

ARTICLE

Roots of Resilience: Unraveling Yacouba Sawadogo's Afrocentric Ecological Wisdom through Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Through a personal mentoring relationship with Yacouba Sawadogo, the author analyzes his narrative, highlighting the roots of the climate crisis in the disconnection between humans and nature. The catastrophe epitomizes the visible manifestation of the invisible decay of “the interconnected relationships within creation (*Zamane*).” The author demonstrates how the Champion of the Earth advocates for a shift in mindset towards Mother Earth. Their qualitative inquiry includes interviews and narratives, examining Sawadogo's Afrocentric ecological wisdom. *In smelling his smell*, the focus is on his resilience to provide a comprehension of individual ingenuity and community support, which are valuable for sustainable practices.

Résumé

À travers une relation de mentorat personnel avec Yacouba Sawadogo, l'auteur analyse son récit, mettant en évidence les racines de la crise climatique dans la déconnexion entre les êtres humains et la nature, une catastrophe qui illustre la dégradation “des relations interconnectées au sein de la création (*Zamane*)”. L'auteur démontre comment le Champion de la Terre préconise un changement de mentalité envers la Terre Mère. Sa recherche qualitative inclut des entretiens et des récits, examinant la sagesse écologique afrocentrique de Sawadogo. *En respirant son odeur*, l'auteur partage sa compréhension de son ingéniosité et la force de sa communauté, qui sont précieuses pour des pratiques durables.

Resumo

A través de una relación de mentoría personal con Yacouba Sawadogo, el autor analiza su relato, destacando las raíces de la crisis climática en la desconexión entre los seres

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humanos y la naturaleza, una catástrofe que ilustra la degradación de “las relaciones interconectadas dentro de la creación (*Zamane*)”. El autor demuestra cómo el Campeón de la Tierra preconiza un cambio de mentalidad hacia la Madre Tierra. Su investigación cualitativa incluye entrevistas y relatos, examinando la sabiduría ecológica afrocentrista de Sawadogo. *Al respirar su olor*, el autor comparte su comprensión de su ingeniosidad y la fuerza de su comunidad, que son valiosas para prácticas sostenibles.

Abstrair

Por via de uma relação pessoal de mentoria com Yacouba Sawadogo, o autor analisa a sua narrativa, na qual se destaca a desconexão entre seres humanos e natureza como causa da crise climática. A catástrofe simboliza a manifestação visível da decadência invisível das “relações interligadas dentro da criação (*Zamane*)”. No artigo, o autor explica o modo como o “Campeão da Terra” defende uma mudança de mentalidade em relação à Terra-mãe. O seu estudo qualitativo inclui entrevistas e narrativas, analisando a sabedoria ecológica e afrocêntrica de Sawadogo. *Smelling his smell (cheirando o seu cheiro)* centra-se na capacidade de Sawadogo para oferecer uma compreensão da criatividade individual e do apoio comunitário, que são preciosos para adotar e manter práticas sustentáveis.

Keywords: Yacouba Sawadogo; Northern Burkina Faso; Afrocentric ecological wisdom; qualitative research methods; environmental resilience; community support

Introduction

In the heart of northern Burkina Faso, amid the challenges of desertification and climate change, a beacon of hope emerged in the form of Yacouba Sawadogo—a seventy-seven-year-old indigenous ecologist, revered farmer, and recipient of the United Nations Environment Program’s prestigious 2020 Champions of the Earth Award (United Nations Environment Programme 2020).¹

While his story has reached far and wide, this study will guide readers to truly be immersed in his world, understanding his unique philosophy against desertification rooted in Afrocentric ideals. Those who rewarded Sawadogo did not, unfortunately, capture the profound philosophy guiding his efforts; that was a problem. Unsatisfied with the descriptive approach to the Sahel hero, I decided to conduct my research using my own perspective, articulated through a qualitative inquiry approach (Creswell and Guetterman 2019). I focused on probing the roots of resilience by developing my new theories of how Afrocentric ecological wisdom is exemplified in Sawadogo’s achievement. I delved into his cultural beliefs and worldviews concerning climate change, examining how he incorporated these perspectives to comprehend and express the phenomenon. Furthermore, I consider the foundation of his hope amidst the challenges of desertification and the common dominant problem-solving methods. Therefore, I count myself among the privileged few who have encountered him or immersed themselves in his universe and *smelled his smell*.² Spending time with Sawadogo, I found not just a Champion but a mentor, a father in sacred knowledge. Through this personal journey, I rediscovered my roots, the essence of my multifaceted identities, and the profound inspiration that shaped me into a researcher deeply engaged in the epistemologies of the South (Santos 2014, 2016).

My engagement with Sawadogo has led me to uncover a repository of sacred wisdom, encompassing practices, beliefs, and a profound life vision. This knowledge transcends the individual; it represents the collective wisdom of a community. In this paper, I will navigate Sawadogo's world through several thematic phases. The first thematic phase involves providing essential background on my positionality, along with the historical and cultural context that frames this study. This foundational phase sets the stage for understanding the broader environment in which Sawadogo's wisdom is situated. The second thematic phase will elucidate my adapted research theory and methodology, grounded in Afrocentric wisdom. This section will detail how these approaches have informed my engagement with Sawadogo and his community, aligning with the principles of Afrocentric epistemologies. The third thematic phase will present the significant findings derived from my dialogue with Sawadogo and his community. This phase will explore the insights gained from my interactions and the practical implications of his ecological wisdom. The final thematic phase will involve a critical analysis of these findings and an exploration of their broader implications and benefits. This analysis will bridge the gap between conventional research methodologies and the nuanced Afrocentric context, offering a comprehensive understanding of Sawadogo's ecological wisdom and resilience. This multifaceted exploration provides a concise yet thorough understanding of Sawadogo's approach, highlighting the transformative power of qualitative research in Africa. It serves as an invitation to engage deeply with qualitative research, embracing diverse perspectives with depth and courage.

Background: Positionality, Culture, and Context

My reflection on Yacouba Sawadogo's ecological practices is shaped by my own intersectional identity, merging African traditions with global perspectives. Disillusioned with the Western-centric solutions to the climate crisis, I turned to Sawadogo's work and encountered a profound ecological empathy through his methods. His case, emerging from Burkina Faso's socio-historical context, showcases resilience and offers exemplary roots of Afrocentric ecological wisdom.

Yacouba Sawadogo's journey in combating desertification began amid a national crisis in Burkina Faso during the mid-1980s, a period marked by severe drought affecting much of Africa.³ His efforts can be seen in the broader context of African environmental activism, which includes the Green Belt Movement initiated by Wangari Maathai in Kenya in 1977 and the reforestation campaign led by President Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso. Maathai's Green Belt Movement was a transformative force in addressing deforestation and promoting sustainable development. Her grassroots initiative mobilized women and local communities to plant trees, restore ecosystems, and advocate for environmental justice, leading to the planting of over 50 million trees. This success highlighted the power of collective action in ecological restoration (Maathai 2006).

Sankara's reforestation campaign in the mid-1980s resonated deeply with Maathai's vision. Faced with severe drought and desertification, Sankara launched the "One village, one grove" initiative, aiming to create a green belt

around Burkina Faso. This campaign, driven by a sense of national pride and resilience, resulted in the planting of ten million trees in just fifteen months.⁴ It underscored the importance of community mobilization for environmental recovery and illustrated Sankara's commitment to both ecological restoration and national dignity (Peterson 2021). Sankara's vision extended beyond immediate environmental concerns. His efforts were a strategic move to challenge the Global North's indifference to Africa's environmental crisis and to redefine Africa's role in environmental stewardship.⁵ By fostering local ownership and agency, Sankara aimed to reposition Africa from being seen as a passive recipient of aid to an active participant in shaping its environmental future (Wilkinson 2021). In this context, Sawadogo's work emerges as a continuation of this legacy, building on the foundations laid by both Maathai and Sankara. His innovative approaches to combating desertification reflect the enduring influence of these pioneering efforts and contribute to a broader narrative of African resilience and environmental activism.⁶

Inspired by Sankara's leadership, Sawadogo abandoned his business and committed himself to transforming his barren land into a thriving forest (Mwenda 2019). At a time when most of Burkina Faso's population depended on agriculture for survival, the country still struggled with food insecurity and relied heavily on international aid. The tension between immediate agricultural needs and long-term environmental stewardship posed a significant challenge for farmers like Sawadogo, who sought sustainable solutions amid limited resources. Yet, over the next forty years, Sawadogo's perseverance earned him the title of "The Man Who Stopped the Desert" (Dodd 2010), a tribute to his success in halting the encroachment of the desert on his land. While the title may overstate his impact, it is undeniable that Sawadogo's efforts exemplify the potential of indigenous knowledge and local action in the global fight against desertification and climate change.

Sawadogo's emergence within the larger context of Sankara's environmental vision highlights the historical and political motivations behind his work. His methods reflect not only a practical response to environmental degradation but also a deeply philosophical commitment to Afrocentric ecological practices. With this foundation, I have employed various theories and methodologies to explore his achievements and the broader significance of his work for the Sahel region and beyond.

Afrocentric Wisdom in Action: Research Methodology and Framework

In investigating Yacouba Sawadogo's work and its broader implications, I employed a methodology that is both flexible and deeply rooted in Afrocentric and decolonial philosophies. This adaptive approach ensured that the research framework was sensitive to the cultural and intellectual contexts of Sawadogo and his community, allowing for a more authentic engagement with the subject matter. The research framework draws upon Molefi Kete Asante's concept of Afrocentricity (Asante 2003), which places African knowledge and experiences at the center of analysis. Asante defines Afrocentricity as "a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives

predominate” (Asante 2003, 2). This approach not only empowers Africans to engage with their history and culture but also challenges the Western-centric paradigms that have historically marginalized African knowledge. By focusing on Afrocentricity, this study acknowledges the diversity of African identities and aims to reclaim the agency of African peoples in interpreting their realities.

Afrocentricity’s conceptual foundation, while sometimes critiqued for its terminology, remains vital for addressing the historical marginalization and objectification of African peoples by Western systems. The term “Afrocentricity” represents a dynamic and evolving framework that emphasizes African perspectives as primary in understanding and shaping knowledge. This approach does not seek to reconstruct a static precolonial identity but rather to disentangle African knowledge systems from European intellectual domination, affirming African agency and epistemological autonomy. African epistemologies have always been dynamic and responsive, as seen in historical examples such as the sophisticated governance of the Kingdom of Mali (1235–1600 AD). Under the leadership of figures like Mansa Musa, Mali’s capital, Timbuktu, became a renowned center of learning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, hosting scholars from across Africa and the Islamic world. Timbuktu’s libraries and universities, such as the famous Sankore University, embodied an African intellectual tradition that combined local knowledge with influences from the broader Islamic world, demonstrating the fluidity of African epistemologies. Similarly, the cosmology of the Kingdom of Kongo (1390–1857 AD) and the theological debates of the Kingdom of Aksum (100–940 AD) illustrate how African knowledge systems have been both influential and adaptable over time. Applying Afrocentricity today involves understanding these rich traditions as living and adaptable rather than static. By emphasizing African peoples as active agents, Afrocentricity provides a framework that counters the historical marginalization of African knowledge systems by Western-centric paradigms.

The study also aligns with Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s concept of “epistemologies of the South,” which advocates for cognitive justice by recognizing the value of non-Western knowledge systems (Santos 2014, 2016). Santos argues that the comprehension of the world goes beyond any singular perspective, highlighting the need for diverse epistemologies in global discussions about social change. Both Afrocentricity and Santos’s framework challenge Western epistemic dominance and support a pluralistic approach to knowledge production. Sawadogo’s ecological wisdom exemplifies Southern epistemology by integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary challenges. His practices offer a unique perspective on sustainability that aligns with cognitive justice principles, emphasizing the resilience and adaptability of local knowledge systems in addressing climate change and environmental degradation.

Data collection for this study, conducted in July 2022 in Gourga, Burkina Faso, engaged ten farmers, including Sawadogo, through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and on-site observations. This methodological approach was guided by Afrocentric qualitative methods, which emphasize oral traditions and collective memory. By honoring the African tradition of knowledge transmission through oral means, the study ensured that participants’ voices were fully captured and understood within the context of their lived experiences.

The analytical framework was informed by postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, drawing from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). These seminal works highlight the role of African agency in reclaiming ecological knowledge systems as resistance against colonial power structures. Additionally, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) enriched the analysis by framing Sawadogo's knowledge as a form of pedagogical resistance and empowerment, addressing broader socio-ecological issues beyond mere agricultural techniques. The study employed a combination of deductive and inductive coding methods. Deductive coding used predefined categories—such as setting, characters, actions, and resolution—to examine Sawadogo's impact on his community. Concurrently, inductive reasoning allowed new insights to emerge from the data, linking Sawadogo's teachings to practical outcomes observed among the farmers. This combination of deductive and inductive methods provided both structure and flexibility, facilitating a comprehensive examination of individual narratives and communal knowledge. Overall, the logic behind this blended analytical approach is essential as it provides a framework for conducting Afrocentric research. It moves beyond simply reporting findings to offering a methodological model that respects the depth of African knowledge systems. By combining deductive and inductive approaches, the research not only documents but also deeply understands participants' perspectives, exemplifying Afrocentric research methodologies that honor both individual and collective insights. Reflecting the African proverb, "The path is made by walking," this approach highlights the significance of the research process in shaping the depth and quality of the findings.

Dialogues with Sawadogo and His Community: Unveiling Significant Findings

Engaging in dialogue with Sawadogo and his community through the previously outlined theoretical frameworks and exploratory methods revealed valuable insights that resonate with principles supported by climate scientists and environmentalists (Sörlin and Warde 2009). Despite lacking exposure to Western-centric education or research conducted in modern laboratories, the perspectives of these farmers align with contemporary concerns (Pope Francis 2015, 2023). They identify prevailing anthropocentric views, consumeristic attitudes, and the objectification of everything, including Mother Earth, as fundamental causes of rapid climate deterioration. However, despite these challenges, their optimism for the future is rooted in their trust in God and reverence for their ancestors.

The appreciative tone of this section is intentional. While the article may appear as an encomium to Sawadogo, recognizing his contributions with respect and admiration is crucial given the impact of his innovative practices. This does not preclude critical analysis. Although standard academic analysis often requires distancing from the subject, the ecological method practiced by Sawadogo necessitates empathy and a spiritual connection with the animate universe and the teacher/mentor. This approach is valuable to learn from and consider. The development of the methodology demonstrates the study's rigor, as

engaging with Sawadogo through conventional scientific methods resulted in a transformative experience shaped by his teachings. Therefore, empathy and spiritual connection are essential in sustainability practices, not merely as affective states but as integral elements of the ecological wisdom that guides sustainable futures.

Inquiring about Sawadogo's cultural beliefs and worldviews on climate change revealed his perspective on the crisis as a relationship crisis within the concept of *Zamane*. When asked about his views on the climate crisis, he contemplatively surveyed his surroundings—a gesture symbolizing reverence for his “invisible surroundings”—and solemnly stated, “Our world is spoiled.”⁷ In describing the world, he used the concept of *Zamane* instead of *Dunia*. Both words in Mooré, the most widely spoken language in Burkina Faso, mean “world.” However, “*Dunia*” refers to the created world, while “*Zamane*” signifies many creatures connected and relating to one another. By using “*Zamane*,” Sawadogo implies that our interconnectedness has become problematic. He believes humans in nature and promoting have forgotten their true identity and live in permanent conflict with their nonhuman contemporaries. The climate crisis, he asserts, stems from a crisis in the relationships binding us as interconnected beings. According to his conviction, humans in nature and promoting have lost touch with their original connection to nature, disregarding intricate bonds with invisible spirits, plants, animals, mountains, rivers, and forests. Sawadogo denounces humanity's anthropological impoverishment—a decline in understanding what it means to be truly human. He advocates decentering humans in nature, promoting harmonious relationships with the Earth's elements. To him, authentic humanity demands that we acknowledge our dependence on the Earth from which we originated. He affirmed:

They (humans) have forgotten that we (humans and non-humans) all are Mother Earth's children. We return to her womb at the end of our lives. Her well-being and ours are intertwined, but we need her more than she needs us. She can continue to live and flourish even if we disappear. The more we care for her, the better we receive from her. Nevertheless, her capability of regenerating without us is beyond our imagination.⁸

Sawadogo views Earth as older and mightier than humanity, capable of regenerating independently. Listening to his views evokes conflicting emotions; humans can help restore Earth, but if they fail, natural processes will prevail, potentially leading to the eradication of humanity. He connects the climate crisis to a human crisis, attributing Earth's degradation to weakened spiritual connections. He emphasizes the necessity of rediscovering our genuine identity, rooted in our relationship with God and nature, to mitigate the climate crisis. The Sahel hero also observes a disturbing trend where soil components steadily lose their integrity amidst the Earth's escalating population. Expressing dismay towards overconsumption policies and growth campaigns, he argues that the rampant exploitation of nature and the absence of education on its preservation lead to ongoing soil depletion. He emphasizes that human actions significantly exacerbate the climate crisis.

Further discussions with Sawadogo on the foundation of his hope to tackle desertification and opposition from potential enemies reveal the crucial role of African Traditional Religions and Spirituality in his environmental philosophy. African spirituality, under which these religions fall, views nature as animated, believing that divine presence resides within all living beings and emphasizing respect and harmony. The inherent capacity of individuals to sense their profound connections with others, encompassing the living, departed ancestors and future generations yet to be born, is integral to their essence. Understanding this intricate web of interconnectedness becomes imperative in crafting the dignity of creation. The African concept of belonging to communities is inextricably tied to the land—the soil that functions as an “umbilical cord,” weaving together past, present, and future threads. This earthly connection serves as a nexus bridging the spiritual and mundane, the individual and the community, linking the terrestrial realm to the celestial and the underworld (Mbiti 1990; Magesa 1997).

Sawadogo and his community have safeguarded their spirituality, contrasting it with the potential dilution caused by societal interactions. Central to this belief system is the understanding that humans, animals, plants, rivers, and mountains share living spirits. The well-being of all is interconnected, and caring for one another and for nature is regarded as sacred. Sawadogo exemplifies this spirituality through profound observations and contemplation. His silence before responding signifies respect for the universe, a gesture of humility deeply ingrained in African traditions. When sages like him gaze at nature, they acknowledge a mightiness greater than themselves, displaying humility. Breathing deeply, they connect with the universe’s energy, expressing further humility. African spirituality sees humility as a key virtue, emphasizing interconnectedness and interdependence.

Despite his vast knowledge, Sawadogo emphasizes that the most authentic answers emanate from the universe itself, underscoring his role as a custodian rather than a controller of nature. This perspective aligns with the views of other scholars who stress the importance of humility and harmony in human-environment interactions. For instance, Shiva (1993) argues that true ecological wisdom comes from acknowledging the intrinsic value and self-regulating capacity of nature, rather than imposing human-centric solutions. Similarly, Abram (1996) highlights the need for a deeper connection with the natural world, suggesting that our most profound insights arise when we attune ourselves to the rhythms and processes of the environment.

Sawadogo’s approach to receiving this knowledge is deeply rooted in traditional practices and experiential learning. He acquires wisdom through a profound engagement with the land and through the oral traditions passed down by his ancestors. This knowledge is not merely theoretical but is experienced directly through active participation in ecological practices and observations of natural processes. By positioning himself as a steward of nature’s wisdom rather than its dominator, Sawadogo echoes these sentiments, advocating for a relationship with the environment that is based on respect, attentiveness, and collaboration. His methods illustrate that authentic understanding emerges from a respectful dialogue with nature, rather than from imposing external

frameworks. This approach not only fosters sustainable practices but also aligns with broader philosophical and ecological frameworks that value the interconnectedness of all living systems. This profound reverence, essential in a materialistic world, contrasts sharply with prevalent detrimental attitudes toward the environment. In addition to African traditions, Sawadogo's spiritual foundation lies in his Arab-Islamic education, which instilled virtues like humility and gratitude for Allah's creation.

Sawadogo's life story is a testament to the transformative power of resilience, hope, and unwavering determination. His journey, marked by trials and tribulations, sculpted his character into that of a sage and environmental steward. Through adversity, he discovered the art of turning challenges into opportunities, demonstrating that problems often carry solutions within them. Sawadogo's life was shaped by a series of setbacks, beginning with his inability to fulfill his dream of becoming a Koranic mentor. However, this setback did not deter him; instead, he found solace in his mentor's belief in his exceptional determination. While he couldn't interpret the Koran as his peers could, his mentor's blessing became a pivotal force in his life. This blessing, combined with his determination, led him to unexpected achievements. The blessing Sawadogo received empowered him to succeed differently—not in the traditional sense of academic achievement but in his ability to read and transform his milieu, an education more profound and impactful than conventional schooling (Dodd 2010).

As he explained, his path took an unexpected turn during a challenging period in Burkina Faso's history, when he chose to invest his prosperity from trading into agricultural and agroforestry work. Confronted with his community's defeatism and their exodus from the village, he decided to pioneer new agricultural methods, rejecting the prevailing pessimism. His conviction in the Earth's potential guided him, and he began by planting trees using the Zaï technique, which miraculously transformed barren soil into arable land. The technique consists of a planting pit with a diameter of 20–40 cm and a depth of 10–20 cm. Usually, pits are dug during the dry season from November until May. Per hectare, the number of Zaï pits ranges from 12,000 to 25,000. After digging the pits, composted organic material is added to create a chemical process necessary to fertilize the soil. After the first rainfalls, the manure attracts termites, whose tunnels break up the soil, making the holes larger and capable of containing water and fertile organisms for an extended period. When seeds are placed inside, they grow and flourish (Dodd 2010). The results were undeniable, echoing the African saying, “the Earth does not lie,” which signifies that one inevitably reaps what they sow. Witnessing his success, those who had left the village returned, eager to learn from his innovative methods. Through his enduring commitment, Sawadogo exemplifies the potential for harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature, offering a timeless lesson in environmental conservation and reverence for the Earth. His life narrative serves as an inspiration, urging humanity to reevaluate its relationship with nature and embrace the wisdom inherent in humility and spiritual connectedness.

Sawadogo's success, while inspiring, also provoked jealousy and hostility. “Despite facing serious opposition from locals—being called a ‘madman’ for breaking with Zaï traditions to his forest being set on fire—Sawadogo never

considered giving up” (Right Livelihood 2024, para. 5). His resilience prevailed, leading some of his adversaries to eventually become his disciples. Urbanization presented new challenges, as individuals sought to reclaim parts of his forest as ancestral land. Through sheer determination and support from friends, he managed to protect a significant portion of his forest, though this required constructing a protective wall, which limited its further expansion. His tenacity is deeply anchored in his spirituality and trust in the universe’s divine order. Even in the face of hostility and attacks, he exhibited a remarkable sense of equanimity, refraining from harboring hatred or seeking revenge. Instead, he attributed the actions of his adversaries to ignorance, believing that those who sought to harm him were ultimately harming themselves. Sawadogo’s optimism extends beyond environmental concerns; he addresses not only climate change but also the moral decay of humanity, perceiving challenges as opportunities for collective introspection and transformation.

However, there are limitations in his observations that must be addressed for a more comprehensive understanding of climate change. For instance, his assertion that “modernization” and “new machinery” exacerbate heat generation oversimplifies the complex scientific processes involved, such as greenhouse gas emissions and the greenhouse effect. This simplification can lead to misunderstandings about how human activities specifically contribute to climate change. Additionally, while his focus on local observations is important, it does not fully address the global scale and complexity of climate change. His emphasis on deforestation and modernization within his community overlooks broader factors such as industrial emissions, oceanic changes, and atmospheric processes. A comprehensive understanding of climate change necessitates integrating these broader scientific aspects, which are not fully encapsulated by his localized perspective.

Furthermore, Sawadogo’s approach centers on the moral and ethical dimensions of humanity’s relationship with nature, emphasizing spiritual reconnection and environmental harmony. Although this view resonates with many indigenous worldviews, it may overlook the need for technical and policy solutions essential for climate change mitigation and adaptation. Effective strategies often require technological innovation and international cooperation, which may not be entirely captured by Sawadogo’s cultural critique. Moreover, Sawadogo has not engaged with ecologists who hold differing views, limiting the depth of his arguments. Incorporating diverse perspectives could refine his understanding and underscore the necessity of integrating modern technology with traditional knowledge for effective environmental solutions. Therefore, while Sawadogo’s perspective is significant, a balanced approach that considers scientific complexity and diverse viewpoints is crucial for addressing climate change effectively.

After decades of dedicated work, Sawadogo’s innovative approach has drawn many who are eager to learn from him. His blend of spiritual insight and practical agricultural techniques has transformed not only the land but also the lives of those who have witnessed his work. Among his followers are nine individuals—seven men and two women—who have come to sit under his metaphorical tree, consistently seeking his wisdom. Sawadogo did not summon them to imitate

him; they were naturally drawn to the marvels of his accomplishments. This spontaneity is symbolic of wisdom, echoing an African proverb: "In every village, there is always at least one wise old man sitting under a tree in contemplation. Those who come to him learn from his wisdom, while those who turn away do not realize what they lose. Indeed, the old one sitting sees farther than the young one standing."⁹ Unlike those who envied him, these followers made a discerning choice by attending Sawadogo's lessons, viewing them as participation in a sacred class.

In a focus group discussion with these nine followers, the men were more forthcoming than the women in sharing their experiences with Sawadogo. Sanoussa, a sixty-eight-year-old male and seemingly the most experienced of the group, recounted his encounter with Sawadogo:

I have known Sawadogo for a long time as a successful trader. Most people who grew up with him are familiar with the business he was doing. During the great famine, he chose to become a farmer, refusing to leave the village as everybody was doing. He was so successful that the people who left the village returned from exile. We nicknamed him "Yacouba Zaï." I have to say it, my son. I am convinced that Yacouba received several forms of blessings: from God, his parents, his Koranic master, the land, and the trees he planted. Furthermore, he is very wise. He likes sharing his challenges with me.¹⁰

When asked about the moment people began to admire Sawadogo, Sanoussa described how admiration grew as they witnessed a transformation: "In just five years, the once barren and sandy soils that people had abandoned started to grow grass and regreen. The revival of the neglected land was visible to everyone."¹¹ This sentiment was echoed by Serge, a seventy-eight-year-old male, older than Sanoussa but less experienced: "Initially, everyone thought Sawadogo was crazy, including myself. But when he had his first harvest, which was more bountiful than anyone else's, he regained their respect. His efforts were truly transforming the soil. He even dug a well for the villagers and taught us to collect trees of all kinds."¹² The admiration his followers express, which might appear to emphasize Sawadogo's personal significance over his techniques, is not a cult of personality but an Afrocentric approach to teaching and knowledge transmission.

Boureima, a forty-five-year-old male, shared the challenges faced by those who learned from Sawadogo: "I joyfully learned a lot from Sawadogo. However, we, his followers, need more agricultural tools to create similar forests. For now, we are doing our best to improve our farming and have groves. However, we need carts, wheelbarrows, and spaces to exploit."¹³ As other male followers shared their experiences, mixed feelings emerged, including admiration for their mentor, self-doubt about achieving his level of recognition, and concerns about desertification and growing insecurity in the Sahel region. Karim, a forty-eight-year-old male, was critical of the government, expressing disappointment: "Sawadogo received a lot of decorations and rewards, but there needs to be a follow-up. People made promises, but we see nothing. We do not know if benefactors send support and somebody, somewhere, is blocking it."¹⁴

Only after the men finished sharing their experiences did the two women feel comfortable speaking, reflecting the patriarchal norms influencing participation dynamics. Alizeta, a thirty-two-year-old female, agreed that Sawadogo's techniques are impactful. She was drawn to meet him after hearing about his success and initially visited with her husband:

"Sawadogo firmly believed that as he worked on the soil, the soil worked for him, yielding bountiful results in the end. When he noticed the interest people have in coming to learn his lessons, he started to respond positively to the invitations of farmers from different villages who solicited him for mentorship."¹⁵ Amina, a sixty-three-year-old female and Sawadogo's daughter-in-law, explained her encounter with him:

Before I married into their family, I heard about his successful techniques. On my farm, I am exploiting the techniques I have learned with him. There is a visible difference between those who implement the Zaï technique and those who do not. I hope this technique can be expanded to the benefit of many people. I initiated all my kids to the Zaï technique. During their vacations, we work together on the family farms.¹⁶

She further added: "This forest is helpful to everybody. If you are sick and you come to this forest, you can easily find some leaves for remedies. Sawadogo is generous and does not make any difference between people."¹⁷ While there was no significant difference in the substance of the experiences shared by men and women, the women appeared more impressed by Sawadogo's generosity in sharing his techniques. Alizeta, despite being married, manages her own farm, while Amina relies more on her husband's farm and highlighted the medical benefits of Sawadogo's plants. This nuanced difference underscores the diversity of Sawadogo's impact across gender lines.

Analyzing Insights: Implications and Broader Context

The theories and methodologies I employed to delve into Sawadogo's world enlightened my comprehension of climate change. Sawadogo's techniques epitomized the potential of African agroecologists to glean wisdom from ancient traditions while fostering innovation. His accomplishments stand as a manifestation of practices that harmonize postcolonial and decolonial theories. Immersing myself in the Earth Champion's discourse on the initiatives to combat the climate crisis shifted me from a self-centered researcher to a humble and introspective self-effacing researcher.

The theoretical framework that guided my exploration made it feasible to engage with Sawadogo and his community, gather their narratives, engage in profound discussions, and analyze their experiences. Theories act as beacons illuminating uncharted territories, providing a roadmap to comprehend novel phenomena. While conducting research in the familiar village of Gourga, I transformed the known into the unknown, unlocking essential insights. Employing genuine curiosity, I probed the participants, unraveling their profound

knowledge and inherent wisdom. The discoveries from my inquiries into the two pivotal questions are informative, profoundly enriching, and empowering. These theories and studies serve as interlinking threads, weaving together the tapestry of “present and past,” “local and global,” “vernacular and cosmopolitan,” and “postcolonial and postmodern” realms (Venn 2006). Sawadogo and his community serve as architects, erecting bridges between disparate perspectives. My primary focus was on comprehending Sawadogo’s intricate belief systems, his unique worldviews, and his interpretation of the climate crisis. Understanding that his observations and perceptions encapsulated the essence of climate change, I began my journey by keenly observing and perceiving Sawadogo and his environment, seeking to view the world through his eyes. During the interviews and explorations of his forest, I delved into his universe, employing ecological wisdom and indigenous knowledge systems to gain deeper insights.

Sawadogo’s world can be understood through postcolonial and decolonial lenses. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists are compelling because, for them, the world we share is only fully understood when related to the history of colonialism and imperialism imposed by the Global North on the Global South for centuries. Slavery and colonization shaped the current world we inhabit. Through legitimized ideologies, the West justified the inferiority of colonized nations and imposed its dominance over the rest of the world. Even after achieving political independence, countries in the Global South remained economically and ideologically burdened by the influence of Western powers.

Nevertheless, many within these dominated societies, including Sawadogo, retained their original belief systems and worldviews. Sawadogo contextualized the climate crisis as a consequence of a deeper, contemporary loss of sense and meaning. While acknowledging that the degradation of the Earth and soil due to overexploitation of resources is a leading cause of the crisis, he emphasized that many people have distanced themselves from their identity within the common *Zamane*. In their superficial understanding, they have forgotten that they come from the Earth’s womb and will eventually return there at the end of their lives.

One of the capital purposes of my research was to address the minimization of non-Western knowledge and wisdom in Africa. In valuing and celebrating Western-centric knowledge at the expense of African knowledge and wisdom, the leaders of colonialism and neocolonialism tried to silence Africans’ contributions to science. Universalizing Western cultures and civilizations and presenting them as the best in the world contributes to judging other civilizations and cultures as inferior. While studying and uplifting Sawadogo’s narrative, my research participated in valorizing postcolonial and decolonial theories. I aimed to encourage colonized people to find their identity by claiming the richness of their past, like Fanon (1952, 1963), for whom native Africans must learn, accept, and appreciate their history to be reborn. Instead of devaluating their past, people in Africa must separate themselves from the imposed ideologies governed by Western-centric thinkers. Sawadogo’s achievement could be situated between postcolonial theorists’ approaches and decolonial theorists’ approaches to knowledge and science.

First, according to postcolonial theorists, colonization has ended, and formerly colonized communities can reject Western-centric models and invent their own models to liberate themselves from oppression (Mignolo 2011). The originality of Sawadogo's Zaï and stones cordon methods is sufficient proof that there are people in Africa who choose to reject Western-centric models and use their own models to succeed. Additionally, Sawadogo did not receive a Western education or implement Western methods to transform his desertic land into a forest. Instead, he implemented ancestral techniques and succeeded perfectly. Therefore, postcolonial theorists would find reasons to trust his approach.

Second, the decolonial theorists, unlike the postcolonial thinkers, acknowledge that the ongoing system of colonization and recolonization is evident in developing countries and prevents these countries from systematically emancipating themselves (Mignolo 2011). Rewarding Sawadogo solely, without questioning the community-based philosophy and worldviews that justified his achievement, is another form of colonialism. The rewarders colonized his success. They have imprisoned him and his achievements within Western categories that isolate individuals to reward them at the expense of their communities or inspirational leaders. The instrumental inspiration that guided Sawadogo came from the revolutionary Sankara, who was assassinated by Western-centric African leaders who feared his Afrocentric ideas and charisma (Prairie 2007).

When I interviewed Sawadogo, I noticed that he was dissatisfied with the system that rewarded him. The sage ecologist was clear in expressing his discontent, stating: "I did receive international recognition with rewards from organizations. However, I need help understanding their purpose." Sawadogo's ambivalence toward Western recognition aligns with decolonial theorists' critiques, which often question the intentions and impacts of such accolades. His skepticism highlights a deeper truth about his life's work: it transcends external validation and stands as a genuine embodiment of Afrocentric ecological wisdom.

As I listened to Sawadogo's reflections on climate change and his strategies for combating desertification, it became increasingly clear that he represents what decolonial thinkers have been calling for—self-reliant, determined individuals capable of shaping their futures through their frames of reference. For decolonial theorists, like Mignolo (2011), the path to reducing the harm of ongoing colonialism lies in fostering thinkers who reject imposed Western paradigms in favor of their own. Sawadogo's wisdom is deeply rooted in his ancestral knowledge, and his understanding of climate challenges comes from personal experience, not abstract theoretical debates.

Although he has not engaged with the intellectual discourse surrounding colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial theories, Sawadogo exemplifies their core values. Inspired by Thomas Sankara's anti-colonialist stance, he transformed his environment—and, in doing so, his own life—by harnessing millennia of wisdom passed down through generations. He understands the climate crisis on a fundamental level, far deeper than many modern scholars. By framing his insights through an Afrocentric lens, I began to see how his approach is not just a reaction to Western-centric solutions, but a proactive embodiment of ecological resilience.

Reflecting on the responses I gathered from him, I am tempted to label Sawadogo a “decolonial philosopher rooted in postcolonial practice.” While he may not describe himself in these terms, his worldview mirrors Mignolo’s (2011) description of the Global South’s unique contribution to rethinking the world’s problems. Sawadogo critiques the spiritual and practical detachment from the Earth that plagues much of contemporary thought, grounding his philosophy in an intimate relationship with nature that echoes decolonial calls for epistemic freedom.

In contrast to critiques such as Neil Larsen’s *The Jargon of Decoloniality* (Larsen 2022), which questions the practical relevance of decoloniality, Sawadogo’s work offers a living example of how Afrocentric ecological wisdom can be applied in real-world contexts. His farming techniques are not abstract or rhetorical; they are tangible, effective, and deeply rooted in the lived realities of his community. Sawadogo’s approach avoids the pitfall of becoming mere rhetoric by staying anchored in the material restoration of land and livelihoods.

If the Sahel were to embrace Arjun Appadurai’s vision, as articulated in *Beyond Domination: The Future and Past of Decolonization* (Appadurai 2021), it would affirm Sawadogo’s claim: “My methods are innovative, forward-looking, and capable of creating sustainable futures, rather than merely seeking to recreate a pre-colonial past.” Sawadogo’s ability to address local needs while engaging with global challenges makes his practices dynamic and impactful, situating him as a leader in both Afrocentric and global environmental discourses.

In response to critiques of the decolonial agenda, such as those raised by Olúfemi(é) Táíwò (2022) against scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) and Kwasi Wiredu (1996), it is essential to emphasize that Sawadogo’s achievements transcend the reactionary stance often associated with decoloniality. His work exemplifies modern African resilience, as where his community defines sustainability on its own terms while contributing meaningfully to global discussions on environmentalism. Sawadogo is not merely rejecting the colonial legacy; he is actively shaping a future that draws from both ancestral wisdom and contemporary ecological needs.

Moreover, Sawadogo was deeply concerned with human dignity when he reflected on the consequences of relying on material goods to create happiness. Although we did not explicitly discuss human rights, his reflections suggested a preference for emphasizing human duties and responsibilities, particularly in light of the dangers facing our common home. This commitment to responsibility and resilience reflects a deeper determination that Sawadogo described when recounting the tremendous obstacles he faced—both epistemological and physical. It was as though Sawadogo had embodied Santos’s convictions: “First, the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world. Second, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Third, the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory, and such diversity should be valorized” (Santos 2016, 8). Sawadogo convincingly explained the advantages of being blessed by his Koranic mentor, a blessing he believed extended through the Earth and its trees. This divine blessing formed the foundation of his hope to fight desertification and resist Western models of

development. Some in the West may doubt the power of such blessings, but for the Sahel hero, this grace is alive, powerful, and central to his mission—an embodiment of cognitive justice and the valorization of diverse epistemologies.

To Santos (2014, 2016), the hope of the Global South lies in challenging the epistemic violence of Western-centric frameworks by embracing alternative grammars and scripts rooted in relational ecologies. Sawadogo exemplifies this potential through his “negotiations with termites,” demonstrating relational ecology’s practical application in addressing desertification. Rooted in Afrocentric ecological wisdom, these negotiations cultivate reciprocal relationships with nonhuman beings animated by a living spirit, offering a profound response to ecological and existential crises. This approach reframes termites not as pests but as vital ecological agents whose activities—such as aerating soil, recycling organic matter, and enhancing fertility—are crucial to ecosystem restoration. Unlike Western-centric negotiation models that prioritize verbal articulation, Sawadogo’s methods emphasize action-based and emotional communication. Guided by a worldview where humans and nonhumans share consciousness and divinity, he practiced negotiation through tangible acts: providing organic material to attract termites, respecting their habitats, aligning agricultural activities with their rhythms, and avoiding harmful practices like pesticides. Using the traditional Zai method, he integrated termites into soil restoration, transforming barren land into productive farmland. These actions reflect an attunement to termites’ needs, fostering a relationship grounded in empathy, respect, and reciprocity. Communication in this worldview transcends words, manifesting through actions that honor termites’ agency and indispensable ecological role.

Sawadogo’s worldview resonates with Indigenous philosophies worldwide, such as those of Amazonian and North American traditions, which view forests and nonhuman entities as partners rather than resources. Like the treaties advocated by the International Indian Treaty Council (n.d.), his practices emphasize relationality and shared responsibility. For Sawadogo, the Earth is not a resource to exploit but a cocreator of life whose health depends on reciprocal care. As Santos (2014) notes, these relational ecologies embody the hope of the Global South, elevating local knowledge systems and challenging reductionist paradigms. By integrating spiritual values, ecological wisdom, and practical innovation, Sawadogo offers a compelling model for humanity’s survival—one rooted in humility, relationality, and care for the Earth’s interconnected mysteries. His methods provide tangible proof of the efficacy of alternative grammars and scripts. His legacy critiques extractive systems and presents a vision of ecological justice that transcends borders. Through daily acts of reciprocity with nature, he plants seeds for a future where humanity reclaims its place within the web of life.

Reflecting on my experience, I realized a significant transformation within myself, growing from being a self-centered researcher to a self-effacing researcher. Upon arriving in the village of Gourga, my initial purpose was clear: to conduct research interviews. However, the stark reality of the villagers’ daily struggles quickly shifted my focus. I understood that my research objectives needed to take a backseat to the more immediate need to connect with the people

and their hardships. The villagers didn't just want to answer my questions; they needed me to fully engage with their reality first. They wanted me to *faire corps*—to embody their struggles and truly unite with their suffering. As one villager said, they wanted me “to smell their smell” before even attempting to investigate my research motives. In this context, “to smell someone’s smell” is an expression of deep empathy—feeling another’s emotions and genuinely understanding their experience. This demand for connection profoundly changed my perspective. Instead of focusing solely on my research goals, I shifted toward understanding their emotions and struggles on a much deeper level. Through this process, I moved from being a self-centered researcher to becoming a self-effacing researcher, characterized by empathy, compassion, and a desire to understand the context of my coresearchers. Engaging with Sawadogo and his community through this empathetic lens helped build trust. Their shared concerns, particularly about the violence affecting their region, deepened my own sense of humanity. I not only felt their pain and fear but also became genuinely invested in helping alleviate their suffering. This transformation allowed me to become a researcher motivated not by personal ambition but by a deeper commitment to the well-being of the people with whom I was studying and collaborating with.

Conclusion

In crafting this paper, I aimed to create a strategic roadmap for visionary inquirers embarking on qualitative research within the African context. Unraveling the intricate layers of my multifaceted identity as a crossroads and intersectionality epistemologist, intricately interwoven with the tapestry of my country’s history and Sawadogo’s narratives, laid the foundation from which I boldly stood. By employing Afrocentricity as the cornerstone of my lenses, I delved into the profound realms of postcolonial and decolonial theories, uncovering the richness inherent in these perspectives. Drawing inspiration from the Earth Champion and his community, I imbibed invaluable lessons, notably the embodiment of Mother Earth as a living being and the profound umbilical connection, we share with her.

Sawadogo emerges as an authentic disciple of Mother Earth, personifying the essence of ecological interconnectedness and resilience. His legacy is a powerful catalyst, urging us to reassess our relationship with nature and embrace the indigenous wisdom that sustains our planet. Sawadogo’s life becomes a beacon, guiding future generations to embrace indigenous wisdom, nurture self-reliance, and foster a harmonious coexistence with nature. His story transcends mere triumph; it is a profound lesson in the art of coexisting with the Earth in a symbiotic dance of life. Undoubtedly, this nonexhaustive approach to the climate issue holds the potential to yield unprecedented solutions for ecologists and anthropologists alike. Above all, this qualitative expedition also served as a transformative odyssey, reshaping me from a self-centered researcher stuck within utilitarianism into one characterized by self-effacement for others. This profound evolution echoes the depth and impact of the journey undertaken.

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Notes

1. United Nations Environment Programme. 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org/championsofearth/laureates/2020/yacouba-sawadogo>
2. To smell "someone's smell" is an expression of empathy that means feeling someone's emotions and attempting to understand how they feel.
3. Between 1970 and 1993, the region experienced 20 years of severe drought. For further details, refer to: Essoungo, André-Michel. 2013: The Sahel: One region, many crises. Africa Renewal. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2013/sahel-one-region-many-crises>
4. For further details, refer to: <https://toposmagazine.com/sankaras-burkina-faso/>
5. For further details, refer to: <https://newsreel.org/video/THOMAS-SANKARA-THE-UPRIGHT-MAN>
6. President Sankara launched this program with an endogenous approach to development, which relied on mobilizing internal social forces and resources. It utilized the accumulated knowledge and experiences of the country's people. For further details, refer to: <https://newsreel.org/video/THOMAS-SANKARA-THE-UPRIGHT-MAN>
7. While conversing, Sawadogo conveyed deeper insights through his nonverbal expressions, illustrating the profound disconnection within creation. To him, the climate crisis represents a visible manifestation of humanity's loss: the understanding of interdependence. Merely seeking external solutions offers temporary fixes to the problem; true resolution requires introspection and inner transformation.
8. These words left me unsettled, as the wise man articulated the intricate nature of our relationship with Mother Earth, emphasizing our dependence on her. Interview, July 2022.
9. This expression symbolizes Sawadogo's profound wisdom and scientific understanding.
10. Interview, July 2022.
11. Interview, July 2022.
12. Interview, July 2022.
13. Interview, July 2022.
14. Interview, July 2022.
15. Interview, July 2022.
16. Interview, July 2022.
17. Interview, July 2022.

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