

## Towards a Yoruba conception of ecojustice

Adewale O. OWOSENI\*

### Abstract

*Eco-justice is primarily concerned with the goals of mitigating environmental harm and sustaining the environment and its components on the basis of an inclusive notion of justice that advances that no ecosystem units (human and nonhuman lifeforms) are unduly engaged for destruction or massive exhaustion. It follows that the advancement of eco-justice is also underscored by the dynamics of interaction/relations among the ecosystem units within the environment. In light of this, the complexity of human, flora, and fauna relations is implicated. Within the philosophical parlance, this point of relations between human and nonhuman lifeforms has been subjected to ethical debates, in terms of anthropocentric, non-anthropocentric, post-anthropocentric, and animist analyses, while suggestive means of advancing eco-justice from the context of indigenous knowledge systems seem ongoing. With specific emphasis on indigenous Yoruba thought, this discourse attempts to interrogate the extent to which eco-justice is advanced. It adopts critical and hermeneutical approaches to engage indigenous Yoruba thought as encapsulated in Ifa myths, relevant sayings and beliefs. The paper identifies some problems associated with Yoruba conception of ecojustice and submits that its notion of eco-justice is founded on the basis of 'eco-empathy', which is foregrounded by the myth of a 'market-place of tolerance.' It argues that the myth of a 'market-place of tolerance' proffers an optimistic and alternative ideal towards realizing ecojustice, founded on tolerance, forbearance, mutual recognition, and respect of the essence of all lifeforms (human, nonhuman and the environment) for the sake of interdependent survival and harmonious wellbeing.*

### Résumé

*L'écojustice est principalement concernée par les objectifs d'atténuation des dommages environnementaux et de maintien de l'environnement et de ses composantes sur la base d'une notion inclusive de justice qui avance qu'aucune unité des écosystèmes (formes de vie humaines et non humaines) ne doit être indûment engagée dans la destruction ou l'épuisement massif. Il s'ensuit que la promotion de l'écojustice est également sous-tendue par les dynamiques d'interaction/de relations entre les unités des écosystèmes au sein de l'environnement. À la lumière de cela, la complexité des relations entre humains, flore et faune est impliquée. Dans le langage philosophique, ce point des relations entre formes de vie humaines et non humaines a fait l'objet de débats éthiques, en termes d'analyses anthropocentriques, non anthropocentriques, post-anthropocentriques et animistes, tandis que des moyens suggestifs de promouvoir l'écojustice dans le contexte des systèmes de savoirs autochtones semblent en cours. En mettant un accent particulier sur la pensée autochtone Yoruba, ce discours tente d'interroger la mesure dans laquelle l'écojustice est promue. Il adopte des approches critiques et herméneutiques pour engager la pensée Yoruba telle qu'elle est encapsulée dans les mythes Ifa, les proverbes pertinents et les croyances. L'article identifie certains problèmes associés à la conception Yoruba de l'écojustice et soutient que sa notion d'écojustice est fondée sur la base de « l'éco-empathie », laquelle est mise en avant par le mythe d'un « marché de la tolérance ». Il avance que le mythe du « marché de la tolérance » propose un idéal optimiste et alternatif pour réaliser l'écojustice, fondé sur la tolérance, la patience, la reconnaissance mutuelle et le respect de l'essence de toutes les formes de vie (humaines, non humaines et l'environnement), au nom de la survie interdépendante et du bien-être harmonieux.*

**Keywords:** eco-justice, eco-empathy, Yoruba, human and nonhuman lifeforms

\* Adewale O. OWOSENI is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, South Africa and a faculty member at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His research explores Indigenous knowledge systems in Africa, with particular attention to environmental thought, eco-justice, and the intersections of African philosophy and the environmental humanities.

DOI: [10.65130/c7np9ey](https://doi.org/10.65130/c7np9ey)

## Introduction

Human and nonhuman species, natural and ecological entities remain entangled in a complex web of relationships. Attaining a balanced scale of moderation of such entangled relationships foreground the quest for ecojustice. Ecojustice can be described a sort of justice pursued towards the alleviation of the undesirable conditions of the entire environment due to human driven impact or motivations (Weinhues 2020). In other words, ecojustice addresses the undesirable consequences of human-centered construction of the notion of justice, as reflected for instance in the advancement of

environmental justice and social justice (Washington et al. 2018; Kopina 2014). It follows that ecojustice fosters the socio-ecological resilience of natural life forms and systems, (human and nonhuman) as a precondition for the realization of holistic/inclusive justice. Advancing an inclusive foundation or basis of justice requires a conceptual reconsideration of the position of lifeforms or ecological units at the marginal fringes of the ecosystem. This means that the pursuit of ecojustice means the dispersal of the notion of justice beyond human-centered construction to nonhuman species and ecological entities at large.

The impression that ecojustice advances a beyond human-centered construction of justice does not in anyway render the reality of human impact on the entire environment unreal. However, it tends to expound a value-inclusive (human and nonhuman/environmental) approach or foundation of justice. It is in this connection that ecojustice fosters human and nonhuman relations towards intersubjective or holistic justice. While copious efforts toward the advancement of ecojustice remain ongoing, minimal attention is still paid to the extent that norms of indigenous communities/societies also promote the value of intersubjective wellbeing (that is wellbeing for human, nonhuman lifeforms and

environment). It has been established that indigenous communities are saturated with norms of intersubjective values for enhancing the integrity of human and nonhuman wellbeing (Roth 2010; Turner 2000, 1275 – 1278; McGregor 2016, p. 46 – 48). As such, indigenous communities propel the pursuit of ecojustice. The following discourse attempts to exemplify an indigenous account of ecojustice, with particular reference to Yoruba thought.

It presents a critical and hermeneutical exposition of Yoruba thought or understanding about holistic or inclusive justice that is ecojustice. The discourse is partitioned into three sections. The first section addresses the connection between indigenous knowledge and ecojustice. This is further exemplified in the second section through the exposition of Yoruba ecological understanding of the dynamics of relations between human and nonhuman lifeforms. The last section engages the underlying myth of ‘the market place of tolerance’, as derived from *Ifa* corpus as a foundation for Yoruba conception of ecojustice, and the possible limitations of the advancement of such conception.

### Indigenous Knowledge and the Pursuit of Ecojustice

Generally, the discourse of indigenous knowledge interrogates the core relevance of a people’s way of knowing about things or phenomena, in accordance with the context of ‘what is claimed to be known’ (and how), which may not fit within supposed extant and ‘global’ ideals of knowledge production. Hence, it is not uncommon that synonymous descriptive terms or coinage such as traditional ecological knowledge and traditional knowledge systems are used to refer to indigenous knowledge systems. This is often so since it is presumed that IK is knowledge that is peculiar or unique, as a primordial identity of a people or community’s worldview. This presumed

primordially of IK is foregrounded by the dominant Eurocentric (Cartesian/Western) assumption about modernity as a schema for understanding the mind – body dualism, superior – inferior complexity, human – nonhuman/more-than-human divide, superaltern – subaltern/marginal groups and so on.

Peter Cole and Pat O’Riley (2020) aptly captures this stance of understanding about IK when they suggest that IK remains a victim of global corporate capitalism, which is as a result of colonial-imperial regimes that attempt to dismiss, truncate and extinguish indigenous lives and autonomous rights of determination in terms of its relational capacity, management of its natural resources and external realities. The impression here is that while indigenous knowledge is advanced as a clamour for democratizing the knowledge space, which is a means for entrenching epistemic justice for cultural modes of knowing, its significance as a complementary/alternative approach for mitigating the consequences of ‘self-serving’ (concentric) knowledge regimes is yet to be realized. The burgeoning era of the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz et al 2010, p. 2228 – 2231), which is fostered by the impact of colonial industrial complex is an example of such ‘self-serving’ (concentric) knowledge regime. This era has triggered a historical pathology of pandemic crises, climate and socio-ecological variation/change, which are solely responsible for the gradual rise in human and nonhuman mortality rate, displacement of nonhuman species, depletion of habitat, ecosystem crises, and biodiversity. The potency of indigenous knowledge as a complementary approach to mitigate some of these undesirable consequences lies in its inherent value of oneness of natural, human, and nonhuman wellbeing. In fact, the existing imperative of ‘One Health’ initiative that also prioritizes the convergence of human, nonhuman, and environmental wellbeing (Amuguni, Konde, Bikaako 2019) has always been an essential characteristic of indigenous

know-how (Owoseni & Olatoye 2022, p. 215 – 230). This characteristic provides a ground for the advancement of indigenous knowledge scale as a foundation for inclusive and nondiscriminatory sense of justice towards holistic ecosystem wellbeing, that is ecojustice.

Foregrounding ecojustice through indigenous knowledge scale of understanding about the environment is not a recent development. It is an ongoing effort that is in tandem with the idea of ‘ecological commons’ (to use the coinage of Hugo Alroe). Alroe (2005) had hinted that ecojustice is a liberating and challenging concept that ‘troubles’ the current pace of global liberal market, structural, and technological approaches to organic agricultural practices since it facilitates the retrenchment of fairness and justice in respect of the custodianship and management of the environment into the hands of the commons. In other words, ecojustice, which is invariably called ecological justice repositions the mediation of social and ecological interests into the hands of the ecological commons (that comprise the local/indigenous people, future generations, and nonhuman species). At the same time, it enhances the recession of dominant global modernity/ideals of environmental growth and development that has aided and abetted ecological crises, which constitute stress to holistic sustainability of wellbeing.

Precisely, in the case of the lingering effects of dominant global modernity on organic agricultural practice or production, Alroe noted the inevitable consequences of rigid food class structures, which widens the gap between the producer and consumers that fosters unbridled capitalism/consumerism, reduction of food diversity, and shrinking of landscapes. Given these adverse realities, ecojustice becomes a conduit within indigenous knowledge scale for leading appreciable correctness to such undesirable consequences that confront the existential survival of the ecological commons. Low and Gleeson (1998), Bryne, Leigh & Cecilia (2002)

share similar opinions on the viability of ecojustice as a safeguarding conceptual tool of resistance to reposition and alleviate the undesirable and vulnerable predicament of the ecological commons in the face of dominant and exclusive approaches to holistic wellbeing. Indigenous knowledge systems in Africa or African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) that are inherently suffused with consideration for ecojustice exemplify the understanding about balanced or inclusive wellbeing for human and nonhuman species as well as the environment (that is the ecological commons). Thus, AIKS is viable for its heuristic value of advancing the oneness (harmony) of ecological systems and biodiversity. While the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Report 1987) and United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio Earth Summit 1992) had reckoned that indigenous or traditional knowledge systems remain viable for its inherent worth of a harmonious ethics of respect and relations with nature/earth, the call for its incorporation alongside existing approaches towards the attainment of ecological justice is yet to be realized.

One major factor responsible for this is the subsisting skeptical opinion about the scientific nature of indigenous ecological understanding as derived from myths, legends, proverbs, wise sayings or beliefs of the people. Obiora and Emeka (2015) as well as Lawal (2019) have made efforts to engage this skeptical impression. They opined that in the case of African indigenous knowledge systems, the 'tradition' of ecological ethics steeped in the culture of myths, proverbs and so on to foster harmonious relations between humans and nature does not suggest an irrational or unscientific justification of Africa's past ways of life before the influx of Western styled modernity or techno-scientific approaches. They suggest that such ecological understanding is rather embraced for its values of trial and error, and time-tested norms of engagement with/within the

environment that accrues from the experience and consistent held beliefs of the people, which later becomes systematized into cultural norms of myth, proverbs, wise sayings and so on.

In fact, Babalola (1998) posits a strong thesis for reliance on the systematization of Yoruba cultural understanding as scientific through his analysis of the Yoruba 'geosophic' consciousness about climatic variation/change, geological timing and spacing via circulated indigenous concepts such as *osan ganringanrin*, *iyaleta*, *afemojumo*, *kato rerin o digbo*, *kinniun oloola iju* among many others. It seems difficult to deny that this cultural construction of ecological outlook through AIKS propels indigenous people's knowledge, attitude, and view about what eco-justice should entail since some of these norms are still in circulation. However, in order to avoid the impression that African communities have the same (homogenous) norms of ecological understanding, it is essential to exemplify the notion of ecojustice through the instance of an African indigenous worldview. Yoruba worldview or thought would suffice as an instance here.

### ***Ise Eniyan, ni Ise Eranko, Irorun Igi ni Irorun Eye: Yoruba Ecological Understanding of Relations among Lifeforms***

*Ise eniyan ni ise eranko, irorun igi ni irorun eye*, which literally means "the ways of humans are like the ways of animals, just as the comfort of the tree is the comfort of the birds" are combined Yoruba expressions about the similarity of the cognitive/behavioral state and wellbeing of human and nonhuman lifeforms (inclusive of animals and trees). The deployment of these sayings by the typical Yoruba individual or community is not mere arbitrary rhetoric but signifier of two things. On one side, it signifies the observation of the relational attitudes/dispositions of human and nonhuman animal species alike. On the other

side, it signifies a culmination of the Yoruba cultural understanding regarding existing precautionary (mythological) worldviews about the possibility of disharmonious wellbeing of human and nonhuman lifeforms, due to the occurrence of indiscriminate interspecies/multispecies engagement. This could be due to the dismissal of essential traditional wisdom that could ordinarily prevent the disintegration of holistic wellbeing, as impressed in Yoruba thought.

It is important to expedite an exposition of Yoruba thought in this regard to concretize this preceding assertion. Before embarking on this, it is equally important to hint that when allusion is made to Yoruba/Yoruba thought in the context of this discourse, it refers to the cultural identity shared by the dominant groups of people found especially in the parts of Southwestern Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, and other diasporic regions of the world that identify with the description or identity markers (that include *Ifa* corpus, sayings, proverbs, beliefs and so on) of people that are described as Yoruba (Akinjogbin 2008). In other words, this discourse establishes the notion of Yoruba on pre-existing characterization of the group on the basis of communitarian and complementary conception of reality (Blier, 2012; Oduwole & Fayemi 2017) as well as cultural and geographical criteria established on the rationale of the previously mentioned identity markers. It also needs to be mentioned that previous efforts of describing what counts as 'Yoruba' provides a constitutive foundation for the advancement of further insights in Yoruba thought on diverse phenomena. Aligning with these charitable efforts, the subsequent discourse proceeds on an exposition of the conception of ecological understanding within the same thought system on this basis.

A veritable way of gaining insight into the aforementioned issue of Yoruba ecological understanding is to reflectively sieve through the ethnographic body or content of thought in Yoruba worldview, which is often

encapsulated in *Ifa* corpus or mythical accounts, proverbs and sayings. For the sake of clarity, *Ifa* refers to the vast repository or corpus of information/knowledge about the language, culture, belief system as well as the socio-cultural peculiarities of the Yoruba (Eleuibon 2019, p. vii), which is often consulted for understanding potential, actual and emerging phenomena or issues. Thus, *Ifa* is central to Yoruba thought and encompassing for seeking ideas and information about phenomena, that could afterwards be subjected to critical interpretations and analysis. However, there still exists other Yoruba ethnographic sources like beliefs, proverbs and sayings that complement the central place of *Ifa* on issues in Yoruba thought.

Specifically, regarding the ecological understanding of relations among lifeforms or biodiversity, the *Ifa* verse (*Odu Ifa*) of *Okanranosun* illustrates the basis of the conservative and moral injunction of *Irorun igi ni irorun eye* through the myth of the Iroko tree and parrot (Eleuibonn 2019). According to the narrative, the parrot has been barren for a long time and desired to have a child. In order to realize her desire, she consulted (or divined) from an *Ifa* priest called *Okitipo-eba-ona* about what she has to do surmount her ordeal of barrenness. The *Ifa* verse divined for the parrot reads thus:

*Okitipo-eba-ona*

Rounded-mounds-on-the-side-ways

*Adifa fun Odidere*

Ifa divination was performed for parrot

*Nijo ti n fomi oju segbere omo*

While she was waiting for lack of children

(Eleuibon 2019, p. 1 – 5)

After the consultation, the *Ifa* priest told the parrot to offer prayers and visit the Iroko tree by the road-side of the city and present her request to the tree, who would definitely bless her with the gift of a child. The parrot did as she was instructed and birthed a child. As a token of appreciation, the parrot

relocated and started living with the Iroko tree. As it was the habitual practice during the time that people offered prayers and presented their request to the Iroko tree whenever they pass by, the parrot would affirm and accentuate the prayers. In other words, the parrot became the mouth piece of the Iroko tree for accentuation of prayers. However, it happened on a particular day that a woman who also suffered a similar fate like that of the parrot (that is barrenness) approached the Iroko tree with the prayer request for a child, which was affirmed and accentuated accordingly by the parrot. Since this woman promised to offer a life goat to the Iroko tree upon positive response to her prayer request, she approached the Iroko tree and offered the life goat as promised after she birthed a child. The parrot, who was also elated about the situation asked the Iroko tree for the heart of the goat out of all the parts. The spirit of the tree refused to grant the parrot's request and this led to a disagreement between the two since the Iroko tree claimed it was not the parrot that possessed the power of procreation used in changing the fate of barren women. Due to this insult, the parrot also became determined to show the Iroko tree the reach of her power. She planned to render the tree insignificant and irrelevant. She attained this by reverting accentuation to prayer requests or supplications offered to the Iroko tree into a curse, since she was still the mouthpiece of the tree. So, on an occasion when a passerby offered a prayer request for anticipated favour or blessing, the parrot responded in the following way:

**Passerby** (offering the prayers):

Iroko, how are you?  
*Oluwere*; the money bearing tree  
 Please, let me make good sales  
 Let me make good profits.

**Parrot** (responding with a curse):

You this woman would not make good sales  
 You would not make money  
 Your business shall be fraught with debts.

The terrifying news of the awful proclamation of the Iroko tree reached the ears of the king, and it was decided at the palatial court that the tree be diminished to nothing by being hacked down. The whole community approached the tree with axes and dissected it into pieces, while the parrot also lost its abode and wandered about. There is no doubt that this narrative in *Ifa* is laced with meaning for reciprocity of mutual recognition and respect among lifeforms (bird, tree, and humans) to aid harmonious relations/survival. Importantly, the point here is that the disrupted relationship between the Iroko tree and the parrot led to disintegration or disunity. This gives credence to the understanding that the privation of *irorun* (that is the common comfort/wellbeing) for both the tree and parrot would consequentially lead to *airorun igi ni airorun eye* – the discomfort of the tree is the discomfort of the bird. The privation of the wellbeing of both is manifested in the eventuality of the Iroko tree been hacked down and the parrot losing its protective abode/shelter and wandering about.

While *Okaranosun* emphasized the gains of mutual reciprocity or respect and the consequences of the lack of it for disruptive wellbeing, *Ifa* verse of *Osameji* that contained the narrative of *Ada Orisa - Obatala's* sacred cutlass (Elebuibon 2016, p. 38 – 42), clearly illustrated the undesirable consequences of oppressive/exploitative relations among lifeforms. According to the narrative, *Obatala* possessed *Ada Orisa* (a sacred cutlass with attached bells), given to him by *Orunmila* for the sake of warding off or combating evil forces on his way. This fortified *Obatala* against evil intents, so he could relate freely with any forces without being hurt immediately. It happened that the *Eleye* (cult of witches, who were also birds) and human beings (represented by *Obatala*) agreed to dig a well. After the completion of the digging of the well, the *Eleye* refused humans access to it. However, they did not stop at that, they

began to raid *Obatala's* farm courtyard of cotton wool indiscriminately. *Obatala* and the cotton wool began to grudge and complained about these indecent acts of the *Eleye*. Hence, they consulted their *Ifa* priests, who chanted as follow:

*Omi toki toki omi won*  
Little drops of water  
*Omi wo gbaun gbaun*  
Their ancient water  
*Adifa dun Oosala Oseremagbo*  
*Ifa* divination was performed for *Oosala*  
*Oseremagbo*  
*Ti n lo ree pon omi won.*  
The day he went to fetch their water.

*Elamere abe owu*  
*Elamere* the priest under the cotton wool  
*Adifa fun owu*  
*Ifa* divination was performed for the cotton  
wool  
*Nbe laroobuje eye oko.*  
On the day she was under the duress of the  
witches.

*Akitipa lawo ile*  
*Akitipa*, the strong man, the priest of the  
house  
*Bobo yakata lawo ode*  
*Bobo yakata*, the priest of the outside  
*Adifa fun Oosala Oseremagbo*  
*Ifa* divination was performed for *Oosala*  
*Oseremagbo*  
*Yoo sofin oro kan*  
On the day he made the law that  
*Yoo pe keyekeye ma tun jowu mo*  
Witches and their birds should not eat  
cotton anymore.

This divination or consultation done for *Obatala* further fortified him to beckon, confront and admonish the birds never to attempt to eat the cotton wool in his farmyard again. Otherwise, they would face the undesirable consequences if they dared to. *Aro* (a type of bird) and other few birds defied this warning and became inflicted with boils,

fell sick, and died afterwards. This incident angered fellow birds, who also dared *Obatala* to come and fetch from the dug well. Since *Obatala* needs water from the well to aid his artistry endeavor, he defied the witches' (birds) threat and afterwards, they witch-hunted him. *Obatala* managed to escape to *Orunmila's* house. where another divination was made for him by the priest. The divination made aided *Orunmila* to be able to trap the witches when they came hunting for *Obatala* in his house, through offering them their tasty meal of *ekuru* (baked beans) and glue (which clipped their wings to their body, deterring them from flying and putting them in a discomfiting position). Upon several pleas to be freed from the unbearable pains and discomfort by the witches, *Orunmila* bargained and prevailed upon them that the only condition of their freedom is that they would never hunt *Obatala* again or eat the cotton wool indiscriminately. Through oath-making, they succumbed to *Orunmila's* proclamation about leaving *Obatala* alone. As a symbol of appreciation, *Obatala* returned and gave the sacred cutlass to *Orunmila*, which till date is found in most temples of *Ifa*. In praise of such symbolic gift given to *Orunmila*, the *Ifa* chorus below are chanted:

*Ada Orisa ni e*  
*Obatala's* sacred cutlass, you are  
*Ada Orisa ni e*  
*Obatala's* sacred cutlass, you are  
*Ada owo mi*  
This cutlass in my hand  
*Ada orisa ni e*  
*Obatala's* sacred cutlass, you are

The significance of the above narrative about the sacred cutlass for the praxis and practice of agriculture would soon be expounded in the discourse. Similar narratives abound in *Ifa* myth about the snail, who was an apprentice of *Obatala* and also suffered the consequences of exploitative or manipulative dishonesty in relationship with *Obatala*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The snail, an apprentice of *Obatala* spied on his master in order to possess the capacity of carving humans. In the

Besides mythical excerpts from *Ifa* verses on the dynamics of relationship among lifeforms, there are existing proverbs or sayings that also provide insights. Again, insight about the symbolism of the cutlass is embedded in the Yoruba proverbial saying of *ada to mu sansan ko le ge oko funra re, eniyan lo n se atokun fun u* – a sharp cutlass cannot cut the grass itself; it is humans that take charge of the cutlass for cutting grass. This saying clarifies that human will or intention determines the extent of the engagement of the use of cutlass in nature since it remains a tool, subject to human use or discretion.

This has implication for the moderation of human engagement with the ecosystem. This would soon be explicated as the discourse progresses. Another proverb that corroborates the importance of human moderation within the ecosystem is *bi a ko ba so igi be, a o be eniyan* – if we do not exercise caution in cutting down trees, we would cut humans alongside with it. This proverb speaks aptly to the menace of extreme deforestation that may accumulate into disastrous end even for human survival. There is no doubt that the motives of the Yoruba proverbs are not difficult to understand, for discerning the importance of avoiding indiscriminate human engagement with lifeforms, in order to safeguard individual and collective survival. At other times, such motives are embodied in Yoruba thought as taboos (*eewo*) that have moral consequences if breached in Yoruba beliefs (Owoseni & Olatoye 2014, p. 97 -118). While it is impossible to exhaust the body of thoughts

in Yoruba ecological understanding of the relations among lifeforms in a discourse of this nature, it is also important to hint that there are specific sayings that exist to spur empathic feelings of care consideration in humans toward nonhuman animal species within the environment. Such includes the saying that *akeyinje ko mo pe idi n ro adie* – he/she who consumes eggs is unaware of the pains of hatching experienced by the hen”, and *obe o da lorun, oju ni maluu n ro* – slaughtering of the cow with a knife is no ease for the pains of the cow. The cynical sayings that *a n pa eepa, eepa ni oun n pa aja* – we are busy killing the lice on the skin of the dog, the lice keep boasting it is the one killing the dog, and *a n gba oromo adie lowo iku, o ni won je ki oun lo atan lo je* – we are salvaging the chick from untimely death, the chick is complaining that we are barring her from visiting the dumpsite to feed, also fit within this category of Yoruba saying.

The above proverbs in Yoruba thought elicit the need for human to care about other species within the ecosystem, even though such sayings hardly provide any justification for reasons that this needs to be so. However, one can entertain reasons for the case of such within the rationale of ‘ecological empathy’ for the sake of attaining or realizing ecosystem integrity that would aid human, nonhuman and environmental survival as a whole. At this juncture, it is necessary to provide the ground for advancing the idea of eco-empathy as the foundation of Yoruba conception of eco-justice.

### Eco-Empathy: Ecojustice as a ‘Market Place of Tolerance’ in Yoruba Thought

Eco-empathy, also commonly known as ecological empathy is a well circulated notion in the fields of environmentalism, psychology, and education (Lithoxoidau 2017; Mcknight 2010; Berenguer 2019; Mahbub 2022) among others that emphasize the central place of responsible human behavioural conduct and attitude towards the environment (on the basis of human personification of nature) in a

---

process of moulding a figure when his master was not around, it dropped to the ground and cracked. Knowing fully well that *Obatala* never commits such mistakes in the process of creation, the snail fled to the house of *Ogun* for safety from his master’s wrath. However, he was traced and apprehended by *Obatala*. As punishment, *Obatala* removed the hands and legs of the snails. This is the reason attributed for the snail’s nature of dragging on his its chest to the ground. This also culminated into the popular saying among the Yoruba that:

|                                 |                                         |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <i>Yoo fi lole</i>              | It will crawl with it                   |
| <i>Enu ti Igbin fi bu Orisa</i> | The mouth the snail used to abuse Orisa |
| <i>Yoo fi lole</i>              | It will crawl with it                   |

(Elebuibon 2016, p. 63 – 65).

flourishing manner that would safeguard the health/wellbeing and integrity of the environment, within which humans coexist with other natural lifeforms. Within mainstream environmental ethical thought of the Global North, it is rooted within the rationale of deep ecological thought or ecocentrism, as represented in the ideas of Aldo Leopold (1949), Arna Naess (1973), and Paul Taylor (1986). From the context of African worldviews, reference to eco-empathy as a means of realizing holistic or interdependent wellbeing is not common. This is the case despite the fact that animistic attribution to most nonhuman lifeforms (inclusive of animals, plants, trees, spirit/forces, deity, ancestors) in traditional African communities flow from the anthropomorphic substantiation of their agency as lively beings that influence (fraught or impact) the chain of wellbeing in time and space. The instance of the dynamics of relationship among lifeforms as presented in the previous section, where birds, cottonwood, *Obatala*, humans, and so on played key roles in Yoruba thought (on the basis of such animistic attribution and anthropomorphic substantiation) provides ground for the consideration of eco-empathy as a foundation for the advancement of holistic, inclusive and nondiscriminatory justice (that is ecojustice).

The consideration of inclusive justice for lifeforms that are often at the receiving end of exploitation or indiscriminate manipulation synchronizes with the imperative of Thaddeus Metz's (2007, p. 321 - 341) projection of Afro-communal ethics. Afro-communal ethics emphasizes the ethic of oneness (harmony) or communion through some sort of participative empathy (Samuel & Fayemi 2019, p. 79 - 95), which safeguards all lifeforms or communal biodiversity from undue engagement or exhaustion that may lead to disruption in the chain of wellbeing for individuals or collective in the course of relations. However, the germane question remains; how does eco-empathy foreground

ecojustice in Yoruba thought of relations among lifeforms?

In order to embark on the engagement of this vital question, it is important to take two steps. The first has to do with the issue of unpacking what Yoruba indigenous conception of empathy means, and the second is discerning the implication of this for Yoruba ecological understanding about the dynamics of relations among lifeforms. Relying on *Ifa* narrative myth would aid the unpacking of the concept of 'empathy' in Yoruba thought. The myth of the 'market place of tolerance' (Elebuibon 2019) would suffice at this point for such purpose. In the narrative, four strong deities namely *Orunmila*, *Sango*, *Orisa-nla*, and *Ogun* decided to sojourn and patronize a famous and boisterous market called *Payamora*. The four gates of the market are usually guarded by four stern-looking men namely *Agbo* (ram), *Aja* (Dog), *Igbin* (snail), and *Ewure* (goat). As it was the usual practice, these deities made effort to visit their diviners (*Orunmila*) for consultation on the trip that they intend to embark upon. *Ogun*, being an arrogant and heady personality almost forgot to visit his diviner until the eve of his departure, since he considers the practice of consultation as insignificant formality. The diviners set to work on each deity's request and advised that they make sacrifice and take along two thousand cowries before going to the market. *Orunmila* (who also consulted his own diviners), *Sango*, and *Orisa-nla* obeyed by making sacrifices and taking along two thousand cowries. This has to be done in order to fortify them against abuse, disgrace, embarrassment, and insult that they may encounter at the market. However, *Ogun*, being proud and arrogant, chose to dare anyone who confronts or challenge him at the market.

At the appointed time, *Sango* approached the market and was accosted by one of the stern-guard men called *Agbo* (Ram). At the sight of *Sango* within the entrance of the market, *Agbo* began to reel out the panegyrics of the deity

by saying “*Olukoso*, the fire master; the one who is armed to the eyeballs.” After saying the praise of *Sango*, *Agbo*’s countenance changed and he became furious, ordering the deity to drop two thousand cowries immediately, or else the deity would be disgraced. Even though *Sango* felt irritated and very angry about this molestation from *Agbo* (someone who cannot even march *Sango* in terms of strength and power), he took charge of himself and complied as he remembered the warning of the diviner. Afterwards, *Sango* gained full access into the market and never experienced any sort of molestation or hinderances on his way. Similar situation confronted *Orunmila* and *Orisa-nla*, who were accordingly praised by another two stern-looking men at the gate namely *Ewure* and *Igbin* respectively. In praise of *Orunmila* and *Orisa-nla*, *Ewure* and *Igbin* chanted their panegyrics as follow:

*Ewure* (In praise of *Orunmila*)

*Orunmila Eleri-Ipin*

*Orunmila*, the custodian of destiny

*Oloja orisojo ninu Eborá*

Oh King among the deities

*Bolajokoo omo ere lapa*

*Bolajokoo* the offspring of the royal python

*Okinkin, ti meyin erin fon*

*Okinkin*, the great trumpeter that blows the  
ivory to melody

*Igbin* (in Praise of *Orisa-nla*)

*Alabaa Alase*

The great exponent of suggestions and  
authority

*Ojojo, baba erin*

*Ojojo*, the father of elephants

*Alele koriko di iwin*

At night grasses turned a monster

*Okunrin taara bi igi Ojia*

An amazingly straight forward man.

After the praise-singing, both deities were addressed harshly by the two gatemen. Like *Sango*, they took charge of their emotions, did

not quarrel or argue, dropped the two thousand cowries each and moved peacefully into the market. *Aja*, the last stern-man at the gate, in the manner of the rest confronted *Ogun* at the entrance of the market gate. He began chanting the panegyrics of *Ogun* as follow:

*Ogun onija ole*

*Ogun* the great fighter

*Ejemu Oluwonran*

The Great Chief of *Ejemu Oluwonran*

*Asinwin abeegun kikan*

A powerful mad man

*Afofoida tibagba leru*

A glittering sharpened sword that baffles  
the old man.

After this praise singing, *Aja*, in a rude and harsh voice ordered that *Ogun* should drop the two thousand cowries to avoid being molested, and disgraced. *Ogun* would not take this insult, and confronted *Aja* and fighting ensued. He beheaded *Aja*. As *Ogun* beheaded *Aja*, two dogs emerged again and jumped on him and the fighting continued. The more heads *Ogun* beheaded, the numbers of the dogs multiplied and attacked him. During this period, the market activities were still on. After sometimes, *Ogun* decided to withdraw from the fight, since he realized that he was being delayed for entering into the market. Since the dogs have also shredded *Ogun*’s cloth into pieces during the fight, *Ogun* became naked and ashamed of his condition. He ran to a nearby place to fetch some palm fronds to cover his naked and, returned to the market. After he returned, it dawned on him that it was already too late to enter the market as commercial activities has ended.

This myth is instructive for discerning Yoruba indigenous (albeit metaphoric) understanding of empathy as *Ki a maa fir ero si ero ara eni ro* or *Ki a maa fi ara eni si ipo elomiran*, which means factoring other’s thought/feeling in one’s choice of action or thought, or placing oneself in other’s condition/state before

taking an action or decision. While this is not the only value that reflects in the myth above, it is important to explain the way that empathy plays out in the myth. There is no doubt that the market in the myth is a converging space of interaction or relations in which everyone/agent within the space has assigned roles to perform within the limit of the extant rules, authority, and operation of the market. The ascription of these roles is in such a way that their performances by the agents in the market do not necessarily lead to conflict among them. The deities, who visited the market for instance are traders who intend to engage in some form of exchange of commerce (or interaction), while the stern-men at the gates represents the presence of authority, or custodian of rules and regulations within the market. The previous consultation/divination literally refers to the mindset or orientation/training process for the deities to possess the virtue (skill) of empathy when engaging or relating with others within the market place. And, empathy in this direction, involves the need to demonstrate reciprocity, forbearance, tolerance, mutual respect and recognition towards others (in terms of dignifying them without challenging them at their duty post) in order to actualize the purpose or performance of their roles (which is mainly for the sustenance of their wellbeing or survival).

In simple terms, *Sango*, *Orisa-nla*, and *Orunmila* epitomize empathy by displaying the virtue of reciprocity, forbearance, tolerance, mutual respect and recognition towards the respective stern-men (ram, snail, and goat) at their duty post.<sup>2</sup> The result of

such display by the three deities was obviously flourishing for the fulfilment of their existential need without hampering the existential state of the 'Other' (that is the stern-men at the gate). This means there was really no cause for a situation of disruptive co-existence or wellbeing due to the principle of empathy embraced by these deities. In the case of *Ogun*, it was otherwise since *Ogun* was intolerant and non-empathic by refusing to reckon with the dignity/integrity of the stern-man, who has even behaved rightly (previously) by recognizing *Ogun* through praise-singing of his panegyrics before the change in countenance. The consequences in the case of *Ogun* were also obvious; disruption of wellbeing of the 'Other' and himself, absence of mutual respect/recognition, reciprocity, as well as the unfulfillment of *Ogun*'s existential need. One would have thought that *Ogun* would have embraced the Yoruba injunction of *bi awo ba kii fun ni, a kii fun awo nii, baa wo o ba gba eni ni igbawo, awo a te, awo a si yaa* – when an initiate accepts one, one should accept the initiate in return; when an initiate does not help one in times of need, the bond is definitely broken, and one would be shamed and disgraced. *Ogun* should have realized that the stern man was an initiate when he acknowledged his prowess as the great fighter. The same reciprocity ought to have been discharged from *Ogun* towards the stern-man, who was at his duty post. This would be ensured by simply obeying the instruction of the diviner (in terms of making the sacrifice and taking along the cowries to pacify the stern-man) before entrance into the market place. The elucidation of empathy as presented above is at best a proximate description of what empathy entails in Yoruba thought. The concern still remains; how can empathy be extended for ecological

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that even within the expanse of Yoruba belief, these animals (Ram, Dog, Snail, and Goat) that were represented as stern-men at the market gate are conceived as totemic preferences of the deities in terms of being mediums of appeasement to the deities by people who pray to them or request a favour from them. Ram (*agbo*) is for *Sango*, *Ewure* (goat) is for *Orunmila*, snail (*igbin*) is for *Orisa-nla*, and dog (*aja*) is for *Ogun*. Ordinarily, this means that these animals were objectified as devotees of the deities, who should always be in a state of unquestionable submission and loyalty to them. The myth of the marketplace seems to be a twist of the status or reversal of these animals' roles to the deities, as against the

---

popular Yoruba belief about them as totemic mediums of the deities. This is not a mistaken narrative despite this twist. It is likely that this narrative is circulated for the purpose of emphasizing the virtue of empathy (reciprocity, mutual recognition and respect etc.), especially since it is now the turn of the deities to succumb to the authorities of their totemic agents.

consideration of holistic justice/wellbeing (that is ecojustice)?

Since empathy from the context of Yoruba thought entails tolerance, forbearance, mutual respect/recognition, as well as reciprocity, it follows that eco-empathy would involve an ecological dimension of tolerance, forbearance, mutual respect, reciprocity and recognition within the context of human and nonhuman lifeforms (inclusive of animals and the environment) relations. While it is difficult to be exact about how ecological dimension of empathy is elicited by each lifeform, there is no doubt that eco-empathy through cultural conception of the dynamics of relations (which is mainly by virtue of human norms of conduct/engagement) can be enhanced to gauge a possible way to attain proximate holistic justice for all lifeforms. The previously stated Yoruba proverbs that *ada to mu sansan...fun un* and *bi a ko ba so igi be...mo* corroborate this point. This spurs the need for further clarification on the previously hinted issue of the symbolism of cutlass for agricultural practice in lieu of the realization of ecojustice.

As a matter of analogy, the indigenous conception of cutlass as a sacred tool for the enhancement of safety can be considered as metaphor in reference to the moderation of contemporary agro-allied practices (that embrace the use of heavy machines) for food production and fauna cultivation towards human ends. And, the point impressed by the Yoruba proverb that *bi a ko ba so igi be...mo* is mainly to draw our awareness about the need to moderate exclusive agro-allied practices (through the use of these heavy machines) that plunders the ecosystem or environment (which is the mainstay of our resource extraction). In other words, where extreme ploughing or land clearing is carried out, there is a tendency to displace or destroy the ecosystems of 'beneficial' insects within the top or subsoil that could aid germination of even the crops that humans feed on. It is in this sense that even the safety of humans is

implicated if such practice is not moderated. Importantly, it should also be stated that the proverb (*bi a ko ba so igi be...mo*) does not connote that humans live within the trees in Yoruba community. Rather, it is intended as a metaphorical conveyance of the imminent danger that may unfold for the human community at large if indiscriminate falling of trees (deforestation) is enabled to thrive. The reality of the consequences of such is commonly observed in most societies of the world where such practice is massively embraced. This is to speak of societies in developed climes where exclusive adoption of techno-scientific advancement has shaped their environmental livelihood in such a way that they are constantly confronted with ecological crises that range from volcanic eruption, earthquakes, extreme weather conditions, horrendous wind waves, to flooding among others.

Similar analogy of the repercussion of unmoderated human relations with nonhuman lifeforms is also illustrated through the Yoruba myth narrative of Iroko tree (that was chopped into pieces) and the parrot (who became homeless) due to non-cognizance of empathy between the two. The undesirable ending of the Iroko tree and parrot reinforces the wisdom in the Yoruba saying that *adaje ladaku* – to eat alone is to die alone. 'Eating together' (in terms of the value of sharing things in common) is a way of bonding and communing together (Owoseni 2023) that would increase the capacity of empathizing with one another. In this case, such bonding from the context of Yoruba thought could occur between humans and nonhumans, human and ecosystem, nonhumans and ecosystem, or even among humans (interpersonal relationship) or within nonhumans. Succinctly put, the point reached here is that eco-empathy that involves the consideration of the ecological wellbeing of all lifeforms, with core allusion to the critical role of the moderation of human engagement with nonhuman lifeforms constitutes the veritable framework for the

advancement of ecojustice in Yoruba thought. In other words, the ecological space in Yoruba thought is literally a 'market place of tolerance' in terms of the dynamics of the relations between human and nonhuman lifeforms, and this is underscored by the principle of eco-empathy.

### **Concluding Remarks**

There is indeed no doubt that there are issues to ponder upon and engage in the presentation of Yoruba conception of eco-justice through the framework of eco-empathy as presented above. One of such issues could be whether there is a theoretical flaw about importing a global north environmental ethical principle to scale up indigenous ecological understanding about holistic wellbeing of lifeforms. Another critical concern could be about the limit of eco-empathy in the moderation of relations of human and nonhuman lifeforms in indigenous context. It is also possible for any discerning mind to inquire the methodological limitation of such indigenous conception of ecojustice, especially if one is curious about the line of demarcation between literal and metaphorical interpretation or analysis of indigenous ecological understanding about the subject matter, as impressed in Yoruba thought.

It might be difficult to provide sufficient responses to some of these possible concerns within the limit of this discourse. However, the discourse has made efforts to demonstrate that there are cultural/indigenous insights generated on the universal or global challenge of ecological crises. Importantly, it impresses that Yoruba ecological worldviews also contribute in this regard. Relying on the ethnographic mode of knowing within Yoruba thought via *Ifa* myth of 'the market place of tolerance' and other relevant myths, as well as proverbs and sayings, the study adds a voice to existing debate on the pursuit of eco-justice through the advancement of eco-empathy as the basis for the moderation of relations between

human and nonhuman lifeforms (inclusive of biodiversity, animals and the ecosystem at large). The discourse suggests that the ecological dimension of Yoruba notion of empathy as *ki a maa fi oro si ero ara eni ro* constitutes a core edge for the advancement eco-justice. It navigates through both literal and metaphorical instantiations of Yoruba ecological understanding about the dynamics of relations between human and nonhuman lifeforms. In all, this discourse does not aim to impress that the Yoruba thought elicits a peculiar or unique approach to engaging the challenge of ecological crises, rather it reinforces the importance incorporating cross-cultural insights and contributions to ongoing global issues.

## References

- AMUGUNI, H., Konde, N.J., and Bikaako, W. (2019). *One Health Principles and Concepts*, Kampala, Uganda: OHCEA.
- ALROE, H. F. (2005). "The challenge of ecological justice in a globalising world", in U. Köbke et al. (eds) *Researching sustainable systems*, ISOFAR Proceedings.
- AKINJOGBIN, I. (2008). "Towards a political geography of Yorùbá Civilization", in M. Okediji (ed.) *Yorùbá Cultural Studies*, Ile-Ife: The University of African Art Press.
- BABATOLA, O. (1998). "Traditional African geosophy: An explanatory synthesis", in S.B. Oluwole (ed.) *The essentials of African studies* vol 2, Unilag: General African Studies.
- BLIER, S.P. (2012). "Cosmic references in ancient Ife", in C. M. Kreamer (ed.) *African cosmology*, Washington: National Museum of African Art.
- BERENGUER, J. D. (2010). "The effect of empathy in environmental moral reasoning", *Environment and Behaviour* vol. 42 n° 1.
- BRYNE, J., G. Leigh, and M. Cecilia. (2002). *Environmental justice: Discourses in international political economy*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.
- COLE, P. and O'Riley, P. (2020). "Indigenous ecojustice narrative in an era of climate change and pandemics", *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability: Annual Review* vol. 16. Issue 1.
- ELEBUIBON, Y. (2016). *The adventures of Obatala: Ifa and Santeria god of divinity* vol. 1, Osogbo, Osun State: The Ancient Philosophy International (A.P.I) Production.
- ELEBUIBON, Y. (2019). *Ifa: The custodian of destiny*, Osogbo, Osun State: Ancient Philosophy of Nigeria House of Culture.
- KOPINA, H. (2014). "Environmental justice and biospheric egalitarianism: Reflecting on a normative-philosophical view of human-nature relationship", *Earth prospect* 1.
- LAWAL, A. (2019). "A justification of indigenous knowledge system", *African Philosophical Inquiry: An Independent Forum for the Exchange of ideas in Philosophy and Allied Areas*.
- LEOPOLD, A. (1949). *A Sandy County almanac: and sketches here and there*, London: Oxford University Press.
- LITHOXOIDOU, L. S. et al. (2017). "Trees have a soul too!": Developing empathy and environmental values in early childhood", *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education* 5(1).
- LOW, N. & G. BRENDAN. (1998). *Justice, society, and nature: An exploration of political ecology*, London & New York: Routledge.

- MAHBUB, R. (2022). "Can ecological empathy play an effective role to make an environmentally responsible individual? A review of deep ecology and Covey's idea of empathy", *Philosophy, Social and Human Disciplines* 2021 vol. II.
- MCGREGOR, D. (2016). "All our relations: Indigenous perspectives on environmental issues in Canada", in D. Long and O.P. Dickason (eds) *Visions of the hearts: Issues involving aboriginal peoples in Canada*, Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- MCKNIGHT, D. M. (2010). Science, communication, and controversies, "Overcoming "ecophobia": fostering environmental empathy through narrative in children's science literature", *Frontiers in Ecological Environment* 8(6).
- METZ, T. (2007). "Towards an African moral theory", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. 15(3).
- NAESS, A. (1973). "The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement: A summary." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy and the Social Sciences* 16.
- OBIORA, A. C. and E. Emeka. (2015). "African indigenous knowledge system and environmental sustainability", *International Journal of Environmental Protection and Policy*.
- ODUWOLE, E. O. & A.K. Fayemi. (2017). "Animal rights vis animal care ethics: Interrogating the relationship to non-human animals in Yoruba culture", in J. Chimakonam (ed.) *African Philosophy and Environmental Conservation*, Routledge.
- OWOSEN, A. O. & Olatoye, I. O. (2014). "Yoruba ethico-cultural perspectives and understanding of animal ethics", *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* vol. 12, issue 3.
- OWOSEN, A. O. & I. O. Olatoye, I. O. (2022). "A Yoruba worldview on the compatibility of human and nonhuman animal relations (HAR) with environmental sustainability", in D. Masaka (ed.) *Knowledge production and the search for epistemic liberation in Africa*, Switzerland: Springer Nature.
- OWOSEN, A. O. (2023). "Enulebo: Ethical imperative of Yoruba thought on eating for covid-19 related crises", in F. Egbokhare and A. Afolayan (eds) *Global health, humanity and covid-19 pandemic*, Switzerland: Springer Nature.
- ROTH, W-M. (2010). "Local Matters, Eco-Justice, and Community: Opportunities of Village Life for Teaching Science", *Cultural studies of science education* vol. 3.
- SAMUEL, O. S. and A. K. Fayemi (2019). "Afro-communal virtue ethic as a foundation for environmental sustainability in Africa and beyond. *South African Journal of Philosophy*.
- TAYLOR, P. (1986). *Respect for nature: A theory of environmental ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- TURNER, N.J, M.B. IGNACE, and R. IGNACE. (2000). "Traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom of the aboriginal peoples in British Columbia", *Ecological applications. Ecological society of America*, 10(5).
- WASHINGTON, H et al. (2018). "Foregrounding Ecojustice in Conservation", *Biological Conservation* 228.

WEINHUES, A. (2020). *Ecological justice and the extinction crises: Giving living beings their due*, Great Britain, Bristol University Press.

ZALASIEWICZ, J.M et al. (2010). "The new world of the Anthropocene", *Environmental Science & Technology* 44, p. 2228 – 2231.

**To cite this article/Pour citer cet article :** Owoseni, A. O. (2026). *Towards a Yoruba conception of ecojustice. Nouveaux cahiers d’Ethos*, 3, 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.65130/c7np9ey>