

Water in Yoruba Belief and Imperative for Environmental Sustainability

Adewale O. Owoseni

Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, University of Ibadan Post Office, Nigeria

Abstract

The observation by scholars that the typical African people are often overtly religious in matters of interpreting reality demands a critical outlook with allusion to apt consideration of phenomena in relevant locale within the African space. The phenomenon of water has received copious attention worldwide and the need to consider this within an African nay Yoruba worldview is timely. The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria are wont to express that ‘water is the converge of good health, no one can despise it’ – *omi labuwe, omi labumi, eni kan kii ba omi s’oota*. This expression among other narratives convey a symbolic and paradoxical representation of water, which depicts the metaphysical dialectics of water in Yoruba belief. Basically, it renders the phenomenon of water as an entity that has the potency to vitalize and disrupt life-forms, given the beliefs regarding its place in relationship with certain animals like buffalo, fish and some endangered species, plants, trees as well as humans. Resultant impediments that fraught environmental order such as flood, draught and water borne diseases or outbreak in this regard are often linked to these beliefs. This is believed to be due to negating demands of the essential place of water by aberrant practices/acts, abuse, negligence of venerating ancestral grooves, goddesses or spirit. In lieu of this, this discourse adopts a hermeneutic analysis of the phenomenon and argues that the understanding of water in indigenous Yoruba belief is underscored by the dialectics of positive and negative causes that also impact the course of environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Water, Yoruba Belief, Metaphysical Dialectics, Environmental Sustainability.

1.0 Introduction

Religion could be conceived as a spiritual or divine related attitude embraced by a person or group of people towards an image or being through patterns of held beliefs, tradition, myth, worship, reverence, exultation, sacrifice, rituals or rites considered symbolic for the essence of human and non-human existence in nature or reality (see Tylor 1920; Frazer 1922, James 2009, Albanese 2012). It connotes emotional attachment (which also serves as *raison d’etre*) to symbolic entities or image envisioned as the source of religious allegiance. That religion in this sense thus constitute an essential aspect of a cultural or social way of living seems clear (o’Dea 1966, Geertz 1993). Speaking of world religions; Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Islam, Africa religions among many others are instances. Due to the centrality of divine and spiritual elements in religion, its essence is often substantiated through beliefs in natural entities or phenomena affixed with symbolic extra-natural meanings conveyed through totems (Durkheim 1995).

As such, for a religious belief that expresses animism (belief that spirit exists in every object) as we have in some religions, entities like stones, trees, metal, animals or their carcasses, water, humans and other natural entities within the ecosystem are perceived as totems and symbolic figures of spirituality or divinity. Water as a natural phenomenon is caught up in the network of religious belief through substantiation as a symbol or totem of spiritual and divine essence in life and nature. By virtue of this, water can be classified as a ‘religious resource’ (to use the coinage of ter Haar 2005) essential for environmental functioning and order. The need to inquire whether there is a religious perception of water in indigenous thoughts or belief and its significance for environmental sustainability follows from this. Adopting the Yoruba indigenous belief framework, this discourse intends to engage these concerns through a hermeneutical (albeit critical) study of myths, selected sayings, symbolic beliefs about water deities and prohibitions in the sacred water scape of Osun-Osogbo groove in Yoruba enclave (Southwest Nigeria). In lieu of this, this discourse also establishes the need to incorporate Yoruba belief of water towards global ecological crises.

Prior to embarking on the above, there is the need to clarify the usage of key concepts as it would be adopted in the discourse. In the discourse, the functionality of beliefs within the framework of indigenous Yoruba thought is taken as granted. Water refers to sacred water-scape (such as river Osun) within the Yoruba enclave. Dialectics is adopted as an allusion to principle of causality dynamics (positive and negative)¹ and life forms allude to biotic and non-biotic entities within Yoruba environment.

¹ Within the context of this discourse, dialectics simply alludes to the inherent opposition of causality informed by acknowledgement or aberration of beliefs as given in indigenous thought. This would become clear as the work progresses. For further insight on ‘dialectics’; see von Popper, K. 1963. “What is Dialectics?” In *Conjectures and Refutations*. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, pp. 312 – 335. Retrieved from www.vordenker.de/ggphilosophy/popper_what-is-dialectic.pdf. Accessed July 18, 2016.

2.0 Religion, Environment and Water in Yoruba Thought

Scholarly works like those of Emilo Chuvieco (2012, 9 - 12), Bron Taylor¹, David Gronfeldt² to mention a few have made laudable efforts to showcase the linkage between religious cum indigenous beliefs and environment related concerns of conservation, management and development. These efforts spur the need to further exemplify potential indigenous beliefs that enact approaches or interpretations for environmental sustainability. The substance, significance and function of water in many beliefs, in relation to the course of environmental sustainability, have stimulated intellectual contributions (see Oestigaard 2009) albeit critical consideration of what is obtainable in Yoruba thought is yet to receive adequate attention and elucidation. Drawing on the example of Chuvieco's work proffers plausible insight on how to alleviate this dearth of attention within the context of Yoruba belief.

Put succinctly, Chuvieco (2012, 9 – 20) employed a comparative approach to explicate the trend of human to nature relations as perceived in world religions like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism; with specific focus on water as a natural resource. Chuvieco asserts that these religions exhibit complementary relationship patterns like stewardship, analogy, cosmic humility, natural mysticism, dominion and worship that inform attitude towards the environment. Following this example, to explicate the intricacies of Yoruba belief and understanding about the environment presupposes a proper understanding of the idea of African environmentalism.

However, it is important to hint that in contemporary times, the supposed Yoruba belief of environment are not free of the impacts of adopted religious beliefs such as Christianity and Islam, that influence some Yoruba people's disposition. For instance, the tenets of Christianity (as in those that have to do with incompatible beliefs in indigenous religious doctrines of *poly-demoniads*) and Islam (doctrine popularly accorded as *Shirk* practices)³ in some ways influence non-participation in indigenous belief or practices. Asserting whether the disposition of such Yoruba people are religiously or culturally determined is difficult to sustain since there are possible cases of partisan practitioners of adopted religions inclining to or declining such Yoruba beliefs of the environment. While this may constitute another interesting take on the matter in further studies, this discourse is limited to the consideration of Yoruba (indigenous) belief of water as an environmental phenomenon.

Regarding the idea of African environmentalism, scholars like Geoffrey Tangwa, Kevin Behrens and Segun Ogungbemi have impressed a common view. These scholars, through the notions of eco-bio-communitarianism (Tangwa 2004: 387 - 395), African relational environmentalism (Behrens 2014: 63 - 82) and ethics of nature relatedness (Ogungbemi 2005) respectively argue that environment in typical African society is conceived as a holistic web of interrelated life-forms and space, granted by animistic beliefs and forces (as earlier clamoured by Parrinder 1969 and Idowu 1994) which is also core to the knowledge, attitude, practice and relations of human to the environment.

The Yoruba beliefs or worldview of the environment is no exception in this regards as showcased in the scholarly works of Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), Bolaji Idowu (1978), Raymond Ogunade (2005) among others. In other words, Yoruba religious perception about the environment and its constituents which includes water, depicts relatedness with other entities or life forms like trees, human and animals among others for the purpose of enhancing ecosystem balance or order.

Water and Associated Life Forms in Yoruba Belief

Like most world belief systems such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism⁴ among others, indigenous Yoruba belief is suffused with ontological conceptions about the agency, immanence and transcendence of celestial/supernatural beings in the construction of the environment and its entities. Specifically, factoring the phenomenon of water as an inclusive environmental entity is granted in Yoruba belief, given the array of

¹ See Taylor, B. "Lynn White Jr. and the Greening of Religious Hypothesis". Retrieved from *doi: 10.1111/cobi. 12735*. Accessed July 8, 2016.

² See Gronfeldt, D. Water Development and Spiritual Values in Western and Indigenous Societies. Retrieved from www.waterculture.org/uploads/Groenfeldt_-_Wate_Spirituality.pdf. Accessed June 30, 2016.

³ See for instance the 1st and 2nd commandments in the Ten Commandments of the bible (Exodus 20: 3 – 5) and Surah Al-Nisa (Quran) 4: 116, Quran 6: 106 that prohibits Christians and Muslims respectively from upholding contrary religious beliefs/precepts. Importantly, despite the differentials explicit among these diverse beliefs that is Christianity, Islam and Yoruba, they share a commonality in terms of the substance and function of water as a purifying or healing element. In Islam, this is showcased in the procession of ablution in the course of preparing for prayers, while in Christianity, the exorcist beliefs vested in the sprinkling of "Holy water", entrenched among the Catholics and many Pentecostal churches is a vivid example. For Yoruba perception or belief regarding this, see p. 9, second paragraph of this article.

⁴ For instance Christianity acknowledges the role of the supernatural ordinance that is God in the creation of the universe and entities in nature such as the atmosphere (air), land, trees, animals and human persons. Similarly, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism acknowledges the role of Allah, Vishnu or God in creation of the universe and its constituents.

legend/myths, sayings and practice that constitute the ideological framework of Yoruba belief. Embarking briefly on an apt exposition of these constituents is expedient at this point to bring to fore the claim of environmental relatedness of water.

Yoruba myths impress that the belief of the people about water is entwined with the creationist analogy that features the primordial nature of the 'first waters'¹ as a causative agent in the evolution or catalyst of the landscape/earth. While there are varying accounts regarding the causative agencies involved in the Yoruba myths of creation ranging from the contents of creation to actors like *Orisa-nla*, *Obatala*, *Orunmila* and *Oduduwa* (often avowed among the Yoruba as the founder of Ile Ife – the Holy City); there appears to be a converge understanding concerning the role of *Olodumare* or God (the Supreme Being), sand, water and cock. Take for instance two varying accounts about the agency of *Obatala & Orunmila* (Account A) as against *Oduduwa* (Account B) presented below.

Account A: In the beginning was only the sky above, water and marshland below. The Supreme Being, known as *Olodumare*, ruled the sky, and the goddess *Olokun* ruled what was below. *Obatala*, another god, reflected upon this situation, then went to *Olodumare* for permission to create dry land for all kinds of living creatures to inhabit. He was given permission to do this and to also create human beings for companionship. However, before leaving heaven, he sought advice from *Orunmila*, oldest son of *Olodumare*. He was told he would need a gold chain long enough to reach below, a snail's shell filled with sand, a white cock, a cat, and a palm nut, all of which he was to carry in a bag. All the gods contributed what gold they had, and *Orunmila* supplied the articles for the bag. When all was ready, *Obatala* hung the chain from a corner of the sky, placed the bag over his shoulder, and climbed down. When he reached the end of the chain he saw he still had some distance to go. From above he heard *Orunmila* instruct him to pour the sand from the snail's shell, and to release the white cock. He did as he was told. The cock landing on the sand began to scatter the sand on the marshy land. The sand formed dry land, the bigger piles becoming hills and the smaller piles valleys. *Obatala* jumped to a hill and named the place *Ife*²

Account B: ...*Oduduwa* was sent by God from heaven to create the earth and the human race. He descended from heaven accompanied by his lieutenants and landed at *Ile-Ife*, with a handful of sand and a cock in his hands, he spread the sand over the earth, which was covered with water, and the cock spread the sand all over the earth and created land (Alade 2015: 61).

These accounts when subjected to further analysis could be shown to be replete with contradictions about the creative agency of water and landscapes in Yoruba belief, but that it conveys the view that Yoruba have a cosmic view of water as a primordial entity entwined with the belief about creation is indisputable. Albeit this discourse does not dwell on comparative analysis of varying accounts, it is necessary to hint that attempts to address possible contradictions have been proffered by Suzanne Blier's (2012: 11 – 21) balance account of the cosmological myth of the Yoruba. In Blier's account, the Yoruba myth about the world or globe is presented through the analogy of a gourd or calabash cut horizontally so as to form a separate base and cover, with the upper half identified with the sky-linked creator god, *Obatala*, the lower half with the earth god and new dynasty founder, *Oduduwa* (Ibid: 11). In other words, these 'contested' figures (*Oduduwa*, *Obatala* etc.) in Yoruba creation myth, in line with the agency of water, sand and cock should be conceived as religious phenomena, forces and persona continually moving, intersecting, cross-pollinating, challenging, and energizing one another (humans inclusive) across a myriad of celestial and earthly spheres (Ibid). Perhaps, this is the rationale behind the attribution of indwelling spiritual forces or goddesses in water abode or sources in Yoruba belief. Citing the observation of Parrinder (1969: 45) is instructive here;

All the great rivers of Yoruba country have their presiding spirit. We have referred to Oya, goddess of the river Niger, wife of Shango the thunder god; two other wives of his were the rivers Oshun east of Ibadan and Ovia at Benin. One of the most popular river spirits is Yemoja, who is called mother of all deities and has shrines in many parts of the country, but especially rules over Ogun at Abeokuta... Olokun is the 'owner of the sea' in Yoruba... Olosa the Lagoon goddess is worshipped chiefly by those who live along the coast.

One interesting observation in the above citation is the female gendering of the spiritual custodian of these rivers in Yoruba belief. The implication this holds for environmental balance would be unfolded later in the discourse. Besides myth, the environmental relatedness of water with other life forms is encapsulated in catalogues of common and popular sayings among the indigenous Yoruba, which propels the tendency for recognition, identity

¹ This locution is intended to convey the ambiguity that surrounds the nature of the primordial 'water' in Yoruba belief; that is it instigates a philosophical or skeptical outlook as to the indeterminate nature of the 'water' in question. One hardly could claim to have a clue of whether this water is visible or invisible, stagnant or flowing, spiral or spherical, salty or fresh; since oftentimes myth strives to a large extent on mystery. This simply is to state clearly that the impression that this (indeterminate) 'water' concretizes the land topography in this sense is basically religiously derived, given Yoruba belief.

² This account is culled from "Yoruba Myth of Creation", retrieved from www.gcompletion.com/.../LESSONS%203-4%20UNDERSTANDING%20&%20RE... Accessed on June 29, 2016.

and symbolic relations or attitude to water in Yoruba belief. Five selected sayings illustrate this and they are highlighted as below;

Omi labuwe, omi labumu, enikan kii bomi soota – water is the converge of good health, no one can despise it.

Odo laye – water is the spring of life

Otutu ki mu eja lale odo – the fish does not complain of cold in water.

Odo kii kun, k'obo eja loju – water or river cannot surge to the highest current and blur the sight of the fish.

Iku omi ni'pa omuwe, iku ogun ni'pa akikanju – death by water is fit for the swimmer, death in war is fit for the warrior. That these five sayings have import for environmental relatedness and sustainability would soon be shown.

Furthermore, the example of Osun-Osogbo grove, a UNESCO world heritage site and largest sacred grove, dedicated to the worship of Osun (river goddess), in present day Yoruba world,¹ signify the praxis of environmental relatedness and brings to fore the utility of attributed beliefs and myths that influence attitude to water and water-related life-forms like the buffalo and fish, which are often considered the accomplices of the goddess.² By virtue of this, fishes are also totemic entities, not accessible to the devotees of the grove as food. Similarly, when buffaloes are found swarming in any river outlet in this Yoruba community, their activity is not interfered or disrupted on the basis of the belief that one who taunts the animal risk the wrath of the goddess Osun.

This is also extended to the belief about prohibitions of fishing (applicable as well to the goddess Yemoja in Yoruba belief), hunting of endangered species like white-nosed monkey and poaching of flora (herbal varieties that have inherent medicinal values. Precisely, the ritual associated activities like; the march of the votary maid (*Arugba*) from the center of the city (Osogbo in Osun State, where the grove is located) to the grove, outbound strategies that disallow encroachment, poaching or hunting of life forms that is animals and certain plants/trees (in order to mitigate overwhelming anthropocentric interest), and the converge of Osun-Osogbo devotees on pilgrimage to the grove³ (from various parts of the world) signifies the prioritization of the principle of environmental relatedness and vitalization of environmental sustainability approach from a Yoruba worldview. The plausibility of this would be shown in the subsequent section.

3.0 Imperative for Environmental Sustainability

Drawing upon the framework of beliefs in Yoruba thought to bring to fore the imperative for environmental sustainability is expedient at this juncture. This would be attempted through a hermeneutic interpretation or analysis of this framework. Basically, hermeneutics is the art of interpretation (Romualdo 2007: 11) that seeks to throw light on the fundamental conditions that underlie the phenomenon of understanding in all its modes, scientific and nonscientific alike, and that constitute understanding as an event over which the interpreting subject does not ultimately preside (Linge 1976: xi). In other words, the method of hermeneutics aims at understanding what a specific group of people say and do and why. Given this, its adoption as an approach to analyze the idea or principle of environmental relatedness in Yoruba belief is not out of range within this discourse.

Regarding beliefs, the predominant belief that the female (feminine) goddesses are the chief custodian of water presupposes the notion of reproduction/regeneration, care, peaceful and harmonious interaction with water related entities, inclusive of plants, which emphasizes the symbolism of water's potency, vitality and fertility that are considered essential for human and environmental recreation. This symbolism of water is (metaphorically) conceived in similar terms women's (female) physiological capacity of recreation. This is also connected with the view about the consecration of certain plants or animals as favorites or enhancer of the goddesses' vitality. In this light, Borokini & Lawal (2014: 20 - 33) attempted to establish the link between religion and traditional medicine beliefs in Yoruba by explicating the role of Yemoja, Osun and Oya in matters of recreation or fertility and the rationale for the propagation of plant species that are believed to aid the vitality of these goddesses in the dispensation of their roles. Borokini & Lawal (2014: 25) notes accordingly that:

Yemoja was noted as the mother of waters, primal waters, and nurturer. Yemoja symbolizes the amniotic fluid in the womb of the pregnant woman, as well as the breasts which nurture. She signifies the protective energies of the feminine element, manifesting her specific effects at the level of the womb liver, breasts and buttocks. The medicinal herbs she governs are kelp, squaw wine, cohosh, dandelion, yarrow, aloe, spirulina, mints, passion flower, and wild yam root.

¹ See whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1118.pdf. See also, www.susannewenger-aot.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Lesleys-article.pdf. Accessed July 18, 2016.

² See Ajibade, G. O. 2006. Animals in the Traditional Worldview of the Yoruba. *Folklore*, 10(30), pp. 157-158.

³ See whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1118.pdf

Oshun, the goddess of feminine energy and hydrotherapy: sensuality, beauty and gracefulness are personified by Oshun. She is responsible for clarity and flowing motion and has the power to heal with cool water. She is also the divinity of fertility and feminine essence... She acts on the circulatory system, digestive organs, elimination system, and women's pubic area. Herbs consecrated to her include yellow dock, burdock, cinnamon, damiana, anis, raspberry, yarrow, chamomile, lotus, uvaursi, buchu, myrrh and Echinacea.

Guardian of the cemetery, Oya is connected with tempests, winds of change, storms, and progression. Usually in the company of her masculine counterpart, Shango, she is the deity of rebirth... Oya's effects are in the lungs, bronchial passages, mucous membranes. Herbs used for such pathologies are mullein, comfrey, cherry bark, pleurisy root, elecampane, horehound, chickweed.

The above connection with human (female) physiology, plants and weather (in the case of tempest) suggests clearly that besides the religious conception, nature or the environment is personified with/after the attributes of the goddesses in Yoruba belief. Here, the principle of environmental relatedness seems obvious.

The selected sayings convey literal as well as metaphorical insight in Yoruba belief about the connection between liveliness (2nd and 1st saying) and sustenance, in relation to water. Simply, to be lively is to be in activity. It could be stated that even spiritual entities like the goddesses that preside over water in Yoruba belief are not exempted from this factor of activity. After all, water is essential for drinking, health care, irrigation, power generation among many others and this is incorporated even in belief-related activity like ritual healing, purification, providence and many more that is endemic in Yoruba beliefs held about water sources like Osun. This implies that water is crucial for human and natural survival. The 3rd saying indicates that the Yoruba acknowledges the importance of harmony among life forms; animals (symbolized by fish) and water.

This connotes that for the Yoruba, when environment is conceived, effectively managed and approached as a site of interconnected web of beings, the certainty of flourishable (co)existence among all entities in nature is ensured. The 4th saying is also a metaphorical import closely associated with that of the 3rd. The last saying has ambivalent meaning though not exclusive of the understanding of 'what you sow, you reap'. This injunction reiterates within this context that, nature should be treated with mutual respect as nature is also reactionary. This bespeaks the prevalent occurrence of climate change or crisis, due to human activity in nature. Human activity engendered the impact of exhumed, pollution, mineral extraction, greenhouse gasses that culminate to large scale global warming and climate change.

Moreover, beliefs expressed about the disruption of the 'peace' of some goddesses, neglecting or doing things contrary to their ontological essence as held in Yoruba belief have dire consequences for environmental as well as personal wellbeing. The instance of taunting a buffalo in sacred rivers, waste disposal or actions considered prohibited by the gods and goddesses, hunting or eating totemic embodiments like in the case of fish, that is believed to be a sacred servant in the river Osun and Yemoja may incur wrath of disease or inflictions like thunder strike, flood, draught, fever etc. Similarly, the Yoruba belief that ritual contents considered as aversion or taboos of the goddesses have the same recurring effects hold sway here.¹ Non-avoidance of these aberrations would engender imbalance in nature or environment, which have concrete consequences like shrinking sacred waters, wild wind, felling of trees, destruction of farm produce, collapse of buildings/bridges,² drainage difficulties, erosion, ill health and in severe cases, loss of human and animal lives. That ensuring or paying obeisance in the appropriate proportion to these goddesses via commitment to beliefs compatible with practice like worship, offering of the appropriate appeasing ritual materials, and observation of attributed taboos to avert these looming undesirable outcomes should not be treated lightly. This affirms the rationale of environmental sustainability, conservation and mitigation of the extinction of species associated with the phenomenon of water

¹ For instance, in the case of the goddess *Oya*, only goats and fowl are conceived as appropriate ritual (animal) materials in the preparing of appeasement to the goddess. Similarly, this is obtainable in beliefs about other gods' preferences in Yoruba land. For *Ogun* (God of Iron), dogs, snails, tortoise and rams are appropriate as appeasement/propitiation materials; *Esu* (the Yoruba trickster deity) prefers black fowl, *Sango* (God of Thunder) is fond of ram; *Orunmila* (God of Wisdom, Knowledge and Prophecy) is fond of rats, *Osanyin* (God of herbal medicine) is fond of the tortoise; *Egungun* (masquerade) is fond of rams, etc. See Ajibade Olusola cited in Owoseni, A.O & Olatoye, I.O. 2014. Yoruba Ethico-cultural Understanding and Perspectives of Animal Ethics. *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* Vol. 12: 3, p. 116.

² The recent June 28, 2014 flood that wrecked a lot of havoc or destruction of properties and lives at Apete area in Ibadan (capital city of Oyo State) is an apt instance here; where reasons varying from uncompleted construction of the main bridge to environmental pollution and negligence of worship or rituals to the goddess river, Osun are acclaimed the cause of the disastrous flood. Importantly, Chief (Mrs.) Osunbanse Alari, one of the Osun River priestesses who visited the scene insisted that the people's refusal to worship the river goddess was the cause of the calamity and stated that: "we only worshiped the river goddess about two years ago, but the oracle revealed during the rites that she should be worshipped soon again to avert imminent anger of the goddess." See Ibadan Floods: The Mystery, Buck-passing and Politics. Retrieved from www.latestnigeriannews.com/.../ibadan-floods-the-mystery-buckpassing-and-politics.... Accessed July 14, 2016.

in Yoruba belief. This understanding suggests that beyond superstitious grounding of Yoruba belief of water, the rationale of conservation is instigated by the existential significance of the water spirits/goddesses associated with the allegiance of animals, trees and climatic change or condition (occasioned by draught, flood, thunder strikes and so on).

The ritual march by votary maid which usually involves the accompaniment of the King of Oshogbo (*Ataoja* of Osogbo; Osogbo, being the capital of Osun State, where the river itself is located), Osun priest/priestesses and large troupe of people, mostly Osun devotees signify the purification rites and resolution of hope for Yoruba people to get their existential problems or needs ranging from diseases affliction, barrenness to providence and blessings met. One could perceive this investment of belief in Osun-Osogbo as a site of human aspiration and hope. It is conceived by the people as the ‘waters of life’ given the belief in its revitalization of life and nature. The outbound strategy depicts the grove as an analogous entity to natural pharmacy and zoo, which houses more than 200 species of plants that have medicinal values and bio-diversity of endangered species like plankton, animals such as white-throated monkey (*cercopithecus erytogaster*) that are estimated at a population of more than 60, putty-nosed monkey, red-capped mangabey, pangolins, Nile monitor lizard, royal python, African rock python and so on.¹

Here, noteworthy mention needs to be made of the quintessential role of the Austrian artist Susanne Wenger (christened *Adunni Olorisa*) who was at the fore front of disallowing the degradation of the grove through encroachment, poaching, destroying of religious and artistic edifices in the 1950’s (palace, statues etc.). With specific reference to Osun river, the water resource of the Osun-Osogbo groove, *Adunni Olorisa*’s role was a premeditated one, intended to mitigate the misuse and mismanagement of the grove that portend a far reaching effect for its perpetual existence, hence allaying the diminution of a significant aspect of the Yoruba cultural history. While it seems difficult at this point to determine the pre-conditional cause of the abuse of water in specific terms within the site prior to the intervention of *Adunni Olorisa*; conceivable proximate causes in line with the preceding motive hinted, could be alluded to the misuse and mismanagement of water as a resource in the community due to unbridled human activity that seems to disrupt the primordial state of *Osun* (water). In other words, the factors of the receding rate of the shrinking sacred water body due to unwarranted use and discard or lack of religious obeisance/rites in the appropriation of the water body (that is *Osun*) as an ontological substance or ‘being’ could be attributed as the immediate cause of abuse of water within the Yoruba community. In the bid to forestall the degradation of the grove, *Adunni Olorisa* in collaboration with the King had erected more than 40 statues, sacred boundary lands, vigilante groups which rendered the grove as a UNESCO world acclaimed site of tourist attraction.² *Adunni*’s intervention indicates the essentiality of human intervention in enhancing the environment scape. In similar vein, the practice of pilgrimage by Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria and Yoruba descent in diaspora as well as Osun devotees around the world signifies that the grove is indeed a melting point of human and nature exchange/relations, which enact the essence of environmental recognition and cooperation in Yoruba belief. It follows as impressed in this discourse that this understanding is not based on mere superstition, the tacit concern is; what undergirds the Yoruba understanding and belief of the phenomenal conception of water and water-associated life forms for the enactment of environmental sustainability? In the affirmative, Yoruba belief of water in this context is underpinned by dialectics of positive and negative causes. Simply, dialectics in this context is an allusion to the force of causality that is positive and negative causes derived from beliefs founded on the principle of environmental relatedness of water as a phenomenon in indigenous Yoruba belief. In other words, the prevalent belief, myth and practice (analyzed in the foregoing) about the substance and function of water for the enactment of environmental sustainability turns on two points, the negative and positive. As shown in the discourse, the negative cause alludes to the resultant outcomes like felling of trees, erosion, thunderstorm, disease outbreak, loss of human and animal lives due to aberration of practices, negligence or abuse of sacred forces that disrupt environmental balance. The positive cause as explicated in the discourse range from enhancing of conservation of species, inter-species harmony, environmental order, personal wellness, to tourist exhibitions and aesthetics. These inherent oppositions conveyed in Yoruba belief about water is dialectical and suggests that environmental relation and engagement in lieu of the above is underscored by religious and extra-religious motivations culminated to showcase the place of human, plants, trees, landscape in relation to the phenomenon of water and its other related entities.

4.0 Towards Addressing Global Ecological Crises

Lynn White’s famous writing, “the historical root of our ecological crisis” has gained scholarly attention for the observation that ecological conditions that is pollution, degradation and so on are also spurred by religious dogma/attitudes besides the evident impact of science and technology on the environment. Speaking specifically of Western scientific and technological impact on the environment, White asserts that;

¹ See whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1118.pdf.

² *Ibid*.

Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes towards man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and Neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post Christians.¹

While White's assertion has been subjected to diverse contestations especially as regards the idea that Christian attitude also conditions the course of ecological (in)stability in Western societies,² the remark that "what we do about ecology depend on our ideas of man-nature relationship"³ signifies the plausibility of laying claims to other indigenous beliefs and contribution to global ecological crisis. Thus, indigenous belief like the Yoruba that is laced with inherent dialectics as expressed in beliefs about associated life forms is not devoid of contributions to global ecological crisis.

However, addressing global ecological crisis can hardly be severed from the state of global environmental politics at the international community level. While much effort on global initiative on the course of addressing ecological crises has accrued to the quest for sustainable development, as pronounced in the United Nations enactment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), indigenous approaches to ecological/environmental sustainability are yet to be fully incorporated. This seems indisputable as the notion of environment on a global scale is putatively conceived as a natural capital shared by all, hence the most appealing approach would be one that spans across national and international boundaries.

Embracing the Brundtland Report's definition of sustainable development as 'development that is consistent with future as well as present needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987 cited in De Campos Mello 2000: 34) implies that addressing the impact of ecological stress or crisis that range from degradation of soil, water bodies, atmosphere or forest demands taking cognizance of local knowledge schemes to discern appropriately the perceptions about the critical present and future. In other words, discerning the contextual prioritization of what preserves each enclave's present and future being/existence remains essential to local communities as it is to the international community. This determines to a large extent how such enclaves address the imminent ecological crises faced in the course of attaining sustainable development.

Given this, it is apposite that a discourse of this nature be extended to show its relevance to global ecological crisis. Asserting the suitability of Yoruba belief towards ecological crisis demands understanding that the approach that such cultural zones of the world adopt for managing their environment is closely tied or pre-determined by their perception about nature and the entities within it. Within the precinct of the Yoruba, as shown, this is manifested in the conceptual understanding of the cosmos as a layered or hierarchized reality with entities such as water attributed with primacy of causation or deprivation of liveliness (that is positive-negative dialectics) for other life forms like humans, animals, land, valley or hills. Much about this have been relayed in the sections above.

Specifically, in terms of ecological crises like emission of carbondioxide or greenhouse gasses, drought, flood, loss of habitat, species extinction and many more that decimate and condition contemporary livelihood; volatility seems low in Yoruba enclave since intensive industrialization is not common. Nevertheless, human activity and population pressure (Wahab *et al* 2015; Babalola 2014) pose ecological threats in the Yoruba enclave. The intervention of human activities (that is activities not informed by sacred beliefs/attitudes) in the case of Osun-Osogbo depicts this. Agricultural activities, construction of proximate settlements, sewage flow from settlements to the grove, waste disposals like plastic bags trapped in the Osun river bank and root of trees,⁴ remain threats that cannot be underrated as ecological concerns. More so, this ecological concern is reinforced by the humid climate that pervades the enclave, which favours the presence of micro-organisms like mosses, lichens & fungus that produce chemicals that attacks artefacts and other materials; earth, metals, cement, that would in the long run mix with rotten leaves and rainwater to produce destructive chemicals.⁵ In the face of these, how can Yoruba belief address such ecological threats?

Emphasizing that the dispensation of Yoruba belief in contemporary times would exclusively address these ecological threats would amount to a pointless ambition since pro-active techno-scientific measures that demand governmental or State responsiveness needs to be engendered to address the issues of the organic cause of ecological threats like emissions of destructive chemicals, waste disposal and land/resource use and control among others that are essentially cost intensive. Be that as it may, the utility of environmental relatedness, typified through Yoruba belief of water in the discourse points that; spiritual explanations also incorporate important ecology, conservation and sustainable development strategies (Johnson cited in Babalola 2014: 353),

¹ See White, L. "Historical Root of Our Ecological Crisis". Retrieved from www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf. Accessed on January 2, 2017.

² See Edmonds, E.B. "The Ecological Crisis: Is Christianity Responsible?" Retrieved from https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/binah/02_063.pdf. Accessed on January 3, 2017; Arnold, E. B. 1987. "New Mission: Rescuing the Earth". *The Egg: A Journal of Eco-justice*, Vol. 7, No. 3.

³ *Ibid.* p. 5.

⁴ See whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1118.pdf.

⁵ *Ibid.*

thus the concept of sacred entities could also provide a basis for rehabilitation of the ecosystem.¹ Basically the need to curb the excessive anthropocentric or human centered activities is suggested in Yoruba belief and could also be harnessed for its significance and function to allay ecological threats. In contemporary reality, this would mean;

- Engendering ecosystem based industrialization rather than human centered industrialization that would portend a conducive atmosphere for life forms to thrive and co-exist perpetually. For instance, this is explicated through the conservation of groves (inclusive of water scape, trees that is afforestation) as sacred spaces instead of subjecting such to indiscriminate misuse, inclusive of deforestation that could result to loss of habitat for endangered species. The realization that disallowing unnecessary deforestation would also mitigate the build-up of carbondioxide in the atmosphere that enhance the rate of global warming is indisputable.
- Rational consideration of the ontological space of natural resources, inclusive of animals and non-humans that is trees, plants, water and so on as essential for ecological survival or perpetuity rather than usurping natural resources as entities to be explored or billed for exhaustion. This is exemplified through the Yoruba rationale of water belief as a primordial substance, edified by the presence of goddesses, whose allegiance is shared with certain animals, trees and plants as well as held beliefs propelled by popular sayings and obeisance that abhors abusive use of water and the associated life forms.

In other words, while technological and scientific advancement of environmental management could hardly be discounted for ecological balance, Yoruba belief (of water) incite that in contemporary times, the quest for ecological balance be complemented with progressive indigenous beliefs, attitudes and practices that propel the interdependency or interrelatedness of life-forms as one essential for human and natural survival.

Given the above, the discourse basically recommends the need to;

- Incorporate indigenous outlooks such as Yoruba belief of water and associated life forms alongside scientific and technological approaches in dealing with ecological dynamics.
- Integrate communal participation in the course of achieving sustainable environment/ecological balance since the community people are the custodian of this belief.²

Simply, we posit that these could also complement efforts to alleviate ecological crises in contemporary times, and where appropriate actions are taken to codify such indigenous outlooks as attitudinal disposition and practice towards the use of environmental resource like water, nature or the environment as a whole stands a chance of being considered as an end than as mere means for enhancing human and ecological survival.

Concluding Remarks

This discourse has made effort to argue that Yoruba religious belief, especially pertaining to water and the imperative for environmental stability should not be taken for granted. It advanced the view that while religious belief is central to the perception of water, it is demonstrable and not bereft of rational explication. This has been done via a hermeneutic analysis of Yoruba saying, beliefs, myth and practice in associated with the phenomenon of water. It posits that the negative mode of causality of environmental order that is ecosystem imbalance in Yoruba cosmos occurs as a matter of aberration of norms/attitudes, beliefs and practice. Thus, one could claim that indigenous Yoruba thought on water and environmental management is much tilted towards positive relations for vitality and regeneration of nature and reality as a whole. This means that one can be optimistic when indigenous belief base of environment management are incorporated as an essential factor for addressing global ecological crises. Thus, this discourse submits that such indigenous outlooks can complement technoscientific efforts in mitigating global ecological crises.

References

- Albanesse, C. (2012). *America: Religions and Religion*. United States: Wadsworth Publishers.
- Alade, A. D. (2015). Creation Stories and History of State Foundation: A Re-assessment of Yoruba Myth and Legend of Creation. *Researcher* 7 (3).
- Awolalu, J. O. and Dopamu P. A. (1979). *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonjo Publishers.
- Babalola, F. D. (2014). "Potential and Challenges of Indigenous Knowledge in Conservation of Biodiversity in

¹ This is a paraphrase of Ramajunam and Cyril's view (as cited in Babalola 2014: 353) that "the concept of sacred species provides a basis not only for natural resource management but also for rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems with community participation". See Babalola, F. D. 2014. "Potential and Challenges of Indigenous Knowledge in Conservation of Biodiversity in Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove, Nigeria". *International Journal of Science and Nature*.

² This is also advanced by Babalola 2014: 356 and Wahab et al. 2015: 007. See Wahab, M.K. A., Alarape A. & Ayodele, I. A. 2015. "Human Activities and Biodiversity Conservation: Osun Osogbo World Heritage Site". *Merit Research Journal of Agricultural Science and Soil Sciences Vol. 3(1)*.

- Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove, Nigeria”. *International Journal of Science and Nature*.
- Blier, S.P. (2012). “Cosmic Reference in Ancient Ife”. *African Cosmology*. Retrieved from scholar.harvard.edu/.../blier_cosmic_references_in_ancient_ife._african_cosmology_. Accessed July 2, 2016.
- Borokini, T. I. & Lawal, I. O. (2014). “Traditional Medicine Practice among Yoruba People of Nigeria: A Historical Perspective”. *Journal of Medicine Plant Studies* 2(6). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/...Lawal2/publication/...Traditional_medicine_practices_... Accessed January 2, 2017.
- Behrens, K. G. (2014). An African Relational Environmentalism and Moral Considerability. In *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 36: 1.
- Chuvieco, E. (2012). Religious Approach to Water Management and Environmental Conservation. *Water Policy* 14. Retrieved from www.etica-ambiental.org/insertaEstadisticaController.php?id=.../chuvieco2012a.pdf. Accessed January 2, 2017.
- De Campos Mello, V. (2000). “Mainstreaming the Environment: Global Ecology, International Institutions and the Crisis of Environmental Governance.” *Human Ecology Review* Vol. 7, No. 1.
- Durkheim, E. (1995). Fields, K. E. (trns.). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Belief*. USA: The Free Press.
- Frazer, G. (1922). *The Golden Bough*. New York: MacMillan.
- Geertz, C. (1993). ‘Religion as a cultural system’. In G. Clifford *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Fontana Press.
- Idowu, E. B. (1978). *African Traditional Religion - A Definition*. London: SCM Press Ltd.
- Idowu, E. B. (1994). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman, New York: A&B Book.
- James, W. (2009). The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/james/williams/varieties/complete.html>.
- Linge, E. D. (1976). *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Philosophical Hermeneutics*. University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, London.
- O’Dea, F. T. (1966). *The Sociology of Religion*. Methuen.
- Oestigaard, T. (2009). *Water, Culture and Identity: Comparing Past and Present Traditions in the Nile Basin Region*. BRIC Press: Bergen.
- Ogunade, R. (2005). Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion: Implication for Leadership and Society. Paper presented at “Science and Religion: Global Perspectives” at Metanexus Institute in Philadelphia, P.A, USA.
- Ogungbemi, S. (2005). An African Perspective on the Environmental Crisis. In L. Pojman (ed.) *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Parrinder, G. (1969). *West African Religion*. Britain: Redwood Burn Limited, Trowbridge & Esther.
- Tangwa, G. (2004). Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics. A Companion to African Philosophy. In K. Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Ter Haar, G. (2005). ‘Religion: Source of Conflict or Resource for Peace? In G. ter Haar and J.J Basuttill (eds.) *Bridge or Barrier: Religion and Vision for Peace*. Brill, Leiden.
- Tylor, C.E.B., (1920). 1832 – 1917. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*. London: Murray.
- Ramanujam, M. P. & Cyril, K.P.K. (2003). “Woody Species Diversity of Four Sacred Groves in the Pondicherry Region of South India”. *Biodiversity and Conservation* 12.
- Romualdo E. Abulad, SVD. (2007). “What is Hermeneutics? *Kritike* Volume 1: No. 2.
- Wahab, M. K. A., Alarape A. & Ayodele, I. A. (2015). “Human Activities and Biodiversity Conservation: Osun Osogbo World Heritage Site”. *Merit Research Journal of Agricultural Science and Soil Sciences* Vol. 3(1).

Acknowledgement

This work is a draft of seminar paper presentation under the group sub-theme “Water and Religion” at Bergen Summer Research School 2016 in Norway. I acknowledge also the critical suggestions of a friend, Timi Olujohungbe, as well as *My Barrister* – Oluwabusola Eniola Jagun for sparing some thoughts on the work.