in state protection alone, and ground development in stewardship rather than extraction. It examined what each tradition specifically contributes: biblical theology's covenant accountability and prophetic critique of injustice, and ATR's practiced vocabulary of communal obligation, oath, and land-based responsibility. From this comparison it proposed a framework built from principles both traditions already hold, rather than principles imported from outside either. The paper closed by outlining what such a framework would require of religious leaders, policymakers, and development practitioners working in African, and especially Nigerian, contexts, where both traditions continue to shape everyday moral reasoning whether or not policy documents acknowledge it.

Keywords: Biblical Theology, African Traditional Religion, Peace, Security, Sustainable Development, Ubuntu.

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Introduction

Peacebuilding, security policy, and development planning in Africa are, more often than official language admits, religious undertakings. The people who carry them out have had their sense of a flourishing community shaped as much by Sunday sermons and traditional

proverbs as by any secular training in conflict resolution or economics. Yet the frameworks these fields actually use tend to treat religion, where they notice it at all, as a variable to be managed, a source of conflict to be defused, or a stakeholder group to be consulted, not as a genuine source of theological and cosmological reasoning about what peace, security, and

development are for. This gap between how peacebuilding and development are practised and what actually motivates the communities they serve has real costs. Salifu's (2025) study of religion as a tool for conflict management and sustainable development in Nigeria found that religious ethical values, justice, tolerance, and patriotism, drawn from Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion alike, remain central to how ordinary Nigerians understand peaceful coexistence, even as formal peacebuilding institutions continue to treat religion as a complication rather than a resource. This paper addresses the underuse of biblical theology and African Traditional Religion, read together rather than as rivals, as sources for a framework of peace, security, and sustainable development genuinely rooted in how millions of Africans already reason about these questions.

Recent African scholarship has begun supplying the material such a framework needs, even though no one has yet assembled it into one. Opuni-Frimpong (2023) shows African theologians actively using scripture to confront corruption, injustice, and poverty in public life, arguing that biblical perspectives on justice and the common good are not private devotional matters but resources for public-policy engagement that Ghanaian church leaders have drawn on for decades. Mensah (2023) compares Psalm 40:7, 'thy law is within my heart,' with African indigenous sacred texts and

shows that internalised moral law, obedience from conviction rather than external compulsion, is a shared concern of the Hebrew Psalter and African indigenous religious thought, not a uniquely biblical idea later imposed on African communities. Mokhutso's (2023, 2026) two studies of Christianity and African Traditional Religion, one on tension within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the other on the deeper philosophical compatibility between the traditions, together show that the relationship between biblical theology and ATR is better understood as an unfinished conversation than a settled contest: real friction in institutional practice, but genuine convergence in underlying values. Nyawo (2023) demonstrates what this convergence looks like on the ground in Eswatini, where the Incwala ritual still functions as a resource for social cohesion that a purely biblical or purely secular development framework would miss.

None of this literature, strong as it is individually, assembles biblical theology and ATR's shared resources into a working framework for peace, security, and sustainable development together, the language in which African governments, regional bodies, and development agencies actually plan and budget. Opuni-Frimpong's work stays within Christian ethics; Mokhutso's stays at the level of theological comparison; Nyawo's Eswatini study, rich as it is, is a single case rather than a general

framework; and Salifu gestures toward the practical synthesis this paper attempts without developing biblical theology and ATR's specific contributions in depth. This paper works in that open space. It moves from what each tradition brings to peace, security, and development on its own terms, to what becomes visible once the two are read together, to a set of framework principles that can inform how religious leaders, policymakers, and development practitioners work in African, and particularly Nigerian, contexts.

Definition of Terms

Peace, as used in this paper, means more than the absence of armed conflict. It means right relationship among persons, between persons and their environment, and, in both traditions examined here, between the community and the sacred order that sustains it (Mensah, 2023).

Security refers to a condition in which a community's members are protected from violence and want, and in which mechanisms exist to address grievance before it escalates into conflict. This paper treats security as resting on communal trust and legitimate authority, not on coercive capacity alone (Salifu, 2025).

Sustainable development denotes an approach to material and social progress that meets present needs without depleting the ecological, communal, and intergenerational relationships that future flourishing depends on. This definition was chosen because it fits both biblical

stewardship language and ATR's own land-based ethic (Nyawo, 2023).

Biblical theology, as distinct from systematic or dogmatic theology, refers here to reading scripture's own theological themes, covenant, justice, shalom, stewardship, on their own terms and in their own historical development, rather than through a later doctrinal system imposed on the text (Holter, 2023).

African Traditional Religion, following usage elsewhere in this field, denotes the indigenous, largely oral spiritual and ethical systems practised across African societies, grounded in belief in a Supreme Being, veneration of ancestors, and the mediating role of divinities and ritual specialists (Sarbah & Adjei, 2024).

An indigenous framework, for this paper, means a set of guiding principles for practice built from resources already present in a community's own religious and cultural traditions, rather than principles developed elsewhere and adapted for local use (Mokhutso, 2026).

What Each Tradition Brings to the Question of Peace

Biblical theology's contribution to a framework of peace begins with the richness of its own vocabulary for the concept. Shalom, the Hebrew term usually translated 'peace,' carries a wholeness the English word rarely captures: bodily wellbeing, right relationship with neighbour, and right relationship with God, all at once. A

community could not, on biblical terms, be at peace while its poor went hungry or its courts favoured the powerful, however quiet its streets. Opuni-Frimpong (2023) shows this vocabulary doing real work in contemporary African public life, where church leaders draw on biblical justice language to confront corruption and structural poverty, because shalom's wholeness makes silence about injustice theologically untenable, not merely politically inconvenient. This is peace as an achievement requiring active justice, not peace as a fragile absence of disturbance to be protected by staying quiet.

African Traditional Religion arrives at a similar destination through its own vocabulary, built less around a single key term than around a dense web of practices: oath, taboo, ancestral mediation, and communal ritual. Together these treat peace as inseparable from the health of the whole community, not as a private good an individual might secure alone. Mensah's (2023) comparison of Psalm 40:7 with African indigenous sacred texts is instructive here: it shows that internalised moral obligation, law written on the heart rather than merely imposed from without, works as a peace-sustaining mechanism in both traditions, restraining wrongdoing before it requires external correction. Nyawo's (2023) study of the Incwala ritual in Eswatini shows this internalisation working at communal scale: the ritual's annual renewal reaffirms bonds of obligation between the

king, the ancestors, and the wider community, sustaining social cohesion year on year rather than merely responding to conflict once it has broken out.

Where the two traditions differ is less in what they mean by peace than in where each locates the authority responsible for sustaining it. Biblical theology roots that authority in a single covenanting deity whose character supplies a standard capable, in principle, of judging any king or nation, a universalising move visible in how biblical prophets could indict Israel's own leadership without appeal to any higher human court. Holter (2023) shows this universalising impulse was never meant to exclude African peoples, a point worth stressing given how often biblical theology has been received in Africa as an import rather than a genuinely inclusive resource. African Traditional Religion, by contrast, distributes the authority for peace across ancestors, territorial divinities, and living custodians, elders, diviners, traditional rulers, whose legitimacy is renewed through ongoing communal relationship rather than a single universal source. This gives ATR's peace mechanisms a local specificity that biblical theology's more universal claims sometimes lack, and gives biblical theology a cross-communal reach that ATR's locally rooted mechanisms sometimes struggle to achieve alone.

Security as a Communal Achievement

Both traditions resist the modern assumption that security is primarily the state's business, something a government provides for citizens who otherwise wait to be protected. Salifu (2025) found that religious ethical values continue to shape how Nigerian communities manage insecurity locally, often filling gaps left by a state whose formal security apparatus cannot reach every farming community or urban neighbourhood. Salifu's use of Durkheimian functionalism underscores a point both biblical theology and ATR would recognise: a community's shared moral commitments do real security work, sometimes more effectively than formal policing. Mokhutso (2023) offers a useful caution, however: where Christian institutions have suppressed rather than engaged ATR's communal mechanisms, they have sometimes weakened the very communal trust security depends on, leaving a vacuum that neither imported church structure nor traditional authority alone has filled.

Ngwoke (2025) shows concretely what happens when this communal dimension of security is neglected in favour of purely institutional or purely spiritual responses. Nigerian Christians' engagement with corrupt and violent politics has often oscillated between withdrawal, treating public life as beyond redemption, and uncritical participation, baptising political ambition without theological scrutiny. Neither builds the

sustained communal accountability that biblical prophetic tradition and ATR's oath-bound accountability structures actually require. Yusuf and Shittu's (2022) survey of ATR's conflict resolution mechanisms shows what that accountability looks like in practice: traditional processes for managing land disputes, succession conflicts, and interpersonal harm work because they treat security as inseparable from restoring the disputing parties' standing in the wider community, not as a technical problem solved once and set aside. Chlouba's (2024) continent-wide finding, that traditional institutions still shape ordinary citizens' democratic attitudes, for better and worse, confirms that this communal dimension of security is not a historical curiosity but a live, measurable feature of how Africans experience governance and protection today.

This evidence suggests that a genuinely indigenous security framework would need to treat the state's formal security apparatus as one layer within a larger structure, not as security's primary source, a structure that also includes the moral formation religious communities provide, the accountability traditional institutions exercise over their own members, and the communal trust both depend on and help sustain. Neither biblical theology nor African Traditional Religion imagines security as something government delivers to a passive citizenry; both imagine it as something a morally formed,

mutually accountable community produces together, with formal authority playing a necessary but partial role.

Stewardship, Ubuntu, and the Land

Sustainable development, defined as this paper defines it, raises a question both biblical theology and African Traditional Religion have rich resources to answer: how should a community relate to land and material resources without treating either as simply available for extraction? Biblical theology's stewardship tradition, rooted in the creation narratives' language of humanity tending rather than merely possessing the earth, treats land as held in trust rather than owned outright. This has direct practical weight in agrarian contexts where land is the primary source of livelihood and, increasingly across Nigeria's Middle Belt and beyond, the primary source of violent conflict. Mensah's (2023) reading of internalised law in the Hebrew Psalter connects naturally to this stewardship tradition: a community that has genuinely internalised responsibility toward the land, rather than merely complying with external regulation, is far less likely to exhaust that land for short-term advantage.

Ubuntu supplies African Traditional Religion's own version of this stewardship instinct, extended beyond land to the whole web of communal and material relationship a person is born into. Mugumbate and colleagues' (2023) widely cited account of Ubuntu describes

personhood as constituted through relationship across family, community, society, and spiritual dimensions at once. This makes it difficult, in principle, to pursue material development that damages one of those dimensions for gain in another, since the wellbeing Ubuntu cares about was never simply individual or material to begin with. Lunga and colleagues (2025) apply Ubuntu to disaster risk reduction and governance and show this stewardship logic working in genuinely contemporary policy: embedding Ubuntu's relational ethic into planning produces more resilient outcomes than frameworks that treat communities as passive recipients of development designed elsewhere.

Nyawo's (2023) Eswatini study brings these threads together concretely. Indigenous spirituality's role in peacebuilding and development cannot be separated from its role in regulating how a community relates to land, resource, and ritual time: the Incwala ritual's agricultural calendar embeds ecological restraint directly into the community's religious life, rather than treating environmental limits as an external constraint development must work around. Falola (2022) situates this ecological embeddedness within ATR's wider epistemology, arguing that the same cosmology which venerates ancestors and territorial divinities has always encoded real limits on how land may be used, and by whom, as a matter of religious obligation rather than

optional environmental policy. Read alongside biblical stewardship theology, this suggests that a development framework drawing on both traditions would treat ecological restraint not as an add-on to growth but as a condition any genuinely sustainable development, in either tradition's terms, would have to meet from the outset.

Building the Framework

Reading biblical theology and African Traditional Religion together on peace, security, and development does not produce a single doctrine either tradition would fully own, but a set of shared principles that can anchor practical work without diluting either tradition into the other. The first principle is that peace requires justice, not merely quiet. This follows directly from shalom's wholeness and from ATR's insistence, visible across Yusuf and Shittu's (2022) survey of indigenous conflict resolution, that unresolved grievance, not surface calm, is what genuine peacebuilding must address. The second principle is that security is a communal achievement resting on moral formation and mutual accountability, not a service the state delivers alone. Salifu (2025) and Chlouba (2024) support this empirically; biblical prophetic tradition and ATR's oath-bound accountability structures support it theologically. The third principle is that development is stewardship rather than extraction, following from the convergence this paper has traced

between biblical creation theology and Ubuntu's relational ontology, a convergence with direct implications for how land-based conflict, environmental policy, and resource governance should be approached in African contexts.

A fourth principle, less often stated but implicit throughout this scholarship, is that neither tradition should be treated as the other's junior partner. Mokhutso's (2023, 2026) paired studies caution against the institutional pattern in which Christian structures suppress or merely tolerate ATR instead of engaging it as a genuine interlocutor, a pattern that weakens the very communal trust this paper has argued security and development both depend on. A framework built on these four principles, justice-oriented peace, communally grounded security, stewardship-based development, and genuine mutual standing between the two traditions, would not require African governments or development agencies to become confessional in any narrow sense. But it would require them to stop treating religion as background noise to be managed, and start treating biblical theology and African Traditional Religion as what the evidence here suggests they already are for millions of Africans: working theories of what a flourishing community actually looks like.

Findings

Biblical theology and African Traditional Religion converge substantially on what

peace, security, and development actually require: wholeness rather than mere calm, communal trust rather than coercive protection alone, and stewardship rather than extraction, even though each tradition expresses this convergence through its own vocabulary and mechanisms. Recent African scholarship, produced largely by theologians and social scientists writing from within the communities they study, has been building the individual pieces of a combined framework, biblical public theology, ATR's peacebuilding mechanisms, Ubuntu's relational ethic, without yet assembling those pieces into one working structure for peace, security, and development together. Security, on the evidence both traditions and recent empirical scholarship supply, functions largely as a communal rather than a purely state achievement: frameworks that treat religious and traditional institutions merely as stakeholders to consult, rather than as active sources of the moral formation and accountability security depends on, work with an incomplete picture. Development framed around stewardship rather than extraction finds strong, independently arrived-at support in both biblical creation theology and Ubuntu's relational ontology, suggesting this convergence is not coincidental but reflects a genuine shared insight about the relationship between community, land, and material flourishing. Finally, the institutional relationship between biblical theology

and African Traditional Religion remains genuinely unsettled, with real documented tension in practice even where the two traditions converge philosophically. Any framework built on both must address that institutional tension directly, rather than assume philosophical convergence will resolve it on its own.

Conclusion

Ask a Nigerian pastor and a traditional priest, on the same afternoon, what peace actually requires of a community, and the two answers will rhyme rather more than either man expects. On the evidence gathered here, the pastor and the traditional priest are not describing two different destinations when they talk about what their community needs to flourish. They are describing the same destination in two different languages: biblical theology's shalom and its ethic of covenant accountability, and African Traditional Religion's dense communal vocabulary of oath, ancestor, and Ubuntu, both converging on peace as justice achieved rather than violence merely absent, security as a community's own moral achievement rather than a service delivered from outside, and development as stewardship of relationship and land rather than extraction from either. This convergence has been documented piece by piece across a growing body of recent African scholarship without yet being assembled into a single, usable framework, which is the gap this paper

has tried to close. The framework proposed here does not ask either tradition to give up what makes it distinct, biblical theology's universalising prophetic claim or African Traditional Religion's rootedness in specific land, lineage, and ritual. It asks policymakers, religious leaders, and development practitioners to stop treating that distinctiveness as an obstacle to cooperation, and to start treating it as two genuinely complementary sets of resources for the same, still unfinished, work of building peaceful, secure, and sustainably developing African communities.

Recommendations

Turning this framework into practice will require deliberate effort in several directions at once:

1. Peacebuilding organisations and government agencies working on conflict resolution in Nigeria and comparable contexts should formally include both Christian and African Traditional Religion leadership structures as active partners in local peace processes, drawing on the communal accountability mechanisms Yusuf and Shittu (2022) and Salifu (2025) document, rather than treating religious actors as stakeholders consulted only after a secular process has already been designed.
2. Security policy at state and community level should invest deliberately in the moral formation and communal accountability structures both traditions supply, supporting the institutions, churches, mosques, councils of elders, that do this formation work, rather than measuring security investment solely in terms of policing and hardware.
3. Development agencies and land policymakers should adopt stewardship rather than extraction as an explicit planning principle, drawing on the convergence this paper has traced between biblical creation theology and Ubuntu's relational ethic, particularly in resource-conflict-prone regions where land is simultaneously livelihood, inheritance, and sacred trust.
4. Christian institutions operating in African contexts should take seriously Mokhutso's (2023) caution against treating African Traditional Religion as an obstacle to be overcome rather than a genuine theological interlocutor, since institutional tension between the two traditions actively undermines the communal trust that peace, security, and development all depend on.
5. Researchers should extend the comparative work this paper has begun, testing the proposed framework empirically in specific African contexts, since a framework built from principles shared across two traditions still needs the contextual grounding that only

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sustained, community-based research can supply.

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