

**ETHNOLINGUISTICS AND THE ECOLOGY OF THE IGBO  
ABORIGINES OF NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Ethnolinguistics is the study of the relationship between a language and the cultural behavior of the people who speak it, while ecology refers to the study of living things, including humans, and the environment. Among the Igbo aborigines of Nigeria, eco-labeled proverbs are culture-based sayings contrived to re-orient members of the community in the protection and preservation of the environment and provide insights into the lifestyle and history of a community. The paper analyses some eco-friendly indigenous proverbs of the Igbo aborigines of Nigeria using the eco-criticism theory and opines that the rich eco-related proverbs of the people can be the powerful and effective instruments for the protection and preservation of the environment.*

**Keywords:** Ethnolinguistics, Ecology, Igbo Proverbs, Environment.

**Introduction**

Ethnolinguistics, also known as cultural linguistics, is the study of the relationship between a language and the cultural behavior of the people who speak it. Cultural linguistics examines how various features of human languages encode cultural conceptualisations, including cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors (Sharifian, 2011). In the application of ethnolinguistics, ethnosemantics is usually adopted. Ethnosemantics is a method in ethnographic research and ethnolinguistics focusing on semantics (web) by examining how people categorize words in their own language. Ethnosemantics studies the way people label and classify the cultural, social, and environmental phenomena in their world and analyze the semantic categories these

classifications create, in order to understand the cultural meanings behind the way people describe things in their world.

According to Meeker (1972) Eco-criticism is the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. In his work; *The Comedy of survival: studies in literary ecology*, Meeker also described eco-criticism as an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of human space. However, according to Reeckert (1978), eco-criticism is the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Eco-critics usually ask such questions as:

How is nature represented in the Novel, Poem/Play?

What role does the physical-geographical setting play in the structure of the Novel?

How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?

How is science- in the form of genetic engineering, technologies of reproduction, sexualities- open to critical scrutiny in terms of the effects of science upon the land?

Eco-criticism believes that human culture is related to the physical world, that all life forms are interlinked and expands the notion of the "world" to include the entire ecosphere. In addition, the theory of eco-criticism propounds a definite link between nature and culture, where the literary treatment, representation and thematisation of land and nature influence actions on the land. Furthermore, Abrams and Harpham describe eco-criticism as the study of literary art forms from the angle of nature and environment (540).

The environment is best understood in the fields of geography and biology where it has to do with the space occupied by living things and non-living things within the enclosure provided by the surface of the earth. The environment includes features such as houses, the atmosphere, the stones, the ground, non-living and living things. The environment provides the space that humans live in, alongside other animals and plants. The average African understands the importance of the environment and the roles it plays in the affairs of humans. This is why some cultures have given god-like strengths and attributes to objects of nature like the earth, the sun, the trees, and others. In Igbo culture, in particular, the mother earth is highly revered as a powerful

motherly goddess. There are also cases of rivers being ascribed to be gods and goddesses. Akinyemi posits that African oral arts, values, and cultures are usually shaped by the environment around them. Thus, the worldview of Africans determines how their modes of culture turn out or are shaped. Oral arts like proverbs, folktales, songs, lullabies, masquerade performances are heavily influenced by what is seen and felt (33). Sometimes to buttress the importance of nature, these objects of nature are idolized and exonerated in form of gods, goddesses, or messengers of the gods.

It is after realizing the importance of the environment that many proverbs have been birthed in the use of language in complementing what has been noticed about the environment. These proverbs are in different cultures and languages. Each culture forms a proverb or a group of environment-leaning proverbs according to the specific environment of that culture and the cultural understanding of nature. Thus, the primary role of proverbs is not for aesthetic use, but the transmission of knowledge and values of a culture from generation to generation. Unlike other art forms that are mainly considered as art due to their aesthetic value, this is not the same with proverbs. Although they may be beautiful with their use of language and structure, they do not just represent beauty alone with just words, their usefulness is usually embedded in their meaning. Their meaning is of utmost importance for their use in the language of all forms. All languages in Africa have a good number of proverbs within them. There are proverbs of different moments and needs. A speaker would know the best proverb to use in any situation. Thus, African languages have evolved and taken in their use of a plethora of proverbs of various kinds. Richards writes about the environment as having tremendous effects on humans. Environment affects people greatly and plays a role in every facet of their lives (51).

Therefore, proverbs and other art forms are created to remind humans of the vitality of the environment. The man is the environment; the environment is the man. There is constant bickering in most cultures about the need to safeguard the environment. This need is portrayed in oral art forms such as folk-tales, songs, dramatic performances, and proverbs. Often, these oral art forms are heavily influenced by the social aspect and other aspects of humans.

There are often changes in climate and weather as the earth ages, and these changes are on a negative side leading to an increased call on the people to safeguard the environment better. In modern times, there is the issue of climate change with the evidence of increased temperature, uncertainty in seasons, increased natural disasters, and some others. Powell argues about the negative side of climate change and writes about it as one of the foremost determinants of the extinction of man and the entire life on earth. Climate change is responsible for the recent abnormalities in terms of weather, climate, and temperature (24). The major concern with climate change is that it should not mainly be concerned with the past; instead, it should be mainly concerned with the future. How would the people be taught about climate change and how to prevent its further catastrophic tendencies?

Chapin stating his point of view surmised that climate change has to do mainly with the bad system of sanitation, overproduction, overpopulation, and maintenance. The major contributor to this disaster is the urban centres. He summed the issue of climate change to be caused by the declining environmental situation of cities under the physical point. The physical point of this menace has to do with the issue of missing sanitation facilities, structures in elemental maintenance, and the presence of trash and rubbish. There is also the problem of severe environmental influences such as noise, odour, and dust. In terms of the problem of overpopulation, there is the case of inadequate community facilities such as schools, playgrounds, public water, and sewage systems, as well as street and drainage facilities (120).

Thus, the urban centres bring more harm to the environment than the vast rural areas of the world. After the disaster coming out from the urban centres, it is the rural areas that act as sinkholes for the disaster and damages. Apart from the direct problem brought upon the environment by the humans, there is also the non-direct factors that are more disaster-like such as the dumping of refuse into the ocean, oil spillage, improper rubber waste disposal, gas and smoke emission, use of hazardous chemicals in the environment, rapid deforestation and a whole lot of other negative effects on the environment.

All these have negative effects on the environment leading to severe effects on earth. This is the reason why there is an increased call on the need for increased better treatment of the environment. When the environment is not properly treated or taken care of, there is a constant decline in the standard of living on earth.

Proverbs are most at times considered to be as old as any human language. They have been passed on from generation to generation that they have become vital parts of the language. The origin and its use can no longer be traced. Thus, an understanding of the definition of proverbs has often come out in different languages. Chinua Achebe, considered the father of Modern African Literature, in his *Things Fall Apart*, states that “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (25). Thus, if you understand the role palm oil plays in an average Nigerian meal, you will understand the importance of proverbs. They have become some sort of a vital greasing part in the meal of language use. Achebe’s assertion is the Igbo understanding of proverbs. Reading through his first novel, as well as some other of his novels, one can think of the importance of proverbs among the Igbo people. Proverbs are used in different types of speeches and different venues; however, proverbs are more used in the discussion of weighty matters and subjects. To pass a message better or to increase the understanding of a speech delivered, proverbs are used. Thus, proverbs can best be explained as a situation where a speaker encapsulates his thoughts in a suitable and appropriate mode and channel. Osundare writes about Yoruba proverbs “‘Owe l’ esin oro, bi oro ba sonu, owe ni a fi nwa a’, and this in English means a proverb is a horse which carries a subject under discussion along, if a subject under discussion goes astray, we use a proverb to track it” (3). Osundare’s interpretation of the Yorubas’ understanding of proverbs is that it is like a vehicle of language and the track which guides language use and passage of information. The use of horses here is like a symbol of transportation. He goes further to elaborate his definition that “the proverb is the horse of the word, the word is the horse of the proverb when the word is lost, it is the proverb we use for finding it” (4). Osundare’s view and understanding of the use of proverbs can further be expanded to be the mode through which the subject of discussion is fine-tuned. Proverbs become guides as to how the message is formed so as not to be lost. If the speaker by any way runs off the track, it is these proverbs that would lead him or her back to the subject of discussion. Therefore, apart from adding further

and more elaborate details to the subject matter, it also guides the speaker in the process of delivering the speech.

Osundare's postulation is similar to that of Achebe in the aspect of the connection in the understanding that the delivery of speech is made easier and smoother. For Achebe, it is the palm oil serving in the food or meal of language, and for Osundare, it is a horse, a vehicle, in the transport form of language. Proverbs make speech-making and passing of information easier and with a better understanding.

Meanwhile, Lawal, Ajayi & Raji write that proverbs are employed to reinforce and keep up the traditional recognition for elders, and they are also used as a useful means of social control where they are handy in settling quarrels and disputes (40). Proverbs also have a long history in the lives of the people as they may have begun as just regular wise sayings in human interaction and language until they became vital parts of a language.

These scholars tie down the use of proverbs to the tradition and culture of the people. To them, proverbs are recognized or symbolized by the situation of elders. Elders are judged according to their use of proverbs as proverbs are not only tied to wise sayings but also traditions. Since proverbs are not only utilized for their wise sayings, but they are also equally important based on how well they are tied to the traditions of the people. What they state further is that proverbs are closely tied to the social life of the people. It is the closest artistic construction to the social life of the people. Since it is the direct representation of the lives of the people or the situation of lives of the people, it has become one with the social lives of the people. Proverbs are the great parts of the people and their direct representation, thereby forming a tradition.

It is on this note that Hussein emboldens the point that proverbs are very important in a different culture, and in places like Africa, it plays a great role as Africa is known for its rich oral arts and proverbs are part of the rich oral art that is most widely used in the continent, and there is a long tradition of oral arts (28). Most time in language use, proverbs do not just play any aesthetic role, they also serve as the acceptable medium of passing or transmitting knowledge from generation to generation.

Agbola and Mabawonku are of the view that Africa's proverbs have evolved so much and are embedded in the language that they have come to elucidate or illustrate taboos that deal with environmental health, or religious rituals, and other aspects of the culture (17). They are used often extensively in African traditional society to sustain the environment and keep it from all disease vectors. Thus, proverbs also play a good role in sensitizing the people on the need for environmental health. Of course, there are other situations where proverbs come in to play great roles in helping humans understand their environment better. However, according to Agboola and Mabawonku, they are particular about the issue of environmental health.

Proverbs are often studied in the reality of the culture they are coming from. The society where they emanate from is usually used in studying proverbs. Thus, they are seen as a replica of the social construction or social environment of their origin or place of use. Most scholars do not define proverbs as mere literary works of art or any other form of scholarly recognition; instead, they are easily seen as part of the social organization or arrangement of the people. Proverbs are considered as literary works of art based on their use of words and the arrangement of these words. Proverbs do not follow the norm in composition and organization as compared to regular use of words and languages. The common understanding of proverbs is that they are understood to be the wise sayings of a community and in all totality represent the understanding of the way of life of the people, but this is not entirely so. However, proverbs are regarded as wise sayings that equally have an opinion of most of the aspects that concern human lives. This ranges from the aspect of relationship among humans to non-human or non-living features of human life and processes. Proverbs seem to have an opinion about every facet of life. The environment is made up of living and non-living features of human life. It impacts the lives of humans in various ways and plays a role in the standard of living of the people. This adds up to the reason why proverbs and the environment connect. The environment is a major decider or determiner of the outcome of human life, so the use of words or organization of words has to be connected to this feature strongly.

Eze states that proverbs are the wise sayings of a community, embedded in the culture of the people, portraying life as it is and all that connects to it. They are seen as having the true reflections of human existence. They are the representations of human lives, the interaction

they have with one another, and the non-human aspects of their lives (4). Eze's postulation simply means that proverbs reflect human life and all its features, and this is the reason he calls it "wise sayings." Proverbs understand most aspects of life. This justifies the reason why proverbs are often used in important conversations among people. The use of proverbs has evolved from ordinary play and the use of language to act as a solidifying element in human interaction and discourse.

Furthermore, Mieder, a well-known scholar of proverbs explains the term as a well-known word of folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation (119). Proverbs are like literary works of art or art forms as they contain stylistic features of proverbs such as alliteration, simile, metaphor, rhyme, pun, and some other features. Mieder opines that in several languages, assonance, the repetition of a vowel, are also exploited in forming artistic proverbs as seen in the proverbs of people of Oromo in Ethiopia with the proverb, *kan mana baala, a'laa gala* meaning "A leaf at home, but a camel elsewhere." Proverbs are found in many parts of the world, but some seem to have richer stores of proverbs than others such as in West Africa (128).

Proverbs are most times borrowed across lines of language, religion, and even time. For instance, "No flies enter a mouth that is shut" is, at this time, found in countries like Spain and Ethiopia. Of course, this proverb has gone through multiple languages and millennia; however, this proverb can be traced to ancient Babylonian civilization (Pritchard 146). Thus, proverbs are multi-cultural, too, so far, they meet up to the cultural requirement of the environment.

Anambra State is not exempted from the chaos of climate change. It is an erosion prone state with excessive flooding and soil degradation. Most towns in Anambra State are predisposed to poor environmental practices such as, improper disposal of waste, open defecation, air and water pollution, and varieties of other health hazards.

#### **Igbo Proverbs on the environment**

1. He who desires to stay under a tree shade at old age must plant a tree now: 'Onye choro ino na okpuru osisi na-aga akunye

- mkpuru n'ala ugbua' This encourages behaviours that help the greenhouse effect.
2. Who gives a Squirrel palm fruit that has been roasted in the fire? 'Onye n'enye Osa mkpuru nkwu ahuru n'oku?' This proverb drives in the need to encourage forestation for the sustenance of wildlife.
  3. When an old woman gathers Okazi leaves and cuts the roots, the famine that came this year will return next year. 'Agadi nwanyi kpacha Okazi, dopu mgborogwu ya, agu biara na afo ahu, ga biakwa ozo na afo ozo.' This shows that famine is caused by the activities of man. When man works against the environment, it affects man adversely one way or the other.
  4. Let the hawk perch and the Eagle perch. The one that tells the other not to perch; let its wings break. 'Egbe bere Ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela nku kwakwa ya' This proverb tries to show the need for peaceful coexistence in the ecosystem which will yield greater results for all the inhabitants.
  5. Water does not come out of its source polluted. 'Mmiri adighi esi n'isi mmiri gbaru' This proverb shows that water pollution is man-made and discourages the activities of man that causes pollution.

The passage of time and the progression of human civilizations seem to have made the issue of climate change more negative on the environment and the people. This has caused humans to employ anything within their reach to try and stem the tides of the menace. Thus, proverbs formed in the past and the ones formed in the present have been utilized consistently in this modern time to connect to the importance of proverbs and the need to stop the harm to the environment.

Diaconu states that despite the increased and consistent advancement of science and technology, the different cultures' proverbs about the climate and weather have not in a great way influenced human actions and behaviours of agriculture, fishing, and other environment-affecting economic activities yet (31). Since proverbs express commonly accepted truths, it has been reasoned by scholars that the minds of people are supposed to be changing a lot relating to the environment with some of the proverbs attached to the environment; however, it is not so.

Stone makes an assertion that emphasizes the importance of proverbs. To him, in describing the negative effects on the environment

by different factors, he states that proverbs have a greater impact than the simple words they encompass (25). People can use proverbs to give their children, their neighbors, their adult family members lessons and life scenario on morality or provide advice for them or call their attention to an important issue. Thus, proverbs become the perfect amplifier of information and facts concerning the everyday life of the world. Proverbs are ever-ready tools that convey information about the environment, ranging from the harm done to the environment to the need to avoid some factors in further throwing the environment into more chaos. Proverbs serve as sure art tools in illustrating nature. Similarly, Sá Júnior writes that proverbs usually have didactic potentials, and have become instances of everyday (popular) culture that share a strong feature with reality. Proverbs are representations of human lives or processes of living. Even though they are short and are supposed to provide a brief representation of human lives and association, they still find ways to pass on lessons to the people (14).

In other words, these lessons can be passed on so much that they become restrictions against the people or taboos. Thus, proverbs and other art forms can continuously be imbibed by the people that they get into human hearts and become unwritten codes of conduct for the people. They become guidelines on the process of living among humans. These taboos are prohibitions or strongly forbidden acts by the social customs of the people (Oduyale 18). Some cultures have even made these taboos to touch the area of environment and nature very well. For instance, among the Igbo, there are varieties of transgression against mother nature represented by the motherly goddess ani, they are called nso ani. These transgressions against nature are considered grievous crimes and most at times involve the death or destruction of a human, an animal, or any other object of nature.

Thus, the oral arts of the people and the consistent use of language have been able to codify these reservations and thought processes of the people to become dictates. However, before these ideas become dictates, they have gone through series of continuous use within the human community. There are proverbs all around the worlds that are leaned towards the environment. They either do appraisal of nature, guide the people, or condemn transgression against nature in one way or another. There will be a study of some of these proverbs in selected cultures and their close links to their environment.

Olabode and Siyanbola in their study of Yoruba poetry stated that proverbs are closely linked to the environment and nature, and they bring up instances of some of these proverbs. One is “*Obun –un r’iku oko tiran mo; oni ojo ti oko oun ti ku oun kowe*. This proverb means an untidy woman takes the customary mourning period for her husband as an excuse for not adhering to the need of personal hygiene” (9).

This proverb goes more with environmental and personal hygiene. It goes more in line with the need for cleanliness and purity. There won’t be good health and prosperity if there is no cleanliness as people would have to spend a lot of money on health checkups if there is no cleanliness. Therefore, irrespective of the situation, one should be clean and maintain hygiene for himself and all that is around him or her.

There is also another environment-leaning good Igbo proverb, “the tree that bears fruit is a good one and must live.” This one encourages that humans to let animals and plants live. Humans should not go on indiscriminate killing and cutting of trees to serve their interests. Trees serve as bearers of oxygen and providers of fresh air; this is the reason why they must be safeguarded.

There are also Igbo proverbs linked to the environment. These proverbs mainly talk about the weather and its effects on the lives on earth. As discovered in the other proverbs illustrated in this paper, they are the artistic combination of words that have meanings beyond the surface level. Most Igbo proverbs are about the weather, the climate, and how it affects the lives of the people.

Praise brings up some of these proverbs accordingly, one goes that “in March, rain on the roof during the morning and the bee comes out in the afternoon.” This best explains the pre-farming season and urges the people to prepare for farming. The rain is yet to come and there is heat or other forms of weather suitable for cultivation, this parable directs the people to begin to prepare for the farming season.

On another note, Igbo proverbs showcase their portrayal of nature, warn the people of the danger of an unfavourable climate caused by the

gravity of the actions of humans. By depicting the sad situation of the unfavourable climate, the people are presented with the effects. It goes that “winter in March and dry in April leaves the farmer begging.” The farmers beg for a good climate as they are prevented from going to their farms. These English proverbs also reveal the effects of climate change.

### **Analysis and discussion**

Five major eco-friendly proverbs were analyzed using the Eco-criticism theory viz:

1. He who desires to stay under a tree shade at old age must plant a tree now: ‘Onye choro ino na okpuru osisi na-aga akunye mkpuru n’ala ugbua’.

The proverb contains a biological theme- “tree” and encourages tree planting as a source of healthy and desirable environment. Meeker (1972) states that Eco-criticism is the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. In his work; *The Comedy of survival: studies in literary ecology*, Meeker also described eco-criticism as an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of human space. Proverbs are generally considered as literary works and in this case, propagates tree planting as a way of creating and conserving an inhabitable environment as well as encourages behaviors that support the green house effect.

2. Who gives a Squirrel palm fruit that has been roasted in the fire? ‘Onye n’enye Osa mkpuru nkwu ahuru n’oku?’ The need for forestation as a means of sustaining wild life is highlighted in the proverb. The Squirrel and Palm Fruit represent the animal and plant components of the ecosystem respectively and their interaction corroborates the theory of eco-criticism. Eco-criticism believes that human culture is related to the physical world, and that all life forms are interlinked and expands the notion of the “world” to include the entire ecosphere. The linkage between the animal and plant lives represent a part of the “world” which the theory advocates.

3. When an old woman gathers Okazi leaves and cuts the roots, the famine that came this year will return next year. 'Agadi nwanyi kpacha Okazi, dopu mgborogwu ya, agu biara na afo ahu, ga biakwa ozo na afo ozo.'

The implication and consequences of human activities on other members of the eco-system are emphasized in the proverb. It also shows that famine can be caused by certain activities of man. In addition, the theory of eco-criticism propounds a definite link between nature and culture, where the literary treatment, representation and thematisation of land and nature influence actions on the land. In this case, the treatment of the "old woman" upon the "Okazi leaf" affects the yield of the land.

4. Let the hawk perch and the Eagle perch. The one that tells the other not to perch; let its wings break. 'Egbe bere Ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela nku kwakwa ya'. The proverb reiterates the essence of coexistence in the ecosystem and also emphasises the importance of each member of the system in the overall sustenance and yield of the ecosystem. According to Meeker's definition, the biological themes and relationships in this case apply to the Hawk and Eagle.
5. Water does not come out of its source polluted. 'Mmiri adighi esi n'isi mmiri gbaru'. Eco-criticism addresses how our metaphors of land, river and other physical components of the eco-system influence the way we treat them. In the proverb, the theory of eco-criticism applies to water pollution and suggests that water pollution is man-made and can be curtailed if human activities are checked. It appeals to the senses and attempts to be reassuring that water pollution can be mitigated.

### **Conclusion**

Obeng argues that proverbs remain important for various reasons. Its uses are far more valuable than the primary role of carrying more weight in a discussion or to make a conversation more alive and expansive (521). Unarguably, proverbs speak to every facet of human existence and provide, in this case, a possible linguistic panacea for environmental degradation. The study strongly posits that the Igbo

aborigines of Nigeria possess a rich encyclopedia of proverbs capable of initiating and driving a new wave of revolution in the protection and preservation of our environment. Proverbs “have been and remains part of the most powerful and effective instruments used for transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another” (Akporobaro 69). In line with Akporobaro’s thesis, Igbo proverbs can influence the manners of the people towards the environment, if properly articulated and applied.

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**AKU: AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH**

ISSN: 26814-0761 (Print) 2814-0753 (e). Vol. 2 No. 1. 2021

*A Publication of the Association for the Promotion of African Studies*

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