African Vitalism and the Politics of Entangled Humanism

Anatoli Ignatov

In the early afternoon of July 7, 2018, local intellectual Christopher Azaare invited us to sit down under the shade of the big neem tree in front of his Museum of Gurensi Culture in Gowrie, Ghana. Azaare began to narrate his research on Gurensi cosmology and the meaning of *tiŋa* (earth divinity): With the traditionalists, they always wonder how they have come about, that is who created them. . . we have two important phenom- ena. . . that is the sky and the earth. The earth is the *Atiŋa*, and then the sky is the *Awine*. . . they believe that *Atiŋa* is manifested, that is the *tiŋa*, as a stone. . . And the ancestors, where they are buried is in the *tiŋa*. . . if somebody dies, he is sent to the grave, they roll a stone on it and that is why they sacrifice on the stone because the ancestors have been covered in the stone. They'll refer to the grave as the womb of the earth, just like the womb of a woman, so we are being laid in the bosom of the *tiŋa*. And the *tiŋa* also has some sacredness because the spirit of the earth, which is in the stone, is the *kugere*. . . The *tinkugere* conveys the spirit of the whole commu- nity. . . And they say they don't know where they came from, so no one owns land. It existed before man came so they don't sell land. You can't sell it because you came and met it. . . the *tiŋa* has chosen somebody to communicate to the people through him. . . a *tindaana*, who performs the necessary sacrifices on behalf of the community. The spirits of that stone are also manifested in the *tindaana*. . . *tiŋa* has two meanings: the community is the *tiŋa*, so the chief is only responsible for the people who live in the community, but because the *tiŋa*, which is the soil, communicates with the *tindaana*, he is the only one who has access to the *tinkugere*. . . whatever is on the *tiŋa*, the chief has nothing to do with it. . . the chief's duty is only to give fines. If somebody wrongs in a criminal act, then it is the chief who has to judge. . . if there is a spill of blood on the *tiŋa*, then it is the *tindaana* who has to make the purification. . . it is a serious matter if blood falls on the earth.[1]

Azaare presents the Gurensi concept of *tiŋa* as a complex web of entanglements among various forms of political and jurisdictional authority, human and earthen vital agencies, cosmological and ancestral claims, rituals and performances of sacrifice, and collective identities. *Tiŋa* refers

simultaneously to a female earth divinity; a community of the dead, living, and unborn; a spiritual practice of intergenerational land trusteeship that challenges the exclusivity of Western notions of "ownership" and "property"; a view of material nature as recipro- cating ancestors and communicating environment; and a more-than- human domain of political and diplomatic authority.

This essay puts the concept of *tiŋa*, drawn from a neglected African tradition of ecological political thought, into dialogue with William E. Connolly's concept of entangled humanism. In recent works such as *Facing the Planetary* and *Climate Machines, Fascist Drives and Truth*, Connolly calls upon his readers to "transfigure the old humanisms that have played important roles in Euro-American states into multiple affirmations of entangled humanism in a fragile world" via role exper- iments designed to recraft the visceral registers of cultural life.[2] In Connolly's view, these deeply entrenched Euro-American humanisms can be decolonized through mutually transformative engagements with non-Western traditions of thought: "It is critical to address non-Eu- ro-American modes of thought in decolonizing areas that often suffer the most today from climate change, as they also contest exceptionalism and sociocentrism."[3] Entangled humanists engage with these traditions in order to "challenge fantasies of cultural self-sufficiency and domi- nance over nature that often accompany exceptionalism without always contending either that every nonhuman force in the world is also an agent. . . or insisting that care for human welfare must be sacrificed entirely to generic care for the earth itself."[4] For Connolly, entangled humanism enhances appreciation of the multiple nonhuman agencies and forces with which diverse human cultures are imbricated and culti- vates those entanglements "in ways that do not jeopardize humanity itself."[5]

This essay takes Connolly's call seriously. I seek to enhance our appreciation of one such non-Euro-American mode of thought that I provisionally call "African vitalism."[6] I argue that African vitalism presents us with an alternative model of what it means to be human. This tradition of African eco-humanism presents human actions as profoundly intermixed with those of land, plants, animals, spirits, and ancestors.[7] This model extends moral consideration not just to the current human generation, but to future generations and to an animate environment. These vitalist traditions of African eco-humanism foster a dialogical relationship with the earth's vital agencies as they position the earth as the primary source of human ethics and politics.

In particular, this essay explores the West African Indigenous concept of *tiŋa* (earth divinity), a spiritual political constituency governed by earth spirits and dead ancestors that challenges Eurocentric notions of politics as exclusively human practices of authority linked to a state or other form of centralized

power. I show how the pluralist practices of African elders and *tindaanas* described by Azaare constitute an ecolog- ical ethics and politics of entangled humanism that has been neglected by Euro-American political theory in favor of abstract models that priv- ilege anthropocentric and individualist perspectives. *Tiŋa* is a concept of multigenerational trusteeship proceeding from the premise that land belongs to the ancestors, and that the living are only temporary possessors whose use of land is conditional upon their compliance with time-honored ancestral prescriptions and taboos.[8] This concept under- lies forms of juridical and political oversight exercised by traditional authorities such as *tindaanas* (earth custodians) who derive their powers from their association with the earth spirits and promote peaceful relations through joint jurisdiction on human entanglements with the vital forces of the environment. It also reveals that, for the Voltaic region of West Africa, the state has never been the sole locus of socio-political authority.

Tiŋa emerges as the earth's dynamic order of sovereign activity that shapes and legitimates coexisting orders of human governance, diplomacy, and sovereignty.[9] Here I build on Amy Niang's study *The Postcolonial African State in Transition*, in which Niang explores the concept of *Tenga* (the equivalent term to the Gurensi *tiŋa* among the Mossi of Burkina Faso and other Voltaic societies) as a dynamic norma- tive order that the African postcolonial state has been internally built against. Niang argues that Voltaic societies have enlisted ritual as a form of resistance to state power, which manifests in the contempo- rary tensions between political rulers (chiefs) and spiritual authorities (*tindaanas*) over overlapping jurisdictional prerogatives.[10] Like Niang's study, my exploration of *tiŋa* reveals the sources of African Indigenous political authority to be multiple, diffuse, and diverse.

GIIM N-DEI TINGANE: ETHICS OF ENTANGLEMENT IN A MULTIGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY

One African variant of entangled humanism finds expression in the Gurene concept of *tiŋa*, which enlarges our understanding of what it means to be human in close interdependence with other human beings and the more-than-human world across multiple, intersecting temporalities. In Azaare's view, *tiŋa* is an ancestral trust that limits the commercialization of land relations and entails ethical obligations towards future generations:

> Neither the *tindaana* nor any one individual could sell out land. The reason for the prohibition is that land belongs to the ancestors who live underneath the Earth. These ancestors still have vested interest in the preservation of the land which they have left behind for the living descendants. . . one is bound to face fierce resistance in one's attempt to cut down sacred sites (where the ancestors reside) or taking soil from it.[11]

Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu concurs with Azaare that within such African traditions people's relationships to land are governed by ethical considerations that land "belongs not to individuals but to whole clans and individuals only have rights of use that they are obli- gated to exercise considerately so as not to render nugatory the similar rights of future members of the clan."[12] Wiredu defines this obligation to preserve the environment for posterity as a "two-sided conception of stewardship": "Of all the duties owed to the ancestors none is more imperious than that of husbanding the resources of the land so as to leave it in good shape for posterity. . . there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obli- gations to both ancestors and descendants which motivates environ- mental carefulness."[13] The current generation has a dual ethical respon- sibility to past and future generations. The duties to the ancestors are at the same time duties to posterity. Since the ancestors ensured that the environment was able to sustain collective life, the living owe them a debt of gratitude. This debt entails not only respecting ancestral lega- cies of ecological stewardship but also a responsibility for the care and wellbeing of their descendants. Human beings thus belong to an ethical community of temporally interdependent generations.[14]

Bujo uses the concept of "anamnestic solidarity" to describe the ritual practices that renew the relations of reciprocity between the living and the ancestors within this model of multigenerational ethics: "African ethics are articulated in the framework of anamnesis, which involves remembering one's ancestors. A narrative community, fellowship here on earth renews the existence of the community of the ancestors. This re-establishing (poiesis) in turn implies the praxis which efficiently continues the remembrance of the ancestors and gives new dynamism to the earthly fellowship."[15] Anamnesis is an interactive process that enables the invisible community of the dead ancestors and earth spirits to engage in communicative relations with the visible community of the living. This communication is not understood in representative terms as people's attempt to speak for the dead; rather, the ancestors are contem- poraries who commune with the living through various rituals and cultural protocols that have been laid down over multiple generations. By characterizing the remembrance of the ancestors as a form of "poiesis," Bujo also reminds us that these practices should not be equated with interpretations of African tradition as stagnant and ahis- torical. Rather, they are an adaptive, creative, and dynamic form of reconstituting the relations between past, present and future that "give. . . new dynamism to the earthly fellowship." When *tindaanas* and elders gather at the *tingane* (earth shrine) to perform sacrifices to the spirits of the earth and the ancestors, they consult tradition to address questions and issues of contemporary concern. "The past is significant only when it proves to be the bearer of life for the present and the future," and the main goal is forging an intergenerational conversation about

how "to act under the changed circumstances in the spirit of the ancestors."[16] This ongoing process of renewal of relationships does not leave the ancestors unchanged. In a world of becoming, the ancestors' identities are continuously being made and remade: "[A]n ancestor is a human being who is called continually, even after death, to become a person; the living relationships that he maintains with his living descendants continue to shape his identity and personality."[17]

This multigenerational ethic of entanglement extends moral consideration not only to the past and future human generations, but also to a multitude of other species and vital forces of nature. In *Facing the Planetary,* Connolly observes that "some variants of entangled humanism may embrace a god or gods of entanglement," or pursue an immanent divine or "the theme of immanent naturalism that is never apt to understand the world completely."[18] The concept of *tiŋa* refers to such gods of entanglements. Ancestral gods and agencies populate the savannah landscape of the Voltaic region of West Africa, weaving multi- species entanglements of solidarity and cooperation that resonate with the orientations of contemporary trends of theorizing such as immanent naturalism and "new materialism."[19] According to Azaare, the spirits of the ancestors "inhabit" groves, trees, rivers, mountains, and other earthen forms: "[W]hen some of the ancestors came, they decided to live in valleys, others decided to live in mountains, and others decided to live on trees. . . so there are spirits manifested in these things. . . that is why some of these areas are strictly prohibited."[20] In the Gurene language, such abodes of the earth spirits are commonly called *tingana* (singular: *tingane*). As Azaare explains in the introduction, a *tingane* area where the pioneer ancestors first met *tiŋa* is designated as *tinkugere*, i.e., a place of abodes for the spirits of the whole community and sacrifice to the earth gods. Unlike the gods of Islam and Christianity, the earth gods are material, historical, and immanent, reconfiguring the relations of reciprocity and care between different generations as relations between human beings and various other beings and vital forces of nature. This posture of respect and care for *tiŋa* is expressed in the Gurensi saying *giim* (viim, jiim, diim) *n-dei tingane* (i.e., "a cluster of trees makes a *tingane"* or "a thick grove of different plant species makes a *tingane*").[21] The saying underscores the entanglement of human cycles of intergen- erational reproduction and growth with ecological processes of renewal of nature. It simultaneously communicates a time-tested ancestral prescription to respect and preserve the sacred grove (i.e., when we see *giim* or a cluster of trees we should be aware that it is a *tingane* that must be approached with a posture of reverence).[22]

Each *tingane* also interweaves a diverse web of totemic entangle- ments, which involve long-term relations of kinship and interdepen- dence between certain species of plants, animals, and earthen forces with human descent groups

such as clans and lineages. A *tindaana* explained to us once that "when you hear people say here is a *tingane*, elders or people have observed that the *tingane* spirit can actually trans- mogrify into a python or a lion for people to believe in the existence of the gods."[23] This concept of totemic ancestorhood is widespread across sub-Saharan Africa. It casts light on an ethics that prioritizes practical and variably embodied relationships with the nonhuman world, according with Connolly's description of a "creed of entangled humanism" that fosters attentiveness to the cultivation of specific ethical relations with other species: We thus affirm care for the human estate in its worldly entangle- ments as we also stretch that care beyond the scope of human exceptionalism and toward other species with whom we are entan- gled. We care about humans as we incorporate into ourselves more actively appreciations of how members of other species care about themselves. . . Entangled humanists pursue neither a morality of purity nor a pure horizon of community. . . the humanist dimension in entangled humanism means that as we become more aware of other modes of experience we both extend the net of species appre- ciation more widely and learn that we must cast our lot with some species more than others.[24]

Throughout northern Ghana, communities have extended "the net of species appreciation" to baobab trees, crocodiles, monkeys, pythons, and other animals and plants. They have learned that to sustain collec- tive life and flourish in the harsh savannah landscape they must cast their "lot with some species more than others." These themes figure prominently in the stories that *tindaanas* and elders would tell about the observance of taboos and obligations to totemic ancestors: . . . [In] our Tingane and its jurisdiction area, it was a taboo for you to burn the bush. That is why the place is called *Abulgea-mɔkurigɔ* (old grass of the streaming creek of the ebony tree). I quite remem- ber when we were young and coming from school, there was a big baobab tree around that area. A big python was there. We went and picked eggs thinking that it was guinea fowl eggs until we brought them, and they chased us to send them back. That we have gone for the *tingane's* eggs. There was also a small area around there where there were some catfish. The water never dries up and nobody catches that fish. . . there were certain taboos that kept those things alive.[25]

Biodiversity preservation is ensured through taboos and cultural proto- cols that govern the ethical relations between indigenous clans and their totems. During a gathering of the Upper East Tindaama Council, the *tindaana* cited above told the group that "My foremost taboo is that my *tingane* does not eat goat, any who brings a goat for pacification must find a substitute. . . Also, we do not harm a python for it is our spirit and kindred."[26] A *tindaana* from a different community responded affir- matively to his statement and identified with the same totemic ancestor: "We also taboo the killing of a python. If by mistake a person kills it, they have to brew *pito,* kill an animal for pacification before the

python is buried."[27] A *tindaana* from a third community joined the conversation: "My *tingane* taboos crocodiles and pythons."[28] Some of these totems involve long-term family relationships with animals that saved a founding ancestor; others are associated with ancestors' return into trees, animals, and water bodies. Even the pouring of libation at the *tingane*, which in the Upper East usually involves a mix of millet flour and water, benefits ants, centipedes, and "burrowing insects whose activities create aeration as they feed on the flour after the ritual."[29] Entangled humanism thus equips us with resources to cultivate recep- tivity and openness to ethico-political entanglements with other species, stretching human "capacities of experience enough to inhabit the experiential edge of other species. . . without becoming attuned to any completely."[30]

TRANSGRESSING LIMITS: COSMOPOLITICAL DIPLOMACIES OF ENTANGLEMENT

Entangled humanism troubles the order of senses entrenched in polit- ical modernity that eclipses non-Western concepts of humanity in which human and totemic ancestors, future generations, and earth spirits are all included as members of the political community. Connolly observes that even as "entangled humanists also acknowledge limits to the human ability to feel, perceive, think, know, judge, and respond in a world teeming with a variety of human and nonhuman modes of perception," "as multiply entangled beings we seek periodically to stretch the visceral habits of perception and identification" and augment "congealed drives within and between us by tactical means to open common sense to new modes of experience, experiment, and attachment."[31] Here Connolly's entangled humanism can be put into dialogue with Achille Mbembe's *Brutalism*, in which Mbembe notes that the preoccupation of precolonial African cultures with all kinds of ontological and metaphysical questions has rarely been acknowledged: "These questions concerned the limits of the Earth; the boundaries of life, the body, and the self. . . the human subject as an assemblage of multiple entities, the arranging of which was a task that had to be taken up ever anew." [32]According to Mbembe, "among the great human ques- tions African cultures pondered were those about the world beyond the perceptible, the bodily, the visible, and the conscious."[33]

Indigenous northern Ghanaian societies have developed a set of interdependent and complementary institutions and forms of authority such as *tindaanas* and *baga/bakolego* (soothsayer/soothsayer's shrine) to ponder such questions and mediate agonistic relations with alterity. A *tindaana* once described the relationship between these forms of authority in the following way: "I commune with the gods in the house of the *bakolego*. Here they tell me

what they have in their mind. Sometimes they communicate through dreams."[34] A complementary office to *tindaanas*, soothsayers called *bagenaba* are chosen by the spirits and gifted the powers of divining and healing in the form of *tingane* (earth spirits) or *kulega* (water god or river god). During our visit, a soothsayer in the Bongo traditional area shook the rattle to summon the spirits: I desire Asakiyaa Tingane who is a river god, who reveals the hid- den for me. I crave that he answers this summon and emerge. I crave your presence so that together we attend to them. . . I am but a vessel that you together with the earth spirit (*tingane*) continue to work through me, a mere mortal. I have no power but a vessel. Descend now and work for me.[35]

The whistling and rattling continued. The soothsayer stopped the incantation to pour out the divination accoutrement from a goat skin. He then strummed his baby *kɔniŋɔ* (guitar), and the rattling resumed: "River god, have you descended?" He would repeatedly blow the horn of the buffalo: Asakiyaa Kolga (River god of Asakiyaa) are you seated? I asked, 'have you descended?' True the world is graced with divine peace and happiness of God whenever you descend. Take for a second time your earned gifts. [Whistling.] I have seen that." The soothsayer then threw a pair of heavy and flat steel square metals to determine if the way was cleared for divination: "I entreat you beg this earth spirit who is your kindred to sit down."[36] The soothsayer also used the proverb "One arrow does not kill an elephant" to describe the principle that guides his plural methodology and fluid interpretive practice. An elephant, because it is a great beast, cannot be killed with just a single arrow. Similarly, myriad problems cannot be solved with a single instru- ment or solution.[37] At once an officiant of sacrifices and "vessel" for earth and river gods, the soothsayer moves and translates between the perspectives of vital forces of nature and enlists a diverse assemblage of objects and practices for mediating relations with otherness.

Tindaanas and soothsayers thus play the role of "cosmopolitical diplomats in an arena where diverse socionatural interests are forced to confront each other."[38] The objects that the soothsayer enlists in the divination session—gourd rattle, *kɔniŋɔ*, goat skin bag, steel metals, etc.—are not inanimate "things," but "repositories of all kinds of ener- gies, vitality, and virtualities," and as such, they call for "transmutation, and even for transfiguration."[39] They function as "thresholds" from which it becomes possible to measure the degree of transgression of existing limits."[40] For Mbembe, such practices of "cosmos-making" mean "trading continuously on processes of reversibility, reticularity, and fluidity."[41] The sounds of the rattle, *kɔniŋɔ*, and soothsayer's whis- tling, as well as the soothsayer's tasting of a black sticky substance at the onset of the session, disrupt an Eurocentric order of senses that privileges visual modes of sensation over auditory and gustatory ones, keeping alternative African ways of being in the world with

human and nonhuman others below the threshold of recognition.

Tindaanas and soothsayers can be conceived of as functioning as "para-diplomats." Thinkers such Sam Opondo and Noe Cornago have used the term "para-diplomacy" to refer to practices of intermediating agonistic relations with otherness that do not take the state, professional diplomats, or even human beings, as the default subjects of diplomacy.[42] These traditions also highlight the political efficacy of Indigenous prac- tices of conflict mediation in northern Ghana that incorporate multiple diplomatic powers distributed across the vital materialities of both human bodies and the earth. This is how a prominent *bagenaba* described his working relationship with *tindaanas* and chiefs: "In my work, I help the earth priest and the chief in the physical and spiritual governance of the land. . . I ensure the peace of the land and propose ways of appeasing the gods when they are offended to avert any calamity. I communicate to the chief and he, in turn, [communicates] to the people. The chief does not tell the people I had prescribed the mode of appeasement. He makes the message his and delivers it so."[43] *Tindaanas*, chiefs and soothsayers promote peace through joint jurisdiction on human relationships with an animate environment. Even though it is the chief who represents the public dimension of traditional political power, it is soothsayers and *tindaanas* who exercise authority behind the scenes and mediate rela- tions between the human political constituency and the invisible gover- nance of earth spirits, where the real locus of political power lies.[44]

DECOLONIZING THE HUMAN

This essay has explored neglected African models of ethics and poli- tics—models of entangled humanism—that stretch anthropocentric habits of perception and extend notions of political collectivity into the nonhuman world across multiple generations and temporalities. The exchanges between Connolly's concept of entangled humanism and African vitalism prompt us to recognize that what is most valuable about us as human beings is not our alleged self-sufficiency or some individualized aspect of rationality. Rather, it is our interdependen- cies and relationships with other human beings, totems, and a material world teeming with a variety of vital forces, ancestral agencies, and modes of nonhuman perception.

Mbembe observes that African vitalism views the human as a "compound of multiple living entities. It is not self-generating. Others are always responsible for its coming to life. . . what we call identity leaves no room for self-enclosure, autarky, the face-to-face with oneself, the refusal to encounter the world, or mistrust, or a self that asserts itself in solitary fashion."[45] Connolly agrees that entangled humanism enriches our understanding of what it means to be human and culti- vates responsiveness to a world of becoming that is not predesigned for human mastery:

A critique of sociocentrism does not mean the denial of human, col- lective agency. It means accentuated attention to how a variety of active nonhuman force fields interact with late modern versions of human agency in capitalism, social democracy, Christianity, and so forth, joined to active efforts to adjust our conduct to these volatile realities. . . These are not simply nonagentic forces. They are micro- agents that help to constitute us. Without them we would not be agents. Human-nonhuman entanglements.[46]

Rather than denying human uniqueness and agency, such transfigu- rations of the "old humanisms" in Euro-American states extend and complicate human agency: "[T]hey complicate agency by amplifying the number and type of conscious and unconscious elements that compose it. They extend agency as they also confound hubristic theo- ries of human exceptionalism."[47] Mbembe concurs that African tradi- tions of thought have complicated our view of the human person as a microcosm of an interactive and vitalist universe, in which a person becomes a person only through their plural entanglements with the vital materialities of nature. Within these traditions, "the human person was defined essentially by its wealth of vital energy and its capacity to reso- nate with the multiplicity of living species that populated the universe, including plants, animals, and minerals. Neither fixed nor immutable, it was characterized by its plasticity."[48] "Truly singular people," like the soothsayer and *tindaana* in Ghana, are "those with a recognized ability to produce various assorted arrangements of forces, to capture and reconfigure life's flows."[49] In this respect, Mbembe concludes, "African metaphysics can be said to be about becoming and not about substance."[50] At a time when climate wreckage is swiftly exposing the limits of the humanisms bound up with variants of Western capitalism, imperialism, and Christianity, metaphysical relationships such as *tiŋa* are better positioned to amplify the voices of African earth and river spirits over familiar Euro-American human voices. They are "more apt than Western philosophies of the subject to help us to grasp identity as something that is ever in motion, never the same, always open to that which arrives, and that never ceases to synthesize itself anew upon encountering different energy flows."[51] African vitalism thus offers a time-tested model for how to attune to the energy flows of the earth and synthesize humanity anew to resist the ecological degradation wrought by Western capitalism in the Anthropocene.

NOTES

1. Interview with Chris Azaare by author and Fara Jim Awindor, July 7, 2018. For the full video of the interview with Azaare and video tour of his museum see the supplementary materials of the feature dedicated to Azaare's intellectual work in the Local Intellectual Series of the journal Africa

2. (90) 4 (August 2020). https://doi.org/10.1017/S000197202000025X
3. William E. Connolly, Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming (Duke University Press, 2017), 168.
4. William E. Connolly, Climate Machines, Fascist Drives and Truth (Duke University Press, 2019), 41–42.
5. Connolly, Climate Machines, 40.
6. Connolly, Climate Machines, 40
7. The term "African vitalism" builds on overlooked vitalist dimensions of influential visions of "African humanism" that were advanced by Africa's leading political thinkers in the context of decolonization in 1950s and 1960s, most notably by Kwame Nkrumah in Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization (Monthly Review Press, 1964) and Léopold Sédar Senghor in "Négritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century" in I Am Because We Are: Readings in Africana Philosophy, ed. Jonathan Scott Lee and Fred L. Hord, 55–64 (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016). Nkrumah's and Senghor's concepts of consciencism and Négritude both advance Afrocentric views of the human person as a microcosm of an interactive and vitalist world of becoming. "African vitalism" can be also situated within contemporary debates in the growing field of African environmental ethics, most of which have been focused on southern African traditions. This body of scholar- ship has advanced a notion of African humanism as an "eco-humanist" tradition of philosophical thought because it extends moral considerability and agency to the past and future generations and to a material nature of vital forces. For example, see Mogobe Ramose, African Philosophy through Ubuntu (Mond Books, 1999); Bénézet Bujo, Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001); Munyaradzi Felix Murove, "An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation: The Shona Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu," Mankind Quarterly 45, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 195–215; Gary Behrens, "Moral obligations towards future generations in African thought," Journal of Global Ethics 8, nos. 2–3 (August–November 2012): 179–91; Garikai Madavo, "African Environmental Ethics: Lessons from the Rain-Maker's Moral and Cosmological Perspectives" in African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader, ed. Munamato Chemhuru, 141–152 (Springer, 2019); and Placide Tempels, Bantu Philosophy (Presence Africaine, 1959).
8. I borrow the term "eco-humanism" from the work of Michael Onyebuchi Eze, in which he highlights a widespread African notion of humanity that enlarges our understanding of what it means to be human in interdepen- dence with other human beings, animals, spirits, ancestors, biological and non-biological life, and other vital forces that make up the environ- ment. According to Eze, the Xhosa/Zulu aphorism "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu" (i.e., "a person is a person through other persons"), best defines what constitutes African eco-humanity, i.e., a humanity expressed not

only in relationship with other people, but also with living and non-living beings, and the environment. See Michael Onyebuchi Eze, "Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism): An African Environmental Theory," in The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy, ed. Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola (Palgrave, 2017).

9. See also S.K.B. Asante, Property Law and Social Goals in Ghana 1844–1966 (Ghana Universities Press, 1975), 22.
10. For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between the two major political constituencies within African cosmology—the human and the spiritual—see Nwando Achebe's Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa (Ohio University Press, 2020). Achebe's focus is on the female spiritual principle of governance, i.e., female spiritual monarchs such as rain queens, spirit mediums, priestesses, goddesses, female medicines, etc. She argues that these "spiritual monarchs were the real rulers of African communities and towns, and human beings were merely there to interpret the will of the spirits" (24).
11. See Amy Niang, The Postcolonial African State in Transition: Stateness and Modes of Sovereignty (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018). In Niang's view, Tenga refers to an "ecocultural field of identities" and counter-discourses to state-making processes that have ensured the preserva- tion of preexisting forms and structures of political authority in Africa, and that had to be constantly reworked "to respond to anxieties generated by state power" (27–28).
12. Christopher Anabila Azaare, " Tindaanaship and Tindaanas in Traditional Gurensi (Frafra) Communities: Land Use and Practices," Africa Local Intellectuals Series 90, no. 4 (2020): 25–26. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972020000261.
13. Kwasi Wiredu, "Philosophy, Humankind and the Environment," in Philosophy, Humanity and Ecology: Philosophy of Nature and Environmental Ethics, ed. H. Odera Oruka (African Centre for Technology Studies, 1994), 46.
14. Wiredu, "Philosophy, Humankind and the Environment," 46.
15. These ethical obligations to promote the wellbeing of future generations and the environment associated with the West African concept of tiŋa as a multigenerational trust resonate with the ecological ethic expressed in Southern African concepts such as ubuntu and ukama. I offer an in-depth exploration of these resonances in Anatoli Ignatov, "Theorizing with the Earth Spirits: African Eco-Humanism in a World of Becoming" in The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Politics and Theory, ed. Joel Kassiola and Tim Luke (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 503–538.
16. Bénézet Bujo, Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 34–35.
17. Bujo, Foundations of an African Ethic, 49–50.
18. Bujo, Foundations of an African Ethic, 89, 94. See also Ignatov, "Theorizing

with the Earth Spirits," 517–518.
19. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 170.
20. Recent trends in political theory have challenged understandings of politics as an exclusively human domain by re-thinking agency, subjectivity, power, and authority as including influences from nonhuman bodies and the vital forces of the earth and planetary processes. Contemporary thinkers such as Jane Bennett (2010), William Connolly (2017), Amitav Ghosh (2021), Bruno Latour (2017), Karen Barad (2007), Stacy Alaimo (2010), and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) have advanced such trends. This essay connects this emerging school of theory to a set of already existing—albeit marginalized—African practices of theorizing that approximate the intuitions of "new materialists" and "immanent naturalists." However, an in-depth analysis of these points of contact is beyond the scope of the essay.
21. Interview with Chris Azaare by author and Fara Jim Awindor, July 7, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000197202000025X
22. Interview with tindaana and elders by author and Fara Jim Awindor, July 21, 2017.
23. I am indebted to Joseph Aketema for this interpretation.
24. Interview with tindaana and elders by author and Fara Jim Awindor, July 21, 2017.
25. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 171–72.
26. Interview with tindaana and elders by author and Fara Jim Awindor, July 21, 2017.
27. Tindaana at the meeting of Upper East Tindama Council, Bolga, July 6, 2018.
28. Tindaana at the meeting of Upper East Tindama Council, Bolga, July 6, 2018.
29. Tindaana at the meeting of Upper East Tindama Council, Bolga, July 6, 2018.
30. Joseph Aketema and Yao Joseph Ladzepko, "Indigenizing, and Developing Africa: The Role of Indigenous Cultural Norms and Values," Journal of Black Studies 54, no. 5 (2023): 380.
31. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 171.
32. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 170–171.
33. Achille Mbembe, Brutalism (Duke University Press, 2024), 48.
34. Mbembe, Brutalism, 48.
35. Interview with Tindaana, July 3, 2018.
36. Divination session with soothsayer, July 3, 2018.
37. Divination session with soothsayer, July 3, 2018.
38. Divination session with soothsayer, July 3, 2018. I am grateful to Joseph Aketema for the translation and interpretation of this saying.
39. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Cannibal Metaphysics, trans. Peter Skafish (Univocal, 2014), 151. In chapter 9 of Cannibal Metaphysics, Viveiros de

Castro offers an illuminating discussion of Amerindian shamans as "commuters" or conductors of perspectives between the human and nonhuman worlds, practices of "transversal shamanism" that resonate with the pluridiplomatic practices of tindaanas and soothsayers in Africa's Voltaic region.

40. Mbembe, Brutalism, 48.
41. Mbembe, Brutalism, 48.
42. Mbembe, Brutalism, 48.
43. See Sam Opondo, Diplomatic Para-citations: Genre, Foreign Bodies, and the Ethics of Co-habitation, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022) and Noe Cornago, Plural Diplomacies: Normative Predicaments and Functional Imperatives (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013).
44. Interview with BagenabaS□ by author and Fara Jim Awindor, July 8, 2018.
45. See also Ignatov, "Theorizing with the Earth Spirits," 509.
46. Mbembe, Brutalism, 56.
47. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 184.
48. Connolly, Facing the Planetary, 108.
49. Mbembe, Brutalism, 57.
50. Mbembe, Brutalism, 57.
51. Mbembe, Brutalism, 57.
52. Mbembe, Brutalism, 57. In another essay, Mbembe's conceptualization of African vitalism may be put into productive conversations with the ideas of Caribbean anticolonial thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire who have sought to decolonize humanism and unsettle Western conceptions of what it means to be human. See Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black,'" in National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America, ed. Antonio Gomez- Moriana and Mercedes Duran-Cogan, 30–66 (Routledge, 2001); Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2005); and Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, trans. Joan Pinkham (Monthly Review Press, 2000).