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## **ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN YORUBA RELIGION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP AND SOCIETY IN NIGERIA**

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### **Introduction**

 world over is beginning to pay renewed attention to the issues of the environment, and Nigeria is no exception. Individuals, in different life-threatening situations<sup>1</sup>, have confessed how small they appeared to themselves, and how mighty Mother Nature was when "natural disaster" struck. Some of the incidences that posed as dangerous were consequences of human interference with harmony of nature. Either out of omission or commission, humanity the world over, has consistently devastated the environment, tampering with the orderliness and the sacredness of the biosphere, the marine and aquatic lives. When nature decides to react, the manifestations are evident in form of epidemic, flood, marine pollution, diseases, pestilences, famine and sometimes, terrible storms.

In view of these, nations of the world now engage in programmes of collating and harvesting the vast pieces of information that can assist them in managing the environment for harmonious relationship with it. Recently, the Nigerian government mapped out activities that will encourage her citizens to be environmental friendly and also treat it with some measure of respect. As shown on the network news<sup>2</sup>, the Vice President of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar 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 enormity of the necessity to embrace and care 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 all human needs are met. These needs are ever changing and always on the increase. If we must meet these needs by recourse to nature, it must be done with dignity and in appreciation for what she 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 fact keeps them in regular check that they ought to be careful how this earth is treated. The idea that God is the Creator of the Universe is held by most 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 are designed for a purpose). This Being is invisible, ubiquitous and immortal. The idea of the creation of the Universe and all that is there is fundamental to the basis of the religious beliefs of Yoruba people. Respect for the environment has always been with them. 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. All the features in nature are created and placed there for a significant purpose. The sole aim is to create a healthy 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 the Yoruba, are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, caves, trees, brooks, lakes, and thick forests.

The Osun groove in Oshogbo, whose forest and river are forbidden for hunting and fishing, is an example of the care for the environment. The Oke-Ibadan (Ibadan Hill) is a place set apart for the spirit of the hill which the people believe had offered them help in the war days and continues to pour his blessings on the people of Ibadan (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:73). The same thing operates among the Egba of Abeokuta, where the Olumo Rock is dedicated to the spirit of the rock

believed to have offered them assistance in war days (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:73). Whatever people consider to be the home of a spirit is usually set apart as a sacred place, and there, 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 the 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 compartment of the Yoruba life, and this includes nature and the environment. This is the main reason why all of the creation in the environment cannot be treated with disrespect. In a typical Yoruba setting, you do not just dig the ground for any purpose without due permission from the soil<sup>3</sup>. This is in the belief that the soil has life of its own. The major reason the Igbo will do some ceremonies to welcome the new yam, is in appreciation of mother earth for yielding her bowel to them for food. This mode of respect informs Ijebu-Ode culture in which people are encouraged not to hit or beat the ground, trees, bushes and grasses anyhow because they might get angry and deal with them in their sleep. Rivers, streams, even rainwater are treated with some level of respect. Indeed, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Yoruba religion has always been a highly environmental friendly 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 reserves (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.

That creation is most widely acknowledged work of God 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?"

Orunmila leaned back,  
gazing contemplatively  
he said, "You travellers 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 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 (visible and invisible) in the environment, the human life is incomplete. Because of the spiritual presence that is palpable in the Yoruba community and the environment, any violation of nature's integrity (i.e. respect for nature) requires some rituals to appease some of 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 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>

Furthermore, the Yoruba concept of the environment is all embracing; the humans, animals, plants, and the "non-living beings", form the entire human society or community. Therefore, for a peaceful co-existence of all of these beings, the 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. They are known 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 a duck, he or she must stop and put some money and other items on the dead duck. Failure to do this may attract automobile accident. In addition, the Yoruba also have a saying regarding the right to life of insects that says:

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

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

These may sound ridiculous, but this is the way of indigenous knowledge 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 killed anyhow in Yorubaland. We can multiply examples, but suffice to mention these few in support of the Yoruba attitude to the integrity of creation which by extension is the environment.

In addition, some of the problems of flooding that we experience in Nigeria are due to people's disregard for nature. We are quick to, most



of the time, attribute flooding as a natural disaster. Whereas, the indecent attitude of people dumping refuse along drainage channels when it rains, can cause flooding problem.

Another dimension to the interconnectedness between the Yoruba and their environment is the step they take in rituals to correct a violation in nature. The Yoruba see the physical world as a reflection of a more complex, subtler, and more lasting yet invisible entity called 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 go to 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 why they are usually very careful about what they do with nature, because rituals are also expensive. Furthermore, as an appendage, it is so crucial that the leadership of any society or community should strive to advocate and maintain the sanity of the environment.

#### **Past and Present Attempts at Sustaining Environmental Friendliness in Nigeria**

The Nigerian government has attempted in the past, and is still trying at maintaining 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 keep the environment clean every last Saturday of the month. But it soon became comatose. Recently, the present administration created a Ministry of Environment, and is also giving attention 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 of the environment and regard for traditional values concerning sacred places. In this direction, we recommend Yoruba religious attitude to the leadership of the Nigerian government, especially in the terms of reference of the Ministry of Environment.

### **Caring for the 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 must 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 there. The government that gave permission for the erection of those corporate buildings ought to have known that the sea also require some respect and the spiritual beings dwelling there deserve 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 involves participation in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community" (Mbiti, 1969:2). Society is based more on obligation than on individual rights. One assumes his/her rights in the exercise of his/her obligations, which makes society a chain of interrelationship. It is not impossible that most problems that Lagos State faces might not be unconnected with the wrath of the spirits of the lagoon. Rituals, and some demolition 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 disdain. Permission through consultation with the oracle might be required before certain building projects or road construction works are embarked upon. When the leadership of our society is spiritually conscious, and also bear in mind that they are God's representative to the community, they will enquire first from the unseen before taking any action on behalf of the society.

The tree planting exercise is so crucial to the health of the community. 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<sup>8</sup>. 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 heat of the Sun. They serve as windbreakers for buildings. The Africans do not just cut down trees. Certain trees are cut with some permission from the oracle through prescribed rituals. This is because God allowed trees to exist. Nigerians have cut down most of their useful and valuable trees. We need to plant some more. 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. The point we are trying to make is that, tree felling should not be done arbitrarily or with reckless abandon.

In addition, virtually all our trees and plants in Nigeria serve as medicine, food, and shelter for humanity. These reasons then strengthen the point on the creation of Ministry of Environment with Africans who are knowledgeable and have spiritual understanding of the environment, to head it. It is rumoured that the American government is now sending agents to buy<sup>9</sup> all the land upon which *Dogoyaro* (Neem tree - *azadirachta indica*) is growing, having known 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 roles. 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 nature remedies to cure diseases, and sicknesses of humankind. These herbal trees and plants are never destroyed but preserved by the Yoruba. The Nigerian leadership need to learn from this example, to ameliorate some of her health related problems.

The continued Delta crises, apart from the high disregard for marine, aquatic and human lives by the western oriented oil companies, might not be far from 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 the instability 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 crossroad to finding a lasting solution to it. All that might be required for all we care, might be some structural adjustments, and of course 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 inter-boundary wars that have arisen because of environmental degradation. Land disputes – either over mineral resources or economic trees – have caused a lot of stress in this 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 need to 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 in 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. 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. Ever before the 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, road and air accidents to mention but a few. It appeals therefore to logic and reasoning that if our political leaders found solace and protection in our environment, there is urgent need to consciously preserve our environment as exemplified by the adherents of Yoruba religion that 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 will bring people all over the world to appreciate the beauty of their environment. It will also reduce capital flight and conserve foreign exchange because their leaders will not have to go to America or the west for relaxation, recreational or tourist visits.

Nigerian leaders should exploit their abundant resources to advance their indigenous science and technology by constituting a commission to study their indigenous technology in textile, communication and health care system by afrelists who have used this for the advantage of individual, communal and societal progress and stability. Instead of copying irrelevant technology from the west and America, their political leaders should develop their own indigenous technology to know what is going to happen to 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, 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 that of the West who hold ideas and feeling that nature could be tamed, and the environment controlled scientifically.

Conclusively, they 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 just as we had in the prehistoric traditional Yoruba society.

### 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 at 9:00 pm, on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 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, which the author made available to me. It is still a work in progress, p.1.
- 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.*

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