

**TRADOECOLOGY OF THE YORUBA AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINING THE  
ENVIRONMENT IN TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES: A STUDY IN  
ECOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

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**Abstract**

*This paper focuses on tradoecology of traditional communities. Using the Yoruba as a case study, it examines the usefulness of tradoecology as a tool in studying the ecological anthropology of traditional communities. It aims for a sustainable environment in the face of on-going monumental destruction of the planet. Data reveal that the world is inundated with severe ecological problems with apocalyptic proportions. Under this pathetic condition, the research notes that traditional communities, like the Yoruba are worst hit as they lack the needed modern scientific means to confront the menace. The paper identifies and proposes tradoecology as eco-friendly and as a most appropriate mechanism for sustaining the environment. Methodologically, the study engages in ethnographic fieldwork in parts of Yorubaland, which are considered as pristine traditional communities to gain firsthand knowledge of tradoecology and thereby build up fundamental points on ecological anthropology of the people. Findings indicate that Yorubaland has immense traditional ecological mechanisms, which can ameliorate the gamut of ecological degradation confronting humanity. The paper concludes that the study of tradoecology and*

*ecological anthropology of the Yoruba portends great value to anthropological and ecological studies.*

**Keywords:** Ecological anthropology, Environment, Tradoecology, Traditional communities, Yoruba

## **Introduction**

There are ongoing cataclysmic environmental crises in the world, with damaging effects on humanity and the planet. The conclusion emanating from studies indicates that the planet is experiencing the biggest mass extinction in history of the earth, (Robinson, <https://earth.org>, Stanchwa, <https://pawsomeadvice.com>). Importantly traditional communities of the world are badly affected. Scholars like Anderson (2016), Berkes (1993), Platten and Henfrey (2009), and Olaniyan (2003), have examined data on ecological disasters of traditional communities and concluded that the earth has entered a perilous phase. In a critical contribution to the issue, Tubi (2020) describes it as “ecocide”. In a recent ecological study of traditional Yoruba communities, graphic illustrations of the menace of ecological disasters confronting the people were highlighted:

The *olori ode* (chief hunter) of Ogidi, one of the principal towns of Okunland, looked askance towards a direction and said, “In the past, we had antelopes, grass cutters and bush pigs in this forest. Now, it is bare”. An aged *aworo* (chief priest) at Ayedayo states, “The relationship between human beings and the environment was hallowed in this community”. Pointing to one of the hills, he sighed and continued, “Nobody dared to set fire to the sacred grove those days, but now look at it; as fire set by cattle herders has razed everything down”. The herders commence early bush burning as a deliberate method of getting fodders for their cattle. The *oba* (traditional ruler) of Iluke, of Bunu district in northeast Yorubaland, in a discussion with the researcher, opines that traditional communities have lost their hallowed land and pristine environments to the activities of “modern people” who have no regards for the peoples’ culture, (Tubi 2022:2-3).

## **Methodological and conceptual clarifications**

The framework of the study emanates from three propositions: (i) That traditional communities of the world, like the Yoruba, provide scholars with sufficient data to re-examine the multiplicity of global environmental crises affecting humanity and proffer environmentally workable solutions. (ii) That it has become incumbent

on scholars to engage in ecological anthropological study because it has become apparent that scientists alone cannot solve the mounting ecological crises bedevilling humanity. It is therefore imperative for scholars to carry out extensive study of traditional peoples of the world so as to examine, obtain, distil and employ their pristine traditional ecological methods, as applicable. (iii) That ecology has serious anthropological implications and it is certain that the ecological war will not be won unless, its anthropological angle is clearly examined as pointed out by scholars such as Anderson, (1991), Branton (2007), Haen, et.al (2016) and Tubi, (2018).

Methodologically, the researchers employed direct participant-observation fieldwork, which is best suited for anthropological studies. They visited and examined several ecologically worsened sites in Yorubaland, with special focus on Okun communities in northeast Yorubaland. To enhance a balanced ecological anthropological study, the researchers spent two (2) years studying the tradoecology of some traditional Okun-Yoruba communities and their response to their immediate environment.

The Yoruba are groups of dialectically related peoples of West Africa, that speak the same language. They are indigenous to Benin, Nigeria and Togo republics. The dialects include Akoko, Awori, Egba, Ekiti, Oyo, Igbomina, Ijebu, Ilaje, and Okun amongst others. They form one of the largest ethnic groups of Africa. They are traditionally urbanised and are grouped under various forms of monarchical government, which date from prehistoric times. Their ethnohistory is influenced by the personality of an individual called Oduduwa. Ile Ife is generally acclaimed as their ancestral home and as the source of the world, by popular mythology. Their worldview is shaped by their belief in a Supreme Being called Olodumare, who is served by multiplicity of deities, (Fadipe, 1991). Scientific archaeology identifies the Yoruba as autochthones of their locations (Ogundiran, 2020; Tubi, 2020). The choice of northeast Yorubaland for intense fieldwork is supported by archaeological claims that it is the oldest inhabited part of Yorubaland, (Allworths-Jones, et.al, 2012; Ogundiran, 2020; Tubi 2020).

Anthropology in this paper is defined as the general science of humanity, which offers a systematic study of peoples on earth. It offers the most holistic approach to the study of humanity in all parts of the world. Kottak (2010:579-584) describes it as a means of appreciating the diversity among human beings. Ecology is explained in this text as the systematic study of the interconnectedness between living things and the natural environments. The British Ecological Society defines ecology as the study of the interactions among living things and their

environment, (<https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org>). Ecological anthropology in this study has broad perspectives. It refers to the branch of anthropology and its methodology of inquiry in ecology. It studies the interconnectivity between human beings and everything in nature. It is a holistic methodology of research. Its primary focus is the traditional communities of the world. Ecological anthropological inquiry is based on indigenous people, with basic elements of their traditions still left largely undistorted by foreign contacts. Ecological anthropology engages scholars on how to achieve and maintain sustainability of the earth, which has been subjected to massive onslaughts of ecological despoliation. It also examines the reciprocity between human beings and their environment thereby investigating how human communities shape their environment and how nature in turn shapes human communities, (Gragson and Blout, 1999; Platten and Henfrey, 2009: 491-500; Kottak, 1999:23-35). Kottak (1999:23-35), projects its value in initiating and sustaining a new ecological inquiry in anthropology.

The term tradoecology refers to general traditional ecological knowledge. According to scholars like Gragson and Blout (1999) and Haenn, et. al (2016), tradoecology deals with the entire knowledge of the environment, its resources and how they affect human beings. It is the popular scientific study of how people live within the ecosystem in their particular locale. The term can also be called ethnoecology, which is primed for the study of ecology of different ethnic groups. In this study, the terms (tradoecology and ethnoecology) cover a whole range of what can collectively be called scientific knowledge of traditional people of their environment. In studying the ethnoecologies of traditional communities, it assesses the interconnectivity and complex relationships between human beings and the environment within a particular locale.

Scholars such as Anderson, (1996), Berkes (1993), and Branton (2007), have shed more light on it by highlighting the socio-anthropological dimensions of ecology. The concern cuts across as theologians and scientists, religionists and politicians, scholars and activists have urged for a critical tradoecological study of the world. According to Berkes (1993:433), traditional ecological knowledge holds the key to environmental management in the face of uncontrolled consumerist taste of the modern world. Important contribution comes from Tarusarira, (<https://doi.org/101111/erev.12302>) who focuses on Africa and provides data of ecological knowledge systems.

Tradoecology in this paper covers the corpus of indigenous knowledge of traditional people acquired over the years and the scientific cross-cultural study

of how people live in the ecosystem within their particular locale. This paper identifies three critical elements of tradoecological study, namely: (i) It is a conscious scientific study of human-environment relationships over time that seeks to understand how communities conceptualise their environment and make sense out of their relationships with the natural environment. (ii) It is a cultural approach to the study of ecology, which means it is an anthropological endeavour. (iii) It systematically gathers and filters traditional indigenous knowledge of the environment, which makes it a scientific enterprise.

### **Highlights of global ecological crises**

Environmental condition of the world has worsened geometrically over the years and data present a glooming picture for the planet, humanity and everything in it. Data from the World Health Organization show that 7 million persons died each year over air pollution, plastic kills over 1 million seabirds every year, and there are 5.25 trillion of plastic debris in the ocean. 8.3 million acres of tropical forest are lost a year, so that every 6 seconds human beings destroy a soccer field-size of rainforest. The sea level is rising at average of 3.2 mm per year globally, more than 68 billion tones of top-soil is eroded annually, and human beings generate estimated 92 million tones of textiles waste per year, (Robinson, <https://earth.org>; Stanchwa, <https://pawsomeadvice.com>). Data point to steady rise in global temperature; in fact, it has accelerated horribly more in the last 50 years due to air pollutants arising from fossil fuels, coal burning power plants, among others. The earth's ocean temperature is getting warmer, frequency of hurricanes has increased since the 1980s, extreme heat waves cause thousands of death around the world and the Antarctica is losing about 134 billion metric tonnes of ice per year since 2002. Severe droughts, troublesome new pests, heavy downpours, increased flooding, amongst others, have inflicted severe hardship on humanity. These are just few of the data.

Scholars like Branton (2007), McDonagh (2010), Carrington (2019), and Koop (<https://www.zmescience.com>.) examine the various sources, natures and degrees of ecological crises from scientific perspectives and gave a wide range of data on the frightening ecological condition of the world. The conclusion is that the world is under serious ecological crisis. In 2017, 16,000 scientists issued a joint warning to humanity on climate crisis (Christensen 1). The same thought was expressed on 5 November 2019, by 11,000 scientists from 150 countries who issued a severe warning on the menacing climate change thereby sounding calls on vital signs and indicators of the magnitude of the climatic and ecological emergency facing humanity,

(<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/05/climate-crisis-11,000-scientists-arn-of-untold-sufferin> and <https://www.zmescience.com>).

### **Tradoecology of traditional Yoruba Community**

The tradoecology and ecological anthropology of the Yoruba people bring forth the richness of their traditional ecological prowess and knowledge. Data from this research show that the Yoruba have rich tradoecological knowledge and its knowledge is well grounded among the people. This paper identifies tradoecology of the Yoruba as an important tool in environmental management in the face of unrelenting global onslaughts of westernization and globalization, which have succeeded in creating severe ecological degradation on the planet.

One of the first concrete observations from the fieldwork about the Yoruba is that they possess traditional ecological knowledge that has been very valuable to their society and environment. Among the Okun speaking people, like their Yoruba kins, there is evidence of tremendous knowledge of nature. They also have deeper knowledge of fauna and flora. They have names for different geographic features, weather conditions, water bodies, plants, animals, and land. They have useful in-depth knowledge of plant and animal resources. With ease, Okun farmers and yam sellers count different types of white yam as *ewusu*, *kege*, *okumodo*, *olaka*, *ogunmole*, *awala*, *lolo*, *ipe*, *sebukere*, *boki*, *oga*, *anilokoja*. Apart from the popular white yam, farmers count five species of yams namely *ewura* (water yam), *omino* (aerial yam), *koko* (coco yam), *olo* (yellow yam) and *ehuru* (bitter yam). During this research, the *Aworu* of Ogidi identifies over 40 types of leaves and trees within a radius of 16 kilometres.

Among the Okun, the research discovers that by their daily contacts with the environment, rural folks were able to count over 120 *eranko* (animals) and identify with ease various types of *ejo* (snakes). They counted as many as 12 types of *ejo* found in Okunland such as; *apedun*, *ipeta*, *iyemere*, *ogba*, *awumotu*, *mori*, *oka*, *owori*, *ajola*, *omonurin*, *ere* and *monamona*. They counted off-hand 6 types of *obo* (monkey-like creatures) which are *aghere*, *edun*, *agha*, *ato*, *inaki*, and *elegbede*. Young boys of secondary school age across Okunland counted with ease various rats, which include *aburujagi*, *agogo*, *amo*, *afi*, *ute*, *asin* and *ekuile*. When the researchers asked their city-dweller counterparts in Lokoja, Kogi State capital city, they were unable to do. These show that traditional people acquire tremendous scientific knowledge through direct contact with the environment. It is on this basis that the opinion of Birkes (432), that traditional ecological knowledge provides a rich data on the

ecology and ecological management of traditional, preliterate societies, becomes very authoritative.

### **Cultural indicators of tradoecology of the Yoruba**

The Yoruba, as this study shows, have clearly marked cultural indicators of tradoecology. This paper examines them succinctly under five headings:

#### **(i) Tradoecological knowledge is acquired through contact with the environment**

Traditional Yoruba society has good knowledge of the environment through their direct contacts with nature. They are abreast with ethnoscientific knowledge, which is of prime importance in ecological management. Through this, they know the alternating wet and dry seasons, as well as time for planting and harvesting. They know the sounds of birds and animals, in addition they can identify the tracks and footmarks of various games.

#### **(ii) Cumulative tradoecological knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation**

Another aspect of traditional Yoruba ecological knowledge is that it is based on oral transmission. This knowledge is passed on from generation to generation through orature using songs, dance, stories, and beliefs. As a cumulative *repository* of data, traditional ecological knowledge is an authentic form of knowledge that has helped the people for thousands of years in coping with their environment. It is hoped that Western scientists will gradually come to recognise the importance of cumulative knowledge in ecological management.

#### **(iii) Tradoecology is based on sustainability of local resources**

The tradoecology of the Yoruba is deeply rooted on sustainability of the earth. As a result, traditional Yoruba's scientific knowledge is immensely useful to the communities because it helps to sustain local resources. This study discovers that traditional ecological knowledge is very helpful in sustaining the environment and it is helpful in providing traditional remedies that avoid the rapid depletion of natural resources. It projects traditional system of environmental management, through its various means of farm management, crop planting, water treatment, animal husbandry, etc. Generally, it involves the knowledge of natural environment, usage of nature and sustainability of local resources; therefore, it is useful for sustaining the ecology.

#### **(iv) Tradoecology indicates symbiotic relationship between human beings and the environment**

Traditional Yoruba's ecological knowledge shows the interconnectivity between people, animals and nature and the symbiotic relationship between them. It is a cautious approach to earth management which prevents human beings from despoiling the earth, because doing so will pose a lot of harm to humanity. The study discovers that as a system that is natural, it involves symbiotic relationships between human beings, animals, and plants.

#### **(v) Tradoeology is anthropologically oriented**

Traditional ecological knowledge of the Yoruba can best be described as indigenous science (herein called ethnoscience). In comparison to Western science, traditional ecological knowledge is based on ethnology, whereby it is conceived as a form of knowledge that is acclaimed as the property of the society that practices it. In addition, it is spiritually oriented, uniting the psychical, nonmaterial, and inner aspects of human beings. Also, it is ethical, makes value statements, and it is associated with a belief system. By juxtaposition with Western science, ethnoscience is qualitative in method and passed orally and it is based on factual observation, naming, classifying of things found in nature and transmitted verbally, while western science is materialistic, quantitative, and written.

#### **Relevance of Tradoeology in Yoruba Culture**

This study identifies the following values of ecology in Okunland which are; indicator of weather and climate, source of agriculture and food supply, religious values, health care, sheltering, clothing and anthropological values.

#### **(i) Tradoeological knowledge indicates weather and climate condition**

First, ecology is the major ecological indicator of the climatic condition of the area. Invariably, the geographical location of the area plays significant roles in their religious, economic, and social activities.

#### **(ii) Tradoeology helps to sustain food supply**

The weather and climate provide them rich natural resources for sustenance and living. Their agricultural practices and mechanism of food supply are based on the ecology of the area. Located in the savannah and rain belts of West Africa, Yorubaland has arable land that is good for crop farming and cash crops. The people are adept in farming in which major crops are yams, millet, beans, and cassava. They rely largely on local foods for their sustenance because of the fertility of their soils, although their menu now include rice. The land also supplies them portable water from streams, cisterns, and springs. The area is also full of animal

resources from which they derived meat for their menu. Animals sourced include antelopes, deer, rabbits, snakes, and assorted birds like partridge and guinea fowl. There are also locally domesticated animals like goats and sheep, which are eaten by the people.

### **(iii) Tradoecology serves religious purposes**

Ecology also serves religious purposes for the people. Immediately, it is clear to the researcher that their religious system is closely aligned with nature in which their deities are personifications of geographic features and natural endowments like hills, rivers, animals, and forests. These morphological features are conceived as the abodes of the deities or in some cases, they are also considered as the manifestations of the deities. As this study indicates, the deification of the environment has significant religious concept among the Yoruba. In addition, the obvious fact that all religious paraphernalia are made from natural materials, such as cloths, leaves, masks and palms point to the ecotheological import of their religion.

### **(iv) Tradoecology provides health care**

Another way in which ecology plays important roles in Yoruba tradoecology is through health care. Tradomedicine is a major source of medical treatment among the people. Male and female experts practice herbology across board. They are especially good in psychiatric and orthopaedic treatment and in the treatment of fertility and childbirth problems, malaria and other health challenges. *Babalawo* and *iyaalagbo* are adept in the medical values of plants and trees in the area. They prepare concoctions with herbs for the treatment of different ailments, which many claim are very effective. *Aworo* Ogidi counted 20 medicinal leaves within a distance of 1.5 kilometres in Ogidi. Herbology is a gift and knowledge, which is integrated into African healing system. There are some functional modern orthodox health centres in the area, which cater for the needs of the people. However, traditional health practices are still very popular among the people. It is envisaged in the study that this practice will continue for a very long time and the time for integration of traditional medical practices with Western practices should be cemented.

### **(v) Tradoecology in aid of sheltering**

Shelter is a basic human need. Sheltering is primarily made from natural materials among the Yoruba. This fact underlines the relevance of tradoecology among the people. A traditional house is made from mud beaten with straw. Houses are roofed with timbers and grass. However, with modernization, cement blocks and

corrugated iron sheets have largely replaced the traditional forms of construction. Yet, there are many houses that are still built of mud. Timbers are still the preferred material for logging.

**(vi) Tradoecology as source of aesthetics**

Data from the study indicate that tradoecology played significant roles in the aesthetics, clothing and accessories of the people of Yorubaland. Traditionally, the materials for clothing are natural materials, which are sourced locally. Informants claim that weaving was one of the most important traditional industries of the people. Cotton the primary material for cloth was sourced locally from farmers or bought from the markets. Expert weavers constructed weaving looms, where assorted fabrics were produced. They weaved assorted types of cloths, which were used for dresses, customs for masquerades, wedding ceremonies, and chieftaincy installations. They also produced sizable amount for sale at markets. Due to the use of Western, Chinese and Indian fabrics, and the takeover of the clothing industry in the country by giant conglomerates, the traditional weaving industry has almost ceased. What is left now is a minuscule of a huge industry in the past.

**(vii) Tradoecology is valuable for cultural studies**

Tradoecology furnishes us with reliable ethnographic data on the anthropological features and archaeological artefacts of the people that were buried under the earth. As scientist dig up these artefacts, we are able to know about the past cultural achievements of the people through their artefacts and cultural features by giving them ethnographic interpretations.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This study shows that traditional ecological knowledge is a conscious acceptance of the contribution of local people to environmental issues. It makes acceptable to researchers that the locals can contribute to a sustainable future because they are stakeholders. This tradoecological study clearly reveals that the Yoruba have immense knowledge of the environment. They possess intimate knowledge of animals and plants, hunting, fishing, farming, tapping and trapping. They, in addition, have a holistic knowledge of forestry and herbology. Modern researchers cannot jettison this body of knowledge; rather they should be harnessed and made useful for human beings. This is in line with the submissions of scholars like Birkes (440) and Hernandez-Mercillo (10-14), amongst others, who have made clarion calls for enhancement of traditional scientific knowledge and method.

The paper provides a clear picture of ecological anthropology. It gives succinct facts about its usefulness in scholarship. Ecological anthropology recommends itself for scholars because of the profundity of its data on ecology and the ongoing environmental crises in the world. The paper examines the traditional ecology of the Yoruba and surmises that the basic principles of tradoecology can be surmised as three points: It is a scientific study of human-environment relationships over time, which seeks to understand how communities conceptualise their environment and make sense out of their relationships with the natural environment. It is principally a human approach to the study of ecology, and it involves traditional indigenous knowledge of the environment. The paper concludes that tradoecology provides the best environmentally friendly methodology for ecological management.

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