



DECOLONIZING CREATION THEOLOGY: GENESIS 2 AS AN INDIGENOUS TEXT IN AFRICAN COMPARATIVE HERMENEUTICS

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Abstract

Genesis 2 has been alienated from the African context being traditionally framed as a tool of colonial proselytization. However, a decolonial reading reveals that its primary themes such as the 'earth-bound' origin of humanity and the infusion of divine breath, parallel African indigenous ontologies, suggesting that the text functions more as an indigenous-aligned narrative than a foreign import. Western "hermeneutical colonization" has spiritualized Genesis 2, stripping it of its material "earthiness" and alienating it from the African lived experience of land as a sacred, ancestral entity. Reflecting the phenomenological and decolonial orientation of Professor Umar Habila Danfulani, this study aimed at reclaiming Genesis 2 as an "indigenous text." It employed a comparative decolonial hermeneutic to dialogue the Hebrew narrative with West African creation myths (specifically Berom), focusing on the themes of dust, breath, and cultivation. The study found that liberating Genesis 2 from Eurocentric dualism reveals a holistic anthropology that affirms African "eco-spirituality." Findings indicate that the Yahwistic "stewardship" model aligns with African views of humans as sacred tenants of the earth. This re-reading provides a robust framework for decolonizing African theology and fostering "spiritual re-enchantment" in response to contemporary ecological crises.

Keywords: Genesis 2, Decolonial Orientation, African Traditional Religion, Land Ethics, Comparative Hermeneutics.

Introduction

In the traditional worldview of the Berom people of North-Central Nigeria, the relationship between humanity and the earth is not merely one of habitation, but of ontological continuity. The *Gwol* (soil/ground) is regarded as a sacred repository of life-force and ancestral memory. This indigenous perspective offers a potent lens through which to re-examine the Yahwistic narrative of Genesis 2, which has long been subjected to a Western "hermeneutical colonization" that strips the text of its material grit in favor of abstract spiritualization. Traditionally, Genesis 2 has been framed as a tool of colonial proselytization, a narrative imposed from without to replace "pagan" attachments to the land. However, a decolonial reading suggests that the "earth-bound" origin of the 'adam from the 'adamah parallels the very myths the colonial project sought to erase. In Berom mythology, the creation of the human is fundamentally a "molding" process, where the earth provides the substance and the divine provides the animation.

Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani is widely recognized as one of Nigeria's foremost scholars in the history of religions, African Traditional Religions (ATR), inter-religious encounter, and phenomenology of religion. A member of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Jos since 1984, Danfulani's academic formation includes a PhD from Uppsala University, where his



dissertation focused on divination among the Ngas, Mupun, and Mwaghavul peoples of Nigeria, analyzed through a phenomenological and anthropological lens in Pebbles and Deities. Danfulani's phenomenological approach is rooted in the long academic tradition of seeking an integral understanding of religious phenomena by describing and interpreting lived religious experience on its own terms rather than imposing external categories (1999). This method involves attending to religious meanings as given by adherents themselves, suspending reductive explanations that strip practices of their existential weight. Phenomenology, in this sense, is both descriptive and hermeneutical: it seeks the structure and meaning of religious experience with respect to actors' own symbols, rituals, and cosmologies (Deezia, 2025).

Within African religious studies, this approach counters older colonial and post-colonial paradigms that tended to view African religious expressions as primitive, derivative, or inferior to Western or Abrahamic traditions (Durodolu & Chisita, 2024). Oguntola-Laguda has advanced scholarship that treats African religious behavior such as divination, neo-traditional movements, and sacred healing shrines not as curiosities but as epistemically rich phenomena that warrant description, interpretation, and comparative dialogue. Such work aligns with wider decolonial aims of asserting indigenous epistemologies against epistemic hierarchies inherited from colonial scholarship. Phenomenology dovetails with decoloniality when it refuses to subordinate African religious thought to Western ontological categories and instead foregrounds African conceptual worldviews as legitimate hermeneutical resources (Savides, 2022). Danfulani's scholarship thus contributes not only to descriptive religious studies but also to broader epistemological resistance against imported frameworks that have historically marginalized African systems of meaning (Ogundade & Dada, 2022).

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Drawing on the phenomenological and decolonial orientation of Danfulani, this study aims to perform an act of epistemic restitution. It argues that Genesis 2 functions as an "indigenous aligned" text. By placing the Hebrew narrative in dialogue with West African creation myths, particularly focusing on the themes of dust, breath, and cultivation, the research seeks to move beyond "contextualization" toward a full "re-enchantment" of the biblical record. The following analysis employs a comparative decolonial hermeneutic to demonstrate that the Yahwistic model of "stewardship" is not a mandate for exploitation, but a blueprint for Eco-Spirituality. It affirms that the human is a "Sacred Tenant," whose ethical health is inextricably tied to the health of the *Gwol*. Through this synthesis, the study provides a robust framework for an African Theology of the Soil that can respond to contemporary ecological crises and the alienation of a technology-saturated world.

The figure of Genesis 2 within African religious discourse exemplifies the challenge of colonial importation of sacred texts and interpretive frameworks into contexts with robust indigenous cosmologies. Genesis 2 is often introduced through missionary and Western theological paradigms



that implicitly position biblical creation narratives as universal templates for understanding humanity's origins, nature, and relationship with the earth (Schmid et al, 2022). In many African theological and religious studies curricula, this biblical narrative becomes the default cosmological reference, against which African traditional cosmologies are measured, adapted, or dismissed (Owusu-Gyamfi, 2023). This transplantation of Genesis into African religious imagination carries a complex legacy. On one level, African Christians and scholars find in Genesis profound theological resources for articulating human dignity, sacredness of creation, and moral anthropology (Mathu, 2025). However, the universality claims embedded in colonial reading strategies often resulted in devaluing indigenous cosmologies by assuming that meaningful creation accounts must conform to biblical categories to be considered legitimate or "theological" (Punt, 2023). This is what is meant by colonial import: the uncritical acceptance of imported sacred texts and interpretive frameworks as normative benchmarks rather than as culturally situated narratives among many (Heaney, 2016).

The colonial import problem manifests as a multifaceted marginalization of African thought, beginning with an epistemic hierarchy that privileges Europeanized biblical cosmologies as "sophisticated" truth while dismissing African traditions as "primitive" myths (Ouma, 2025). In Agboada (2025), this hierarchy is reinforced by an interpretive lens that imposes Western theological constructs such as body-soul dualism and abstract metaphysics which distort indigenous sensibilities rooted in communal personhood and rootedness in the land. Ultimately, this leads to the displacement of indigenous epistemologies, where the institutional dominance of colonial missionary frameworks suppresses African creation stories, producing a monological discourse that prevents a genuinely comparative theology from allowing indigenous cosmologies to stand on their own terms. Such dynamics are increasingly critiqued by scholars operating at the bridge between decolonial theory and African theology. In the study of ATR, there is a growing recognition that imported biblical narratives need to be re-situated within plural cosmological conversations rather than remain the unchallenged center (Zhiya et al, 2025). What is required is not rejection of Genesis per se, but a decolonized posture toward biblical texts one that recognizes both Genesis and African cosmologies as culturally situated narratives with their own internal coherence and theological depth. This study adopts such a posture. It treats Genesis 2 as an indigenous ancient Near Eastern cosmology, worthy of comparative dialogue with African creation ontologies, and not as a universal standard. Doing so reflects both the phenomenological commitment to understanding religious phenomena from within and the decolonial commitment to epistemic plurality, two strands central to Danfulani's scholarly legacy.

Theoretical Framework

Comparative Decolonial Hermeneutics is a method that seeks to disrupt the "coloniality of knowledge" by placing biblical texts and indigenous traditions on an equal epistemic footing. Unlike traditional comparative religion, which often used Western categories as the universal standard (Ndlovu, 2018), a decolonial approach acknowledges that the Yahwistic narrative of Genesis 2 was produced in an Ancient Near Eastern context that shares more with African agrarian ontologies than with modern Western Enlightenment dualism (Rathbone, 2006). This framework operates on the principle of diatopical hermeneutics, a term popularized by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2023) and adapted in African theology to describe a dialogue between different "topoi" (places of knowledge). By reading Genesis 2 through this lens, we move beyond viewing the text as a colonial tool and instead treat it as a site of "intercultural translation" (Santos, 2023). This allows the researcher to reclaim the Hebrew concepts of 'adam (humanity: male and female) and 'adamah (soil) as being in direct conversation with African concepts of ontological grounding in the land, rather than being mere precursors to Western individualistic theology. In addition, Danfulani Method is characterized by a deep engagement with lived religious experience, the "real-life" expressions of faith that occur outside



of formal dogmatic structures (Danfulani, 2001). For Danfulani, the sacred is not an abstract concept but is found in the rituals, symbols, and communal lives of people, particularly in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

Applying this method to Genesis 2 involves a "phenomenology of the soil." Instead of analyzing the text as a static historical document, the researcher looks at how the themes of earth and breath are "lived" in African communities today (e.g., in Berom agricultural rituals). Danfulani (1999) emphasized that African traditional religions are "religions of the land," where the moral order is tied to the physical environment. By engaging with these lived realities, this study moves from a "library-based" exegesis to a "field-based" theology, ensuring that the interpretation of the Yahwist narrative is anchored in the actual indigenous epistemologies and historical experiences of African people.

Exegetical Analysis of Genesis 2:4–15

The Yahwistic narrative offers a strikingly materialist account of human origins. Unlike the Priestly account in Genesis 1, which focuses on the *Imago Dei* through divine fiat, Genesis 2:7 depicts God as a potter (*yatsar*) molding the human (*'adam*) from the dust of the ground (*'adamah*) (see Jusu, 2016). This linguistic wordplay is vital for decolonial reading. The term *'adam* is not a proper name in this context but a generic noun for "humanity," which is etymologically inseparable from *'adamah*, the arable, red soil (Dike, 2025; Dike & Agbo, 2025). This relationship implies that the human is not an alien entity placed upon the earth but is a biological extension of the earth. As noted by Stiver (2012), the J-narrative reflects an agrarian worldview where human identity is defined by its "rootedness" (or ontological grounding) in the land. By emphasizing this "dust-to-dust" connection, the text challenges the Western dualism that treats the soul as a celestial prisoner of a terrestrial body (Roskos, 2003). Instead, the "breath of life" (*nishmat chayyim*) transforms the earthen clay into a "living being" (*nephesh chayah*), suggesting a psychosomatic unity that aligns deeply with African holistic thought.

To apply the "Danfulani Method," there is a dialogue between this Hebrew text with the lived myths of the Berom people of the Jos Plateau. In Berom cosmogony, as documented in Danfulani's phenomenological studies (2001), the relationship between the people (Dagwi) and the land (Gwol) is both mystical and foundational. Similar to the Yahwistic potter, many Berom traditions and broader Middle Belt myths describe the Supreme Being using clay or earth to fashion the first ancestors. This is not merely a metaphor for death, but a definition of life; the Berom person is an "earth-being" whose moral and spiritual health is tied to the health of the soil. In an African phenomenological reading of Genesis 2:4–7, the soil is viewed as the "First Parent," transforming the creation of the human from an abstract event into the birth of a communal lineage where the dust (*'aphar*) carries the ancestral essence of the "living dead" (Mbiti, 2015). This perspective replaces the Western emphasis on "dominion" with an Environmental Ubuntu, asserting that the human (*Adam*) only exists through a vital, reciprocal bond with the ground (*'adamah*), just as the divine breath (*nishmat chayyim*) is viewed not as a private soul but as a shared communal life-force animating the entire village (Chemhuru, 2024). Within this framework too, the divine breath (*Nishmat hayyim*) is viewed not as a private soul but as a communal "vital force" (Bujo, 2022) that animates the entire village and ecosystem. Consequently, the "crisis" of the unworked ground in verse 5 is resolved through the spirituality of the hoe a form of "liturgical labor" (Ranft, 2009) where the human acts as a "Gardener-Priest." This role positions the gardener as a custodian of the land who maintains the cosmic equilibrium between the tangible soil and the intangible spirit, treating the *adamah* as a living subject with its own inherent rights (Dike, 2025).

Worthy of note too is the fact that while Genesis 2:15 speaks of the human being placed in the garden to "cultivate and keep" (*'abad and shamar*), Berom traditional religion manifests this through the



Mandeng or harvest festivals and rituals of the "Priest of the Land" (Da-Gwom). For both the Yahwist and the Berom, the soil is a sacred partner in a covenant. If the land is defiled by blood or injustice, the "living being" (the human) suffers because their material source is corrupted. By comparing the J-narrative's 'adamah with the Berom Gwol, it is obvious that "indigeneity" is not just a political status but a theological one (Danfulani, 2001). Both traditions reject the colonial-extractive view of land as "real estate." Instead, they present a "pedomorphic" (earth-form) anthropology where human dignity is derived from the shared composition with the ground that is cultivated (Scarritt, 2024).

In Genesis 2:8–15, the Garden of Eden is not an abstract paradise, but a specific, demarcated "sacred geography" defined by its proximity to the divine and its life-sustaining rivers. This echoes the African Sacred Grove (do hwet in Berom), which serves as a terrestrial meeting point between the physical and spiritual realms. Just as the Garden is the site where God "walks," African sacred groves are the dwellings of deities and ancestors. This garden is not a fenced-off private estate, but a source of life defined by the four rivers, arteries that connect the divine center to the land; reinforcing the African ontological view that the Earth's "blood" (water) and "flesh" (soil) are a singular, life-giving system (Opande, 2023). When the human is placed in the garden to '*abad* (serve, cultivate, till) and '*shamar* (guard) it, the text codifies the role of the '*adam*. This mandate transforms agricultural labor into a liturgical act of "Environmental Ubuntu," where the *Adam* serves the *Adamah* to maintain the cosmic equilibrium between the community, the ancestors, and the Creator (Dike, 2025). The prohibition against certain actions in Eden mirrors the indigenous taboos that protect African groves from deforestation (Osemeobo, 2013). Thus, these spaces are viewed as sanctuaries of biodiversity maintained through ritual phenomenology.

The mandate in Genesis 2:15 to "till" (*abad*) and "keep" (*shamar*) the earth is often mistranslated through Western lenses as "domination." In a decolonial reading, '*abad* carries the weight of "service" or "worship," and *shamar* implies "guarding." This mirrors the African ethical mandate where farming is a liturgical act. Among the Berom and many agrarian Nigerian communities, the act of "tilling" is balanced by the responsibility of "keeping" the land's spiritual potency (Danfulani, 2001). Within an African ethical framework, the mandate to "till and keep" ('*abad* and '*shamar*) in Genesis 2:15 functions as a covenantal duty that elevates agricultural labor to the level of stewardship. By "tilling," the human engages in a vital participation that serves the soil's potential, reflecting the "Ethic of Vital Force" where human dignity is tied to the flourishing of the entire life-system. Simultaneously, the command to "keep" transforms the human into a Custodian of the Ancestral Trust, mirroring assertion that the land is a sacred link between the ancestors and the unborn (Dike et al, 2025; Mbiti, 1990). The "Gardener-Priest" paradigm establishes an environmental Ubuntu, where the ethical health of the community is measured by its vigilance in protecting the *Adamah*, ensuring that the "seen" material of the earth remains a fit vessel for the "unseen" breath of the Divine (Pilani, 2024). The land is not a commodity, but a sacred trust held by the living on behalf of the ancestors and the unborn (Dike et al, 2025).

The exclamation in Genesis 2:23: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," is the biblical foundation of corporate identity. Rather than an individualist contract, the Yahwistic narrative presents human relationship as an ontological unity. This is the Hebrew equivalent of Ubuntu or the African philosophy of "I am because we are." In African communalism, the "body" of the individual is an extension of the "body" of the lineage. The J-narrative's focus on shared substance (bone and flesh) reinforces the African view that personhood is found in the "web of relations" rather than the isolated "self." Western theology, influenced by Platonic dualism, often separates the "soul" from the "body." In contrast, Genesis 2 and African ontologies present a holistic embodiment. The nephesh chayah (living being) of Genesis is a psychosomatic whole. Note also that in the Yahwist narrative,



kinship and embodiment are expressed through a "somatic continuity" where the human (*Adam*) is revealed as the self-conscious expression of the ground (*Adamah*). This embodiment rejects the dualism of spirit and matter, proposing instead a Vitalist Kinship that aligns with the concept of "African Vitalogy," where all of life is a singular, pulsating web of energy (Ignatov, 2025). For the African context, this means the human body is an "Ancestral Extension" of the earth; we carry the minerals of the ancestral land within our very bones (Mbiti, 2015). Consequently, the "Soil-Body" becomes the site of a profound ethical embodiment: to care for one's physical self is to care for the earth, and to serve the earth is to honor the communal "flesh" that sustains the lineage, fulfilling the mandate of a lived, "Earth-bound" Ubuntu (Bujo, 2022). By applying a relational ontology, this study argues that the African human is not a "soul in a machine" but a "being-in-relation" to the soil, the community, and the divine.

Decolonial Implications

Professor Danfulani's work extensively addressed religious and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt, often centered on land. A "Soil Theology" derived from Genesis 2 offers a decolonial pathway to peace in which the Land as Shared Mother and in terms of Justice and Restoration. By this perspective, if all humans are 'adam (of the soil), then land-grabbing and blood-shedding on the soil are acts of "sacrilege" against our shared material origin. Soil Theology demands that land disputes be resolved not just through legalistic Western property rights, but through the restorative ethics of indigenous land covenants. Decoloniality involves the "re-enchantment" of knowledge that was "disenchanted" by colonial secularism. In a globalized world driven by AI and extractive technology, the "earth-bound" theology of Genesis 2 reminds African communities of the sacredness of the local and the material. Reclaiming the J-narrative as an indigenous-aligned text empowers African scholars to utilize IKS to address climate change and social fragmentation, proving that ancient myths are vital for future survival.

Further, the decolonial implications of a "soil-centered" exegesis lie in the systematic dismantling of the colonial "Logic of Extraction," replacing it with a Theology of Relationality that restores the Earth as a living subject (Oord, 2022). This shift moves the African audience from the periphery of a Western "Man-over-Nature" hierarchy to the center of an Indigenous Custodianship, where the act of "tilling and keeping" becomes a form of epistemic disobedience against the commodification of the land (Alamezie, 2024). By reclaiming the *Adam-Adamah* bond, the African subject undergoes a process of rejoining the body to the ancestral soil and the community to its vital source (Mbiti, 1990). Ultimately, Genesis 2 serves as a decolonial manifesto: it asserts that true liberation is not merely political independence, but the restoration of the sacred, liturgical bond between a people and the ground that birthed them (Bujo, 2022).

Conclusion

The intellectual legacy of Professor Umar Habila Danfulani serves as a clarion call to move beyond the "hermeneutical captivity" of Western theological frameworks. This study has demonstrated that when the Yahwistic narrative of Genesis 2 is liberated from Eurocentric dualism and abstract spiritualization, it reveals a profound ontological symmetry with African indigenous worldviews. By repositioning the Yahwist narrative as an "indigenous aligned" text, the discourse transitions from a monological framework where the Bible functions as a foreign judge of African culture to a dialogical engagement where the 'adamah of the Hebrew Bible and the *Gwol* of the Berom people speak with equal authority.

Reclaiming an Africanized future for these disciplines requires a commitment to Soil Theology, a framework that honors the material, communal, and sacred rootedness of humanity as sacred tenants of the earth. As the globalized world becomes increasingly mediated by technology and disconnected



from the earth, the "earth-bound" anthropology of Genesis 2 provides a vital ethical compass. This approach does not merely "contextualize" a foreign text; it performs an act of epistemic restitution, affirming that African religious realities offer the necessary keys to unlocking the deepest truths of the biblical record. Ultimately, the future of Biblical and Religious Studies in Africa lies in this phenomenological re-enchantment. By synthesizing the rigorous analysis of ancient texts with the lived sacredness of African traditional life, the path blazed by Professor Danfulani is honored. The scholarly horizon expands toward a space where the "dust of the earth" is no longer a symbol of insignificance, but the very site of divine presence, communal resilience, and decolonial hope.

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This study is dedicated to the honor of Umar Habila Danfulani, whose scholarship on African indigenous religion, culture, and decolonial consciousness has continued to inspire critical engagement with African realities and knowledge systems. His insistence on the legitimacy of African worldviews and indigenous epistemologies provided the intellectual stimulus for this research and shaped its hermeneutical orientation.

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