

# THE TREES STILL SPEAK:

## THE COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE OF THE NATURAL WORLD



*Adebayo Akomolafe (PhD) is a clinical psychologist, lecturer, speaker and author. Currently he is coordinator, International Alliance for Localization & Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Covenant University, Nigeria. Bayo is an international figure and poet-activist for a radical paradigm-shift in collective human experience.*

### EXPEDITIONS TO THE WILD FRINGES

**A**CCORDING TO MANY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AROUND THE world, the cosmos is anything but a dead, mute and silent place. Everything is alive: stones, mountains, the nightly tunes of a croaking army of frogs, the dancing fog that blinds and confuses, the clouds that weep the purging rain. *Everything sings*, swirling in and out of reckoning and usefulness, having seasons of wakefulness and dormancy, but possessing an irrefutable vitality, potency and agency that is not metaphorical or derived from human activity.

The world did not explode in a fury, only to condense into lifeless lumps of matter – awaiting the redemptive arrival of human sentience – as is the generic plot of scientism. Instead, from the Ainu people of Japan, distributed in the Sakhalin Island in the north to the Kuril Islands and the island of Hokkaido and Northern Honshū, to the Efik people of South-eastern Nigeria, *wherever ancient ways of knowing have been preserved*, there is an intimate reckoning with the wondrous vibrancy of all things. Whether it be with giant trouts, people made from corn, golden ropes hanging from a corner of the sky, primal tarantulas, or mountains leaning into a human conversation that interests them, indigenous stories and traditions orient listeners and practitioners towards a cosmos that befuddles, surprises, and invites one to probe deeper. A world that is never the same the second time you look. *A world that returns your curious gaze.*

As an ethno-psychotherapeutic researcher, I embarked on a quest to investigate the shamanic practices and wisdoms of Yoruba traditional healers in two local

governments in southwester Nigeria. My concern was to make more explicit their narratives about their interactions with subtle realms and otherworldly beings, and how their engagements with these realms provided real alternatives to the orthodoxies of Western-styled psychotherapy<sup>1</sup>. My journey took me through unbeaten paths, through remote villages hidden from the asphalted conversations of modernization, and through an inner coming-of-age ritual – one that slowly converted me from my previous loyalty to a static world *of a single overriding truth* to a world that spilled into many other worlds. I met and interviewed six experienced healers who employed divinistic means to understand and offer help to clients that presented a wide range of problems and life challenges to them. Sometimes, while waiting to be granted access to the healer, I would eagerly watch throngs of seekers, their petitions gorily embodied in headless carcasses of bloodied chickens squeezed into earthen calabashes, their steps and rituals gently directed by nodding sub-priests, their tongues unceasingly and prayerfully provoking the gods and clouds and ancestors. Having being raised a Christian of the evangelical stripe, something within found the proceedings fiercely disturbing – and yet, fascinating. There was a feral openness and refreshing intimacy about the way their unshod feet implored the sepia ground beneath, brushing away ashes that had spewed from the hollows of a decorated tree stump nearby.

When I did get the chance to interview the healers, I was transported into restless realms that further dislodged my quaint notions about the *self-evident* separation of things. The journey was turbulent. Their expositions opened up a world in which everything was connected with everything else. Nothing was trivial, trite or tepid. Every object, in the worldview of these men, seemed to have its place, its agreement with an intricate web of things. Items we would normally lose sight of in the modern world, which are largely inconsequential to us – an orphaned eyelash on the floor, a doodle marking out spilled water on parched earth, a drunken bug clawing up the edges of a hot plate of *ofada* rice – were charged with meaning, and spoke in cryptic languages the healers strained to master. Even the wind brought madness. One healer told me: “There’s the ‘madness of the wind’. There is the one who goes out and gets blown upon by the wind (*atégun*). The wind touches him; he begins to

[behave in a particular way]. He is incoherent in his speech, and speaks to no one in particular. That's the one of the wind (*wèrè atégùn*)."

Another healer addressed the 'white man's' obliviousness to the vibrancy of the material world around us – hinting that people suffered greatly when they did not see the signs around them, or acknowledge their interdependence with nonhuman forces: "The 'white man' cannot believe it – because over there they do not see that there are hidden forces (*ayé*) that people exploit to disturb others. But now things are changing – people are getting it... Now things are changing. This story of the doctor I told you... if I ran into someone and told them the tale they'd find it hard to believe. But now, on television, these mysteries are becoming very popular. The 'white man' will not see the way we see, because they do not believe people do things to other people. But here, we know that these forces are here – because we have terrible things in our hands. There are some things, for instance, that should not touch you. If I were to put this thing here on your body, you won't even give it any thought. You'd say: "Is this not alligator pepper?" Whereas here, this has powers and we have seen it. That's why we believe in the ways we do."

Making sense of the heaps of interview data slowly freed up hermeneutic plot lines that impelled themes of exclusion, a systematic erosion of cultural identity, and the silencing of the nonhuman world – thanks to the din of modernity. One healer spoke of how the progress of modernization had forced the spirits away from their homes, driving them to the fringes of things. He also said that these homeless, angered spirits sought closure and often pounced on people in order to exact revenge. I asked him what he thought we could do to live well, to thrive as a people, to enjoy the blessings of the world. His response was an invitation to 'get lost', to reanimate our alliances with nonhuman and agentic worlds, to learn to listen to plants and hear the secrets of fields – a hard won access to a poly-vocal cosmos that is fluent in many languages.

In a sense, the healer was beckoning on those willing to hear him to recognize the futility underlying the premise of human sentience as alienated and anomalous. For him, and for an increasing number of teachers, scientists, mystics, and communities around the globe, we inhabit a *living universe* – frothing with playful forms of consciousness – and we imperil ourselves when we do not take this into account. Man is not the sole holder of intelligence, and because we have imagined that he is alone with the burden of awareness, staring out into the blackest night, separate from 'nature' instead of asymptomatic of 'it', lord

over the elements, we have summoned a cultural abstraction that is leading to the demise of our species, other species, and the planet.

#### THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

Nothing feeds our modern superciliousness and civilizational pathology like the myth that the nonhuman world is bereft of agency, of vitality, of story; that we are magisterial anomalies interrupting a dead swirling heap of mute, passive things; and, that at best, the grace of human sentience animates 'objects' with nothing more than a metaphorical vitality they otherwise lack. But this binary view, which divides the world into man and his playthings, has helped catalyze a politics of indifference, an ecosystem of abuse, and a generic culture wherein an economic metric standard – a single notion – is offered as the measure of all value.

In place of a shamanic effulgence, *an enrapturing vision of our interdependence with all things and the über-ubiquity of intelligence, agency and vibrancy*, we have effectively built a passive monolith to concretize our separation from the world around us. We live in quarantine. In order to correct 'nature', we have reified ways of knowing that sidestep the intelligence of rivers, sand and dew, and we are fostering a linearity of thought that is predicated on a static universe, a passive universe open and curiously submissive *only* to the scrutiny of human ratiocination. Whereas, indigenous cultures usually accommodated practices and rituals that nurtured kinship with other species – and this, because there was a recognition of nonhuman powers – 'Western' or globalizing industrial culture produces a discourse of evasion and exploitation, which motivates its citizenry to treat nature as a threat to flee from or as a field of resources that are at best instrumental to our ends.

And this discourse is spreading.

Indigenous wisdoms are succumbing to the sterilizing influences of industrialization – thus creating an epistemological hegemony in which one logic of knowing is treated as exclusively valuable. Children are sent to be students in a school system that is premised on the *a priori* demarcation of living and learning. While in school, they will be educated out of their cultural ties and linguistic richness – an official language impressed upon them. Those that 'succeed' will be granted certificates that offer them access to further discipline by an anonymous, generic sorting mechanism called the job market. Their lands will be transformed, roads built, highways constructed, and houses allocated in urban settlements. They will learn to see the decimation of

trees and the extractive activities of giant corporations as normal, and even necessary for the continued survival of the human race. They might even learn to advocate for deregulated trade policies allowing the free movement of corporations across boundaries. *Growth is necessary*, they will insist.

However, what this cultural fixation with growth and progress tries to repress is the devastation it has wrought on people, on languages, on culture, on planet earth, on imagination. Scientists, alarmed by the level of damage to the earth brought about by human activity, coined the term, 'Anthropocene', to describe a geological timeframe characterized by the violent disruption of the planet's ecological spaces, atmospheric conditions and life systems. What this means is that we "[...] have collectively entered a period marked by increased industrialization – the distressingly potent consequences of which have led to the loss of biodiversity, an increase in carbon dioxide emissions, the loss of critical ecosystems and the concomitant extinction of many species, ocean acidification, air and water pollution, the destruction of coastal areas, ozone depletion, and the sporadic emergence of 'new' pathogenic conditions and crippling ailments. The combined effects of the presence of humans on earth now arguably rivals that of 'nature' itself – so that it is now believed we no longer abide on the same planet that supported life a mere thousand years ago."

Consequently it is now almost taken for granted that we live in a crisis-ridden age. What is probably not as popular is the consideration that our impasses are borne out of the exclusionary dynamics of modern culture, by which I mean the tendency to devalue alternative visions of aliveness, knowing, and reality. Jane Bennett, in her book, *Vibrant Matter\**, connects today's crises of ecological devastation, cultural genocide, climate change, and an unparalleled upswing in the number of mental health issues reported, with the failure to see or notice other worlds of being: "Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even 'respect' [...]."

In this sense, we are a poor species today, not because we are not 'growing' fast enough (as the myth of growth would have us believe), but because we have shut away the unthought – the wilds: we have traded our multidimensionality, our ancient

trysts with the elements, the wisdom of ossified allies, for a morsel of a curious abstraction: modernity. What would become of politics and economics today if trees, rocks and river were consulted? What would become of consumerism – our use and dump rituals – if we realized that there is no such thing as 'waste', or even 'use' (the former representing a cultural inadequacy to notice the continued vitality of the world around us – even when not fit for our agendas; the latter holding an intrinsic presupposition of human centrality in the otherwise two-way dynamics of utility)?

#### THIS SHAMANIC TURN

The Cartesian paradigm fostered a vision of *the whole* that can be completely understood from its parts, a view of human rationality as an infallible guide to truth and certainty, and – more impliedly – the centrality of human being to experience. Intelligence, in this conception, is exclusively a human attribute – a tool that we must employ to navigate an unspeaking world. It is not an attribute of stones, caves or spirits. Consequently, we have 'otherized' the world around us, and treated 'it' in a way that does not evince 'respect' or mutuality – and we are worse off for it.

Today, however, we are witnessing the uncoupling and dismantling of this metanarrative of human supremacy. A number of factors is emphasizing the untenability of this vision of the world, and stressing the need to adopt a broader, more ravishing vision of what it means to be a citizen of reality. One of such factors is the anomalies in the 'hard' sciences – reports of which are seeping into public memory and silently influencing our understandings of the real. An anomaly arises when a model or framework or paradigm cannot address an observation, or when the internal logic of a system of thought has no provisions for a 'new' variable. In such instances, the paradigm itself undergoes seismic changes in order to accommodate the errant data – or is eventually replaced. In this case, the deep-seated assumption that the world is dead, that matter is mute, and that awareness is an epiphenomenon of the brain, is being contested – without an effective retort – and is slowly giving way to the idea that awareness, not matter, is fundamental, and that matter is an 'expression' of awareness. David Chalmers, an Australian philosopher of mind and cognitive scientist, first posed the disturbing question in the early 90s – *the hard problem of consciousness* – by asking: 'how could something as material as the brain ever give rise to something as immaterial as awareness?' Recent advances in neurophysiology have attempted to answer that question by emphasizing the way chemical changes in the brain give birth to different forms of

awareness. While correlating states of awareness to certain neural activity has led to remarkable innovations in that field, there is little or no headway gained to resolve Chalmers' *hard problem*. The mystery remains, except – as Peter Russell, a professor of philosophy at the University of Arizona, insists – we let go of the untenable idea that 'intelligence' is an exclusive attribute of man and highly evolved species.

This *shamanic turn* to collective intelligence also coincides with even older observations made about 'reality' at subatomic levels. The quantum world harbours a certain weirdness, a queerness, that does not cohere with our commonsense understandings of how the world works. Perhaps the most bizarre series of interpretation of quantum physics, an elucidation of which this essay cannot even pretend to attempt, is that the physical state of things are determined at the moment of observation – and that what we rudely call 'matter' behaves as if it were actually influenced by the presence of an observer, thus giving matter anthropomorphic features. This suggests that what we call reality is porous, fluid and intersubjective. Does this explain how shamans, by altering their wakeful states (sometimes by the ingestion of psychedelic substances or by less invasive means like 'sonic driving', ritualized drumming, and other forms of auditory stimulation), are reportedly able to traverse multiple worlds, engage with subtle realms and mysterious beings, and bring back wisdom and guidance into 'ordinary' reality?

The cracks in our established ways of knowing the world are paving the way for a more plural, trans-dimensional notion of intelligence – but so are the deep *psychic* reconfigurations of our *collective unconscious*. Carl Jung posited the idea of the collective unconscious to describe a hive mind operating beneath individuated ego systems and across life forms, which collects and organizes experience (oftentimes in form of archetypes). I submit, provisionally, that today's amorphous and widespread feelings of disenchantment with the status quo are giving birth to different archetypes, different questions, and different orientations towards life. It seems possible to read today's crises as a coming of age – one that is loosening the tight strings of human centrality. It seems that what it means to be 'human' is undergoing an alchemical transmutation of some sort – helped by the escalating cultural crises of certainty and identity.

Jung himself rehabilitated a rich tapestry of alchemical symbolism and texts – the ancient traditions dedicated to finding ways to transform base metals into gold – as an exemplification of psychological evolution. The first stages of this transformation process always began with the *nigredo*, which is a

deep blackening of the *metal*, or – translated into psychological terms – a difficult acquaintance with *shadows, hidden depths* and suffering. This suffering is however necessary in order for transformation to occur. I cannot help but think that today's crises are creating deconstructive moments, making it possible for a deeper appreciation of just how much a recalcitrant world 'outside' awaits our *humiliation* – in order to speak new truths to power.

#### CONCLUSION: A POLITICS OF HUMILITY

We are at our tether's end – and there is a growing recognition that our best efforts to address today's problems are often counterproductive and inhibitory to true and lasting systemic changes. The deeper consequence of affirming nonhuman worlds, porous realities, fluid materialities, agentic and vibrant objects, and subtle forces more compelling than causality, is letting go of cherished onto-theological categories like free will and determinism. Choice and action no longer looks the same in this cosmos-political vision of a more democratic alliance of intelligences. I ask: what would become of activism today if we listened as much as we complained... if we held as justly sacred a refusal to do anything at all – just as much as we valorise conscious effort? If we saw problems as agentic forces we could listen to, instead of blips in the machine we ought to fix? If we are connected to everything else, if agency describes more than just human action in the world, then a *politics of humility* is needed to meet today's challenges – and by a politics of humility I offer the idea of a poetic scheme that recognizes the need to 'slow down' when matters are urgent; one that realizes that to slow down isn't to accept defeat, but to relax the ego's defences enough for other forms of knowing to occur, in order to hear other tunes that seek to be heard. A politics of humility is one that orients us towards the shaman's secret: that the trees still speak.



---

\* (Ed's N.) - Jane Bennet (2010). *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham-London: Duke UP).