

Sacred Space of African Indigenous Forces of Nature: Environmental Ethics for the African Diaspora

F.A. Ruffin

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

KEYWORDS Òrisha. African Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Gender. Divination. Mediumship Possession

ABSTRACT The displaced Africans from the transatlantic triangular slave trade took the essence of African indigenous forces of nature including environmental ethics with them and those forces of nature sustained in them. These forces are everywhere in rivers, oceans, lakes, thunder, lightning and graveyards. It is argued that the Òrisha are autonomous forces of nature and may express themselves through divination and mediumship possession. The paper explores the role of several African women displaced in Brazil and Cuba who were selected by the Òrisha to safeguard and expand this Yoruba system. It highlights implications for gender in African indigenous knowledge systems. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for environmental ethics and policies that honour the forces of nature and that are central to peace, wellbeing and sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The transatlantic triangular slave trade was one of the earliest forms of globalisation of human cargo. The involuntary capture and subsequent enslavement of millions of Africans over centuries resulted in Africans being displaced to different continents. The majority of slaves were exported to Brazil and Cuba (Curtin 1969). The imperialistic Oyo Empire in ancient Yorubaland was involved in slave trade during the last quarter of the 18th century despite prohibitions against enslaving Yoruba people (Law 1991). Political unrest within the empire, however, including rebellion by subject states such as Dahomey, led to the downfall of the Oyo Empire in the 1830s as the exportation of slaves to Brazil and Cuba increased. In the 1840s, nine/tenths of slaves exported to Brazil were Nagô (Yoruba people in Brazil) (Verger 1954). By the 1850s nearly thirty-five percent of the slave population in Cuba consisted of Lukumí (Yoruba people in Cuba) (Ramos 2009).

Despite the horrific dehumanising debacle of the transatlantic slave trade, the Nagô/Lukumí took African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) with them, including the Òrisha system as a way of life. Collectively, the deities that comprise Òrisha are forces of nature. Forces of nature are alive and everywhere, their essence is indicative of rivers, oceans, lakes, thunder, lightning, mountains, graveyards, caves, forests, crossroads, moon, sun, rain, wind and other spaces. These spaces are sacred not just to Yoruba/Nagô/Lukumí indigenous communities on the

continent and in the Diaspora but also other people who embody oneness with the forces of nature. As naturalistic entities these forces of nature are easily accessible and may express themselves through human beings – particularly diviners and mediums of Òrisha or AIKS. Priestesses and priests of Òrisha have altars with artefacts and implements that contain ase/axé/aché (divine power and authority) of Òrisha. This ase/axé/aché is drawn from forces of nature in the natural environment and consecrated by animal sacrifice (Matory 2001: 182).

However, anthropocentrically driven environmental ethics, which tend to be hegemonic, fail to recognise the autonomy of forces of nature. Even environmental ethicists who deem nature as subject rather than object still perceive naturalistic entities as non-living and functionless, simply existing without any evolutionary fit in ecological systems (Katz 1997). This perception is diametrically opposed to the intrinsic value, interactive worth and vitality of African indigenous forces of nature – irrespective of human consciousness (Nabudere 2011). Scholarly literature on Òrisha exists (Abimbola 2010, 2001; Ramos 2009). However, there is a lacuna in the literature regarding the examination of the AIKS of Òrisha in the context of environmental ethics. It seems literature on gender in the Òrisha system in the Diaspora neither treats gender implications in relation to AIKS nor environmental ethics (Ramos 2009; Butler 2001). This paper aims to contribute an exploration of the Òrisha AIKS and gender implications in the context of environmental ethics.

A two-pronged argument is here advanced. First, as alive and autonomous forces of nature the Òrìsà are entitled to human-made environmental ethics and policies that promote Òrìsàs' states of being in the natural environment as sacred space. Second, gender neutrality of devotee selection by the Òrìsà and the key role of women in this AIKS serve as a model of complementarity in gender roles which is instructive of a way forward for African-inspired environmental ethics. The paper is organised as follows. First, epistemologies of the Òrìsà are examined as an AIKS in the context of environmental ethics. Second, emergence of the AIKS of the Òrìsà is explored in Brazil and Cuba with specific reference to the role of women therein with implications for gender. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for environmental ethics and policies that honour the forces of nature and that are central to peace, wellbeing and sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual study is based on reflexive history and the interpretive method. As Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2015: xix) posit, "for interpretive researchers, concepts are part of everyday talk, lives, and written or depicted record of situational actors and/or embedded within a literature, becoming part of the historical background that forms the context for scholarly thinking". Toward that end, literature on Yoruba cosmology of the Òrìsà knowledge system was drawn from secondary sources. These were accessed extensively through electronic search engines including African Writers Series, EBSCOHOST, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Project Muse, and Sabinet. Key terms and phrases were used such as Òrìsà, Òrìsà divination and mediumship possession, Cuban cabildos, candomblé terrieros, gender in AIKS and environmental ethics. Authors of the secondary sources drew upon methodologies in anthropology, folklore, history, life histories, mythology, and narrative analysis. These scholars undertook extensive fieldwork in Nigeria, Brazil and Cuba, with more than 70 years of collectively combined research among them.

Unlike westernised ontologies and epistemologies that separate the material from the spiritual, African concepts of reality and ways of knowing perceive wholeness – that the material and spiritual are not dualistic but part of a com-

plex broader oneness (Nabudere 2011). As such, a lens that unified African ontology and epistemology was applied. In IKS research, the knower is part of that which is knowable and known. Hence, the author's 20 years of naturalistic and participant observation of the Òrìsà AIKS played a role in the interpretive research method undertaken in analysis of secondary sources.

The case study strategy (Yin 2013) was used to explore expansion of the Òrìsà AIKS from Yorubaland to the African Diaspora in an effort to begin to understand the autonomy of the Òrìsà in a real-life global context. In contrast to other Òrìsà-related studies which generally focus on human beings as units of analysis, this study used the interpretive method and content analysis to examine the autonomy of Òrìsà as a unit of analysis. In other words, the methodological approach focused on Òrìsàs' autonomous states of being. This may be evidenced through humans by divination or mediumship possession but is not the result of volitional action of humans. Evaluative criteria are specific to the epistemic communities generating the research being judged (Yanow et al. 2015). Therefore, content analysis was employed to decipher the systematic classification process of coding identified categories. The aim was to examine previous research done on the Òrìsà (Zhang et al. 2009). Such interpretivism was applied to build logic and argumentation about autonomy of the forces of nature and implications for gender in the context of African-inspired environmental ethics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Epistemologies of the Òrìsà AIKS in an Environmental Ethics Context

African-inspired environmental ethics are commonly inherent in AIKS. African indigenous knowledge systems can be defined as traditional inter-generational knowledge observed in surroundings and used to understand realities and solve problems. It may be revealed through dreams, vision and intuition (Moahi 2012). Perceptions and definitions of environmental ethics generally turn on the question of values. Of longstanding and continuous debate in theory and practice is whether the natural environment is of instrumental or intrinsic value on its own merit (Rolston 1988; Katz 1997; Egri 1999). In-

strumental value denotes that something is valued as a means to an end. In contrast, objective intrinsic value of an entity exists independent of human attitudes or judgments (Sandler 2012). It is contended that as forces of nature, Òrìsà hold objective intrinsic value. Unlike westernised worldviews of nature as of instrumental value to humans and under human domination, African epistemologies conceive oneness of humans and the natural environment. Rather than human domination of nature, philosophies and epistemologies of Òrìsà are directed toward consultation with the forces of nature through divination. Each Òrìsà is believed to be linked to and overseer of certain areas in the natural environment (Walker 1990). While westernised philosophies and epistemologies tend to separate the knower from that which is known and knowable, philosophies and epistemologies of Òrìsà unify the knower with that which is known and knowable. The way in which divination unifies human relationships with Òrìsà as forces of nature is typical of spirituality embedded in AIKS but highly understudied. According to Nabudere (2011):

[I]t is in the interest of humanity that these forms of knowledge which 'primitive' peoples have continue to generate and apply to their conditions need to be articulated and mainstreamed so that they gain attention in the Western world. This means the epistemological implications of the African divinational practices must be articulated and put forward in a living manner.

Òrìsà are seen as forces of nature (Parés 2005; Walker 1990). It is argued that these forces of nature are autonomous yet accessible by humans through divination and during mediumship possession. Human beings do not control communication from Òrìsà. Rather, Òrìsà provide guidance and direction to human beings. There are many Òrìsà as conceived in Yoruba cosmology and no intention is made here to name them all. In Yorubaland, different Òrìsà were primarily associated with different nations, depending upon the needs and focus of a nation (Ramos 2009; Dianteill 2002). During and after the slave trade, African identities in Brazil and Cuba blurred nation-state and ethnic demarcation as the Òrìsà AIKS unfolded in the Diaspora (Butler 2001). Yet in highlighting a number of Òrìsà in this paper, it is worth noting that the natural environment where they are believed to dwell and oversee was sustained by adherents in the 'new world'. This is important when placing this dis-

cussion in the context of environmental ethics. The names of Òrìsà and locations in the natural environment associated with them were maintained upon diffusion to the African Diaspora. To demonstrate the consistency of names, in this article, the name of a particular Òrìsà first appears in Yoruba, then Portuguese and then Spanish. One relies heavily upon the natural environment such as mountains, forests, rivers and oceans to communicate and work with Òrìsà. On the African continent and throughout the Diaspora there is likewise the concomitant use of drums – which likewise come from the natural environment. Pursuant to this AIKS, there are also certain drums and drum rhythms, songs, dances, colours, fabrics and other aspects identified with each Òrìsà. Òrìsà are further connected to sacred space in nature through the different herbs, plants, trees, animals and foods associated with a particular Òrìsà (Ramos 2009; Murphy 1994; Walker 1990).

To understand Òrìsà as forces of nature it is important to distinguish them from ancestors. In this AIKS the two occupy different but interactive realms. Ancestors in African ways of knowing generally refer to blood family members who have passed on but are still very much involved in family relations. The living dead (Mbiti 1989), as ancestors may be referenced, carry expectations of descendants. These expectations vary per descendant depending upon one's destiny. For instance, ancestral expectations may be higher for individuals who embody certain gifts or who are continuing the work of a particular ancestor. Ancestral practices, rituals and ceremonies are different from those for Òrìsà. For instance, Yoruba people devised the Egun-gun IKS for ancestors (Butler 2001).

In contrast, Òrìsà are believed not just to have walked the earth in human form at some point, but to have also accomplished a rigorous elevation that could be called resurrection and which resulted in deification (Pemberton 1989; Verger 1954). As such, each achieved a high level realm built into the forces of nature and relatively aloof to occurrences in one's everyday life. Unlike family ancestors who remain bound to earthly matters of their families and are still working through their unresolved human issues, Òrìsà are an autonomous collective. While some accounts of Yoruba indigenous knowledge reflect that a spiritual being, before incarnating for human existence, may pick one's 'head' or 'ori' which governs one's destiny (Abimbola 1994);

during one's lifetime, it is Òrìsà who pick their children. It is Òrìsà who ultimately decide the spiritual community in which an initiate will discard her or his old life and be reborn as a child of Òrìsà (Butler 2001:142; Murphy 1994: 87). An individual may be oblivious to the existence of Orisa, yet every person is arguably a child of Òrìsà given the spiritual archetypal characteristics of Orisa and the personality of a human being. In other words, some realities exist irrespective of human awareness. However, one receives 'a calling' from the Òrìsà if one is expected to be initiated into the Òrìsà AIKS priesthood (Murphy 1994).

It is the autonomy of the Òrìsà that makes them forces of nature. Or, conversely, since Òrìsà are forces of nature, they are autonomous. Under either perception, ancestors differ in orientation from Òrìsà although the two work together. In Lukumi tradition, for example, one is expected to attend to matters of ancestors prior to proceeding with rituals that invoke Òrìsà. Any ritual or ceremony for Òrìsà is preceded by calling names of ancestors by all those present. This may include blood family ancestors but must include the names of deceased priests/priestesses widely known in the tradition and those specific to the Òrìsà lineage into which one is initiated. The voice of the Òrìsà comes most notably through the 16 cowrie shells attached to an elaborate time tested AIKS evident throughout the African Diaspora that designate *inter alia* which Òrìsà is speaking, the lesson(s) to be learnt and available problem-solving interventions (Abimbola 1997b; Walker 1990). The hallmark of Òrìsà and Ifa divination is generally character development (Abimbola 1975). However, if the diviner is not focused upon her or his own character development, divination could be compromised. Both ancestors and Elegbára/Exu/Elegua must be propitiated before other Òrìsà can be approached. If the requirements of either are not met prior to accessing Òrìsà, Òrìsà may remain aloof, best laid efforts rendered useless and life circumstances of a devotee degenerated. While ancestors may be quickly stimulated to action through herbs, powders, or other artefacts, Òrìsà are known to take years or even decades to accede to a devotee's request – depending upon the extent to which one's lessons are learnt and character development is achieved. Yet Òrìsà may demonstrate timeless immediacy

of intervention on their volition. This too suggests the autonomy of Òrìsà.

Problem-solving interventions that propitiate Òrìsà are often conducted in the natural environment associated with a given Òrìsà. For example, Obatalá/Oxala who is the senior Òrìsà (Murphy 1994:61-62) is connected to the sun and owns mountain-tops so interventions may need to be conducted in that sacred space. Ocum/Oxum/Oshún is associated with fresh river water and Yemojá/Iemanjá/Yemayá with sea salt waters while both are linked to rainfall. This means that ceremonies dedicated to or action required by divination may need to be performed nearby or within such waters. Since Oya/Iyansa/Yansa oversees the wind, tornados and graveyard, and uses lightning to wage war, offerings to her may be expected to take place in cemeteries or during lightning and strong winds. Sangó/Xangô/Changó owns fire, electricity and thunder and shares lightning with Oya/Iyansa/Yansa; is known to communicate through these media and may need to be propitiated during these natural phenomena. Ososi/Osoxi/Ochosi is a hunter and owner of the bush so interventions that invoke him may need to take place in forests. Ogun works closely with Ososi/Osoxi/Ochosi in forests; owns iron and is known for melding warrior-tools. Elegbára/Exu/Eleguá owns the crossroads – those in the natural environment, those in one's life and the crossroads between the human and Òrìsà world when it comes to invoking Orisa. In Lukumi tradition, the latter three Òrìsà are collectively termed 'warriors'.

Hence, when sunrays are intensified and climate change induced and when mountains are adversely affected by mining and other exploitative events that extract natural resources, the sacred spaces of Obatalá/Oxala are defiled. As oil companies pollute rivers and oceans in the interests of modernity, capitalism and imperialism, Osun/Oxum/Ochún and Yemojá/Iemanjá/Yemayá are thereby desecrated. When the built environment is developed atop gravesites or even where coffins are disinterred and reinterred, and diminishing biodiversity affects the quality of air and wind, Oya/Iansá/Yansa is adversely disturbed in her natural space. The increase of greenhouse gases that lead to climate change disrupts the natural rhythm of thunder and lightning which goes against the grain of Shangó/Xangô/Changó's elements in the biosphere. Deforestation destroys the sacred space of Ogun

and Ocosi/Osoxi/Ochosi and wreaks havoc on oxygen levels in Oya/Iansá/Yansa's terrain of air and wind. Taken as a whole, the human-driven destruction of the natural environment is a travesty against Òrisa as the forces of nature.

Therefore, environmental ethics should recognise the autonomy of Òrisa on the African continent, in the Diaspora and throughout the world; implementing appropriate policies accordingly. This is a non-anthropocentric view of the natural environment. The natural environment, according to African ways of knowing was not intended to be dominated by humankind but to work in harmony therewith. In other words, environmental policies must take into account the workings of the natural environment on its own merit as autonomous and alive forces of nature – this is a point to which the discussion subsequently returns. The discussion now turns to gender and the key role of women in this AIKS of Orisa.

Women in Preservation and Expansion of Òrisa as an AIKS in Brazil and Cuba

Unlike most scholarly research which considers human actions that drove the sustainability of this AIKS in Brazil and Cuba, this paper explores the autonomous ase/axé/aché of Òrisa that seems to have prompted human action. This human action appears to have been largely executed by women and accessed through divination and mediumship possession. This gives rise to the question of gender. However, human gender matters should be distinguished from gender on the Òrisa realm. Individual Òrisa are gender-specific. On the one hand, Obatalá/Oxala is known to have 16 roads of being, 8 male and 8 female. Such a manifestation of the senior Òrisa suggests the complementarity of female and male spheres. Such complementarity is evident in Becker's (2006) study in Namibia and Nzegwu's (2012: 15) in Nigeria. For example, in their respective studies concerning African indigenous epistemologies regarding gender, Becker (2006) and Nzegwu (2012) found in different African regions complementarity of social, political, economic and spiritual societal roles of men and women. In ancient Namibia, women and men were seen as "inhabitants of different spheres in a complementary social duality" (Becker 2006). Nzegwu (2012) indicates that, among the indigenous Ibo, a "dual-

sex political system was underpinned by egalitarian ideas upon which citizenship rests". In African philosophies and epistemologies the socio-economic, political, cultural and spiritual realms are holistic and not dichotomous as in westernised worldviews. This holism was preserved in expansion of the Òrisa IKS throughout the African Diaspora in female led communities as subsequently discussed. Returning to gender attributes of specific Òrisa, Shangó/Xangô/Changó, Ososi/Osoxi/Ochosi, Ogun and Elegbára/Exu/Eleguá are male Orisa. In the Lukumí tradition, Elegbára has multiple but all male roads. On the other hand, Ocun/Oxum/Oshún, Yemojá/Iemanjá/Yemayá (both of whom have multiple roads in the Lukumí tradition) and Oya/Iyansa/Yansa are female Orisa. However, when Òrisa select a human being for initiation to that Òrisa or for general oversight should initiation be unrequired by one's destiny, human gender is immaterial and irrelevant. In other words, as autonomous forces of nature, and irrespective of Òrisas's gender, Òrisa selects human males or females as children without differentiation. Òrisa do not select initiates based on gender but generally on personality archetypes linked to a particular Orisa.

As to human gender, westernised concepts of gender that portray men as dominant/superior and women as recessive/inferior seem misplaced in the AIKS of Òrisa. Understanding African ways of knowing human gender, as identified by Becker (2006) and Nzegwu (2012) respective studies, illuminates the key role of women in preserving and expanding this AIKS in the African Diaspora as a matter of complementarity of roles. Candomblé in Bahia means at once spiritual traditions and community life and terreiros are sacred buildings and grounds where candomblé takes place (Murphy 1994). Similarly, cabildos in Cuba are likewise associations of devotees as well as locations for Òrisa practices and rites as well as other community activities for wellbeing (Ramos 2009). Candomblé terreiros and Cuban cabildos can be construed as nations within the larger nation-state embodying realities different from the wider material society (Murphy 1994). As a respondent told pioneering researcher on gender in AIKS Landes (1947) about candomblé, it is "almost as difficult for a man to become great in candomblé as it is for him to have a baby". The greater the fidelity and purity of Òrisa rites and practice, the more wom-

en are found to be in leadership (Murphy 1994: 52). Men may be priests, drummers, preside over animal sacrifice or serve in an advisory capacity (Parés 2005; Butler 2001; Matory 2001). Through divination and mediumship that ascertain guidance from Orisa, female led candomblé community-building included provision of socio-economic and political services such as health and nutrition (through herbology and traditional healing), housing, and legal assistance (Butler 2001; Murphy 1994). Likewise, through divination and mediumship possession, female governed cabildos included peace-making between groups that had been at war in West Africa, such as the Lukumí and Arará (Ramos 2009). Both candomblé terreiro and cabildo women leaders facilitated purchase of freedom for enslaved spiritual leaders of Nagô people in Brazil and Lukumí people in Cuba (Murphy 1994; Ramos 2009).

Orisa appear to have selected certain women – irrespective of the Orisa to whom the priestess was initiated – to set the course for stabilising this AIKS in the African Diaspora during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such priestesses (termed *iyalorixás* in Brazil) are next discussed followed by those in Cuba (termed *iyalòricas* in Cuba).

Bahia, Brazil

In Bahia, during and after slavery, there was constant contact between Nagô spiritual practitioners and those in Yorubaland to ensure purity of the Orisa knowledge system and to provide authentic goods to sustain it (Matory 2001; Murphy 1994). There is contradictory evidence as to whether the Jeje or Nagô nation laid the foundation for continuing this AIKS in Bahia. While most scholars point to the Nagô nation (Butler 2001; Murphy 1994; Landes 1947), Parés (2005) claims it was the Jeje nation. There is likewise dissent on which is the oldest candomblé terreiro. Most scholars contend it was Casa Branca do Engenho Velho (Casa Branca) followed by two other major candomblé terreiros that descended from it (Butler 2001; Murphy 1994; Landes 1947). However, according to Castillo (2013) the Ilê Maroíá Laji (called Alaketu) is as important but a seldom mentioned candomblé terreiro which does not seem to descend from Casa Branca. The founder of Alaketu, Otampê Ojaro was born of Ketu royal lineage in 1785 and enslaved around 1789. Upon gaining their freedom she and her husband Babá Laji returned to their na-

tive Ketu after 1809 and then eventually back to Bahia after which Alaketu was founded (Castillo 2013). Iyá Otampê and Babá Laji were contemporaries of a founder of Casa Branca, Iyá Nassô (Francisca da Silva) and her husband José Pedro Autran (Castillo 2013).

Casa Branca was founded by three women – Adetá, Iyá Kalá and Iyá Nassô in 1830 with Iyá Nassô figuring most prominently (Matory 2001). Her mother was a Bahian slave who acquired her freedom and returned to her native Kêtu, being initiated into the Òrìsà AIKS. She sent her daughter, Iyá Nassô, who was initiated to Shangó/Xangô/Changó, back to Bahia to found Casa Branca. Iyá Nassô, her daughter Marcelina (Obatossi) and granddaughter Madalena travelled regularly between Kêtu and Bahia, including long study stays in Kêtu to preserve Africanness of the Òrìsà IKS in Bahia (Butler 2001).

As a result of a succession dispute upon *iyalorixá* Marcelina's demise, *iyalorixá* Maria Julia da Conceição withdrew from Casa Branca and organised another candomblé terreiro, Ilê Omin Axé Iyamassé (called Gantois after geographical location). There she restricted the title 'Iyalorixá' to female blood relatives. *Iyalorixá* Maria Julia passed on in 1900 and was succeeded by her daughter *iyalorixá* Pulcheria. Within the first decade of the 20th century *iyalorixá* Mãe Aninha of Casa Branca left that candomblé terreiro to found Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá (Butler 2001; Murphy 1994). Born Eugenia Anna dos Santos in 1869 to African parents in the non-Yorùbá Gurunsi nation; she was initiated to Shàngó/Xangô/Changó at Casa Branca (Butler 2001; Matory 2001). These three candomblé terreiros remain distinct but interconnected through events and practices. Along with others, they were designated national landmarks in Brazil between 1984 and 1999 (Giumbelli 2014).

While Òrìsà are associated with particular natural environmental areas, rites locate them in candomblé terreiros. Certain artefacts, implements, colours and numbers are associated with particular Òrìsà. Substances such as herbs, soils, stones and waters used to invoke Òrìsà are all drawn from the natural environment. This requires an environmental ethic that recognises preservation of sacred space of Òrìsà. For example, the life force of Yemojá/Iemanjá/Yemayá in the sea is evident in the following recant of an observed ceremony as told by a respondent during Landes' research in Bahia in the early 20th century:

People were gathered in the suburb of Tojuca at the end of the railroad line. Their candomblé was going strong, and priestess was dancing, possessed of Iemanjá. Suddenly she began to run, and no one could stop her. Madly she raced into the river Catú with her clothes on. She disappeared, and her body did not rise again to the surface. Back on the bank the drums roared sacred songs, calling upon the goddess to return her. After a long time the priestess came out of the water, looking like Iemanjá herself. She was dressed in new garments delightful to behold. She returned to the temple, dancing as never before, and at dawn danced back to the river. She stepped into the water, then stepped out again. And everyone was still with astonishment, for her wonderful clothes were gone and she wore again her old ones. So people say that the Queen of the Sea actually came to earth that night to play with her favourite children in the suburb of Tojuca (Landes 1947: 96)

This observation by an onlooker supports the proposition that Òrìsà are autonomous forces of nature in their own right. In this case, Iemanjá mounted her daughter. This possession was not controlled by human beings. Instead this demonstrates Iemanjá's own volition. Similar cases of mediumship and divination are further explored in the island of Cuba. These upcoming examples seem to likewise support the proposition that Òrìsà are autonomous forces of nature and that, by extension – environmental ethics should therefore recognise and be guided by this factor.

The Island of Cuba

Given some thirty years of research Miguel Ramos was able to construct, largely through oral tradition, the key role of three Yoruba women in Cuba in preservation and expansion of the Òrìsà IKS during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Ramos 2009:40). First, iyalòrisa “Apôto” was enslaved from the Egbado region of Yorubaland in the mid-19th century. Having been initiated to Shangó/Xangô/Changó in her native land, she was best known by her spiritual name Obá Tero which means ‘the king has great calm’. Her Spanish name is Ma Monseratte González. It appears that by the late 1860s iyalòrisa Obá Tero acquired her freedom leaving a plantation for Havana city life. Just as Kétu-Nagô iyalorixás in Brazil

assumed leadership of candomblé terreiros, so did Lukumí iyalòrisas in Cuba like Obá Tero direct cabildos – often assisted by their husbands. This is because African women in Yorubaland were central to indigenous spiritual knowledge systems (Abraham 1946: 21; Ramos 2009: 47). Throughout most ancient African societies kings/queens and chiefs/chieftesses did not govern alone but relied heavily upon a host of diviners and mediums who were largely female (Beattie and Middleton 2013). Iyalòrisa Obá Tero and her husband presided over a cabildo in Havana during the early 1870s but soon moved to Matanzas due to what Ramos (2009) refers to as ‘*La division de la Habana*’. This was prompted by an intense dispute between iyalòrisas about how Òrìsà required initiation ceremonies and rituals to be performed. The two iyalòricas next described claimed to be guided by Òrìsà to execute ordination rites in a way different from iyalòrisa Obá Tero. Therefore, the two iyalòrisas (Ajayí Lewú and Efunshé Warikonó) together sided against Obá Tero. However, Obá Tero's move to Matanzas and directorship of Cabildo Lucumí Santa Bárbara in that region led to expansion of the AIKS of Òrìsà and divinely inspired peace-making between the Arará (Dahomey) and Lukumí peoples.

Iyalòrisa Ajayí Lewú's Spanish name is Timotear Albear but she was best known as Latuán. She arrived in Cuba as a slave around 1863; was from the Oyo region of Yorubaland and not unlike iyalòrisa Obá Tero had been initiated to Sangó/Xangô/Changó. Iyalòrisa Latuán was a well-known Obá Oriaté – which is a pre-eminent leader and overseer of initiation ceremonies. This high level leadership position in the Òrìsà AIKS was traditionally held by women until iyalòrisa Latuán trained a Lukumí man in the early 20th century. He subsequently trained only other men. Before the mid-20th century this position became male dominated and women were thereafter forbidden to undertake it in what was unfolding as the Cuban-centric Lukumí system. This controversy continues in the 21st century.

The final iyalòrisa under discussion Efunshé Warikondó of Egbado is believed to be of royal origin (Ramos 2009: 48). In Cuba she was given the Spanish name Nà Rosalía Abreú. The time and circumstances regarding her entry to Cuba and whether she came enslaved or free are unclear. Identity of the Òrìsà to whom she was initiated is likewise disputed. The weight of ev-

idence suggests she was initiated to Ososi. In any event, just as Nagô female leadership of the Òrisa AIKS reigned in Bahian camdomblé terreiros during and after the transatlantic slave trade, so it was for 19th century Lukumí female spiritual leaders in Cuban cabildos. By the last quarter of the 19th century, both ialòrisas Latuán and Efunshé worked closely together at Cabildo San Jose 80 – ialòrisa Latuán as Obá Oriaté and ialòrisa Efunshé as director of the cabildo.

Iyalòrisas Obá Tero, Latuán, and Efunshé engaged in divination to ensure performance of spiritual ceremonies and rituals in accordance with mandates from Òrisa. Yet a lengthy and contentious human dispute arose between ialòrisa Obá Tero on the one hand and ialòrisas Latuán and Efunshé on the other hand. Ramos (2009: 51) argues that the dispute between these ialòrisas ran deeper than conflict over ritual and ceremony procedures and Cuban territoriality. Rather, “West African antecedents probably fostered some bitterness between the Egbado and the Oyo” (Ibid). Nevertheless, the warring factions agreed that ialòrica Obá Tero would move to Matanzas and ialòrisas Latuán and Efunshé remain in Havana.

Arguably, ‘*La division de la Habana*’ was not as much a human dispute between ialòrisas as it was an exercise of autonomy of Òrisa as forces of nature. The various human arguments that underlie the dispute are beyond the confines of this paper. Suffice it to say that divination and mediumship possession likely prompted parties involved to undertake different interventions upon guidance from Òrisa. However, the outcomes were beneficial not just for preservation and expansion of the Òrisa AIKS in Cuba but also particularly to the United States (which is also beyond this discussion). Of concern here are examples of the autonomy of Òrisa as exemplified by activities that occurred after ialòrica Obá Tero relocated from Havana to Matanzas.

When conflict about ordination rites ensued between Obá Tero and a babalòrisa (male priest) named Ikudaisi in Matanzas she tried to ignore the disagreement on the human level. However, Sangó/Xangô/Changó took the matter into his own hands during mediumship possession of Obá Tero. As a respondent revealed to Ramos (2009), one evening:

Shangó dashed out to the wooden bowl that rested atop the inverted mortar where Obá Tero kept his attributes and took one of his most

scared emblems, the lightning stone (edún ará), from the bowl. Myth says that such stones accompany the bolts of lightning and the orisha propels from the heavens to castigate the wicked. Shangó ran out the doorway with the stone, and then walked to Ikudaisi’s house and stood in his doorway. Holding the stone in his hand, Shangó performed a rite with the stone and yelled to heavens. Soon after, the skies darkened and an ominous thunderstorm ensued. Lightning strikes were reported all over the town, but one very symbolic bolt struck right in front of Ikudaisi’s door, in the same spot where Obá Tero, possessed by Shangó, had stood a while earlier. Mysteriously, Ikudaisi died the following day and Obá Tero was hailed as the victor (Ramos 2009: 57, interview of A. D. P. Pérez: 1999, 2000)

Hence, the autonomy of Sangó/Xangô/Changó overtook the human consciousness of Obá Tero to effect mediumship possession. Sangó/Xangô/Changó himself settled the dispute as a force of nature – using the sacred thunderstone and invoking lightning.

Similarly, through an annual divination ceremony in which Obá Tero figured prominently, Òrisa autonomously requested a festive event. The event would involve dancing, drumming, mediumship possession and was to be attended by both Lukumí and Arará peoples (Ramos 2009: 59). In West Africa, the Oyo Kingdom had invaded Dahomey for slaves and Arará people were enslaved and brought to Cuba before the importation of Oyo-Lukumi people, likely remaining a source of conflict between groups in Cuba. During possession of their respective mediums at the event Towossi (an Arará force of nature related to death) asked Osun/Oxum/Ochún if he could have her daughter – that he would offer her much and place her in a leadership position where people had no direction – and that as a result, the Lukumí and Arará would know peace. To this Osun/Oxum/Ochún acquiesced. As a result, the Arará people subsequently incorporated much of Lukumí indigenous knowledge into Arará ceremonies and rituals – although some practices may not have been new, just forgotten and now restored. Hence, in the African Diaspora, forces of nature brought peace to two ethnic groups formerly embattled in West Africa. This suggests autonomy and sustainability of forces of nature in the Diaspora. The next section considers the intersection of Òrisa AIKS, gender

and environmental ethics before the paper closes with recommendations for African-inspired environmental ethics that honour Òrìsà and is gender conscious.

Intersection of the Òrìsà AIKS, Gender and Environmental Ethics

The sanctity of the natural environment is threatened by a misconceived epistemology of environmental ethics that fails to recognise the autonomy of the forces of nature. It is here argued that Òrìsà are alive and autonomous forces of nature. Òrìsà dwell in natural environment areas associated with their forces. As forces of nature Òrìsà embody intrinsic value and exist irrespective of human consciousness. This philosophical and epistemological perspective is diametrically opposed to westernized epistemologies that view the natural environment as instrumental and under human dominance. In this paper, the autonomy of Òrìsà is suggested by a description of mediumship possession by Yemojá/Iemanjá/Yemayá in Bahia and Sangó/Xangô/Changó, Osun/Oxum/Ochún and Towwosi in Cuba. What may seem like human leadership succession disputes in Bahia could be Sangó/Xangô/Changó exercising autonomy and expansion. Similarly, human disagreement over execution of ordination rites could have been an autonomous act of Òrìsà for expansion of the AIKS across the island. The divined request for and mediumship possession during the festive event in Cuba seems to be an autonomous act of Òrìsà that led to peace-making between nations at war in West Africa. While Òrìsà are everywhere, intricate rites locate them in candomblé terreiros and cabildos as well as at the altars and in the bodies of devotees. Òrìsà dwell in, rites are performed at and elements drawn from the natural environment. Hence, environmental degradation is tantamount to desecration of Òrìsà. Therefore, it is further contended that, as autonomous forces of nature, Òrìsà are entitled to environmental ethics and policies that promote their states of being in the natural environment as sacred space. This should be the case on the African continent, in the Diaspora and across the world. It could be accomplished through policy-making and natural resource governance and management.

During the transatlantic slave trade Yoruba women exported to Brazil and Cuba played key

roles in preserving and expanding the Òrìsà AIKS in the Diaspora. Candomblé terreiros and cabildos established an institutional base for their power and set standards for others (Ramos 2009; Butler 2001). While individual Òrìsà are gender-specific, Òrìsà selection of initiates is gender-neutral. Any initiate to the Òrìsà AIKS is a bride of Òrìsà (Matory 2003). A human male is a bride of a female Òrìsà. A human female is bride to a female Òrìsà. Westernised concepts of husband and wife and male and female roles are ill-suited for understanding and practicing African indigenous traditions. Òrìsà appointed certain Yoruba women to sustain the AIKS of Òrìsà in the Diaspora. This suggests the centrality of female leadership in AIKS sustainability. It is noteworthy that the majority of priestesses here discussed were initiated to Sangó/Xangô/Changó irrespective of whether the priestesses were born in Kétu, Egbado or non-Yoruba regions. Sangó/Xangô/Changó is patron Òrìsà of the Oyo Kingdom known as ‘king of kings’ and ‘victorious warrior’. His autonomy and archetypal characteristics seem to have been infused in enslaved Africans fighting for freedom, community-building and spiritual continuity in the face of racism, capitalism and imperialism. Yet this resistance to domination by non-Africans and preservation of the Òrìsà AIKS was led by his daughters. While Brazilian ialorixás continue to lead the Nagô driven candomblé community, male domination of the Lukumí tradition in Cuba seems to have overtaken key roles like Obá Oriaté as previously indicated.

As to gender, in the introduction to Diop’s classic work, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, historian John Henrik Clarke writes:

The Africans had produced a civilization where men were secure enough to let women advance as far as their talent, royal lineage and prerogatives would take them. (Diop 1978)

This could be in part because, unlike ancient nomadic Indo-European patrilineal societies, ancient sedentary African societies were matrilineal and the mother-child relationship of greatest significance (Diop 1978). While ancient Indo-European women were similar to slaves under the auspices of their husbands and disabled from public deliberation, indigenous African women “enjoyed a liberty equal to that of a man, had a legal individuality and could occupy any function” (Diop 1978). Diop (1978), not unlike Becker (2006) and Nzegwu (2012), argues

that gender in indigenous African society revolved around “harmonious dualism” and the matriarchal regime was not involuntarily imposed upon men but “accepted and defended by men”. From African antiquity, the fullest spectrum of mediumship qualities descends through the female line (Diop 1978). This is suggested by leadership succession in *candomlé terreiros* through female bloodlines. The tendency toward patriarchy in contemporary African societies stems in part from Islam, Christianity and the European presence in Africa (Diop 1978).

Just as westernised patriarchy was externally imposed upon indigenous African societies during colonisation thereby barring women from traditional roles, so was an environmental ethic that separates humans from the natural environment. This is in contradistinction to the oneness of humans and nature articulated by African epistemologies. Female leadership and matricentric values and traditions are central to AIKS, so should such leadership be central to African-inspired environmental ethics. It is contended that gender neutrality of devotee selection by *Òrisa* and the key role of women in this AIKS serve as a model of complementarity in female and male roles. This is instructive of a way forward for African-inspired environmental ethics in the context of gender complementarity.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the Yoruba IKS of *Òrisa* was discussed as autonomous forces of nature with objective intrinsic value in the context of environmental ethics. Several *Òrisa* were highlighted and the key roles of a number of displaced African women selected by *Òrisa* to safeguard and expand this AIKS were examined. Gender complementarity in this *Òrisa* AIKS was explored as a model for understanding gender in AIKS and environmental ethics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The intersection of *Òrisa* AIKS, gender and environmental ethics brings to the forefront a number of recommendations:

- Meaningful inclusion and consistent participation of AIKS female priesthood in local, national, regional and global policy-making on environmental ethics.

- Gender complementarity in natural resource governance and management.
- Establishment of global/local NGO with UN status, led by AIKS female priesthood that prioritises IKS forces of nature across the world as a matter of environmental ethics
- Fines assessed against multi-national corporations to endow a trust fund overseen by the global/local NGO
- Profits gained through carbon trading contribute to fund
- Global/local NGO to issue requests for proposals and award grants to fund entrepreneurial environmental-friendly community development projects by local residents that spur sustainable livelihoods in different regions.
- AIKS value-driven research to better work with IKS forces of nature.
- Use of divination and mediumship possession in peace-making and conflict resolution.

Finally, African indigenous ways of knowing gender complementarity, as suggested by the *Òrisa* IKS, offers a way forward not just for environmental ethics but also for contemporary governance and management of other issue areas and on broader scales. The author praises all *Òrisa* for motivating this paper. The author wishes to thank Oloyé Adéyemon and Miguel Ramos for providing insight on the Yoruba origin of the Lukumí tradition thereby demystifying its Cuban-centric manifestation.

REFERENCES

- Abimbola W 1975. *Iwapele: The concept of good character in Ifa literary corpus. Yoruba Oral Tradition*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan, pp. 389-420.
- Abimbola W 1994. Ifa: A West African cosmological system. In: TD Blakey, WEA van Beek, DI Thomson (Eds.): *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression*. Vol. 4, *Monograph Series of the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies*. London and Heinemann, Portsmouth: James Currey, pp. 100-117.
- Abimbola W 1997a. *Ifa Will Mend Our Broken World*. Boston: Aim Books.
- Abimbola W 1997b. Images of women in the Ifa literary corpus. In: FES Kaplan (Ed.): *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses and Power: Case Studies in African Gender*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, P. 448.
- Abimbola W 2001. The bag of wisdom: Osun and the origins of Ifa divination. In: J Murphy, M Sanford (Eds.): *Osun across the Waters*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, P. 304.
- Abimbola W 2010. Religion, world order and peace: An indigenous African perspective. *Crosscurrents, Religion and the United Nations*, 60(3): 307-309.

- Beattie J, Middleton J 2013. *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Becker H 2006. New things after independence: Gender and traditional authorities in postcolonial Namibia. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32(1): 29-48.
- Butler KD 2001. Africa in the reinvention of nineteenth century AfroBahian identity. *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 22(1): 135-154.
- Castillo SL 2013. The Alaketu Temple and its founders: Portrait of an Afro-Brazilian dynasty. *Lus-Brazilian Review*, 50(1): 83-112.
- Curtin PD 1969. *The Atlantic Slave Trade – A Census*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Diantell E 2002. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the Orisha religion in Africa and the New World (Nigeria, Cuba and the United States). *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26(1): 121-137.
- Diop CA 1978. *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Chicago: Third World Press.
- Egri C 1999. Nature in spiritual traditions: Social and cultural implications for environmental change. In: F Fischer, MA Hajer (Eds.): *Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 58-80.
- Giumbelli E 2014. Recomposing the nation conceptions and effects of heritage preservation in religious universes. *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology*, 11(2): 442-469.
- Katz E 1997. *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Commitment*. Lanham, Maryland: Littlefield Publishers.
- Law R 1991. *The Oyo Empire c. 1600 – c. 1836 A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. 2nd Edition. Brookfield: Greg Revivals.
- Matory JL 2001. The “cult of nations” and the ritualization of their purity. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100(1): 171-214.
- Matory JL 2003. Gendered agendas: The secrets scholars keep about Yorùbá-Atlantic religion. *Gender and History*, 15(3): 409-439.
- Mbiti J 1989. *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Heinemann Education Publishers.
- Moahi KH 2012. Promoting African indigenous knowledge in the knowledge economy. *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives*, 64(5): 540-554.
- Murphy JM 1994. *Working with the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Nabudere DW 2011. *Afrikology, Philosophy and Wholeness: An Epistemology*. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa.
- Nzegwu N 2012. Widows and daughters in inheritance disputes. In: N Nzegwu (Ed.): *Family Matters Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy Culture*. New York: State University of New York Press, pp.103-156.
- Pemberton J III 1989. The Oyo Empire. In: HJ Drewal, J Pemberton, R Abiodun (Eds.): *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Seattle: Harry N Abrams Inc.
- Ramos MW 2009. La división de La Habana: Territorial conflict and cultural hegemony in the followers of Oyo Lukumí religion, 1850s-1920s. *Cuban Studies*, 34(1): 38-70.
- Interview of Antonio David Pérez, by M.W. Ramos, Matanzas, 11 October 1999, 16 August 2000.
- Rolston H 1988. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values of the Natural World*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Verger P 1954. *Dieux d’Afrique*. Paris: Editions Revue Noire.
- Walker SS 1990. Everyday and esoteric reality in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé. *History of Religions*, 30(2): 103-128.
- Yanow D, Schwartz-Shea P (Eds.) 2015. *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Yin RK 2013. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Zhang Y, Wildemuth BM 2009. Qualitative analysis of content. In: B Wildemuth (Ed.): *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, pp. 308-319.