

Research

Water in Yorùbá (Southwest Nigeria) religious belief and practices

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Abstract

Among the Yorùbá, one of the three largest ethnic groups primarily based in southwest Nigeria, water holds several meanings which are usually demonstrated in its capacity as a regenerating and degenerating power. To draw upon its affirming quality and elude its caustic powers, the Yorùbá exhibit strong reverence for water and, therefore, give critical attention to it. This reverence manifests through various ritual observances and religious rites that may include the presentation of non-human life or blood or any other acceptable ritual material. In the literature, water is presented ordinarily in its fluid state or as a 'staple' consumed to sustain human, animal and plant life as well as satisfy all kinds of human needs. Among the Yorùbá, however, water is approached in a different light and beyond its mere physical state. Drawing on Yorùbá verbal texts such as *odù ifá* (divinatory poems or texts) and *òwe* (proverbs), oral interviews and secondary sources, I present a hermeneutic approach to the intrinsic capacity of water within the context of Yorùbá religious belief and practices. I also examine water as a numinous power in Yorùbá culture and myths. I argue that the Yorùbá people's reverence for water informs the diverse religious and cultural practices that manifest across sites where sacred water bodies are situated and why verbal formulations have been developed to explain water's 'extraordinary' powers.

Keywords Water · Yorùbá deities · Belief · Cosmology · Holy wells

1 Introduction

Water, according to scholars, antedates the earth and the sun [1], forming one of the earliest known elements in space before human existence. This observation is gleaned from the creation stories of ancient societies and illustrates that water is part of the fundamental elements which make up the earth. The discourse calls critical attention to the importance and the centrality of water to humanity's well-being and existence generally. Water holds extraordinary powers and has been subjected to all kinds of uses throughout history. Water has facilitated the evolution of human civilisation [2], expanded irrigation systems [3], aided the agricultural revolution [3], decimated human civilisations [4], initiated wars [5] and enforced peace agreements [6]. In addition, water catalysed the formation of great empires, [7] and has proved to be a source of rich spiritual devotion in certain cultures [8]. The utilisation of the inherent powers of water over time has accomplished complex forms of shared developments that impacted human existence and the evolution of civilisation up to the present.

Throughout history, humanity and water have interacted in phenomenally diverse ways. Here, humanity responds to its daily survival through the active use of water. Owing to its ambivalent and ambiguous nature, water evokes multiple meanings in diverse spaces such that a historically fertile dialogue exists between water and its adaptation by humanity. As a fluid material power that sustains human life, water and water bodies (rivers, lakes, seas, oceans, dams among

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others) become sites or heritages of place and latent agencies for local inflexion where socio-cultural, traditional as well as practices of environmental precautions are observed [9].

The Yorùbá are one of the three major ethnic groups primarily domiciled in the six states of southwest Nigeria. They are also located in parts of North-Central Nigeria (Kogi and Ilorin) and parts of the region of the Niger Delta. Although, the population of the Yorùbá is spread across West Africa, specifically in the Republic of Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ghana, and also the United States, Cuba, Brazil and Venezuela, the people trace their history to the ancient Yorùbá city of Ilé-Ife, southwest Nigeria.

Among the Yorùbá, water is believed to have a regenerating and degenerating power. To draw upon its affirming quality and elude its caustic powers, the Yorùbá exhibit strong reverence for water by extending due attention to it. This reverence manifests through religious observances and rites that include the presentation of acceptable ritual material such as food and drinks. Water is presented ordinarily in its fluid state or as an element consumed to sustain human life but the Yorùbá view water beyond its mere physical state. The article attempts a hermeneutic approach to elucidate upon the intrinsic capacity of water within the context of Yorùbá religious beliefs and practices. As a numinous power in Yorùbá culture and myths, the Yorùbá people's reverence for water within such milieu explains the presence of diverse religious and cultural practices across sites where water bodies are located and why various aphorisms have been developed to demonstrate water's 'extraordinary' powers.

1.1 The intrinsic value of water

Water forms a very important element for human existence and through it, all human life owes its survival. While water may assume physical attributes and can fulfil everyday human needs such as drinking, washing and bathing, the Yorùbá considers this material element in extraordinary terms. As Oyeronke Olajubu notes, "Human reactions to water stem more often than not from its utilitarian benefits rather than its intrinsic worth [10]." Although the Yorùbá have developed for a period aphorisms and other verbal formulations to explain water's 'utilitarian benefits', as Olajubu rightly suggests, on the contrary, and equally important is the intrinsic worth or value of water which manifests beyond its physical state or attributes. For instance, the Yorùbá proverb (òwe), *Omi, baálé àlejò* (Water, the lord and master of the visitor), places water, by its nature, as a maximal power which a visitor cannot ignore. Although a visitor could be offered beverage, alcohol or wine or, in certain cultures, kola nut or food, water, however, remains the most important consumable or fluid, particularly for a visitor returning from an exhausting journey. In Oyekan Owomoyela's denotative meaning of this proverb: "Water is the ultimate thing with which one welcomes a visitor [11]," he demonstrates the bridge between desire and nature which water could satisfy only by being itself an element of nature. There are other proverbs in this category on water, although applied differently. For instance, the Yorùbá proverb, *Iná tó òlérí omi á kù sọ̀nù* (The fire that challenges water will die off), in a literal sense, illustrates the difference in might and strength of two powerful natural elements—fire and water. Its denotative meaning suggests that it is reckless to contend against an opponent that one is no match for [11].

Besides its appreciation of proverbs, the Yorùbá cultural worldview comprehend water in other ways. An interesting illustration of the intrinsic value of water can be observed in the song; *Water No Get Enemy* (Water Has no Enemy) by late Nigerian Afrobeat music artiste, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. While the song has been examined from its ideological, literal, political and metaphorical lenses elsewhere [12], within the context of this analysis, *Water No Get Enemy* underscores the close connection between the power of water and human existence and, by extension, its intrinsic value.

Tóo bá fẹ̀ lọ wẹ̀, omi lo máa ló

Tóo bá fẹ̀ sebè, omi lo máa ló

Tórí bá n gbóná, omi lẹ̀rọ̀ rẹ̀

Tọ̀mọ̀ bá n dàgbà, omi lo máa ló

Tómi bá pọ̀mọ̀ rẹ̀ o, omi náà ló máa lo

Kò sóhun tóo lè sẹ̀ kó má lomi

Omi ò lẹ̀táà o.

If you desire a bath, you make use of water

If you wish to prepare soup, you make use of water

If you have a bout of headache, water is the antidote

If a child ages, you make use of water

If water puts your child to death, you have to still make use of water

There is nothing you can accomplish without the use of water
Water [therefore] has no enemy [13].

In this song, water serves a variety of purposes, one of which is both as a cleansing and purifying agent. As the body consistently burns energy due to the rigour of hours of work, temperature, emotions, use of medications, and food consumption among others, the body responds or reacts by releasing salt-based liquid or fluid from the sweat glands. This bodily reaction becomes discomforting since it usually generates sweat from the sweat glands causing body odour or bacterial infection on the skin, if left unattended. To rid the body or skin of such irritation, a bath becomes necessary before oral or surface medications are applied to the body to prevent skin infection. Apart from the normal use of water as a cleansing agent, it plays a critical role traditionally in addressing medical or non-medical challenges. Herbal baths, for example, are useful therapies. From a recent ethnobotanical survey of medicinal plants used in the treatment of malaria among people of Ògbómòṣò in southwest Nigeria, it was discovered that the treatment regimens of the disease generally involved, among others, bathing with “the aqueous herbal preparations for 5–7 days or until symptoms of malaria disappear [14].” This treatment regimen has often proven to be safe and efficacious over time.

In *Water No Get Enemy*, Fela demonstrates the centrality of water for humanity’s existence on earth and afterlife by cleansing impurities in ways that no other fluid could accomplish. A child from the period of birth is physically impure and remains constantly in that state in adulthood until death. This explains why a bath is important after a child’s birth to remove harmful bodily impurities. Through this first bath, an infant receives the unique opportunity of renewal. The child constantly performs this ritual in everyday life and whether the individual grows into adulthood or not, a bath, in most cases, is required to commit a person to earth after his death. This is where the following lines in the song, *if a child ages* and *if water puts your child to death*, constitute very deep meanings.

Water becomes the life support for a child when alive because, beyond its purifying quality, water sustains the inner and outer body network. After death, the same water is used to cleanse the body of impurities and, in some cultures, the body is ritually bathed or washed before it is interred. As a parenthetical expression, *you make use of water* or *you have to still make use of water*, stresses the inevitability of humanity’s attraction towards water, thus, translating into symbolic attributes to signify water’s role on human during life and death. Fela, therefore, speaks not in a literal sense as it appears in the song but in the context of social and cultural configurations of Yorùbá human lived experience. What does this imply? In the realm of religious and ritual practices, water exists as a natural symbol of purification to facilitate humanity’s transition and renewal from this world to another world (afterlife). Based on these social states of transition and renewal which also include immersion and incorporation, Twigg affirms that:

The symbolism of water... is most strongly present in those traditions that use total immersion, where the rite marks the transition, typically of an adult, from a worldly state to one of incorporation into the body of the faithful, the passage through the deep water symbolising the passage through death to the new life beyond [15].

In other words, water carries important structural constituents that sustain life and nourish the same in the afterlife. The structural constituents exist in the abstract and are decipherable to the esoteric. That water cannot be dispensed with in any situation that humanity finds itself is demonstrated in the concluding line of Fela’s song, *Water No Get Enemy*. There is, indeed, a sense to suggest that this song was inspired by, or drawn from, a verse of the Yorùbá *odù Ifá*. The *odù Ifá* or divinatory poems or texts is an ancient divination system of the Yorùbá people which uses a comprehensive corpus of texts and numerical algorithms to make specific decisions based on a system of signs interpreted by a diviner or priest. Consisting of 256 parts each subdivided into verses with unknown precise numbers, these verses are verbalised by priests in poetic forms and exemplify the history, cosmology, language, beliefs and values of the Yorùbá people across the world. Based on the above, Fela’s *Water No Get Enemy* serves as an example of a revised version of a verse in the *odù Ifá* illustrated in the following lines:

A ɛ gbéré wáyé
Omi ló máa gbà á
Arinrin gbèrè ló sóde òrun
Omi ló máa gbà á
Omi làbùwè
Omi làbùmu
Ènikan kì í bómi sòtá
The one who comes to the world.

Will be received by water
 The one who slowly goes back to heaven
 Will be received by water
 It is water that we bath with
 It is water that we drink
 No one makes enmity with water [10].

The *odù Ifá* above simply explains how water is conceived intrinsically. The centrality of its use in multiple or varieties of contexts, as Olajubu submits, could be “mythical, mystical, natural, [and] metaphorical [10].” While explaining the first two contexts—mythical and mystical—Olajubu suggests that in Yorùbá cosmological accounts, water is perceived in myth as preceding any creation, whether material or immaterial, and mystically, as the abode of certain deities. Olajubu’s argument remains central to the subject matter of the article which shall be explained shortly. Although inconspicuous in some localities and, in few cases, silenced in the myth that surrounds them, sacred water bodies (rivers, lakes, streams, ponds, oceans and holy wells) are also important abodes of primordial spirit beings where they are deified or worshipped. These sacred water bodies, it must be stated, are not simply a focal point of worship alone but also the inherent imperceptible numinous agency within or around them which, in this case, are represented by water. The physical structures (blocks, shrines, trees and iron bars) and all the spectacular human ritual activities (periodic festivals, votive offerings and sacrificial rites) around these sacred water bodies serve as complementary forces all fused into one another to give this agency their interconnected sacred identity.

The integral powers in water and its potential as both a spiritual and physical agency becomes clearer from the excerpt of a Yorùbá song titled *Ọṣun* rendered in honour of *Ọṣun* (Yorùbá deity of fertility) by Yorùbá folk music artiste, *Àṣàbíòjè Afénápá*;

Omi ò lápá o, omi gbégi
Omi ò lẹ̀sẹ̀, omi gbéyàn lọ
Ìṣòro ayé mi omi gbe lọ
Ìdàámù ayé mi omi gbe lọ
Àgbàṅọ ayé mi omi gbe lọ
Gbogbo àbíkú ayé mi omi gbe lọ
 Water has no arm, yet uproots the tree
 Water has no leg, yet washes humanity away
 My life challenges are washed away by water
 My worries are washed away by water
 Àgbàṅọ¹ in my life is washed away by water
 The àbíkú² in my life is washed away by water [16].

The above song illustrates very deep meanings that require some explanations. Among the Yorùbá, water’s intrinsic value is identified based on its manifestation as a powerful incorporeal agency. What this suggests is that water conveys the presence of a numinous power whereby humanity gains from the “power of place” that such water unconditionally provides. According to Celeste Ray, sacred sites are numinous places while “the presiding spirit of the place became an intercessor with the ultimate divine [17].” The *Ọṣun* river which flows westward and traverses five states in southwestern Nigeria, for instance, is not only sacred but devotees hold the belief that the deity, *Ọṣun*, presides over it and, for this reason, has since become something of an intercessor for worshippers across the world till today. The Yorùbá regard most of the deities in its pantheon as vicegerents of *Olódùmarè* (the Yorùbá Supreme Being) and, as a result, are positioned as messengers or carriers of human requests or prayers directly to the latter. Some of these deities, however, now seem to share equal powers with the Yorùbá Supreme Being. *Ọṣun*, in a line of her citation poetry, is called “*Ajeje* the mother of the day” and “a mother who has herb in the river, her given child would have longevity [18].” *Ọṣun* devotees view the deity beyond her reductive identity as the river goddess of fertility and marked by several aspects integrated into the “political, economic, divinatory, maternal, natural, [and] therapeutic [19].” Exemplifying *Ọṣun* in these forms based on her citation poetry, where she retains the dual role of mediator and conveyor, reveals her as an indispensable deity. Rowland

¹ *Àgbàṅá* is an evil recipe or function that prevents a person from saving money.

² *Àbíkú* in Yorùbá belief is a child who dies in infancy and is reborn several times.

Abiodun captures this better: “Without Ọṣun’s sanction, no healing can take place, no rain can fall, no plant can bear fruit, and no child can come into the world [20].” This suggests why Ọṣun’s worshippers liken her powers to that of the Supreme Being, although this is not intentionally conceived by any form of stratified boundaries.

Àṣàbíòjè Afẹ̀nápá does not reveal in her song whether this water which she attributes with powerful human strength refers to the Ọṣun deity but evidence suggests so since the Ọṣun river is considered by devotees to possess powers that exist beyond human intervention. What the song, therefore, demonstrates is that the power inherent in water can resolve human adversity and transform into a destructive power capable of removing a tree without human interference.

1.2 Water as divine agency and power

Within Yorùbá religious milieu, water is identified for its divine attributes, composing interconnected supernatural powers. In this regard, water is both a restorative and caustic category; depending on the relationship people form with it. To demonstrate the caustic power of water, a narration, for instance, links the constant overflow of the Lagos Lagoon in Nigeria to the exertion of the deity’s (Ọṣàrà) wrath upon its devotees and the residents of the area for neglecting her [21]. In this narration, Ọṣàrà is said to have been so greatly enraged that several people drowned through her powers in response to being neglected by her devotees and people who generally benefit from her resources. Following the incessant cases of suicide detected at the Lagos Lagoon through the Third Mainland Bridge in 2007, some Ifá priests who were consulted confirmed that the tragic incident occurred on account of the Lagoon feeling “hungry and angry [22].” When requested to identify the avenue to mitigate the tragic incident, renowned Ifá priest, Ọba Ọlórúnwà Ayékònilógbón, suggested that the Ọba of Lagos was required to appease the deities of the river. Ayékònilógbón revealed further that it was important to “get close to the water, take a little for consultation... [to] reveal why all these things are happening... [else] we might be chasing shadows [22].” Although the reasons for the incident at the Lagos Lagoon may be viewed from the medical, psychological, socio-economic or environmental prisms, Ọba Ayékònilógbón’s claim is attributed to a long-standing belief that water bodies are ‘spirited’ and often caustic when their powers are not renegotiated through ritual propitiation or devotion.

In the case of water’s restorative power, this could be seen from the following lines in the *Odù Ọṣètúá* of the *odù ifá* popularly chanted by devotees of Ọṣun as a form of divination to her. In a personal communication with priest Olaifa Akande based in Osogbo, southwest Nigeria, the following lines were rendered:

Ẹ padà sílé ayé
 Kí ẹ̀ sí máa ké sí Ọṣun
 Fún gbogbo ohun tí ẹ̀ bá fẹ́ ẹ̀ ẹ̀
 Ohunkóhun tẹ́ ẹ̀ bá dáwọ́ lé
 Yòò sí máa túbà-tùṣẹ̀
 Return to the world
 And confer with Ọṣun
 Whatever you intend to do
 Anything you lay your hands upon
 Will prosper with ease and success.

The *Odù Ọṣètúá* above captures Ọṣun’s ‘restorative’ powers who, as the verse of this *Odù* indicates, were neglected by the sixteen (male) deities sent to the earth by Olódùmarè because she was considered to be weak, easily dispensable and as a personality with very little relevance for the mission ahead. Realising that Ọṣun’s àṣẹ (authority), being the sixteenth and the only female *Odù*, was the actual solution to make a success of their earthly mission, the sixteen male deities immediately appealed to Ọṣun several times until she finally acceded to their rapprochement. It is why Ọṣun is popularly referred to as *Abáwọ̀npẹ̀jọ nídìí ìmòràn* (The ever-present counsellor at their decision-making meetings), which is a clear manifestation that her presence in any gathering (of deities) is indispensable and her contributions prized for its potentiality.

The above illustrations are apparent testaments to water’s divine attributes and the diverse forms it embodies as a supernatural element. Beyond this, it is germane to point out that the supernatural powers endowed in water are attributed to deities who, in most cases, are female-gendered or feminine. With a few exceptions, virtually all sacred water bodies, as illustrated in Table 1, are ‘spirited’ with a presiding female identity associated with uniquely diverse powers [23]. Some of these rather renowned sacred water bodies and the deities directly associated with them include Ọṣun river (Ọṣun), popularly worshipped in Ọṣogbo and located in many parts of Yorùbáland such as the Odo-Eja area in Ede

Table 1 List of major Yorùbá female water deities and powers

	Yorùbá female water deities	Powers	Cult
1	Ọṣun	Associated with fertility, economic prosperity, wellness	Across Yorùbáland, Latin America and the Caribbeans
2	Ayelala	Retributive justice	Coastal Yorùbá communities
3	Ọbà	Healing, renewal, fertility, prosperity	Yorùbá towns of Igbon, Ogbomoso and Santeria cults among the Afro-Cuban diaspora
4	Ọya	Wind, lightning, violent storm, fertility	Yorùbá town of Ira and Candomblé communities in Brazil
5	Olókun	Fertility, wealth, violent storm, wellness	Ilé-Ifè, coastal, Yorùbá communities, Latin America and Caribbeans
6	Yemoja	Infertility cure, violent and destructive, turbulent storm, healing,	Parts of Yorùbáland, Latin America and Caribbeans
7	Yewa	Virginity, death, purity, chastity	Parts of Yorùbáland and Latin America
8	Ọtin	Defence, prosperity, wellness, longevity	Yorùbá community of Odo-Otin
9	Ọsààrà	Fertility	Ile-Ife and parts of Yorùbáland

Fig. 1 Ọṣun River, Odo-Eja Area, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.
Source: Author.



community shown in Fig. 1; Sogidi Lake (Sogidi), located and deified in Awẹ town in Ọyọ; and Èsinmìnrìn river (Esimirin), located and worshipped in Ilé-Ifè. Others include Ọsà river/well (Ọsààrà), located and worshipped in Ilé-Ifè and a few other coastal Yorùbá communities; Olókun/Òkun river/well (Olókun), located and worshipped in Ilé-Ifè and several coastal Yorùbá towns; Ọbà river (Ọbà), located and deified in Ògbómòṣó, Ọyọ State; and Ọtin river (Ọtin), located and worshipped in Ìníṣà, Ọṣun State, all in southwest Nigeria.

Each one of these female water deities has its respective roles, unique powers or attributes and could account for a large number of female devotees in their cults and their stern involvement in the ritual process or practices and divination to them. Despite their unique distribution across the Yorùbá landscape, West Africa and the African Diaspora, each of these female water deities connect in one way or the other and also share profound relationships which complement their powers. There is a need to restate that non-water deities, too, fall within this category of association and friendship, for instance, between Ògún (Yorùbá deity of iron) and Ọsányin (Yorùbá deity of healing and medicine) [24]. As regards water deities, their complementarity is illustrated in the expression, *Odò gbogbo l'agbo* (All rivers are medicine), often erroneously attributed to Ọṣun. The Ọṣun river incidentally is not the only sacred water body that the Yorùbá people benefit immensely from. The term, "all rivers are medicine" means water agencies from anywhere could be drawn for healing purposes, for its physical or spiritual benefits or consumed orally for its accumulative powers. The seawater (omi òkun), although salty and unsuitable for human consumption in its original fluid form, is usually drawn by members of the African Independent Churches to resolve existential challenges faced by members and visitors [25]. These existential challenges can range from lack of childbirth and strange illness to marital challenges and job losses. The water contained in the *Sogidi* Lake is also consumed for curative purposes and in other instances, its deity, *Sogidi*,

is believed in the people's lores to extend love and affection to children [26]. Adepegba provides sufficient proof of this statement thus: "Water is...panacea to all life problems [and] can be taken from any river" (emphasis mine) [27]. Such a river, in this case, are those endowed with sacred identities. This explains why, although universally known as water, in Yorùbá cosmology, and from personal communication with Ọṣun priest, Baba Adigun Ọlọṣun, it is identified by such names as *Àgbò* (medicinal concoction), *Òdògùn* (medicine) among other epithets.

Interestingly, water divinities do not appear or exist in isolation. Although represented in the form of water, their strengths are drawn from the diverse human activities performed or carried out around them. Songs, praise poetry, chants, invocations and even prayers are some of the important verbal renderings performed by devotees and priests to these water divinities or required by the deity itself, to venerate or derive from the water's remedial qualities. In *Ilé-Ifè*, for instance, Willet recounts how the Olókun (Yorùbá deity of the deep and vast ocean of the world) is venerated by devotees through the following invocations:

Olókun lokún gbéra nilè o

Ọṣin erùpẹ gbéra nílẹ̀

Ọmọ mi, Olókun dá owó

Yèyé (i) dáàna ọmọ.

Strong owner of stone beads rise out of the earth

Chief of the earth/soil rise out of the earth

Children of water, Olókun created money

Mother (Olókun) gives children as presents [28].

In giving spiritual meaning to these ritual designs, either annual or periodic festivals are celebrated at the spot where the water deity is believed to reside. These occasions are prompted by several reasons such as to replicate a historic occurrence linked to a deity. Overall, it is aimed at drawing from the overwhelming powers held by the deity—powers which are usually guaranteed only on those occasions.

As it appears, each water deity comes with its appurtenance or religious symbols/objects. These objects are rooted in diverse meanings that are, in most cases, ambiguous even to devotees. Nonetheless, symbols attach some form of efficacy to a deity's power(s) or its essential embodiments and, in other cases, serve as a form of safety or protective armour to subdue any opposition [28]. Just as Ọṣun deity is, for instance, associated with brass objects and other precious materials such as swords, hairpins, knives, bells, bangles and rattles, so is Olókun with *sẹgi* beads, cowry shells, white chalk and white cloth. Other deities are renowned for their wooden sculpture crafted by their devotees to represent their physical image or real identity and are, in most cases, permanently stationed in a shrine dedicated to the deity. These wooden objects often ritually charged and fed, could also be assigned to family compounds connected with the deity and tended to by a chief priest/priestess. In other instances, these sculptured deities are hidden in a remote part of a traditional ruler's palace where he is required to perform certain rituals on them or carry out specific instructions through their guidance.

Apart from these 'inanimate' symbols or objects which represent many Yorùbá deities, water deities are also strongly associated with animals who, for the most part, represent messengers of these deities. These animals are forged from malleable metallic elements like tin, brass or iron for purposes of adornment or as sacred identifications in sacred or open spaces. In his study on the Olókun deity in Cuba, Mason notes that the python is the possession of Olókun's wife, and sacred to the Erinlẹ̀ deity while birds and snakes are connected with the worship of Ọṣun [29].

2 Conclusion

Water holds a very strong attachment to humanity and, for several generations, has applied all manners of skills and power to appropriate its value for all kinds of purposes. The intimate relationship that exists between humans and water is linked with this belief that the fluid element contains supernatural agency that triggers a metamorphosis. Water is identified as a sacred category and avows universal affinity in unique ways that it is embedded within local myths and legends of several societies as a connecting agency between the natural and *otherworld*. As highlighted earlier, water carries several meanings and purposes which is demonstrated in its capacity as a regenerating and degenerating power. To draw upon water's affirming quality and elude its caustic powers, humanity has given utmost reverence to this fluid element. This is carried out through ritual observances and sacrificial rites that may include the presentation of life or blood or any other acceptable non-human materials.

What is mystical about water and why is it considered so important to earthly life? Water is identified, for instance, in ancient Chinese culture as one of the five elements of life alongside wood, metal, fire and earth [30]. Apart from the fact that water is life-sustaining, it serves both as a purifying and healing agent. Although belonging to the same elemental category, water is an opposing agent of fire which, regardless of its size or volume, makes way when it is applied either in small or large quantities. Water holds metaphysical qualities such that when it is stirred, the earth becomes nourished (bounty harvest and greenery) or underfed (drought and heat). In other words, water's use must be balanced. For ages, the restorative capacity of water such as through hot and cold springs and mineral baths has been used in diverse ways—to purify the body through Muslim ablution (wudhu); Jewish cleansing bath (mikvah) or Christian baptism, and in other religions and cultures through water deity worship all for wellbeing and to foretelling the past or future through sacred water bodies (holy wells) such as *Ori Ayé* in present-day Ondo, southwest Nigeria [31]. Its uses cannot be quantified yet what makes water unique is its indispensability.

Author contributions This is a sole-authored manuscript which involved personal and extensive fieldwork. I wrote the manuscript from start to finish based on results/data from the field and also visited some of the rivers identified in the text to take a number of images one of which appears in the manuscript.

Data availability All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this manuscript.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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