



# Green Letters

## Studies in Ecocriticism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgrl20>

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To cite this article: Ayokunmi O. Ojebode (12 Nov 2023): Seven Falls from Olumirin's Pot: African Eco-Spirituality and Myths of Erin-Ijesha Waterfalls in Nigeria, Green Letters, DOI: [10.1080/14688417.2023.2272942](https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2023.2272942)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2023.2272942>



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Published online: 12 Nov 2023.



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## Seven Falls from Olumirin's Pot: African Eco-Spirituality and Myths of Erin-Ijesha Waterfalls in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary critics of ecocriticism have explored ecologies dynamically across different genres in postcolonial African literature, especially in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. However, they overlook African Eco-spirituality underpinned by indigenous African religion and conservative practices to address impending global ecological crises. The primary data were thirty (30) simple random interviews conducted with local entertainers, paramount rulers, residents, pedestrians, market women, commercial drivers, cyclists, and skilled labourers at Erin-Ijesha, Olumirin waterfall site in Oriade LGA in Osun State and Aba-Oke Efon Alaaye LGA Ekiti State, Nigeria. The study modelled Ikechukwu Kanu's (2021) sources of African eco-spirituality, namely proverbs, gods and deities of nature, mythologies, totems and taboos, to explore indigenous practices and mythologies among indigenes of Aba-Oke/Erin-Ijesha. The study concludes that Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha communities promote attitudes of gratitude, reverence and stewardship for various life forms, which could catalyse change to mediate the damaged ecosystems and slow down the impending climate crisis.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 July 2022  
Accepted 13 October 2023

### KEYWORDS

Aba-Oke/Erin-Ijesha Waterfall; deep ecology; ecospirituality; environmental conservation and myths; Nigeria

'Step aside and watch your feet  
Do not kill the insect  
That insect you overlook  
God alone could create it' (*Odu Ifa Ogbe-otura– Iwapele*).

### Introduction

Contemporary critics of ecocriticism like Tanure Ojaide (1998), Cajetan Iheka (2015), Ernest Emenyonu, Cajetan Iheka and Stephanie Newell (2020), Jerome Masamaka (2020) and Ogaga Okuyade (2020) have explored portraits and themes of ecologies dynamically across different genres in postcolonial African literature. The scholars highlighted the adverse effects of oil exploration and environmental degradation, especially in Nigeria's Niger-Delta region, the revolution in Africa against colonial hegemony, the impact of rural-urban migrations, the gendered approaches to ecocriticism, urbanisation and

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ecology, complexities of the human-animal relationship and the environmental abuse in Africa. However, there is little or no consideration of African Eco-spirituality, an indigenised ecological approach perceived as primitive and unscientific. Nonetheless, the indigenous African religion and conservative practices are potential alternatives to addressing current global ecological crises.

Traditionally, Africans promote religious practices and beliefs in ancestral spirits and agencies like mermaids and mermen. They designate specific regions and sites like groves, pools, trees and wetlands as sacred abodes for ancestral spirits. Thus, the Shona tribe in Zimbabwe prohibit the deforestation of fig trees and groves which are considered shrines. Also, ancestral wetlands and pools were exempted from deforestation except on the approval of a traditional priest who acts as a medium and conducts necessary propitiations to the ancestral spirits (Mccgiffin, 2019). Notably, African ecocritics like Eunice Ngongkum (2020) attempted a declensionist reading of Anglophone Cameroonian poet John Ngong Kum Ngong's *Blot on the Landscape* (2015) and *The Tears of the Earth* (2018), but within the framework of Postcolonialism. However, the scholar highlights aesthetics, symbols and borrowings from oral traditions to advocate public activism against capital and neocolonial politics in Cameroon. Although Jerome Masamaka's (2020) study is slightly close to this study, especially on cultural subjectivities, however, they differ in data and geographies of Ghana and Nigeria. Masamaka subtly imports Ghanaian Ewe's totemic practices and animal advocacy into the analysis of Kofi Anyidoho's selected poems to reinforce the African philosophy of sacredness and significance of non-humans, especially honeybees.

In Nigerian literature, patterning the legacies of the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, a former Niger Delta writer and environmental activist, Tanure Ojaide's poetic oeuvre offers in-depth insight into the tragic realities of resource control, extraction marginalisation and oil pollution in the Niger Delta. Remarkably, the poet's dominant imageries of sacred trees and aquatic spaces, significantly as the abode of *Mami Wata* (mythical half-human and half-fish figure), is influenced by the Niger-Delta cultural milieu, which values mutual respect between humans and non-humans. Thus, Ojaide's poetry predominantly portrays humans as 'residents' to underscore their circumspective and temporal obligations as stewards of the ecological space. Also, the poet's deployment of aesthetics of outrage and 'monstrous' imageries exposes his utter disgust for injustices and underdevelopment of Nigeria's geography and nostalgia for the original harmony between humans and non-humans and past realities before the advent of globalisation (Ojaide, 1998). Whether Niger-Delta South-Southern Nigeria or Yoruba Southwest, Xhosa South Africa or Shona in Zimbabwe, the shared religious veneration for life forms, non-humans, spirits, and abilities indicates that beyond being ordinary objects, they are active agents and life forces sustaining the complex African ecosystem.

Pointedly, African epistemology is an 'uncritical form of tradition' (Emenyonu, Iheka, and Newell 2020, 7). The above postulation seems to highlight the ecocritics' general disinterest in 'deep ecology' or indigenised approach like African Eco-spirituality in Africa which is this study's focus. Perhaps, the scholars were trying to promote a more modern Western approach suitable for postcolonial discourses but not unwritten African literature/sources. However, the African scholars defeat their earlier stance by advocating 'epistemic disobedience' and 'decolonial' paradigms grounded in African cosmologies. Most importantly, Cajetan Iheka and Stephanie Newell's (2020) serve as the bedrock to

argue for a more flexible approach to address entangling ecological crises in the post-modern era, given the complexity of unravelling the symbiotic relationship between humans and non-humans in Africa.

Despite the laudable decolonial agenda and praxis in some of the aforementioned cultural and literary ecocritical studies, underpinned by African epistemologies and indigenous practices, the dominant theoretical construct of postcolonial ecocriticism excludes Eco-spirituality. Therefore, this study explores indigenous practices and mythologies among indigenes of Aba-Oke, a community on the crest of the scenic Olumirin/Erin-Ijesha waterfalls, Osun State, Nigeria, from an Eco-spiritual perspective to engender a more sustainable African ecosystem. This study seeks to answer the following questions: What are the myths surrounding the origin of the Erin-Ijesha waterfalls, and do they spur the conservative impulse of the Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha communities? Are there communal attitudes, philosophies and taboos protecting the sacredness of Erin-Ijesha waterfalls? Does spiritual veneration for the Olumirin deity keep the site ecologically infrangible? The responses would demonstrate the connection between the Aba-Oke/Erin-Ijesha community and Olumirin (the waterfalls' deity) and highlight the spiritual sensibilities and harmony between human beings, spirits and nature among the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria.

### **African eco-spirituality: theory and methods**

African eco-spirituality, as deployed in this study, is a framework to appreciate, reverence and pre-empt undue exploration and exploitation of nature and the sacred, especially within the contexts of a natural and cosmic ecosystem in Aba-Oke/Erin-Ijesha waterfalls, Nigeria. For Aba-Oke/Erin-Ijesha residents, any violation of prescribed social laws prompted personal or communal rituals and sacrifices to appease spirits that inhabit the physical spaces to maintain social balance and harmony. The spiritual experience aids the discernment and experience of interdependence and unity among human beings to promote attitudes of gratitude and reverence for various life forms with whom they share their planetary home. Indeed, some indigenous African practices in 'greening' the environment seem insignificant in the worsening climate crisis. However, they foster communal change on a small scale which could eventually become a large scale, mainly based on the expectation that the catalyst actions for change could be properly utilised to ameliorate the broken state of the ecosystems (Wheeler, 2022).

This study models Ikechukwu Kanu's (2021) sources of African eco-spirituality, namely proverbs, gods and deities of nature, mythologies, totems and taboos significantly utilised by indigenous Africans for conserving their environment to maintain the symbiotic relationship between their communities, spirits and nature. Kanu's (2021) study parallels sources and characteristics of African eco-spirituality religion, cosmology, morals and interdependence to assess indigenous practices and mythologies among Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha indigenes who reside close to the scenic Olumirin/Erin-Ijesha waterfalls, Osun State, Nigeria. The primary data constitutes thirty (30) simple random interviews conducted with local entertainers, paramount rulers, residents, pedestrians, market women, commercial drivers, cyclists, and skilled labourers around Erin-Ijesha in Oriade LGA of Osun State and Aba-Oke Efon Alaaye LGA, Ekiti State, Nigeria. All the respondents were within the age range of 18 to 70. The interviews serve as a bedrock for the oral history of

the waterscape and perceived conservative indigenous practices. The interviews were transcribed and then translated and back-translated from Yoruba into English, and the data were tone-marked and transcribed into English. The secondary data included books, journals, archival materials, documentaries and internet resources.

### **African eco-spirituality and myths**

Eco-spirituality is a theoretical construct that harnesses spiritual experience and sensibility as practical steps towards healing the earth and preserving ecological resources through sustainable human beings' efforts. It is tailored towards creating alternative values, ethics, and decisions about and for the earth while underscoring religion from multifaceted perspectives as a bedrock for ecological discourses drawing insights but not limited to related disciplines, economics, geography, politics, science, focusing on the core spiritual intuition to comprehend the mystical and sacred power of life and being in nature (Rockefeller and Elder, 1992). The core feature of spirituality is active contact with the metaphysical or unseen realm to derive solutions for individual and collective reflection, choices and actions (Ver Beek, 2000). Thus, Eco-spirituality is a unique blend of religion and environmental activism (Bonfiglio, 2012).

Historically, Eco-spirituality was a reaction to the West's capitalist, materialistic and technological ideals, which are the primary factors causing the increased global ecological and environmental crises in the contemporary era (Schalkwyk, 2011). The theory intersects studies on the ecosystem and spirituality which is deeply rooted in the history and religion of Aboriginals globally who have attempted to maintain their connection and oneness with the earth. Since the 1960s, the theory and practice of Eco-spirituality have been an intrinsic aspect of the culture in North America up until the early 1970s with a global reawakening across disciplines on the significance of ethics and religion to ecological and social liberation (Rockefeller, 1992). Some notable intercultural and inter-religious institutions like the United Nations, World Wildlife Fund, and World Conservation Strategy have worked closely to develop religious and spiritual policies to contain impending global ecological challenges. In 1996, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim of the Harvard Centre for the Study of World Religions undertook a project on Religion and Ecology, which saw the hosting of ten conferences attracting a cream of top researchers and environmentalists across different global religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Indigenous Traditions, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto and Taoism. The ongoing project has reached a discussion stage to be implemented by the United Nations (Schalkwyk, 2011). Despite commendable and innovative interventions by multinational organisations like the United Nations through their Millennium Project's Task Force and 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the current global ecological crises and their consequences implicitly reveal the need for a balanced humanist and spiritual approach.

In the African literary domain, activist-writer Wangari Maathai's 'eco-spiritual activism' has attracted the attention of critics like Mutua and Kilonzo (2018); Okuyade (2020) and Musila (2020) who consider her works to be motivated by her passion for preserving the sacredness of daily life and the environment. Despite Maathai's laudable contributions to the burgeoning field of Eco-spirituality, it seems environmental activism is a modification of stereotypic Western ecocritical strategies (e.g. tree planting, low-emission zoning,

conversion of greenhouse gases, use of recyclable waste, alternative/renewable energy sources) are insufficient to achieve optimal ecological sustainability in Africa. Meanwhile, given that social attitudes and cultural norms are primary intrinsic factors for human-induced ecological devaluation and destruction. Therefore, it is crucial to re-evaluate indigenous African attitudes and philosophies about the sacredness of the biodiversity, ecosystem and planet, which could motivate the people to take necessary social and spiritual action. Thus, African eco-spirituality, a collegial, fluid, and humanist approach, provides the platform to address ecological crises from a deep spiritual dimension reflecting on the profound significance of life, non-humans, and the sacred which contravenes Western technological and materialistic approaches (Aurélié 2017). Eco-spirituality's core tenets focus on people's religious consciousness and reverence for ecology through appreciation, habitation, interconnection, nurture and veneration (Suganthi, 2019).

Generally, Africans are exceptionally religious and in their worldview, the spirit realm is so interwoven into the physical that they are indissoluble (Mbiti, 1969). African ontology is fundamentally anthropocentric, locating human beings at the apex of God's creation. Africans believe that both God and humans share a mutual relationship and exist to serve each other's statuses as the creator and the created. They believe the invisible God is kind and manifests himself in his creation. Thus, human beings are expected to replicate similar kindness towards everything in their environment (Mbiti, 1989). Human beings' moralistic disposition towards other living and non-living things distinguishes them from animals and other lesser creatures. The African cosmological and ontological philosophy is the bedrock for the hypothesis that each creation has its unique purpose and should be revered (Ogunade, 2005).

However, above human beings are spirits who act as an intermediary between God and humans and oversee humans' affairs and destinies during the afterlife (Mbiti, 1970). Spirits are invisible and roaming beings that could inhabit any material object. The triangular relationship between God, humans, and spirits is the same structure for an individual's personhood and integration into an African family and kinship system. Every African is compelled to service his bond with the living, ancestors and the unborn. Being a piece of the organic community, such a person is indebted to his social group and predecessors. Thus, personhood is predetermined by the corporate community that produces a member. Since individuals share the same life force with the community, their person or identity is shaped by the popular African philosophy: 'I am because we are; and therefore I am' (Mbiti 1989, 236).

Apart from the bond within the social group, Africans share the same life force with their ecosystem, maintained by deep reverence and restraint. For instance, the Shona in Zimbabwe acknowledges Mwari (the leading spirit), Varidzivenyika and other minor spirits as guardians of their lands. For them, lands are shared possession of the living, ancestors and unborn. Since the ancestral spirits also influence rainfall and the fertility of lands, the indigenes maintain their lands and natural resources as prudent stewards (Chavunduka 2001). Also, the African ethnic group personalises animals, rocks, water bodies and mountains as totemic symbols. For instance, the *shiri* (bird) and *dziva* (water bodies) are exempted from eating, indirectly preventing extinction. Thus, lands and their products become less valuable because they are perceived to be abodes for non-humans and spirits. Also, metal and clay carriers used for common cooking were not to be used for fetching from some rivers because it was considered demeaning for inhabiting water spirits.

Consequently, the Shona believe that water spirits/mermaids and pythons protect wetlands. Therefore, carriers with soot could pollute water sources and irritate the water spirits thereby causing them to migrate or dry up the water. The Shona's indigenous practices and ecological conservation are the same in many parts of Africa, including Yoruba Southwest Nigeria (Dodo, 2015). In Africa, strict adherence to the religious codes fosters social balance, permanence and cordiality with non-humans and spirits. Therefore, indigenous Africans promoted taboos as communal checks to maintain social ethics and the ecosystem to prevent human-induced and natural catastrophes like blights, deaths, droughts, epidemics, famines, thunderbolts, miscarriages and wars (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010).

### Yoruba indigenous practices and ecological conservation

Nigeria is a multicultural nation with rich and distinct cultural identities and over 250 ethnic groups, the most populous and politically dominant being Hausa-Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo (Ibo) 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, Tiv 2.5%. The country also has over 500 languages with diverse ethnic nationalities (Akinyemi and Falola 2016). Yoruba distinctly believe in *Olodumare*, the mysterious creator and supreme deity overseeing the terrestrial and extraterrestrial realms. The ethnic group have standardised their accepted knowledge through festivals, rituals, and oral performances engendering adulations, folktales, myths, philosophy, songs, and wise sayings, which are crucial for environmental sustainability. The Yoruba believe that though human beings are superior to other creatures, they should be cautious of irritating or disrupting social harmony, especially with their 'co-occupants' (Idowu 1978, 173). The diffused hierarchy between the spiritual and physical realms blends with the Yoruba worldview of religion, philosophy and art. Therefore, indigenous Yoruba value the omniscience of *Ifa*, the god of divination and wisdom who reveals and supplies practical knowledge about their social and religious obligations (Ojebode, 2023).

The *Ifa* corpus, a primary source for indigenous Yoruba philosophy, details how the agent/voice of the *Ifa* oracle, *Orunmila's* muse, on the incredible personality of *Olodumare* from his assessment of the environment and nature:

Orunmila fehinti o wo titi,  
Oni, Eyin ero okun, Eyin ero osa,  
Eyin o mo pe, ise Eledumare tobi?

Translation:

Orunmila leaned back, gazing contemplatively

He said, "You travellers to the sea,

You travellers to the lagoon,

Don't you perceive that the works of *Olodumare* are marvellous? (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 73–76).

Thus, Yoruba perform communal rites and sacrifices to maintain the liminal bond between the realms of the living, unborn and ancestors. The rites and sacrifices are essential to restore the balance between the physical and metaphysical realms (Soyinka, 1976). The latter abstractive realm is more composite and delicate but permanent to tap endless energy for a cyclic rejuvenation of the ecosystem. The symbiotic correspondence between the realms thus necessitates that any challenges encountered by any individual

or community can be solved by accessing quantum elemental forces (Ologundudu, 2008). There is nothing like dead cells/matter in African ontology because each creation and even the minutest physical element radiates a life force, something like a wave-particle that traditional healers and elders, monarchs, and performers harness to heal the universe (Senghor, 1995). Disequilibrium leads to adverse outcomes like drought, illness, miscarriage or social imbalance. However, magic, voodoo, and mysticism are inventive indigenous means of restoring, not fragmenting, the harmony that exists between human beings and the cosmos. Thus, in the African worldview, the cosmos is far from inactive, inert, or 'dead'. It is vibrant, fluidic and evolving (Ikuenobe, 2014). The following Yoruba maxim validates the philosophy: *eku o ke bi eku, eye o ke bi eye agan o t'owo ala b'osun* 'rodents are not squeaking, and birds are not chirping, and infertile women fail to conceive for provoking the deities/nature.

Indeed, the indigenous Yoruba are cautious in preserving their environment even when their profession requires exploring and exploiting nature, like blacksmithing, dyeing, farming, hunting and sculpting. The Yoruba blacksmiths are cautious and moderate when producing equipment for farmers and hunters (Green and Muhammed 2020). The indigenous Yoruba prioritise the minutest insect (*aafa inu igbo* – cleric of the forest) as sacred and protect it from being killed (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979). They believe any form of negligence threatens both human and non-human ecosystems. In many cosmopolitan Nigerian cities, motorists often halt their brakes anytime they encounter ducks and sheep on the road to prevent their deaths. The considerate act originates from a Yoruba myth about supplicating Ogun (Yoruba god of iron) to avert any form of 'evil' or road and mechanical accident. The philosophy underlining the myth is that if a motorist accidentally runs over an animal, they must park to put some money and other items in the dead animal's mouth or initiate an impending road accident (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979). The collective commitment to preserving the environment and other entities, humans and non-humans, especially vulnerable animals, is summed up in a Yoruba children's folklore adapted from an *Ifa* corpus:

Yi ese re si apakan,  
Ma se te kokoro ni,  
Kokoro ti iwo ko naani ni,  
Olorun lo le da a,

Translation:

Side-step your feet  
Do not kill the insect  
That insect you do not regard

It is God alone who could create it (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 73–76).

Apart from validating the indigenous Yoruba's thoughtful and conservative intuition, the instruction 'do not kill the insect' also acknowledges the value of non-humans, especially insignificant and vulnerable creatures, as an organic unit of the ecosystem. Moreover, their sacredness and death could impede or foster the life cycle in the environment. In addition, Awolalu and Dopamu's (1979, 76) assertion, 'it is God alone who could create it', underscores the intrinsic Yoruba philosophical insight into creation as a piece of God's enigmatic imagination, not simply self-existent and self-sustaining as promulgated in many Western cosmological models of the universe, particularly the 'Big Bang' theory (Ogunade, 2005).

Thus, Yoruba's ethical and moralistic dimensions have equivalent in Eco-spirituality critical to environmental conservation and sustainability and to addressing global ecological crises like biodiversity and habitat loss, climate change, deforestation, global warming, mass extinction and rapid deterioration of the atmosphere, oceans and soil caused by Western globalisation. Despite the advent of colonialism, the premodern Yoruba society had standard legal traditions and philosophies that guided environmental conservation and sustainability encoded into their folksongs, myths, proverbs, and taboos influencing their daily religious and social activities.

### History, myths and crest of Erin-Ijesha/Olumirin waterfall

Erin Ijesha also known as Olumirin Waterfall is located in the developing town of Erin-Ijesha, Osun State, Nigeria. Although Erin-Ijesha/Olumirin waterfall from the bottom is situated in Erin-Ijesha Oriade LGA Osun State, however, it shares geographical boundaries with Aba-Oke, a rustic homestead on its crest in Efon Alaaye LGA of Ekiti State. Oral tradition accounts that after Oduduwa's (traditional progenitor of the Yoruba race) demise, there was a heated dispute among his children, princes and princesses of Ile-Ife about whom to take possession of Iro, a sculpted deity believed to grant peace, fertility and prosperity. Therefore, Akinla, Oduduwa's eldest daughter, decided to migrate further away from the Yoruba cradle town to institute her kingdom since princesses, especially Oduduwa's descent, had equal rights to the throne in the premodern Yoruba politics. As a result, the Ife princess, her husband (Olule), and entourage trekked for about seventeen days (irin ojo metadinlogun) from Ile-Ife to their first settlement Ugbo-Oja (located in Iperindo/Odo area in the present Atakunmosa East LGA, Osun State). After a short stay at 'Ugbo-Oja', the party discovered that they could not reside there permanently due to water scarcity. Therefore, they proceeded until they arrived at Erin-Itadogun (a coinage from Irin Itadogun – a seventeen-day journey) was later renamed by indigenes as Erin-Ijesha in 1140AD (Aba-Oke farmer, personal interview, 20 March 2022). Notably, Akinla's sojourn is not far-fetched from the popular Yoruba myth about the sixteen Ile-Ife crowned princes' mass exodus from the cradle town to institute the Yoruba kingdoms. Akinla's brothers fondly tagged her with the panegyric name, *Yeye Aye* (Mother of all), expressed fully in the Ife poetic lines *E soni sigun b'erinja, Erin ni yeye oni* denoting 'no one confronts the elephant, the mother to alligators'. Princess Akinla was revered by her siblings, Oduduwa's princes and was conferred with the titular name 'Akinla, Yeye Aiye' (translated Akinla, the world's sovereign Mother) being Iro's Ife goddess' sole custodian. Thus, it was a norm for a newly crowned Akinla of Erin-Ijesha (titular name thereafter for both male and female paramount rulers) or Owa Obokun of Ijesaland to consult first with 'Iro' and observe her traditional festivities and purification before ascension. In the meantime, Akinla's large entourage included key relatives and personalities like Akinla's brothers and sisters. Onitafa eventually became the title holder Baba Ijoja of Erin, led a team of skilled hunters, and the chief priest Lowa Bisi led Iro priests. Also included were native healers (Elewe Omo), diviners (Adifala), and Iro goddess adherents who later dispersed to institute their towns. The primary occupations of the growing community were mainly farming and hunting (Aba-Oke farmer, personal interview, 20 March 2022).

Initially, Erin-Itadogun otherwise known as Erin-Ijesha, comprised four quarters, Inisa, Egiri-Oke, Idi Ayan and Imose, with Ejigbomekun (later Itadogun) as its central market

supervised by the hunter (Onitafa) who had a nearby quarter to it. Eventually, the town's name was changed to Erin-Ijesha. Erin-Ijesha's historical origin influenced the formation of its sister towns, Erin-Ile, Erin-Papa, Erin-Moje, Erinmo, Erin-Osun, and Erin-Ada, perpetuating Yeye-Akinla and her company's journey. During one of their expeditions northwards, the hunters, specifically Aponju-Abela, saw a giant deity holding a gigantic pot, out of which water gushed from a considerable height as illustrated in Figure 1. Frightened by the extraordinary sight, they promptly reported to the Ife princess. She consulted with an Ifa priest to identify the unknown deity tagged as 'Olumirin', a different deity from the well-known Iro, Ife's predominant deity. Akinla sought to uncover the deity's powers and taboos, given her mystical pot, a prospective water source for the community. The Ifa oracle suggested annual human sacrifice as a token of appreciation to sustain the gift of nature. But, after the demise of Yeye Akinla, one of her sons who succeeded her prohibited human sacrifice for animal sacrifice (bulls) during their annual festivals insofar as it did not provoke the Olumirin goddess (Aba-Oke trader, personal interview, 20 March 2022). During Akinla Stephen Adeyinka Adeosun's reign (1959–1999), the monarch who professed Christianity altered the name of the waterfall site from Olule Orioke to Oluwamiran (Another Lord) and abolished animal sacrifices while granting public access after its commissioning to tourists for excursions to the seven-cascades cliff (surviving relic after Olumirin supernaturally vanished). The first premier of the Western Region under Nigeria's parliamentary system (1952 to 1959), Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the phenomenal Yoruba nationalist and statesman, commissioned Olumirin waterfalls in 1959.

After the first main waterfall, a pedestrian bridge to Olumirin waterfall's second cascade leads first to a historic cave, Agbon-Agbeleku, about 70 metres, discovered by Aponju-Abela, the same hunter who discovered the Erin-Ijesha waterfall and could comfortably accommodate about fifty persons. During Oba Alua's reign, a former



**Figure 1.** The picture shows a monument at the entry to Erin-Ijesha/Olumirin waterfall site, symbolising the mystical pot that is the water source for aba-oke and Erin-ijesha communities.

monarch of Erin-Ijesha, the cave served as a shrine for Oodua, commemorated thrice annually in a festival. However, the shrine vanished due to weathering but is currently utilised as a relaxation shade for farmers, traders, and wanderers who access the tourist site for trade – the second cascade splashes from 14 metres to create a safe, shallow and low-current pool for children. As illustrated in [Figure 6](#), there are generally no wild animals, snakes or stinging insects in the second cascade, possibly due to the waterfall's gushing sound. Like the second waterfall, the third has rocky and steep pathways though there are twigs and roots to steady a climber's feet (Aba-Oke farmer, personal interview, 20 March 2022).

The third cascade is about twenty minutes from the second, towering from 43 metres. It is a similarly shallow pool safe for swimming. To descend into the fourth cascade is slightly tedious because the terrain is sloppy and requires holding tightly to twigs to slide downwards. The fourth waterfall is not as tall and massive as the second but can be reached only by daring climbers. Reaching the fifth cascade requires climbing out of the fourth with its pit-like landscape. The pathway to the fifth waterfall is connected and has a close view but requires grabbing, sliding, and free-fall to the base, preferably for expert climbers. Reaching the sixth cascade requires a tricky manoeuvre out of the deep-seated rocks of the fifth site. The trek to the sixth cascade is less complex and requires no climbing, but accessing the waterfall 20 metres below sea level needs caution as the climber grabs and steadies their feet to touch the base. The sixth waterfall is minor, and the landscape is like standing in an open cave with the surrounding vegetation. At this phase, the gushing sound of the first main waterfall is very distant because of the altitude of 650 metres above sea level and 258 metres in height (Aba-Oke farmer, personal interview, 20 March 2022).

As illustrated in [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#), to access the seventh waterfall, a long trek on a stable landscape through a rocky and bushy pathway with large cocoa, kola nut, plantain, cassava, yam, corn, pineapple, oranges, and *Thaumatococcus danielli* or ewe-



**Figure 2.** The researcher hikes through the mountainous pathways to interview aba-oke residents.



**Figure 3.** The picture shows sun-dried cocoa pods in front of one of the huts in Aba-Oke.

*iran* (a popular leaf for storing local pap and bean pudding) plantations to *Abake* or *Aba-Oke*, denoting 'homestead at the top' or in full *Ajebamidele Aba-Oke* that is 'Wealth Has Accompanied Me To The Homestead at The Top'. **Figure 4** illustrates the plantation of the popular leaves used for serving local pap among indigenous Yoruba communities. The rural enclave is mainly for farmers and traders, specifically those into cassava flakes (*gari*) local preparation (Aba-Oke trader, personal interview, 20 March 2022). The distance between Olumirin waterfall and the Abake homestead is 4 kilometres, categorised separately under Efon Alaaye LGA of Ekiti State. Olumirin's first main waterfall counting upwards is 352 metres in height and about forty-five minutes to two hours distance from the seventh waterfall at the peak which is static and a primary water source for the Abake inhabitants. As illustrated in **Figure 5**, the first waterfall descent is believed to be



**Figure 4.** The picture shows large plantations of *thaumatococcus danielli* or *ewe-iran* in Aba-Oke, for growing the popular leaves for storing local pap and bean pudding among indigenous Yoruba communities.



**Figure 5.** The picture shows the first cascade from the Aba-Oke descent, the primary source of Erin-Ijesha/Olumirin waterfalls.



**Figure 6.** The picture shows the second cascade, a minor waterfall about 20 metres below sea level in an open cave with the surrounding vegetation.

curative for people with any physical ailments. Also, one of the respondents affirmed that the waterfall is a source of tourist attraction which simultaneously boosts the economy of the Aba-Oke community as they sell their farm produce, wares and snacks to them (Aba-Oke farmer, personal interview, 20 March 2022).

### **Rituals as ecospiritual practice in olumirin history**

Few studies on Erin-Ijesha waterfalls in Osun State, Nigeria, mainly from agricultural, biochemical, hydroelectric, geographical, literary, microbiological, socio-economic and ecotourist perspectives offer general ecological and descriptive information on the popular Nigerian tourist site, which attracts over 50,000 tourists yearly with the potential of becoming a mainstream source of livelihood and national revenue. Apart from creative works, the few remaining cross-disciplinary studies on the Erin-Ijesha waterfall exposed a significant gap in the study of Eco-spiritual practices and mythologies, especially among the indigenes of Aba-Oke, the community on the Olumirin/Erin-Ijesha waterfall, Osun State, Nigeria.

Given the fundamental tenet of African eco-spirituality, which is the need to reconnect with nature, people and the cosmos with deep spiritual sensibilities, the initial human sacrifices by Yeye Akinla and her retinuees at the discovery of Olumirin waterfall underscore the deep reverence and gratitude that Yoruba Africans have for non-humans, especially spiritual beings that use nature or elemental forces as their natural habitat. Thus, by giving an invaluable propitiation, the new community inevitably adapted their lives to Olumirin's bounties to meet their agricultural, social and spiritual needs. Indeed, the historical origin of the Erin-ljesha/Olumirin waterfall indicates that nature is a source of livelihood and identity that imprints both personal and communal lives. On the one hand, the Erin-ljesha myth duplicates the Ile-lfe myth about Moremi, the former queen's conquest against the Igbo raiders who terrorised her community incessantly. Thus, she desperately sacrificed her only child to Esinmirin (the Sky god). Both myths indicate that the indigenous Yoruba had deep insight into evoking a higher spiritual force at critical moments and for critical decisions concerning human survival, whether personal or collective. Rachel Wheeler's (2022) explanation of Eco-spirituality corroborates that human beings' unique insight and imagination of the ecosystem are heightened through conscious awareness of continuity in non-humans or other-than-human life forms to consolidate their relationship with the sacred.

In the case of Erin-ljesha indigenes, the annual human sacrifice enhances their sense of judgement, interdependence and communality to promote cultures of appreciation and worship of Olumirin (a superior deity to Ile-lfe's), who predominate their ecological space. The new settlers believed that any form of negligence in their annual communal rituals would invoke the Olumirin's wrath leading to the fragmentation of their community and the physical/spiritual environment. Also, the imbalance in the waterfall quality is their primary source of livelihood being new settlers. Rituals as a basis for liturgy is a stipulated code for public worship with the primary objective of initiating communication and communion with a deity within a religious circle. Thus, worship and festival are indissoluble. In this regard, individual or community rituals could be communicated through expressions, performances, and symbols. Personal rituals are a set of practices to commemorate critical events in an individual's life, while communal rituals are engrained into the society's religious structure (Awolalu and Dopamu, 2005).

The Erin-ljesha community had a distinct histo-religious identity fostering continuity and harmony. During the fieldwork, one of the respondents added that there are peculiar rituals of the Aba-Oke community, the homestead at the Erin-ljesha waterfall's crest that also contribute to the fragility of the environment, first, a mystical drum is beaten annually to locate any abducted/missing member of the community. Equally, there is an annual commemoration of Egungun-Owa, a mystical masquerade whose ritualistic movements and performance create a widespread dread causing inhabitants to stay indoors and compulsorily rest from farm labours throughout the ritual (Aba-Oke farmer, personal interview, 20 March 2022). Thus, Erin-ljesha and Aba-Oke inhabitants distinguish themselves as active stewards of their environment, harnessing physical and spiritual forces to significantly contribute to ecological conservation, security and communal values.

## Festivals and female titular office as ecospiritual practice in Erin-Ijesha

Eseme'e is an important chieftaincy title exclusively for women only in Erin-Ijesha. The title-holder esteemed as queen, community women leader, and historian is an equivalence of the Akinla, the male monarch presiding over Erin-Ijesha. Since the inception, Erin-Ijesha, the titular office has been bequeathed only to the Olugboroibi ancestral family. Eseme'e's office echoes eco-feminist ideals that interrogate hierarchical and power structures undergirding how human beings relate to animals, land and women (Kebaneilwe, 2015).

Meanwhile, the Eseme'e office has strict codes and taboos like wearing traditional white-themed accessories like attires headgear, blouses and wrappers, shoes and horse whisks. Also, the title-bearer must eat or drink only freshly-prepared dishes or water. She must not step on untidied floors or surroundings, and she is prohibited from cuddling a child expected to have stopped child-bearing. Eseme'e does not lift loads on her head or kneel to greet anyone regardless of class, status, and age because she holds the prestigious office of leader to community women. Female chiefs like Yeyerisa and Yeye Sajowa, Yeye Jemu, Yeye Saro, Yey Lemo, Yey-ro, Yeye Jero and Yeye Looyin Obinrin ably assist her (Adigun and Awe 2009).

Most importantly, she performs cultural, political and spiritual roles like assisting the Akinla and other paramount chiefs to institute favourable policies for the community and women issues and settling minor disputes like a public fight among rival wives, which is a taboo in the indigenous Yoruba society. Also, she ratifies the appointment and selection of female titular officeholders. Eseme'e leads women in communal labour. Regarding her spiritual roles, the female paramount chief leads the rituals for Oduduwa (traditional progenitor of the Yoruba race) for the sixteen Yoruba monarchs, Akinla of Erin-Ijesha, Ewi Ado-Ekiti, Osemawe Ondo, Alaaye Efon, Elerinmo Erinmo, Ajalaye Ipetu-Ijesa, Alaafin Oyo, Ooni Ile-Ife, among others, but exempt Owa Obokun who is prohibited from visiting Oodua's shrine in Erin-Ijesha. As a custodian of culture, Eseme'e performs critical roles during the Agbeleku Festival (associated with the collapsed shrine on Olumirin cliff). She pours plenty of salt on the Oodua spot as a peace sign for the Erin-Ijesha community. Among other things, Lowabisi, a powerful priest (Iro Imole) from Ile-Ife, comes around to clean and sweep Eseme'e's palace with charms and cleaning equipment to make it more conducive and free of evil spirits that may upset the peace and harmony in the community. The votive items used for her coronation include spotless white sheep, kola nuts, two white horse whisks, and a peacock's feather.

Women relatives from the Olugboroibi family stay with the new candidate for three months to assist and motivate him in completing the tedious coronation process staying awake throughout the three times she took back and forth to the Oodua's shrine times before daybreak (Adigun and Awe 2009). Eseme'e's titular office reveals that religion among the indigenous Yoruba interlinks social and political structure, material culture, law and custom, and physical environment (Ojo, 1971). Beyond her role's feminist and religious significance, the stringent accoutrements and taboos indicate that the Erin-Ijesha community values hygienic attitudes that promote environmental conservation, women's development and empowerment. Apart from Oodua, the principal deity in Erin-Ijesha, the white theme is the signature for many Yoruba deities and festivals like Obatala (arch divinity), Osun (goddess of Osun River in Nigeria), Ifa (god of divination and

wisdom), to endorse the sacredness and pious personalities of the deities and their priests. Esemee's titular office highlights women as a positive social and spiritual agency in sustaining the environment, a core tenet of related disciplines like Ecofeminism and Feminist spirituality.

Ecofeminism, a dynamic social movement for social change, was a reaction to women's social, ecological, economic, and political challenges caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism (Gaard and Murphy 1998). Likewise, Feminist spirituality focuses on norms or lifestyles related to the sacred by probing female bodies and feminine ideals (Wheeler, 2022). Therefore, Eco-spirituality is an all-inclusive framework that blends common tenets from other ecological perspectives with a deeper focus on the anatomic and social, religious and symbolic representation of women and the environment. Given the above, Esemee's role significantly foregrounds the exploitation of women and the environment, reinforcing women's social identity to subvert the male-dominant culture that undermines their potential. Pointedly, Eco-spirituality in the context of Esemee's titular office and Oodua festival justify religious codes, practices and taboos that underscore Erin-Ijesha women's commitment to the physical and spiritual ecosystem to promote awareness, acceptance and appreciation of other humans, non-humans and spiritual entities sharing the same ecological space.

### **Myths and taboos as ecospiritual practice in aba-oke community**

Many myths and taboos among Aba-Oke residents are influenced by their socio-cultural, geographical and religious perceptions of their environment. The community was created out of obligations for easier access for farmers and traders via the Olumirin waterfall route is approximately forty-five minutes to two hours trek. Generally, both Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha inhabitants believe that the waterfall's source is mystical. Meanwhile, its water remains fresh and curative for any form of skin rashes, swells, body pains and joint ailments. Aba-Oke residents believe that any indigene drinking of Olumirin's waterfall is exempted from being kidnapped for money rituals. Besides, they have taboos related to co/residency, including the prohibition of bringing harmful charms to the community because it will backfire (Aba-Oke trader, personal interview, 20 March 2022).

Also, residents do not steal from their neighbours to keep the site's harmony and sacredness. One of the respondents from Erin-Ijesha shared with the interviewer that culture prohibits indigenes from selling roasted corn and yam because it is tantamount to exploiting nature and spirits sustaining the community's agriculture (Aba-Oke farmer, personal interview, 20 March 2022). Indigenous African societies subscribe consistently to taboos and rituals on a personal and collective level to supplicate on behalf of a community or as an obligation to deities. It seems Africans were unconsciously or indirectly controlled by dominant spiritual forces which propelled permanent allegiance to a deity or non-humans. Thus, an individual's 'free-spirited' relationship with fellow human beings is inapplicable to nature or the environment. The community may not overburden such individuals with obligations, but they have constant debts to pay to predecessors.

Taboos like beliefs in *Abiku* or terrifying spirits inhabiting Iroko (baobab) trees among Yoruba Southwestern Nigeria, respect for ancestral python among the Igbo East and eating pork or swine products among Hausa North, among others, are moralistic and

prescriptive rules governing community's relationship with their environment to foster balance and harmony (Magesa, 2015). Likewise, Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha residents subscribe to taboos like not employing harmful charms, theft and selling organic food items, believing that doing so would protect Aba-Oke inhabitants from Olumirin's retribution. Thus, African communities enforce taboos because they act as ecological guardians or police for the community and environment (Adu-Gyamfi 2011).

Most importantly, adherence to taboos enhances the life worth of non-humans, elevating them from being relics to social agencies within the ecosystem. The sacredness of the non-humans prevents their exploitation and locates them in an ethical relationship with humans, especially within religious contexts (Iheka 2015). In this regard, Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha's indigenous residents' deep commitment and reverence for spiritual elements within their ecosystem can be regarded as positive practices that can be harnessed to combat the contemporary global ecological crises, including industrial activities in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Considering the highlighted indigenous conservative practices encoded in myths, religious festivals/offices, rituals and taboos in the Yoruba states have survived modern civilisation and shaped the ethics of the communities validated as potential tools for ecological sustainability.

## Conclusion

The findings indicated that residents of Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha have a deep ecological commitment and exude the deep philosophies that aid the sustenance of the scenic waterfalls despite the Nigerian government's indifference to their tacit demands for basic social amenities and the renovation of the poorly-maintained ecotourist site. Though it seems Aba-Oke and Erin-Ijesha residents' strict adherence to conservative rules and veneration of the Erin-Ijesha/Olumirin waterfall deity is mainly obligatory for fear of divine retribution and social imbalance. Nonetheless, their consistent ethical practices locate human beings as stewards whose decisions and indecisions could impact on culture and attitudes of the upcoming generation towards environmental conservation. This study reveals that government and stakeholders need to incorporate cultural and religious perspectives to balance predominant scientific instruments to successfully contain ecological crises, which are not necessarily rational but underlined by humans' ambition and self-sufficiency.

Therefore, communal beliefs and myths among indigenous people should be encouraged because it is a potential tool for biodiversity and ecosystem conservation and to slow down the negative impact of human activities on the climate. As a sacred site, the Erin-Ijesha/Olumirin waterfalls are an ecotourist site and a source of history and social identity of people who have survived globalisation by evolving and nurturing their environment. The communal practices like Esemee titular offices and Agbeleku festival could motivate social action, especially among women who will ultimately benefit nature's sustainability and enhance measures against ecological exploitation in Nigeria and globally. The study concludes that the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) could adopt the ecotourist site as part of the world heritage. The Nigerian government should invest in and encourage communities and cultures that positively contribute to environmental conservation.

## Acknowledgments

I sincerely appreciate my research assistants, Muyiwa Aderinto and Samuel Akinfenwa, graduates of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, for helping to gather information from primary sources during the fieldwork at the Erin-Ijesha/Olumirin waterfall.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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