



ECO-THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PSALMS 8 IN THE CONTEXT OF BIODIVERSITY PRESERVATION AND FIELD HUNTING IN OSUN GROOVE

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ABSTRACT: *One of the prominent natural ecosystems in Nigeria that has attracted global attention with rich cultural, social, economical, political and religious relevance is Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove. In spite of the rising global scholarly attention on eco-theology and biodiversity, there is still inadequate scientific research on eco-theological implications on Osun-Osogbo grove and biodiversity preservation in the light of Psalms 8. Thus, this study aims at assessing the implication of eco-theological implications of Psalms 8 in the context of biodiversity preservation and field hunting in Osun-Osogbo grove, Osogbo, Osun State. The study employed historical and exegetical analyses using secondary sources of data. The pioneering work of Jürgen Moltmann serves as the theoretical basis of the study. The grove is regarded as the abode of the goddess of fertility, Osun, one of the pantheon of the Yoruba gods, the landscape of the grove and its meandering river is dotted with sanctuaries and shrines, sculptures and art works in honor of Osun and other deities. Osun-Osogbo Festival has attracted a lot of tourists to the grove contributing to the economic growth of the state. Plant, trees and animal species are gradually decreasing; thus, some flora and fauna are endangered. In the context of Psalms 8, biodiversity preservation needs to be enabled as it was observed that encroachment into the grove from the buffer zone as well as uncurbed daily activities along the road are beginning to have negative effect on the rich ecotourism potentials that are being conserved. Conclusively, the grove remains an integral part of the cosmological system needed to be governed by man and not man be governed by it.*

KEYWORDS: Ecotheology, Psalms, Osun-Osogbo Grove, Biodiversity, Preservation.



INTRODUCTION

The term *eco-theology* came into prominence in the late twentieth century, mainly in Christian circles, in association with the emergent scientific field of ecology (Encyclopedia.com, 2019). Eco-theo-logy is a term derived from the combination of three Greek words: *οικο* (*eco*) and *Θεός* (*Theos*) and *λογος* (*logos*). *Οικο* means house or household; *Θεος*, *theos* means God and *λογος* means study. Thus, eco-theology is a compound word for ecology and theology. Ecology is a branch of study dealing with relationships of organisms with their environment and with each other while theology can be literally defined as a science or the study of God and His word. Thus, eco-theology is a concept that studies man and other creatures in their environment from the Christian perspective using a theological approach. Eco-theology aims at studying planet earth as the habitation of man from God's point of view.

Eco-theology, including human ecology, is an interdisciplinary science that studies ecological phenomena using theological methods and approaches, i.e., it is part of ecology. On the other hand, however, it is an interdisciplinary science belonging to theology, which interprets transcendent reality, which is reflected by the content of faith in the context of ecological systems, and therefore it requires the cooperation of experts of both fields (Hufnagel & Mics, 2023).

As an applied science, eco-theology is the application of theological methods in order to study the consequences of human action from the perspective of contemporary ecology. It strives to achieve that the principles of theological ethics (as well as the motivating power of faith and the communities and the institutional system of religious practice) can ensure, taking effect on human action, the harmonious functioning as well as the maintenance and fulfillment of the self-identity of the biosphere (and that of human society as an integral part of the biosphere), "the nature balance" (Ituma, 2013).

Eco-theology is a form of constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns. In other words, ecotheology is a theological discourse that highlights the whole creation otherwise referred to as nature as an interrelated system. It thus emphasizes the maintenance of all of creation of God on earth, such as plants, animals and other natural resources. In addition, the study pays more attention to the relationship between humans and nature as a mandate that God has given and maintains the created nature in Genesis 1: 28-30 (Mirzaqon, 2017).

Eco-theology as a field of study is established on the premise that a relationship exists between human religious/spiritual worldviews and the degradation or restoration and preservation of nature. It explores the interaction between ecological values, such as sustainability, and the human domination of nature. The burgeoning awareness of the environmental crisis has led to widespread religious reflection on the human relationship with the earth. Such reflection has strong precedents in most religious traditions in the realms of ethics and cosmology, and can be seen as a subset or corollary to the theology of nature (Wikipedia, 2024).

One of the prominent natural ecosystems in Nigeria that has attracted global attention with rich cultural, social, economical, political and religious relevance is Osun-Osogbo Sacred Forest Grove. Osun-Osogbo Sacred Forest Grove (otherwise known as Osun grove) represents a classic example of where important biological, environmental, religious and cultural values converge to form a special landscape in need of carefully considered conservation. The green



forest is well blended with man-made erected sculptures arrayed in series, embedded across the terrain of the grove with motifs in Yoruba traditional myth and religion. Osun grove remains a cultural heritage for more than eight decades, playing significant roles in Osogbo, Osun State capital in Nigeria.

Besides the sheer fact that various studies have been conducted on Osun-Osogbo grove, which include studies on assessment of Osun-Osogbo sacred grove, impact of tourism and ecotourism on the grove, roles of the sacred grove as well as studies on its biodiversity; just to mention a few (Lameed *et al.*, 2024; Oladeji *et al.*, 2021; Adeyanju *et al.*, 2021; Oladeji & Olatuyi, 2020; Oyeleke *et al.*, 2017; Ogunfolakan *et al.*, 2016; Yusuf, 2016; Ogundiran, 2014; Onyekwelu & Olusola, 2014; Osegale *et al.*, 2014; Wahab, 2014; IUCN, 2005). These scholarly works have not been focused as much on the Psalter, Psalms 8 and the biodiversity preservation vis-avis Osun grove through the lenses of theological implications of preservation of biodiversity in the context of the grove. In spite of the rising global scholarly attention on eco-theology and biodiversity, there is still inadequate scientific research on eco-theological implications on Osun-Osogbo grove in relation to the theological contents of Psalms 8 and biodiversity preservation. Thus, this study seeks to fill this academic vacuum by assessing the implication of eco-theological implications of Psalms 8 in the context of biodiversity preservation and field hunting in Osun-Osogbo grove, Osogbo, Osun State.

The purpose of the study is to assess the ecological implications of Psalms 8 in the context of biodiversity preservation and field hunting in Osun-Osogbo grove, Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives were to trace the historical background of Osun-Osogbo grove, review the trend of biodiversity of Osun-Osogbo grove in the last two decades, examine the implications of Osun Osogbo festival and the taboos guiding the place that prevent field hunting on Osun-Osogbo grove, thereby leading to biodiversity preservation.

Studies on eco-theology are increasingly becoming important not only in the academic circle; but in society, ecologists, environmentalists, the legal system, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and environmental sectors as well as in the religious sector. It is important to keep in mind that eco-theology in Psalms 8 explores the relationship of man and his environment as a gift from God, warning against nature in terms of degradation of nature, ecosystem management and environmental sustainability in general. Specifically, eco-theology seeks not only to identify prominent issues within the relationship between man, nature and religion, using the biblical basis but also to outline potential solutions to environmental problems, challenges and sustainability.

Thus, this study is important as it raises the consciousness of man, researchers, and the government on the subject matter. Besides, this study adds to existing literature. In addition, the significance of this study hinges on the sense of enlightenment it serves all stakeholders which include the religious practitioners, government, legal practitioners, law enforcement agents and the entire society on the need to preserve flora and fauna around them. Also, the study is expected to awaken the consciousness of worshippers to become knowledgeable of the socio-economic, religious and environmental outcome of religious exercises in the study area.

The study was carried out in Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria and focused on the ecotheological implications of Psalms 8 on biodiversity preservation of Osun grove. Osun State has thirty Local Government Areas (LGAs) and one Area Office. It is a homogenous state comprising Yoruba ethnic groups with the Osun, Ife, Ijesa, and Oyo subgroups (Wikipedia, 2022). Besides,

the dominant religions in the study area are Christianity and Islam; however, a certain amount of traditional worshippers exist and they all peacefully coexist. Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove is located approximately between latitudes 7°44'50.0" – 7°46'00.0" N and longitudes 4°32'40" – 4°33'40" E. It is contained within the rainforest zone of South-Western Nigeria. This area is characterized by high humidity and rainfall. The mean annual temperature is about 27°C and the relative humidity of the area is between 92% – 99% (Ola & Adewale, 2014). The mean of the annual rainfall is between 1200 mm and 1450 mm. However, considerable stretches of the original forest have now been replaced by secondary forest and derived savannah (NEST, 2016). The grove covers an area of about 75 hectares with a buffer zone of about 47 hectares surrounding it (Ogunfolakan *et al.*, 2016).

The Osun grove is an ancient shrine and it is regarded as sacred by the traditionalists who believe that the water goddess purportedly believed to inhabit inside the water is a fertility goddess. The worship of Osun River goddess is annually celebrated with all its paraphernalia in a calendarical manner. It has its dos and don'ts and taboos that guide the grove and the worship.

The buffer zone around the grove features significant anthropogenic influence. It is mainly farmland, cultivated mostly with subsistence crops like maize, beans, cassava, okra and pineapple. Within the buffer zone northward of the Main Gate is a plantation of Teak (*Tectona grandis*). Further outside the buffer zone is Osogbo town itself (Adisa *et al.*, 2016).

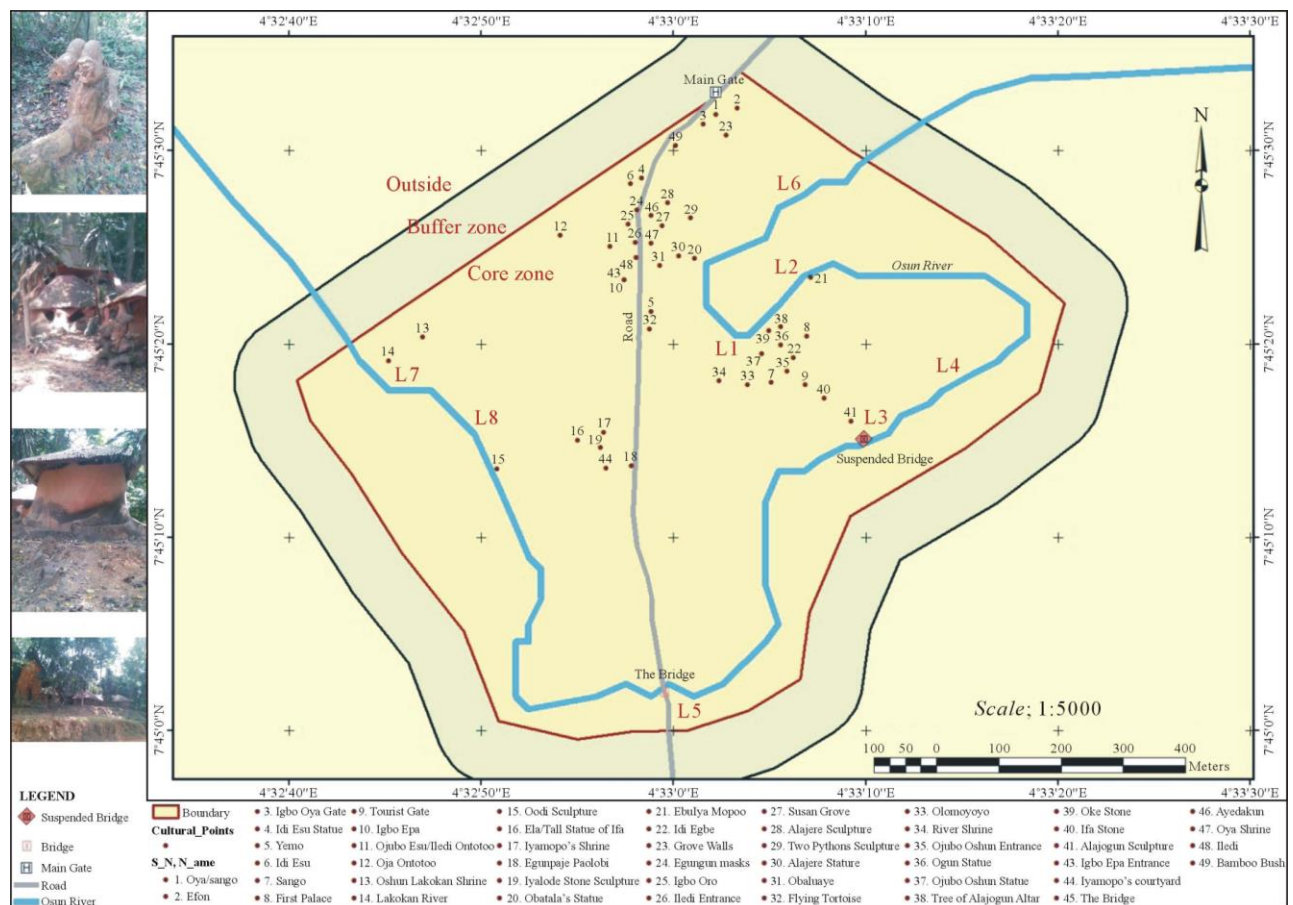


Figure 1: Map of Osun Sacred Grove showing various natural and cultural features.



The research method employed for this study included historical and exegetical analyses of Psalms 8. The historical analysis largely depends on secondary sources such as books, journal articles, encyclopedias, the internet and archival materials. In addition, library materials such as Bible, commentaries and other relevant materials were used.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study premised on the pioneering work of Jürgen Moltmann that states the immanence of the Creator in the world as a theory: “An ecological doctrine of creation implies a new kind of thinking about God. The center of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. The center is the recognition of the presence of God in the world and the presence of the world in God.” On the other hand, it emphasizes the role of man as a steward in pure form: “Human lordship on earth is the lordship exercised by a tenant on God’s behalf. It means stewardship over the earth, for God. Only human beings can know the will of God and can consciously praise and magnify Him” (Moltmann, 1985).

Moltmann’s work stands out in the ecotheological literature regarding its quality level, ahead of his time. From an ecological point of view, its particular merit is that it provides an integrative and credible theological reflection on biodiversity preservation and others (Hufnagel & Mics, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual etymology of eco-theology as a term with ever increasing use and ambiguity, simply refers to an academic exercise studying “how questions concerning our current understandings of ecology converge with theological inquiry to address the relationships between God, humans, and non-humans” (Brotton, 2018). There are, of course, numerous paradigms and modalities that fit within these coordinates. Following the work of Willis Jenkins, drawing on the work of Laurel Kearns, subdivided eco-theology into three overarching strategies: environmental stewardship, eco-spirituality, and eco-justice (Jenkins, 2008). By elucidating these three stratagems, a more holistic vision of eco-theology emerged.

Conceptually, the ecological activity of humans can be seen in three ways. Firstly, it is viewed from the Biblical point of view with Christianity in mind. The study interprets Psalms 8 as a reflection of God’s handiwork in which man is inclusive. Man is privileged to have dominion as ordained by God. However, this mandate received from the Creator must be treated with a sense of responsibility to God. Mankind has to take care of the earth received from God in this way, because it is responsible for it. This resembles Jenkins’ concept of environmental stewardship. Secondly, the study considers environmental pollution and climate change as social and legal problems. As these also have a negative impact on human health as well as other creatures, it is believed that if the environment is not well managed, our right to health is violated. In the 21st century, the biggest challenge for ecotheology is the rapid population growth, birth control, and dealing with overconsumption resulting from the capitalist system. Hence, we all must become conscious of the need to preserve natural resources with which we are endowed. This resembles Jenkins’ concept of eco-justice. Thirdly, the miraculous and unfathomable aspect of the cosmos, of which man is only a tiny part, serves as an important source of inspiration for man. Thus, man tends to become religious; ascribing supremacy to



creation against the Creator. This resembles Jenkins' eco-spirituality. The eco-spirituality of man in the light of environmental stewardship and eco-justice is the focus of this study with respect to Osun-Osogbo Grove.

An Eco-theological and Exegetical Overview of Psalms 8

Psalms 8 is a song of praise; written in the genre of a hymn; the first hymn of praise in the Psalter, following the introductory Psalms 1 and 2 and the laments in Psalms 3-7. It is a chant that focuses on the majesty of the Creator, His powerful identity name, royal glory, ordinances in the heavenlies set on earth, His representative on earth-man, the delegated privileges given to him, his finitude and superiority over creatures. Psalms 8 follows the typical three-part structure of Psalms of praise, consisting of an introduction (vs. 1), a body that focuses on creation and human's role therein; (vs. 2-8) and a conclusion that is a repetition of the introduction (vs. 9) (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014).

Psalms 8:1 expresses a beautiful expression of adoration to God. The Psalmist moved from God's transcendence to His immanence (vs 2). According to Wiersbe (2024), Jehovah is so great that He can entrust His praise to infants and children and still not be robbed of glory! Reflecting on the little beginning of man as a babe, though weak and helpless at this stage; yet, God has used and will continually use the foolish to confound the wise (cf. I Sam 17; II Kings 7; I Cor. 1: 27).

In verse 3, the Psalmist considered heavens as part of the handiworks of God. The heavens mentioned here (שָׁמַיִם, shāmeykhā) does not refer to the abode or throne of God but the sky, the atmosphere. Furthermore, the author compared man to other creatures and realized that God has given humankind a special place in creation, making them a little less than the angels; He has crowned man with honor and glory (vs 5). Psalms 8: 3 – 8 reads:

(vs. 3) When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, (vs. 4) What is the man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? (vs. 5) For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. (vs. 6) You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, (vs. 7) All sheep and oxen — even the beasts of the field, (vs. 8) The birds of the air, And the fish of the sea That pass through the paths of the seas.” [NKJV]

Literarily, the above verses imply that man is set to control all other creatures and their privileges are “exclusivistic”, no other creature is expected to share it with him. He has been put in charge; he has been saddled with the responsibility to administer, *You have put all things under his feet...* Additionally, man is given the right to eat the plants as food (cf. Gen 1: 29 *And God said, “See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food (NKJV).*

In the world view of ecotheology, many scholars opined the extent at which man should exercise his dominion and control. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that we also attend to the translation and interpretation of biblical texts, since many of these texts have been (and still are) used as grounds for arguing that humankind has a superior position over creation and that creation is therefore at the disposal of the needs (and greeds!) of humanity. Psalms 8, line 6 reads:



תַּמְשִׁילֶהוּ	בְּמַעֲשֵׂי	יְדֵיךָ
Tam'shiylēhû	B'maásëy	yädeykhä
<i>You have made him to have dominion</i>	<i>over the works</i>	<i>of Your hands;</i>
כָּל	שָׂתָה	תַּחַת־רַגְלָיו
Kol	shaTäh	tachat – rag'läyw
<i>all</i>	<i>You have put</i>	<i>under – (things) his feet,</i>

Literally, the above verse indicates that man has been crowned as king over the works of God and all other creatures have been placed under man's control. However, it should be noted that the verse started with a subject (You i.e. God). It was the Subject (God) that made (permitted, installed, ordained) His subject (man) to have dominion. In addition, He (God) was intentional, purposeful and responsible for placing all other creatures under man's feet. Simply put, two kings are being honored in the chapter; first, the Creating King, God the Almighty, the King of the Universe; and secondly, man, the created king, whose domain is the earth as well as the sky. The created king on the earth is given the responsibility to look for the ways through which the creatures under him would give glory to the Creating King, how the creatures would be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth and not go into extinction. Thus, man must be seen as a subject under God's dominion first before being considered as a ruler over God's works.

Besides, the above verse **must not** be translated in isolation from the other eight verses in the chapter. The name of God (vs 1 & 9) is described as אֲדִיר –*adiyr* that is, “majestic, excellent, lordly, glorious, mightier, or principal”, an adjective that is often used in the context of kings (Kohler & Baumgartner, 2000). Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014) also highlight the royal overtones here, and Lawrie (2010) points out that the framing versus group mankind with the rest of creation as “domain and subjects of the King”.

With the above understanding, everything that is proclaimed within these boundaries, that is, earth and sky, must be understood in the light of this exclamation of praise that has God as its subject (Maré, 2006). God is the Creator, the giver, the agent who bestows responsibility on humankind, and humans are (meant to be) the humble recipients of this task to rule as stewards in the creation of God. Thus, it becomes evident that the word “dominate over”, directed to humans who know and acknowledge their humble place of insignificance and finitude in (not over) creation needs to rule with the consciousness of accountability to Him who placed him in power. This is environmental stewardship.

Along with other scholars, Brown (2002) recognizes the link between Psa. 8: 6 – 8 and Gen. 1:26–28. It is in this creation narrative where humankind is made in the image of God, blessed by the creator God and then tasked to rule over all the animals and creatures of the earth. The Biblical Hebrew lexeme used in Gen. 1: 26 רָדָה, “to rule” is a synonym of מָשַׁל which is used in Psa. 8: 6. According to Brown (2010), he argues convincingly that the language in Gen. 1 “lacks all sense of exploitation”. There is no sign in the text that points towards a competition for resources. To the contrary, “humanity's ‘regime’ over the world in Gen. 1 is constructive, even salutary, consonant with God's life-sustaining creation” (Brown, 2010).



The word וַיִּרְדּוּ (w'yir'dû) and וַיִּרְדּוּ (ûr'dû) in Genesis 1: 26 and 28 means “have dominion over” i.e. prevail against, reign, rule over and תַּמְשִׁילֶהוּ -tam'shiylêhû in Psalms 8: 6 means “to have dominion over” that is, govern, reign, bear rule or have power. It is evident that man is superior to all other creatures under whose supervision the creatures stand; Noah, a good reference point. However, a good understanding of the word ‘dominion’ reveals man to be in charge of all other creatures. It means, man has the exclusive right, authority, power to govern, control and have the mastery of it.

Thus, man can take charge, administer and appropriate the resources within his boundary to satisfy his needs or desires. This does not necessarily mean that man should abuse, overuse or destroy these resources. It simply means that man needs wisdom, skill and technical-know-how of managing these resources to his advantage. In other words, as man has the right to own and use; he needs to manage and appropriate his resources through sustenance and discipline in order not to overuse or abuse his privilege. Here, there is a need to recall Deuteronomy 22:10; “*You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.*” and Deuteronomy 25:4; “*You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.*” As Apostle Paul rightly pointed out: Does God care for ox? (cf. I Cor. 9: 9). The answer is yes! God cares! It would be an abuse, wickedness to yoke the donkey, of lesser strength with ox. Likewise, it would be an act of wickedness to hinder the ox from feeding while working. If God gave this instruction in the Old Testament, it simply means that God frowns at wickedness and abuse of power.

Furthermore, Deuteronomy 22: 1 – 4 presented God’s instruction to man with respect to a weary donkey that has missed the road or overburdened. The instruction means that man must exercise authority with care. Deuteronomy 22: 6 – 7 reads:

If a bird’s nest happens to be before you along the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, with the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall surely let the mother go, and take the young for yourself, that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days.

Deuteronomy 22:6–7, 9 speaks volume about eco-theology and biodiversity preservation for both fauna and flora, respectively. Although man is authorized to explore the usage of these creatures at will, he must neither be exploitative nor destructive. In other words, man should strive to strike a balance between usage of the resources at his disposal in order to sustain his development, health and welfare without endangering, destroying or bringing other creatures to extinction. Simply put, this is eco-justice.

From the Christian theological viewpoint, having dominion as expressed by the Psalmist indicates ‘being served by other creatures’ and ‘not serving the creature’. Dominion means supremacy, rule over, or reign over. Hence, man is expected to rule over creatures and not to be ruled over by creatures. The mysterious circumstances surrounding a creature River *Osun*, should not inspire man to worship the creation above the Creator. On the other hand, man should strive to maintain balance between inspiration received through nature and spiritual revelations; and avoid being subjected to bondage through religious overzealousness thereby endangering his relationship with the Creator. This is eco-spirituality!

In a nutshell, Psalms 8 focuses on the authority of God the Creator in name, judgment, justice, supremacy and power. The Psalms reveal that there are other planets: the celestial beings-the world of angels, bodies that rule nature, influences the world of agriculture, beauty and glory

of nature and the aquatic world and their creatures. Man is privileged to be given the grace to rule over them all except the angels.

History of Osun-Osogbo Grove: An Overview

Osun-Osogbo grove and its festival are believed to have a history of more than 700 years. Historically, an ancestral occurrence led to the celebration of this festival. Once upon a time, a group of migrants who were led by a great hunter called Olutimehin settled on the bank of the Osun River to save themselves from famine. On the river-side, Yeye Osun the river goddess appeared from the water in front of Olutimehin and requested him to lead people to a special place, which is the modern Osogbo town (Oyintiloye, 2012). The goddess promised to protect the group and bring them prosperity in return for an annual sacrifice to her. The group accepted the proposition, and today the annual sacrifice to the Osun River goddess is still celebrated as the Osun-Osogbo Festival (Agu, 2018).



Figure 2: Picture of a sculpture in Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove

Biodiversity at Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove

The dense forest of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, situated on the outskirts of the city of Osogbo, is one of the last remnants of primary high forest in southern Nigeria.

As at 2005, the grove was a natural herbal pharmacy containing over 400 species of plants, some endemic, of which more than 200 species are known for their medicinal uses (UNESCO, 2024). The grove serves as a refuge for animals including 7 species of primates, the endangered red-capped mangabey (*Cercocebus specie*), putty-nosed monkey (*Cercopithecus nictitans*), and white-throated monkey (*Cercopithecus erytrogaster*) (IUCN, 2005; NCMM, 2005; Yusuf, 2016). The forest sanctuary is home to 40 shrines, two historic castles, and several sculptures and works of art dedicated to Osun and other gods (Osegale *et al.*, 2014).

However, the scientific research conducted by Ogunfolakan and others in 2016 reveals that the grove consists of 2 rock types, 3 minerals, 88 plant species, 108 insect families and 4 mammal



species. Predominantly, murid rodents, shrews and primates were the mammals (Mona monkey) that inhabit the grove. It is also obvious that biodiversity decreases extending outward from the core area of the grove into the buffer and outside zones (Ogunfolakan *et al.*, 2016).

Additionally, the study of Okosodo and Tinuoye (2020) revealed that a total of 125 bird species belonging to 49 families and 18 orders were recorded in the grove. The Order Passeriformes had the highest frequency (51%) of the entire number of birds recorded, while the dominant families were Estrildidae and Pycnonotidae, comprising (74%) of the total species. One endemic and one rare weaver bird species were recorded. A total of 741 individual tree species in 174 tree species and 49 families were enumerated. The highest occurring tree species are *Brachystegia eurycoma* and *Brachystegia nigerica* with 36 and 19 tree species respectively.

The research conducted by Ugbe and Kuje (2022) reveals that a total of 70 tree species belonging to 26 families were observed in the grove as at 2022. The tree species in the Fabaceae and Apocynaceae families were the most abundant. Most of the tree species encountered were in the IUCN categories of vulnerable (6.7%), least concerning (71.1%), and not evaluated (71.1%). The result revealed that the core zone was richer and more diverse than the buffer and the outer zones, with diversity indices of 3.06, 2.995, and 2.16, respectively. The fauna species diversity and richness index were 3.40 and 2.35, respectively. The least vulnerable fauna species were 86.4%, with 6.8% vulnerable. Class Aves has the highest percentage of 61.4%, with Gastropoda being the least-represented (2.3%). Mona monkeys were the most sighted fauna species in the area.

Comparatively, the plant species in the grove is decreasing; from 400 in 2005 to 88 in 2016. Likewise, 174 tree species and 49 families in 2020 dropped to 70 tree species belonging to 26 families in 2022. From the above research works, some flora and fauna are endangered. Ugbe and Kuje (2022) posited that this could be due to the use of pressure and anthropogenic activities such as tree felling in the buffer and outer zone of the area, obtaining tree parts for herbs in the core zone of the area, farming and grazing in the buffer and outer zone of the area, resulting in a rapid decrease in the number of tree species in the area.

Religious Activities at the Grove

The grove is regarded as the abode of the goddess of fertility Osun, one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods, the landscape of the grove and its meandering river is dotted with sanctuaries and shrines, sculptures and art works in honor of Osun and other divinities. The sacred grove, which is now seen as a symbol of identity for all Yoruba people, is probably the last in Yoruba culture. It testifies to the once widespread practice of establishing sacred groves outside all settlements. According to Alabi (2013), the Yoruba are fond of a belief in sacred sites and these sites are considered to be non-homogeneous in nature among others. The sacred sites serve as places of super sensible and incorporeal experience, protection, fertility, prosperity and refuge in the times of wars, disasters, droughts, famine, peace and cultic worship.

Set within the forest sanctuary are forty shrines, sculptures and art works erected in honor of Osun and other Yoruba divinities, many created in the past forty years, two palaces, five sacred places and nine worship points strung along the river banks with designated priests and priestesses. The new art installed in the grove has also differentiated it from other groves: Osogbo is now unique in having a large component of 20th century sculpture created to reinforce the links between people and the Yoruba pantheon, and the way in which Yoruba



towns linked their establishment and growth to the spirits of the forest (UNESCO, 2024). It should be noted that every language, tribe, nation and race has primitive beginnings when they held the belief that their gods were the owners of the nation and this is not peculiar to the Yoruba alone.

The restoration of the grove by artists has given the grove a new importance. It has become a sacred place for the whole of Yoruba land and a symbol of identity for the wider Yoruba diaspora than before. The 1950s witnessed the desecration of the Osun-Osogbo Grove; shrines were neglected and priests abandoned the grove as customary responsibilities and sanctions weakened. Prohibited actions such as fishing, hunting and felling of trees in the Grove was done indiscriminately until an Austrian national named Susanne Wenger (1915 – 2009) helped to reinstate traditional protections (Probst, 2009; The Guardian Nigeria News, 2019).

The Grove is an active religious site where daily, weekly and monthly worship takes place. In addition, an annual processional festival to re-establish the mystic bonds between the goddess and the people of the town occurs over twelve days in July and August and thus sustains the living cultural traditions of the Yoruba people. In recognition of its global significance and cultural value, the Sacred Grove was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005 (UNESCO, 2024).

Implications of the Osun-Osogbo Festival

The grove hosts an important annual two week-long festival to honor Osun goddess, during which the current traditional ruler is rededicated to Osun, and the ties between the people of Osogbo and the water goddess are renewed. The grand finale of the festival is held in the sacred grove (NCMM, 2005). Osun-Osogbo Festival has attracted a lot of tourists to the grove contributing to the economic growth of the state. The influx of international and national tourists as well as international and national journalists without doubt has improved the image of Osogbo in South-West Nigeria. Locally, during the festive period, economic activities improve as a result of sales turnover of food items, beverages, drinks, groceries, services such as transportation, security, cosmetics, fashion designing, accommodation as well as laundry services and the rest.

Of paramount importance are the benefits derived by priests and priestesses from worshippers during the period. Many miracle seekers will part with goods and money in order to have their spiritual needs met. Besides, the roads to the grove become busier and traffic congestion during the festive period is inevitable. Transporters take advantage of this by inflating the price of transportation in order to make brisk businesses. Extortions by some security personnel as well as pilfering by some hoodlums are witnessed and inclusive during the festival. .

Lameed et al. (2024) reported that despite the vast ecological attributes the site possesses, Osun-Osogbo sacred grove is still seen as a cultural destination; only few sees the site in the light of its natural or ecological attributes. It is a characterization of religion to ascribe super sensibilities to unique mountains, waters and groves by the ancient man as religion impinges its stubbornness and in-depths on the minds of men. But regardless of this site's ecological attributes, it still has great influence in attracting tourists to the site while most of the tourists were satisfied by their visit to the site by suggesting that they will revisit the site and recommend it to friends and families. Besides, some of the tourists show great concern and attitude towards the sacred environment and the ecological biodiversity preservation in the



grove. This implies that while ecological and environmental tourists were attracted and fascinated by the ecological attributes of the site, indigenes were only attracted to the site by the religious worship activities going in the grove as a traditional heritage.

Moreover, the traditional festivals (and spiritual consultation) which is an intangible heritage resource and scenery offer forest functions such as air circulation, habitat for endemic species, water circulation and nutrient balance, and tourism and cultural magnitude (initiation rites and ceremonies, home to deity) that are fundamental in satisfying the basic social, cultural; and economic needs of local communities. These natural features have potential to fulfill both economic and social functions which are present and futuristic (FAO, 2017).

Developing sacred sites into tourist destinations as in the case of Osun Osogbo, attracts more visitors and generates income (Ormsby, 2012; Osegale *et al.*, 2014; Probst, 2013, 2016). Moreover, attracted tourists who visit during the non-festive period can only access the grove by paying an entrance fee (obtaining a ticket). This serves as income for the government. Local tourist guides also benefit by receiving tips for services rendered.

Eco-theological Implications of Psalms 8 and Biodiversity Preservation in the Context of Field Hunting in Osun-Osogbo Grove

Without argument, man has been positioned to be the created landlord of the cosmos but using selected eco-theological texts from Judeo-Christian traditions to justify their destructive exploitation, manipulations, abuses and indiscriminate injustices to the ecosystems is uncalled for. Psalms 8 offers to the great Creator praises from nature and worship due to His incomparable and mysterious handiworks in nature and ecosystem. The ecological biodiversity would give praises to God when they are preserved and cared for by the created landlord. Psalms 8 did not and does not creatively, historically, textually and lexically teach the destruction of biodiversity. Man should not glory in the destruction of biodiversity but should glory in their preservation.

The great Creator desires praises to His name and handiworks from His creatures and man is privileged to offer praises to God by observing His greatness and majesty through the lenses of the biodiversity he is endowed with and around him. They are not the target for abuses, destruction and eco-injustices. If the theological ideas of “have dominion” and “subdue” as some claim connote and include abuses, destruction and mismanagement of the earth and biodiversity, “who” and “what” will offer praises to the name, glory and majesty of the LORD, our LORD? Man needs to be careful and mindful of what he is entrusted to take care of and use to praise the name of His Creator.

Man should see his superiority as “delegated” to the praises and not to the destruction of the handwork of the Creator. Psalms 8 definitely teaches that man is under the power of delegation of the Creator and he is supposed to take care of what is “lower down him” in “communicable attributes” of the loving God. These biodiversity species do not share the communicable attributes of God and this makes man to be superior over them, which does not tantamount to abuses, killings and indiscriminate destruction but rather praise-worthy biodiversity preservation.

Osun Osogbo is a natural gift-grove by creation before the Yoruba progenitors woke up and found the grove as fascinating to them and later divinized it. The Yoruba divinized the grove based on their experience of the numinousness of nature with mythical taboos, dos and don'ts,



traditions, religious festivals and sacrifices, rituals and celebrations as inherited from their progenitors. In their native wisdom and knowledge, super sensible myths are attached to the grove. If the founding fathers and ancestors of the race had hunted all the biodiversity in the grove, what would the posterity see as a global tourist center today? Hunting of animals and fishing within the river is prohibited by ethnic taboo (Ogunfolakan *et al.*, 2016). Corroborating Ogunfolakan, Zaccheus Onumba Dibiaezue Memorial Libraries (2024) reported that fishing is prohibited within the grove. He buttressed his submission by saying, “Osun waters signify the relationship among nature, the spirits and human beings, and reflect water’s significance in Yoruba cosmology as a symbol of life: the river is believed to have healing, protective and fertility powers. The fish are said to have been used by the goddess Osun as messengers of peace, blessings and favor; thus, the fishing prohibition.

Furthermore, Ogunfolakan *et al.* (2016) reported that threats to the environmental sanctity of Osun Grove appear to come not only from outside but also within. He observed that the road which runs right through the grove carries significant daily traffic, with passersby leaving litter and feeding the monkeys unauthorized with bananas and other tidbits, an act that constitutes human interference in the natural ecosystem of Osun grove. If this particular interference is not controlled there is the danger that the Mona monkey population could explode to dominate the mammal community and cause ecological imbalance, affecting other biological components of the grove adversely (Ogunfolakan *et al.*, 2016).

According to UNESCO (2024), the Grove had a well-developed management plan covering the period 2004 – 2009 that was adopted by all stakeholders and the site enjoys a participatory management system. The Federal Government administers the site through a site manager of the National Commission for Museums and Monument as empowered by Decree 77 of 1979. Osun State Government equally contributes to its protection and management through its respective Local Governments, Ministries and Parastatals, who are also empowered by the state edicts to manage state monuments.

The community’s traditional responsibilities and cultural rites are exercised through the Ataoja, the King and his council - the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council. There are traditional activities that have been used to protect the site from any form of threats such as traditional laws, myths, taboos and customs that forbid people from fishing, hunting, poaching, felling of trees and farming (UNESCO, 2024). Aniah and Yelfaanibe (2016) as well as Mgumia and Oba (2003) posited that the protection and preservation of these sacred sites are closely linked to enduring religious beliefs, community developed rules, and complex socio-cultural and spiritual associations with divinities and ancestral spirits.

The religio-cultural belief and practice of the grove places restrictions on hunting and cutting of trees with various taboos and mythological understanding that animals inhabiting the grove are the children of the goddess and the trees serve as covering for the goddess. Thus, it is prohibited to kill or hunt for animals or birds in the grove; it is also considered as a sacrilege to cut down the trees for commercial or domestic uses. This submission is in line with the findings of Rajora and Solanki (2019) that sacred groves are forest patches conserved by the local people through socio-cultural and religious practices. This religious and socio-cultural practice has enabled sacred groves to harbor a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna and has played a significant role in the conservation of biodiversity (Singh *et al.*, 2019).



Conversely, Onyekwelu (2021) and Sheridan (2009) reported that sacred groves were not created primarily for biodiversity conservation; they are often the only remaining patches of natural or semi-natural habitats in several landscapes. The traditional worshippers and devotees maintain the intangible heritage through spiritualism, worship and symbolism. There is a management committee made up of all cadres of stakeholders, which implements policies, actions and activities for the sustainable development of the site (UNESCO, 2024).

Osun sacred grove preserves the cultural evolution in terms of initiation rites, cultural festivals and ceremonies; preservation of tangible cultural items associated with the Yoruba belief; enhance traditional belief of local communities in form of taboo, rituals and dedication to forest deities. The association of traditions and festivals such as *Iboriade*, *Odunegungun*, *Ikesinrodo* with biodiversity in the grove is of high conservation value because it helps in the preservation of the tradition of Osun Osogbo communities and offer potentials for tourism.

CONCLUSION

Psalms 8 is a call to man to be sensitive to his responsibilities of taking care of the biodiversity around him. The ultimate God wanted him to explore the cosmos and the ecosystems in his care to His glory. This he can do by taking good care of the ecosystems around him. The evils done to the ozone layers, where there is a natural protection to the heat of the sun biting on man should be a lesson to man if he would enjoy blessing of natural water, good oxygenated air, reduce the effects of global warming and hot weather and other environmental challenges around him.

Osun-Osogbo grove remains one of the largest surviving tangible expressions of Yoruba divination and cosmological ecosystems around the world. In the context of Psalms 8, biodiversity preservation needs to be enabled as it was observed that encroachment into the grove from the buffer zone as well as uncurbed daily activities along the road are beginning to have negative effect on the rich ecotourism potentials that are being conserved. Furthermore, access to the grove and the behavior of visitors once inside needs to be monitored more closely by designated security officials. However, the grove remains an integral part of the cosmological system needed to be governed by man and not man be governed by it. Therefore, the grove should be seen as one of the “lower than man” in nature and viewed as a way of praising the wonders of God in nature and not be divinized to the dethronement of the worship of the Creator, who created the world of nature of the river, the stones, rocks, fish, monkeys and trees in the grove.



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