



The Animal is Not Just Meat: A Critical Appraisal of Yoruba Ethics of Animal Consumption

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Abstract: Currently, Non-human animals have the popular identity of being regarded as food on the plate or tool for exploitation. In response, philosophers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan objected from the place sentience and entitlement to rights. However, this issue persists, where some scholars called the pretentious claim of change in practice to be a modification of their approach to exploit, which we consider, is due to the failure to emphasis on the ontology of these animals. Hence, this research paper aims to approach it from an African perspective of spirituality, particularly from the Yoruba worldview. To the Yoruba, the environment, just like humans, has its respective spirits, purposes, and relevance. It is not to be treated with disdain or abused. In the case of animals, they, in their traditional settings, have always treated animals with respect and reverence, considering their ontological being. Even if used for the purpose of consumption, or sacrifices, animals are treated with a certain dignity, and not just as meats, as against the unethical view of animals, most especially the consumable ones as mere foods on the plate. As a framework for ensuring the responsible consumption of animals in present time, this research paper presents the Yoruba approach to giving reverence to animals, which is well-documented in their folklores. It surveys how within the Yoruba settings animals are treated with dignity and reverence, considering their communal belonging, spiritual consciousness, and ecological relevance, all of which would contribute to the global walk to environmental sustainability.

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Introduction:

The growing global concern in recent decades, over the deteriorating relationship between humans and the natural environment (See Bentley, 2013; Bernstein, 2025), of which the treatment of non-human animals is not an exception (see Akande, 2024; Adamson, 2015), is on the rise. This concern is fueled by the recognition that much of modern civilisation is built upon an anthropocentric worldview, one that accords exclusive moral worth to humans while relegating animals and other elements of the natural world to mere resources for exploitation. Some set of anthropocentric individuals are supported by the Abrahamic religion, and some by the human natural quest to conquer and dominate. These experiences have always manifested in cases such as industrial animal farming, down to ritual slaughter practices, most of which are devoid of ethical considerations (see Cole, 2011; Thierman, 2010). These practices are however informed by the popular and anthropocentric view that

animals are nothing more than meat on the plate, commodity for pleasure and satisfaction, among many others, which has prevailed to become a problematic narrative. In response, philosophers like Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (1983) objected from the place of their ability to feel pain, and their entitlement to rights, respectively. However, this issue persists, where some scholars called the pretentious claim of change in practice to be a modification of their approach to exploit, which we consider, is, due to the failure to emphasis on the ontology of these animals (see Cole, 2011; Thierman, 2010). Though, the theories of these scholars, Singer (1975) and Regan (1983) are globally influential and embraced, this paper identify, they often reflect Western philosophical traditions and may not be situated within the African ontologies and ethical orientations behind their reference for animals, which also explains why it is being exploited and manipulated. This, hence, informs the need to explore the Yoruba animal ethics as an African indigenous perspective that could provide

alternative pathways to reconciling human-animal relations.

Among African communities, especially within the Yoruba worldview, as this paper seeks to employ, confers a certain spiritual significance to the environment at large, including all that inhabits it. In their thought system, animals are not merely biological entities but are seen as spirited beings with purpose, agency, and inherent value (see Olusola, 2005; Olabimtan, 2025; Lasisi, 2023; Owoseni, 2020; Mogaji, 2025; Bẹwaji, 2018). Even with the fact that animals are consumed or used for sacrificial purposes, they are not treated with moral indifference, but rather, with ritualistic reverence, symbolic acknowledgement, and ethical restraint. This belief system is however reflective in their epistemic institutions, including their folklores, religious beliefs, proverbs, among many others, all of which inform the moral wisdom and ethical underpinnings guiding their relationship with animals (see Olusola, 2005; Owoseni, 2020; Lasisi, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this

paper seeks to investigate the Yoruba ethical tradition surrounding animal consumption, particularly as captured in folklores and oral traditions. In achieving the goal of this paper, the discussion is divided into four major sections. The first section examines the concept of the commodification of animals by exploring how animals are often regarded merely as instruments for human survival, whether for meat, for pleasure, or for other utilitarian purposes. The section further exposes the ecological implications of animal commodification for the entire ecosystem, creating the floor for the next section. The second section moves into examining Western approaches to curbing this commodification, with particular attention to Peter Singer and Tom Regan's ethical perspectives. This section, however, points out the limitations of such approaches, particularly their inability to account for the ontological significance and inherent agency of animals beyond their capacity to feel pain and individual rights. The third section explores the Yoruba ontological perception of

animals by emphasizing the primacy of the spiritual attributes ascribed to them and their integral role within the ecosystem. Here, animals are not just sentient beings but are seen as spirited entities whose existence contributes to ecological balance and harmony. The fourth and final section advocates for the application of this ontological framework as a philosophical response to contemporary views that reduce animals to mere food on the plate. The paper then proceeds to conclude, arguing that the Yoruba worldview of animals is no doubt a compelling alternative to dominant anthropocentric paradigms by recognising the spiritual dimension of animals. It contributes to ongoing conversations on environmental ethics and sustainability as regarding animal liberation through its emphasis on the ontological value of Animals, beyond the popular sentience ascribed to it.

The Instrumentalization of Animals and the Disruption of Ecological Harmony

Animal instrumentalisation has become rampant in today's

society. Animals have been absorbed into almost every aspect of human life, not as equals, but as instruments used to achieve specific goals: as food, companions, security agents, home support, and so on (Schlemmer, 2017). As Popova (2020) notes, using the case of dogs, she argues that dogs have been part of human society for nearly 15,000 years. Originally, all animals lived in the wild, which is naturally considered their proper habitat. However, through the need of them by humans, many animals became domesticated within the human society, particularly for the sake of human survival (Clutton-Brock, 1999; Zeder, 2012). Though research shows that it is not only animals that have undergone domestication, for there are records of plants and other resources essential to human life haven undergone same domestication, primarily for human purposes and nothing else (Smith, 1995; Diamond, 1997). All of this have been argued to have resulted in the stripping away of any inherent value, agency, ontological status, or ecological role these animals may possess (see Diamond, 1997; Clutton-Brock,

1999; Zeder, 2012. Thus, these animals are reduced to mere tools for satisfying human needs and, to a large extent, human wants and desires. One of the major ways animals have been instrumentalized is in the area of consumption, where humans use them as food, or more precisely, for nourishment. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2015), it was reported that in 2010, 291 million tonnes of meat were produced globally, with the average person consuming approximately 42.2 kilograms of meat per year. This represents a significant, and indeed drastic, increase in meat production, which was initially about 71.4 million tonnes worldwide nearly 50 years earlier (FAO, 2015). However, meat consumption is even more severe in European countries, where it was recorded that the average European consumes approximately 83.4 kilograms of meat per year. In the most developed countries, the figure is about 13.7 kilograms of meat consumed per person, on average, per year (FAO, 2015). All of this reflects how the high demand and consumption of meat has increased rapidly in

recent years (Schlemmer, 2017).

The act of reducing the worth of animals to mere instruments of utility, thereby quantifying their value only for their usefulness to humans rather than for any inherent worth, has contributed to numerous contemporary concerns, many of which are ethical. In this regard, thinkers like Regan and Singer have raised significant moral objections to this view by advocating for the recognition of animals as beings with rights or interests. Regan, for instance, argues that animals are “subjects-of-a-life” and as a result, deserve, outside of being instrumental or utility calculated, moral consideration (Regan, 1983). On the other hand, Singer contends that the capacity to suffer is the foundation for moral concern and calls the disregard for animal suffering a form of “speciesism” (Singer, 1975). However, looking beyond ethical concerns, there are also ontological critiques that point to the erasure of animals' agency and their being-in-the-world. Arguments stemming from the position that animals are

considered mere object of exploitation, which denies them of their ontological identity, fueling their inability to possess selfhood (Calarco, 2008). This situation has, however, prevailed, even within the reformed approach of care towards these animals, which Cole (2011) situates within the framework of Foucault as a shift from disciplinary power to pastoral power, which still reflects human dominance and interest. Hence, this reveals that despite the arguments of scholars on animals' inherent value and characteristics, including emotions, social, and existential value, that qualify them as subjects in their own right, not merely as passive entities to be used at will (Gruen, 2011; Nussbaum, 2006), their exploitation still persists.

Against the backdrop of an expanding global population, the issue of the consumption and production of meat has emerged not just as a dietary choice but also raises some ethical, ecological, and philosophical concerns, which demand critical attention and urgency (Schlemmer, 2017). No doubt, religious texts such as the

Holy Qur'ān emphasise the necessity of moderation and stewardship of the earth as it houses are creation of Allah (Obi, 2024), which helps inform modern principles that can be extended to contemporary practices such as factory farming. However, considering recent developments relating to moral questions, the ontological agency of animals, among others, the moral imperative stretches further beyond just care, which, in fact the end goal is for meeting human needs (see Thierman, 2010). Considering the works of DeGrazia (1996, 2002), Gregory and Grandin (2007), Joy (2011[2010]), and Francione and Charlton (2013), the meat industry is faced with serious ecological implications, spanning from sustainability, biodiversity loss, and waste management, down to social injustices such as exploitative labor conditions and inequitable food distribution. This situation has compelled philosophers such as Singer and Regan to delve into establishing groundwork for an ethical framework that abolishes the instrumental view of non-human animals, by granting it moral consideration from the

sentient point of view. This will be properly established in the following section.

Western Ethical Responses to Animal Abuse and their Ontological Limitations

Having recognized the exploitative relation humans have with animals, particularly on how they treat and perceive them, Western philosophical discourse, most especially through the work of Singer and Regan has condemned such human-animal relations. Both scholars pursued the establishment of animal ethics in order to confer some kind of rights on animals (Regan, 1983), or liberate them from suffering (Singer, 1975). Today, Singer's utilitarian perspective, which is built on the principle of minimizing animal suffering, presents a powerful indictment of factory farming, animal sports, and other exploitative practices on the grounds that animals, just like humans, have the capacity to feel pain and experience suffering. In his popular work titled *Animal Liberation* (1975), Peter Singer shows the moral irrelevance of species membership; a concept he famously termed speciesism,

thereby arguing that the act of inflicting unnecessary pain on sentient beings is morally wrong and indefensible. In pursuing this claim, he situates it within the consequentialist framework, where he considers that the suffering of any sentient creature must be weighed equally in ethical deliberation. However, he is not agitating for equal rights to vote, equal rights to be voted for, among many other human desires, but rather on the aspect of suffering, where he considers ethical deliberation a necessity. However, while Singer's framework challenges the brutality of the meat industry, it remains constrained by its instrumental reasoning, which is that animals are worthy of moral consideration not because of what they are in the ontological sense, but rather because of how they feel. This all reduces animal identity to a function of sentience and, as a result, leaves in place a logic that affirms human sovereignty over other forms of life. As a critique, many scholars have responded, such as Lori Gruen (2011), critiquing this approach on the grounds that it fails to engage with animals as subjects

in their own right beyond the calculus of suffering. Viewed through the lens of Matthew Calarco's (2008) ontological critique of anthropocentrism, it is reasonable to infer that Singer's model does little to challenge the structural systems of exploitation that commodify animals, since it frames animal ethics within the language of liberal moral reform rather than pursuing a radical rethinking of human-animal relations.

Tom Regan on the other hand, in his popular agitation for animal rights, builds a rights-based theory of animal ethics, where he argues that animals, are subjects-of-a-life, and as such should be considered as bearers of inherent value. In his popular work titled *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), Tom Regan contends that animals, just like humans, have, desires, memories, and a sense of the future, and as such they are not merely sentient but existentially individuated. By this position of his, he tried to portray, or rather tilt toward, not in the real sense, but partially, to an ontological recognition of animals as beings with their own life projects. In his argument, he departs from

the utilitarian tradition to mirror the deontological ethos of Kantian moral philosophy; except, unlike Kant, Regan extends the domain of moral agents to include non-human animals, which contrasts with Kant's argument for rational agents. This, however, is further supported by Armstrong et al. (2003), when they argue that, the feelings of others warranting one's attention. Accordingly, "... the mere realisation that others experience negative feelings in the same way that they themselves do is enough to generate moral concern. The attribution of mental states, especially those associated with pleasure and pain, joy and misery, is irrevocably connected with the possibility of morality" (Armstrong et al., 2003, cited in Olusola, 2005: 157).

However, while Regan's contribution deepens the ethical terrain and provides a firmer foundation for legal protections and moral standing, it still confines animals within a human conceptual universe. The categories of rights and moral personhood undeniably remain human constructs imposed upon animals to make them intelligible to a juridical framework built by and for human beings. In response,

critics such as Cora Diamond (1978) have argued that Singer and Regan's models, though progressive, fail to capture the moral complexity and relational depth of human-animal interactions. In a similar vein, Anat Pick (2011) exposes the vulnerability and alterity of animal life, although not addressing Singer or Regan directly, but her *creaturely* framework points toward the ontological dimension these traditional models often overlook.

Inferring from all of the above arguments, it becomes clear that Western models for animal liberation, as Singer agitated, or animal rights as propounded by Thomas Regan, are entrenched in epistemic structures that cannot fully accommodate non-human otherness. The logic behind this, even in its most progressive expressions, fails to escape the disciplinary power embedded within the biopolitical management of animal life. No doubt, there exists a visible shift in contemporary Western practices towards what Michel Foucault (2007) calls *pastoral power*, wherein states and institutions appear to care for

animals through improved welfare regulations, humane slaughtering methods, and veterinary protections, all of which remain a reformed modality of control (Cole, 2011). Animals, no doubt, as we have argued, are cared for, but not because they are recognized in their own right, rather, such care is orchestrated to serve a much enclosed interest, which is none other than human interest, including improving consumer health by contributing to their hygienic condition, and advancing ethical rebranding. Supported in some literature, Scholars such as Dinesh Wadiwel (2015) and Clare Palmer (2010) reinforces this observation, positing that this apparent turn toward care still operates within the framework of domination, where animals remain within a regime of managed life, monitored suffering, and regulated death. And so, by implication, these reforms function ideologically, because in reality, they only mask the continuity of commodification under the veneer of compassion. Slaughterhouses may now follow higher standards of hygiene and worker protection,

but the *telos* of such reforms remains the efficient transformation of life into marketable flesh (Thierman, 2010). However, the emphasis on sustainability and ethical consumption, which is highlighted in works like Joy (2011) and Francione & Charlton (2013), functions not to liberate animals, but to assuage human guilt and consolidate consumerism under the disguise of morality or what we could call moral pretense.

Considering the inhumane human-to-animal relation that led animal activists, the likes of Thomas Regan and Peter Singer, to critique the dominating human-to-animal relation has not been duly addressed even with their critique and recommendations. Rather, the responses from these institutions, animal farm institutions, show that the model propounded has not transcended its foundational anthropocentrism; instead only led these institutions to refine their method. If we are to situate this within the Foucauldian theory of disciplinary and pastoral power, we will realize that the move is nothing other than a move from disciplinary

cruelty to pastoral care, which does not necessarily dismantle the structure of animal commodification. It only attempts a re-legitimization of this human-animal relation in a more palatable and attractive way, one which diverts attention from their practices (Cole, 2011). As a remedial alternative, the next section explores the African perspective, particularly the Yoruba ontological perception of animals, which represents a radical departure from the western model, and highlights a different ontological orientation, where animals are not merely objects of ethical concern, but are perceived through the lens of being co-constituents of a shared cosmological order.

Yoruba Ontology and the Spiritual-Ecological Status of Animals

African ontology at large has always been spirited. It has been deeply entrenched in the religious beliefs of Africans, documented in folklores, of which the Yoruba ontology is not an exception. As Olusola (2005: 155) argues, “the role of folklore cannot be over emphasized in any culture. It

deals with any aspect of a culture's beliefs, practices, crafts, speech, legends, or stories that have been passed on orally from generation to generation." The Yoruba, whose origin is located in Southwest Nigeria (Mogaji, 2025) have approached the talk of existence and being through a spiritual lens (see Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010; Akomolafe, 2016). This belief has over time influenced and informed their total perception of reality. To this set of people, everything has life; purpose, spirit, and even essence (see Mogaji, 2025, Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). They further believe that the world in itself is an interdependent one, where everything is interdependent upon itself, whereby one aids the other's success. As Lasisi (2023: 96) argues,

The traditional Yoruba people see the interdependence of the people and the environment as important; this is because their cultures, beliefs, morality and traditions were outcomes of several observations of their environment which makes their caring for the environment paramount and this relationship

is visible in their attitudes.

Within the Yoruba ontology, they believe in the existence of a hierarchy, which is classified into levels. We have Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and even Level 4. The Level 1 domain is dominated by *Olódùmarè*, *Ọbatálá*, *Ifá*, and *Èṣù*, while the Level 2 domain is dominated by forces including the *Ajé* and *Ajogun*. Level 3 is dominated by humans, plants, and animals, and the Level 4 domain is then dominated by the ancestors (Abimbola, 2005).

Considering the focus of this discourse, we do need to learn a solution to the hierarchy. It is discovered that animals, humans, and plants are classified under the same hierarchy, which means they all have the same spiritual characteristics, as the spiritual realm to the Yoruba people is the maxim for quantifying anything. Now, the question is, since humans and animals are of the same category, to better portray the value and importance of animals, we can then examine the characteristics and inherent value of humans. According to the Yoruba people, they hold the view that

humans have destiny, a purpose, among many other characteristics, which define their selfhood (see Gbadegesin, 1984; Oyeshile, 2002; Akande & Motadegbe, 2022). Since this is the case, together with the classification of animals, it then follows that animals are arguably in possession of all the human spiritual inherencies, which made Olusola (2005) argue that they equal to man; although, in spiritual underpinnings. In affirming a certain degree of intelligence of the monkey, and Proverb, Lasisi (2022: 100) argues "... are often taken as essential among the Yoruba people." The Yoruba proverb goes thus:

Àáyá gbón

The monkey is wise

Ògúngbè nàà gbón

And the hunter is also wise

Àáyá n gungi

the monkey climbs a tree

Ògúngbè nàà n bère.

And the hunter lies in ambush (Olusola, 2005: 164-5).

The above proverb demonstrates a kind of strategic intelligence on the part of humans, represented by the hunter, and on the part of animals, represented by the monkey. This shows that animals possess their own

unique agency, which qualifies them to be accorded full spiritual recognition. Thank you for watching.

According to Owoseni (2020), the Yoruba ontological worldview approaches the status of animals through a religious cum ontological understanding, and this in itself has guided their relationship with them. Supported in the work of Olushola (2005), the Yoruba people in their tradition accords all established for humans to animals in some certain states, such as respect for their mating moment, pregnant animals, and animals in labour, among many others.

Furthermore, in the Yoruba worldview, animals have been classified over time through their taxonomical perspectives, habitats, and characteristics, among many other qualities of identification, all of which exemplify their connection to the community (Olusola, 2005). Exposed by Owoseni (2020: 3),

Ajibade Olushola (2005) has aptly signified that in Yoruba view, the conception of animals is guided by taxonomical and physiological considerations (*eran omi*, aquatic animals; *eran elèsè méji*,

bipeds; *eran igbó*, wild animals; *eran afàyàfà*, reptiles; etc.), associated taboos, songs, chants, and panegyrics that influence relations with animals in the farmstead, homestead (like dog and hen), or wildlife (buck/deer).

This serves as concrete evidence of their being part and parcel of the community, unlike Tom Regan's individualistic approach to defending animals. However, in tandem with Regan (1983) argument on the feelings of animals, the Yoruba believe animals feel pain, suffer, and experience pleasure, among other sensations, but they are also in possession of communal consciousness, belonging, purpose, identity, and a sense of selfhood, which define their being.

In addition to the above, Yoruba traditional thought identifies the place of animals in human society, whereby humans have even gone as far as naming animals after human names because of the connection and bond they share with them (Olusola, 2005). This bond has inspired the composition of various songs and chants, including the *songs for Obo* (Monkeys), songs for

Efon (Buffalo) among many others. One of the practices still observed today, that reflects the Yoruba worldview of their strong affiliation with the animal kingdom is the reverence for the animal called *Efón*. This reverence has its root in their mythology, which reveals that the *Efón* shares an ancestral lineage with the deity known as Òyá, and this belief has guided their relationship with it till the contemporary time. They believe that this animal, in all its forms, must not be killed for food, which stems from the understanding that it is not just an animal, but a sacred being connected to divinity. Accordingly to Yoruba folklore, the song below is to exonerate the value of *Efón*:

Efón Ògbó

Buffalo, ÒgbóOmo

A-kù-má-rò

The offspring of the one
who bleats as if it wants to rain

Gbogbo eni tí n to Ekun léyìn

Everybody following
buffalo

Ti Oya ní nṣ e

Belongs to Oya

Òrò tí n lémo gungi ní
wàràwàrà. The spirit that
pursues the child until he climbs
the tree (Olusola, 2005: 162).

In addition to the buffalo, there are other animals, such as the vulture, that are never killed (Oduwole, & Fayemi, 2017), and some whose killing requires special consideration before it is carried out. According to an eulogy dedicated to Vulture, Olusola (2005: 169) exposed thus:

Bí a ò rígun

If we don't see the vulture

A ò gbodòş ebo

We must not offer sacrifice

Bí a ò rákàlà

If we don't see ground hornbill

A ò gbodòş orò

We must not perform rituals.

All of this reflects the deep reverence the Yoruba have for animals. Animals are considered an integral part of their community and are understood to have spiritual significance. According to Owoseni (2020: 3),

Raymond Ogunade (2004) and Sikiru Adewoye (2007: 54) exemplified how taboo-induced injunctions in Yoruba thought enhance environmental conservation that impact relations with animals such as buffalo (affiliated with water source in allegiance of the goddess Oya), dog (affiliated

with avoidance of peril, disasters, or environmental accident in allegiance of Ògu'n, the god of metallurgy), vulture (igu'n), and yellow palm bird (ẹyẹ – ògà) accorded for their potency to spur environmental degradation/destruction or famine in the land.

Another animal which the Yoruba ascribe *oríkì* to is Àparò (bush fowl), which goes thus:

Àparò

Bush fowl

Eni tí a ò fémo lówó rè

The one that we do not marry his daughter

Tó n gbàna lówó eni

And he is receiving dowry from us

Abi-tete-npológún erú The one with thighs that are inviting the owner of twenty slaves

Abi-ijánjá-pológbòn iwòfà. The one with pieces of meat that are inviting the owner of thirty servants (Olusola, 2005: 161).

Considering the *oríkì* given to Àparò, it describes the kind of relationship the Yoruba have with the bird. Àparò, as a bird, has been identified as an animal that irresponsibly engages with people's farms by freely plucking millet, corn, and other edible farm products for its consumption, which is why the metaphor of receiving dairy

from a horse is used. Likewise, the parts of the tithes and the pieces that are inviting the owners of twenty slaves and the owners of thirty servants are also used to refer to important people in society, all of which point to the value placed on the meat of that *Àparò* for consumption. In other words, the Yoruba reverence for animals does not preclude their use for feeding; after all, we need them to survive.

Thus, to the Yoruba, animals deserve to exist, welfare cared for and respected as beings due to their ontological background (Oduwole, & Fayemi, 2017), and even ecological significance (Ogunade, 2004; Adewoye, 2007). They are accorded dignity just as humans are (Olusola, 2005). Even in cases where animals are killed for food, such killing is not done out of mere desire, but out of necessity. This worldview demonstrates that, for the Yoruba, animals are not merely food; they are spiritually conscious beings and their welfare shouldn't be ignored.

This shift from right-based (Regan, 1983) and feelings-based (Singer, 1975) approach

to the Yoruba ontological based approach (Abimbola, 2005; Olusola, 2005; Owoseni, 2020) exposes the difference between the Western approach to animal ethics as contained in the work of Regan (1983) and Singer (1975).

Yoruba Ontological Ethics and the Reimagining of Animal Value

The Yoruba ontological orientation, which has been established to offer an alternative paradigm for reconceptualising human–animal relations, one whose defining characteristics transcend the reductionist, anthropocentric frameworks that dominate much of contemporary discourse, will be further amplified in this section for reimagining the value of animals. Unlike Western models, which, as argued in earlier sections, remain largely entrenched in either utilitarian calculations of sentience, as postulated by Singer (1975), or juridical frameworks of rights, as highlighted by Regan (1983), the Yoruba worldview grounds the moral constitution of

animals in a spiritual–ontological continuum, which in itself refuses to sever beings from their cosmological interdependence. This grounding in ontology, which defines the very essence of being, provides a more compassionate basis for recognising the value of animals, not based on sentience or rights-bearing status, but rather based on mutual origin, affiliations, and defining features, which positions them as co-constituents of an interconnected universe.

In the Yoruba thought system, as exemplified earlier, existence is inherently spiritual, and all entities, including humans, animals, plants, and natural phenomena, participate in a hierarchical classification of being, which is structured in levels. The classification of animals alongside humans and plants at Level 3 of this cosmological ordering is not in neither accidental nor is it illusory, but rather points to the shared spiritual characteristics and existential value of all the beings in that category. Here, we are informed that moral consideration is not contingent upon comparative cognitive

ability or capacity to suffer, but arises from the recognition of shared ontological inheritance. This notion rearranges the ethical discourse: to diminish animals is, in essence, to diminish a constituent of the very web of existence upon which human life depends (Owoseni, 2020).

In line with the Yoruba worldview, one of the distinctive features of this framework is its refusal to isolate animals as objects of moral deliberation in the abstract, which Schlemmer (2017) highlighted has prevailed in the meat production industry. Rather, they conceive of the moral community as inclusive and relational, where animals are engaged with through lived practices, rituals, and taboos that reinforce their value (see Olusola, 2005; Oduwole & Fayemi, 2017). The prohibition against killing certain animals, such as the *ẹfón* (buffalo) which is as a result of its association with the deity Òyá, as highlighted by these scholars, is proof of the reason for a cosmology in which specific species are woven into mythological and ancestral narratives (see Olusola, 2005;

Oduwole & Fayemi, 2017). These prohibitions, however, are not mere symbolic gestures but function as moral and ecological safeguards positioned to ensure species preservation while alluding to their sacred status. Such injunctions are not, however, limited to the *ẹfón*, as they extend to other species like the *igu'n* (vulture) and *ẹyẹ ògà* (yellow-palm bird), whose perceived spiritual potency demands their protection (Ogunade, 2004; Adewoye, 2007). In this way, it is clear that Yoruba ontology resists the homogenising tendency of Western environmental ethics to universalise moral obligations, instead embedding them in culturally resonant relationships that sustain both moral order and ecological stability.

This ontological grounding also has its pragmatic ecological implications and has helped ancient Yoruba society preserve the environment. As argued by scholars such as Ogunadi (2004) and Oduwoye and Fayemi (2017), taboo-induced restrictions have historically functioned as mechanisms that conserved the environment by placing limits on the over-

exploitation of species and maintaining ecological balance in turn. In essence, while modern conservation biology widely frames such practices as traditional ecological knowledge, the Yoruba system integrates this knowledge within a normative structure where catering for the welfare of animals and respecting their dignity is inseparable from respect for the cosmic other. In other words, all welfarism, care, and protection geared towards animal life is synonymous with ensuring ecological stability. This synthesis of metaphysical belief and practical conservation suggests without confusion that Yoruba ontology anticipates, in its cultural state, the call for an ecocentric ethic, which in today's world is advanced in Naess's (1989) Contemporary Environmental Philosophy.

Furthermore, the Yoruba worldview of ontology refrains from the idea of compartmentalization when it comes to moral worth. They resist discrete categories such as intrinsic value and instrumental value. That is, the same animal that participates in sacred rituals may also, under conditions of

necessity, be consumed as food. However, even in such cases, the killing of certain animals is governed by ritual propriety, symbolic acknowledgment, and moral restraint. This practice challenges the Western dichotomy between preservation and use, demonstrating a more nuanced moral economy in which use; whether for food, companionship, work on farms, or other purposes, does not imply devaluation, and reverence, on the other hand, does not preclude use. Hence, this refusal to collapse animals into a single moral register has, over time, enabled the Yoruba model to address the complexities of human–animal interactions in a way that purely prohibitionist or purely egalitarian models cannot.

Without much ado, it is salient to argue that the Yoruba conception of animal value, in all sense of responsibility, expands the discourse of animal ethics beyond the predominant focus on sentience. For while they acknowledge, in line with Regan’s (1983) position, that animals feel pain, experience pleasure, and form social bonds (Olusola, 2005), these attributes

are not the basis for their moral status. Instead, it rests upon the understanding of animals as possessing spiritual identity, which also comes with communal consciousness, belonging, purpose, and selfhood. In this respect, the Yoruba approach aligns with certain strands of contemporary post-humanist thought, such as Calarco (2008), which call for an ontological de-anthropocentrism that refuses to measure animal worth by human-driven criteria. However, the Yoruba model is distinguished by its embeddedness in a living cultural practice, which, since ancient times, has defined their relationship with animals not merely as a theoretical critique. By integrating animals into the same moral and ontological plane as humans, the Yoruba ontological approach to animal ethics undermines the anthropocentric hierarchy that places humans at the centre of the universe, thereby challenging their sovereignty over nature. This, however, is not an attempt to erase distinctions between species, but rather to better situate these distinctions within a

cooperative interdependence, which some African philosophers have described as an eco-communitarian ethic (Behrens, 2020). Through this framework, Yoruba animal ethics has significant implications for contemporary debates on environmental ethics and sustainability, considering how it challenges contemporary animal ethics that only considers their instrumental value for human benefits.

An alternative route for reimagining the value of animal life, this paper proposes this ontological lens, particularly the Yoruba worldview, for a paradigm shift in global animal ethics. It does so by rejecting the popular view of animals as a resource for export or as mere means to human ends. Rather than asking whether animals qualify for moral consideration based on human standards, it begins from the premise that all beings, whether plants, animals, humans, or other phenomena, already participate in the moral and spiritual order. This, in turn, could influence policy frameworks that integrate culturally grounded ontological ethics into conservation strategies. By doing this, policy

would look beyond purely technocratic or economically driven approaches, incorporating sacred narratives, ritual practices, and communal ethos that bind humans and animals together. In this way, the Yoruba ontological animal ethic offers a radical reorientation of the moral imagination. Thus, locating animal value within its shared spiritual ecology, this approach dissolves earlier attempts to which reduces animals to units of sentience (Singer, 1975), objects of legal rights (Regan, 1983), or any other form of objectification to defend animal life, by repositioning them instead as indispensable participants in the web of existence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, having established all of our arguments above, beginning with the abuse of animals, whereby they are instrumentalised for food, for pleasure's sake, and for other purposes without considering their ontological dimension, we proceeded to examine Western responses to this unethical use

and engagement with animals. However, we noticed certain loopholes, particularly in relation to the ontological consciousness of these animals: they are regarded neither on an individual basis, as argued by Regan, nor solely from the fact that they feel pain, as argued by Singer, but rather in terms of their ontological being, being inherently valuable in themselves, having a place within a communal consciousness. This concern has provoked and informed our conceptual framework of Yoruba animal ethics, which approaches animals from an ontological perspective whereby they are categorized within the same level as humans and plants. Hence, every respect and dignity given to humans must be reciprocated to animals. This research paper is, however, not suggesting that there is no distinction between species; rather, we argue that all species share the same spiritual root, the same spiritual background, and that their spirituality should be respected and revered. This reverence does not mean they cannot be used for feeding, and using them for feeding does not automatically imply that they

are abused or devalued. We have, however, refused to collapse animals into the moral register that they are to be cared for merely because they feel pain or possess individual rights. That is not our argument here. We have shown in detail that situating the animal as having value within a shared spiritual ecology transcends, and indeed avoids, the trap of reducing them to units of sentience or objects of legal rights. We have argued that they are indispensable participants in the web of existence, and that the Yoruba approach challenges the adequacy of Western approaches. As such, it invites a rethinking of animal ethics beyond the paradigms of rights, welfare, and utility.

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