



**ORAL TRADITION AND AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTALISM IN WASIU
ABIMBOLA'S YORUBA MOVIE, IKOKO EBORA**

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ABSTRACT: *The oral tradition in African society has always served the purpose of transmitting the values of the African people across generations among other functions of entertaining and provoking critical thought. In the emerging global concern over environmental sustainability, understanding the perspective from which people view and interact with the environment around them would provide insights into the human-induced challenges facing it, and how these challenges can be overcome. This paper thus posited that the oral repertoires of African societies would provide insights into the people's perspective of the environment around them. This paper, therefore, undertook an examination of the oral literary forms such as incantations, proverbs, myths, and songs in Wasiu Abimbola's Yoruba film titled Ikoko Ebor for the deployment of environmental aesthetics which are peculiar to the Yoruba culture. The study concluded that the deployment of environmental agencies in oral literary forms reflects the African conception of the environment as a functional entity and a complementary agency for the use of man.*

KEYWORDS: Oral Literature, Africa, Environmentalism, Functionality, Yoruba



INTRODUCTION

Traditional African oral literary forms reflect the culture, beliefs, and world views of the African people. These oral forms have been variously described as aggregating Africa's philosophy, behaviour, psychology, and interrelationships (Akano 2010, Malinowski 1926). Despite the transition from the oral mode of transmitting these philosophies to the written mode, especially with the invention of printing, and in spite of the gradual erosion of traditional civilisation by Christianity and Islam, African writers are still at the fore of incorporating these forms into their written works (Kalu and Ukam 2019, p. 178). It has become an aesthetic to interrogate cultural and other philosophical concerns of society depicted in their works. One of which is what this present study attempts: to interrogate the environmental culture of the Yoruba people through their oral traditions.

The Yoruba and Oral Traditions

The Yoruba are one of the dominant peoples of West Africa with a presence across Nigeria and other countries in Africa. The Slave trade also led to the exportation of the people and the eventual spread of the culture to other parts of the world such as North America and South America. Aliyu (2020) describes that the Yoruba people “people construct myths, among other oral forms, to explain the mysteries of their existence. These myths include stories of how the world came to be, and also justifications for the existence of natural phenomena around them. These stories are a peoples’ way of understanding and responding to their world” (p. 96). As a culture founded on oral literary forms, there are within the corpus of oral traditional forms of the Yoruba people epistemologies which reveal the peoples’ ideology and lived realities. Finnegan (2012) posits about the oral traditions of the Yoruba as “the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of preliterate societies which have evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another” (Finnegan, 2012, p. 22).

Finnegan also identifies genres of oral literature in Africa to include poetry which may be panegyric, elegiac, and religious poetries; songs which include lyric, topical, political, children’s songs and rhymes; and prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, oratory, drum language, and drama (pp. 52-80) within the corpus of Yoruba oral traditional forms are the prose, poetry, and dramatic forms which are explicated in the selected movie for this study.

Environmental Concerns in Oral Literary Forms

Emerging concerns over environmental sustainability have resulted in scholars investigating human relationships with the environment with the view to understanding how interactions with the various agencies impact the environment. Literary critics have resorted to studying literary works for their contributions to the discourse on environmental sustainability. The oral literary forms within the African society are a rich reservoir for exploring the African perception of the environment around them. This is exemplified by Abiola Irele (2011) in his enunciation of the functionality of African oral tradition. In “Sounds of a tradition”, he identifies six roles the traditional oral art forms perform among which is what he terms the symbolic function. This symbolic function encompasses “collective self-definition and of ‘cognitive mapping’ for members of the culture ... for they not only provide a mode of reflection on human experience but also represent a relation to the world elaborated through language” (p. 32). Irele’s position centralises how oral traditional forms implicate a people’s cognition, and how it conditions and informs, on a collective front, their experiences and lived



realities. This is also as Rosalind Hackett's (1996) review of works in Drewal's *Art Journal* states:

...meaning is continually emergent, elusive, and constructed from available evidence, namely oral and written literature, the discourse of local specialists, the close examination of the historical and cultural milieu of the work, its morphology, imagery, uses, and its relationship to other arts and performance contexts (p. 15).

In explicating meaning from the oral literary forms contained in Wasiu Abimbola's film titled *Ikoko Eborá*, an understanding of the Yoruba belief about the origin of the universe is imperative. Lere Adeyemi (2011) in his paper titled "Literature and Climate Change"; an exploration into the cultural representations of the environment in D.O. Fagunwa's prose works, identifies a multi-tiered hierarchy within the Yoruba cosmogony. Topmost is *Olodumare* – the creator of the heavens and the universe:

The Yoruba believe in Olodumare who creates heaven and the universe. The physical and the invisible environment, the biotic and abiotic spheres are created by Olodumare. The responsibility of man is to maintain harmony with the Cosmos. Human beings are expected to endeavour to create harmonious relationships with fellow human beings and the physical and non-physical environment, fauna, flora, and the spirits of the ancestors in order to sustain the perfect harmony with God (p. 412).

Adeyemi's hierarchy puts humans below Olodumare and above spirits, animals, plants and other non-biotic agencies such as rivers and hills. He also identifies that humans occupy a central position in the maintenance of a stable ecosystem through their interactions with the various agencies around them. Adeyemi equally identifies that the Yoruba acknowledge the existence of the invisible part of the environment; the atmosphere and stratosphere.

The recognition of the existence of a relationship between humans and the various agencies within the environment presupposes a mutually beneficial interaction. While humans make use of the biotic and non-biotic agencies for sustenance, spiritual, religious, curative and economic purposes, they are saddled with the responsibility of maintaining harmony among all the agencies, including God – Olodumare. This is seminal to understanding Abubakar Abdullahi's (2011) analysis of the implications of the forest in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. He states that the play "depicts the interdependence of the human communities and that of the forest, and presents a reciprocal relationship between the two" (p. 376). His exploration of the relationship between humans and spirits which are believed to inhabit environmental constituents is concluded by the assertion that the relationship between humans and the environment is a communion:

informed by an underlying philosophy of reciprocity. The terrestrial supplicates to the empyrean for benevolent gestures throughout the season and this cordial relationship is sustained on the condition that both are consistent in upholding all that is beneficial and avoiding those that are detrimental to the union (p. 375).



This ‘reciprocity’ does not, however, confer a superior status upon the environment or its components. Abdullahi adds that, despite the reciprocity, humans continue to assume a central position in the scheme of things. In what he terms “demythologising”, he maintains that the “dependence on man for sustenance and exultation diminish the powers of the empyrean and gives the impression of man’s leverage to manipulate them to do his bid” (p. 380). This position may, however, be considered anthropocentric and debilitating to the natural environment. It assumes the arrogation of superiority to humans and inferiority to the non-human environment which more often than not, have been identified as contributing to the exploitation of the non-human environment. Anthropocentrism describes any conceptualisation of the non-human environment as being of instrumental value to humans (Bassey, p. 160). However, Bodunde and Aliyu (2017) opine that “the African conceptualizes the environment as a functional constituent which plays a major role in the preservation and sustenance of man. In spite of this anthropocentric stance, the environment is not considered as an ‘object’ to be exploited without some measure of control or reciprocal duties to the environment and its components. Cultural practices which are significantly influenced by religiosity obligate man to protect the environment from destruction” (p. 113). This corroborates Abdullahi’s position on reciprocity in the human/environment relationship.

Hence, our exploration of oral traditions in Wasiu Abimbola’s film *Ikoko Eborá*, which translates to mean “the pot of spirits”, would reveal this mutually beneficial relationship between humans and other constituents of the environment. This is as Irele (2011) explains the symbolic function that traditional oral literature plays as “not so much as a faithful reconstruction of the past but rather as a recreation, a reactualization in the present, of events in the course of which the original foundation of the collective existence was established” (p. 33).

Synopsis of the film *Ikoko Eborá*

Wasiu Abimbola’s film *Ikoko Eborá* is a Yoruba film which depicts life in the traditional setting, prior to the incursion of colonialists or western civilisation. It tells the story of Oderinde, a man who is plagued by a generational curse that will make him lose all his children while he dies without a successor. Oderinde comes from a lineage of hunters and his children keep dying just as the annual festival for the god of iron (Ogun) approaches. Ogun is the patron god of hunters.

In Oderinde’s quest to solve the mystery behind his yearly loss of children, an oracle priest reveals to him that his (Oderinde’s) father had incurred the jinx of children not succeeding the male members of the family. This is because Odekunle (Oderinde’s father) failed to abide by the rules governing the hunting of animals in the forest. Odekunle’s insensitivity, which is borne out of his anxiety to be a successful hunter, makes him discountenance the inborn instincts of hunters when the game is at hand to be killed. He kills what he thinks is an animal, but which in actual fact is the offspring of a spirit. The spirit then places a curse on him which extends to all his generations.

The solution given to Oderinde is for him to bear a sacrifice composed of an antelope’s heart; it is a mission on which he will also lose his life for his only remaining son to get well and survive him. As a safeguard against the curse, his lineage is to also refrain from eating game ever again.



DISCUSSION

In the course of the actions, oral literary forms such as incantations, songs, and myths are used in the film. It is through these oral modes that this paper intends to explore the environmental perspectives of the Yoruba people depicted in the film.

African Environmentalism in *Ikoko Eborá*

The concept of African environmentalism presupposes that Africans have a markedly different conception of what the environment connotes and how it should be related with. Recent studies on environmentalism have established that the Western world conceives of the environment more from the culture of conservationism. Hochman contends in *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel and Theory* (1998, p. 22) that the campaign to preserve the environment is borne out of the Western world's culture of 'aestheticizing' nature and the environment. This conservationist culture has influenced their conception of nature as an independent entity which should be allowed to manifest without human interference, and also that nature should not be ascribed with any form of functionality, especially concerning humans (Watson 1983, Slaymaker 2007, Caminero-Santangelo 2007, Vital 2007).

This Western culture is in opposition to the reality of the African people whose daily sustenance, spiritual life, economic development and social life are tied to the environment. Africans preserve the environment for many reasons different from why Europeans or Americans preserve the environment. For instance, Adeyemi (2011) situates the context of the forest in Yoruba society within the purview of spiritualism as the forests have spiritual connections with the people as sites where sacred rites of initiations and other spiritual activities take place (p. 414). Kpone-Tonwe and Salmons' (2002, p. 276) investigation into the Ogoni people's conception of, and interactions with, the rivers and streams in the community conclude that the water bodies constitute more to the people than just sources of water or food, but have spiritual connotations. While Ken Saro-Wiwa documents in *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992, pp. 12-3) that:

To the Ogoni, the land on which they lived and the rivers which surrounded them were very important. They not only provided sustenance in abundance, but they were also a spiritual inheritance. The land is a god and is worshipped as such... To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only provide water for life – for bathing, drinking etc.; they do not only provide fish for food, they are also sacred and bound up intricately with the life of the community, of the entire Ogoni nation.

Mbiti (1969) stresses in his book *African Religions and Philosophy* that “for African peoples, this is a religious universe. Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object of the phenomenon; it is filled with religious significance. Man gives life even where natural objects and phenomena have no life” (p. 56). Therefore, any consideration of the environmental perspective contained in an African literary production must take into perspective the cultural prescription of a functional, albeit mutually-beneficial relationship between man and the environment.



Wasiu Abimbola portrays this mutually-beneficial interaction between the people of Magbe and their environment in the film *Ikoko Eborá* through the various constructions of interaction between the characters and the environment. Set in traditional Yoruba land, Abimbola depicts the connectedness of man to his environment through the characters' daily activities, including economic, religious, mystic and curative.

The physical setting of the community close to the forest, and the characters' numerous incursions into the woods imply that the forest serves a multitude of purposes to them. The hunters' use of kola nut as a medium between them and the god of Iron (Ogun) is another depiction of the functionality of nature. The ifa priest's request for the heart of an antelope to cure Oderinde's son is indicative of the curative powers of nature's agencies. Rosalind Hackett notes in her estimation of the spiritual cum curative powers of nature agencies that they possess vital forces, and as such, felling trees or killing animals can be construed as metaphorically shedding blood and thus constituting an act of sacrifice (1996, p. 40). Oderinde's success in getting the antelope's heart is steeped in numerous challenges; the first of which is the unusual absence of any animal in the forest. The hunters' encounter with spirits which leads to the death of all the other hunters in Oderinde's retinue is another challenge. Only the metaphysical interference of the head hunter ensures that Oderinde succeeds in escaping from the spirits and also aids him in finding the much sought-after antelope, which is again conjured by the head hunter. These establish that while humans seek help from spirits to solve challenges, the powers of humans invariably transcend those of spirits.

Abimbola stresses the existence of checks and balances to curb humans from taking undue advantage of other constituents when he prescribes that the solution to both Odekunle and Oderinde's quest for successors be that they offer themselves as a sacrifice, and also that bush meat becomes a taboo for their lineage. This puts a check on their lineage continuing to hunt animals as the meat would recast the curse on them.

The myth of Ogun as an embodiment of African environmental aesthetics

Ogun is one of the traditional gods of the Yoruba people of West Africa, whose role in the gods' descent from heaven to earth was significant enough to earn him a pride of place in the pantheon of gods. Hal Horton (1989, n.d.) describes the Yoruba god – Ogun as “among the most important. The god of war, of the hunt and ironworking, Ogun serves as the patron deity of blacksmiths, warriors, and all who use metal in their occupations. He also presides over deals and contracts... The Yoruba consider Ogun fearsome and terrible in his revenge; they believe that if one breaks a pact made in his name, swift retribution will follow”.

The Yoruba people's conception of Ogun can be derived from his praise songs and beliefs attached to certain actions worshippers take. For instance, the film *Ikoko Eborá* opens with hunters chanting Ogun's panegyrics and invoking his spirit. Among Ogun's attributes contained in the chant which reveals how a man should interact with the environment is the line that states, “Ogun is he who has authority over the waterside and the homestead. A foolish man thinks he can evade Ogun by running into the forest; who does not know that the god who has dominion over the riverside and the homestead can also extend his reach into the forest?” This attribute limits man's exploitative tendencies over these environmental agencies as Ogun is believed to oversee all that transpires there.



The hunters also beseech Ogun not to visit his anger over them should they transgress. This prayer is done using the allegories of bees and the river: “Ogun, if you metamorphose into a bee, do not sting me; if you metamorphose into a river do not drown me”. By employing these allegories, the hunters exhibit the awareness that these environmental agencies can be inhabited by spirits to enact penance against erring persons. This is a hallmark of African environmentalism in which both biotic and non-biotic components can serve as abodes for spirits. A case in point drawn from the film under study – *Ikoko Eborá*, is the scene where hunters who have been in the forest hunting for many days and who have not had a drink of water have an encounter with spirits. Three humanised spirits had fetched water in pots and placed them by the trunk of a tree. The thirsty hunters saw the water and tried to drink it. Spirits emerged from the tree trunk and engaged the hunters in a fight. The depiction of the spirits emerging from the tree is an indication of the African belief that such components can serve as abodes for supernatural entities.

Among the many beliefs surrounding Ogun which also regulate how humans exploit other agencies within the environment is his ability to obtain retribution against anyone who breaks a pact. Odekunle breaks the pact that exists between hunters and spirits who live in the forests when he discountenances his instinct not to kill the deer which he sees on an expedition. Hunters are steeped in traditional medicine and also require significant spiritual fortification against the powers of the numerous spirits which are believed to live in the forest. The fortification allows them to know which animal to kill and overpower spirits they may encounter on their expeditions. In his quest to return from the expedition with a sizable game, he kills the child of a spirit who was on an errand for its mother. The mother witnesses the killing and transforms her murdered child from a deer into a rat. Odekunle is downcasted over the smallness of what he thought would be a big game. The aggrieved spirit-mother appears in a humanised form to Odekunle, she appears to him as an old woman and begs Odekunle to give the rat to her. Odekunle reluctantly accepts and narrates his ordeals to her. He claims he comes from a lineage of successful hunters but he has the misfortune of never killing anything significant. This is apart from his wife’s inability to have a child after many years of marriage to him. The old woman proffers a solution to his problems. She tells him to woo any woman he meets in the forest and take her home as his wife and the forest woman would bring him significant luck. The old woman gives him this advice in order to set him up for her revenge. This old woman then metamorphoses into a young beautiful woman and crosses Odekunle’s path who woos her in accordance with the suggestions of the old woman. In her new form, the old woman, now called Ewatomi, brings fortune to Odekunle on many fronts; he becomes the most successful hunter in the village as only he brings home game after any expedition; Ewatomi conceives of a child, a feat Odekunle’s wife has been unable to achieve until Ewatomi has her own child; and she serves as protection to him whenever evil is plotted against him. Despite these successes, Ewatomi makes life difficult for both Odekunle and his first wife – Aduke. Of note in the character of Ewatomi in Odekunle’s house is her staunch refusal to eat bush meat. She continually causes friction between everyone in the household which provokes both Aduke and Odekunle to castigate Ewatomi’s lack of relatives. This annoys Ewatomi who threatens to pack out Odekunle’s household. Ewatomi’s ensuing flight from home and Odekunle’s chase result in Odekunle shooting her, to prevent Ewatomi from taking his son away. Ewatomi changes form into the old woman whom Odekunle encountered in the forest. She then tells Odekunle of his sin, saying she helped him to attain success and his first wife to conceive so that he would feel the pain of losing his children; just as she felt the pain of losing her child. She then curses him that he would not have a child to succeed him. The old woman



takes her revenge for the murder of her child which Odekunle caused by disregarding the warning signs he felt. This punishment can be linked to Ogun's attribute of retribution as Oderinde's children die as the annual festival for the worshipping of Ogun approaches.

The pact existing between hunters and the world in the forest is one which ensures that hunters do not stray beyond the boundaries of propriety and ensure stability in the supernatural and animal world of the forest. This is reflective of Adeyemi's submission that the Yoruba culture saddles man with the responsibility of maintaining harmony with all components in their environment (2011, p. 412). The myth of Ogun also encompasses some of these guidelines which regulate man's interactions with his fellow men and other biotic and non-biotic components of his environment, prescribing punitive measures to deter inhumane exploitation.

CONCLUSION

The myth of Ogun as deployed in Wasiu Abimbola's traditional film *Ikoko Eborá* provides insight into the ways the Yoruba people of Africa interacted with themselves and the environment. This myth, among the several others in the Yoruba culture, moderated man's innate tendencies to overtly exploit, subjugate and downright destroy. The incursion of western "civilisation" through colonialism and the introduction of other religions have resulted in the erosion of traditional beliefs which ensured that humans interacted safely with their environment. Other challenges of the growing human population have necessitated that natural resources be used without regard which has led to its being stretched to grave limits.

While recognising that a reversal to the traditional beliefs is not feasible, what is, however, imperative is the reduction of the current depletion of the earth's resources and the despoliation of the environment. Reawakening man's awareness of the environment as a living, functional and important part of man's existence is the first step; this is one of the missions which the film *Ikoko Eborá* sets out to achieve. Wasiu Abimbola engages with this mission in order to reawaken viewers' consciousness of the sacredness of environmental agencies which could influence how younger and future generations interact with the environment.

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