



LA DARARA WA LA DIRAR: ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENTAL JURISPRUDENCE AND SANITATION IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Environmental degradation in Southwest Nigeria, driven by rapid urbanisation, industrial effluents, and deteriorating sanitation infrastructure, demands frameworks that resonate with the cultural and religious values of affected communities. While policy and technological interventions have received sustained scholarly attention, the jurisprudential resources of Islamic legal thought remain largely unexplored in environmental discourse. This paper appraises the Islamic legal maxim *La Darara wa La Dirar* (“no harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated”) as a foundational framework for environmental sanitation and protection in Muslim communities in Southwest Nigeria. Employing a qualitative doctrinal methodology, the study undertakes a systematic textual analysis of primary Islamic sources, the Quran, authenticated Hadith literature, and classical Fiqh scholarship, to establish the maxim's normative scope and environmental applicability. The paper argues that *La Darara wa La Dirar*, one of the five foundational principles of Islamic legal theory, provides a robust theological and ethical basis for environmental responsibility, rendering any act of environmental degradation a form of *darar* (harm) expressly prohibited under Islamic law. The study further demonstrates how this maxim intersects with the Quranic concept of *Khilafah*, humanity's stewardship of the earth, to generate a comprehensive Islamic environmental ethics applicable to contemporary sanitation challenges in the region. The paper concludes that integrating Islamic jurisprudential principles into environmental policy and community sanitation frameworks in Muslim-majority societies in Southwest Nigeria can yield outcomes that are more culturally resonant and sustained than purely secular approaches.

Keywords: Islam, Environmental Sanitation, La Darara wa La Dirar, Islamic Jurisprudence, Khilafah.

Introduction

The environmental crisis confronting Southwest Nigeria is not merely an administrative or infrastructural failure. It is, in a profound sense, a crisis of values, of the relationship between human communities and the natural world they inhabit. The states of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti, which constitute the geopolitical southwest of Nigeria, are among the most densely populated zones on the African continent and simultaneously zones under severe environmental stress. Rapid urbanisation, expanding informal settlements, deteriorating sanitation systems, industrial effluents discharged into waterways, and unchecked accumulation of solid waste have combined to produce conditions of ecological harm that are measurable, documented, and deeply consequential to human health and well-being.

Policy responses to this crisis have been persistent but largely insufficient. Legislative frameworks at federal and state levels have addressed aspects of environmental management, but implementation has remained weak, community engagement shallow, and the cultural and religious dimensions of environmental stewardship almost entirely absent from formal policy discourse. Southwest Nigeria is home to one of the largest and historically most rooted Muslim populations in sub-Saharan Africa. Islam has shaped the cultural, moral, and social life of Yoruba communities for over five centuries (Abubakar, 2024). For the large proportion of this population that organises its worldview through Islamic principles, secular environmental interventions disconnected from faith-based values are likely to find limited resonance and even more limited compliance.

This paper addresses that gap. It argues that Islamic jurisprudence, and specifically the Prophetic legal maxim *La Darara wa La Dirar* (“no harm shall be inflicted or reciprocated”), provides a rigorous, historically grounded, and culturally resonant framework for addressing environmental sanitation in Muslim communities in Southwest Nigeria. The maxim, derived from authenticated Hadith literature and elevated by classical scholars to the status of one of the five foundational principles of Islamic legal theory (*Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyyah al-Kubra*), has binding normative force within Sunni jurisprudential tradition. When systematically applied to the contemporary environmental context, it generates both a prohibition of environmentally harmful conduct and a positive obligation to remove existing harm, a dual mandate that maps directly onto the challenges of sanitation governance in the region.

The paper proceeds through seven sections: doctrinal methodology and scholarly context; a textual examination of *La Darara wa La Dirar*; analysis of the Quranic *Khilafah* concept; a profile of the environmental sanitation crisis in Southwest Nigeria; application of the maxim to sanitation challenges; and conclusions with policy recommendations.

Islamic Environmental Jurisprudence: Doctrinal Foundations and Methodology

Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) constitutes one of the most comprehensive legal systems in human intellectual history. Developed over fourteen centuries of scholarly engagement with the Quran and the authenticated Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and elaborated through analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), scholarly consensus (*ijma'*), and the higher objectives of law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*), Islamic jurisprudence addresses the full range of human conduct, including the relationship between human communities and the natural environment.

Classical Islamic scholarship did not develop a discrete category labelled “environmental law.” However, the principles necessary for an Islamic environmental jurisprudence are embedded throughout the tradition, in the prohibitions on corruption of the land (*fasad fi al-ard*), the protection of public resources through *hima* (protected zones), the obligations of communal welfare (*maslaha al-'amma*), and the foundational maxim of no harm. The *maqasid al-shari'ah* framework, the five essential objectives of preserving religion (*hifz al-din*), life (*hifz al-nafs*), intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), lineage (*hifz al-nasl*), and property (*hifz al-mal*) (Al-Ghazali, 1993; Auda, 2008), provides the overarching structure within which environmental obligations are situated. Contemporary scholars have additionally proposed preservation of the environment (*hifz al-bi'ah*) as a sixth essential, reflecting the growing recognition that Islamic legal theory must formally engage with ecological challenges (“New Essential Values of Daruriyyah,” 2016).

This study employs a qualitative doctrinal methodology, the systematic analysis of primary legal texts, their classical commentaries, and their application to a defined contemporary problem. This approach is appropriate to Islamic jurisprudential inquiry, which proceeds through rigorous textual reading rather than empirical data collection. Primary sources examined include the Quran, authenticated Hadith literature, and selected classical *fiqh* works, with particular attention to the Sunni tradition predominant among Yoruba Muslims in Southwest Nigeria.

La Darara wa La Dirar: Textual Basis, Scope, and Classical Elaboration ***The Hadith Foundation***

The maxim *La Darara wa La Dirar*, “no harm shall be inflicted, and no harm shall be reciprocated,” derives from a Prophetic hadith transmitted on the authority of Abu Said al-Khudri (may Allah be pleased with him), recorded in the Sunan Ibn Majah and the Muwatta of Imam Malik (Ibn Majah, n.d.; Malik ibn Anas, n.d.). In five Arabic words, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) established a foundational legal principle of extraordinary scope: any action that causes unjustified harm to another party, individual or collective, is prohibited under Islamic law. Reciprocation of harm beyond just restitution is equally forbidden.

The classical jurists recognised this hadith's foundational character immediately. Imam Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911 AH) in his *Al-Ashbah wa al-Naza'ir*, and Imam Ibn Nujaym al-Hanafi (d. 970 AH) in his parallel Hanafi compendium, both identified *La Darara wa La Dirar* as one of the five grand legal maxims (*Qawa'id Kubra*) upon which the entirety of Islamic jurisprudence rests (Al-Suyuti, 1998; Ibn Nujaym al-Hanafi, n.d.). This elevation of a single Prophetic statement to the status of a foundational principle reflects the breadth of its application across virtually every domain of Islamic law.

The Meaning of Darar and Environmental Implications

The concept of *darar* (harm) is the operative term of the maxim. Classical jurists defined it to encompass injury to any legally protected interest, including life, health, property, and public welfare (“Jurisprudential and Legal Analysis of Groundwater Extraction,” 2024). This definition has direct environmental implications. The contamination of water sources that a community depends upon for drinking, cooking, and ritual purification (*wudu'*) constitutes *darar* to life and health. Discharge of industrial effluents into shared rivers destroys communal resources, *darar* to property and communal welfare. Accumulation of solid waste generating disease vectors constitutes *darar* to public health. Each of these forms of environmental harm falls squarely within the prohibition of *La Darara wa La Dirar*.

Contemporary scholarship has confirmed this interpretation. As Dr Saeid Sobhani articulated in his 2025 University of Exeter lecture on Islamic jurisprudence and environmental challenges, “Since the environment constitutes a form of public wealth, any harm inflicted upon it falls within the scope of *La Darar*, and is therefore prohibited under Islamic law, especially when it endangers public health or ecological stability” (Sobhani, 2025). This is consistent with the classical understanding of the maxim and represents its necessary extension to contemporary forms of environmental harm.

Al-Darar Yuzal: The Remedial Extension

La Darara wa La Dirar does not function in isolation. It is accompanied by the derived principle *Al-Darar Yuzal*, “harm must be removed.” Where the foundational maxim prohibits causing harm, *Al-Darar Yuzal* mandates the remediation of harm already inflicted (“From Islamic Legal Maxims to Environmental Regulation,” 2026). Together, these principles generate a complete regulatory framework: harm is prohibited prospectively; where it occurs, it must be removed; and the perpetrator bears legal responsibility. This structure maps precisely onto modern environmental governance: the preventive dimension prohibits harmful conduct; the remedial dimension mandates clean-up, restoration, and accountability. Contemporary research published in the RSIS International Journal of Research in Islamic Social Sciences (2026) confirms that these maxims, when systematically applied, support regulatory doctrines including environmental tort liability, the Polluter Pays Principle, and precautionary governance (“From Islamic Legal Maxims to Environmental Regulation,” 2026, pp. 1821–1822).

The Quranic Concept of *Khilafah* and Environmental Stewardship

The legal prohibition established by *La Darara wa La Dirar* receives its deepest theological grounding in the Quranic concept of *Khilafah*. The Quran declares in Surah al-Baqarah (2:30), “And when your Lord said to the angels, Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority” (Quran 2:30, Saheeh International trans.). The Arabic term *Khalifa* (plural: *Khulafa'*) denotes a vicegerent, steward, or trustee, not an owner. Humanity does not possess the earth; it has been entrusted with its administration on behalf of its Creator. A trustee who damages what has been entrusted bears both moral and legal responsibility for that damage.

This theological mandate is reinforced throughout the Quranic text. Surah al-A'raf (7:56) prohibits causing corruption upon the earth after its reformation (Quran 7:56, Saheeh International trans.). Surah al-Rum (30:41) attributes the visible corruption of land and sea to human action, presenting environmental degradation as both a consequence and a sign of moral failure (Quran 30:41, Saheeh International trans.). Surah al-Rahman (55:7–9) frames the natural world as a divine creation maintained in a state of balance (*mizan*), the transgression of which constitutes a fundamental wrong. Ahmad (2025), writing in the Global Journal *Al-Thaqafah*, demonstrates through systematic thematic analysis that the Quran consistently frames environmental conservation as a function of humanity's stewardship role, grounded in the principles of moderation (*wasatiyyah*), justice (*'adl*), and gratitude (*shukr*).

The intersection of *La Darara wa La Dirar* with *Khilafah* is jurisprudentially decisive. Where *Khilafah* establishes the positive duty of environmental stewardship, *La Darara wa La Dirar* provides the legal mechanism for enforcing it: any act of stewardship that results in *darar* to the entrusted environment violates both the legal maxim and the theological duty simultaneously. Environmental pollution and inadequate sanitation management are not merely governance failures in this framework. They are, in Islamic jurisprudential terms, actionable wrongs, *darar* inflicted upon a public trust, prohibited by Prophetic injunction and inconsistent with the Quranic mandate of vicegerency.

Environmental Sanitation Crisis in Southwest Nigeria: Context and Community Scale of the Crisis

Southwest Nigeria is confronting an environmental sanitation crisis of serious and documented proportions. UNICEF confirmed in November 2025 that Nigeria's rapid urbanisation is outpacing sanitation infrastructure, exposing millions to preventable public health risks (UNICEF, 2025). As of 2023, approximately 54.3 per cent of Nigeria's population, some 123.7 million people, live in urban areas, up from 29.7 per cent in 1990 (UNICEF, 2025). Southwest Nigeria, anchored by the Lagos-Ogun-Oyo corridor, is one of the most densely urbanised regions in sub-Saharan Africa, and its sanitation systems have not kept pace with this growth.

Research published in the Journal of Global Health in 2025, examining informal settlements of Ogun and Oyo states, documents the severity: substandard housing, inadequate sanitation, unsafe drinking water, and poor waste disposal practices generate elevated disease burdens across these communities (Olamide et al., 2025). The combined population of Ogun and Oyo states stood at 14.4 million in 2022. The World Bank recorded that only 31 per cent of Nigeria's population use safely managed sanitation (World Bank, 2020, as cited in Daily Trust, 2025). Nigeria recorded over 1,141 suspected cholera cases with 63 deaths in 2024 alone (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, as cited in ScienceDirect, 2024). A Springer Nature systematic review assessing Nigeria's progress towards SDG 6 identifies inadequate infrastructure, pollution, and mismanaged waste as persistent barriers to universal sanitation access (Farouk et al., 2025).

The Muslim Communities of Southwest Nigeria

The Muslim population of Southwest Nigeria is substantial, historically rooted, and institutionally organised. The Yoruba people, who constitute the dominant ethnic group across the six southwestern states, have maintained a relationship with Islam for over five centuries, predating colonialism and the modern Nigerian state (Abubakar, 2024). Islam entered Yorubaland through trans-Saharan trade routes and scholarly exchange, producing a Muslim community of considerable cultural distinctiveness, known for religious pluralism, deep communal ties, and established institutions of Islamic learning.

Islamic religious groups constitute approximately 46.2 per cent of Nigeria's total population (Johnson & Zurlo, as cited in Joseph et al., 2023), with a significant proportion in the southwest. Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya orders, exercise substantial social influence across Yoruba Muslim communities (Pew Research Center, 2012, as cited in Wikipedia, 2026). This organisational infrastructure of mosques, Islamic schools (*madrassas*), Sufi lodges, and Muslim community associations constitutes the social network through which Islamic jurisprudential values are effectively communicated and acted upon. It is this very infrastructure that renders the application of *La Darara wa La Dirar* to environmental sanitation not merely theoretically sound but practically viable.

Applying *La Darara wa La Dirar* to Environmental Sanitation Sanitation Failure as Darar: The Jurisprudential Case

The application of *La Darara wa La Dirar* to the environmental sanitation crisis proceeds through a straightforward jurisprudential analysis. Open defecation, widespread in informal settlements of southwest Nigerian cities, contaminates soil and water sources, *darar* to life

(*hifz al-nafs*). Illegal discharge of industrial and domestic effluents into rivers destroys communal water resources essential for drinking, cooking, and ritual purification (*wudu'*), *darar* that additionally undermines the performance of religious obligations. The uncontrolled accumulation of solid waste creates disease vectors, produces toxic gases, and renders public spaces inhospitable, *darar* to both public health and communal welfare.

Each of these conditions meets the classical definition of *darar* and is therefore expressly prohibited under *La Darara wa La Dirar*. The implications are not merely moral exhortations. They constitute actionable legal obligations. Any perpetrator of environmental *darar*, whether an individual dumping waste in a communal space, an operator discharging effluents into a waterway, or a local authority failing to provide functional sanitation infrastructure, is in violation of an Islamic legal principle of the highest order (Sobhani, 2025).

Individual, Communal, and State Obligations

Islamic jurisprudence addresses environmental harm at three levels. At the individual level, *La Darara wa La Dirar* prohibits any conduct that causes environmental harm to others. At the communal level, the classical institution of *hisbah*, the duty to command right and forbid wrong, generates a collective religious obligation (*fard al-kifayah*) for Muslim community organisations to actively monitor and resist environmental harm (Ajmal et al., 2025). Mosques, Islamic associations, and community leaders in Southwest Nigeria carry an active jurisprudential responsibility to advocate for environmental cleanliness within their constituencies. At the state level, the principle of *maslaha al-'amma* (public interest) empowers and obliges governing authorities to intervene against environmental harm, to deny permits for ecologically destructive activities, impose liability on polluters, and enforce sanitation standards (“From Islamic Legal Maxims to Environmental Regulation,” 2026, pp. 1821–1822).

The Maqasid Framework: An Integrative Analysis

Environmental degradation in Southwest Nigeria does not harm a single protected interest; it simultaneously undermines multiple maqasid essentials. Polluted water and poor sanitation threaten life, undermining *hifz al-nafs*. Toxic environments impair cognitive development, undermining *hifz al-'aql*. Displacement caused by ecological collapse disrupts family and community structures, undermining *hifz al-nasl*. Destruction of agricultural land and natural resources devastates livelihoods, undermining *hifz al-mal* (“New Essential Values of Daruriyyah,” 2016). This multi-dimensional analysis situates environmental sanitation not as a peripheral concern of Islamic law but as a central obligation cutting across its highest objectives. A Muslim community that tolerates preventable environmental degradation is, in jurisprudential terms, permitting ongoing violations of the most fundamental protections that the *shari'ah* was revealed to establish.

The Cultural Resonance Argument

Purely secular environmental policy in Nigeria has a documented record of limited effectiveness. Legislative frameworks have been enacted, agencies established, and development programmes implemented; yet the sanitation crisis has deepened. One explanation is the disconnect between the framing of environmental obligations in secular

policy and the moral vocabulary through which most community members in Muslim-majority areas of Southwest Nigeria organise their understanding of right conduct.

For a devout Muslim in Ibadan, Ilorin, or Abeokuta, a government notice prohibiting open defecation is a bureaucratic instruction. The Prophetic hadith *La Darara wa La Dirar*, communicated through the mosque as a matter of divine obligation, is a command of the highest normative order. Research on religion, community practice, and behavioural change demonstrates that obligations grounded in religious conviction generate more durable and internalised compliance than those rooted in civic duty alone (Ajmal et al., 2025). The Sufi brotherhood networks, the Friday *khutbah*, the *madrassa*, and Muslim community associations are institutional channels through which jurisprudential principles can reach millions of people, channels that no secular environmental campaign can replicate in depth or reach.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Islamic legal maxim *La Darara wa La Dirar* provides a robust, jurisprudentially grounded, and culturally resonant framework for addressing environmental sanitation in Muslim communities in Southwest Nigeria. Drawing on authenticated Hadith literature, classical Fiqh scholarship, and the Quranic concept of *Khilafah*, the paper has demonstrated that environmental degradation, contaminated water, open defecation, industrial pollution, and mismanaged waste, constitutes *darar* within the classical definition and is therefore expressly prohibited under Islamic law. The complementary principle of *Al-Darar Yuzal* generates a positive obligation to remediate existing harm, establishing an Islamic regulatory framework spanning prevention, prohibition, accountability, and restoration. Environmental stewardship, properly understood through the lens of *Khilafah*, is not peripheral to Islamic practice but intrinsic to it. The Muslim communities of Southwest Nigeria, with their centuries-old institutional networks, Sufi brotherhoods, mosques, and Islamic schools, possess the social infrastructure through which these jurisprudential principles can be communicated and acted upon at community scale.

Recommendations

This paper advances four recommendations:

First, Islamic scholars and jurisprudential bodies in Southwest Nigeria, including the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and state-level Muslim communities, should formally incorporate environmental responsibility within the *La Darara wa La Dirar* framework into religious programming, sermons, and community guidance.

Second, state environmental agencies in the southwest should establish formal partnerships with Muslim community organisations to develop faith-based sanitation programmes that draw explicitly on Islamic jurisprudential principles as their motivational foundation.

Third, Islamic educational institutions in the region, including *madrassas* and faculties of Islamic studies at Nigerian universities, should incorporate environmental jurisprudence as a formal component of their curricula.

Fourth, empirical research should assess the penetration of Islamic environmental jurisprudential concepts in Muslim communities in Southwest Nigeria, identify gaps between doctrine and practice, and evaluate the effectiveness of faith-based environmental communication strategies.

The environmental sanitation crisis in Southwest Nigeria will not be resolved by policy, infrastructure, or technology alone. It requires a moral framework capable of generating sustained, internalised commitment to environmental responsibility across millions of people. For the Muslim communities of this region, that framework exists, in the jurisprudential heritage of Islam itself, expressed in the five words of the Prophetic maxim: *La Darara wa La Dirar*.

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