

# Ecological Perspectives in Tiv Folklore, History and Policy in North Central Nigeria

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Diverse ecological resources have been associated with Tiv folklore, history and policy. Most frequently used are animals whose uniqueness in size, hierarchical position in the biological evolutionary ladder and food chain are useful criteria in understanding their role in Tiv culture. The educative role of folklore, the relevance of history in shaping the present and future policy justifies a biological approach towards an in-depth understanding of the salient ecological niche of these animals and the other resources utilized. Since ecological studies seek to relate the interactions between living things and their environment in space and time with the ultimate aim of sustainable utilization by man, understanding the impact of these ecosystem services or resources will shade more light on some aspects of Tiv culture. This paper aims at unravelling the ecological perspectives underlying the usefulness attached to these resources that have been used extensively based on observational knowledge that have accumulated over centuries.

## Introduction

The Tiv people constitute the 4th largest ethnic group in Nigeria with a geographical spread across Benue, Taraba, Nassarawa and parts of Adamawa States based on the manuscript of Dzurgba and Tyokumbur (2001, pp1-29). Political agitation and resource control associated with state creation together with poor representation has left an indelible mark on the psyche of many that the Tiv are indigenous only in some parts of Benue State, beyond which they are

regarded as sojourners even though historical records show otherwise. The political spread of Tiv in present day states of Nigeria started when Britain created Northern Protectorate from 1900 to 1910 by Lord Lugard through a military campaign. The creation of Benue Province brought together Wukari (Taraba State), Nassarawa, Lafia (Nassarawa State), Idoma and Tiv (Benue State) divisions. For administrative convenience and promotion of economic trading going on at the time, some parts of Tivland were merged into Wukari, Nassarawa and Lafia divisions (Dzurgba and Tyokumbur, 2001; Egunjobi, 2005).

The rich culture of the Tiv as embedded in her folklore, history and policy is replete with ecological intellectualism that predates the arrival of Western Education in Tivland. Diverse ecological resources either biotic or abiotic in content have featured prominently in shaping the ways of life and thinking of the people. In ecology, biotic factors refers to the living components of the environment which are broadly grouped as plants and animals, while the abiotic factors fall under the categories of topography (relief features such as rivers, streams, valleys, mountains and swamps), climatic (rainfall, wind, temperature, humidity, cloud cover and sunshine) and edaphic (soil properties such as profile, structure, chemical composition). A unit where these biotic and abiotic factors interact is known as ecosystem, while the place where an organism or living thing lives is its habitat. On the basis of these ecological concepts, this article is aimed at highlighting the ecological perspectives associated with some popular Tiv

folklore, history and policy. Animals that have featured in Tiv legend are widely ranged and by no means exhaustible and include the following: the green snake (Tiv: *Ikyaren*), tortoise, elephants, lions, goats amongst others. In Tiv policy, traditional titles have been awarded to eminent personalities and community leaders using name appendages based on ecological factors that have assisted the Tiv in some folklore and legends. It is therefore very important to unravel the view of utilizing ecological resources through historical events, folklore and policy in contemporary times. This article therefore is aimed at identifying and exploring the ecological relevance of animals and non living resources in Tiv culture; and to open up space for discourse on the human ecology of Tiv people of Central Nigeria.

## Ecological Perspectives in Tiv History and Folklore

The green-grass snake *Ikyaren* (in Tiv), is a slender non-poisonous snake that is usually found gliding its way across tree branches, shrubs, herbs and under roofs in the guinea savannah ecological zone where the Tiv live. It is never killed by the Tiv because it is regarded as a friend because of the role it played in prehistoric times in saving them from her enemies. Myth has it that while the Tiv were being pursued by their enemies, the snake stretched itself across a deep and wide river in order to enable them to cross at some point during their migration or warfare. As a result, *Ikyaren* is always safe whenever it enters the housing or farm

yard of a Tiv man. The legendary friendship between these two descendants from the two biological classes of reptilia (*Ikyaren*) and mammalia (The Tiv) has been passed on by word of mouth through the generations of Tiv from prehistoric times. Although this presents an opportunity for biological studies on the green-grass snake *Ikyaren* to unravel the taxonomy, anatomy, physiology, ecology, behaviour and evolutionary history, such a study has never been reported. However, from an intellectual and biological perspective, *Ikyaren* is barely a metre long and could have required a head-tail-head joining of several snakes to stretch across the legendary wide stream or river, characteristic of the bumper to bumper in modern day traffic jam in obtainable in crowded cities. The presence of a backbone or vertebral column to support the muscular tissue gives credence to strength and rigidity, however, the argument lies in reconciling the tensile strength of the stretched animal that could support human weight without yielding to gravitational pull. The width also counts because of the swinging movement that comes with walking across a single cylindrical stretch and more so during frightful moments of escaping from an enemy on the trail. Therefore, it is possible that several of the snakes could have aggregated to increase the width to enable the Tiv to cross the river, so much like in contemporary bridges. On the other hand, a man in fright could hardly take complete note of the ecological features due to the influence of the hormone adrenaline that increases body activity. From this angle, it can be argued that primary succession (Fatubarin, 2001), a natural process that gradually fills up ponds and lakes with silt and soil with predictable stepwise transformations into green vegetation cover that gives way eventually to a climax community of forest over periods ranging from 50-100 years or more, could have been in transition at such a location. Creeping plants (creepers) along the stretch of a swamp not well known to the Tiv prior to the attacks or migration and may

have been misconstrued under the emergency in which they found themselves as a green-grass snake. On the hand, it is possible that a wooden bridge usually the trunk of a tree which was coated with green algae that thrives on moisture-rich wooden materials placed across streams found in contemporary times in Tivland would have prompted the popular legend. Incidentally, tree trunks coated with microphytic algae, serving as foot bridges across streams are bound to be slimy to touch, slippery to touch and therefore risky to walk on, but somewhat possible under frightful situations. Such bridges are found along abandoned footpaths during seasonal floods or human migration which was the norm of the time. Although the precise location of the green-grass snake stretch has not been located in contemporary times, it can also be argued that rock formations under water across the stream or river protruding close to the surface coated with green to blue-green algae could have been utilized at the time. On the contrary, beliefs in the existence of a supreme deity cannot overrule a miraculous crossing as documented in the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites (Holy Bible, 2001).

In Tiv myth and history, it is believed that God asked Tiv to send two emissaries to convey the message of longevity of human life on Earth. This was a thorny decision when they were communicating together in prehistoric times that would eventually be decided upon which animal that returns first with the message from the Supreme Deity living in a distant land. The Tiv then envisaged that sending a dog would ensure that the animal would pick up the parcel on long life, run fast, return and deliver it in good time ahead of the slow moving tortoise (Rupert, 2003; Dzurgba, 2007). However on the way back, the dog that was conveying the message of human eternity on Earth came across its favourite food, ate and slept off in the bush under a very cool shade. The tortoise which was bearing the message of a short lifespan on Earth and a hereafter eventually shuffled past the sleeping dog and became the first to

deliver the message of a short lifespan to the consternation of the Tiv and humanity. Ecologically, this myth is a portrayal of domestication of animals and plants which was started in ancient times based on the useful qualities of some animals. The dogs can run fast, alert and notify man about the presence of strangers in the compound during the day and at night, knew tracks of wild animals and could lead hunters on their trail. Thus, they have been domesticated by man for security reasons and companionship. In return, man offered it protection, food and shelter, while some form of language communication evolved including giving it a name which it responds to when called. Other forms of taming and training evolved in modern times such as detection of hard drugs and chemicals due to their highly developed olfactory senses. Similarly, the tortoise is partially domesticated for spiritual and aesthetic purposes by humans due to its very long life span.

## **Tiv Policy and the Ecological Dimension**

The award of Tiv traditional titles bears the indelible marks of ecology and thus highlights the level of appreciation and use of ecological resources to sustain the institution and culture from prehistoric times. The Lion 'King' is a symbol of strength, dignity, resilience, honour, respect and stability and therefore represents the highest honour in Tivland that is accorded to the paramount ruler of the Tiv race, The Tor Tiv (King of The Tiv People) with the title of *Begha u Tiv* (The Lion of Tiv People). Ecologically, the lion (Biologically known as *Panthera leo*) is perched on top of the food chain and commands ecological respect in scholarly thought as the 'king of the jungle'. A food chain is a linear model depicting energy flow in the ecosystem through a feeding relationship between plants and animals. It starts with green plants that manufacture food through the process of photosynthesis using the sun in the terrestrial environment (on land), while in the oceans, seas rivers and other

water bodies, it starts with microscopic plants known as phytoplankton. Terrestrial green plants and aquatic phytoplankton are primary producers in the biosphere, while the animals that feed on them are herbivores (primary consumers) and the next arrow connects them to the carnivores (secondary consumers) and then to tertiary and quaternary consumers. As a result of this feeding relationship, energy flows from the producers that convert solar energy from the sun into chemical energy which sustains all other living forms in the biosphere (Stiling, 1992). Animals that feed on both plants and animals are known as omnivores. The Lion (carnivore) that feeds only on animal flesh is not intimidated by the size of the herbivore since it is the most powerful predator in the jungle. Thus, from observation, Tiv policy has made it a symbol of its highest traditional leadership position.

The Elephant also occupies a unique hierarchical position in Tiv culture. Elephants are large land African elephants which are found in the ecological zone inhabited by Tiv are classified as a single genera comprising of two distinct subspecies namely the savannah elephant (*Loxodonta africana africana*) and the forest elephant (*Loxodonta africana cyclotis*). They are mammals that belong to two genera of the family Elephantidae namely; *Elephas* and *Loxodonta*. There are three types of elephants living today which include the African Bush Elephant, the African Forest Elephant and the Asian Elephant also known as the Indian Elephant distinguishable by the sizes of their ears, tusks and body hair. Thus African elephants have larger ears and body sizes, while Asian elephants are more hairy.

The elephant is renowned for its immense size, strength and a highly retentive memory. As a result, it is generally known that the elephant never forgets a favour or injury done to it by any humans because of its highly developed brain which is closely at par with the dolphin. As a partially domesticated animal, it is a friend of man because the taming skills brought forth the benefits for man's comfort and convenience. Its ability to carry heavy

luggage, sustain its balance and swim across rivers without submerging its load were useful services to the Tiv before population pressure and hunting virtually eradicated the abundant stocks found during prehistoric times. The elephants were therefore very helpful in conveying goods and rescuing the stranded Tiv by ferrying them across deep and dangerous stretches of Rivers Benue, Katsina Ala, Donga for farming, hunting, trading and occasionally warfare. In Tiv administrative policy (administered by the Tiv Traditional Council), the title of *Jime Nor i Tiv* (The back of an Elephant for the Tiv) is conferred on a supportive and worthy son, a clear application of ecology into Tiv culture. The back (dorsal trunk) of an elephant as it were, is used by man for conveying goods and people through difficult terrains such as land or crossing deep rivers or other long distances. It is because of this human ecological benefits of the elephant that made it to be recognized as an ascription to worthy, indefatigable pillars of support and friends of the Tiv race. This is possible through observational science of ecology and appreciation of nature by the Tiv for the usefulness of the partially domesticated animal. In contrast to the ecological phenomenon of the abundance associated with population of animals in the wild and environmental consciousness of conservation for proliferation and multiplicity among the Tiv, there can only be one *Jime Nor i Tiv* at a time as a matter of policy.

*Zege Mule u Tiv* which means 'The big shade for the Tiv people' awarded to Tiv friends with clout, influence and respect. In ecology, shades are provided by big trees that are resilient, being on ground for a while and well nourished with the requirements for growth and regeneration. The tree branches, leaves and trunk provide microhabitats for insects, birds, reptiles and small to large mammals. Earthworms (not cankerworms) and harmless ants abound in the roots to recycle dropping leaves back into nutrients for the big tree. The shade it provides is cool, protective and refreshing to all animals that visit it not

to mention the seasonal fruits it produces. Therefore, the title of *Zege Mule u Tiv* is an ecological contraption to honour friends and acquaintances of the Tiv people.

*Nom iyange i Tiv* means 'The rising Sun of the Tiv'. Ecologically, the sun is the major source of energy in the biosphere (Chapman and Reiss, 1992) from which green plants on land and phytoplankton in water bodies manufacture food through the process of photosynthesis thereby ensuring a steady flow of energy in the ecosystem either as crops, meat and absorbable energy-giving nutrients. Vitamin D which is necessary for normal bone formation and for retention of calcium and phosphorus in the body (Microsoft, 2008). It is formed by ultraviolet radiation (sunlight) of sterols present in the skin.

The most important of these sterols are 7-dehydrocholesterol, formed by metabolic processes in animals, and ergosterol, present in vegetable oils. The action of sunlight converts these two compounds, respectively, to cholecalciferol (vitamin D3) and ergocalciferol (also called calciferol or vitamin D2). Vitamins D2 and D3 are equivalent in human metabolism, but in birds vitamin D2 is much less effective than D3, which therefore is preferred in the formulation of poultry-feed supplements. After the vitamins are formed from the sterols, further chemical reactions occur first in the liver and then in the kidneys, changing them into hormones that participate in absorption of calcium into the bloodstream and formation of bone (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009). The title is awarded to Tiv sons who exhibit similar ecological traits to the benefit of Tivland and humanity in general, but is only one at a time just like the natural sun in the sky.

*Ijor gbyoughur i Tiv* translated as 'The living spring of the Tiv' connotes a stony groundwater source that flows ceaselessly from the ground within the valley of a hydrologic system. According to Adesiyani (2005), Spring is the flow of fresh water from the ground which results when rain water percolates through a permeable stratum, such as clay, and often occurs at the foot of hills

where they frequently serve as sources of drinking water, because the water is pure having been filtered. In Tivland, because of the frequency of occurrence on overlying soil rich in stones and stony particles, it is referred to as “*Ijor gbyoughur*” in Tiv (meaning stony spring). Therefore, no excavation is necessary to reach the water table but could be done at the point of flow to aid easy collection of water at the surface. Therefore, the flow of *Ijor gbyoughur* water is automatic, natural and in its purest form that does not require any form of treatment, filtration or boiling for domestic uses such as drinking, cooking or washing. In ecology, natural springs are part of the water cycle which is powered by solar energy through the processes of evapotranspiration (dual evaporation of water from the soil and plant surfaces) and respiration in animals, which condenses in the upper atmosphere and falls as rain, precipitation or snow. A proportion of the rainwater runs off into streams, rivers, lakes and oceans while a significant proportion seeps through the soil becomes available for plant uptake, flows under gravity to become groundwater that flows along decreasing gradients into the aforementioned water bodies. Tivland is replete with springs from time immemorial and as such through physical observation, this ecological feature of *Ijor gbyoughur* (spring ) is awarded to highly enterprising and prudent sons of Tiv who have distinguished themselves in their endeavours through consistency and have stood the test of time in sustaining themselves and supporting others. It can be awarded only one at a time in contrast to the multiplicity of availability of spring water sources in Tivland and Nigeria in general.

## Conclusion

The article concludes that the relevance of ecology in influencing Tiv folklore, historical thought and policy as shown in the discussion above cannot be overemphasized. This article asserts that everyone practises ecology, regardless of status, learning, thought, religious calling, ethnicity or location in diverse ecological zones. Therefore from prehistoric times survival (*Ikyaren* myth), sanctity of life (Dog-Tortoise Longevity Message), principles of domestication of animals (biogeography), and most recently policy on award of traditional titles which all reflect an ecological perspective suggest the vital role of ecology in the affairs of the Tiv people of Central Nigeria. It is recommended that further research needs to be carried out on the biology and evolutionary history of the green-grass snake (Tiv: *Ikyaren*), ecological studies of animals related to Tiv folklore, history and policy, and location and identification of the river or stream and spot where they crossed on the back of the outstretched green-grass snake (Tiv: *Ikyaren*) in contemporary times. ■



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