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**Yoruba Ethico-cultural Perspectives and Understanding of Animal Ethics**

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**YORUBA ETHICO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AND UNDERSTANDING OF ANIMAL ETHICS**

**Abstract**

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While divisions between animal rights and animal welfare have preoccupied public discourse and practice concerning animal ethics in developed countries, little consideration has been accorded to non-Western framings of animal ethics. Yoruba ethno-cultural settings in Africa have displayed certain philosophical and ethico-traditional understandings of human-animal relations through activities that engage animals for food and economic purposes and in religious practices and festivals. This article raises the fundamental question: Is there a Yoruba understanding of animal ethics? This inquiry was conducted by critically surveying the traditional framework of wise sayings, proverbs, practices, adages and relational attitudes of the Yoruba. We identify the Yoruba understanding of animal ethics by engaging these perspectives alongside the Western distinction between animal welfare and animal rights. We argue that the Yoruba understanding, including a superstitious, relational attitude toward nonhuman animals, is essential to the global discourse of animal ethics and animal liberation. This work takes for granted that the global project of animal ethics should be rooted in a cross-cultural understanding of human-animal relations, Western and non-Western, in order to forge a model for the quest of animal liberation across all cultures including the Yoruba enclave.

### **Animal Ethics: Between Animal Rights and Animal Welfare**

The need to contextualize ‘globalized’ discourse within historical or cultural particularities to assess the universality of principles, theories and practices cannot be overemphasized. This article explores cultural particularities often taken for granted in assessing human-nonhuman animal relations, using an inquiry into the Yoruba understanding of animal ethics as a case study. Following the ‘reflective impulse’ of the Yoruba notion of human-animal relations, our study departs from the prevailing framework of animal ethics as currently pursued in intellectual circles. Despite a tendency to pose the Western intellectual perspective as a yardstick, we assert the need to include other cultural perspectives in the discourse of animal rights and animal welfare. Many non-Western perspectives do not align wholly with Western viewpoints, and accordingly, many non-Western ethico-cultural perspectives have not yet been acknowledged. In the case of the Yoruba, the central question of this article—whether the Yoruba have an understanding of animal ethics—differs from the question of whether the Yoruba *conceptualize* animal ethics in its own right. Focusing on the

latter question implies that the Yoruba might hold a distinct system of animal ethics that sets them apart from the rest of humanity.<sup>1</sup> Such a stance would create intellectual bifurcations that could obscure a common outlook, generating an us/them perspective that scholars like Anthony Appiah, Godwin Sogolo and others have argued against.<sup>2</sup>

Animal ethics describes the study of human-non-human relations. The focus on animal ethics in this article is an attempt to understand the appropriate human regard for non-human animals in Yoruba culture. Animal ethics is the umbrella under which the two camps of animal rights and animal welfare are organized, though animal ethics also includes other subject matters, such as animal law, speciesism, animal cognition, the concept of non-human personhood, human exceptionalism, and theories of justice. Animal ethics also shares a common concern with environmental ethics, as it considers animals within the purview of the reckless damages man has done to the natural environment as a whole.<sup>3</sup> While some may consider humans to be the “apex of creation,” without other creatures (visible and invisible) in the environment, human life is incomplete—in fact, impossible (Ogunade, 2004, p. 183). This assertion presupposes that nature is not meant for human purposes alone, implying that all species should work alongside each other to ensure the health and wellbeing of nature as a whole. This stance introduces moral issues that have created a divide among animal ethicists, separating them into the camps of animal rights proponents and animal welfare proponents.

According to Barcalow (1994), moral issues arise from choices that affect the “well-being of others” (p. 4). An action becomes morally questionable when it opens alternate courses of bringing harms or benefits to oneself or others, however those “others” may be identified. Animal rights proponents hold that animals are moral persons, and they thus condemn any sort of human exploitation of other animals, including their use for food/fiber, experimentation, entertainment or sport, or as pets. They argue that human beings hold no special place in nature, and that it is ignorance for humans to think they are at the “pinnacle of creation” (Olen & Barry, 1992, p. 340). Central to this perspective is the claim that all beings/species experience pain equally. Whether the subject of feelings or pain is a human or non-human animate being, causing pain and suffering is inherently wrong.<sup>4</sup>

This camp has also argued that certain human interests are trivial and insignificant by comparison with important animal interests. Accordingly, acting on human impulses to the detriment of animals is unjustifiable, and interests such as food consumption, experimentation, or

research are thus called into question. It is assumed that the only reason we humans carry on the way we do is that we are too lazy or thoughtless to change or explore other alternatives (Olen & Barry, 1992, p. 341). Animal rights proponents also contend that other animals, like human beings, have inalienable natural rights. Rights to live and to move unhindered are instances of such entitlements, since other animals, like humans, are sentient beings. Peter Singer's notion of "equal consideration" as expounded in some of his works (Singer, 1990; Singer, 1995, pp. 55-62) according to Gruen (1993), "provides the moral foundation for this budding and boisterous animal liberation movement" (p. 343) that proceeds under the banner of animal rights. Moreover, Tom Regan's notion of equal/moral rights is entrenched in this view in animal ethics.<sup>5</sup> Ingrid Newkirk, cofounder and president of the animal rights organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), is fervent about this ethical point of view, asserting the following:

Instead of seeing all the other species on Earth as ours to convert into hamburgers, handbags, living burglar alarms, amusements, test tubes with whiskers, and so on, we need to respect them as fellow beings, as other individuals and families and tribes who have the same basic interests in experiencing joy and love and living without needless pain and harassment as we do.

Organizations like People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), New Jersey Animal Rights Alliance (NJARA), Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) are at the forefront of championing this ethical point of view.

Several arguments have been presented to counter what many consider as the "absolutist" thinking of animal rights proponents. Critics of animal rights question whether animals can be morally considerable, since their actions are the automatic output of innate feelings that they are likely incapable of moderating and for which they therefore cannot be held responsible. The claim is that other animals do not possess capacities equal to those of human beings in terms of intelligence, rationality, obligations, duties, moral claims or sense of virtue and vice. It has also been argued that equal treatment of animals and humans would lead to disastrous consequences, engendering economic devaluation in terms of consumption and trade patterns and loss of jobs among ranchers, farmers, fishermen, butchers and others, potentially leading to economic dependency of some nations on others. Equal consideration of other animals would also have far reaching negative effects on progressive research, such as the use of animals as test models to verify the viability of treatments of diseases and eradication of organisms detrimental to human

wellbeing. The presupposition here is that holding on to the animal rights ethical standpoint in theory and practice would be inimical to public health and one-health concerns.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Olen and Barry (1992) have noted that “whatever good comes to non-human animals, the consequences to humans would be disastrous” (p. 342).

In theological terms, St. Aquinas and St. Augustine taught that the universe is constructed as a hierarchy in which beings at lower levels (animals) were created to serve those above them (human beings). St. Augustine maintained that “by a most just ordinance of the creator, both their life and their death are subjected to our use.”<sup>7</sup> According to this view, it matters little that animals are used as food or as experimental tools, since they are not entitled to any form of rights. Baxter (1999), for instance, believes that rights are unique to human beings. In his view, animals do not use or understand moral judgment in conducting relationships with other species. The soundest policy, then, according to Baxter is “to take account of only the needs and interest of people, not penguins or pine trees” (p. 148). Such claims run counter to the viewpoint of animal rights proponents, as they presuppose that, after all, relationships with members of our own species are appropriately the primary moral concern for humans (Olen & Barry, p. 343).

This speciesist stance has been proposed by anti-animal rightists, who regard moral consideration of other animals as a defect in rationality. The animal welfare movement, however, offers a different ethical point of view. Scholars like Francione and Regan (1992) agree that animal welfare tenets differ from the claims of animal rights. They maintain not only that the philosophies of animal rights and animal welfare are separated by irreconcilable differences, but also that the enactment of animal welfare measures actually impedes the achievement of animal rights. They conclude that welfare reforms by their very nature can only serve to retard the pace at which animal rights goals are achieved (pp. 140-142).

The argument here is that the animal welfare position is inconsistent with and ethically unacceptable to the claims of the animal rightists, or “abolitionists” as they are often called. Prior to the inception of the movement, the welfare approach held human morality and behavior as its central concern. Combined with animal welfare movements and animal-protection legislation, the efforts of British dignitaries like Richard Martin, who championed the first Animal Welfare Organization in 1822, expanded the sense of “welfarism” to include nonhuman animals. Organizations like the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA), Compassion in

World Farming (CIWF) and the National Animal Interest Alliance (NAIA) among others are foremost organizations spearheading the cause of animal welfare. Unlike the Animal Rights movement, these organizations do not clamor for total abolition of the use of animals; rather, they emphasize the prevention of animal suffering, promoting animal health and projecting a just and compassionate society for the ethical treatment of animals whenever they are used for human purposes. They advocate that animals be granted proper training to enable them to live safely and comfortably in a society dominated by human standards; stray animals should be adopted and neutered and spayed to prevent overpopulation and the suffering that attends it; sick and injured animals should be given veterinary care. The United Kingdom (UK) has exerted tremendous effort to promote animal welfare. In 1979, the UK government set up the Farm Animals Welfare Council, recommending the following five freedoms or principles of animal welfare:

- Freedom from thirst and hunger
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury and diseases
- Freedom to express normal behavior
- Freedom from fear and distress<sup>8</sup>

From the standpoint of Animal Welfare groups, the observation of these freedoms amounts to moral consideration for animals and that animals like humans are morally considerable. The objective of animal welfare advocates is the humane use of animals, whatever the purpose. Unlike Animal Rights proponents, Animal Welfarists do not seek to eliminate the use or companionship of animals by humans. For the welfarist, as long as animal pain and suffering is avoided, the value of animal lives is not compromised. This is a way of saying that within the framework of Animal Welfarism, animals do not have autonomous moral rights that equal those of humans. The point of convergence between animal rights and animal welfare is that both are concerned with the status and conditions of animals' existence, while the point of divergence lies in the degrees to which animals may be subjected to use by humans. Often times, the Abolitionist strand of Animal Rightists condemn and seek to abolish human use of animals regardless of whether that use may be termed "humane" or "inhumane," while animal welfare emphasizes and allows only the "humane" use and treatment of animals.

Despite extensive global attention to the animal welfare-rights distinction, there remains a need to deploy cultural epistemic outlooks on the issue. In this study, we consider Yoruba perspectives on human-animal relations in an effort to discern a Yoruba understanding of animal ethics.

### **Yoruba Culture: Perspectives on Human-Animal Relations**

Who are the Yoruba? What is the Yoruba conception of human-animal relations? To what extent is the Yoruba conception bound by a cultural, or collective, philosophy? Does this conception presuppose a Yoruba understanding of Animal Ethics? If it does, what moral principles and questions does this ethical system yield? Can it be affirmed as a welfarist or rightist orientation? What is the contribution of the Yoruba understanding of animal ethics to the global discourse?

For decades, scholars have acknowledged ties between African modes of knowing and interpreting reality and the influence of cultural traditions, values, religions, customs and beliefs of the people. These connections have especially attracted the interest of scholars who investigate African epistemology, logic, ethics and morality.<sup>9</sup> The Yoruba tribe is no exception to this rule. We take it for granted that the Yoruba conception of the ideals and principles that guide human-animal relations may be accessed through the framework of oral tradition, encoded in thoughts, proverbs, adage, and wise sayings which have served as the repository of social and ethical norms and cultural expectations about the status of animals under the custodianship of the local community, elders or native heads (Adewoye, 2007, p. 53).

### **Yoruba Culture and Identity**

Who and what are included in the phrase “the Yoruba and their culturally related people”? Akinjogbin attempts to describe this group broadly, via the baselines of language, common origin, similar institutions, modes of worship, beliefs, membership, customs as well as other usages (2008, p. 7), but these baselines are yet to be proven sufficient and adequate for the categorization of the Yoruba. For the purpose of this work, we define the Yoruba by geographical and cultural criteria. The Yoruba are an ethnic group located in South Western Nigeria and Southern Benin in West Africa and constitute over 35 million people in total; the majority are from Nigeria and make up 21% of its population.<sup>10</sup> There are also accounts that the Yoruba are found in Togo, Sierra Leone, Ghana and the diasporic regions of Cuba, Brazil,

Trinidad, Tobago<sup>11</sup> and others. The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria (those within the geographical boundaries of Oyo, Ogun, Ekiti, Ondo, Lagos, Osun) are the focus of this study. Following Akinjogbin (2008, p. 9), it is less difficult to categorize these sects as Yoruba, as their history and ways of life confirm a continuum in terms of cultural traditions, common language, and political organization of war and peace.

The Yoruba exhibit common linkages of ancestral traits, customs, rites, beliefs and social institutions. Thinkers like Ojo (2008) and Olajubu (2008, pp. 13-46) have contributed their intellectual insights on the identity of these linkages. Ojo (2008, p. 14) notes the pervasive elements of ancestral veneration (masquerades, deities, ancestors, worship of gods like *Sango*, *Ogun* and others), rituals, artifacts, and divination system (*Ifa*), and he traces these through the process of intra and inter-ethnic diffusion among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. Focusing on the presence of oral artists (poets, priests, diviners, singers, enchanters, etc.) in Yoruba land, Olajubu (2008) has identified the prevailing trend of orature (oral literature ingrained in the traditional or cultural corpus of the Yoruba view on reality as a whole) as an intrinsic virtue of the average Yoruba. He asserts that “among the Yoruba, verbal art is a specialist art and artists are special members of the society” (p. 32). Of interesting note is Olajubu’s emphasis on stereotype oral productions or appreciation (poetry, chants, panegyric—in Yoruba, *ijala*, *oriki*, *ewi*) about virtually all things among the Yoruba, including animals,<sup>12</sup> birds, and plants (p. 38). Of particular interest to the present study is consideration of how a Yoruba cultural understanding of animals is encapsulated in this body of sayings, adages, views, proverbs, poetry, practices and so on. By analyzing Yoruba orature, we attempt to derive the ethical implications of some Yoruba perspectives on human-nonhuman animal relations.

### **Yoruba Cultural Understanding of Animals**

Olusola (2006, pp. 155-172) has attempted to discern the Yoruba cultural understanding of animals, which he called Yoruba ‘ontological perceptions’ of animals (p. 155), by earmarking the classification of animals, placement of animals in the Yoruba cosmology, religion, traditions, economics (food and hunting), and interactions between humans and animals. His efforts have yielded the following insights on the existential status of animals among the Yoruba:

- In Yoruba understanding, animals are categorized by groups, habitat and physiological traits. Thus within Yoruba animal kingdom classification, we have *eran omi* (aquatic, sea



or water animals), *eran ile* (land animals), *eran afayafa* (reptiles), *eran elese meji* – (bipeds), *eran elese merin* (quadrupeds), *eye* (birds), *eku* (rats), *eran ile* (domesticated animals), *eran igbe* (wild animals) (p. 156).

- The Yoruba perception of animals is complemented with taboos and mythical explanations about certain animals. These explanations are preserved through the tradition of folklore, religious beliefs and worship practices, poetry, legends, rituals and so on. Examples are taboos against the interruption of sexual intercourse among animals, prohibitions against killing or eating sacred animals like vultures, ground hornbills, and parrots. The case of *adie irana* (the fowl that clears the road),<sup>13</sup> which is designated for rituals and buried along with the corpse of an extraordinary member of the society, shows that the Yoruba cosmos is filled with religious-metaphysical interpretations of animals. This reveals that some animals among the Yoruba are granted ‘divine’ rights and are revered. The myth surrounding the reverence for the river goddess *Oya* and buffalos (exempted from the category of game animals to be hunted) also illustrates this Yoruba belief (pp. 157-158). This also accounts for the Yoruba belief in the transmigration of human spirits into the bodies of animals: insects, birds, goats, deer etc. (p. 159). Though this sort of thought is mysteriously rather than scientifically grounded, it accounts for the Yoruba belief that “possessed” animals are perpetrators of both evil and good deeds.
- In ‘traditional’<sup>14</sup> Yoruba land, both nonhuman animals and humans are perceived as agents of propitiation/sacrifices to the gods, animals are given meaningful names similar to the practice of naming human beings, and they may be the subject of panegyrics or songs of praise.
- In Yoruba cultural understanding, there are patterns of both unhealthy and healthy relationships between humans and other animals. Olushola (2006) portrays this aptly with reference to the hunting expeditions among the Yoruba. The hunting song below displays an unhealthy relationship between humans and animals:

<i>Omo ale lehoru ninu igbe o!</i>	Rabbit is a bastard in the bush
<i>Omo ale lehoru ninu igbe o!</i>	Rabbit is a bastard in the bush
<i>Bo ba ti rode</i>	Whenever it sees the hunter
<i>Ni o pale mo kia</i>	It will quickly take to its heels
<i>Omo ale lehoru ninu igbe o!</i>	Rabbit is a bastard in the bush! (p. 164)

Ajibade Olusola further hinted that some sayings, folklore and folk songs of the Yoruba illustrate healthy interactions or relationships with animals. *Mo maja leyin, o jan an nigi, emi naa lo jan nigi* – “if you beat my dog which follows me with a rod, I am the one you have beaten with the rod,” (p. 165) is an instance of such sayings. Folk songs like the following also affirm healthy relationships with animals among the Yoruba:

<i>Adie mi</i>	My rooster
<i>Eyi ti mora</i>	The one that I bought
<i>O si je lo</i>	It went out
<i>O ko si koto</i>	It fell into a pit
<i>Iya bami gbe</i>	Mother helped me carry it
<i>Gbigbe ti mo gbe</i>	As I carried it
<i>Gbigbon ni n gbon</i>	It was shaking
<i>Mo wa fi yena</i>	I put it by the fire side for warmth (p. 167)

Popular folklore, moonlit tales about tortoise, man and the squirrel<sup>15</sup> also portray patterns of interaction between humans and animals in the Yoruba worldview (p. 166) and inform the Yoruba about the natural character and attitudinal (psychological, physiological, and biological) dispositions of classes of animals.

- The Yoruba also demonstrate an awareness of the mental consciousness of animals and their experience of pain and suffering, yet they conceive of animals as nutritional, a consumable means of promoting human health and satisfaction:

*Bi ereke omo eranko ko ba ba je, ti omo eniyan ko ni dun* – “if the cheek of the offspring of an animal is not broken, that of the humans will not be sweet”.

*Oju ni maluu n ro, obe o dara lorun* – “The cow is suffering only during the time of slaughter, knife is not something pleasant on the neck”.

*Ife ti a fe adie ko denu, ibi ki a paaje lo mo* – “Our love for roosters is not genuine; the point is to kill (and eat)<sup>16</sup> them” (pp. 168-169)

These three sayings illustrate that the Yoruba cultural philosophy reckons that animals are sources of human food, despite human awareness that killing animals causes them pain. The consumption of animals surpasses the purpose of nutrition to include medication/treatments (healing, in Yoruba land), as animals’ bodily parts are ground alongside other curative ingredients to treat specific ailments.<sup>17</sup>

Olusola's (2006) attempt to categorize elements of the Yoruba cultural (collective) philosophy about animals is not all encompassing, however. Idowu's (2008) collection of 1,000 Yoruba proverbs (written in Yoruba language) provides further insights into Yoruba cultural perspectives about animals. Beyond the assessment of human-animal relations via the frameworks of sayings, adages and so forth, Idowu's collection demonstrates that the Yoruba also perceive animal-animal relations and interpret them as holding metaphorical significance for human-human relations. The following proverbs from Idowu's collection are instances of such:

*Aguntan to baja rin yoo jegbe* (p. 12) – “The goat that frolics with dogs would definitely eat faeces.”

*Aja iwoyii lo mo ehoru iwoyi le* (p. 12) – “It is the dog of this modern time that can chase the rabbit of this modern time.”

*Ajanaku koja, mo ri nnkan firi, ti a ba rerin, ka sope a rerin* (p. 13) – “The elephant's passage is beholding and majestic; when we see an elephant, we should acknowledge we have seen an elephant.”

Proverbs of this category, as suggested before, have metaphorical import for humans, but to delve into this would mean drifting into another discourse. However, it is important to note that the Yoruba perspectives do not exclude considerations of animal-animal relations, and as shown in the three proverbs above, these considerations extract from the peculiarities of particular species of animals (size, feeding habits, natural dispositions or attitudes). For instance, the proverb “the goat...faeces” derives from the observation of local dogs in Yoruba communities that feed on debris, human waste products and other waste, while the second proverb “it is the dog...times” is an extract of the sensitive dispositions of both animals involved in a predatory chase and survival scuffle. The last proverb derives from observations of the size of the elephant. Still other proverbs employ images of animals, yet are neutral in their implications for human-human and animal-animal relations. Such proverbs are aphorisms of warning, precaution and modesty. For instance:

*Aja tii yoo sonu, ko ni gbo fere ode* (p. 12) – “A dog destined to get lost would never heed the hunter's whistle.”

*Asa to ba fara wegún, eyin aaro ni yoo sun* (p. 13) – “A hawk that imitates the ways of a vulture would find itself in the pot of soup.”<sup>18</sup>

*Labalaba to ba digbo legun, aso re a faya* (p. 43) – “A butterfly that perches on thorns or spikes would have its skin torn.”

Further probing of this general perception of animals from the Yoruba point of view raises the possibility of a Yoruba ethico-cultural understanding of animal ethics.

### **Yoruba Ethico-Cultural Understanding: Implications for Animal Ethics**

The Yoruba tradition does not display in clear terms the sphere of its ethical viewpoint regarding human-to-animal relationships. Some sayings, proverbs and beliefs appear seductively ‘rightist’ in pattern or represent a shift from a welfarist to a rightist concern for animals. The Yoruba says *ise eniyan nise eranko*<sup>19</sup> – “the way of man/humans is also the way of animals.” Often, such sayings have dual meanings, as both metaphoric and literal expressions in reference to human and non-human situations. The saying above implies something of Singer’s emphasis on equal treatment. For Singer, the capacity to suffer is the primary criterion for considering the interest of any being, even though extending the basic principle of equality from one group to another does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way, or grant exactly the same rights to both groups (Regan, 1980, pp. 101-102; Singer, 1992, pp. 343). This saying further extends the imperative of the assertion in Yoruba that *a kimo alaja, kanaa aja re pa* – “when we know and are friends with the owner of a dog, we should not beat the dog at all or beat the dog to death” (Adewoye, 2007, p. 54); this implies that we must treat a dog in the terms we find appropriate for treatment of its (known) owner. This claim is an indicator of the Yoruba tradition against inhumane treatment of animals, which they believe is closely linked to inhumane treatment of (proximate) fellow humans.

*Akeyinje ko mope idi n ro adie* (Adewoye, 2007, p. 56) – “The person who consumes the egg does not know the pains the hen passed through during the hatching process,” – is also an aphorism in the Yoruba traditional worldview that opposes non-humane consideration of animals by criticizing the prevailing speciesist stance of humans toward animals as well as the reckless damage and lack of empathy demonstrated by the ends (human life) to the means (animal life). This adage warns against careless human treatment of animals and the disruption of the life cycle that occurs when animals are regarded as mere commodities.

Additionally, Ingold (1988, p. 12) maintains that most cultural/traditional conceptions share classic anthropological implications of totemic practices in regard to animals. The Yoruba

tradition may not be exempted from this category, as can be seen in many of the examples presented below. Totemism (or totemic practices) refers to specific meanings or beliefs that people attribute to certain images or objects. In some cases among the Yoruba, these objects may include carcasses or images of animals, which are used as symbols of religious allegiance (faith and belief). Totemic beliefs in this sense simply imply that we owe religious allegiance to animals as objects of worship and as such, we ought to revere, respect and care for them. Some animals within the Yoruba traditional corpus are revered as sacred figures of religious worship. Some of these animals include the yellow palm bird (popularly called *eye oga*), vulture (*igun*) and royal python. Any attempt to fell a tree where the decorous bird (*eye oga*) lays its eggs is to visit doom upon the society. The vulture in Yoruba land is a sacred bird and should not be used as a burnt offering, game or food. The Yoruba saying confirms this: *a ki pa igun, a ki je igun, a ki fi igun bori* (Adewoye, 2007, p. 54) – “We do not kill the vulture, we do not eat the vulture, we do not use the vulture as sacrifice to the gods to remedy human destiny.” This saying warns against any attempt to kill the vulture for food, or use it as sacrifice to the gods. The Yoruba tradition further encourages the preservation of animals through certain rituals, customs or taboo. A good example of this is common among some families and towns in Yoruba land. In Ondo town for instance, indigenes are forbidden to eat giant rats (*okete*). Also, the *Onikoyi* and *Alapa* family are forbidden to eat yellow palm birds or any kind of snake. In addition, certain species of animals are categorized as sacred within the Yoruba community during certain festive periods or ceremonial events like *Ogun*, *Osun* festivals. This indeed informs the preference of the Yoruba community in employing animals like doves and goats as sacrifices for societal purification or stability. Furthermore, animals like dogs are used for hunting and as pets, since they are conceived as instruments of appeasement to the gods. The wrath of the gods, manifest in accidents, unforeseen/spiritual contingencies or outbreaks of illness, follows upon the human-caused death of an animal that is a companion or favored being of a god.<sup>20</sup> The saying that *eyele ko kin bonile je, kobonile mu, kowa dojo iku ko yeri*— “the dove does not drink and dine with its owner and on the day death beckons, it should flee”—illustrates the extent of Yoruba beliefs about the roles of these animals. According to such beliefs in Yoruba culture, a god’s wrath serves as propitiation or atonement for the individual’s life that was claimed by the god. Hence, some animals simply become totems and are regarded as sacred, enjoying a privileged place in

the Yoruba community (through due feeding, care and husbandry); these animals are by human ingenuity (within the Yoruba parlance) reserved for the gods.

Beyond this, the Yoruba ethico-cultural perspective assumes a superstitious stance, not necessarily built upon religious grounds but deriving from mysterious (metaphysical) explanatory models about the unique attributes of some animals, which shape the relational attitudes of humans toward animals. For instance, the cat (*Olongbo* in Yoruba) is mystical because of its inherent agility that enables it not to land on its back no matter the altitude or the gravitational force employed in throwing the cat. Also, the unique sparkle of the cat's bright eyes in the night informs the traditional Yoruba that this kind of creature is likely to be from the world beyond, despite scientific explanations about animal anatomy, genetics and physiology. Among the Yoruba this perception has patterned relational attitudes toward animals such as cats, owls (*Owiwi*), and even flocks of sheep and goats. In Yoruba land these animals are perceived as stakeholders in terrestrial-celestial realms,<sup>21</sup> and as such many Yoruba stand in awe of these animals and 'relate with them in their own right.'<sup>22</sup> The assumption here is that even in the case of conceiving of such animals as mysterious, as observed in Yoruba ethico-cultural enclaves, it is still necessary to classify such conceptions as factors in the Yoruba's relational attitude toward other animals if the account of Yoruba understanding of animal ethics is to be complete. An 'outsider,' not aware of such dispositional tendencies, upon contact with the Yoruba, may be quick to categorize such relational tendencies of human to animal relations as motivating an animal rights stance that grants autonomy to animal existence. On the contrary, it is difficult to classify such tendencies as characterizing an animal rights position, as the motivations behind the Yoruba superstitious stance differ from those of animal rights advocates. For the sake of brevity, it is appropriate to consider this perspectival factor in human-animal relationships among the Yoruba as a 'superstitious relational attitude.'

Practices, attitudinal dispositions, sayings, aphorisms and proverbs that have bearing on the Yorubas' traditional conception of human-animal relations are too immense to be captured here, but our concern goes beyond this to stress the salient points that distinguish the Yoruba ethical understanding of human-animal relations. The points below stand out, given the insight above.

- The Yoruba attribute feelings and pain to animals. Not only this, the Yoruba forbid cruelty/brutality to animals, as is implied in sayings like *a kimo alaja kanaa aja re pa* –

“when we know the owner of a dog, we should not beat the dog at all/ to death” (which implies that we must treat a dog in the same terms we would treat its known owner) – and *ise eniyan nise eranko* – “the way of man/human is also the way of animals.”

- The Yoruba perceive a religious connotation in animals’ status, as can easily be inferred from the totemic implications highlighted above. There is also a saying to the effect that *agbalagba to n ta roba mo eye, ti koba fisile, yoo wo ina* (Adewoye, 2007, p. 54) – “an elderly person taunting the peace of a bird relentlessly by stoning would be condemned to the gulf of fire.” The simple point conveyed here is that the Yoruba conception transcends the status of the elders (custodians) or the most eminent members of society, urging everyone to respect the inherent value of animals, regarding them and treating them as ‘beings’ in their own right.
- By virtue of these points, it may not entirely be out of place to state that the Yoruba ultimately conceive of animals as moral beings, thereby embracing an understanding of animal ethics.
- Beyond this, the Yoruba deploy the value of ‘superstitious relational attitudes’ as grounds for ethical understanding of human-animal relations.

The moral issues underscored by the Yoruba ethico-traditional understanding of human-animal relations are not difficult to outline. As the rudiments of an ethical system that includes nonhuman animals, the Yoruba consider the principles of good deeds (doing that which is benevolent), avoidance of causing pain, respect for certain rights (like freedom of movement and survival) consecrated capacities to live (safeguarded by taboos); they also attribute consciousness and awareness to other animals and maintain superstitious relational attitudes. These principles and ideals do not explicitly disclose the ethical sphere of the Yoruba people, as it does not provide a systematic account of the possible range of moral expectations in all cases of relationships between humans and different individual animals or kinds of animals. This is probably because some common Western contexts of engagement with animals for purposes like experimentation are not common or obvious in the traditional Yoruba society. On the surface, Yoruba tradition appears neither ‘rightist’ nor ‘welfarist,’ as it does not propose eliminating the use of all kinds of animals for human purposes. Whether or not the moral issues highlighted are to be evaluated from the points of duty, virtue or consequences (as the Kantians, Consequentialists, Aristotelians, Feminists and other ethical theorists would contend) is not



directly implied by the Yoruba tradition, and as such, subjecting this conception to alternating theories would be to drag it out of the boundaries of the concern here, though this is a task worthy of critical discourse in another study. The question remains: What is the contribution of the Yoruba understanding to the global discourse of animal ethics?

This examination of Yoruba cultural attitudes toward human-nonhuman relations, to an extent, has attempted to establish that the Yoruba have an understanding of animal ethics, but there is no clear-cut indication that this understanding is either welfarist or rightist in orientation. That is, the Yoruba understanding seems to occupy a synthetic position between the two. Certain moral issues, as explicated in the Yoruba ethico-cultural reality, are in line with the thematic concerns of animal ethics except for their 'superstitious relational attitude.' This exception might suggest the uniqueness or distinctiveness of the Yoruba ethical understanding or call for an exceptional metaphysico-ethical approach to understanding a Yoruba notion of animal ethics. By arguing for the relevance of the Yoruba understanding of animal ethics, we open up the dimension of cultural perspectives within the global discourse of animal ethics.

It could be stated that animal welfare and rights positions (within the context of the global discourse) explore animal ethics from the pivot of biological, environmental/ecological, religious, political and economic concerns. The Yoruba understanding adds that as a global inquiry, animal ethics should also recognize 'superstitious relational attitudes' (especially in this part of the world) along with other factors such as autonomy, obligation of care, and avoidance of pain and suffering. This is also a constant that shapes human-animal relations in the world, influencing the understanding of animal ethics in regions where this particular factor abounds. It also propels the interrogation of such tendencies in similar enclaves where it has been ignored or undermined. This factor should not be overlooked in an account of animal ethics as a cross-cultural discourse. The quintessential question remains: "Given this understanding of animal ethics, how does the value of a 'superstitious relational attitude' foster the purpose of animal liberation?" This question calls for further critical engagement.

## **Conclusion**

This work has brought to light the perspectives of a non-Western understanding of animal ethics and could serve as a reminder that inter-cultural interrogation of pertinent issues bearing on the universe's well-being (human and nonhuman alike) should be taken as a foremost task.



Subjecting the Yoruba understanding of human-animal relations to the global discourse of animal ethics (alongside the Western distinction between animal rights and animal welfare) is not excluded from the concerns of this task. Moreover, we have been able to show that the Yoruba have a synthetic understanding of animal ethics, exhibited via the array of sayings, practices, beliefs and ‘superstitious relational attitudes’ that articulate the Yoruba worldview. Even though this attempt may only minimally account for all that needs to be brought to light regarding the Yoruba understanding of animal ethics, it could serve as a springboard for broader analysis of ethical standpoints concerning human-animal relations.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is not to deny that the Yoruba have their idiosyncrasies, but our emphasis is on Yoruba commonalities with other cultural perspectives within the global sphere. When peculiarities arise in the Yoruba understanding of animal ethics, they should be evaluated in terms of their contributions to the global discourse of animal ethics, in an attempt to attain an holistic account that would engineer cross-cultural quests for animal liberation. The question of whether the uniqueness of such understandings contributes positively or negatively to the scope of animal ethics and promotes or impedes the quest for animal liberation becomes another issue to intellectually grapple with.
- <sup>2</sup> The intention here is to import the views of scholars like Godwin Sogolo, Anthony Appiah and Olusegun Oladipo among others who have cautioned that in the discourse of critical issues such as animal ethics, philosophers should not limit reflective speculations to their local relevance; rather, critical discourses should be enjoined within the universal spectrum of perspectives, since the aim of intellectual exercise is to promote the unifying prospects of a flourishable humanity. As such, the epistemic undertone of philosophical inquiries should be shared on the basis of human similarities (biological, mental, cultural, ethical etc.) across cultures. This work locates the Yoruba understanding of animal ethics within this context. See Sogolo, G.S. (1993), *Foundation of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought*, Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, p. 74. See also Appiah, K.A. (1992), "Inventing an African Practice in Philosophy: Epistemological Issues," Mudimbe, V.Y (ed.) *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947-1987*, p. 230 and Appiah, K.A. (1992), *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Oxford: Oxford UP; see also, Oladipo, O. (1998), *The Idea of African Philosophy, A Critical Study of the Major Orientations in Contemporary African Philosophy*, pp. 36-40.
- <sup>3</sup> For an account of environmental ethics' philosophical emphasis on the moral relationship of human beings and nonhuman Nature, see *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* in [plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental).
- <sup>4</sup> This assertion is aptly captured in Richard Ryder's ideology of Painism. Also, it is implied by Rollin Bernard this way: "one must believe that the feelings of others warrant our attention ... The attribution of mental states especially those associated with pleasure and pain, joy and misery is connected with the possibility of morality". See Rollin, B.E (2003), "Animal Pain," Armstrong, S.J & Botzler, R.G (eds.) *The Animal Ethics Reader*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 86-91.
- <sup>5</sup> Both Regan and Singer are advocates of non-human animal equality, a basis upon which Animal Rights expand. See Regan, T. and Singer, P. (eds.) (1989), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- <sup>6</sup> One Health recognizes that humans do not exist in isolation but are a part of a larger whole, a living ecosystem, and that all the activities of each member affect the other. Thus, One Health considers health as a whole, taking into account humans, animals and the environment in which they exist. See <http://www.onehealthinitiative.com>, accessed on February 1, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> This is the position of St. Augustine as regards human-animal relations, as noted by BBC. Network/Animals in a blog: "Religion and Ethics," accessed on March 7, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> "Animal Welfare," Wikinews. Net, *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, accessed May 2008.

<sup>9</sup> It is necessary to emphasize that this discourse could also be considered one of the footprints of African philosophy, pursued as a philosophical enterprise situated between critical/analytical and cultural studies, a controversy that has cast longtime skepticism on the question of whether reflections on issues addressed within the enterprise qualify as philosophical or whether they are a mere anthropological reportage on a people or community's ways of life.

<sup>10</sup> See "Nigeria" at *CIA World Factbook*: "Yoruba 22%" out of a population of 170.1 million (2012 estimate)," retrieved from [http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba\\_People](http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_People), accessed October 4, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> For further engagement on this, see Lovejoy, P.E (2003), *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity in the African Diaspora*, Continuum International Publishing Group, pp. 92-93. See also Ruckelshaus, W.C (2006), *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture and Identity Formation in Early America*, LSU Press, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Ajibade Olusola has showcased this by presenting the oriki (panegyric) in praise of the antelope (etu) in Yoruba land:

<i>Etu obeje</i>	Antelope obeje
<i>Etu osun</i>	The one who has legs painted red with camwood
<i>Aritete-gbon-on-ni</i>	The one who has thighs with which to touch dew
<i>Eranko ti le tiroo</i>	The animal that put on eye lashes
<i>Eranko tii wa gonbo</i>	The animal that wears gonbo tribal marks

See Ajibade, G.O (2006), "Animals in the Traditional Worldview of the Yoruba," *Folklore*, 10 (30), p.161. Though we adopt Ajibade's recitation of the panegyric on the antelope here to prove the point that Yoruba orature expounds upon the nature of phenomena, events and creatures living or dead, this basis among others on which Ajibade claims equality within the Yoruba worldview for humans and animals remains controversial. Salient features like reasonability, moral responsibility and obligation, and religiosity surpass this basis of equality of humans and animals. Moreover, if orature is granted a common place in the Yoruba worldview applicable to both animate and inanimate things, it suffices that equality could be established among all classes of things, living and non-living. In any case, Yoruba perception is not consensual about this.

<sup>13</sup> See Ajibade, G.O (2006), "Animals in the Traditional Worldview of the Yoruba," *Folklore*, 10 (30), p.168.

<sup>14</sup> Here, 'traditional' is emphasized because the practice of human sacrifice is not as prevalent in modern or civil Yoruba society as it has traditionally been, and thus it could be said to be socially illegitimate, though the case of animal sacrifice remains prominent across the board in Yoruba society, Traditionalists, Islamists, Christians and others not excluded. Ajibade Olusola

(2006, p. 159) also indicated that human sacrifice may not be common in contemporary society because of fundamental human rights enshrined in national constitutions.

<sup>15</sup> The popular folktale of the tortoise, man and squirrel in Yoruba land centers on the benevolent nature of the man who acted as a mediator in the settlement of disputes between the two animals but ended up being a victim of injury inflicted upon him by the animals. While this tale is fictional, it could be deduced that the Yoruba worldview personifies animals as beings similar to human-beings, and thus it is not surprising that this sort of worldview elevates animals' status to divine entities, ancestral accomplices of their forebears, and often as "persons" in their own right.

<sup>16</sup> The addition here is ours; as the saying would be rendered incomplete without this and its absence would misrepresent the Yoruba intent here, which Ajibade seem to ignore.

<sup>17</sup> See Ajibade, G.O., (2006), pp. 168-169.

<sup>18</sup> This is correlated with the belief that in Yoruba land, the vulture is a formidable animal for food; as such, a hawk that takes the chance of getting close to a cooking pot would be added to the available meats in the pot, a risk the vulture can afford to take without fear of being harmed in traditional Yoruba society.

<sup>19</sup> This is a common saying in Yoruba society; mainly it is an oral expression, and thus it is important that it should be catalogued as one of the sayings to draw upon in fine-tuning the Yoruba understanding of human-animal relations.

<sup>20</sup> As regards this, Ajibade Olusola (2006, p. 168) reports that the preference of these animals is not determined by the Yoruba people but by the kind of god in question. Thus, for *Ogun* (God of Iron), dogs, snails, tortoise and rams are appropriate as appeasement/propitiation materials; the Goddess of the River, *Oya* accepts goats and fowls; Esu (the Yoruba trickster deity) prefers black fowl, *Sango* (God of Thunder) is fond of ram; *Orunmila* (God of Wisdom, Knowledge and Prophecy) is fond of rats, *Osanyin* (God of herbal medicine) is fond of the tortoise; Egungun (masquerade) is fond of rams, etc.

<sup>21</sup> There is a Yoruba expression that supports this: *gunnugun eye okun, akalamagbo eye osa, bi o ba jowo gbe ko ma johungbe* (Idowu 2008: 31) – "the vultures of the sea, the vulture of the river, I call on you if you please, accept my offering, and do not reject my voice." This expression shows that the Yoruba believe that animals like the vulture can traverse the terrestrial to celestial realms to convey prayer requests to the world beyond and canvass for favors or positive responses to humans in return.

<sup>22</sup> The proof for this is found in indigenous classical Yoruba movie productions such as *Koto Aye* (Dungeon of the World – our translation), *Koto Orun* (Dungeon of the World Beyond – our translation); also, a film like *Eran Iya Osogbo* (Mama Osogbo's Goat) is suggestive of this Yoruba superstitious outlook. See uploaded scenarios of the movies on "Babaonibaba TV," Nollywood Yoruba movies, accessed online October 9, 2013. While these film texts may be

categorized as ‘fictional,’ they are not mis-representative of Yoruba superstitious beliefs about animals which determine the pattern of human-animal relations.

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