

# **A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION ON THE WORSHIP OF SACRED TREES AND ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

This paper sought to investigate the worship of sacred trees and eco spirituality in Nigeria. Worship of sacred trees is very common in Africa to the extent that almost all communities have designated sacred natural places. This work is to investigate the underpinning secret behind some of the worships/mysterious sacred tree and eco-spirituality in Nigeria especially in Igbo land using analytic method. The researcher concludes that sacred trees and eco-spirituality represents life-cycles of time and cycles of renewal on the earth and in the universe. Sacred trees serve as mediators or as a link to the spiritual realm, and are associated with cultural beliefs in heaven or the afterlife.

**Keywords:** Eco-spirituality, Sacred, Trees, Religion.

## **Introduction**

Effort has been made to unravel the mysterious nature of some trees that trigger some of the African veneration and belief. Specifically, in Nigeria, some persons pay homage to particular trees. They tagged some trees as sacred. Sacred in the sense that it must be revered; failure to do that, one may likely encounter great danger of its repercussion. Report has shown it that as a result of religious zeal, one man of God became deaf because he cut down a particular tree without reverencing it.

However, the worship and veneration of sacred trees, groves, mountains and surface waters is very common in African traditional religion and culture, to the extent that almost all communities have designated sacred natural places. Information for this study was gathered from the researcher's visit to different sacred sites, from folklore, and through open-ended interviews with elderly people in South-East Nigeria. The thrust of this work is to investigate the underpinning secret behind some of the worships/mysterious sacred tree and eco-spirituality in Nigeria especially in Igbo land.

## **Sacred Trees**

Several authors recognize some "categories" of sacred trees, some of which are not mutually exclusive. To clarify the "hallowed" status of trees, in Israel, we must elucidate the conceptual difference between "blessed", "sacred", and "holy" trees. The difference is not merely semantic but reflects the religious attitude to the adoration of trees. According to the Druze religion only people like prophets can be termed "sacred"; physical objects like trees may be regarded only as "blessed". A plant species all of whose specimens are worshipped owing to religious tradition has to be

treated as “holy”. Simoons (1998) distinguishes tree rituals wherein a certain species of tree is considered “holy”, as in the case of the sacred fig, from rituals in which individual trees are “sacred” because of special characteristics or have won respect through their location in a holy place or their association with a holy person.

Sacred trees describe individual trees or woods which were treated with a certain reverence which, normally, protected them from a wilful damage; Clusters of forest vegetation that honours a deity, provide sanctuary for spirits, remind present generations of ancestors or protect a sanctified place from exploitation. They are treated as sacred by virtue of their location, cultural meaning and history. As a conceptual usage, *sacred trees* are subjected to practical manifestations of worship, adoration, and/or veneration that are not practised with ordinary trees. These trees could be single units, groves, forests, or all the specimens of a certain botanical species.

### **Why Sacred Trees?**

It is recognized that trees are not worshipped for themselves but for what is revealed through them, what is implied and signified, especially some kind of power that they express or their being the abode of supreme beings. Eliade (1958) noted, “The image of the tree was not chosen only to symbolize the cosmos but also to express life, youth, immortality, wisdom”. In other words, the tree came to express everything that religious man regarded as pre-eminently real and sacred. It seems that worship of trees began, among other reasons, because of their long life. In most ancient civilizations trees, whose life-span is several times greater than man's, were treated with the same respect as the elders among men. Several generations lived in the shade of the same venerable tree, almost as if it were eternal.

### **Categories of Sacred Trees**

Sacred trees are classified into various elements, thus:

**Natural elements:** this implies the physical characteristics of tree. In Igbo tradition, a child's umbilical cord is buried with a newly planted fruit tree (*ili alo*); this becomes the child's tree of life (*nkwu alo*) which secures lands, confirms the child's blood relation to the patrilineage, and forms a bond between the child and the Earth Mother, *Ala*. Many settlements were named after plants and trees, such as *achara* (bamboo), *uga* (*Anacystrophyllum opacum*), and *ahiara* (giant leaf grass), many of these settlements started at the base of large trees or with some of these plants as their main natural feature.

**Supernatural elements:** it is believed that a particular spirit do reside in the tree and act upon humans. *Akpu* is a sacred silk-cotton tree which is a way to the unseen world of ancestors and spirits, it is where spirits of children stay and sitting under this tree is said to increase the chances of pregnancy. This is different from cassava which was

introduced by Europeans from the Americas in the last 500 years, the *akpu*'s leaves resemble cassava leaves, so it's possible the name was loaned to cassava when it was imported.

*Oji*, most commonly known by the Yoruba name *Iroko*, is a very large tree considered to have mystical powers like many trees. The *oji* was planted near shrines to give the same impression as a cathedral. *Oji* also stands as a metaphor for strength, nobility, and resilience. Its wood is used for titled men's stools, compound doors/gates, and large *ikoro* slit drums, as well as other important ritual items.

The *Ofo* is the tree from which the staff of justice of the same name is hewn from, it is generally forbidden to cut or place a knife against a living *Ofo* tree or use its branches for firewood, so the *Ofo* branches had to naturally fall off in order to be used as a staff of justice, such sticks would have to be consecrated through a ritual known as *is* a *Ofo*. The *Ofo* serves as a connection between the living and the ancestors and the spirit world. A family's *Ofo* staff is entrusted in the care of a first son of the family whose father has transitioned; additionally there is *OFO* for organizations and deities. These trees also serve as shrines.

*Anunuebe*: another important tree which also features in the signification of the masked spirit is *Anunuebe* (*Nnunuebe*). Literally, *Anunuebe* means that "No bird perches on it" or "No bird has the courage to sit on it to rest". This is obviously frightening. If no bird has the courage to perch on it, it means that it has tremendous magical powers -- and it does! It means that *Anunuebe* is not just an ordinary tree: it is a tree that is not just a tree. It is a tree that can transform and cause to transform. It is a tree that can do things. It is, therefore, special; in fact, sacred.

Why is *Anunuebe* a favourite among local herbalists and performers of the masked spirit? Is it just because of the attributed sacredness? There is something dark and frightening here: the mere mention of *Anunuebe* is scary: so, even birds are afraid to perch on the tree? That tree that is avoided by birds must be terribly potent and evil! Is that not enough warning? Thus, *Anunuebe* is descriptively named to warn and frighten, indirectly. The warning is analogical: if birds avoid it, which other warning (about danger) do you need? *A naghi agwa ochinti n'ahia esula* (No one informs a person hard of hearing that the marketplace is in some turmoil). That fellow just has to look and see!

*Ekweekwo nju*: It is considered a sacred tree in Igbo culture, to the extent that it cannot be touched carelessly without the assistant of herbalist. If touches carelessly, it can make one to be in an unconscious state. It is not to be cut down and used for fire wood at all.

**Human ritual:** This involves the various individual activities/behaviours related to the trees and. There are so many trees with ritual symbolism in the Igbo area, the *ogirisi* often used for the deceased, the *abosi*, the *ngwu* tree which is a symbol of wisdom (where the term *okongwu* comes from) and from which *okpesi* ancestor statues are sometimes carved, the *agba* tree, the *ogbu* (fig tree) often used for the living, and so on.

### **Origin of Eco-spirituality**

The idea of Eco-spirituality has existed many years back. However, its emergence was clearly noticed around 17th century, and in Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy. Which assimilated nature and the divine; to the second half of the 17th century and Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, and to the 19th century. It emerged as an organized discourse around the 1980s in the context of a crisis of the environmental movement as well as of the great world religions.

In the early 20th century, it was foreshadowed by some pioneering figures like Mahatma Gandhi, who popularized non-violence in India, or, in the German-speaking area, Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy and the father of bio-dynamic agriculture Pfeiffer, (2006) and Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, who emphasized the links between nature and the psyche. The concept of eco-spirituality immediately suggests that there is a kinship between ecology and spirituality, that there is a spiritual dimension to ecology and that spirituality is in dissociable from ecological concerns. Let us first take care to distinguish the spiritual from the religious.

### **Eco-spirituality: A Conceptual usage**

At the level of conceptual usage, Eco-Spirituality is a voyage discovery between the contingent being and a Necessary being through cosmos. It is our nexus with God through our association with the entire universe. Eco-spirituality is referred to our equilibrium and connectedness to the earth along with our religious beliefs. Tinney (2019) observes that eco-spirituality raises an awareness of the natural Earth, its preservation and our consciousness regarding to the presence of God in all of nature. This implies that eco-spirituality is the ability of our recognition towards the manifestation of God in a natural form.

Furthermore, Charles believed that it is perceived as Creation, nature invites us to turn to the Creator and to take up our responsibility to protect and enhance the natural world as the Garden of both God and humankind.

### **Principles of Eco-Spirituality**

Eco-spirituality is a practised within the limits of some principles. Such principles are discussed as such in this section. Such principles are fundamental rules that help one to undergo on eco-spiritualism exercises. Some of these principles are:

**Understanding the universe as a dynamic entity:** an individual should be able to know that this world/cosmos is a programming construct that supports writing code that will work with entities that are not yet defined.

**Mystical encounters:** This refers to a deep contact with reality, it consist of unity or intimate connection or presence. It helps one to understand that nature has a sacred

inner dimension and encourages us to immerse ourselves in it. This is because it brings a sense of unity, knowledge, self-transcendence, eternity, light and love.

**Recognition of Trinitarian dogma:** Johnson (2014) identifies a neglect of the theology of the Spirit as a root cause for our abuse of Earth and cosmos. In the light of evolutionary science she opens our understanding of God's presence to include God's continuous creation where the God of love accompanies the unfolding of all that is without intervening in natural processes.

**Accompaniment:** to live eco-spiritually, it is advised that one involves in accompaniment. This implies a part in a composition designed to serve as background and support for more important part.

**Avoid Ignoring earthly reality:** urges us to 'live in right relations within the community of creation'. There are good practical and theological reasons why we should do this. The evolutionary story reminds us of our biological kinship with all of reality. We are part of the Earth community; and with God we are all part of the community of creation. We are all part of an embrace, interconnected yet distinct. We must step up to protect our kin, and we do this in solidarity with the God of love.

### **Analysis on the Worship of Sacred Trees and Eco-spirituality**

It is possible to pursue spirituality inside organized religion or out of any religious context, and even without having any faith in God. As it is founded on a personal inner experience, it is difficult to define it univocally, but it is generally associated with a quest for interiority, for self-knowledge, transcendence, wisdom, and the sacred.

### **A Nexus between Sacred Trees and Saint**

In the Middle East, as in North Africa, a saint's grave is closely connected to a sacred tree; trees beneath which saints are buried are regarded as "sacred trees". The identification of the sacred tree with the saint's grave imparts to it the miraculous and magical powers of the holy man. Westermarck (1968) comments that the existence of sacred groves around saints' tombs maybe related to the people's avoidance of cutting down these trees for fear of the saint's retribution, even in places where there is no tomb but only a tradition of the holiness of the location, especially in cases where it is not at all clear who the saint is. Thus it seems (in Morocco) that the worship site exists owing to the grove more than the grove exists owing to the site. Canaan comments that sacred trees that are not connected with graves ever bear the name of a specific personality. This implies that a sacred tree is being determined if and only if it has a link of grave. But then, how could one knows the tree that is connected to grave? Is it not better to opine that sacred trees should be the outcome of its metaphysical activities?

In practice; it is impossible to determine which came first, the tree or the grave, because of the customs of burying important people near sacred trees and of planting

trees on saints' graves Morocco. Hasluck (1973) concluded on this subject in Turkey, "It is often impossible to say whether the sacredness of these groves is primitive and their connection with saints evolved from it, or whether it is secondary and due to their proximity to saint's graves"; the same situation exists in Syria (at that time Palestine was a part of "Great Syria"). The conclusion is that it is not clear if the tree became sacred because of the saint, or the personality became sacred because of the tree.

### **Efficacy of Religious Gatherings**

Trees acquired their sacredness through the habit of historical religious leaders meeting under them, to preach or/and to discuss religious issues. When leaders from Lebanon used to visit their faithful in the Galilee they customarily met their local colleagues beneath these trees, which came therefore to be considered "blessed". Sacred trees can't be considered as an abode of a soul because the Druze believes in the transmigration of souls, a person's body is a kind of clothing for the soul, and with the person's demise the soul passes over to the body of a newborn child". Thus, souls cannot reside in a tree and graves are not revered, trees were blessed on account of the visits of the religious leader; but souls are never connected with trees.

### **Dedication to a Prophet**

In all the ethnic groups we found sacred trees that were dedicated to a prophet. When we asked specifically who the most common, people mentioned al-Khader, who is highly respected by Muslims as well as by Druze. Not less than 30 places (some of which contain "sacred trees") in the Holy Land are named after him. This prophet is adored by Druze as well by Muslims. Al-Khader (also Al-Khidr or Al-Khudr), who has common features that characterize Elijah and St. George, is the most popular of all saints in the Middle East.

### **Romancing sacred Trees and Eco-spirituality in Theological Perspective**

On the third day of creation account according to the Holy writ; Genesis 1, before any other life forms were created, God was said to create all of the plant life that can be found in this world though, of course, only those plants that can reproduce naturally (Evans, 2014; Musselman, 2007). God also remarked that his trees were all "pleasing to the eye", which is suggestive of the innate natural beauty man (usually) finds in trees. Man is requested, by God, to 'subdue' his creations – trees included, for the food they provide, firewood (Leviticus 6:12-13), timber, and other materials and resources.

Before touching upon the specific tree species referred to within the Bible, it is important to recognize the four trees of greatest importance: (1) the Tree of Life (Genesis 2:9); (2) the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:9); (3) the tree upon which Jesus died, and (for a second time); (4) the Tree of Life (Revelations 22:2) (Beattie & Stenhouse, 2007; Evans, 2014; Musselman, 2007). The second tree mentioned, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, has traditionally been considered an apple (*Malus* sp. – 'Malus' in the sense of it meaning 'evil'). Delving into some of

the tree species of the Bible (Old Testament and New Testament, with the Old Testament having importance not only for Christians but also Jews, thus:

**The acacia (*Acacia spp*):** Musselman (2007) writes that the tabernacle, which was a portable place of worship that the Children of Israel took with them across the wilderness, was made entirely of acacia (likely to be made from the wood of *Acacia albida*). There is also suggestion of Noah's Ark being made from acacia wood, though the prevailing consensus is that the Ark was made from the wood of the cypress (*Cupressus sp.*) (de Cleene & Lejeune, 1999; Western, 1961). Furthermore, the acacia was what Christ's crown of thorns was made from, and is also a symbol of immortality (de Cleene & Lejeune, 1999).

**The Almond (*Prunus Dulcis*)**

The most iconic of the references to the almond would be Aaron's rod, which was presented, by Moses, along with eleven other species of tree branch (given by the Houses of the Israelites), to God. Moses placed the twelve branches in the ground, and come the following morning Aaron's rod, the almond branch had budded, flowered, and already set fruit, of which all the almonds had ripened (de Cleene & Lejeune, 1999; Musselman, 2007; Wood, 1942).

**Conclusion**

Having investigated why some Africans traditional religion reverence to a particular trees and considered it as a sacred, it is worthy to state that Nigerian should be encouraged on deforestation. To minimize the cutting down of relevant trees, since on the reverence to sacred trees-one is also undergoing a discovery on his relationship with God. It was noticed that the fruits of some of the sacred trees are teachings that guide us thwart love, compassion, generosity, wisdom, justice, courage, humility, respect, and many other good things the creator has given to the people. Sacred trees and eco-spirituality represents life-cycles of time and cycles of renewal on the earth and in the universe. Sacred trees serves as a mediators or as a link to the religious realm, and are associated with cultural beliefs in heaven or the afterlife.

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