

Ethnography of Ecospirituality and Ethnobotany of Indigenous African Culture: An Anthro-po-theological Case Study of Yoruba Culture

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Abstract: *The study examines ecospirituality and ethnobotany using traditional crops/plants of traditional Yoruba communities of West Africa. In this study, emphasis is placed on the interconnectivity of humans and the environment and on three specific crops namely, yam, kola nut and palm tree, which are considered as prime gifts of deities to humanity, are considered as extraordinaire crops and have pride of place among crops. Methodologically, it employs ethnographic paradigms, which demand a period of integration within the communities. In carrying out this research, the study employs fieldwork and in-Depth interviews. Data analyses give theological and anthropological interpretations to the materials observed by observing the correlation between*

ecospirituality and ethnobotany in indigenous communities of the Yoruba. The paper notes that crops/plants among traditional Yoruba communities, in general, are munificence of the deity and the active expression of fecundity of the earth goddess who blesses the people with richness. The paper concludes that among the Yoruba crops indicate physical and socio-cultural values intermix of religion and ecology is highly pronounced, and that crops have deep anthropological and theological import.

Keywords: *Anthropo-theology, ecospirituality, ethnobotany, traditional, Yoruba.*

Introduction

This is an ethnographic study of ecospirituality and ethnobotany among the Yoruba speaking peoples of West Africa. It proposes that there exists close nexus between ecology, religion and society, and that crops/plants among traditional Yoruba communities serve several purposes, which have profound ecological, anthropological and theological implications. The Yoruba are a group of indigenous ethnic settlements of West Africa that are found in Benin, Nigeria and Togo Republics, the largest concentration been in Nigeria. They see themselves as kindred, sharing the same language, religion, and descent from an eponymous individual called Oduduwa. They are located within the savanna grassland and rain forest regions of West Africa. With its diverse ecological zones, the area is populated with varieties of fauna and flora that give meaning to the peoples' ecospirituality and ethnobotany.

Traditional communities of the world, such as the Yoruba, are the main ethnographic laboratories left in an increasingly technologised world for researchers to

understand the nexus between ecospirituality and ethnobotany. Data and specifics about ecospirituality reveal the interconnectivities of ecology, society and religion. Scholars like Awolalu (1979), Lincoln (2000), van Schalkwyk (2001), Idowu (1996), Tetlow (2014), Okpe (2014), and Tubi, (2021), have stressed the connection between environment and religion/spirituality and illustrated the values of rediscovering the richness of the interplay between human beings and the environment.

The planet groaning on the throes of modernity and globalization is faced with gargantuan ecological crises, which result from consumerist anti-spiritual policies of most human beings. It is therefore incumbent to look at the spirituality of crops/plants amidst consumerism of the present time from the prism of an indigenous community. One of such traditional, but westernizing people are the Yoruba, a major ethnic group in West Africa. This study examines crops, diets and dietary practices as offering suitable illustrations of the interconnectivity of ecology, spirituality and peoples. The paper thus, critically brings forth the anthropo-theological richness of crops/plants they exploit for sundry reasons such as menu, socio-economic purposes, medicinal purposes and religious purposes.

Understanding ecospirituality and ethnobotany

This paper defines ecospirituality as the spiritual reading of the environment. It is concerned with examining the nexus between human beings and their religious convictions about their immediate environment. It examines the sacredness of the earth and everything in it. As earth-based spirituality, ecospirituality encompasses the reality of inherent

values of human and the environment in a complex relationship, (Francis, 2015, Hindmarsh, 2022; Kinsley, 1994). The Catholic pontiff, Francis (2019), sees the spiritual dimension of ecology by pointing at the earth as humanity's common home. Ecospirituality thus highlights the spiritual dimensions of natural environment (Oyewole, 2003). Scholars like Kinsley (1995) and Cumming (1991) expresses ecospirituality as human interrelationships with the earth. There are several ecospiritualities as there are religions of various creeds. In this light, scholars such as Merrit (2010) and Wilkinson (2012) speak of "green faith".

Ethnobotany is the branch of study, which studies traditional knowledge of plants and their usefulness in a given cultural setting. It is the concrete understanding of ecology from traditional point of view. It also means acquiring adequate knowledge about plants and their usage in their traditional locales. Leventin and Mahon (2008) and Martin (2004), opine that ethnobotany is the interpreting the traditional knowledge of the people on their immediate environment. They contend also that it is concerned about sustainability of ecology and useful for medicinal purposes.

Methodology and focus of the study

The paper examines specifics of ecospirituality within Yoruba cultural milieu and the anthropological-theological dimensions of diets and crops as having spiritual meanings among the Yoruba. The main methodology of study is qualitative ethnographic research. It spanned a period of 3 years of participant-observation of the environment and cultural practices of the Yoruba in relation to plants in general. It was

imperative for the study to become a multidisciplinary research involving the triads; anthropology, theology and ecology. This triadic academic pursuit gives the study a sharp focus on discovering, distilling and documenting the various aspects of spirituality, ecology and communities of indigenous Yoruba land.

The study focuses on traditional communities of Yoruba land, which have maintained aspects of their pristine culture amidst the throes of westernization and foreign religions. Certain communities of the Akoko, Okun, Ekiti and Ibolu speaking peoples of northern Yoruba land were chosen for the research, which Key Informants argued were keeping the indigenous customs of the Yoruba, despite inroads of foreign influences. Ethnography was the main methodology of research. It involved a period of insertion among some traditional communities of Yoruba land. Participant-observation, which, has been acclaimed as best suited for traditional communities was employed. Key informants played important roles in the study. These are persons acclaimed by their communities as knowledgeable aged men and women, who have deep insights into traditional norms and practices of the Yoruba. Farmers, chief priest and market women were also consulted as key informants. They provided in-depth analyses of traditional meals and their significance in the communities, and they supplied first hand data on ecological variations and religious ceremonies of their peoples.

Assessing ecospirituality and ethnobotany of the Yoruba

The assessment of traditional Yoruba ecospirituality and ethnobotany falls within what Tubi

(2021) calls Afroecology. A general overview of Afroecology by Tubi (2021) gives refreshing data on the issue. Yoruba's ecospirituality has its genesis in the belief that there is an Ultimate Being called Olodumare who is the source of all things. The world of the Yoruba involves both physical and spiritual realities, in which the two are intertwined. Thus among the Yoruba, the physical world has spiritual counterpart. The Yoruba too have rich ethnobotanical database, which encompasses traditional knowledge of the entire flora in their immediate habitation.

Their spirituality is highly dependent on their environment and their ethnobotanical knowledge is derived from the environment. The study discovers that in traditional Yoruba communities, plants such as kola nuts and palm trees play important anthropological, spiritual and ecological roles. One of such is the use of kola nuts for divination. Traditions attest that the foundation, location and settlement of most Yoruba towns and communities came to be as a result of kola nut divination, which gives direction to the precise locale to situate a group of people by the ancient founders. It is this light that Jegede (2021) sees urbanization in Yoruba land as closely linked with divination and the subsequent division of the land into areas of biotic resources and spiritual resources were based on divination. The ecospiritual aspect of Yoruba ecology was pointed out by Olaniran (2003) who contends that Yoruba cosmology entertains the presence of spiritual beings that are seen as part of the environment.

Key informants say that among the Yoruba, plants, diets and dietary practices form parts of the most

significant indicators of ecology, spirituality and inter-human communion, (Omoniwa, personal communication, Ayepeku, personal communication, Eseyin, personal communication, 2023). Thus, the natural environment is highly valued in traditional Yoruba community. The clearing, cultivating, planting and harvesting of crops have great ecological, anthropological and theological significance. Every stage is carefully marked and celebrated among the traditional communities of Yoruba land. In general, crops are planted and tendered, and meals taken, for sustenance, but in addition, they are engaged in because of their ecological suitability, spiritual connotation and anthropological relevance. Traditional sources attest that crops, meals and drinks have ecotheological and ecospiritual values among the Yoruba people like other traditional communities of the world. As produce of the earth, meals represent the munificence of God and the deities. They point to social and cultural values of human society by celebrating human interconnectivity. They also represent the fecundity of the earth goddess who blesses the people with the richness of the earth, (Adewumi, personal communication, Joledo, personal communication, Oju, personal communication, 2023). Among the Yoruba, an indication of the profundity of the ecospiritual/theological understanding of the society and their environment, comes out in some categories of foods called *ounje ebora*, and *ounje orisa* (food of deities) and *nkan etutu*, (ritual meals) which are accepted by the deities and ancestors, (Obahun, personal communication).

Oral sources identify the importance of certain plants in their culture. The Yoruba values crops as divine

munificence in general, but three are considered as *extraordinaire*. These are classified as “special gifts of the earth”. The three “special gifts of the earth” with significant anthropological and ecospiritual relevance are *isu* (yam), *obi* (kola nut) and *igi ope* (palm tree), (Obahun, personal communication, Hinmikalú, personal communication, Owolohun, personal communication, 2023). These three shall be discussed under the following headings; human sustenance, ritual purposes, socio-economic purposes, and tradomedicine.

Yam (*Usu/isu*): Yam is considered by the Yoruba as “the king of crops and foods”. It is considered as the best gift of the earth among the people, (Adewumi, personal communication, Omonaiye, personal communication, 2023). Key informants mention that there are various types of yams namely white yam, yellow yam, aerial yam, water yam and cocoyam. The most priced is the white yam, which in turn has several subtypes. The Okun, who inhabit the northeast Yoruba land count twelve of such subtypes namely *aga*, *kege*, *okunmodo*, *ewusu*, *olaka*, *ogunmole*, *boki*, *sebukele*, *awala*, *lolo*, *ipe*, *anikoloja*. Yam, as this study indicates, is the most celebrated crop among the Yoruba people. The greatest feast of yam is the annual new yam festival called *odun usu titun*. It is an annual feast held to celebrate the fecundity of the earth and praise the earth goddess for her munificence. It is also held to celebrate *ogun*, (deity of iron), which is the principal instrument of farm work among the people. The Yoruba generally call new yams *egbodo*, *emu* and *emidin*. The anthropological importance of yams is acclaimed in their culture. They are useful for social, economic, and religious purposes.

Human sustenance: Food is one of the necessities of life and yam is the king of food for the people. The first noticeable benefit of yams therefore is that they are used for human sustenance. Yam has immense nutritional value. It contains vitamins, minerals and fiber, which are needed for human body. It provides adequate source of energy and it improves bowel movement. Data state that leaves of yam too have nutritional values (<https://thewoksoflife.com>), as research shows that yam leaves have more nutrients than spinach, carrots and cucumbers. They are sometimes called “queen of vegetables” in some cultures, (<https://thewoksoflife.com>).

Ritual purposes: Yams serve tremendous ritual purposes among the Yoruba. First among equals is that yams are offered as sacrifices to deities. There are four rites associated with yams; rite of planting, rite of harvesting, rite of eating and rite of celebrating new yam. Each of these is carefully marked in the community. During planting, the rite requires that on the choice of land which crop will be planted, before cultivation commences, the farmer is expected to place a bowl of pounded yam with delicious soup and huge fish on one of a big heap with invocation to the earth goddess asking for bumper harvest. In addition, at harvest time, the new yam is used for divination at the new Yam festival, to know what the destiny of the community will be in the coming year. As a divinatory rite, a new yam is cut in half. The pieces are then thrown up. If one side faces up, and the other faces down; it is interpreted as mixed fortunes for the community. If the two face up, it is interpreted as goodness, while if both face down, the interpretation is considered as negative for the community, (Adewumi, personal communication,

Akande, personal communication, Omoniwa, personal communication, 2023).

Socio-economic purposes: Yam also has social-economic purposes among the Yoruba, for example, the celebration of marriage cannot be complete without the inclusion of yams as parts of the bride price. All over Yoruba land, yam is one of the most significant items of bride price. Yam cultivation involves extensive preparation. The process of land clearing takes place in the months of July, August and early September at the peak of the rainy season, during this time youths are usually busy with farm works and they earn fair sum for their services. In these months, the ground has been softened by rain and makes cultivation less tedious. Yams also serve as strong economic power base for traditional people. Failed yam cultivation in a year will result in hunger, while bumper harvest will result in economic empowerment as surplus yams are sold at traditional markets. Families are considered prosperous as much as the banns of yams in their homes, (Hunmikal, personal communication, Otetubi, personal communication, 2023).

Tradomedicine purposes: The Yoruba say that yams have medicinal values. They point at richness of the yam meals in providing sufficient energy as one eats sizable amount always. According to key informants, the people believe that it improves fecundity in males who consume pounded yam regularly, (Obahun, personal communication, Iye Ape, personal communication, 2023). Yam as a tuberous plant has fiber, which is key to maintaining good metabolism. Scientists contend that yam is valuable in fighting cancer, providing nutrients to the body, improve digestive health, fighting obesity, improve cholesterol level, strengthen brain functioning,

alleviate inflammation, and improve sugar level. They also add that it supports healthy heart, provides collagen for hair and skin and can improve eye sight. The scholars Obidiegwu, Lyons and Chilaka, (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) in a joint study highlight the benefits of yam and conclude that the crop has immense benefits to humanity.

Kolanut (*Obi*): This is one of the prime crops among the Yoruba. It is of great anthropological and ecospiritual relevance. *Obi* is associated with life, which points at the physical existence of human lives. It also indicates the fecundity of the earth. Furthermore, *obi* is considered as one of the favourites of Yoruba deities. It is a major source of *ifa* divination. When the Yoruba in general break *obi*, they are reconciling humanity and heaven. It is the greatest sign of peace. It is a delicacy for human beings and the deities.

It comes in white (*obi pupa*) and red (*obi afin*) colours. *Obi* has different sub-types. (i) *Akiriboto* refers to one single kola nut, without lobes. This is very uncommon. It is highly valued for medical purposes. (ii) *Gbanja* refers to the popular kola nuts with two lobes. This particular kola nut is greatly desired as snack or as stimulant. However, key informants say that it is not valuable for *ifa* because its lobes have no lines of differentiation in them. According to Obahun (personal communication), it lacks male or female characteristics needed for divination. (iii) *Eta obi* refers to kola nuts with three lobes, which is priced as the best gift for *esu* and it is also useful for medical purposes. (iv) *Abata* also called *iya obi*, which means “mother of kola nuts”, refers to kola nuts with four lobes. It is the delicacies of deities and human beings. It is useful for divination in giving “yes” or “no” responses to clients. (v) *Olufuwa* refers to kola

nuts with five lobes. (vi) *iwarefa*, which refers to kola nuts with six lobes. This type is very rare and it is considered a special breed. It is priced as a necessary object for the ordination of the *aworo* (chief priest) and for coronation of *oloye* (chiefs).

Human sustenance: Traditional Yoruba sources acclaim kola nuts as of the highest gifts for human sustenance, (Ajakaiye, personal communication, Otetubi, personal communication, 2023). One of the major usefulness of kola nuts for human being is that it starves off thirst. Locals acclaim it as a good agent of food digestion, as it aids metabolism. It is also good for relief of fatigue, and it is a natural stimulant due to the presence of caffeine. For this reason, it is a major nut for those in the desert and semi desert regions of West Africa.

Socio-economic purposes: Socially, kola nuts are used to cement relationships and friendships. Thus, marriages are not concluded unless kola nuts are presented as important parts of bride price. The visits of friends are acknowledged with kola nuts. To deny kola nuts to a visitor is tantamount to a rejection, (Otetubi, personal communication, 2023). It also has great economic value among the trading guilds of Africa. It was a main commodity in the trading communities in ancient West Africa due to this factor.

Ritual purposes: One of the most prized ritual objects in Yoruba culture is kola nut. For this reason, kola nuts are celebrated as choice food for deities and ancestors, (Otetubi, personal communication, 2023). Kola nut has the symbol of truth, which is expressed in Yoruba proverb, *enu agba ni obi ngbosi* (it is in the mouth of elders that we know the mature kola nut), meaning truth. Another pithy saying is *oro lo nyo ida l'apo, oro lo nyo obi l'apo* (it is words that pulls out the sword from

the scabbard, and it is words that pull out kola nut from the pocket). This indicates the positive and negative use of words. The use of kola nut for rituals al is noted among the Yoruba in the making of *awure* (success and good luck). Kola nut is used to dig up luck, dig up success or anything desirable. Kola nut is involved in the recipe of bringing good fortune, health, fecundity, prestige, wealth, (Dopamu, 2003).

Kola nuts are prized as divinatory objects among Ifa devotees. *Abata* is specifically used for divination and fortune telling, as it is acclaimed to have clairvoyance powers. A typical scene goes like this: a client visits *onifa* (owner of ifa/ifa diviner) to make inquiry about persons, events and places. He will clasp four lobes of kola nut and whispers his/her intentions into them. The kola nuts are then given back to the *onifa* who throws them up. The position to which they drop on the floor will indicate the results of the divining process, (Akande, personal communication, 2023).

Tradomedicine: Kola nuts play important roles in traditional medical practices. It is acclaimed by scholars to be useful in aiding blood circulation, and to sweeten breath as well as boosting, metabolism and digestion. Traditions see it as useful in starving off thirst for those going on long journeys. It is also used to cure fatigue, exhaustion and depression in traditional medication, (Adewumi, personal communication, Akande, personal communication, 2023). It is therefore, becomes clearer while it played important roles in the Trans-Saharan trade in the past.

Palm tree (*Igi ope*): Among the Yoruba, *igi ope* is highly acclaimed as one of the prime gifts of the earth goddess. It gives very high ecospiritual values. Every part of the palm is useful to the Yoruba people; the

trunk, leaves, sap, and seeds are very valuable. Therefore, it is one of the most useful natural plants found in their land. The research observed the use of palm in several communities of Akoko, Ibolos and Okun, a fact that neither modernization, western education, Islam nor Christianity could annul.

Human sustenance: Palm tree is seen as the one of the most useful plants which sustains human life among the Yoruba. The seeds of palm trees are processed as oil. Palm oil (*epo ope*), also called *epo pupa* (red oil), is a major product of palm tree used in cooking. The cultural context of the ecotheological relevance of palm oil is its different usage among the Yoruba. Their menu contains high quantity of oil, so much, so that the Igbo often called them *ofe mmanu people* (people of oily soup). This statement comes as a pun, but it expresses the basic reality that the people, especially the Yoruba in general consume relatively high quantity of oil. The Yoruba people often use palm oil as condiments for soup, and to savor boiled yam or roasted yam. The indispensability of palm oil in soup among the Yoruba is enunciated in their orature, *ti enia ko ba tori isu je epo, yio to tori epo je isu*, (one would eat palm oil because of yam, or eat yam because of palm oil). The same usage is also applicable to palm kernel oil (*udin/idin*), (Ojukaniaye, personal communication, Iya Ape, personal communication, Agbale, personal communication, 2023).

Ritual purposes: Palm fronds are very useful for ritual purposes. Palm trees have eschatological relevance among the Yoruba. Those found along footpaths are considered as reincarnation of wicked persons who came back to suffer the consequences of their sins, as passersby often inflict wounds on the trunk. Among the

Yoruba people, tying palm fronds on any object makes it untouchable. Hosting palm fronds on disputed lands is still the best method of keeping land violators in check. Tying palm fronds along paths to ponds mark it “out of bounds” for intruders. Hosting palm fronds in front of groves keep non-initiates at bay. In Yoruba land, palms play important roles in funeral rites. Traditional obsequies among the Okun people are associated with palms, such that mourners tie palms on corpses on transit to inform people to give the needed respect to the dead; this happens irrespective of religious affiliations or status in the society. Palm nuts are useful in divinations. *Emu* (wine from palm) is the first among equals of Yoruba drinks. When used for ritual purposes must be poured on the ground. Earth receives palm oil and palm wine regularly from devotees. Palm wine connoisseurs would not drink without pouring little to the earth. In addition, palm oil and palm wine are useful as objects of rituals as they are considered as special drinks for the deities. These drinks delight the deities as they play important parts in traditional sacrifices. The research noticed that palm oil is poured on the base of trees, boulders or monoliths, which serve as *oju ibo* (spot of sacrifice). Some are poured on *oju iya* (road junctions) as propitiatory rites (Akande, personal communication, Maliki, personal communication, Eseyin, personal communication, 2023).

In traditional milieu, it is generally held that when devotees pour palm oil on the ground, the swamping of ants on it; indicate the visit of the departed relatives who came to eat from the family. Palm oil is used as metaphor for problem, in the popular saying, *ema ta epo si ala mi* (do not stain my white cloth with palm oil). It is also used to expressed something positive in the saying,

epo ni moru, oniyangi maba temi je (I am carrying palm oil, wicked person don't cause me to stumble).

Socio-economic purposes: Palm trees have socio-economic values. They are useful in several ways. According to informants, these roles have antiquity to their credit. Elders say that they are not roles derived from contacts with outsiders. One can cite the following usefulness of palm trees. They are useful in the construction of houses. The trunks are useful as timbers and the leaves as roofing materials. Kernels are processed and sold for economic gains. Palm wine and palm oil bring economic benefits when sold. Palm wine has social values when it is taken with friends and peers as a form of relaxation. From the fronds, brooms are made for sweeping. Brooms are also used to wade off witches. Shaft the waste product of palm oil processing are used as fuel for cooking, the fluffy part of palm fronds are used as ignition/lighter in traditional home. Palm fronds are used for fencing off households and are used for making pens for domesticates. Palm oil is used as tenancy fees on farmland by tenants to landowners. Both palm oil and palm wine play important roles in the celebration of matrimony in Okun communities, (Abiola, personal communication, Omonaiye, personal communication, Hinmikal, personal communication, 2023).

Tradomedicine purposes: Key informants attest to the important roles of palm tree as medicinal. Medically, palm fronds are used as herbs to treat different ailments. The researcher observed that, palms were waved over sick persons as healing remedies. Experts say that they are boiled for the sick to bring healing. Witches are tormented by palm-waving in villages. Palm oil and kernel oil are very useful in the treatment of convulsions

and poison. They are also useful as body lotions. Traditional herbalists recommend *epo pupa* and *udin/idin* for their health benefits like improvement of skin and hair care, boosting brainpower/enhancing retentive memory, remedies for heart diseases, and reduction of stress. *Udin/idin* (palm kernel oil) is one of the most potent materials used for traditional medicine among the Yoruba. Its usage is wide and it is useful in multiple cases of the most serious to the benign. The study reveals that it is useful for orthopedic treatment and for the treatment of convulsion, poison, paralysis, and hair and skin among others, (Owolohun, personal communication, Ajakaiye, personal communication, Ayepeku, personal communication, Omoniwa, personal communication, 2023).

Conclusion

The paper engages in ethnographic study of two related concepts ecospirituality and ethnobotany among the indigenous communities of the Yoruba speaking peoples of West Africa. The study investigates traditional knowledge and practices of the Yoruba in exploiting their natural resources for different purposes. Using ethnographic paradigm, the study reveals the interconnectivity of ecology, society and religion. On one hand, it supplies adequate data on ecospirituality and ethnobotany of traditional Yoruba communities and on the other hand, the study notes the richness of the flora of Yoruba land in providing sufficient data on anthropo-theological discussion of ecospirituality and ethnobotany of traditional peoples and cultures. It is incumbent that the research engages in what can be called spiritualization of the environment of Yoruba cultural milieu. This is because it shows the spiritual dimensions

of their traditional environment. The study concludes that among the plethora of crops/plants of Yoruba land, three are highly prized as “special gifts” of the earth goddess, namely yam, palm oil and kola nut, which are considered as extraordinary plants by the Yoruba. Furthermore, the study surmises that crops among them possess intricate spiritual, socio-economic and physical dimensions.

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