Sacred Ecology: The Environmental Impact of African Traditional Religions

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Abstract

Do religions codify ecological principles? This paper explores theoretically and empirically the role religious beliefs play in shaping environmental interactions. I study African Traditional Religions (ATR) which place forests within a sacred sphere. I build a novel non-market interactions model of a continuum of agents with heterogeneous religious beliefs whose actions continuously affect the spatial density of forest cover. The equilibrium strategy shows how individual beliefs and their distribution among the population can be a key driver of forest conservation. The model also characterizes the role of resource scarcity in both individual and population consumption decisions. I test the model predictions empirically relying on the unique case of Benin, where ATR adherence is freely reported. Using an instrumental variable strategy that exploits the variation in proximity to the Benin-Nigerian border, I find that 1 standard deviation increase in ATR adherence has a 0.4 standard deviation positive impact on forest cover change. I study the impact of historically belonging to the ancient Kingdom of Dahomey, birthplace of the Vodun religion. Using the original boundaries as a spatial discontinuity, I find positive evidence of Dahomey affiliation on contemporary forest change. I estimate the model parameters and show how the predicted spatial distribution fits well the observed joint forest and beliefs distribution.

JEL Codes: Z12, Q5, C7

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