

POTENTIALS OF MYTHS IN IJESA INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY OF NIGERIA IN THE CONSERVATION OF HER FOREST

JOSHUA KAYODE*, KAFAYAT ARILEWO AND MODUPE JANET AYENI

Department of Plant Science, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

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Abstract.

The rapid appraisal method was used to identify the existing myths related to trees and/or forest in nine communities belonging to five out of the six local Government areas that Ijesa occupied in Osun State, Nigeria. The trees specified in the myths were identified and their abundance in the study area was determined. The beliefs held on the myths were determined among the adherents of the three major religions practiced in the study area. The myths observed were classified into five categories and their potentials in the conservation of indigenous tree species in the study area are discussed.

Introduction

The initiative that suggests the dedication of forests to deities and spirits as a means of forest conservation is widely acknowledged but not well researched. Apart from Kayode (2003), Kayode and Otoide (2007), a gross dearth of studies abounds on the potentials of utilizing this strategy in forest conservation in Nigeria.

Myths are essential component of people's indigenous knowledge. Elsewhere, in Ethiopia (Tregave 1997), Kenya (Tengberg *et al.* 1998) and Brazil (Posey 1997), the use of traditional ecological knowledge in the conservation of forest resources, has been widely advocated. At present in Nigeria, the rate of wanton destruction of the forest can be better imagined. Existing statistics on the rate of deforestation in Nigeria are alarming yet little or no efforts are being made to salvage what remains of the country's forest resources.

It is quite appalling that no component parts of the country-Federal, States and Local governments are presently involved in serious forestation projects. Previous projects executed in Nigeria had concentrated on the use of exotic species to the detriments of the indigenous tree species.

Consequent on the above, the study being reported here is an attempt to carry out an in-depth study on Ijesa, as a part of an on-going research project in the Department of Plant Science, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria; that is aimed at identifying indigenous tribal myths that could be exploited in the conservation of Nigerian indigenous tree species.

Materials and Methods

The Ijesa is a unique ethnic tribe in Osun State, Nigeria. At present, they occupied six local government areas of the State (Table 1). Most of them were farmers, Yoruba but with a unique Ijesa dialect. The entire Ijesa land is situated in the rainforest region. The climate is characterized by wet and dry seasons with the rain lasting from March or April to October. Annual rainfall generally ranged between 1300 and 200 mm with over 80% of the rain falling during the wet season. Temperature is high throughout the year with an annual average of above 25.8°C.

*Author for correspondence: <joshua.kayode@eksu.edu.ng>.

The soils in the area are ferruginous tropical soils formed from crystalline acid rocks. Their main feature, according to Gbadegesin and Olorunfemi (2011) include a sandy surface horizon underlain by a weakly developed clayey, mottled and occasionally concretionary sub soil. These soils are generally considered to be high natural fertility. The soil is sensitive to erosion and occasional water logging as a result of the clayey sub soil. Agboola (1974) described the soils as of medium productivity class and of good potentials.

Table 1. The composition of Ijesa land in Osun State, Nigeria.

S/No.	Local government area	Senatorial zone	Land area (km ²)	Population
1	Atakumoda East	Osun East	238	76105
2	Atakumosa West	"	577	68350
3	Ilesa East	"	71	105416
4	Ilesa west	"	63	106809
5	Obokun	Osun Central	527	116850
6	Oriade	Osun East	465	148379
Total			1941	621868

The rapid appraisal method as of Martins (1995) and Kayode (2010), was used to identify the existing myths in nine selected communities in Ijesa land. In each community, 10 respondents who had maintained continuous domicile in the community for the past 20 years were interviewed with the aid of a semi-structured questionnaire matrix. The interviews were conducted with a fairly open framework that allowed for focused, conversational and two-way communication. Existing myths in each community and the tree species embedded in each myth were identified.

The relative abundance of the tree species identified in the myths was determined within 2 kilometer radius of each community using the abundance scale of Bongers *et al.* (1988) as follows: less than 5 individuals as rare, 5 to 10 as occasional, 11 to 30 as frequent, 31 to 100 as abundant and over 100 as very abundant.

The beliefs of adherents of the three major religions in the myths was examined by identifying 5 adherents each of Christianity, Islam and traditional religions in the community and were interviewed on the effectiveness of the myths in the community.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows the socio-economic classification of the respondents in the study area. Most of them were male (64%), mostly in the active age of between 20 and 60 years (88%), of diverse religion beliefs, illiterates (73%) and of low economic size. A common feature among the respondents was their awareness of the myths in their communities thus indicating that the socio-economic features were not regarded as prerequisites to their awareness of myths in their environment. Field observation revealed that the myths were passed from one generation to another through stories, history and/or folklores.

The dominance of male in this study was not surprising as field observation revealed that females encountered often sought the permission of their husbands or parents before they could be interviewed. Previous study by Kayode (2006) had asserted that in Yoruba communities, culture does not allow females to interact freely with strangers. The economic classification varied from one community to another. The index of wealth available in each community was used in the classification. Kayode (1996) had enumerated the desirability quality of this method.

Table 2. Socio-economic classification of respondents in Ijesaland, Osun State, Nigeria.

Feature	Description	Proportion (%) of respondents
Sex	Male	64
	Female	36
Age	20 - 60 years	88
	>60 years	12
Religion	Christianity	21
	Muslim	25
	Other	54
Educational status	Literate	29
	Illiterate	73
Economic status	Low	52
	Medium	45
	High	3

Table 3. Myths identified in Ijesaland, Osun State, Nigeria.

Myths	Specificity (specific example)
1. Prohibiting the cutting of part(s) of some tree and insulated them from being use	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Milicia excelsa</i> (Welw.) C. C. Berg roots in the centre of Ijebu-jesa 2. Bark, roots and leaves of <i>Sennia podocarpa</i> (Guill. & Perr.) Lock in Ijebu-jesa 3. <i>Millicia excelsa</i> (Welw.) C. C. Berg and <i>Draceana arboreus</i> (Willd.) Link in Igbo-agbo (scared forest) in Ipetu ile 4. "Married" <i>Adasonia digitata</i> L. and <i>Ficus thonningii</i> Blume (Ose tako-tabo) in Ilesa
2. Regulating and controlling some human activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prohibiting pounding and tree cutting (harvesting) at night in Ijeda-ijesa 2. Prohibiting frying of Akara (Akara-elepo) near <i>M. excelsa</i> (Welw.) C. C. Berg at Ita-akogun, Ilesa
3. Prohibiting certain species of tree from being use for fuel	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Newbouldia laevis</i> Seem. ex Bureau in Ijeda-ijesa 2. <i>Myrianthus arboreus</i> P. Beauv. among Sango adherents in Imesi-ile 3. <i>Newbouldia laevis</i> Seem. ex Bureau among royal families in Ilare
4. Prohibiting indiscriminate use of forest community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Igbo-mojebo</i> a scared forest in Ijeda 2. <i>Igbo-Agbo</i>, a scared forest in Ipetu 3. <i>Obalogun</i> shrine in Iloko 4. <i>Igbo-Oroke</i>, a sacred forest in Otan-ile 5. <i>Ogun-Ereja</i> shrine in Otan-ile 6. <i>Igbo-Oko (Igbo-Ita)</i>, a sacred forest in Ibokun 7. <i>Igbo-Otebere</i>, another scared forest in Ibokun
5. Prevention of specific people from assessing forest community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Young people are prevented from <i>Mojebo</i> forest in Ijeda 2. Women are prevented from <i>Oroke Alaleolu (Oke-Irenani)</i> forest in Imesi-ile 3. Non-indigenes are prevented from the forest stated above in Imesi-ile 4. Women and strangers are prevented from sacred <i>Igbo-Igbale</i> in Imesi-ile 5. Menstruating women and women of child bearing age are prevented from sacred, Oka in Imesi-ile 6. People with unclean mind are prevented from <i>Ceiba pentandra</i> situated in <i>Yemogun</i> area of Ilesa 7. Non members of royal family are prevented from <i>Umotin</i> forest in Otan-ile 8. Women and non-indigenes are prevented from sacred <i>Igbo-igbale</i> in Imesi-ile 9. Non-indigenes are prevented from sacred, <i>Igbo-Agbekun</i>, <i>Igbo-Opikin</i> and <i>Igbo-Yeyeritaji</i> in Ibokun

The various myths expressed by the respondents were classified into five major categories (Table 3). Parts of some trees were prohibited from cutting and were insulated from being used. Trees involved in this category were mostly uncultivated in the study area. They included *Milicia excelsa* (Welw.) C. C. Berg, *Senna podocarpa* (Guill. & Perr.) Lock and *Adansonia digitata* L. Study by Kayode and Otoide (2007) revealed that these species regenerated poorly.

Also in the study area, myths abound that regulate and/or control some human activities in the communities. Table 3 revealed that taboos prohibited tree harvesting at night and frying in close proximity of *M. excelsa* (Welw.) C. C. Berg. Night harvesting is detrimental to the surrounding trees especially the juvenile trees while heat might equally be detrimental to the fecundity of flora species. Previous assertion by Kayode and Otoide (2007) had revealed that many of the indigenous tree species were poorly represented in the sapling stage hence there is the need for their conservation.

Similarly, myths that prohibited certain tree species from being used for fuel abound in the study area. Studies by Kayode (1997), Kayode and Kadeba (2011) had identified the use of fuelwood as a major cause of forest depletion in Nigeria.

Table 4. Species indentified in the myths and their abundance status.

Species	Vernacular name	Family	Abundance status
<i>Adansonia digitata</i> L.	Ose	Bombaceaceae	Rare
<i>Alstonia boonei</i> De Wild.	Ahun	Apocynaceae	"
<i>Baphia nitida</i> Lpdd	Uto	Papilionaceae	"
<i>Blighia sapida</i> K.D. Koenig	Isin	Sapindaceae	Occasional
<i>Ceiba pentandra</i> (L) Gaertn	Araba	Bombacaceae	Rare
<i>Dracaena fragrans</i> (L.) Ker Gawl	Peregum	Dracaenaceae	"
<i>Ficus thonningii</i> (Blume)	Odan	Moraceae	Occasional
<i>Milicia excelsa</i> (Welw) C.C. Berg	Iroko	Moraceae	Rare
<i>Millettia thonningii</i> (Schumach & Thonn.) Baker	Ito	Papilionaceae	"
<i>Myrianthus arboreus</i> (P. Beauv.)	Obisere	Cecropiaceae	"
<i>Newbouldia laevis</i> Seem. ex Bureau	Akoko	Bignoniaceae	"
<i>Senna podocarpa</i> (Guill. & Perr.) Lock	Asunrin	Caesalpinaceae	"

Table 5. Perception of adherents of three religions groups on the effectiveness of the myths in Ijesaland, Osun State, Nigeria.

Description	Proportion of religion group (%)			Average
	Christianity	Muslim	Traditional	
Believe in myths efficacies	45	48	98	64
Do not believe in myths	55	52	02	34

This study revealed that *Newbouldia laevis* Seem. ex Bureau and *Myrianthus arboreus* P. Beauv. were immune from being used for fuel in the study area. Both species were not cultivated in the study area.

Table 3 also revealed that myths abound that prohibit the indiscriminate utilization of forest communities in the study area. These forests were dedicated to deities, gods and spirits. Kayode (2013) had earlier observed the existence of such forests in Yoruba land. Studies conducted in

Nigeria, such as Kayode (2004) had opined that the forest is still the reservoir of diverse native tree species in the country. Unfortunately various unwholesome activities in the forest had continued to serve as threats to this diversity.

Myths that also prevent specific people from assessing specific forest communities also abound. People discriminated against by these myths, in the study area included young people, women and non-indigenes while youth and non-indigenes might have little or no care for resources, such as forest, Kayode (2006) had asserted that women, due to their household responsibilities, has been prominent in the unsustainable utilization of forest. Also non-indigenes are regarded as strangers. Lloyd (1962) and Berry (1975) had earlier asserted that in Yoruba communities, strangers normally have restricted set of rights to community resources, to which sacred forest belong.

A total of 12 tree species belonging to 9 different families (Table 4) were identified in the myths observed in the study area. All these species were local (indigenous) species and most of them were presently rare in the abundance scale used in this study. Field observation revealed that only *Ficus thonningii* Blume was reportedly planted by few respondents, among the tree species identified. Thus, this study like the previous studies by Kayode (2003), Kayode and Otoide (2007), revealed that tree component of myths are skewed to the indigenous species.

The test conducted on the believes of adherents of the three dominant religion sects selected in the study area revealed that considerable proportion (64%, Table 5) still believe in the myths and that gods visit violators of the myths with misfortune, diseases and death. Thus, the myth is still found to be creating fear in the minds of residents of the study area.

In conclusion, the results from this study tend to suggest that myths could be used as disincentives to exploitation and deforestation in the study area. Previously authors such as Kayode (2003), Kayode and Otoide (2007) had enumerated a number of strategies by which the myths could be kept alive. There is however, the need to carry out comprehensive studies on the existing myths, groves and shrines among the various ethnic groups in the country.

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