

THE SCRIPTURAL CONCEPT OF *ILE* (DUST/SAND) AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE AMONG THE YORUBA

EZEKIEL GBENGA MARADESA *Ph.D Student*

Department of Religious Studies

Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

Phone: 08061250698

email: bishopeniel@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the Scriptural concept of Ile (dust/sand) and its significance among the Yoruba. Ile is an inevitable phenomenon of human existence. Man was created with dust through moulding. Yoruba cosmogony also alludes to the creation of the earth via the instrumentality of dust. Orisa-nla (arah divinity) was commissioned by Olodumare to come to the earth in order to create the solid earth. Olodumare handed over to him a loose earth, five toed hen and a pigeon. When Orisa-nla arrived, he threw the loose earth on a suitable spot on the watery waste. Then he let loose the hen and pigeon and these immediately began the work of scattering and spreading the loose earth. This, they did, until a great portion of the waste was covered. When enough of it had been covered, Orisa-nla went back and reported to Olodumare that the work had been accomplished. Virtually everything about man is hinged on land, even after creation. Basically, he is walking on land, he travels on land. He is equally feeding on things that are produced by land. The Yoruba cosmogony glaringly states that land is quite wide or broad which is derived from the nomenclature, Ile-Ife. Arguably, Ile-Ife is not “House is wide’ but “land is wide or broad”. The Yoruba have migrated both far and near. It is on the basis of this that the Yoruba autochthons can be found in places that are several kilometers away from the cradle of the Yoruba, which is Ile-Ife. We have the Okun-Yoruba in the present day Kogi State and we have them in both Igbomina and Offa in the present day Kwara State, just as they are found in the Republic of Benin, Cuba, Brazi etc.

Introduction

There is probably no doubt that *Ile* (dust/sand) is of enormous significance to man. This is apparently because of the fact that man was created by God with dust. The scriptures record that God moulded man with dust and breathe the breath of life to the nostrils, and it subsequently became a being. The Yoruba cosmogony, too, attaches tremendous importance to the

loose earth. This is because it was what was given out to *Obatala* or *Orisanya* to come and create the solid earth. Land, i.e. dust/sand is of essence to man, apparently because man can probably do nothing without land. Usually, he walks on land and sleeps on land on a daily basis. Essentially, what he eats from time immemorial comes from land. There is a saying among the Yoruba which states inter alia:

Agbori ile a jeku o
Agbori ile a jeja
Agbori ile a se rere
Ase dowo eni to dawa saye

Interpretation

We live on land to eat rat,
We live on land to eat fish,
We live on land to do good things,
Authority is in the hands of the
one that creates us to the world.

The connotation of this is that the land is indeed the very essence of human existence. No doubt, without land, man may not be able to do anything. Put differently, land is what is sustaining man on earth. If land is taken away, there will probably be nothing known as man in the universe. This is basically because, there would be nothing to stand on, and there would also be no food for man, for his sustenance.

Biblical Concept of *Ile* (Sand/Dust)

Genesis 2:7 gives a fascinating account of *Ile* (sand/dust). The passage states thus: Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being. What can be deduced from the above is that man is actually dust. God is reported to have known the significance of sand/dust which he had hitherto created and made further use of it. Hornby defines sand as a substance that consists of very small fine grains of rock, sand is found in beaches in deserts,¹ while he sees dust as fine powder that consists of very small pieces of sand earth.² We should note that both, that is, sand and dust can be used interchangeably.

The significance of sand/dust, though negligible, cannot possibly be over-emphasised in this respect. It simply means that man would probably not have been created without sand/dust. Thus, the place of dust/sand at creation is unenviable. In point of fact, James Miller, writing on dust pontificates that dust is composed of tiny particles of many kinds of solid minerals. The particle

would have a total volume equal to about one grain of sand. The particles consist of minerals, organic matter, soot radioactive materials and salt from evaporated sea spray.³ In relatively pure air, there are fewer than 500 particles of dust per cubic centimeter... whereas dirty air may contain more than 50,000 particles... Inside a house where there is much activity, the concentration of organic dust alone may reach 100,000 particles... the particles include bacteria, spores and bits of cotton, wool, wood, and hair in addition to the usual amounts of soot and minerals.⁴ Buttressing the position of Miller above, Narina H. Dickey states unequivocally that dust can be seen as:

...Fine particles of organic and inorganic substances suspended in the atmosphere. The substances include animal and vegetable fibers, pollen, silica, bacteria and molds. In some cities, atmospheric dust also contains a large number of smoke particles and tarry soot particles. In an industrial city, the air may contain more than 3 million particles... but above the middle of the ocean or in high mountain, the count may be just a few thousand...The size of dust particles varies from about half micron... to several times size. The particles remain suspended in the air for long periods of time and may be carried great distances. Atmospheric dust had two important physical properties: its ability to scatter light of short wavelengths... and its ability to serve as nuclei for the condensation of water vapor. Mist, fog and clouds would never occur but for the pressure of dust particles in the air⁵.

Doubtlessly, one can see very glaringly the import or place of dust from the above postulations. God in his wisdom decided to make man from dust. According to Henry, man was made of the small dust, such as on the surface of the earth⁶. God must have discovered the significance of dust when it was created, and that was probably why he decided to use dust to mould man and subsequently breathe the breath of life to the nostrils (Gen. 3:19). The Lord, out of his power of omnipotence, could have decided to use something else, in the place of dust. He could probably have used stone, wood, etc, however, he decided to use dust. It is probable that God made use of dust to create man apparently because dust can be found globally. There is probably nowhere one

would get to, universally, that dust would not be found. However, stones, wood etc can only be found in selected places and not everywhere. Again, God probably made use of dust to create man because man is to till the land in order for him to find what he would eat. He would need to work on land as to eke a living. Man cannot work and or plant on rock or stone. The seed would not germinate. Thus, the significance of dust/sand cannot possibly be over-emphasised. Chris Church sees dust. as loose earth, used both literally and figuratively. Dust is used in figures of speech for a multitude ... or for abundance of silver... of blood. Dust is used as a metaphor for death, the grave or shed... Dust on a balance is a picture of something insignificant. Human lowliness in relationship with God as well as humanity's close relationship with the rest of the creation is expressed in the making of persons from dust... To return to dust is to die.... To place dust on one's head was a sign of mourning⁷

The allusion of Chris Church above that *dust on a balance is a picture of something_insignificant* is worthy of examination. As discussed hitherto, dust is quite insignificant when assessed etymologically. However, God decided to use it to form man. It is probable that God wanted to demonstrate his infinite or immeasurable might over all things such that his creations would acknowledge his power. Otherwise why the choice of dust to create man when other much more significant or stronger things were very much available then?

Besides, Christ was able to perform series of miracle using his psychic power and means and or objects. The gospel of John states that:... as He said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay saying" Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing (John 9; 6-8). This is to demonstrate the fact that Jesus used probably the least object i.e. dust, to perform miracle. Dust, according to Luck Coleman, is used to describe that which is very small⁸. Yet, Christ made good use of it. He magnified his power in making a blind man see, doing that which, they would think more likely to make a seeing man blind⁹.

Significance of *Ile* (Dust/Sand) among the Yoruba

The Yoruba have a very strong conviction that *Ile* (dust/sand) is a *sine qua non* of man's existence. To them, without *Ile* there would have probably been nothing like the earth. Bolaji Idowu postulates that, what moved *Olodumare* to think of creating the solid earth, no one knows. However, he conceived the idea and at once carried it into effect. He summoned *Orisa-nla*,

the arch-divinity to His presence and charged him with the duty: for material, He gave him a leaf packet of loose earth (Some say that the loose earth was contained in a snail's shell), and for tools, a five-toed hen and a pigeon,¹⁰ for the assignment. Idowu goes on to pontificate that when *Orisa-nla* arrived, he threw the loose earth on a suitable spot on the watery waste. Then he let loose the hen and the pigeon; and these immediately began the work of scattering and spreading the loose earth. This they did until a great portion of the waste was covered. When enough of it has been covered, *Orisa-nla* went back and reported to *Olodumare* that the work had been accomplished.¹¹ He goes on to enthuse that, whereupon, *Olodumare* dispatched the chameleon to go down and inspect what had been done. The Chameleon, it must be noted was chosen on the merit of the extra-ordinary carefulness and delicacy with which it moves about, and The still more extra-ordinary way in which it can take in any situation immediately. From the first visit, the chameleon took back the report that although the earth was indeed wide enough, it was not yet sufficiently dry for any further operation; from the second visit, however, it returned with the cheering report that it was both 'wide enough' and sufficiently dry.¹¹

Idowu is not yet done on the creation of the earth. He goes on to opine that the sacred spot where the work began was named *Ife* – “That which is wide”, from the Yoruba word *fe* meaning “to be wide”. And that according to the tradition was how *Ife* the Holy City of the Yoruba got its name. The prefix *Ile* – was added much later on, to signify that it was the original home of all and to distinguish it from other the towns called *Ife* (Ijebu Ife) which has come into existence as a result of migration.¹²

It is at this juncture, pertinent to examine critically Idowu's concept of *Ile-Ife* that is “wide land “as conceptualized above. Often, it is said in the contemporary days that Ile-Ife is interpreted as “House that is broad”. In parenthesis, the spelling are identical, however, the etymological meanings differ. The idea of *Ile-Ife* (broad land) is confirmed by the series of migration. There is probably no town or village in Yoruba land that will not trace its ancestral origin to Ile-Ife. This is a clear indication that it is *Ile-Ife* i.e. “land that is abroad”. As argued above, virtually all the renowned communities in Yoruba land trace their cradle to Ile-Ife. For instance, the Okun-Yoruba that was located in Kwara state formerly, but now found in Kogi state, who Lord Lugard in 1914 inadvertently carved as part of the North are from Ile-Ife, going by their historical antecedent. We should note that they are peoples of relatively different dialects, but each of their major dialects i.e. Bornu, Ijumu, Kabba and Yagba (BIKY) traced their origin to Ile-Ife. According to

Sunmaila, the origin of the settlement (Iyamoye Ijumu) could be traced to several centuries ago when a band of immigrants who were originally from Ile-Ife (in the present Oyo state now Osun state), arrived there. These immigrants who were contemporaries of the founders of Yoruba Kingdom founded a kingdom there under their leader – Oyeniyi. It is after this eponymous founder that the town Iyamoye (i.e. *Iya-Omo-Oyeniyi*) is named. Thus, Iyamoye, the point of dispersal of the children of Oyeniyi – according to age-long tradition enshrined in the name *Iya*, became the point of dispersal for the core of the ancestors of the Ijumu, first in Gbede, then Adde and Ogidi areas.¹³

Buttressing the position of Sunmaila above, Kola Olubiyo pontificate that Kabba was founded about three thousand years ago by three hunter brothers – Aro, Reka, and Balaja. The oldest was Aro, followed by Reka, and the youngest being Balaja. They were from Ile-Ife the fabled cradle of the Yoruba race. *Kabba Omo Gege* Ile-Ife (meaning Kabba exact descendants of Ile-Ife) is one of Kabba's agnomens usually uttered by our old parents. The three adventurous hunters were of noble birth. Their father was *Oba Ajakaiyeja* of Atiba Quarters, Ile-Ife. They took a piece of Atiba Ile-Ife soil along on their journey to kabba for retention in an animal- skin bag now kept in *Ile Usin* (Owe's House of Lords) for annual rituals.¹⁴ Kola Olubiyo goes on to submit that the three founders' joint expedition from the Ile-Ife to the present day Kabba took many years during which they temporarily stopped or settled at Oba Akure (Oba Ile), Oba Akoko, Ogbagi-Akoko in Ondo State and Ayere in the Old Kabba division,¹⁵ now Kogi state.

The position of Bolaji Iyekolo in respect of the fact that the Okun people, otherwise known as Okun Yoruba is worth assessing. According to him, the Okun ancestral immigrants reportedly were great hunters, farmers, warriors and a princess who migrated to their present locations, centuries ago from the Old Oyo Kingdom and Ile-Ife, purposely to further their individual and or collective interest.¹⁶ The princess among them was reported to be the founder of *Yagba*. This was because they are referring to her as *Iya Agba*, (Old Woman) not necessarily because of her age, but because she was the only female among them. History is subtly silent on who the husband of *Iya Agba* was. We should note that adventure of moving from one place to the other was prevalent among men in those days. Her role as a founder was quite distinctive and somewhat remarkable. Iyekolo goes on to argue that:

Oral and written sources affirm that it was customary around the 15th century for men of substance among the Yoruba to move from their places of original

settlements (towns) with their families, relatives and followers to new lands. At a much earlier date, say 1100, Oranmiyan, one of Oduduwa's sons reportedly moved from Ile-Ife to find the original Oyo town and ruled Benin. Other reasons for such movements, apart from the ones given above, were commercial, trade and economic benefits as well as the desire to demonstrate their valour by being able to stay on their original homes¹⁷

Evidently, the hitherto enumerated points are glaring demonstration that the nomenclature Ile-Ife is not "wide house" but wide or broad land". Arguably, there is probably no single house that can be as wide as the land that the Yoruba people are found, in the contemporary days.

Besides, the sacredness of sand/dust (land) cannot be over-emphasized and that is why it is not usually desecrated. Part of the non-profanity of land is its refusal to absorb blood, no matter, how infinitesimal. If an ordinary hen or cock is slaughtered, the blood would remain on the surface of the soil until it got dried up subsequently without anybody doing anything to it. This is not peculiar to the blood of animal; it also applies to man. We have seen a situation where motor accident occurred. The blood of the victim was found on the surface. What some people did was to pour sand to cover it because it was obvious that it would remain like that, and it could be scaring. However, over the years, it had been raining and *Ile* (sand/dust) had been drinking or absorbing everything. That is probably why the Yoruba would say *opo ojo loti ro ti le ti fi nu*, that is, quite a significant amount of rain had fallen and the sand/dust/land had drank all. Whatever may be the magnitude of water and or rain, the sand would absorb everything. Globally, we have heard of several reported cases of flooding, that is, a situation whereby rivers over-flow their banks. In some cases, farm produce were swept away by the flood, nevertheless, after some time, the flood would subside. The utmost implication of this scenario is that the soil has subsumed the water. The hitherto covered portion of the soil would then be seen. What the land has done or demonstrated here is to exert its authority over the intruder that had come initially. The land remains unchanged. Even in the urban areas where there are cases of land reclamation, i.e. a place that was covered hitherto by water, is reclaimed, the argument is that the portion where water was originally, was land. Also, all the rivers and or oceans universally are found on land and not in the space or in the heaven.

Furthermore, the significance of land to man cannot be over-stressed. According to Elder Ikpeleye, land is of essence to man. Indeed, man is land and land is man. Man was created with ordinary dust and when he dies, he would return to dust. While man is alive, he lives on the land. He does not only live on the land, but he eats things produced by the land. Yam, plantain, potatoes, banana, vegetables etc are planted on the land, and it is land that brings out all these for man's consumption. If land is not there for plantation, there will doubtlessly be nothing for man to eat. No matter the magnitude of strength or intellect of an individual, he/she needs food to sustain him/her to ensure his/her continual growth and the food he/she needs as a stated succinctly earlier, comes from land. The man that is looking fresh or who is good-looking owes that to the land. The one that is fat equally owes that to the land. This is because, as postulated earlier, land brought forth all his consumables¹⁸.

In the same vein, the man who is gorgeously dressed owes that to the land. This is apparently because land brought forth the cotton that the textile industry used to produce the dress. Even the machines that are used in the factories for the production of the cloth are installed on land.

Conclusion

Land and man are inseparable. The two are inter-twined. Every facet of human existence hinges markedly on land. Apart from the fact that man was created with dust, everything that he needs on the surface of the earth comes from land. No man can jettison land and claim that it is insignificant. Land is even especially significant to man in this part of the world apparently because, just as man was made from dust, he would return to dust. Put differently, when man dies, he would be buried in the land. No corpse is thrown away. Again, cremation is not practiced in this part of the world.

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