

Research Note
POSERS ON THE REALITY OF IGI-NLA
(or *Nnunu Ebe*?)

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The Yoruba words *Igi-Nla* simply mean “the big tree”. The name is unlike those of other plants or trees in Yoruba language because it is descriptive. Other plants have specific names by which they are identified. Not many people will confess to having actually seen *Igi-Nla* before. Therefore, questions may be asked: Is *Igi-Nla* the name of a tree or the nickname of a tree? Is the name playing the role of a *menumo* for the real thing (*menumo*, *aipée* or *olorukooba* are substitute names for other names that one is forbidden to mention)?

What is *Igi-Nla*?

From available accounts, *Igi-Nla* certainly resides in the deep forest. All who discuss it hold it in awe. Where does it belong – in reality or in the world of myth? One wonders what Akin Euba, the musicologist had in mind when he named one of his earliest works for piano and Yoruba drums *Igi Nla So* (*Igi Nla* comes into fruition). Does he know the tree or is he simply describing any big tree that has come into fruition?

Stories about *Igi-Nla* border on the fantastic. My father told me that its girth is immense, second only to the baobab; its height is commanding in the forest. No other tree grows within a respectable radius of it and only a few select climbers grow around it. Some special insects and other small animals live on and with it. It offers them refuge and confers some of its immense magical powers on them, such that if one of its insect residents loses grip of its leaves or branches and falls off, any living thing on which it falls withers and dies instantly.

As if to add to the mystification, there appears to be an Igbo equivalent of *Igi-Nla* called *Nnunu Ebe* as quoted in www.nairland.com, a blog site owned by one Oluwaşun Osewa. Someone asked the following question on the website:

I have heard of this mysterious tree called *nnunu ebe* only in story. It is believed that it is found in some parts of Igbo land. The story said that birds do not perch on it and the leaves do not fall on ground. If the leaves fall, birds will carry them back to the top of the tree. No grass or living things grow under it or within its radius. If any bird touches it, it dies instantly. So also do other living things. Please, can someone tell me of this wonderful tree?

Some of the answers to this question on the blog site, showing a lot of contradictions, go thus:

1. A lot of them grow in Fantasy Island.
2. I've heard about this tree too. It's called *Igi-Nla* (big tree) in Yoruba land. It definitely exists because I remember back when I was in Ife, a lecturer mentioned it briefly in a botany class (an elective, not my core discipline). I did some asking around older folks; turns out they know about it too, but much of what they told me is unsubstantiated hearsay. I heard there's one standing somewhere in Ekiti State. Whenever I have the time I intend to go find out. Also online research led me to articles on a tropical *Upas* tree *Antiaris toxicaria*. It may not be the particular species found in Nigeria, but this confirms it's possible from a scientific standpoint. Keep me posted if you get anything concrete to go on, because this phenomenon has kept me fascinated for years.
3. The tree does actually exist, I have been opportuned to have first-hand information on this tree. Villagers have also claimed that they hear voices of crying babies coming from the base of the tree, whether it is a rumour or myth, I cannot ascertain yet.

The tree *Antiaris toxicaria*, referred to in response 2 above (most likely *Antiaris toxicaria*) and its cousin *Antiaris africana* are well known timber trees called *Oro* in Yoruba. These certainly are not *Igi-Nla*.

Powers of *Igi-Nla*

Generally, big plants and animals are regarded as symbols of strength in Yorubaland, and the people appropriate the powers of such living beings to themselves in different forms of poetry like *oriki* (family poetry) or spiritual incantations like *ofo*, *asyajo*, *ogede* and *ase*. Thus for people who fear enemies, the firth of both the *afzelia* (*apa*) and baobab trees are appropriated to self in *ofo* incantations for invincibility. As they say:

Wọ̀n doyi k'apa; apa o ka apa
 Wọ̀n doyi k'oṣe; apa o ka oṣe
 Wọ̀n doyi ka kanga; ko ṣe binu ko si
 Apa ota ko ni ka mi.

As outstretched arms (*apa*) cannot reach round the *afzelia* (*APA*) tree
 And outstretched arms cannot reach round the baobab,
 As one does not jump into a well in envy of its girth,
 So may my enemies' arms never be able to reach round me.

As for *Igi-Nla*, an incantation showing why an enemy would never succeed against the person goes thus:

Bi Şango npa 'raba,
T'o nfa 'roko ya
Bi i t'Igi-Nla ko

If Şango (god of thunder) has the ability to strike Araba the *Ceiba* tree,
And he can tear the *Iroko* tree asunder,
He dares not touch *Igi-Nla*.

Sophie Oluwole (2005) in the *Daily Sun* was either showing a familiarity with the anatomy of *Igi-Nla* or was simply describing any tall, straight tree, as she explains scientifically the above poetry:

These are statements of facts. *Iroko*, as you know, is a tree with branches, likewise Araba, while *Igi-Nla* is a straight tree without branches, and when lightning, which travels in a straight line, strikes, it can bring down other big trees, but not *Igi-Nla*, because lightning goes straight into the ground from the cloud, which propensity brings it into collision with the trees with branches, while the ramrod straight *Igi-Nla* stands solid unaffected. That is pure physics, confirming the law of electricity. What man will use that theory to do is another thing.

So for her, there is nothing extraordinary about Şango sparing *Igi-Nla*; it is all physical. But Şango is reputed to have immense powers, so why spare *Igi-Nla*? What then is this type of tree that even the gods defer to? Do they respect it as the *burning bush* respects the sugar cane plant? Do they fear it? Or do they simply consider sacred? If indeed the gods consider *Igi-Nla* sacred, do they send it on errands, like dealing with other gods or helping them to reach Olodumare? Again, one can benefit from a response to questions on *Nnunu Ebe* in the following:

Not knowing one's cultural history and tradition is one of the greatest tragedies that is befalling us in Africa. This particular tree is a deity. It is worshiped by its adherents. Everything said about this tree is very true. Birds and insects don't perch on it. Its leaves or twigs don't fall to the ground, nothing green grows under it. You dare not approach it beyond a certain distance. It talks. And when its help is sought it sends an emissary in the form of its twig to accompany the petitioner. This is accompanied by a loud clap of thunderous sound. The fact that you have never heard about it, have never visited it, or don't come from the particular locality where this deity exists, does not in any way make this "a fairy tale", or "tale by moonlight". Nigeria is beautiful, rich in tradition and wonder. Explore and get some education about your very roots!

As with other wonders in this beautiful land of ours, in the Owerri axis there exists a river that is a deity. It does not mix with other waters, no matter how

hard you try. The wonder continues when you go along with the river to a confluence where it meets another river that is also adeity. Their confluence is a tempestuous sight. If for any reason some water from river A flows into river B, it flows right back violently. If for any reason a fish from river A swims across into the other river, the fish in river B get very aggressive and drive it right back to river A. If you put river A in a glass cup with say another water source, you'll see a very visible separation gap between them that resembles the situation where you put kerosene and water in a glass cup. Science could never explain any of these. But our ancestors and our fathers understand them. What else do you have to say?

On the Oşun State Government website, under Oġaoluwa Local Government, is a cluttered picture titled "*Igi-Nla* (Mysterious Tree)". Nothing could really be discerned in this picture. A lot of stories on *Igi-Nla* mention its gross anatomy, gross toxicity and spiritual prowess. If it is indeed inaccessible, how can it be studied? Who has seen it before? What is its botanical name? Does it exist in other lands outside Yoruba areas and under what names? Is *Igi-Nla* the same as *Nnunu Ebe*? Are its properties available to man in any beneficial or detrimental manner? Can it be the eventual source of the elixir? We need help if *Igi-Nla* exists beyond myths.

Some scientific facts on *Igi-Nla*?

Before we consign everything to mythology, an interesting entry was found on the website www.metafro.be/xylarium called "Tervuren Xylarium Wood Database". Here, a plant with the name *Okoubaka aubrevillei* (Pellegr. & Normand) was described as follows:

Familia: *Santalaceai* Species name [according to *Bulletin de la Société Botanique de France* 93:139, 1946].

Its local names are: *Igi-Nla* (Yoruba), *Akoebilisi* (Igbo), *Akoebisi* (Edo). The source of this information is quoted as the authoritative Keay (1989). Where does this lead? It appears like going round in circles. So *Igi-Nla* does exist in reality at least in some scientific literature. But whatever became of *Nnuni Ebe* or *Antiaris toxicaria* in the earlier blog entry? We need help from members of the botanical world and the Nigerian Field Society.

Talking about the elixir, here is one nationalistic view of *Nnunu Ebe*:

It could be the tree of life and death. Whosoever shall eat of it shall not die but live and whosoever that is dead [when bathed with cooked leaves of the tree] shall live for ever more. Is it possible that Naija is part of the Garden of Eden?

And again, this comment on the same website on *Nnunu Ebe* (a fellow traveler with *Igi-Nla*):

[These things] are so true. It's still in existence even till today. I also heard that

nobody can take a picture of it. If you dare, the camera will explode and kill you instantly.

This sounds like the ultimate fantasy, but maybe it is not so much of a fantasy. I was at a scientific meeting at one of the parastatals of the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology with an Italian and some others in March 2006. We were discussing the baobab tree and its rich resources. The Italian and his Nigerian partner asserted as a matter of fact that none of the still or video pictures they took of a baobab plant in a village somewhere in Nasarawa State could be printed or played back when they returned to base. They returned to Nasarawa State to take more pictures, but the villagers hinted that the same fate would befall the new set of pictures unless sacrifices were made to the tree! They immediately gave them money for sacrifice and we able to get good still and video pictures. QED!

Conclusion

My conclusion is that somewhere away from science, deep in the humanities, lie a lot of African realities, with science only occasionally dancing round the periphery. The Nigerian editions of the religions of Middle-Eastern Origin, in their post-SAP forms, have been hard at work sealing whatever hope is left of our being able to move out of the world of superstition and fantasy into a science and technology-driven society.

With Alice, wonderland does not seem such a horrible place to inhabit, after all. Maybe we can enjoy it as much as the West is enjoying its technology-based economies and societal values. Someone went as far as saying that Africans should never have ventured into scientific endeavours. Rather they should have stayed put on familiar ground – the humanities and led the rest of the world in that terrain. This is arguable. For now, we need help with *Igi-Nal* and/or *Nnunu Ebe*.

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