

## ISSUES AND THEORIES IN ECOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: A CONSIDERATION FOR AFROECOLOGISM

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### **Abstract**

*The study aims to examine theories that impact global ecology. Theories have been raised in ecology and their valuable contributions and limitations in academic studies have been discussed, however, none of these has an Afrocentric focus. In addition, previous studies have not considered the anthropological implications of environmental crises. The study aims to fill this knowledge gap. This study uses a polymethodic approach which involves ethnography, literary reviews, and critical functionalist analysis. Functionalism reveals the underlying mental principles of the theories. These approaches were chosen because they offered wider sources of data and are useful for in-depth analysis. The result findings revealed that the world is inundated with cataclysmic ecological crises and that some of the major causes come from cultural and religious beliefs which play important parts in how human beings relate with the planet. The study calls for the application of anthropological paradigms in the search for understanding the multifarious causes of ecological problems. One limitation of the study is that it does not include quantitative analysis. This study is significant as it offers fresh anthropological perspectives on ongoing global ecological crises. In conclusion, it argues for the adoption of afroecologism as a viable model in ecological discourse, because it is a workable response to numerous ecological challenges bedeviling the world due to its cultural elasticity, earth-friendliness, and practicality.*

**Keywords: Afroecologism, Anthropology, Ecology, Theories, Religion**

### **Introduction**

This paper gives a general anthropological view of ecology, environmental crises, and associated theories. The study underscores the interconnectivity of religions-humans-environment amidst ongoing ecological crises. Anthropology recommends itself as the “science of humanity”, which studies all aspects of human beings, thus, the paper submits that ecological discourse will receive the needed impetus if it is well grounded in anthropology. Previous studies on the issue indicate immense ecological crises bedeviling the planet and that most of the problems are associated with the activities of human beings (Taylor, 2019; Sponsel, 2012; Tucker, 2004; Merrit, 2010; Mcfague, 2013; Mcdonagh, 2010; Tubi, 2021).

However, these studies have paid little attention to the anthropological implications of ecological problems and none offers an Afrocentric perspective on the issue. This study argues that human cultures and ideological orientations on the environment influence how we relate to it, therefore it calls for an examination of the uniqueness of Africans' relationship with the environment.

Methodologically, the study employed a mixed approach. Data collection was by ethnographic collection and critical review of literary documents. Functionalism serves as a methodology of discussion and analytical tool. Functionalism is a theory based on the premise that whatever human beings perform serves a purpose within that society. It is the value consensus that influences how individual culture interacts with the environment. Functionalism offers clear perspectives of the mental state of how cultures and persons deal with the environment. The mixed approach gives room for wider sourcing of data. Analysis was done by critical interpretation of collected data through the determination of patterns and logical reasoning. The study observes lacuna in the various theories of ecology and therefore proposes afroecologism as an appropriate theory in understanding, and ameliorating the cause and effect of ecological crises. Afroecologism is an African perspective on ecology, with a special focus on the close nexus between human beings, religion, and ecology. The study concludes that the integration of studies seeks to recover, distill, document, and use indigenous African environmental practices that are capable of ameliorating the ongoing ecological crises menacing the world.

**Understanding global ecology:** Data clearly underscores the fact that the entire universe is locked up in a debilitating environmental degradation that might eventually imperil the earth according to the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP28 (<https://unfccc.int>). Ecological degradation of unimaginable proportions has been noticed on earth by global bodies like the United Nations (<https://www.sciencealert.com>, <https://www.unwater.org>) and the World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int>). Similarly, the scientific world has been alarmed by the gravity and enormity of ecological crises, (<https://www.earthday.org>, <https://www.caryinstitute.org>, <https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org>). Great numbers of scientists warned of "untold suffering" if humanity continues creating ecological problems, (Carrington 2019:1) and they pointed a "dire warning to humanity over the health of the planet" (Christensen 2019:1). Scientists across the world have pointed out the looming catastrophe awaiting the world as Chew Sing (2001), in *World Ecological Degradation*, presents a global perspective that draws attention to the scale of ecological disasters.

It is apparent that scientists alone could not solve the problem, therefore concerned scholars and advocates began to explore the anthropological underpinnings of the ongoing ecological problems by examining the interconnectivity between religion and ecology. Ecological anthropology is one of the perspectives that have been advanced in the course of ameliorating global ecological problems. Several critical reviews of ecological issues in anthropology have been examined by Haen, Nora, et al. (2016), in *The Environment in Anthropology*, McDonagh's (2010) *Climate Challenge: A Challenge to All of Us*, Tubi, Dauji and Ibrahim's (2022), "Tradoecology of the Yoruba as a Tool for Sustaining the Environment in Traditional Communities: A Study in Ecological anthropology" and Zeng's (2022) "Development of and reflections on ecological anthropology in China" presents a penetrating treatment of anthropological perspectives on ecology.

Similarly, Tubi (2020: 243-255) describes the menace of environmental scourge going in Africa as "ecocide in traditional communities". Van Schalkwyk (2011) and McDaniel (1990) write searching for a practical eco-spirituality, while McDonagh (2010) persistently calls for human-ecology friendliness. McKibben's (1996), *The End of Nature* is a critique of the human-environment relationship, and Merrit (2010) amongst others has called attention to environmental issues amidst the ongoing ecological crisis. The problem has become protracted because human beings have not been able to fashion out a solution, despite the growing awareness of the unparalleled danger of ecological crises. As a consequence, religious leaders and theologians have also raised critical voices on environmental issues by advocating

anthropological solutions to the myriads of ecological issues. Popes John Paul, Benedict, and Francis (2019, 2020), have come up with several eco-encyclicals and eco-sermons. In fact, Pope Francis raises the stakes higher when he opines that "*Catechism will be updated to include ecological sins*", (<https://ncronline.org>).

**Understanding ecological anthropology:** Ecological anthropology focuses on the complex cultural adaptations of human beings to the environment. It is concerned with the interconnectivity of human beings and their physical environment, by examining how human beings shape the environment, and how these relations in turn influence human beings. According to Salzman and Attwood (1996) and Moran (2007), there is an unmistakable reciprocal relationship between human beings and the planet. Derived from the Greek word *oikos* (habitation), ecology is the study of the interconnectivity of all organisms and the environment. It encompasses the totality of the planet. Ecological anthropology is construed here as the study of the interconnectivity of humans and the biosphere and everything in the ecosystem. It examines the interdependence of demographic dynamics in relation to the ecosystem. It is a considered opinion of this paper that anthropological study is a sine qua non in the quest to find a lasting solution to the numerous eco-crises that frontally challenge the earth.

#### **Anthropological theories on ecology**

Scholars have propounded several theories on ecology with anthropological underlining, which assist them in giving focus to their studies. Such theories are mental constructs and they are akin to road maps. This study examines those that are considered germane to the present study, due to their perceived anthropological orientation, consistency, comprehensiveness, and coherence. These include Anthropocentrism, Steward theory, Dominion theory, and Gaia hypothesis. The study proposes Afroecologism as a viable theoretical orientation on human-ecology relationships. The paper considers Afroecologism as the most primed of all theories.

#### **Anthropocentrism**

This theory is centered on human beings (*anthropos*) and their place in the world. It could be used negatively or positively. Scholars like Kopnina (2018) and Taylor (2017, 2019) have explained the duality of meaning in using the term anthropocentrism. Positively, it is a viewpoint, which behooves human beings to protect and nurture the environment for the sake of humanity. Consequently, if positively construed, it is capable of being interpreted as a basis for environmental protection, whereby it calls on humankind to protect the planet for the sake of humanity. This logic is very sound and it has helped to engender critical ecological activism in Western cultures and religions like Christianity. Another point of importance in its positive application is that the apparent failure of human beings to protect the environment can be interpreted as an affront to God the Creator. It can be stated emphatically that if we fail to protect and conserve the environment, we are disrespecting the Creator. In a negative sense, it is a form of human supremacism. It is seen as a human-centered ecological view, which observes human beings as the most important creatures in the world. Some have used alternative words like human supremacy or human exceptionalism to describe it. This position forms the basis of the origin of human beings' disdain for the non-human world, which lies at the heart of the ecological crisis.

Anthropocentrism is also called humanocentrism. Anthropocentrism is human chauvinism, it is a religious philosophy that looks at human beings as the epitome of creation, the highest of God's creatures, and the master of the universe. Everything in the world is interpreted along human values in which all the resources in the world are to be exploited and used by human

beings. This belief, however, is a common feature of religious beliefs of the Western world like Christianity and philosophies like the Aristotelian and Kantian philosophies. Thus, scholars like Carmody (1983), McDonagh (2010), and Taylor (2007, 2019), amongst others have pointed out this theory as the bane of ecological crisis in the world. Boddice, 2011: 2011: 3-4) opines that anthropocentrism has many faults and calls for caution in its application.

### **Dominion theory**

The perspective that human beings are the masters of the earth is called dominion theory. This is basically a literal anthropological interpretation of parts of the Book of Genesis which many Christians uphold with tenacity in which conquest, domination, lordship, and exploitation come to mind. This theme comes forth in Catholic teachings as follows:

Man was created in God's image and was commanded to conquer the earth with all it contains and to rule the world in justice and holiness: he is to acknowledge God as the maker of all things and relate himself and the totality of creation to him so that through the dominion of all things by man the name of God would be majestic in all the earth (Vatican II *Gaudium et Spes* 1990 No. 34).

This is derived from Genesis 1:26, which states that human beings shall have “dominion” over all created things. The Hebrew word *ve-yirdu* carries the meaning of ruling, subduing, and exercising dominion, which has been used by many to define the doctrine and to make their life choices in relation to the earth. The exact words of Genesis 1:26 in this researcher's own translation are;

*Elohim* said; *na-aseh* (let us make) *a-dam* (mankind) after our own *be-tseleme-nu*, (resemblance), after our *kid-mutenu* (outward likeness). Let them *ve-yir-du* (dominate) over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the sky, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals and over all the creeping things that creep on the *ha-aretz* (earth).

A typical text from the deuterocanonical book, Sirach 17:1-3 says, "The Lord created human beings ... and also granted them authority over everything on earth. ... he put the fear of them in all living creatures and gave them dominion over animals and birds". Biblical passages like these and more are the basis for dominion theory. The impact of these words on some fundamentalists needs critical assessment. These biblical texts can be interpreted as giving human beings complete power to dominate and exploit the earth and everything in it. This means that humanity is the crown and center of the planet. Along this line, the Catholic Church, in fact, does teach that "according to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown" (*Gaudium et Spes* 1990, No. 12).

Carmody in his book, *Ecology and Religion: Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature* (1983), highlights the need to be cautious in adhering to the dominion theory like fundamentalists do. According to him, such a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible will lead to the destruction of the earth by human beings. The critical appraisal of Maltby (2008) concisely captures the basics of this theory in his treatise, "Fundamentalist Dominion, Postmodern Ecology". He examines nature, animals, and human beings in the light of Old Testament scriptures, environmental ethics, and postmodern philosophy. He observes that collateral damage has been inflicted on the planet. Similarly, Carmody and Carmody squarely put the blame on Christianity thus;

Though not all scholars agree on the role that Christian religion played in the destructive process, there is good agreement that the Christian fracture of the cosmological myth, the Christian exaltation of a world-transcendent God, and the Christian exaltation of an

Adam placed by God at the head of creation inclined many Westerners to lay nature waste cavalierly (1985:22).

In assessing dominion theory, the following points can be itemized: (i) It discourages genuine scientific concern for the environment. (ii) It kills gains already made in ecological struggles. (iii) From the biblical point, it distorts the original plan of the Creator, when he made human beings stewards of the Garden of Eden. (iv) It promotes humanity above creation. (v) It can be exploited by politicians for political gains. (vi) It is a strong basis for racism and promotes apartheid policies.

### **Stewardship theory**

Another ecotheological supposition is the steward theory, which is also anthropologically oriented. It is a direct opposite of the dominion theory. Succinctly, it argues that human beings were made to be stewards of the earth and not to have dominion over it. Proponents of the theory equally base their argument on Genesis where God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to till and care for it and not to dominate it. The idea that human beings are stewards and not masters of the earth is also based on portions of the Bible in Genesis 2:15. The researchers' translation is:

“Then the *Elohim YHWH* (Lord God) took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, *le-ave-dah* (to cultivate/keep it) and *ule-sha-me-rah* (tend/dress/care for it)”.

This text offers a new perspective on the human relationship with the planet. Its meaning gives human beings the task of tending, caring, cultivating, and dressing the earth. This text completely rules out the exploitative and destructive relationships, which human beings have had with the planet under some climes.

Carmody (1983), in line with Stewardship theory, offers a new interpretation of the role of human beings in creation in *Ecology and Religion: Toward a New Christian Theology of Nature*. The steward theory gives a refreshing interpretation of the Bible in the face of the challenging condition in which human beings and the earth have found themselves. Thus, the task before humanity is not just to exploit the earth, but to care for it. Abuse associated with dominion is not the original plan of the Creator; rather it crept in out of sin. The whole ecosystem is like a living organism and human beings form an integral part of the total organism. This study identifies stewardship theory as a more adequate and integrated perspective. It involves caring for the earth and responsibly managing its resources. As tenants and not owners, human beings have a responsibility to and accountability to God.

Authentic stewardship presupposes reverence and awe before the grandeur of creation and the magnificence of the planet. We are to have deep respect for life itself, either of animals or plants and we must see God in his creation whenever we contemplate the world. Stewardship demands that all forms of greed, abuse, and insensitivity to nature must be avoided. We are called to responsibly recognize the interconnectivity of creatures and to reverence the interdependence of the whole creation.

To concretize stewardship theory within Christianity, Pope John Paul II (1990), in his book *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, lists some points that should be considered in discussing ecology. He mentions that human beings must cultivate respect for life in general, grow in the awareness of the beauty of creation, appreciate the earth as a common heritage for all human beings, develop a collaborative response to ecological crises, and be responsible in tackling environmental problems. In evaluating Stewardship theory, the conclusion that we are confronted with is to adopt ecological stewardship, which according to McDaniel (1990:23) is the most appropriate interpretation to be given to the Bible in this context. The theory of

stewardship offers an integrative reading of the Bible. It calls on human beings to be involved in the responsible management of the earth because the planet is a unique gift that is entrusted to humanity. It sees us as tenants, not owners or lords of the earth, thus, we must behave responsibly towards the earth. We are to be accountable to God for our management of the earth. The real worth of the earth goes beyond its utilitarian value. Earth is beautiful on its own. We must value its beauty. It enhances the interdependence of everything in the creature.

Tubi, Ojo, and Farouk (2024) presented the Islamic view of stewardship where they argue that Islam does not allow anyone to destroy the planet. Rather, the concept of stewardship is primal in Islam, because in their submission, human beings have been entrusted by Allah to tender the earth. On its own theology, Hinduism conceives the whole ecosystem as integral in which human beings are stewards of the earth, and human beings, animals, and plants are involved in a complex web of interconnectivity. In traditional African religions, the concept of stewardship is very well grounded in the idea of creation in which human beings and other elements of the ecosystem are conceived as needful to one another. In the study of eco-theology of traditional Yoruba societies, Tubi (2018:53), records the chief priest of Ogidi a community in northeast Yoruba land saying, “*Olodumare* never gave human beings total power over his creatures. There are many things in nature which are more powerful than human beings”. He concludes that the nurturing of the earth is a divinely imposed duty on humanity. To do otherwise is to invite the anger of the *ebora* (deities).

The study notes that stewardship theory gives us the clues that we are co-creators with God, not destroyers of the earth. Along this line of thought, the Union of Concerned Scientists also spoke on stewardship, saying;

We the undersigned, senior members of the world’s scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated (<https://www.ucsusa.org/>).

### **Gaia hypothesis**

A fresh idea introduced into ecology is the Gaia hypothesis. This hypothesis is well grounded in anthropology as it focuses on the observation of human life and other life forms as they contribute to maintaining global stability in water, air, plants, and in fact, the ecosystem in general (Volk 2003). Gaia's hypothesis conceptualizes the earth and everything in it as a single organism. It is derived from Greek mythology, where Gaia (the personification of the Earth) is conceived as one of the primordial deities. Gaia is the ancestress of all living things. This hypothesis was developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Marguis. They argued that the biosphere and all organisms play a part in maintaining the stability of global temperature, atmospheric oxygen, hydrosphere, salinity of seawater, etc. In the Gaia hypothesis, the focus is placed on the interconnectivities between the biosphere, atmosphere, and hydrosphere (Lovelock 2000, 2009; Volk 2003).

Borrowing from Hellenism, the concept of Gaia was brought into ecology as a means of connecting environmental issues to Western thoughts and philosophies, which helped the proponents to describe the earth as a complex living organism. In Gaia, the earth has a soul/spirit and the earth is a living organism where humanity itself will truly flourish if only it understands its roles in the cosmos as its self-reflective element. Sin for humankind will be its refusal to recognize its true place in the cosmos and its resultant interconnectedness with other parts of the planet. Gaia's hypothesis can be criticized for being teleological in presentation.

### A Consideration afroecologism

The paper presents Afro-ecologism as the most primed of all ecological anthropology theories because of its deep human orientation and general applicability across all peoples. Afro-ecology has been defined as "an integration of studies which seeks to recover indigenous African environmental practices, document traditional ecological practices and to re-evaluate Africa's autochthonous relationship with the natural environment" (Tubi 2018: 315). Africans have an intense concern for the environment and it is expressed in their traditional religions and socio-cultural practices that are inundated with ecological norms. For this reason, there are numerous taboos/abominations placed on Earth and everything on it. Abusers of nature get appropriate punishments. Earth must be appeased when traduced thus totemic animals, forests, trees, ponds, rivers, mountains, etc. when abused or spoilt/damaged must receive propitiations. Murder and suicide among human beings are considered abominations and therefore the spirit of the community must be appeased. An essential part of African ecology is the admission of spiritual elements in nature. In many instances, nature is divinised and every natural endowment carries spiritual manifestation. According to the research of Tubi (2018) among the pristine traditional communities of Yoruba land, experts in the tradition of Africa, such as the *aworos*, (priests) *babalawos* (herbalists), and *olodes* (hunters), say that it is not only human beings who have spirits. They are of the opinion that plants and animals have their spiritual part. The *aworos* assert that nature and deities are often coterminous. The *olodes* also maintain that animals have spiritual identities like human beings. The *Babalawos* claim that plants have spirits in them. For this reason, nature is hallowed by traditional African communities (Tubi 2018, 2020)

As discernible from this study, it is categorical that the traditional African milieu is based on the acknowledgment of the interpenetrating complexity of the world of nature, which human beings reasonably harness, exploit, manage, and control for various purposes such as religion, health, agriculture, housing, economy, etc. In addition, Africans also hallowed the earth. Olupona (30) writing on religion and ecology in African culture and society opines that the complexity of the interconnectivity of environment and communities in traditional African societies are multifaceted. Using rituals, songs, and lived religious norms within the African context, he postulates that the circles of nature lie behind the ritualization of the environment. He points to the intricacy of the environmental, religious, and cosmological underpinning of the African worldview and maintains that Africans have great respect for the earth.

Another point to note is the infinitely pervading element of eco spirituality where humans and the natural environment plays significant roles in African religions (Oyewole, 2003; Tubi 2018). In this connection, it behooves humanity to adopt eco-spirituality, which is well engrained in afroecology.

Taking a closer look at the degree of environmental factors in traditional African religion, one cannot but conclude as does Tarusarira that traditional African religion cannot be divorced from nature. "African religion informs the way adherents regulate their relationship with both nature and fellow human beings", writes Joram Tarusarira in *African Religion, Climate, and Knowledge Systems* (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/erev.12302>). Olaniyan (2003: 577-579) claims that environmentalism is rooted in African religions in which the natural environment plays important roles in all facets of life in Africa. In the same vein, Oyewole (2003: 368-370) goes further to assert that traditional African religion is so engrained with nature, that if we seek plausible answers to environmental problems, we should seek them within traditional African religions. He argues that Africans love nature, tender it, and live within it, therefore, they possess traditional knowledge, which can be helpful in ameliorating

ecological challenges that harangue the planet and humanity. There is a connection between human beings and nature, wherein human beings have and continue to exert tremendous pressure on the planet albeit benignly within the African milieu. From their writings, it is possible to ascertain the degree of influence that human beings in Africa exact on the planet and in turn know the level of influence that the environment imposes on human beings.

### Conclusion

This study reveals that the concept of Afroecologism is a welcome development in ecological studies. Afroecologism arose out of the concern of theologians, activists, religionists, and scholars of various fields in Africa who felt that the rate of ecological disaster had gone too far. They assert that the earth is facing a precarious situation and that something urgent needs to be done to stem the tide of ecological disasters that have been ravaging the planet. These authors all agree that the main culprits are human beings who have unbridled consumerist taste and therefore have subjected the earth and its natural resources to massive uncontrolled exploitation. In addition, the authors notice the various types of ecological disasters that have befallen humanity such as erosion, air pollution, water pollution, increase in malignant diseases, spread of desertification, etc.

In view of germane anthropogenic data, there is no doubt that Africa is facing serious ecological challenges like other parts of the world and this has several repercussions on the traditional beliefs, economic and social systems. A consideration for Afro ecologism is advocated because of its suffusing richness in eco-friendliness, profundity of human-earth interconnectivity, and prospects of providing the most earth-friendly solution to the current global ecological crises. The idea that human beings are the masters of the earth, that have the right to exploit it as they like, is a strange concept to traditional African communities. The enactment of several taboos on nature points to abhorrence within the African religio-philosophical milieu of dominating the earth, (Omobola, 2013). No one will while claiming to dominate the earth; pollute water, indiscriminately kill animals, and destroy forests and plants without suffering serious repercussions in Africa. Such a thought does not even arise in the minds of Traditional African Religions devotees (Tubi, 2018). The study recommends that the Afrocentric model called Afroecologism, in association with modern scientific ecological management, is best suited for the world.

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**LIST OF TRADITIONAL INFORMANTS**

| S/N | NAME               | SEX    | AGE  | OCCUPATION            | PLACE OF INTERVIEW | DATE                     |
|-----|--------------------|--------|------|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1   | Abiola, Andrew     | Male   | 80   | Retired civil servant | Ilonkan, Ogidi     | Researcher's field notes |
| 2   | Adebayo Kemuna     | Male   | 78   | Farmer                | Aiyede             | 7/7/2020                 |
| 3   | Adeniyi Olawale    | Male   | 80   | Farmer                | Ife Ijumu          | 7/7/2020                 |
| 4   | Adeohi Maliki      | Male   | 82   | Masquerade dancer     | Iyara              | 5/6/2019                 |
| 5   | Adewumi, A.        | Male   | 91   | Chief hunter          | Ogidi              | 9/4/2019                 |
| 6   | Ajakaiye, Bayo     | Male   | 98   | Farmer                | Ilonkan, Ogidi     | Researcher's field notes |
| 7   | Akande, Ajiboye    | Male   | 99   | Chief priest          | Aalo, Ogidi        | 8/9/2020                 |
| 8   | Augustine Ikuenayo | Male   | 83   | Farmer                | Iyara              | 5/6/2019                 |
| 9   | Baiyemo            | Male   | 75   | Farmer                | Ihale              | 9/10/2020                |
| 10  | Chief E. T. Isaiah | Male   | 80   | Traditional chief     | Odo ape            | 9/10/2020                |
| 11  | Chief Oju          |        | 95   | Traditional chief     | Odole, Mopa        | 1/2/2019                 |
| 12  | Chief Sasu         | Male   | 85   | Traditional chief     | Alu                | 3/7/2019                 |
| 13  | Dada Michael       | Male   | 77   | Farmer                | Iyara              | 5/6/2019                 |
| 14  | Esther Ibinaiye    | Female | 69   | House wife            | Iyara              | 5/6/2019                 |
| 15  | Fatimayin, Gbaluju | Male   | 101+ | Chief priest          | Aalo, Ogidi        | Research's fieldnotes    |
| 16  | Fibiana Adewumi    | Female | 71   | House wife            | Iyara              | 5/6/2019                 |