

# Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion: Implications for Leadership and Society in Nigeria

**Ogunade, Raymond**

*Institutional Affiliation: Coordinator of Programmes, LSI and Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria*

This paper was prepared for “Science and Religion: Global Perspectives”, June 4-8, 2005, in Philadelphia, PA, USA, a program of the Metanexus Institute ([www.metanexus.net](http://www.metanexus.net))

Abstract:

The environment is people, and people are the environment in Yoruba religion. Yoruba religion is palpable in the Yoruba environment. Hence, religion pervades the Yoruba people in every aspect of life. The fact that the Yoruba beliefs and traditions evolved from observations and interaction with their environment makes caring for the earth a significant central issue in the Yoruba life. This paper attempts to examine the approach to environmental issues in Yoruba religion and the implications on leadership and society in Nigeria.

Nature - biosphere and the marine - plays vital roles in the community life of the Yoruba. Microscopic organisms, birds, trees, rocks, rivers, both the visible and the invisible are completely interwoven with the cycle of the religious, social, political, economic, and even moral segments of the typical Yoruba life. Deeply held with this tradition is the notion that Olodumare (God) placed human beings at the apex of nature to nurture, tend and manage for their use and enjoyment, without disrupting the beauty and order therein. Unbridled carelessness, and unchecked passions for nature's generosity, by individuals can make or mar the peaceful coexistence of the human society with the land that supports its growth and thriving. Leadership potentials and the potentials of traditional traits in the individual Nigerians must therefore be developed in order to manage the God-given natural resources for the benefit and the improvement of the society.

## **Introduction**

Societies the world over are beginning to pay renewed attention to issues in environmental protection and sustainability and Nigeria is no exception. Individuals, in different life threatening situations', have confessed how small they appeared to themselves, and how mighty Mother Nature was when "natural disaster" struck. Some incidences that posed as dangerous are consequences of human interference with the harmony of nature. Either out of omission or commission, humanity the world over has consistently exploited the environment, tampering with the orderliness and the sacredness of the biosphere and marine and aquatic lives. When nature reacts to this exploitation, the manifestations are evident in the form of epidemic, marine pollution, diseases, pestilence, famine and sometimes devastating storm damage resulting from overuse of resources and removal of the traditional protections of natural growth. In view of these issues, many nations of the world now engage in programme of collating and harvesting the vast pieces of information that can assist them in managing the environment in support of a harmonious relationship. Recently, the Nigerian government mapped out activities to encourage the environmental awareness of her citizens. As shown on the network news<sup>2</sup>, the Vice President of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar publicly planted a tree, and encouraged every Nigerian to plant at least fifty. This attitude is in line with the global wave of romance with the environment.

The enormous necessity of embracing and caring for the earth and all her wealth is the reason we are postulating the attitude of Yoruba religion (to the environment) to the Nigerian leadership and society. It is important to note that it is from the environment's rich resources that most human needs are met. These needs are ever changing and always on the increase, as populations grow. If we must meet these needs by exploiting natural resources, it must be done with dignity and in appreciation and protection of what the earth has to offer.

## **The Concept of Environment in Yoruba Religion**

The Yoruba are in constant consciousness and acknowledgement of God's divine lordship over the whole earth. They also believe that "man is a tenant on God's earth" (Idowu, 1978:206). This deeply ingrained belief, keeps them aware of the importance of their stewardship role in protecting the earth. The idea that God is the Creator of the Universe is held by the Monotheistic religions of the world. The argument that the Universe is created and designed by a Being is further supported and demonstrated by ontological and teleological arguments (the philosophical theories that all of creation is designed for a purpose). This Supreme Being is invisible, ubiquitous and immortal. The idea of the creation of the Universe is fundamental to the basis of the religious beliefs of Yoruba people. Respect for the environment has always been an integral part of these beliefs.

The Yoruba do not usually tamper with nature carelessly. Modernization has taken its toll on this aspect (just as it has affected all other aspects) of the Nigerian life. Yoruba believe that all the features in nature are created and placed there for a significant purpose, and that one of the sole aims is to create a healthy, sustaining and beautiful habitat for human beings. Some of these natural features are also to serve as abode for a category of the divinities (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:73). These are no more than personification of natural forces and phenomena. For instance, the myriad spirits (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:73) which populate the world of Yoruba belief are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, caves, trees, brooks, lakes, and thick forests. <sup>3</sup>The Osun groove in Oshogbo, whose forest and river

are forbidden for hunting and fishing is an example of the deep desire for care of the environment. The Oke-Ibadan (Ibadan Hill) is a place set apart for the spirit of the hill which the people believe offered them help in times of war and continues to pour its blessings on the people of Ibadan (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:73). This same traditional reverence operates among the Egba of Abeokuta, where the Olumo Rock is dedicated to the spirit of the rock believed to have offered the people assistance and protection in war days (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:73). Whatever natural manifestation the people consider to be the home of a spirit is usually revered as a sacred place, where people offer worship to a particular spirit. The environment and the people are in close relationship in Yoruba religion. The Yoruba life is at a critical junction (Some, 1999:125) where the natural meets the supernatural and where ancestors and the divine intersect with the humans.

Sometimes, the name of some divinities may tell of the natural phenomenon through which they manifest (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:74). The name Ala or Ani among the Igbo means "earth". The same word is used for the arch-divinity who is the earth-goddess. The word okun in Yoruba means "sea", but the goddess of the sea or ocean is also called olokun (the owner or lord of the sea). One important truth about Yoruba religion is that the divinities are the objective phenomena of the religion (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:75). Each of them oversees a particular aspect of the Yoruba life - this includes nature and the environment. This is the main reason why, in theory and in practice of Yoruba living, all of the creatures must be treated with respect and reverence. In a typical Yoruba setting, you may not just dig the ground for any purpose without due permission from the soil or the earth goddess<sup>3</sup>. This is in the belief that the soil possesses life of its own. The major reason the Igbo perform ceremonies to welcome the new yam, is in appreciation of mother earth for yielding her bowels to them for food. In the same vein, the Yoruba will not talk or chatter over food or during meal times for two reasons: respect for Mother Earth, and health reasons. The Yoruba believe that Mother Earth is so generous and kind to have opened up her bowels and yielded food for them to eat. And so in sacred appreciation, unnecessary discussions or matters that can wait for discussions are left until the meal is over. Secondly, they also do not talk during meals because they believe that it is unhealthy to do so. One could choke in the process.

This mode of respect for the abundance and generosity of the earth also informs Ijebu-Ode culture in which people are encouraged not to hit or beat the ground, trees, bushes and grasses in any way, as the inherent entities within may become angered and retaliate upon the offenders in their sleep. Rivers, streams, even rain water are treated with some level of respect. Indeed, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Yoruba religion has always been a highly environmentally respectful religion. Adherents of Yoruba religion are regularly involved in reforestation and preservation schemes, and their shrines are protectors of nature<sup>4</sup>, with some even doubling as nature preserves (as we have noted in the case of Osun groove). The religion has much to say about conservation. Throughout the ages, the Yoruba people are constantly learning what their faith has to say about preserving the environment. <sup>4</sup>That creation is most widely acknowledged as a work of God or a Supreme Creator in Africa, is clearly explained in the words attributed to Orunmila\*by the Yoruba:

*Orunmila fehinti o wo titi,  
Oni, "Eyin ero okun,  
Eyin ero osa  
Eyin o mo pe, ise olodumare tobi?*

Translation:

Orunmila learned back, gazing contemplatively He said, "You travelers to the sea,  
You travellers to the lagoon,  
Don't you perceive that the works of God are marvellous?"<sup>5</sup>

From the above, the Yoruba do not only appreciate the wondrous works of God, but they also strive to call the attention of the rest of the world to it. Come to think of it, do not the plants and animals perform most functions as humans? They feed themselves, grow, multiply, live and die. Humans might be at the apex of creation, but without these other creatures in the environment, the inspirations of faith, and human life are incomplete. Because of the spiritual presence that is palpable in the Yoruba community and the environment, any violation of nature's integrity requires rituals to appease the spirits that dwell in the environment. This view is so difficult for the West to grapple with (Some, 1999:22). Attempts to protect and preserve the environment in the West are often purely for aesthetic and sometimes economic reasons.

The problem however is that pro-environmental legislation often has adverse economic effects on special interests. The so-called politics of interest (Oelschlager, 1994:53), as distinct from the politics of the common good, triumphs for the obvious reason that a "much injured minority proves to be a more formidable lobbyist than the slightly benefited majority"<sup>6</sup>. This Western influence has devastated and choked most of our cities in Nigeria of their once beautiful habitat. This is not the case in the villages where life is green, and healthy. Indeed, longevity is a direct consequence of fresh and unpolluted environment<sup>7</sup> amongst the village dwellers. Furthermore, the Yoruba concept of the environment is all embracing; humans, animals, plants, and "non-living beings", form the entire human society or community. Therefore, for a peaceful co-existence of all of these beings, humans who consider themselves to be in charge must be careful not to provoke or destabilize their environment and their "co-tenants." For instance, the tiniest of insects is regarded as having rights to life. This is the reason why the ants are considered "aafa inu igbo" (the alfa of the forest).

The Yoruba are known to give them food items (grains) whenever they come across them in the forest or bush path. Ants are believed to bring good luck. We would also recall that in some parts of Yorubaland, motorists attempt to slow down motion whenever they come across ducks on the road. If by accident, a motorist runs over an animal, he or she must stop and put some money and other items on the dead animal, based on the belief that failure to do so may attract an automobile accident. In addition, the Yoruba also have a saying regarding the right to life of insects that says: \*Orunmila is the Yoruba divinity for wisdom. Orunmila oversees the Ifa corpus, oracle and divination. 5

*Yi ese re si apakan,  
Ma se te kokoro ni  
Kokoro ti iwo ko naani ni  
Olorun lo le da a*

Translation:

Side step your feet  
Do not kill that insect  
That insect you do not regard  
God also create.

These words may sound extreme, but this is the way of Yoruba indigenous belief and wisdom. A deeper analysis of all of the above will reveal that the admonitions are also in the interest of human beings. We would also remember that the chameleon is a sacred being that cannot just be harmed in any way in Yorubaland. We can multiply examples, but suffice to mention these few in support of the Yoruba attitude to the integrity of creation. In addition, some of the problems of flooding that we experience in Nigeria are due to people's disregard for nature. We are often quick to attribute flooding to natural disaster. Whereas, the indecent attitude of people dumping refuse along drainage channels when it rains, can cause flooding problem. Additionally, deforestation and building strips the land of vital protection from floods. A reawakening of the deep beliefs of Yoruba tradition could help to allay these problems. Another dimension to the interconnectedness between the Yoruba and their environment is the steps they take in rituals to correct perceived violations in nature.

The Yoruba see the physical world as a reflection of a more complex, subtler, and more lasting yet invisible entity of energy. It is as if they are the shadows of a vibrant and endless resourceful intelligence dynamically involved in a process of continuous self-creation. Nothing happens here that did not begin in that unseen world. If something in the physical world is experiencing instability, it is because its energetic correspondents have been experiencing instability (Some, 1999:161). The Yoruba understanding is that the material and physical problems that a person or community encounters are important only because they are an energetic message (Opoku, 1978:11) sent to this visible world. Therefore, people often engage that realm to try to repair whatever damages are being done there, knowing that if things are healed there, things will be healed here. Ritual is the principal tool used to approach that unseen world in a way that will rearrange the structure of the physical world and bring about material transformation. This is an integral part of the reasons why Yoruba people are very careful about their interaction and use of resources in nature - because these "corrective" rituals are also very expensive.

Past and Present Attempts at Sustaining Environmental Friendliness in Nigeria Historically, Nigerian governments have attempted, and continue to strive, to maintain a healthy and vibrant environment. This is evident in the establishment of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA). Part of the scheme of War Against Indiscipline, during Buhari and Idiagbon's regime was to admonish citizens to clean their communities every last Saturday of the month. But, despite an initial positive reaction, it soon ceased to be followed. Recently,

the present administration created a Ministry of Environment to provide attention and initiatives to caring for the environment, by encouraging every Nigerian to plant at least fifty trees. The current government in Kwara State is also paying attention to the cleanliness of the environment.

As much as these efforts are commendable, the government will need to do a lot more - especially in the area of respect for other creatures in the environment apart from humans, beautification, and regard for traditional values concerning sacred places. In this direction, we recommend a reawakening and application of traditional Yoruba religious attitude toward the earth's resources from the leadership of the Nigerian government, especially in the terms of reference of the Ministry of Environment. Caring for Environment; Implications for Leadership and Society in Nigeria The leadership of any society cannot afford to handle with levity issues of the environment if peace, hygiene and stability are to be achieved. The Nigerian government is still trying to grapple with the problem of flooding of the entire Lagos Island by the lagoon. It is common sense that most of the structures standing close to the sea should not have been constructed there.

To the Yoruba people, the government that gave permission for the erection of those corporate buildings ought to have known that the sea also requires some respect and the spiritual beings perceived as dwelling there deserved some measure of dignity. The lagoon might just be reacting to the encroachment of her territory. The insensitivity of the government, at that time to gratify some individual interests, has put the entire nation into restlessness now. Yoruba religion teaches that, with regard to human relation to society, their membership of a community is emphasized more than their individuality (Opoku, 1978:12). This is reiterated by John Mbiti who pointed out that "to be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involve participation in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community" (Mbiti, 1969:2). From most African perspectives, society is based more on obligation to the community than on individual rights. One assumes his/her rights in the exercise of his/her obligations, which makes society a chain of interrelationships. To most Yoruba people, it is not impossible that most problems that Lagos State faces might be connected with the wrath of the spirits of the lagoon.

Many feel that not only demolition, but also rituals of appeasement might be necessary. Secondly, Nigeria as an African country, should appreciate African values as regards the spiritual world. We are not suggesting that people should not erect structures anymore, but we advocate that natural habitat should no longer be treated with indifference in the interest of development. Permission, through consultation with the oracle, might be required before certain building projects or road construction works are embarked upon. The leadership of our society should be spiritually conscious toward the beliefs and practices of the people living in the land to be worked on. They must bear in mind that they are perceived as God's representatives to the community and inquire first from the unseen before undertaking any action on behalf of the society. The tree planting exercise is a crucial step to promoting the health of the community and re-connecting citizens to the environment.

The forest trees, for example, purify the gaseous wastes which animals, organisms, the sea, including humans, exhale, and at the same time release pure oxygen into the air that we inhale. The forest contributes to the environmental stabilization and protection, serving as sanctuary for all forms of wildlife that give humans their source of protein. Trees provide

shade from the scourge and the extreme heat of the sun in Nigeria. They serve as wind-breakers against buildings and protection from devastating floods. Many Africans do not just cut down trees. Certain trees are cut with permission from the oracle through prescribed rituals. This is because of the belief that God allowed trees to exist and they are therefore a sacred part of creation. Nigerians have now cut down most of their useful and valuable trees and now need to reforest many areas. It is important for us to strike a balance between tree felling and planting, since we also know the economic importance of some trees as revenue yielding. In addition, virtually all of the trees and plants in Nigeria serve as medicine, food, and shelter for humanity. These reasons strengthen the point on the creation of Ministry of Environment should include Africans who are knowledgeable and have spiritual understanding of the environment.

It is rumoured that the American government is now sending agents to buy all the land upon which Dogoyaro (Neem tree - *azadirachta indica*) is growing, having learned of the healing effects, and the values of this tree. Furthermore, thousands of plant species have been used for centuries in Yoruba traditional medicine<sup>10</sup> and many of them are known by medicine-men/women for their presumed pharmacological properties. These plants are naturally preserved and many are planted-around buildings for easy access. Thus nature, in her infinite wisdom and generosity, has provided us a whole storehouse of natural remedies to cure diseases, and sicknesses of humankind. These herbal trees and plants are never destroyed but preserved by the Yoruba. The Nigerian leadership should strive to support research into such benefits to seek the amelioration of some of the country's health related problems. The continued Niger Delta crises, apart from the high disregard for marine, aquatic, and human lives by Western oriented oil companies can easily be perceived as inciting the anger of the water spirits, whose dignity and right to privacy have been trampled upon.

We all know the high rate of loss of lives and properties, and instability and the environmental degradation the Delta crises have caused the Nigerian nation. We are certain that leadership in this part of the country cannot go to sleep with their two eyes closed. The Federal government is still at a cross roads in finding a lasting solution to it. All that might be required are some structural adjustments and of course the allowance of rituals, to appease the wrath of the gods, goddesses and aquatic spirits in these area for peace to reign. This admonition is so important in view of the material, time, resources, financial and human costs, when the order, sacredness and the integrity of the environment is tampered with, in these parts of the country. Furthermore, we are aware of the many inter-boundary wars that have arisen because of environmental degradation. Land disputes - over mineral resources or economically beneficial trees - have caused untold of strife and loss in the country.

This is why indigenous knowledge and wisdom is a serious consideration for peaceful leadership and society in Nigeria. On the other hand, the Nigerian leadership and society could emulate the disposition of Yoruba religion concerning the environment that the quality of the environment is dependent on how wisely it is used as their means of production, and how rationally they use the available natural resources that are capable of leading to greater advancement for all forms. As to the problem of science, technology and development in Nigeria, the key issue is how to go back to the traditional roots of respect and reverence for the innate divinity and sacredness of the natural world. The Western science, no doubt, provides the crucible for the modern technology which has caused environmental crises<sup>11</sup>. What is needed in Nigeria, therefore, is to develop and nurture indigenous science as never

before. Even before colonial rule, Africa had her own technological civilization. Without degrading nature, and the environment, the goldsmith of Ghana produced false gold through the processes not known to the West. The primordial Yoruba blacksmiths produced all the necessary tools and implements for farming and hunting without disturbing the natural creations in their environment.

The manner and how these great works of science and technology were attained without degrading the environment should be incorporated into the Nigerian educational curricula and textbooks for colleges, polytechnics, and universities with a significant bias for technical education. Another important point to note is that traditional Yoruba political leaders explore and exploit environmental resources through Yoruba spiritualists and medicine men/women for their own protection and safety. They do this by wearing amulets, rings, neck-chains, belts, vests and taking of medicinal food against gunshots, acid attack, assassination attempts, road and air accidents. It appeals therefore to logic and reasoning that if our political leaders found solace and protection in Yoruba traditional beliefs and practices, there is urgent need to consciously preserve our tradition in relation to the environment, as exemplified by the adherents of Yoruba religion who constantly interact with the environment to meet individual, communal and even national needs. They can also do this in preserving environment for profit yielding ventures, by creating tourist centres where nature presents its beauty and glory.

Tourism can bring people all over the world to appreciate the beauty of our environment. It will also reduce capital flight and conserve foreign exchange because leaders will not have to go to America or other countries in the West for relaxation, recreational or tourist visits. Nigerian leaders should exploit their abundant resources to advance indigenous science and technology by constituting a commission to study the many facets of indigenous technology - textiles, communication and health - by afrelists who use this knowledge for the advantage of individual, communal and societal progress and stability. Instead of repeating the damaging technologies of the West, political leaders would do well to develop their own resources in indigenous technologies to determine the course of Nigerians politically, economically and socially through their own satellite and forecasting system-Ifa oracle, as it is done in Florida and Ifa village in Oakland, America.

Conclusion Finally, adherents of Yoruba religion fully appreciate the fact that many human catastrophes have their origin in the misapplication of science and technology. Thus, according to their beliefs, they think of the ecosystem as reciprocating, to keep its action in balance. In this light, their activities are guided by the Orisa and the benevolent beings-They also appreciate the great difference between this Yoruba belief and practice and those of the West that nature could be tamed, and the environment controlled scientifically. Conclusively, Yoruba are of the view that if humanity wishes to create a better environment for itself, attain greater comfort as well as achieve appreciable advancement in civilization, humans should discontinue with the practice of wanton felling of trees, desist from uncontrolled breaking of rocks and mountains and end all forms of harshness to nature of any kind. Indeed, this is an era when care for the environment can no longer be considered as unnecessary. The care for the environment is therefore very important if we must have a peaceful, healthy and beautiful environment in harmony with the beliefs of the traditional Yoruba society.

## Notes and References

### A Notes

1 Reality Television - an aspect of Cable News Network programmes that x-rays people's encounter when nature decides to fight back.. 2 Nigerian Television Authority network news for 9:00 pm, on October 1st, 2003. 3 Oral interview. Pa Fagbemi Elegbede, 85 years, Oluorogbo compound, Ile-Ife, 16-04-03. 4 P. Ade Dopamu, "Mankind's Threatened Environment," an unpublished article, Ilorin, p.l. 5 Ibid, p.2. 6 William Ruckelshaus as American Chief Administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency, 1970 - 1973 and 1983 - 1984. 7 Oral interview, Pa Adenrele Sotimehin, 71 years, 6, Oshinubi Street, Ijebu-Ode, 21-04-03. 8 P. Ade Dopamu, p. 3. 9 Oral interview. Arch. Femi Kusa (also a herbal practitioner) 58 years, 2, Agba Dam road, Ilorin, 08-04-03. 10 P. Ade Dopamu, p.5. 11 Ibid.

### B References

Awolalu, J. O. and P. A. Dopamu (1979), *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Onibonoje Publishers. Idowu, E. B. (1978), *African Traditional Religion - A Definition*, London: SCM Press Ltd. Mbiti, J. (1969), *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann. Oelschlager, M. (1994), *Caring for Creation-An Ecumenical Approach to the Environment Crisis*, New Haven: Yale University Press. Opoku, K. A. (1978), *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra: FEB International Private Limited. Some, M. P. (1999), *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community*, New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.