Divining for the Environment:
An Ifá Response to the Current Ecological Crisis

Addressing the current environmental crisis is often described as a moral responsibility, a part of being a good global citizen or steward of the Earth, but for Sub-Saharan Africans, like many others in the post-colonial world, it is a matter of survival. Global warming and the ensuing desertification threatens to desiccate nearly half of the continent's arable land and has already been linked to the increasing instability across the Sahel. Furthermore, rising sea levels, environmentally irresponsible actions of foreign companies, and changing ecological patterns only complicate and compound environmental issues. Thus, it is vital that African scholars, leaders, and laypeople understand the origins of this crisis and take appropriate action to control our own destinies. As history has taught us, if we do not take matters into our own hands, someone else - without our best interests at heart - will do so for us.

In this paper, we argue that the best way to address this crisis is *not* through the intellectual traditions that have contributed to its creation, but rather indigenous modes of thought and being that already contain appropriate responses. To explore these responses within a traditional Yoruba context, we take two different narratives from Ifá as well as the hermeneutics of the Ifá divination system, as models for understanding and addressing different facets of the ecological crisis. We interpret these narratives in light of current issues and use them to begin to address the questions: Why did this crisis begin? How did it occur? What are its potential ramifications? And what can we do about it?

Ifá divination works by taking a contemporary situation or problem and relating it back to an archetypal myth (*itan*) or set of narratives of which the current situation is but a particular manifestation. By relating a contemporary reality back to its ontological root, Ifá divination reveals the origin and true nature of the issue in question and prescribes a ritual course of action, based on mythological precedent, to solve the given problem. The diviner, or babaláwo, interprets these mythological narratives in light of the contemporary situation to provide both a profound understanding of the matter at hand and an appropriate response to this situation, usually involving a sacrifice of some kind. Even a cursory glance at the Ifá corpus reveals that nothing is achieved without sacrifice, and the environmental crisis is no exception. If we are to survive this crisis, we, especially the material elite amongst us, will have to make serious sacrifices.

In this paper, we attempt to play the role of babálawo, using narratives from Ifá to illuminate the current ecological crisis, understand its origins, and prescribe a means of addressing it. We will present and consider the implications of these narratives, and demonstrate their parallels with contemporary philosophical/religious understandings of the environmental crisis, particularly that expounded by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Finally, we will conclude with practical suggestions for African scholars and leaders based on our analyses of these Ifá narratives.

Odu Irosun Osa

The first mythological narrative we will consider comes from Odu Irosun Osa. In this narrative, the orisa, the deities, conspired against the Supreme Deity, Olodumare, demanding that He abdicate the throne. Olodumare agreed to do so only on condition that the orisa should first of all go rule the earth by themselves for sixteen days. But no sooner did the deities disperse than

Olodumare cut off the flow of his *ase* (animating life-force) to the cosmos, bringing everything to a halt. Things became extremely difficult on earth, and soon the orisa were at their wits' end. Shamefacedly, they returned to Olodumare to acknowledge his supreme authority.[1] In this myth, the revolt against Divine Transcendence leads to the elimination of Divine Immanence, which throws the natural world into disorder and chaos that could only be restored by recognizing and resubmitting to the Sacred.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the first scholars to draw attention to the environmental crisis, gives an account of its origins that closely parallels this myth form Ifá. Nasr locates the origins of the crisis in the Promethean revolt of Late Medieval/Renaissance theology, philosophy, and science leading to a desacralization, and eventual destruction, of the natural world. To briefly summarize his lengthy and detailed argument Nasr concludes that the current environmental crisis has its roots in the Western Christian reaction against Greco-Roman naturalism/cosmolatry, anti-metaphysical intellectual trends in the late Middle Ages, and the Promethean revolt of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution against religion and the sacred. His *Religion and the Order of Nature* traces in minute detail the various steps which led to the opposition of the world of nature to the world of spirit, the quantification and mechanization of the former, and finally, the establishment of this particular, secular science as the *only* authority on nature and objective reality. According to Nasr, through the lens of the medieval sacred science, when a medieval Christian looked at a tree, he or she saw a symbol of the cross, divine life, spiritual growth, and Christ himself as Jacob's ladder connecting heaven and earth. Through the lens of modern science, any of the modernized people of the world, regardless of their religion, see an interesting collection of biochemical reactions, which is also potential firewood or a chair. It is this latter view of nature that has become dominant throughout the modern world, and which Nasr argues, is wreaking havoc in nature the world over. According to Nasr, it is only very recently, when our very survival seems at stake, that secular science has given us reason to treat nature with a bit more respect. He writes,

> "Everyone talks today of the danger of war, over-population, or the pollution of air and water. But usually the same people who discern these obvious problems speak of the necessity of further 'development,' or war against 'human misery' stemming from conditions imposed by terrestrial existence itself. In other words they wish to remove the problems brought about by the destruction of the equilibrium between man and nature through further conquest and domination of nature. Few would be willing to admit that the acutest social and technical problems facing mankind today come not from so-called 'under-development' but from 'over-development.' Few are willing to look reality in the face and accept the fact that there is no peace possible in human society as long as the attitude toward nature and the whole natural environment is one based on aggression and war. Furthermore, perhaps not all realize that in order to gain peace with nature there must be peace with the spiritual order. To be at peace with the Earth is to be at peace with Heaven[2].

For Nasr, the key to resolving this crisis lies in developing or reviving a sacred science that can restore significance and symbolism to the world of nature. Our poets, environmentalists, and even our own intuitions seem to tell us the same, yet without a sacred science grounded in what Nasr calls traditional metaphysics, these promptings can not be considered as anything more than subjective sentiments. A sacred science would not negate the findings of secular science, but rather it would provide a symbolic understanding of these findings by integrating them into metaphysics, giving us a real, scientific, and objective reason to love and cherish

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[1] Idowu, E.B. *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longmans, 1970, p. 55

[2] Nasr, S.H. *Man and Nature* p. 13-4

nature—to see her as she really is. Such a project requires the revival of the contemplative, philosophical/intellectual dimensions of religious traditions, for only these traditions can go beyond sentimental fancy or rational speculation to provide solid metaphysical foundations for these endeavors.

While Nasr makes a good case for the religious or spiritual origins of the environmental crisis, and the importance of establishing a sacred science to rediscover an intellectually coherent and defensible love of nature, one can still ask if the whole crisis can't just be solved through technological advancements. Do we really need metaphysics and a whole new science if our current science can simply make greener technologies? If secular science got us into this mess, can't it also get us out of it?

If it were merely a matter of learning to respect nature and be more responsible in our use of her resources, there might be hope for a technological solution. However, the religious and philosophical upheavals of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance also gave rise to the modern conception of progress, envisioned in temporal, material terms. The "Kingdom of Heaven" was no longer primarily "within" or a spiritual ideal as in St. Augustine's *City of God* or Thomas More's *Utopia* (literally "no place,"), but rather a material reality located in the not-too-distant future. This cult of progress has come to characterize nearly every aspect of modern life, from the division of nations into "developed" and "developing," to economies based on growth and expansion, to government policies and even religious groups evaluating their success based on quantitative measures of progress. This material, quantitative notion of progress is in direct conflict with the idea of sustainability, which must ground any approach to the dealing with our finite world.[3] Given these facts, it is clear that we must sacrifice the notion of perpetual material progress if we are to find a sustainable solution to the environmental crisis.

This criticism of the Western cult of progress is also found in Odu Eji Ogbe of the Ifá corpus, to which we will refer later in this paper. But in the myth of the orisa's revolt against Olodumare we can clearly see how the intellectual revolt against the Sacred naturally leads to the creation of a worldview, and world, empty of the animating presence of the sacred (*aṣe*), without which nature and human life fall into conflict an disarray. Thus it is only by resubmitting to the Sacred, by rediscovering the sacred within nature and sacrificing our pretensions of being able to govern or even survive in a world without the Divine, that balance can be restored. But perhaps this lesson is even more clearly illustrated in another myth from the Ifá corpus, to which we will now turn.

Obara Meji

In the indigenous Yoruba cosmology, all creations (humans, animals, plants, and what we would today call inanimate objects) used to be in perfect communion and communication with each other. This is why in mythical Ifa narratives, objects, plants, and animals are given agency and voice just like human beings. In fact, plants in particular were believed to have spoken to people, telling us their various uses and the secrets of their nature. Only later, when we started to abuse that power by making poison and bad medicines or charms, Olodumare, God Almighty, ordered plants to stop speaking to us, practically severing that connection. However, Olodumare did allow plants to continue speaking to Osanyin, the god of herbs and medicine, and he and his

[3] While sustainable progress is not impossible, considering that America, often considered as a model for modern progress, constitutes 5% of the world's population and yet consumes 20% of its resources, such progress is certainly neither generalizable nor sustainable.

priests are believed to be the only ones who can still communicate with plants and understand them in their fullest nature.

This next Ifa narrative about Osanyin and his deep knowledge of plants comes from Obara Meji, one of the major 16 Odu or chapters of the Ifa corpus. When viewed from a certain perspective, this myth can be understood as a mythological illustration of the desacrilization process described by Nasr. Osanyin was brought from heaven to serve as the servant of Ọrunmila, the god of wisdom and Ifa divination, and in this capacity he would often be sent on tasks and errands by the god of divination. Once, Orunmila sent Osanyin to his farm outside of town to clear the brush so he could plant some new crops. Being a good servant, Osanyin went immediately, but when Orunmila came to check on his progress, he was amazed to see that Osanyin hadn't cleared anything! Orunmila was going to use his cutlass to clear some of the bush himself when Osanyin suddenly yelled, "No stop! You don't know what you're doing! That leaf can be used to make a medicine for headaches." Orunmila, of course, stopped and then went to cut down another plant, but again, Osanyin stopped him, saying that *this* plant could be used for another important purpose. It continued like this until Orunmila finally put down his cutlass and asked Osanyin to gather all of the plants that could be used for medicine and bring them back to his house. Since that day, Osanyin would always sit in the corner of Orunmila's house and help him use those plants to make medicines and charms for everyone who came with one problem or the other. This is why the Babalawo have such an intimate knowledge of plants and medicine today.

In this myth, even the wise Orunmila was cut off from the deepest knowledge of plants, which is why he initially wanted to just cut them down so he could engage in agriculture. However, the Yoruba spiritual tradition had still preserved a voice for the sacrality of nature, embodied in Osanyin. Thus, the sacred voice of Osanyin was able to check the desire to manipulate nature for merely human purposes. While Orunmila heeded the warning of Osanyin and institutionalized this knowledge of the environment, in the West, the voice of Osanyin has been systematically ignored and actively silenced. This violent silencing of the last sacred voice of nature and its violent subjugation are precisely the process of desacrilization that Nasr describes. In all its wisdom, Ifa foresaw the temptation to head down this road, provided this narrative to warn against the dangers of such action, and offered an alternative course of action.

It is important to note here, that when Osanyin taught Orunmila how these plants could be used for medicine, the Yoruba word used for medicine is "*oogun*," which really means magic, charm, or medicine. The word carries all of these meanings, because, from the traditional Yoruba perspective, the spiritual is not separate from the physical and natural. This means that plants have more than the mere pharmaceutical qualities—which many scholars have tried to isolate in traditional medicines—they also posses a powerful spiritual nature that cannot be divorced from their biological nature. As a result, Osanyin did not simply give Ọrunmila a handful of herbal remedies, he initiated Ọrunmila into the sacred science of the natural world, which inherently involves the prayers, rituals, and sacrifices that are associated with the pharmacopeia of Ifá today. It is precisely this type of medicine, and the view of nature from which it arises, that have been lost in the West.

From the Yoruba perspective, the West has silenced the voice and ecological tradition of Osanyin to such an extent that in another fascinating Ifa narrative in the foremost chapter Eji Ogbe, white people were described as *ọmọ aṣọgun dere* or "the children of those who

transformed Ogun into an idol."[4] In the Yoruba pantheon, Ogun is the voracious god of war, iron, technology, and progress. He is often imagined as clearing the brush with his iron cutlass, and he is so ravenous that he can consume anything placed before him. While we do not have the time to delve into the deep significance of this phrase, it is clear that in early experience with Westerners, the Yoruba could only describe the foreigners' interactions with nature through the metaphor of a perversion of Ogun's nature and the worship of this type of voracious, technologically-fueled consumption.

Through this narrative in Odu Obara Meji, Ifa would instruct our modern world to stay the hand holding Ogun's cutlass, to listen to the voice of Osanyin, and like the wise Orunmila, to become re-initiated into the sacred science of nature's secrets before it is too late.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nasr's work, like the Ifá oracle, seeks to reveal the origins of the current environmental crisis and prescribes the necessary sacrifice-the abandonment of the Promethean revolt against heaven and a return to traditional worldviews capable of reanimating the cosmos with the presence of the Sacred. As the myths of Ifá suggest, without the presence of the sacred in nature, things simply fall apart, and it is only by recognizing the reality of the Sacred, and re-discovering its presence in nature that harmony can be reestablished between man, heaven, and earth. Just as Orunmila had to give up his farm, and his way of viewing nature, we too have to let go of our pipe dreams of perpetual progress and learn to view nature as our ancestors once did, if we are to have any hope for the well-being of our progeny. Just as the orisa's and Prometheus' revolt against heaven ends in torment and agony, the revolt of modern science and philosophy against the sacred has led to ecological and political turmoil and crisis. For Africans, understanding and addressing this problem is no longer simply a moral issue, it is an issue of mortal concern as well. Thus, African leaders and scholars should neither imitate the West's course of rabid industrialization and "resource exploitation," nor wait for a technological solution from overseas. We must, in tandem with representatives of other sacred traditions, revive, develop, and advance African sacred sciences of nature. If we do not fulfill our duties as described in the Ifá corpus, no one else will. As Ifá says, this is the very essence of what it means to be human, *eniyan*:

… *a wa gegebi eniyan*,	We as human beings,
a wa ni Olodumare yan	We are those whom God has chosen,
lati lo tun ile aye se,	to renew the world,
Eni -a yan ni wa...	We are the chosen ones.5

[4] http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/10-eji-ogbe-oyinbo

[5] Ajanaku, Fabgemi 1970. *Ori, Ipin ati Kadara Apa keji*. Paper delivered at the Conference of Egbe Ijinle Yoruba, Lagos.