

**BETWEEN BELIEF, SPIRITUALITY AND SUPERSTITION: AN  
ECOCRITICAL CONSIDERATION OF SELECTED TRADITIONAL IGALA  
TALES**

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**Abstract**

The traditional Igala society, akin to most African societies, is characterized by certain ethos, including beliefs, values, folklore, and taboos, propagated through traditional oral tales and avoidance rules. The evolvement of religions other than the African Traditional Religion (ATR), especially Christianity and Islam, and the wake of Western civilization witnessed the suppression of some of such tales and rules, contributing to their classification as primitive and superstitious. Hence, the efforts to replace them with new values and culture. Using Focus Group Discussions to collect and analyse data in a qualitative design, this article studies some of these traditional tales and avoidance rules from the prism of ecocriticism to show how they tacitly or implicitly encompass the world's future in their themes. Salient, in this regard, is the burning issue of environmentalism. Highlighting how the manner of their formulation and propagation might have affected acceptability, the article posits that the antiquated narratives were, on the contrary, futuristic from the onset. Therefore, further efforts at their re-presentation, especially in theatre performance, would open them to empirical and scientific approaches, thereby, positioning them as veritable cultural models for environmental conservation.

**Keywords:** ATR, Avoidance rules, Ecocriticism, Traditional Igala tales, Taboos.

**Introduction**

Pre-colonial African societies were largely guided by several belief systems, values, folklore and taboos or avoidance rules. These values were mostly propagated through oral tales laden with moral instructions, behaviour guides, and social restrictions. Adherence to these values and taboo were mostly based on cultural regulations and spiritual injunctions. Thus, flouting them could be punishable by several culturally constructed measures. The popularization of colonial religions, western civilization, and the rise of internet/Information Technology might have relegated some of the belief systems promoted in the oral tales to their description as superstition and has contributed to how adherents have jettisoned such beliefs. In the wake of the world's increasing awareness of climate change and sustainability, an ecocritical consideration

of these traditional tales could reveal a relationship between these adherences and environmental sustainability.

Traditional Igala tales in the context of this article connote ‘stories’ told among the Igala people, with a cultural relevance to the Igala people, and which were from time past, ‘shared orally’ including folktales, myths, legends, and taboos (Madej 1). While a decline in the listening and telling of these traditional tales is a subject of much research (Nkoli and Okoye 1), their implication for conversations on environmentalism and climate action could be one of many possible ways of shifting attention to their resuscitation, maybe in improved forms, for entertaining, educative, informative, and many other socially functional purposes.

Generally, traditional tales typically convey moral lessons and instructions. Those targeted at strict social control may also come forth as taboos or avoidance rules. Onebunne describes taboos as “‘avoidance rules’ that forbid members of the human community from performing certain actions, such as eating some kinds of food, walking on or visiting some sites that are regarded as sacred, cruelty to nonhuman animals, and using nature’s resources in an unsustainable manner” (182). Thus, taboos were a formidable instrument for maintaining social order among many African communities. Formine’s historical examination of food taboos in pre-colonial and contemporary Cameroon demonstrates that taboos, cutting across religious, social, and anthropomorphic classifications, have implications for health, gender relations, and classism. That is far beyond the domain of religion and culture. While this finding means that taboos might have implications for more areas including ecology, climate change, and environmentalism, their manner of propagation that has occasioned disbelief, especially on religious, class, and gender grounds militate against their efficacy for environmentally relevant courses such as ecology and climate action. In Cameroon for example, Formine concludes that:

Food taboos may fade away as women... who occupy high positions make frequent trips to the hinterlands and make radio broadcasts in towns, where they speak in support of women’s liberation and equality with men. Their speeches have prompted some women to question the viability of certain taboos that were observed in precolonial times. Furthermore, many schools have opened, which has increased the level of literacy.... Better-educated women will no longer submit to food taboos imposed by men, as they did in the past. Currently, the few people who observe food taboos in Cameroon live in rural areas. Persistent financial hardship is causing many young people to migrate from towns and cities back to rural areas, bringing with them enlightened, urban ideas. It may well be that in a hundred years, only a few food taboos will be observed in Cameroon. (50-51)

Formine’s exposition above gives insight into some of the factors contributing to a declining rate of adherence to the avoidance rules that many traditional tales propagate. The exposition might also lend credence to a later submission in this study on the need to directly emphasize the socially functional aspects of the traditional tales which may be more effective for actualizing their tacit ecological functions in express terms.

Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, several taboos cutting across the interaction of humans with “water sources, natural vegetation, wildlife, and endangered nonhuman animal species” enforce social attitudes targeted at environmental sustainability (Chemhuru and Masaka 125 – 132). In Nigeria, Adedayo Afe specifically highlights the social functions of taboos among Yorubas of the old Ondo province (106). The Idemili (of the Igbo tribe) and many other Igbo communities hold the python as a sacred animal and enforce appeasement rituals in the event of its killing by mistake (Onebunne 188). There are further examples beyond the shores of Africa, like the Indians for example, who revere animals such as Monkeys and Elephants, the notion of ‘evil forest’ and the conservation it promotes, as well as the embargo on some woods as firewood (Onebunne 188).

Although the primary aims of taboos in African societies were spiritual observances and social or moral behaviour control, they seem to exhibit tacit implications on ecology, environmentalism, and climate change actions. In Igboland, taboos ‘unintentionally’ promoted the “preservation of lands and Wildlife” (Onebunne 187). Kanu states that “Igbo-African indigenous beliefs, taboos, sanctions, and knowledge have contributed hugely to the checking of the abuse of the environment” (1). Kanu further discusses some other animals and their kinds, which may have been protected by an Igbo belief and taboo system (5-11). The ongoing suggests that the subject of Nigerian traditional/cultural tales/beliefs and climate change have been explored in some ways. However, their peculiarities, type, manner of expression, details, or modality of adherence slightly differ across geo-locations or cultures as Nigeria, given its robust ethnic groups would be too large to explore satisfactorily in a single article of this sort.

Concerning the Igala ethnic group, few scholars including Israel Yunisa Akoh have explored the relatedness of Igala spirituality and environmental sustainability (285-300). Given the significant role of religion and spirituality in the lives of the people as well as environmentalism, Akoh submits that “Igala taboos, religious beliefs, sacred rites and totems provide frameworks for defining acceptable resource use. When these traditional practices are promoted and protected, ecological balance would be restored” (298). The question then remains; how can ‘these traditional religious practices’ be ‘promoted and protected’ in an age where stronger forces of ‘new religion’ and globalization challenge their frameworks and occasion a new attitude?

Igala traditional tales have received more scholarly attention in other regards compared to the perspective of climate, environmentalism, and eco-criticism. For instance, among others, Joseph and Emah focus on resuscitative measures for Igala folktales which in their opinion are threatened by "modern technology and games" (74). They advocate increased documentation of Igala folktales in writings as well as through digital technology to leverage the increasing interest of youths in digital technology towards propagating Igala folktales (81-82). Armstrong Aduku Idachaba considers Igala oral poetry as source materials for film and argues that the transposition of Igala oral poetry and traditional tales could enhance the relevance of the tales and bring originality to the film art (140-153). Fidelis Egbunu explores Igala proverbs and highlights their significance to the moral, social, and spiritual existence of the Igala

people (259-264). Therefore, a specific consideration of Igala traditional tales and beliefs regarding environmentalism could reveal peculiar characteristics arising from their mode of propagation, level of adherence amidst continuous globalization, the effect of 'new' religions, and the possible role of drama, theatre, and performance to chart a folklore-climate based research.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

The discussion in this article is framed around ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty's resonating definition is that "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Although the earlier focus was more on written literature, more applications of ecocriticism have demonstrated its suitability for engaging with oral literature. For instance, Ashenafi Belay Adugna undertakes an ecocritical exploration of Oromo proverbs, an ethnic group in Ethiopia (28-34). Geremew Chala Teresa and Hunduma Dagim Raga also undertake an ecocritical examination of Oromo folk songs. Adugna posits that the proverbs "represent the quest for human/nature co-existence, through its claim of the intrinsic value vested on different life forms... which reflects the ethics of care in the culture" (34). Adugna further submits that there is a "utilitarian value attached to nature in the discourses of the proverbs", a spatial relationship between humans and animals and then, a gendered perspective of the relations between humans, animals, and the environment (34). Similarly, Khairil Anwar argues that oral traditions in the form of myths, legends, fairy tales etc possess "ecological wisdom" requisite "to form a green moral character in sustainable development" (6).

Employing the ecocritical approach, Tomi Arianto has studied the '*Mak Ungkai*' folklore among the "Malay people in Tanjung Kertang village, Batam, Indonesia" (576-589). Enongene Mirabeau Sone has explored "the relationship between nature and culture as reflected in Swazi oral literature" etc (39 – 49). The directions of these studies are that a healthy environment relies on aspects of oral tradition and the cultural practices that groups of people develop out of their traditional tales and adherence to inherent beliefs. Although there is a similar pattern in the several studies underlined by the theoretical scaffold of ecocriticism, one peculiarity of each study and indeed, any new study in the area would be an engagement with a new cultural environment or further analytical angles to an already explored cultural background. The ecocriticism theory is applied in this article to examine any possible relationship between certain Igala traditional tales and the physical environment. Given that the avoidance rules inherent in some of the tales concern the relations between humans, animals, and the natural environment, the article explores the tacit-mindedness of ecology in the traditional Igala tales and how theatre and performance arts could become a medium for highlighting veritable models of environmental conservation in the traditional tales.

### **Methodology**

Focus Group Discussion provided data for the discussion in this study. The need to cross-examine some tales also necessitated face-to-face Oral Interviews,

electronic/digitally mediated interviews, and participatory observation. Triangulation of these methods elicited traditional Igala tales and the opinion of selected Igala natives on the meaning and essence of the tales. These methods proved more effective in an informal design of free-flowing discussion in homesteads, among purposefully selected Igala culture researchers, and sometimes, impromptu gatherings of Igalas who are knowledgeable in oral traditions. During data collection, most respondents were familiar with key terminologies they mentioned only in the Igala language. The study however relied on S.S Usman's *Olufia Ekeji (Igala Language Dictionary)* for translating the names of some trees and animals.

### **Discussion: An Ecocritical Consideration of Selected Igala Traditional Tales**

The Igala ethnic group is one among many ethnic groups and tribes in Nigeria, dominant in Kogi State, Nigeria, but resident in good numbers across several parts of Nigeria and the world. As found in most traditional African societies, the Igala people have over the years, resorted to the use of oral tales, taboos, and avoidance rules for regulating social and moral behaviour. A popular saying used to persuade Igala children to be obedient is *anagbo akola ito awalu, itogbe, Ukola che*. This saying implies that, when an elder sends a youngling on an errand, the elder calls the attention of the youngling after giving the instructions and spits on the floor. He will tell the child, "You must return before this spittle dries up. If not, your navel will decay as the spittle dries off". With this, the child would hurry to run the errand as swiftly as possible.

The analogy above, although not directly related to the discussion on environmental conservation formed part of the introductory deliberation during one of the focus group discussions that elicited data for this study. The key question was whether there was any merit in the claim that a child's navel would 'decay' if he/she does not deliver on an errand in good time. It was agreed that fallacious as this is, it was efficacious over the years in getting younglings to do their domestic chores and run errands since they grew into faithfully believing in a 'decaying navel' as a consequence of disobedience or underperformance. This background created the atmosphere for discussing Igala tales that border on environmental conservation. Akin to the given analogy, the tales identified did not originally have their focus on environmental conservation. Leaning on ecocriticism, however, they could be interpreted in terms of interrelated themes drawn across deforestation, bush clearing, fishing, rivers/water bodies, firewood, and meat selectivity.

### **Trees and Water Bodies**

Igala land is blessed with arable land and the Igala people have historical affiliations with farming activities. Evidence is the naming of villages and settlements after farm activities, crops, animals, rivers/streams, and activities of hunters etc (Boston 116). Because some of the farmlands are bordered by streams and rivers, it is widely believed by the Igala people that farmers who are close to any water body must be careful never to "naked the river". By this, they imply that while the felling of trees and clearing of bushes for cultivation could be a common practice, those who farm near any natural

water body must never fell trees or cut bushes to the edge of the natural water body. Hence, one characteristic of rivers in the area is an evergreen thick grass or tree walls. One of the stated consequences for people who “naked the river” is that they would have invited several spirits from the river which would spell doom for them and their farming activities. Although adherence to this practice had this mythical undertone, it was a gatekeeper checking deforestation for as long as people kept to its injunction.

### **Fishing**

A recurrent tale was one related to fishing; the ban on fishing activities in the Inachalo River which is to some persons born out of a historical occurrence or which others describe as merely mythical. Located in Inachalo, Idah, Kogi State, the Inachalo River is held by oral tradition to be the site of the ritual sacrifice of Princess Omodoko, done to win victory for the Igala people during the Igala/Jukun War. Tom Miachi records that the Inachalo River was poisoned as a strategy to kill fighters from the Jukun side some of whom eventually drank the water from the river and died, thereby, contributing to the victory of the Igala people at that war. In Emmy Idegú's *Omodoko*, reference is made to the Inachalo River while preparation was on for the Igala/Jukun war. Idegú notes in the play's direction for action that while leading a group of people in prayers,

...A man dressed in a costume such that is very common in the Northern part of Nigeria... enters the river. He moves to the middle of the river and resumes some other rounds of prayers. Dancing in the river, he stands straight looking into the sky and offering some inaudible sounds. He touches the water, drinks it a little, looks up and does so for a number of repeated times... he pours some powdery substance into the river... As he does so, some fishes scramble in the water. He resumes prayers, a very long one. Holding the red ball high in the air, he throws it into the upper part of the river. It bursts, making a loud sound. Coming out of the river, he looks victoriously fulfilled. (58)

At an intense part of the war, Idegú, in the play *Omodoko*, presents that some of the Jukun warriors “die vomiting blood” (71), an indication that the poisoned river had its effects on the warriors. The popular tale talked about the river maintains that as an aftermath of the spiritual processes leading to the poisoning of the river, the poison itself, and the death of the Jukun fighters, it became an upheld injunction never to fish in the Inachalo River or eat any fish from it. It is believed that the fish in the Inachalo River can never be cooked and if one dares to try, the fish would remain raw regardless of how long it is cooked.

In today's age of information technology as well as a flourishing use of the internet and social media, some youths of Igala origin, have raised challenging opinions regarding the prohibition of fishing in the Inachalo river. That fish from the river would not be cooked constitutes a special area of their probe. Abdullahi Haruna describes this inquisitiveness as “the new thirst for Inachalo water...” and cautions the ‘new generation’;

Do not let your curiosity make you challenge what is not after you... let not your supersonic intellect make you dare the mystery of yesterday... The Inachalo mystery isn't begging for revalidation, as such, it is needless digging up its mystery or debunking its potency. A child can fondle his mother's breast but he dares not near his

father's scrotum, it's not cowardice, it is reverence! The fishes in Inachalo aren't crying to be eaten nor are they disturbing your existence. Leave them potent just like those before you... Some mysteries are better left to be curious about, and not try to clear the curiosity because, when the repercussion births, not only those who seek to dig in will face what it takes from the mysteries but, everyone in that time. Let our thirst for the Inachalo River be that of expanded knowledge, dredging and sustenance of its historical awe and tourism potential. (<https://leadership.ng/the-new-thirst-for-inachalo-water/>)

Haruna's caution points out the increasing level of doubt or desire to subject some of the age-long narratives to practical tests. It is not certain that Haruna's caution would deter the imminent scientific enquiry to ascertain the claim, for instance of the Inachalo River tale. This is, of course, a subject of further research. However, the primary concern here is the implication of the narrative for the relationship between the organisms in the Inachalo River and the ecology of its immediate human society. The age-long adherence to the injunction never to plunder the Inachalo River for fishing activities may have contributed to the preservation of the species of fish present in the river, thereby securing their livelihood through the ages.

### **Visiting Rivers, Streams, and Farms at Noon**

Oral tradition in parts of Igala land holds it that pregnant women should never visit the river at midday (*iko ihiaja/egba ihiaja*) as it is believed that at noon, the river/water spirits (including goddesses) meet. Thus, if a pregnant woman dares to visit the river at that time, she stands the risk of becoming possessed by any of the water spirits, and eventually, giving birth to a child who would be from birth, possessed by the spirit and consequently, required to worship/appease such spirit his/her lifetime or be faced with untold calamity. More discussants at the Focus Group discussion comment that this avoidance rule is not limited to pregnant women alone as in other parts of Igala land, it binds on all and sundry. Various reasons given are that water spirits or, according to others, evil spirits carry out their activities at that time. As such, people are not advised to visit the river at midday through the hot afternoon. Although the veracity of this claim is uncertain, the Igala people over time adhered to this injunction, more so that the Igala people believe in an essential proverb; *enwu ke ma li n a lie n*. That is, "whatever you do not see (find, search for) will not see (locate) you". A similar narrative holds about going to the farm at midday.

There are ecocritical concerns that could be raised from this narrative; in what way could 'giving the river a break' constitute a sort of environmental conservation, especially in a geographical location where such a river provides the major source of 'free' water for nearby dwellers? Or to what degree does an unchecked plundering of the river affect environmental conservation? While these questions might not be convincingly answered yet in the context of these narratives, one insight could be in the submission of Nilsson and Berggren that the protection of "river environments and human needs of rivers remains one of the most important questions of our time" (791).

### **Meat Selectivity**

There are avoidance rules and taboos among Igala people that regulate the consumption of some animals as meat. Participants at the Focus Group Discussion agree that in the traditional Igala society, people generally abhor eating the meat of animals such as *Obala* (cat), *Abia* (Dog), and *Okoo* (pig). Also, most Igala pious Muslims forbid eating the *Ukabu* (Chimpanzee) and *Oge* (Monkey). Again, while these avoidances are propagated under the canopy of religious beliefs, some of which are now lost and described as superstitions, the searchlight here is on how the avoidances have been some sort of gatekeepers for the preservation of key actors of ecology, that is, the animals or objects of the avoidance rules and taboos.

### **Trees and Firewood**

Before the advent of modern and advanced cooking utensils, most African societies relied on the use of dry wood (firewood) from several trees as kindles, fuel, or flames for cooking. This practice is extant in rural African settlements and widely observable in several villages. Among the Igala people, distinct clans have avoidance rules regarding the use of woods from specific trees as firewood which witnessed a religious adherence over time. Discussants at the Focus Group Discussion agree that generally, the traditional Igala society abhors the use of *echi*; the African Indigo (Usman 90) for firewood. Another tree described by the Igalas as *Ukp'omajuwe* (a literal English translation is 'killer of chicks') is also not permitted into homes as firewood. As the name implies, it is believed that where it is used, poultry farming would not thrive as it would lead to the death of poultry birds. There was strict adherence to this injunction as the average traditional Igala home practiced subsistent poultry farming. Some of the observance rules regarding the use of firewood are only restricted to clans. A participant at the Focus Group Discussion exemplifies that in times past, clan members of Ogbogba Oga, of the Igalamela/Odolu Local Government Area of Kogi State forbid the use of the *Agba*; the balsam tree (Usman 11) or African Balsam as firewood. Another participant mentioned that the *Enache* botanically called *Hymenocardiaacida* Tul is forbidden as firewood among some families of the Enjema clan. One pointer to the impending dead end of these avoidances might be the declining knowledge of trees and plants that the avoidance rules included and the reasons for such avoidances.

Another tree whose wood is forbidden as firewood is the *Okopi* tree known by the botanical name, *Lophira lanceolata* Van Tiegh. Akoh mentions that one reason behind the avoidance of the *Okopi* tree as firewood especially "among descendants of Ogbajele in Ofakaga, Ajetachi, and Agala" is that the tree played a role in rescuing their ancestors "from a dreaded disease" (293). Two participants of the Focus Group Discussion however added that it is a divine injunction that ardent faithful of the *ogwu* (twin) rituals obey. The *ogwu* rituals are performed by children born as twins or their parents and since woods from the *okopi* tree form parts of the ritual items, it is thus forbidden as firewood and held sacred, especially by devotees to the *ogwu* ritual. Similarly, *ukpokpo*; the sweet sop shrub botanically known as *Annona senegalensis* Pers (Usman 327) is forbidden by sects of Igala as firewood. It is believed that when



*ukpokpo* is used as firewood, anyone who consumes the food prepared would develop sores in the mouth.

Besides the respective themes explored above, Traditional Igala spirituality may have tacitly strengthened forest reserves which are a source of environmental conservation. Thus, apart from the reverence accorded rivers by preserving their wall of trees, sacred shrines and consecrated places of Igala traditional religious beliefs remain natural environments with secure 'flora and fauna' (Akoh 292). Akoh names a few sites such as "Ayabi in Affa-Ibaji, Okwula forest in Egume, Ojaina (Royal Cemetary at Idah), and the Agana-Obagwu forest in Ofu (292). Similar to the few mentioned, several households, clans, and communities have their respective reserved areas such as the *Okwula*, a place reserved for ancestral worship. Another important site is the *Ereane* which is the name for reserved areas dedicated by Igala traditionalists in different communities to the veneration of the "earth divinities" (Akoh 294) or for spiritual divination, fortification, supplications, appeasements, and cleansing/purification. Given the sacred status of such a place, it is free of any form of encroachment including hunting and deforestation and invariably, contributes to environmental conservation.

Most of these tales, taboos, and avoidance rules were easy to enforce as their spiritual undertone implied that violators do not need to be caught and punished by humans but are reprimanded by the spiritual forces believed to rule over the people. They are however weakened by the same reason of spirituality as more people renounce religious faithfulness or public faithfulness to traditional belief systems, for the now more popular religions; Christianity and Islam (Mckinnon 303). Similarly, the manner of propagating the traditional tales and beliefs; enmeshed in spirituality and now, superstition, may account for why Onebunne hints at the selectivity in adherence to some taboos in recent times. Onebunne notes for instance, that food-related taboos "makes no sense at all, as what may be declared unfit for one group by custom or religion may be perfectly acceptable to another" (180). The decline in adherence to these traditional beliefs and avoidance rules which have been demonstrated to have tacitly promoted environmental conservation implies that, in addition to the many other factors challenging ecology and climate, the awakening occasioning the jettisoning of traditional beliefs with environmental implications would exacerbate global climate conditions.

The consequence is that people will cut down more trees, burn bushes recklessly, encroach water bodies, encroach forest reserves, harm more organisms, and kill more animals. As they do so with the freedom that their doubts about the spirituality of the traditional beliefs, avoidance rules, and taboos provide them, they also do so at the detriment of the global climate condition. Since traditional narratives are raw materials for theatre making, theatre and performance could bring about a reorientation, through which environmentally conservative traditional tales and beliefs could be considered in the light of their ecological advantage, thereby, stemming the impact of their relative boycotting by people on the grounds of 'new religions'. The manner of their representation in drama and performance could therefore provide data for their eco-critical interrogation, would open them to empirical and scientific

approaches, thereby, positioning them as veritable cultural models for environmental conservation.

### **Conclusion**

Igala traditional tales and the beliefs, taboos, and avoidance rules inherent in them exhibit a tacit consciousness of environmental conservation. They were however shrouded in cultural embargo and spiritual injunctions. Since the Igala ancestors may have lacked the theoretical and empirical effrontery to justify how the necessary actions fostered by the traditional tales and beliefs could beyond their spiritual essence, fulfil some environmental conservation functions, they were easily watered down by forces of religion, urbanization, and literacy, and described as superstitions. Theatre and Performance are potent, through re-presentations to re-direct scholarly and practical attention to how some of the traditional narratives are invaluable to the future of the world's climatic condition. Apart from the focus of theatre and performance on the mythic essence of traditional narratives, therefore, a consideration of their implication for ecology, environment, and climate action in contemporary performances and theatre-making processes could be one way of opening Igala traditional tales and beliefs to environmentally functional perspectives, climate centred theorizations and experiments. Theatre and performance, therefore, is one potent means of situating these functional traditional narratives in more social and environmental contexts to occasion better sensitization on their functionality as opposed to their consideration as spiritual observances. This requires an intentional projection of the social and environmental benefits of the traditional tales, taboos, and avoidance rules.

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