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Climate, Security, and the Study of Religion in Africa

Insights from Northern Mozambique

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Abstract

How the security risks associated with climate change, such as social instability and conflicts over dwindling resources, impact the study of religion in Africa has received limited attention from scholars of African religions, despite the need to determine how these impacts influence how religion is conceptualized. However, climate-related security risks intersect with religious beliefs and practices. This article draws on participatory methodologies and an ethnographic study of the security risks stemming from climate change in northern Mozambique. It demonstrates that the emergence of security challenges related to climate change provides religious studies with new data and, therefore, new challenges in rethinking the meaning of African religions. It also shows the significance of attributing religion to climate disasters among religious communities, exposes the epistemological assumptions and conflicts over the role of religion in social challenges, and demonstrates the transcendence of religious differences in times of widespread social crises. The article thus contributes to setting the stage for future studies that aim to understand how climate-driven vulnerabilities change the conception of and engagement with religion in Africa.

Key words

Climate change; peace and security; African religions; conflict; Mozambique

Introduction

How do security risks associated with climate change, such as social instability and clashes over dwindling resources, impact the study of religion in Africa? This question has received limited attention from scholars of African religions, despite the fact that people's everyday responses to the impacts of climate change are largely conditioned by institutional, social, and cultural patterns (Hulme 2017; Schipper 2010). In this article, we systematically unravel how the experience of climate-triggered insecurity influences the study of religion in Africa. By drawing on ethnographic and participatory methodologies within an emerging discourse of climate security, we aim to promote theoretical and methodological discussions to develop the study of African religion further and constructively. In the following section, we review the

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existing literature from two key domains—first, the intersection of religion and climate/environment; and second, climate security—to lay the groundwork for our discussion. We then describe the socio-ecological and religious situation in northern Mozambique, articulating the climatic hazards the region has experienced and its religious demography. We then briefly explain the methods we used to gather the lived experiences of climate-affected communities. We follow this with a presentation of the findings from the interviews and focus-group discussions. Finally, in the discussion section, we analyze how security risks associated with climate can influence the conceptualization of religion.

Religion, Climate, Environment, and Security

Scholarship on religion, the environment, and climate change—often referred to as green religion, eco-theology, or the ecology of religion—primarily adopts a theological, pastoral, or normative approach. This body of work, frequently focusing on specific faith traditions, explores the potential of the world's religions to contribute to environmental conservation and address climate change (Awuah-Nyamekye 2014; Chitando et al. 2022; IPBES et al. 2022; Nche 2012; Nche 2023). It investigates how religious perspectives facilitate or undermine vulnerability, mitigation, and adaptation and the extent to which religions are repositories of ecological insights, emphasizing moral obligations and providing resources for fostering changes in behavior (Grim et al. 2015; Haberman 2021; Haluza-DeLay 2014; Hulme 2017; Jenkins et al. 2018; Schuman et al. 2018; Van Klinken 2022; Veldman 2016; Van Klinken et al. 2024). This scholarship concludes that, arguably, religious traditions that emphasize human dominance over the natural world promote anti-environmental attitudes in their adherents. Conversely, those that sanctify nature promote pro-environmental ones. Most of the scholarly analysis traces how religion can either contribute to or undermine mitigation and adaptation.

Climate security scholarship suggests that, when combined with socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, climate change can threaten community peace and stability. This threat is contingent on societies' abilities to adapt to climate impacts and manage conflicts non-violently (Smith and Vivekananda 2007). Cases in point in which religion is a factor include the mobilization of religious beliefs, values, practices, and identities to justify actions like discrimination and violence over natural resources, such as water (Maingey et al. 2022), the practice of marrying underage girls to wealthier men not of their choice to secure food in times of drought (Gambir et al. 2024), or lynching people accused of having put off rainfall through witchcraft (Artur and Hilhorst 2012). With regard to peace, some religious communities and individuals invoke their beliefs, values, practices, and identities to resolve violent conflict and promote peace and reconciliation during climate-related conflict and violence (Khaira and Ranti 2024).

The climate security discourse, particularly experiences of climate-related security risks, presents fresh contexts, data, and materials for the study of African religions. In contrast, the study of African religions can explain the deep meanings behind people's reactions to climate-related security risks. However, these fields have not yet been brought into conversation with each other. Consequently, how they shape each other remains unexplored. This influence includes how religion is shaped and/or reshaped by the experiences of climate-related security risk. This is the focus of this article, using a case study of climate-affected communities in northern Mozambique.

Study Location and Methodology

Mozambique in southern Africa is experiencing extreme weather conditions due to climate change. Since 2016, it has experienced intense cyclones named Idai (in 2019), Kenneth, Chalane, and Gombe, which left hundreds of people dead, thousands injured, more than a

million affected, more than half a million in need of humanitarian assistance, and hundreds displaced (Nações Unidas Moçambique 2019; Ndapassoa 2023; PDNA 2019). The Mozambique population survives mostly on local resources such as rain-fed agriculture and fisheries. This means that most of the population is highly vulnerable to tropical cyclones and rises in sea level (Gambir et al. 2024; INGC 2009; Ndapassoa 2023). The impact of climate change is compounded by the violent insurgency of al-Shabab (which has no direct ties with Somalia's al-Shabaab). In addition to other sources of concern, the organization exploits local grievances emanating from climate-triggered resource scarcities, such as water shortages or agricultural failures, to recruit members. It positions itself as a protector of people in vulnerable contexts, thus attracting those who feel marginalized or threatened (Swain et al. 2011).

Mozambique is constitutionally a secular state, but it acknowledges the right of its citizens to practice or not practice a religion, and it stipulates that no individual may be deprived of his or her rights because of religious faith or practice if they conform to the laws of the state (Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique 1990). According to 2020 data from the National Statistics Institute, 27 per cent of Mozambicans are Catholic, 19 per cent Muslim, 17 per cent Evangelical or Pentecostal Christian, 16 per cent Zionist Christian, 2 per cent Anglican, and less than 5 per cent Jewish, Hindu and Baha'i. The remaining 14 percent claim no religious affiliation, and a significant proportion of the population adheres to syncretic indigenous religious beliefs, a category not included in the government's census figures but characterized by a combination of African traditional practices and aspects of either Christianity or Islam. Muslim leaders continued to state that their community, concentrated mainly in the north of the country, accounts for 25 to 30 per cent of the total population (US State Department 2021). Mozambique is, therefore, a highly religious country, with Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous religions being the dominant religious traditions (Morier-Genoud 2023; Premawardhana 2021).

This study explored the communities' lived experiences, interpretations, and responses to climate change and associated security risks, such as community tensions and instability. Analysing the data, we observed that climate-related experiences can also provide insights into the study of religions in Africa. We conducted formal and informal interviews with diverse community members, including religious, cultural, and community leaders, in Nampula District, Mozambique, in 2024. This methodology is underpinned by the necessity to study climate insecurity from everyday bottom-up constructions of security in everyday life, which are a prerequisite for gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of fragile communities and developing robust context-specific strategies (Mac Ginty and Firchow 2016; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016). We analyzed our interviews and focus-group discussions through a thematic analysis approach to systematically identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning within the data to uncover key themes and insights. We complemented our study with secondary literature to contextualize the primary data within broader scholarly debates and theoretical frameworks.

Plurality of Religions in Africa

In this section, we present the findings of our research, which are derived from a thorough analysis of the interviews and focus-group discussions. The targeted population involved men and women aged 15 and above engaging in subsistence farming, ensuring diversity in representation across various age groups. The targeted group was considered suitable for this study because the participants who belong to this group experienced the direct impacts of climate change. Due to their reliance on natural resources that are susceptible to climate change, the participants were the appropriate group to answer the research questions. We organize the results around the key themes that emerged from the interviews and focus-group discussions.

Religious Interpretations of Climate Disasters

One traditional leader attributed the extreme and destructive weather events, such as cyclones, to the marginalization and denigration of indigenous religious practices and cultural values. He claimed that sacred places were increasingly being desacralized, taboos were being broken, and communication with the ancestors was being undermined. He stated further: 'In the olden days, we never had cyclones or extreme weather conditions like today. We are experiencing violent weather conditions because there are no prayers to the ancestors for the protection of the land anymore.' Another community member agreed: 'The extreme weather conditions and events, such as cyclones and storms, are incarnations of ancestors who are unhappy with the government's policies. They are now returning through natural disasters and community tensions to express their unhappiness.'

Another community member agreed that the ancestors are questioning what has become of society and want humanity to mend its ways. According to him, previous generations did not experience such extreme and frequent weather conditions that destroy human life, livestock, infrastructure, and natural resources and tear society apart. He said: 'The ancestors are concerned that we are cutting all trees and poisoning bodies of water, and soon there will be no fish. A rich man is not the one with lots of money in the bank. It is the one with plants in his yard because he has something to eat throughout the whole year.' This response underscored the belief that climate change will be addressed not only by the miraculous powers of the ancestors but also by practical actions like growing trees and not poisoning fish. Thus, it highlighted the intricate relationship and commensurability between the world of the living and that of the ancestors in responding to the climate crisis.

The religious attributions of the increased occurrence of drought and other natural disasters are not confined to the impact of the ancestors. They extend to the living in the form of those who are alleged to possess religious powers and use witchcraft to cause natural disasters such as cyclones and droughts and by putting off the rain (Artur and Hilhorst 2012). Witchcraft accusations of this nature tend to increase in times of climate crises and are sometimes accompanied by the lynching of those accused of causing such crises by the local people. The research participants reported that rites and rituals such as *ovetha moro* were also meant to ward off such evil people from impacting the communities.

Respondents from the Christian community echoed similar sentiments. According to them, and tapping into their theology, the extreme weather conditions are caused by transgressions and sins against God, despite secular perspectives that religious thinking has no place in modern society. They argue that climate hazards are proof that human beings have broken the law of God. This is similar to breaking taboos, as articulated by the practitioners of Indigenous religions. God created Adam and Eve to protect the environment. Just as Adam broke the law protecting the environment, humans today do the same. They cut down trees in the country and near the sea, the latter practice leading to the sea encroaching on the land.

Similarly, a Muslim Sheikh concurred that the extreme weather events are due to the sins of humanity. He asserted that hazards like cyclones, storms, heavy winds, and social disharmony happen when the community is living in sin:

> In the past, when people sinned against God, he destroyed them. Today, people are going against God through transgressions such as drugs. The disasters are thus an awareness or reminder from God to present-day modern Mozambique that he is not happy with where things are going. God unleashes such disasters to remind people that they are going astray. The extreme weather conditions are didactic. Human beings remember God better when they find themselves in disaster.

Climate-Related Security Risks and Religious Responses

When livelihoods are threatened by drought, storms, or cyclones, Makhuwa indigenous religious leaders perform traditional rituals and offer prayers to shield their communities from hunger and the ensuing social instability. A cultural and religious leader, known as the *Puiyamwene* or the Queen, performs religious rituals to ask the ancestors for rain and protect the community from violent rains, heavy storms, and conflicts arising from climate-related food shortages. For the Makonde people, this role is assumed by the *mukhulukan*a (the medium of the ancestors), who conducts the religious rituals known as *ovetha moro* (lighting the fire) to 'close the borders of the community', insulating them from climate-induced extreme weather events and related social instability in the language of the research participants. The *ovetha moro* ceremony involves the *mukhulukana* preparing a fire at a community gathering and invoking the ancestors to ensure food security and social cohesion. This fire is then distributed to those who are present, who distribute it further within their communities. Despite being pejoratively labelled as superstitions by 'secular' and technoscientific organizations and institutions, these rituals and practices are central and significant to these communities. This intersection of climate-exacerbated security vulnerabilities and religious rituals not only highlights the deep interconnections between livelihoods, particularly agriculture, and African religions, it also provides fresh insights into how traditional belief systems evolve and engage with contemporary global challenges like climate change. Moreover, these practices not only address physical needs such as hunger and agricultural stability; they also accentuate social cohesion, thereby contributing to research on how religious traditions promote social stability amidst external threats in Africa.

Climate-Related Security Risks and Religious, Cultural, and Epistemological Tensions

The impacts of climate change create not only physical destruction but also epistemological conflicts. One traditional leader pointed to the conflict between the government and the Indigenous religion practitioners regarding what should be regarded as legitimate knowledge in addressing climate-induced calamities. He argued that Indigenous religion and knowledge must be integrated into government policymaking and further: 'Government and politicians talk about Indigenous religion and culture as part of tradition and history, not as a lifestyle. Indigenous religions possess resources that can be deployed to mitigate and adapt to climate risks and resolve peace and security risks.' In what could be a reference to traditional early warning systems (Banla 2024), he said: 'In our culture, we have people who can see the future of these cyclones and disasters.' He further asserted that there is a need to go back to Indigenous religion and culture, which were sidelined at independence, to seek guidance, and thought that the traditional leaders must be given back their traditional roles.

The Sheikh lamented the fact that, despite religious leaders' concern about the climate and environment and their actions to address their adverse impacts, they are excluded from government programs. They are not invited to events or activities by politicians even when the latter work with highly religious people who prioritize and follow the advice of religious leaders. Another Muslim respondent charged that religion must be incorporated into government programs. The other challenge the Sheikh observed is that politicians expect the religious to align themselves with their world view. He thus emphasized that politicians must realize that the religious will always contribute based on their beliefs: 'They will not speak Newtonian physics but Jesus and Mohammed.'

The Integration of Religious Interpretation and Practical Responses

It emerged that, for the respondents, religious interpretations of climate-related challenges and the practical responses to addressing the impacts of climate change are not mutually exclusive.

Church leaders, for instance, support their communities by addressing climate-related traumas, using resources drawn from their Christian tradition. They do this through prayer sessions and workshops to spread information about climate change and to impart knowledge and skills to resolve communal tensions exacerbated by food insecurity.

Due to limited formal education and a lack of access to mass media, most rural community members struggle to interpret and apply scientific information, such as the tables, figures, and graphics used to illustrate the findings of scientific reports. Consequently, they face difficulties in accurately predicting adverse weather events and taking timely actions to mitigate their effects. Religious leaders, who also belong to their communities, fill this gap by conducting workshops in a manner that is understandable to community members. They are adept at breaking down scientific jargon and communicating effectively, bridging the gap between scientific information and everyday understanding. This approach is crucial, as conventional methods of scientific communication may not always align with everyday ways of knowing.

The Christian respondents said that they pray and preach about caring for the environment. They pray for wisdom to deal with the climate crisis in all its dimensions. They do this cognizant of the fact that God will not change the situation miraculously. People must do something (grace builds upon nature). They encourage their followers to participate in climate action activities, including growing trees. According to a Christian pastor and leader, this is scriptural. They use their religious and moral authority to mobilize people for climate action. This resonates with Indigenous religions' initiatives, where the ancestors are consulted while at the same time calling on people to conserve the environment.

The churches perceive reaching out to the poorest of the poor to be a religious mandate. Christian Council of Mozambique church leaders reach out to the poor in the communities they pastor. Because communication channels are important for social acceptability, understanding climate information, and facilitating social stability, it emerged that the affected communities trust religious and traditional leaders ahead of the government, scientists, and politicians, being skeptical of the information the latter convey.

After cyclones Gombe and Anna, CCM-trained pastors provided psychosocial support to internally displaced persons (IDPs). The women's church leadership established a dialogue program that provided safe spaces to discuss how to address child abuse, sexual abuse, and underage marriages after observing that women, regardless of religious affiliation, lacked protection and privacy and suffered mental trauma. The women experience double victimization both as human beings and because of their gender. The effects of sexual and gender-based violence are highly injurious and perpetual (Desai and Mandal 2021), a situation the Church wanted to end.

One Islamic respondent referenced science's findings that human activity significantly contributes to rapid climate change due to using fossil fuels such as coal and petroleum and non-renewable materials. He further charged that other activities such as logging, charcoal-burning, clearing forests for agriculture, livestock grazing, and the expansion of cities contribute to carbon emissions, water, and air pollution. Furthermore, population growth, economic globalization, urbanization, and rising consumption levels do nothing to improve the situation.

Climate Crises Provide a Platform for Ecumenical Engagement

The study showed that crises of climate and environmental security create opportunities for ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. Diverse religious groups come together on a common platform to address shared concerns about climate change and its impact on security, fostering unity and collective action. As the name 'Christian Council of Mozambique' (CCM) suggests, CCM is the apex body of Protestant religious traditions. The coordinator of the CCM stated that

they intentionally deploy an ecumenical approach to address the impacts of climate change. Every year, on 4th October, different churches convene to reflect on the environment and the climate crisis during the celebration of the day known as the Year of Creation. In addition, CCM celebrates National Peace Day, where pastors also preach on climate change and the environment. Muslim and indigenous religious representatives are invited to give messages of solidarity.

Discussion

Lived experiences of climate-related security present a context that prompts new contextual, theoretical, and methodological questions for the study of African religions. The current focus of the climate security discourse on material impacts, explanations, and solutions amid the presence of climate-related symbolic and cultural violence, in which religion is a variable, underscores the need for the study of African religions to adapt to the needs engendered by climate-related security risks, including addressing the values that justify these forms of violence. The study of African religions faces the challenge of exploring how religion can function within various ecological and sociocultural processes. Research participants indicated that climate and nature are closely connected to environmental change. This connection implies that as the natural world changes, it may also alter people's perceptions of and beliefs about the divine, including their views on ancestors in society (Bergmann 2017). The following question becomes relevant: How do climate-related security risks impact the study and conception of African religions? To what extent can climate-related security risks change images of deities, religion, and their corresponding sociocultural practices (Bergmann 2009)?

As much as religion might bring about a change in climate crises, the study of religion can investigate the extent to which the crises might also change people's perceptions of religion. Climate crises such as natural disasters and conflicts might change believers' conception of deities as omnibenevolent or omnipotent. This is because, for some, deities offer hope, which is compromised when pressure is exerted on what is considered a provider of hope. With droughts and floods destroying livelihoods and leading to conflicts, faith grows desperate. The role of the ancestors is not just as spiritual protectors from hazards and risks but also didactic, teaching the living through environmental calamities and acting as moral arbiters concerned with human transgressions against the natural world. Questions such as where God is in all this arise. The study of African religions needs to investigate the extent to which climate security risks transform religion and the conditions of faith, guided by the question: How do African religions change in light of this? The study of religion could explore how climate security risks might be an opportunity for religion to renegotiate or claim a more significant place in society and not something relegated to the past.

While some communities and individuals might regard climate crises as a divine message or a punishment for human transgressions, others might regard them as a sign of heresy and human idolatry. Religious world views might make others feel that deities have disappeared from nature's stage. Thus, climate security does not just represent a new theme; it is vital in studying the depths of African religions. Reflections on climate-triggered security risks within the study of African religions might reveal the extent to which religions are embedded in the natural environment and climate. Thus, continued reflections and explorations of climate-associated security risks might result in deconstructing and reconstructing religious world views, practices, processes, traditions, ideologies, and moralities.

Our investigation explored the epistemological differences and synergies among religious, secular, and scientific understandings of climate change, providing critical insights into the broader discussions on religious marginalization and the politics of knowledge in Africa. We observed a significant disdain on the part of the government and secular opinion towards

cosmological interpretations of extreme weather conditions, the associated security risks, and the role of religious leaders. Despite this, communities look to traditional and religious leaders to give them a moral framework that encourages climate action. Influential figures like the sheiks and other traditional leaders highlighted the alignment between science and African religions. They advocate the rights of indigenous peoples, peace, justice, and broader planetary health, guided by principles such as stewardship, respect for life, ethical consumption, interconnectedness, compassion, and social justice. These leaders are favored over government and non-religious institutions as sources of climate information. This leads to the question of how scientific and religious dialogues about climate change can coexist and support each other. The security risks posed by climate change invite the study of African religions to investigate how religious knowledge is formed and validated so it can address these risks. Participants from various religious backgrounds acknowledged a convergence between scientific knowledge and religious beliefs, emphasizing a harmonious relationship between faith and science. The current marginalization of religion by policymakers exemplifies the silencing of alternative epistemologies by relegating religious interpretations to the past, which perpetuates coloniality and modernity. The study of African religion thus necessitates alternative methodologies, including decolonial thinking, to counteract this marginalization of religion, particularly Indigenous religions, as mere historical and cultural artifacts. Through such approaches, the study of religion can show how alternative epistemologies can offer fundamentally different perspectives on existence and interpretations of the world that should be taken fully into account. These methodologies will enable the exploration, highlighting, and 'un-silencing' of how historically marginalized faith communities and leaders engage in the public discourse on climate security, whether they seek to affirm the primacy of their institutions or prefer to make uniquely personal contributions.

Religious communities go beyond attributing climate disasters and security risks to religious causes: they also acknowledge human-caused deforestation, challenging literature that sees religion as a barrier to climate adaptation and conflict resolution. Such views often argue that religion contradicts science and that recognizing climate change as an 'act of God' absolves responsibility, a perspective frequently associated with African religions (Cannon 2014; Hulme 2009). Practical measures, like tree-planting and workshops addressing climate-induced trauma, are encouraged. Therefore, studying African religions could entail examining how they are practiced and understood amid climate crises and how these crises and security threats influence religious rituals, adaptations, and technoscientific responses.

Our research in northern Mozambique underscored a strong desire among followers of Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous religions to influence climate action positively. Religious leaders are united in their commitment to address climate challenges within their own frameworks of belief. This contributes to the comparative study of religion in Africa by examining how different religious systems—Indigenous, Christian, and Islamic—respond to climatic challenges. It opens up interdisciplinary avenues for studying how climate and environmental science can advance the study of religion in Africa.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to explore the effects of climate-related security risks on the study of religion, especially how climate-related security risks like social instability and resource conflicts affect religious studies in Africa. It highlighted how these risks create a unique context for studying religion on the continent critically. The study revealed the significance of religious interpretations in experiencing the security risks caused by climate disasters among faith communities. It also uncovered the colonial legacies that lead governments and technoscientific entities to adopt secular epistemologies and marginalize religious knowledge in addressing these risks, leading to epistemological assumptions and conflicts. The findings call for a re-

evaluation of religion's role in social challenges. Additionally, it showed that during widespread crises, religious differences can be overcome rather than exacerbated. The study of African religions can emphasize religious knowledge through methods like decolonial thinking, which critically includes faith leaders and communities in the climate security conversation without taking a fundamentalist stance. The article sets the foundations for future research on how climate crises reshape religious engagement and offers strategies for addressing the complex issues of religion, climate change, and security in Africa and beyond.

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