

Religion and Nature in Yorùbá Oral Poetry: A Study in Ecocriticism

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Abstract

In Africa, oral poetry is designed among other uses, to evoke proper spiritual perception and action on religion and nature. However, an eco-poetic study of religion and nature in Yorùbá literary criticism seems to be scanty. The objective of this paper therefore, is to examine the role of oral poetry in shaping religion and nature-related perceptions and practices from the point of view of the Yorùbá society. The research methodology is descriptive and content analysis of data. Data were collected from adherents of indigenous religion, oral poets and the selected poems were subjected to analysis within the theory of Eco-criticism, a theory that gives dynamic signal generated by concern for the health of the earth and its resources. The major finding was that oral poetry such as ifá literary corpus, praise-poetry, ìjálá chant and proverbs among others are used to inculcate the consciousness of one's responsibility to maintain harmony with the cosmos. The paper concluded that oral poetry promotes scientific understanding of religion and nature but man should reduce dangerous activities, which destroy the earth.

Keywords: *Religion, Nature, Ecocriticism, Oral poetry, and Cultural ecology*

Introduction

African literary critics have over the years examined the relationship between literature and other forms of social consciousness, such as morality, philosophy, and psychology among others. However, a more conscious insertion of the study of religion and nature in literary criticism seems to be very recent. Slaymaker (2012) observes that anthologies, reviews, and summaries of Black African literature and criticism reflect the general absence of ecocriticism and literature of the environment and that despite the rapid and global environmentalist literary growth in the 1990s, literary criticism of nature is notoriously behind the time in Africa. He explains further that: the period 1987 – 89 may be considered to mark only the inception of interest in ecolit and ecocrit in Black African literary circles and “that Niyi Osundare is the best example of a writer, critic and academic whose creative energy is focused on environmental and ecological themes, which are evident in his 1986 collections of poems *The Eyes of the Earth*” (p. 690).

While we do not dispute the greatness of Niyi Osundare as a prolific writer, a critic of high standard and an activist in environmental issues, he is not the first poet of nature in Yorùbá society. Many traditional hunters and chanters were very close to nature and they have composed many ìjálá chants on nature as we shall see later. So the themes that have to do with the physical environment had been in African oral literature since time immemorial, long before 1987 which Slaymaker located as the inception of nature literature or literature of the environment in Africa.

Bellarsi (2009) has stated correctly in my view that no human society has historically existed completely independently from nature, be it at the material level or the one of cultural representation (pp.78-84). The Yoruba people have voiced their concerns about the natural world in their oral literature from ancient times to the present. What is

recent apparently is the combination of religion, nature and literature in Yorùbá literary scholarship. Apparently, Yoruba literary scholars are yet to focus their critical attention on religion and nature vis-a-vis the relationship between the physical environment and their oral poetry. This effort is set out to fill that gap. The study would throw light on the influence of religion and poetry on the peoples' perception on the environment and its management. An ecosensitive reading of literature, according to Ragaisiene (2007), would "expand the role of literature to include not only aesthetic/moral but also social and political and perhaps environmental functions" (p. 101).

The objectives of this study therefore were: to examine the place of Yorùbá indigenous religious beliefs in shaping nature-related perception and practices; analyze some selected oral poetry and state how such poetry are used in the management of nature and to project the future role of Yorùbá oral poetry in the face of science and technology. The research methodology is descriptive and content analysis of the selected Yorùbá oral poetry, namely *Eṣe – ifá*, *Oríkì*, *Ìjálá* and *Òwe*.

Ecocriticism is functional in Yoruba society rather than limited to academic discipline in literature. It is a discipline of cultural ecology which in the opinion of Estok (2001) is more than simply "the study of nature or natural things in literature, but a commitment to effecting change in order to contribute material practices in material worlds" (p. 220). The interactions of the people with the environment are always reflected in Yoruba oral literature.

Yoruba oral poetry is the storehouse of cultural values and moral codes of the Yoruba society. Oral poetry for example uses special imaginative construct to entertain and instruct. Those structures of words in oral poetry especially *isàré* are more than mere counters of social intercourse or mere aesthetic ornaments; they are living poems by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined and humanized.

The scope of this paper is limited to the analysis of data collected from *ḗṣe-ifá*, *òwe*, *oríkì* and *ìjálá* genres; while the discussion on environmental management is restricted to the bioticsphere i.e. plants and animals. I examined how the Yoruba manage their biotic environment especially forests, wild life, and urban governance through the selected chants.

Eṣe – ifá (Ifá Literary corpus) and Oríkì (Praise Poetry) in Forest Management

Deep appreciation of nature constitutes an important part of the content of Ifa literary corpus and since it is believed that the poems of *Ifá* are directly from Olódùmarè, the import of each is taken as an article of faith. The vivid description and appreciation of many ordinary objects and creatures of nature, such as plants, animals, birds and insects and other biotic materials in Ifá literary corpus show the great importance the Yorùbá people attach to created things of nature. It also shows the high capacity of the Yorùbá for the appreciation of nature in all its aspects. The forest and all that exist in the forest figure prominently in Ifá literary corpus and praise poetry (*ḗṣe- ifá* and *oríkì*).

A forest is a plant community dominated by trees. It is a very valuable bionatural resource that yields a good variety of goods and services. It forms an integral part of the vegetation of any given society. In Yoruba society, sanctuary forests (*ìgbó orò*) or *Igbó àìwò* (forbidden forest) were many in the past. In such forests, economic trees such as iroko (*Chlorophora excelsa*) *ogánwó*, *agba*, *òmò*, *akòko*, *iyá* etc and other precious species of plants and flowers usually used for medicinal ingredients are preserved and managed.

There is nothing that exists in the forest that *ese-ifá* does not talk about; animals, wild animals and harmless animals, plants, trees, insects, birds of different species. Among the trees prominent in *ifá* –literary corpus is *irókò* (*Chlorophora excelsa*). *Ìròkò* is the most precious West African hard tree used for roofing and furniture. It is a tall, hard and imposing tree, which grows wild in the forest. *Ese-ifá* tells of the distinctiveness of the *irókò* tree and why the tree is preserved in the forest. In *ifá* literary corpus: *Òwónrín Méjì* the following poem is rendered:

Agada-ngba Òsùmàrè
A díá fún Ìròkò Ìgbò
Nígbà tí n jẹ láàárín òtá
Àwọn òtá ní n da Ìròkò Ìgbò láàmú.
Ló bá méèjì kẹ́ta,
Ó looko aláwo
Wọn ní ẹbọ ni kí ó wá rú
Ó sì rú u
Ìgbà tó rúbọ tán
Ni Èsù bá lẹ́pẹ àwọn àgbẹ wá
Pé kí wọn máa sán igbó
Tí irókò n bẹ nínú rẹ
Gbogbo àwọn igi tí n bá irókò sọtá
Ni àwọn bẹ lulẹ
Ìgbà tí wọn dé idí Ìròkò
Èsù ní wọn ò gbọdò gé e
Nítórí pé igi abàmí ni
Ó ní bẹ̀ẹ̀ gégé ni awo dún wí
Agada-ngba Òsùmàrè
A díá fún irókò Ìgbò
Nígbà tí n jẹ nírógbun òtá
Igbó kì í dí gángán
Kéni má mọrókò
Mo yagada-ngba Òsùmàrè

(Abimbola, 1976, p.229)

The giant Rainbow
Performed *Ifa* divination for *Ìròkò* of the city of *Ìgbò*
When he was living amidst enemies,
Enemies were threatening *Ìròkò* of *Ìgbò*.
He therefore added two cowry shells to three,
And went to an *Ifa* priest for divination
He was asked to perform a sacrifice
And he performed it
After he had performed the prescribed sacrifice
Èsù went and called farmers
To come and clear the forest
Inside which *irókò* was.
All the trees that were hostile to *Ìròkò*
Were felled down by the farmers
When they got to the foot of *Ìròkò*
Èsù commanded that they should spare him
Because he was a special tree
He said that was exactly what his *Ifa* priests had predicted
The giant Rainbow
Performed *Ifá* divination for *Ìròkò* of the city of *Ìgbò*
When he was living amidst enemies

The forest cannot be so thick,
The forest cannot be so impenetrable,
As to render impossible the recognition of *Ìrókò*
I have become the giant Rainbow. (Abimbola, 1976, p. 230)

In the text, we see a link between God, man and the nature. *Ìrókò* tree is used in the poem as a symbolic representation of all trees of great importance to the Yorùbá people. Other trees categorized as sacred include: *odán, osè, ògánwó, àràbà, arère, akòko, Òmò, agbigba, òpè, pèrègún, iyeyè, apá and àbo* among numerous others. *Ìrókò* tree is believed to be the king of all trees and it is usually preserved for long in the forest. Thick forests with *ìrókò* trees are commonly reserved and called: *ìgbó ìrókò* (the forests of *ìrókò* trees). Such forests are kept as heritage sites. They are neither cultivated for farming nor used for other commercial purposes. They are used as groves and shrines for some deities and usually forbidden for non-initiates. Only the priests and elderly members of the adherents of the deity could enter the forest at a specific time of the year to offer sacrifice or perform specific rituals. From the ecological point of view, such forests constitute nature reserves whose vegetation is primary and where the ecosystem has not been disturbed by human interference. The *ìgbó ìrókò* phenomenon is an unmitigated effort at environmental conservation and protection.

There are many poems in Ifá literary corpus that describe and connect the existence of animals, plants, birds, insects, reptiles to *Olódùmarè* and how humans should relate with them. For example, not all the animals must be killed for consumption; those earmarked for human's consumption must be killed in a specific manner. When a duck is accidentally killed, ritual must be made immediately by putting coins in its mouth to avert the wrath of the gods. A chameleon is regarded as sacred and it must not be deliberately ill-treated or killed anyhow. The Yorùbá elders say:” *Bòmòdé sòkò lu alágemọ kò ní kú, kò ní rùn, á pòn láşọ bí àparò* (If a young person stoned a chameleon, he would neither die or smell, he would live an impoverished life). Ifá literary corpus gives description of insects, the harmless ones and the dangerous insects and how human should treat them. For example, locust is dangerous to green vegetation, cockroach is harmful while butterfly is seen as harmless and useful to flowers and trees. The harmful insects and birds should be eliminated while the harmless ones should be preserved.

Oríkì is another important genre of Yorùbá oral literature. There is hardly any genre of Yorùbá oral literature that does not contain one or more *oríkì*. Barber (1979) defines *oríkì* as a genre which is composed of attributions or appellations, collections of epithets, pitty or elaborated, which are addressed to a subject. According to Barber (1979), *oríkì orílẹ̀* do not trace genealogies, nor do they revolve around the notion of lineage founder, rather they tell each individual where he or she belongs in the community: they establish the individual on the social map and give him or her a background without which he or she would scarcely exist as a social being (p. 166).

Nothing exists in the Yoruba environment without its own *oríkì*. Apart from *oríkì orílẹ̀* (lineage poetry) which traces people's origin, there are other types of *oríkì*, namely *oríkì àmútòrunwá*, (*oríkì* from birth), *oríkì inagijẹ* (alias or appellations) *oríkì bọ̀rọ̀kinní* (*oríkì* for dignitaries – kings, heroes warriors and honorable men and women etc.), *oríkì òrìşà* (for deities) and all elements of nature such as water, air, fire, wind, hills, rivers, and other living and non living things have their own *oríkì*. In fact, names of significant trees, birds, or animals are used as praise names and converted to surnames e.g. *Àlùkò* (crimson

Touraco; *àjànàkú* (Elephant) *Ìrókò* (*Ìrókò* tree; *chlorophora excelsa*) (Adeboye and Alaba, 2003, pp. 100 – 111). The Yorùbá are so close to their environment that some names given to their children have derivation from the natural environment: hills, rivers, and even animals. For example, *Omişèyí* (River has done this), *Òkètúyì* (the hill has honour), *Òkèwándé* (the hill has come to me), *Òkèşèyí* (the hill has done this), *Igbókòyí* (the bush rejects this), *Òşuntókun* (*Òşun* river is like the ocean), *Ewéjé* (Leaf has medicinal potency) and *Èkùngbà* (lion has agreed).

Lineage *oríkì* is used to preserve the family from one generation to the other. There are chants put in place to remind the subjects of the need to protect the heritage site. The sanctuary forest is forbidden to those who are not members of the lineage or town. Even if the “Sons of the Soil” want to use some medicinal plants or flowers in the forest, they must get the express permission of the elders. Visitors are not allowed access to the site.

Accessibility to the forest is either once in a year or twice depending on the time of the festival attached to the forest. An example of *oríkì orílẹ̀* used for the presentation of the sanctuary forest is as follows:

Omọ onígbó gogoro,
Àjòjì- ò- gbọdọ wọ
Àjòjì kì í wọ gbórò níkòlé nílẹ̀ Arólú
Àjòjì tó bá wọ gbórò baba mi
Èbọ ni wọn fí í şe.
Olu iwere
Oota eluju
Igi gogoro ti i dowo
Ìrókò ni mo mò ni papa
Àwòmójú ni sọyà í wàràbà.

The offspring of the owner of high and thick forest.
A stranger is forbidden of entry
No stranger enters the sanctuary forest in Ikole in the lineage of Arolu
Any stranger that enters my father’s sanctuary forest
He becomes a victim of sacrifice
The head of the forest
The seat of the savannah
The thick trees that bear money
I know iroko tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*)
The sawyers look at the Araba tree in vain. (Mine translation)

The eco-consciousness in the content of the example given is clear. The Yoruba environment is spiritual, economic and political. The forest serves as the sanctuary for spiritual growth. The forest is thick and impenetrable and initiation into the passage of rites is consummated in the forest. Future leaders receive indigenous wisdom and knowledge of the tradition in such *igbó gogoro àjòjì ò gbọdọ wọ* (High and thick forest that aliens are not allowed to enter). The forest is also a site of economic development, which must be guided and protected. The poem portrays the forest as life-giving natural forms that sustain human development. The sustainable management of the forest is based mainly on the ecology of its predominant tree species. The Yoruba people are aware that there are certain tree species that hardly thrive if grown in mono-cultural plantation. A good example is the *ìrókò* tree (*Choloraphora excelsa*). Other species trees like *àràbà*, *ọgánwó* and *akòko* among others are planted and preserved in the forest for years.

The *oríkì orílẹ̀* example is not only to motivate the people or praise their ancestors but also to stimulate eco-consciousness in the hearers. The message of the poem includes the following: that they are the offspring of sanctuary forest and they should conserve biological diversity, ecosystem and habitats; they should sustain the potential yield of their environmental benefits and conserve the natural resources. The people should therefore manage the forest by not allowing àjòjì (which may mean strangers, aliens, colonizers and hijackers) to extract timber especially àràbà and *iroko* trees. The planting and replanting of species should not be compromised with àjòjì (strangers), during festivals just as cutting roads and pathways through the forest is forbidden.

Bush burning in sanctuary forest is a sacrilege so as to preserve *igi gogoro tii dowo* (The thick forest that bears money). The poem stimulates the hearers to always conserve heritage resources and promote aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values of their forest.

Ìjálá Chant and Proverbs in Wildlife Management

Ijala is the Yoruba hunters' poetry in praise of Ògún, the violent, god of hunting, warfare and all iron implements. Ijala chanters are usually hunters and and/or offsprings of hunters. Among the Yoruba, the hunter connotes manhood, as is regarded as male or immense physical strength and dauntless courage. The hunters are closer to nature than other people. They know the names of leaves, trees, birds, insects, flowers and all manners of plants and animals. So the contents of Ijala include the experiences of the hunters with all kinds of animals, plants, flowers and nature generally while on hunting expedition. The ways and manner the Yoruba people manage their biotic environment especially plants and animals are always portrayed in ijala chants. A close study of ijala chants show how the Yoruba people study their environment and manage it for their benefits

The first manifestation of oral poetry in environmental management is the extensive use of Ìjálá chants in the preservation of ecosystems among the Yoruba people. Ìjálá chants make numerous references to heritage sites. Heritage sites cover areas such as sanctuary forests (*Igbó-orò*) hills, rivers and plant gardens in which the exploration of the biotic resources is considered a taboo and which in fact should not be contemplated. Even though the sites have spiritual or religious undertones, the reality is that the sites provide the best opportunity for biological diversity, ecological interactions and protection of endangered species.

Wildlife as used here refers to the broad spectrum of wild fauna we have in nature. It excludes livestock but includes all other animals such as mammals, birds, reptiles and invertebrates. Wildlife is an important bionatural resource in Nigeria today. In the pre-colonial Yoruba Society, wild animals were not kept in zoological or biological gardens as we have them today. However, some forests were located for specific wildlife, such as forests of elephant (*igbó elérin*) forest of wild animals (*igbó eran gágá*) where lions, leopards, tigers, antelopes and duikers were found. There were also streams or pools of fishes, which were sacrileges for strangers to go.

The Yoruba people were then mostly farmers and hunters. They were very close to nature by virtue of their professional calling. The hunters would compose *ijálá* chants not only for celebration of their past exploits but for different animals, insects, fishes and plants based on their good understanding of the ecology of the wildlife and population dynamics of the wildlife species. They observe the minutest details about animals and reflect all these

in ìjálá chant. The ìjálá chant shows the keen observation of the people about the diverse species of wildlife and their habitats.

According to the Society of American Foresters (SAF), a wildlife habitat is the unit area of environment in which an animal population lives and has established its domain or series of territories (1). It includes a forest habitat, grass habitat, marsh and aquatic habitats. Ìjálá chants are full of all the description that can be identified with wildlife habitats, eating habit, physical description, strengths and fruitfulness of the animals. There is hardly any animal known to the Yoruba people without its name being mentioned in ìjálá chant. The *oríkì* (praise poetry) of the elephant is loaded in ìjálá chant and it gives full description of the environmental knowledge of the Yoruba people about the animal – physical and social nature of the elephant, habitat and value. For example, a German researcher Beier (2002) translates an ìjálá chant on elephant this way:

Elephant, a spirit in the bush,
Elephant who brings death.
He swallows a whole palm fruit, thorns and all
He tramples down the grass with his mortar legs
Wherever he walks, the grass is forbidden to stand up again.
He tears a man like an old rag, and hangs him up in the tree.
With his single hand, he pulls two palm trees to the ground.
If he had two hands, he would tear the heaven to shreds.
An elephant is not a load for an old man- nor for a young man either.
(Beier, 2002, p.103).

From the ìjálá chant, we can see the physical description of the elephant, its enormous strength, eating habit and its habitat. The elephant is called a “spirit in the bush who brings death” because nothing can stand in its way. The hunter has to make sacrifice and appease its spirit before venturing to shoot an elephant. The elephants were rarely killed in the past and thus preserved but now, due to modernization and depletion of thick forests in Yorùbá land, elephants have drastically diminished, if not extinct.

Ìjálá chant also gives detailed description of dangerous reptiles, such as snakes, vipers, cobra and python. While lion is regarded as the king of all animals, the python is regarded as the king of the snakes. The python is described in Ìjálá as follows:

Swaggering prince, giant among snakes
They say python has no house,
I heard it a long time ago and I laughed and laughed and laughed
For who owns the ground under the lemon grass?
Who owns the ground under the elephant grass?
Who owns the swamp- father of rivers?
Who owns the stagnant pool- father of waters?
Because they never walk hand in hand, people say that snakes only walk singly
But just imagine, suppose the viper walks in front,
The green mamba follows, and the python creeps rumbling behind-
Who will be brave enough to wait for them? (Beier, 2002, p.111)

The poet opens with a statement of his own knowledge of the python while many non-hunters are ignorant of the abode of the python, he knows and goes on to locate where a python can be found which are “under the lemon grass”, “elephant grass”, “swamp and stagnant pool of waters”. In modern day Botanical garden, the habitat of the python is

usually created to resemble the one described by that *ijálá* chant. The python creeps rumbling because of its length. It is treated as a sacred animal and usually preserved.

Proverb (Òwe)

Proverb (Òwe) is classified as oral poetry, along with *ofò* (incantation), *àlò* (riddles) and *oríkì* (praise poetry). Proverb is considered the horse of speech through which meaning is carried to its destination. (*Òwe leṣin òrò, òrò leṣin òwe, bórò bá sọ̀nù òwe la fì í wa*) meaning that proverb is the horse of speech; speech is the horse of proverb; when speech is lost, we use proverb to trace it. Apart from being the “horse of speech”, proverbs in Yorùbá society constitute the unwritten constitution of the people that guide them on their interaction with fellow human beings and the natural environment. There are numerous proverbs that connect the existence of animals, birds, insects, and other living beings to Olódùmarè (God in Yorùbá belief) and any instruction from Him is usually taken with faith. For example, the following proverbs connect the biotic beings to God:

1. Kò sèni tí èkúté ilé ó fi ejò ológbò sùn ju Olódùmarè lẹ
(There is no one the rat can make a complaint against the cat to, except the Almighty God)
2. M̀arìwò kò wojú ẹ̀nikan à fi ojú Ọ̀lórùn
(The palm front does not look unto anyone except God)
3. Ọ̀lórùn m̀oìwà tí ẹ̀ṣinṣin yóòhù kí ó tó dá aṣọ̀ rẹ̀ pénpé
(God knew the nature of the fly before it created it with a shot feather)
4. Ọ̀lórùn àdàbà ló dá ẹ̀yẹlé, ẹ̀yẹlé n sunlé, àdàbà n sunta
(The God that created the dove created the pigeon, the pigeon lives in the house while the dove lives in the bush)
5. Ọ̀lórùn ló gbà fún m̀arìwò tó fi n gbénú ẹ̀gún ṣọ̀lá
(It is God that allows the palm front to flourish among the thorns)
6. Ọ̀lórùn Ọ̀ba ní gbèbí ewúré, òun náà ní wo ọ̀mọ̀ ẹ̀
(It is God the king that helps the goat to deliver its child, and he cares for it)
7. Ọ̀rìṣà ló dirí ẹ̀wà fákùkọ̀
(It is the divinity that plaits the cock's hair)
8. Àti dádé kinniún kì í ṣe ẹ̀yìn Olódùmarè
(The kingship of the lion is not without God's approval)

From the few examples given above, the proverbs tie the existence of the rats, insects, animals, trees and birds among others to God. The treatment of living and non-living things by the Yorùbá people is based on the instructions of Olódùmarè through proverbs. There are some animals forbidden for human consumption and these are reflected in the following proverbs:

1. Kò sèni tí pagún, kò sèni tí jẹ̀ igún kò sèni tí figún bórí
(No one kills the vulture, no one eats the vulture, no one uses it for sacrifice)
2. Ki ni babaláwo n wá níkùn eèrà?
(What does a diviner look for in the intestine of an ant?)

3. Ọ̀pòlọ̀ yan fanda lójú elégùúsí, elégùúsí ò gbòdò gbaá a láta
(The toad jumps anyhow in front of pepper soup maker without fear,
it cannot be used for pepper soup)
4. Kékeré orí ejò kò ẹ̀ sán mọ̀yán
(The head of a snake however small it is cannot be swallowed with pounded- yam.

From the perspective of natural science, animals have classes, and this, according to Adejumo (2009) is reflected in their relationship. The relationship between the various classes of animals is portrayed in the following typical proverbs:

1. Kàkà kí kinníún ẹ̀kápò ẹ̀kùn, onfíkálukú a yá ẹ̀dẹ̀ tiẹ̀ lótòtòtò ni;
(The lion cannot be the carrier of the tiger's hunting-bag; rather,
they will hunt separately)
2. Bájá bá fojú kan ẹ̀kùn, á pa lóló;
(If adog sights a tiger, it lies low)
3. Ìrònú ìkookò ni yóò pajá;
(The thought of the wolf can make the dog to tremble to death)
4. Bí àgùntàn bá sọ̀nù lágbo ikookò, ẹ̀rẹ̀ké ìkookò ni ká wá sí;
(If the sheep is lost in the assembly of wolves, check the cheeks of the wolf)
5. Àwòdì gbómọ̀ àgbébò, àgbébò múra ijà, ẹ̀ iran baba adiyẹ̀ kan pa àşá rí?
(A hawk captured a hen's chick and the hen prepares for fight; has his forebear ever
conquered a hawk?)

Certain features of the animals mentioned in the proverbs can be observed. The lion, tiger and wolf, are carnivorous animals while the hawk is also carnivorous, the dog and the sheep are domestic animals. The eating habit and habitat of each animal, bird, and reptile are portrayed in the cited faunal proverbs.

Science, African Religion and Nature in Yorùbá Oral Poetry

Scientific knowledge about the environment is said to be universal. According to Olajubu (2003, p. 292), the distinguishing element of African science lies in its methodology. While Western science uses chemicals, test tubes, laboratory and now computers, African science uses the instrument of metaphysics, psycho-analysis, psychotherapy, divination, religious/traditional beliefs and customs. Western science is modern in African societies. The term modern and modernity have been widely used in the expression of two contrasting perspectives. They either suggest that certain new habits, practices or world views are inferior to those of ancient, medieval or classical times and origin or they claim the superiority of these habits, practices, or worldviews, ascribing a positive meaning to their being new, up to date, fashionable, progressive or evolutionary perspective that the emphasis has been on "current" developments and on "the present". The term "modernity" according to Giddens (2002, p. 10) encapsulates the progress of societies from the primitive civilization which evolved at a modern age characterized by industrialization and capitalism, culminating in the current, post modern state of globalization which shapes contemporary society with ever increasing momentum.

Conditions of scientific modernity are apparent in every facet of life in Africa: politics, economy, social life, religion, education, communication and literature among others. The harbingers of Western education are Christianity and European colonialism among others. The expansion of knowledge and technology through improved telecommunications here and there have changed the form and structure of some public sacred spaces like *Igbó ìgbàlẹ̀* (grooves) and other shrines as a consequence of the demands of modern living. The fact is that many of the shrines, sacred forests, and abodes of wild animals, trees, plants, flowers and green vegetations have been occupied either by churches, mosques or industrial buildings.

The two foreign religions namely Islam and Christianity have for long subjected African traditional religion to misrepresentation and stigmatization to the extent that adherents of African religion are afraid of having anything to do with their root again. In 1927, for example, *Erinmope Ekiti*, the town's *Igbó Ifá* was occupied by the St. John's Anglican Church. In 1967, the traditional *Igbó Ìgbàlẹ̀* was effectively occupied after series of battle by the Cherubim and Seraphim Church with the adherents of African religion. The *Igbo Awo* in *Igogo Ekiti* has become a location for road while "Igbó Ògún" in *Otun* has been reduced to the town's market. The green environment, the thick forest and the various species of animals disappeared and the sacred land, hills and mountains were crushed for roads and new buildings. What happened in *Ekiti* happened in other Yorùbá towns and villages in the 19th century during the spread of Christianity.

The consequence of stigmatization of traditional African Religion is that most people connected to the Christian or Islamic religions have renounced their membership of the traditional religion. They also renounced or changed their names completely. Ifájobí (Ifá has hand in his birth) now bears *Oluwajóbi* (The Lord has hand in his birth), *Abókèdé* (He comes through the hill) now calls himself *Abólúdé* or *Aboluwadé* (He comes through the Lord). Most parents especially the educated ones are no longer versed in chanting oríkì (praise poetry).

The secrecy and the mystery surrounding the hills, mountains, rivers, forests and wild animals have been demystified to a great extent, thus, instead of preserving the environment, they are exposed to degradation. The modern Pentecostal churches in many places in Nigeria have become miracle centres, so they negate the use of traditional knowledge system to combat the challenges of life, thus, no animal, bird or reptile is regarded as sacred or untouchable.

Işola (2010, p. 70) notes with deep sadness that:

We know that the situation has changed. The fatal effects of interventions like slave trade, colonialism and two foreign religions overwhelmingly undermined the development and progressive capacities of the Yorùbá and other African cultures.

The point in Işola's expression is that modernity has negative impact on Yorùbá culture and literature. Such experience of modernity as argued by Kwok (1993, p. 12)) has had less than desirable implications for African tradition and heritage. Traditions are transmitted and inherited in fragmentary ways. He argues that there is a loss of "pure tradition" and "whole identity". Even though the concept of "pure tradition" or "whole identity" may be hard to explain because culture is dynamic, the fact still remains that modernity has distorted the significance of Yorùbá oral poetry and has reduced the

sacredness of the environment in the heart and life of the people. However, modernity does not have the capacity to wipe out completely African religion and oral poetry. Most of the poetry has been reduced to writing, while the current explosion of the communication technology has helped in the preservation of the oral poems. Proverbs are still very much in use and still command the respect attached to wisdom. *Ìjálá* has been modernized and used on electronic media for public announcements and advertising on environment and other issues. *Oríkì Orílẹ̀* (Praise poetry) has been documented in books, CDs and in films mostly for entertainment. There are even schools where *Ifá* literary corpus and other poetic forms are taught.

Recommendations

1. Indigenous languages and culture, which are in harmony with nature, should be recognized by all family and public authorities irrespective of religious beliefs;
2. Yorùbá oral poetry connects the people with their natural environment and so the language should not be allowed to die out;
3. The creation of sanctuary forest as practiced by the Yoruba and other African people, preserved biological diversity, ecosystem interactions and protected endangered fauna species. Governments should therefore take an inventory of such sites, recognize and protect them as representative ecosystems;
4. The cultural orientation of the Yoruba people is that the environment belongs to God and the belief that God has given humans the responsibility to maintain it makes them to develop a deep sense of ownership. The modern day attitude and general feeling of “inexhaustiveness” of the natural resources with no sense of ownership and care requires a great deal of cultural re-orientation. The idea that the environment is nobody’s property leads to various forms of environmental degradation. The world can learn from the traditional Yoruba example.

Conclusion

This paper has been located in an ideal Yorùbá traditional community, the type that no longer exists in its totality. Although there are pockets of close-knit communities who by choice live the conservative traditional life of old, it will be difficult to find whole towns and cities in Yoruba land committed totally to such life. However, the reality is that Yorùbá oral poetry still thrives even though few adherents now worship the gods attached to them. Yorùbá oral poetry, such as *ifá* literary corpus, praise- poetry, *ijálá* and proverbs (*òwe*) among others are used to inculcate the consciousness of one’s responsibility to maintain harmony with the cosmos. Yorùbá oral poetry would still be relevant in the future because Yoruba oral poetry is a veritable source of knowledge for applied science; namely, agriculture, engineering, medicine, architecture and environmental science. Yorùbá oral poetry, rather than subverting science, promotes scientific understanding of religion and nature. However, man should reduce the destructive application of Western science to the environment.

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