

# Ecopoetics in Yorùbá Riddles

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## Abstract

In contemporary literary scholarship, assumes that certain subject matters are burgeoning in literary texts produced recently. For instance, the motif of environment/ecosystem seen to be novel in literary representations. However, Africans, long before their contact with coloniality, have engaged their literary texts in interrogating various aspects of their cultural milieu, including the ecosystem. One of the ecocentric poetic genres of Yorùbá literature is *àlò àpamò* (riddles). This study, therefore, investigates the representations of interactions among different stakeholders of the ecosystem in selected *àlò àpamò*. The study reveals that Yorùbá riddles are fraught with ecocritical consciousness. Images of the environment in the discussed riddles emphasize man's inseparable relationship with the environment or ecosystem. Similarly, the anthropocentric nature of man depicts that man and nature cannot be separated as they are mutually interactive.

**Keywords:** Àlò Àpamò, Ecopoetics, Environment, Yorùbá poetry.

## Introduction

Going by the atavistic and metaphorical definition of literature as a mirror of life, it becomes difficult to sever literature from the social realities that it reflects. In other words, there exists an inseparable relationship between literature and society. One of the very important aspects of society that literature represents is an ecosystem. Yorùbá poetry is committed to depicting environmental issues. One of the sub-genres of Yorùbá poetry that is ecocentric is *àlò àpamò*. However, despite the long-existing ecocritical consciousness embedded in this Yorùbá poetry genre, sufficient studies not been carried out on its representations of an ecosystem. Therefore, it is against this backdrop that this study investigates Eco poetics in this Yorùbá *àlò àpamò*.

Contemporary African society faces the threat of having some of her rich oral traditions going into extinction. Many oral traditional genres, particularly those associated with traditional ritual practices, are disappearing, and poetic forms are gaining new content and application through mutation and adaptation in the context of contemporary popular culture (praise names, applied to politicians; songs of abuse during elections sometimes taking the form of incantations). The obverse and certainly more wholesome of this development is the renewed interest shown by African scholars toward the preservation of these oral traditions. Indeed, nationalistic instinct and higher education have tended to make Africans more conscious of their cultural heritage, and the collection and conservation of oral traditions no longer left to foreign anthropologists. Some of the best collections have been by African writers and scholars, and many universities in Africa are now engaged in recording and preserving oral traditional materials. Riddle is one of those African oral traditions that are gradually going to extinction.

Environment or ecosystem plays an important role in Yorùbá riddle making. This assertion is because most Yorùbá riddles lay emphasis on the environment, which is also part of the context of their formation.

The peculiarity of ecocriticism in Nigeria is situated around the struggle for the survival of man who depends on other components of the ecosystem like the aquatic and the terrestrial inhabitants for a worthwhile existence; unlike in the Western part of the world where ecocriticism emerges out of love for nature. Michael Cohen (2004:15) conceptualizes ecocriticism as “an ecological study for the celebration of nature. Daniel Fried (2005:311) validates this view when he states that:

the lure of nature uncontaminated not only by human development but also by human error is central to the works of the most prominent of American nature writers, from Henry Thoreau and Aldo Leopold to Edward Abbey and Annie Dillard.

This reveals why some critics argue that ecocriticism succeeded earlier in the West because, Westerners love and have more time for the admiration of nature, unlike their African counterparts who colonial resistance did not give much time. Even at the commencement of ecocriticism in the West, the struggle did not accompany it because the interest was not in the survival of man. However, the case is different in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular, where ecocritical consciousness is mostly located around the survival of man as in the case of the Niger Delta. The struggle for environmental restoration in the region is out of love for nature – the flora and the fauna, but for the survival of man whose existence is tied to non-humans. This pictures the

indispensability of the non-humans to the survival of man in the region. This accounts for the reason why the people of the region engage in revolutionary actions geared towards environmental rescue, and that has given birth to the emergence of eco-activism in the region (Olániyan, 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework: Eco-criticism**

Eco-criticism as a literary concept emerged from the discussions and meetings of the WLA (the Western Literature Association, a body whose field of interest is the literature of the American West). (Peter Barry, 2005). Eco-criticism aims to show how the work of writers concerned about the environment can play some part in solving real and pressing ecological concerns. Man cannot be separated from his natural environment; thus, eco-criticism investigates the interaction between man and his natural environment. Furthermore, Lawrence Buell (2005:48) defines it as an umbrella term used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice.

Eco-criticism can be summarized again as the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environment praxis. Furthermore, Hutchings (2007) is of the view that as a field of literary inquiry, ecological criticism or eco-criticism, as it is now commonly known investigates literature in relation to the histories of ecological or environmentalist thought, ethics, and activism. One of ecocriticism's basic premises is that literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment. Eco-criticism studies the representation of the physical world in literary texts and their social contexts to account for attitudes and practices that have contributed to modern ecological problems while also exploring alternative modes of thought and behavior, such as sustainable practices that respect the perceived rights or values of non-human creatures and ecological processes. As Buell puts it, literary texts function as acts of environmental imagination that may affect one's caring for the physical world, making the world feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable". Several nomenclatures have been used for Eco-criticism. These include "ecological criticism, green studies. More so, another of eco-criticism's basic premises is that literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment.

The following names mentioned as the proponents of this burgeoning literary concept: Cheryll Glotfelty, Whom Peter Barry acknowledges as the founder of eco-criticism in the USA, Harold Fromm, Karl Kroeber., William Ruekert, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Jonathan Bate, John Elder, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. In Nigeria's

context, the following environmentally oriented writers fall within the practitioners of eco-criticism: Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Odia Ofeimun and Nnimmo Bassey, among others. Adegbodù (2021:39)

### **An Overview of Yorùbá Poetry**

Oral literature has enormous didactic dimensions channeled to the benefit of human society. Oral literature constitutes a pleasurable mode of learning apart from enjoyment. Eyoh (2009) and Adegbodù (2021) assert that Nigerian oral literature deals with certain serious issues about life, man, and his relationships with his environment and with other human beings, all of which are pertinent to development in society today. In other words, oral literature has many roles to play in both national and international development.

In the Yorùbá worldview, oral texts cast experiences into their narratives continuously performed in rituals. Historical and recorded social experiences in oral tradition. Oral tradition, therefore, constitutes the starting point of any investigation into Yorùbá thought system. Yorùbá oral genres include proverbs (*òwe*), incantations (*ofò*), nuptial poetry (*ekún iyàwó*), Ifá corpus (*ese ifá*), lineage and individual praise recitations (*oriki*), hunters' chants (*ijálá*) and riddles (*àlò àpamò*).

The Yorùbá assumes that oral tradition in the form of the spoken word embodies a powerful and active essence. The power and the active essence in the Yorùbá oral tradition may become a vehicle for ideological control. Words become tools for entrenching ideologies of either oppression or liberation. These oral traditions manifest through diverse genres; but taken together, they present a clear picture of the Yorùbá worldview. This worldview is not static or rigid; therefore, its configuration is dynamic. Oral literature for the Yorùbá is always of present relevance because it continues to wield considerable influence on Yorùbá social structures to date. Embedded in the genres are elements of theatre and performance. In addition, it exhibits a great influence emanating from the people's religious advocacy (Adegbodù, 2021).

### **Àlò Àpamò: Meaning, Form, and Features**

There are various explanations given for the term "riddle". Described as a knotty question asked to test someone's intellectual capacity. It also has to do with a situation whereby someone talks in a more difficult way or in a less understandable way. Watson Dictionary (1976:955) explains a riddle as a question or problem phrased obscurely but correctly and posed to test the ingenuity of the person trying to find the answer. Another source, as recorded by Ajikobi (2013:31), explains that a riddle is a puzzling question... requiring some ingenuity to answer. Gatheru (1975:64) explains that riddles are one of the features

that make language strong, especially among the Kukuyu. He states that riddle is important among other things that uphold the language. According to Akómólédè (a group of Yorùbá language teachers) cited in Ajikobi (2013:32)

Àlò Àpamò is a short or long question derived from what we observed in our environments, which demands an answer. The Yorùbá as a race are fond of closely studying things. It is this attentiveness of the Yorùbá that gave birth to Àlò Àpamò, in order to point to the attributes or characteristics of objects that Àlò Àpamò centers on. Àlò may center on many things, such as domestic items, domestic animals, plants, birds, trees, animals and so on.

From the foregoing, it is observed that *àlò àpamò* was given birth to among Yorùbá resulting from their observation of what happens around them. It often takes the form of questioning which calls for critical thinking to decipher. The people carefully look at the features and characteristics of anything they want to study before bringing out questions about it. It is also inferable from the above that riddles based on anything either living or nonliving things within the context of the people. Writing on Yorùbá riddle and its usefulness, *Iwe Imodotun Yorùbá* (1991) cited in Adegboðu (2021:16) states that a riddle is an integral part of the Yorùbá culture and tradition, which is a form of entertainment, especially among the children after the day’s work. Riddles are formed through careful observation and thoughtfulness. Yorùbá riddles show the wit-tiness and perspicacity of the Yorùbá; it awakens children’s intellectual capacity as they try to unravel the question posed to them.

Saka (2015:123) makes it clear that the structure of *àlò àpamò* Yorùbá is in two folds; the subject and predicate (complement). The first structure (subject) based on metaphor, where the poser makes use of what he/she knows very well to describe what he/she has in mind before using “*ehun àfikún afise-hàn* to describe the features or where we can see what he/she is talking about. For example:

	<i>Main subject</i>	<i>descriptive addition</i>	<i>answer</i>
i.	Black headgear ( <i>Gèlè dúdú</i> )	is spread across the road ( <i>gbàjá ọ̀nà</i> )	Soldier ants ( <i>ijàlọ</i> )
ii.	The igbogun bitter yam ( <i>Èsúrú igbogun</i> )	that makes one uncomfortable. The poisonous ( <i>à jẹ̀ wòkè ọ̀jù nàndèrè</i> )	bitter yam ( <i>Gùdùgúdú</i> )

In the above examples, the subject is the main message while the descriptive addition pointing to the description of what happens that the Riddler wants the audience to explain.

Furthermore, Fátókun and Oyèrindé (2014) view *àlò* as a combination of Yorùbá oral literature and poetry, as the combination of the prefix “à” with the verb “*lò*” which constitutes the name “*àlò*”. In their opinion, the verb “*lò*” is to say or wrap something with another, especially when saying something or wrapping something or a particular story with something like an animal, bird, tree, or human being. Òpádòtun (1994:1) says riddle is a kind of poetic genre that is used for entertainment, enjoyment, and education. *Àlò àpamò* is likened to when a Mathematics teacher gives students some exercise to do offhand before giving them the one to solve in their books; the riddle is to arouse the whole-body system of the audience to make them prepare fully for the folktales and songs in the tales s/he wants to tell them. This in line with Olátúnjì’s (1984) position that riddles help in keeping the audience mentally awake before folktales are narrated, they have entertaining values; they often exercise the intellects of the audience; they are instructive, they also have psychological significance.

*Àlò àpamò* precedes or stands as opening glee for the performance of *àlò àpagbè* or *àlò onítàn* (folktales) which consists of telling stories about tortoise, dog and so on. Akinyemi (2015) in his own classification categorizes *àrò* as the third type of *àlò àpamò* which Ogunpolu (2000) categorizes under “Ìtàn fèyí kògbón Yorùbá” (Yorùbá folktales).

## **Yorùbá Literature and Commitment to Ecosystem**

Generally, literature is a form of expression through which ideas of local and universal interests are projected. Presented in the form of poetry, romance, story, biography, essay, and other forms of writing. From another perspective, literature may be said to denote a piece of writing that deals with a particular subject; but for oral literature, it is spoken imaginative communication that is not written but transmitted through the mouth for entertainment and sometimes edification of the audience. Vansina (1985) opines that oral literature is verbal messages that are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation.

Yorùbá oral literature, like other forms of popular culture, is not merely a form of entertainment but a medium for commenting on contemporary social and political events. It can also be a significant agent of change capable of scoring the people’s historical experiences (Adegbodun, 2014). There seems to be an impossibility of discussing African literature without a link to traditional values. These values are stored in the various tales, myths, and legends,

oral narratives of different sorts, songs, and acts. Eyoh (2009) asserts that oral literature has enormous didactic dimensions channeled to the benefit of society. In addition to being an art, oral literature constitutes a pleasurable move of learning. In other words, there are other possibilities beyond this element of enjoyment.

The study of Yorùbá oral literature occupies an important position in literary scholarship. However, this is not unconnected with the fact that Yorùbá literature encapsulates the most vital elements of the people's cultural heritage. Olátúnjí (1987) opines that Yorùbá oral literature is bound to specific cults and institutional practices. Most of the chants and songs are associated with worship. For instance, *ijálá* chants are associated with the worship of Ogun and the hunters' guild, and *iyèrè ifá* associates with Ifá.

Oral literature reflects the people's way of life. Those from riverine areas, for instance, base their folktales on the sea/sea animals, while people among whom hunting is a vocation represent their oral literature forest and animals. Thus, there are different versions of the same basic story in which the setting and the characteristics change according to the occupation and environment of the people. Akínyemí (2015) observes that the formation of Yorùbá riddles essentially arises from a profound reflection of issues in the environment. The ecosystem plays an important role in Yorùbá riddle making. This assertion is because most Yorùbá riddles lay emphasis on the ecosystem, which is also part of the context of their formation.

Yorùbá riddles often depict the interaction between man and his society. In this study, therefore, we will consider the interface in Yorùbá riddles between human and human, human and flora, flora and flora, fauna and fauna, economy/marketing and human, human and dietary, human and physical relief as well as metaphysical realism and flora in order to show the representations of various ecopoetic realities in *àlò àpamò* Yorùbá.

### Human and Human Interactions

Yorùbá riddle discussed in this section depicts the interaction among human characters; this study examines the shared and shown human traits within interpersonal relationships. The following example emphasizes attributes of the relationship between two human qualities in Yorùbá riddle.

*Apàlò:*        *Àlò o*  
*Agbàlò o:*    *Àlò*  
*Apàlò:*        *Ènìyàn méjì n rìn*  
                     *Òjò n pa enìkan*  
                     *Sugbon kò pa enìkejì*

*Idahun: Aboyún* (Olatunji, 1982)

Riddler: *Ààlọ o*  
 Listeners: *Ààlọ*  
 Riddler: Two people are walking  
           One is soaked  
           While the other one is spared  
 Answer: A pregnant woman

The above shows the interface or interactions between two humans, that is, the people walking together, to accent power relations and the issue of inequality and rare privilege in the world. The riddle portrays the friend whom Rain beats as the mother (carrier) while the other friend/companion who enjoys rare privilege in the womb is pregnant (the carried) for specific months. Moreover, while the rain is good for humans, it can also cause severe havoc as implied by the riddle. The interface can also provide a political explanation of the status of the electorate usually presented as more powerful than the elected representatives who exert and wield absolute power over those who entrust them with their mandates just as the fetus enjoys the privilege over the mother (container).

## Human and Flora

The flora is part of non-human characters that humans interact with their environment. The ecosystem covered by flora making it severe. Example of Yorùbá riddles that illuminate the interdependent relationship between humans and flora is the following:

*Apàlọ : Ààlọ o*  
*Agbàlọ o: Ààlọ*  
*Apàlọ : Mo je igba isu*  
           *Mo je irinwó ògèdè*  
           *Mo tún ní ebi n pa mí*

*Idahun: Erin*  
 Riddler: *Ààlọ o*  
 Listeners: *Ààlọ*  
 Riddler: I ate two hundred yams  
           I also ate four hundred bananas  
           I still complain that I am hungry  
 Answer: Elephant

The above riddle reflects the interface between human features and flora in that one is tempted to draw the conclusion that the answer will definitely be a man whose wants are unlimited, however, the exaggerated characteristics of what is eaten provoke profound reflection on whether what is depicted is genuinely human. However, the answer is elephant. Denotatively, no amount of food is sufficient for an elephant. This riddle depicts the size of an elephant's food in relation to its body size. Relating activities to nature could be destructive. The insatiable nature of the elephant is a metaphor for man's insatiable attributes. Men have exploited the ecosystem in the name of globalization and the attractiveness of the natural world. This unchecked gluttony of man accounts for the extinction and endangerment of both flora and fauna. This informs Olaniyan's (2013) submission that in a bid to beautify his environment, man ends up destroying it and invariably destroying himself. The interface seen as a representation of the power relation of the bourgeoisies (depicted by elephants) who wield and abuse their power or position on the powerless proletariat. *Isu* (yam) and *ògèdè* (banana) in the context of the riddle symbolize the oppressed members of society who are maltreated, subjugated, and battered by the ruling class. In other words, this ecopoetic representation metaphorizes socio-political and economic praxis operated in human society.

### Flora and Flora

Just as humans relate among themselves as shown above, there is preponderance of Yorùbá riddles depicting the anthropomorphic interaction among floral objects as members of human ecosystem. The riddle discussed below exemplifies the flora and flora interface.

*Apàlò : Àlò o*  
*Agbàlò o: Àlò*  
*Apàlò : Igi tútù lẹ̀ mọ̀ gbígbẹ̀ o*  
*Idahun: Ika ọwọ̀ ati èékànná*

Riddler: *Àlò o*  
 Listener: *Àlò*  
 Riddler: A fresh/wet stick connects to a dry one  
 Answer: Finger and the nails

The relationship between a fresh/wet stick and a dry one is paradoxical. There is a deliberate effort to see how fresh and dry trees can stick together to form an entity. A careful look at the answer hereby provokes critical thinking. There is a continuous search in our hearts to know an object, which has

such peculiarity or characteristics. One becomes bewildered at the answer especially because the interface of the above flora and flora leads us into a psychological consciousness of a human part. In the above, the stick is a metaphor for the fingers and the nail especially since through such dependency, the nails are still without blood. On the metaphor ground, the fresh tree may imply the younger generation while the dry stick represents the old generation. In other words, these two generations, though in terms of experience and exposure are divergent, are closely interconnected. The interdependent relationship between the old and younger generations is metaphorically and eco poetically foregrounded in this riddle.

### Fauna and Fauna

Furthermore, plants (flora) share an edge, and fauna and fauna exhibit some human-like nature. In the following example Yorùbá riddle emphasizes fauna and fauna interface, exploring faunal ecopoetics

Apàlò : Ààlò o  
 Agbàlò o: Ààlò  
 Apàlò : Àkùkọ baba mi kan láéláé  
 Àkùkọ baba mi kan làèlàè  
*A da igba odó bò ó, síbẹ́ ó n kọ.*  
*Idahun: Èéfín*

Riddler: Ààlò o  
 Listener: Ààlò  
 Riddler: My great grandfather's fowl  
 My ancestral grandfather's fowl  
 We covered it with two hundred mortals, still it crows.  
 Answer: Smoke

The above riddle links fauna (fowl) and fauna (a crow). One is tempted to mention a cock as the answer to the riddle. This is because man is familiar with the crowing of the cock. It once served as a local watch, especially in the pre-literate era. The answer is that smoke, therefore, foregrounds eco-critical consciousness. When the fire gets kindled or put out, smoke is imminent for minutes, hours, and days depending on the intensity of the fire. This riddle, therefore, reiterates the need to take caution and be sensitive in order to forestall fire outbreaks. Besides implying that smoke is also as harmful, as fire itself.

## Fauna and Flora

Aside from human interaction and interrelatedness with the ecosystem, other non-human but living members of the ecosystem equally interrelate. There is a link between fauna and flora in Yorùbá riddles as shown below.

Apàlò :	Ààlò o
Agbàlò :	Ààlò
Apàlò :	Gbogbo igi ni n so fún ẹyẹ je
Olúkòndó ní òun ò ní so fún ẹyẹ je.	
<i>Idahun:</i>	<i>Igi aparun</i>
Riddler:	<i>Ààlò o</i>
Listener:	<i>Ààlò</i>
Riddler:	All trees bear fruits to feed birds
	Blade says it cannot bear fruit to feed birds
Answer:	Bamboo tree

Here, flora referred to as Olúkòndó deliberately refuses to be prey to birds of the air. Several trees serve as food for birds and other animals especially because of their fruits. However, the bamboo tree is of no value as regards being food to any fauna. Naturally, birds feed on plants without paying or appreciating fruit trees; this may be the reason why the bamboo tree cannot be treated the same way as other trees. Thus, the plant is of the opinion that as long as birds cannot appreciate its munificent gesture, it prefers not to waste its fruits. In addition, the riddle presents a strong principle that life or situation is not one-sided since not all fauna have or produce fruits. A man has to understand the essence of each constituent of the fauna in order to adopt ecological strategies to cater to sustainable solutions for environmental change.

In one of his earth-related poems, Niyi Osundare foregrounds the role of man in the poem titled “Ours to plough, not to plunder”. God put a man in charge of nature to plough, tender, and take care of; however, as shown in the above-cited riddle, the unmindful actions of a man with regard to natural endowments are decried. The anthropomorphic protest displayed by Olúkòndó that it will not produce fruit for birds is an indication that nature has a way of reacting when it is abused.

## Economy/Marketing and Human

The below cited Àlò Àpamò validates instances where there is an interface between economic/marketing related issues and humans.

*Apàlò : Ààlò o*  
*Agbàlò : Ààlò*  
*Apàlò : Mo dé ojà Èbúté*  
*N ò bá ju eni méjì lọ*  
*Tí n tà tí n rà*  
*Idahun: Tọkọ-taya*

Riddler: *Ààlò o*  
 Listener: *Ààlò*  
 Riddler: I got to Èbúté market  
 I did not meet more than two people  
 Who is engaging in buying and selling?  
 Answer: Husband and wife

The market in the above riddle is the “marriage market” which usually involves the husband and the wife. In Yorùbá cosmology, the earth is a market with heaven as its home. In other words, all humans shall go back to heaven after we are done with our assignments on this planet Earth, as death is inevitable. Similarly, the riddle depicts the mutual relationship that exists between the male and the female since an individual cannot engage in business transactions with him/herself. Thus, it is imperative for humans to learn from the two characters in the riddle who maintain a symbiotic relationship of buying and selling. The riddle equally viewed from a euphemistic angle. Here, the kind of business transaction that the buyer and seller (husband and wife) engage in is sexual intercourse. Of course, the essence of sexual relations is usually to procreate which metaphorizes the gain from such a transaction.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that Yorùbá riddles are fraught with ecocritical consciousness. Images of the environment in the discussed riddles emphasize man’s inseparable relationship with his environment or ecosystem. Similarly, the anthropocentric nature of man depicts that man and nature are mutually interactive and inseparable. This justifies the highlighted anthropomorphism that permeates most of the Yorùbá riddles. The results of the anthropomorphic nature of Yorùbá riddles, thereby, provoke deep thoughtfulness through ecocritical consciousness.

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