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Human Affinities to Nature and Mythic Ecological Imagination in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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Abstract:

Africa's rich cultural heritage is reflected in literary texts as products of the African intellect with an inherited cosmos in which nature is pivotal. From an African eco-philosophical perspective, this paper examines the implications of human affinities to nature and the mythic ecological imagination in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Occurrences in nature have a great bearing on various ways through which people imagine their environment embodied in their cosmovision. Sighting the new moon, weather forecasting and the symbolic meanings of various biotic and abiotic entities and occurrences in nature form an entangled repository of the people's experiential knowledge. This paper re-reads *Arrow of God* considering the overlapping territories of culture, nature, place and space with indigenous communication systems in mythic ecological imagination. Although colonial and missionary education in Africa expunged indigenous knowledge systems, the contemporary recourse to indigenous ecological thought ruminates how it can supplement the scientific ways of environmental conservation. The paper concludes that imagining nature and the environment in Africa reflects not only culture-nature implications, but it also demonstrates the people's genealogical bondedness to their land.

Keywords: eco-philosophy, nature, culture, mythic ecological imagination, cosmovision.

Introduction

In his *Arrow of God*, Achebe invests hugely in characters who are connected to and involved in dialogue with the physical and spiritual environments. Power struggle in the novel is aesthetically foregrounded amidst several conflicts dominated by the land conflict between Umuaro and Okperi. The colonial factor in the land conflict epitomises its legacy on the African continent with devastating effects on indigenous dialogues with the natural and spiritual environments. Set in colonial Africa, the novel is richly textured with several conflicts that

culminate in the Chief Priest of Ulu, Ezeulu, behaving like Nemesis on Umuaro for undermining his power. This deals a death blow to the mores of the people in the federation of “the six villages – Umuachala, Umunneora, Umuagu, Umuezeani, Umuogwugwu and Umuisiuzo” (Achebe 14) in which he is the spiritual overseer.

Historically, the union of the six villages of Umuaro was born out of fear Abam warriors (Achebe 14), but the coming of Europeans has disrupted that unity. What this suggests is that torn between the cultural experiences of Africa and the European minority in *Arrow of God*, the protagonist, Ezeulu, is aware that counterhegemony is possible only if Africans are educated. Ezeulu's “headstrong” (Achebe 230) character, however, threatens the continuity of African values as he is ignorant of the significance of communal coherence and the interconnectedness of human cultures. As Ezeulu becomes more and more isolated from his people deceived in his own sense of greatness, the people of Umuaro recall “the wisdom of their ancestors – that no man however great was greater than his people; that no one ever won judgement against his clan” (Achebe 230). What this entails is that in Africa, various modes of communication are intended to sustain harmony and interrelationships not only among and between humans, but also between humans and nature.

Indigenous communication systems in Africa reflect a fervour of Africanness that foster development and communal participation in key areas that involve people to work together in order to propel the lifecycle of communities. The term “indigenous communication systems” refers to communication that employs traditional assemblages of media and contexts, such as the agricultural calendar, drum, flute, proverb, festival, folklore, gong-gong crier and storytelling among others. These media of communication are collectively owned and are found in the repertoire of the society. In *Arrow of God* the indigenous means of communication are juxtaposed with exogenous forms of communication represented by the church and its bell, symbolising the modern medium of communication that decimates African cultural values. The bell is also symbolic of intercultural communication. For the people of Umuaro, the bell rings “in its sad monotone” and “singing the song of extermination” (Achebe 42-3). The unvaried tone of the bell with its song that announces the destruction of traditional values is repugnant, at least by now, to the local community. The church bell pollutes not only the air in Umuaro in its “sad

monotone”, but it is also symbolic of the beginning of the dilution of cultural values and environmental catastrophe in Africa.

Literature Review

Literature available on studies in *Arrow of God* reveals that not much has been said on the novel’s human affiliations and bondedness to nature and the role of ancestral connections in the people’s knowledge about their land. In their study of *Arrow of God*, Marandi and Shadpour (2011), from Marxist perspective, critique Christianity and colonialism as ideological tools for erasing the African religio-cultural identity. They argue that in *Arrow of God* “Christianity as an ideological instrument gradually change[s] the mind[s] of African people and [make] them view their religion to be little more than superstition” (53). Hegemonically, the people of Umuaro give consent to the Christian triune gods through whom they harvest their yams and thereby disregarding Ulu, a symbol of their cultural values and the sum total of the gods of the six villages of Umuaro. Ugwu’s (2014) reading of *Arrow of God* sees the involvement of the Igbo gods in human drama through the lenses of Aristotelian tragedy exemplified by Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* in which the Theban gods mediate between the world of the dead and the world of the living in the dramatisation of serious action with purgative effects. Ugwu (2014) posits that “*Arrow of God* embodies tragic qualities which perform dramatic functions and can be explored for their correlation with the classical Greek tragedy” (274). Obika’s death, Ezeulu’s madness and the triumph of Christianity over African religious values at the end of the novel are tragic consequences with Ezeulu metaphorising the central hamartia and/or hubris.

Akwanya (2013) analyses *Arrow of God* with a purview of the trauma that comes with colonialism’s psychic numbing and cultural denigration culminating in loss of identity by the African. References to madness in *Arrow of God* are numerous, for example, in derision, Nwaka says this about Ezeulu: “The man is as proud as a lunatic [...]. This proves what I have always told people, that he inherited his mother’s madness” (Achebe 176). Symptoms of trauma observed in some of the characters in *Arrow of God* can be explained not only in terms their encounters with colonialism and Christianity, but also due to innate factors although Msiska (2018) interprets the novel “as a trauma narrative” (46) in the wake of colonialism. Kakarla (2023) reads Achebe’s *Arrow of God* from the psychoanalytic perspective with a focus of psychological realism that points to trauma as well. In their study of Achebe’s *Arrow of God*,

Akambi *et.al.* (2018) contextualise the origins of Ulu on the basis on myth as “a god of necessity installed by the people for protection [against Abam warriors]. As a deity that comes into existence when the six villages resolved to come together, Ulu is a metaphor for the collective strength of Umuaro and its power cannot be devoid of the people” (70). The shift from Ulu to the Christian god in order to harvest their yams in the closing lines of *Arrow of God* also reflects the people's obligations to prevent their yams from rotting in the fields. Several other studies have been conducted on the novel focussing on the environment.

Devi (2019) employs ecocriticism to examine *Arrow of God* privileging the relationships between literature and the physical environment. In “The Oduche Complex and the Public Policy Environment in Africa: A Nigerian Case Study” (2018), Remi Okeke examines *Arrow of God* in terms of how educated Africans symbolised by what he calls “Oduche Complex” betray their culture by suffocating its values just as Oduche attempts to kill the royal python. This has serious consequences on the African environment the conservation of which is informed by an entangled web of interconnections between the physical and spiritual realms of the existence of both the human and the non-human worlds. Environmental policy in Africa is as weak as Oduche who, after being psychically numbed by Western education, he endangers his own environment. Thus, different studies on Achebe's *Arrow of God* have been conducted since its publication, but this paper departs from these by focussing on human affinities and/or affiliations to nature and indigenous mythopoeic environmental imagination. Indigenous ways of thinking about nature and the environment are rooted in myths that sustain environmental protection resulting from people's bondedness to their land.

Theoretical Framework

This paper applies African eco-philosophical theory to analyse nature and mythic imagination in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Indigenous ecological imagination is closely associated with mythopoeia, that is, myth-making, premised in the people's spiritual realms in which the human and non-human worlds are intertwined. The ways of imagining nature and the environment did not begin with Anglo-American ecocriticism. African literature is replete with nature and the ecological landscape that reflect the interconnectedness of entities conceptualised in the spiritual realm. The use of oral genres in the written African literature informs an inherited repertoire of the collective community whose mores are tinged with environmental sensibility.

Kanu (2021) describes the term “African eco-philosophy” as signifying “the African worldview that critically invokes ecology in promoting environmental protection. It is taken to refer to conceptual frameworks in African ecological and environmental science and as such combines theorising in ecology with some contributions from the African worldview that relates to ecology (5). African ecological imagination is premised on a unitary worldview rooted in ecological holism in which humans are integral part of nature. African eco-philosophy brings to mind the African metaphysical cosmos and ontology that consists of the African experiential episteme. Kanu (2021) explains that “African eco-philosophy [...] attends to questions such as: how does the African understand his or her environment? How has he or she been able to manage this environment even before the advent of the West? What are the spiritual dimensions of his or her eco-system that gives meaning to the environment beyond the Western consumerist and utilitarian concept of the environment?” (1). These are critical questions that deal with “Africanness” in environmental thought that juxtapose capitalist environmental philosophy which is entrenched in consumerism and utilitarianism.

It is worth noting that African eco-philosophy also considers shamanism where “the shaman [...] is a symbol of traditional indigenous culture and a worldview in which spiritual beliefs play a central role for guiding people and shaping how they interact with the environment” (Heith 59). In Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu functions as a shaman and the term “shaman” is defined as “a religious or mystical expert [...] a healer, prophet and custodian of cultural tradition” (Heith 58). As indigenous ecological thought is becoming one of the most persuasive forces in environmental discourses, its galvanisation with modern science in environmental conservation is significant. Tangwa (2004) observes that “[t]he precolonial traditional African metaphysical outlook can be described as eco-bio-communitarian (Tangwa 1996:192), implying recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals, and humans” (389). Communitarianism that focuses on an ecocentric and/or bicentric attitude contradicts Western anthropocentrism and individualism. For Tangwa, a sound environmental ethic should engage “the pursuit of science and technology based on eco-bio-centric attitude of *live and let live*” (394, original italics). Before Christianisation and colonisation, the Igbo of Achebe’s fictional village of Umuaro in *Arrow of God* enjoy life of coexistence with nature unthwarted by Western values.

The moon's fecundity in homology to Mother Earth

The moon is perceived as a symbol of fecundity and in agrarian communities, it regulates the cyclical events in human existence. In Achebe's *Arrow of God*, agriculture is the backbone of the community and the people's livelihoods are regulated by the appearance of the new moon which is central to Umuaro's spirituality. The agricultural calendar is reckoned with Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu, eating a sacrificial yam every new moon followed by an annual purification rite. It is worth noting that prior to the current Roman-Greco twelve months' calendar, people depended on the moon. Latham (2021) observes that "for generations, people have watched the moon for signs of changes in weather. The moon does, in fact, affect the Earth's climate and weather patterns in several subtle ways" (1). This illustrates why *Arrow of God* opens with the protagonist, Ezeulu, peering the new moon. This is not only to help him count the months, the moon has also symbolic and spiritual significance in Umuaro. Depending on its position, the moon is believed to be either good or evil. For example, the "moon he [Ezeulu] saw that day was as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by a cruel foster-mother" (Achebe 1). The use of conceit for the moon in this text as a malnourished orphan portends evil that adds to the theme of the cruelty of stepmothers. As part of indigenous communication systems, Ezeulu beats "his *ogene* GOME GOME GOME GOME ... and immediately children's voices took up the news on all sides" (Achebe 2, capitals in the original). The gong-gong beating is a form of communication and depending on how the *ogene* is beaten, it communicates specific news. Besides children, their mothers also come out to greet the new moon:

"Moon," said the senior wife, Matefi, "may your face meeting mine bring good fortune."

"Where is it?" asked Ugoye, the younger wife. "I don't see it. Or am I blind?"

"Don't you see beyond the top of the *ukwa* tree? Not there. Follow my finger."

“Oho, I see it. Moon, may your face meeting mine bring good fortune.
But how is it sitting. I don’t like its posture.

“Why?” asked Matefi.

“I think it sits awkwardly – like an evil moon.” (Achebe 2)

The language in the formulaic incantation of Matefi and Ugoye for prosperity in this passage is liturgically sacramental. The two women’s invocation to the moon, symbolic of Mother Earth, “may your face meeting mine bring good fortune” implies their desire to avert various forms of suffering they experience as women whose closeness to nature thrives in the ecofeminist strand of feminism. Bosch (2021) observes that “speaking of Mother Earth not only means the created order but also the spiritual practices, prayers and beliefs of those persons who receive her as their mother” (21). That the moon can hurt or fortify humans, rests on myth and spiritual interconnectedness between humans and the moon. According to Royal Museums Greenwich (2023) “[b]elief in the moon’s influence on human sickness and health is ancient and widespread from early folklore and medicine [...], in ancient Greece and Rome [...], girls were given crescent-shaped amulets on their birthday to protect them from evil spirits. Women also wore them to improve fertility and for protection them during childbirth” (1). The spiritual interconnectedness between humans and the moon is rooted in its being a symbol of fecundity. The moon is also linked with mental illness or lunacy which is believed to be dependent on the phases of the moon.

A person who sees many new moons is considered blessed as reflected in Ezeulu’s prayer to Ulu after roasting and eating the sacrificial yam, “*Ulu, I thank you for making me see another new moon. May I see it again and again. [...]. May children put their fathers into the earth and not fathers their children ...*” (Achebe 6, original italics). Here, the physical and spiritual environments cohere together and that children should bury their parents is based on the observation of the banana plant; the theory of the plantain tree that dies surrounded by outgrowths. Thus, the environment, both physical and spiritual, is the source for generating indigenous ecological knowledge. In a related discourse, Owusu-Ansah and Owusu-Ansah (2021) observe that “[t]he African way of producing knowledge involves the fusing of human intellect with the environment, thereby resulting in the realisation of ideas. In other words, both human intellect and environment influence each other” (57). The spiritual environment is vital

in bonding people to nature and ethical formulations. The Igbo cosmology is hierarchically ordered, for instance, from the Supreme Being (Chukwu) at the topmost and other gods such as Chi (personal god), Ota (god of nature), Ekwensu (god who embodies evil), Eru (god of wealth), Idemili whose priest is Ezidemili is a village god while Ulu is the god of the six federated villages. Udo and Ogwugwu are the gods of Okperi mentioned in the land dispute between Umuro and Okperi (Achebe 15). It is worth noting that according to Nwaka, Ezeulu's archenemy, "Idemili means Pillar of Water. As the pillar of this house holds the roof so does Idemili hold up the Raincloud and in the sky so that it does not fall down" (Achebe 41). Significantly, Idemili who belongs to the sky is a male god, while the god of the earth among the Igbo, is female, Ani (Kanu 2018, Ele 2019, Sakia 2019). The priest of Idemili does not "sit on bare earth" and when he dies, he is "not buried in the earth, because the earth and the sky are two different things" (Achebe 41). This position notwithstanding, individuals considered to have died abominably like Unoka and Okonkwo who die of a swelling in his abdomen and by committing suicide, respectively, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, are not allowed burial into Ani's earth. The spirits of the ancestors arbitrate between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Human affinities to nature reflect their bondedness to their land and their genealogies. I argue, therefore, that environmental ethics is as strong and it is as weak as the people's affinities to nature including their spiritual outlook.

In *Arrow of God*, the gods are known to inhabit certain *locale* such as streams and forests. We read from the novel, "[...] the nearer stream, Ota, had been abandoned since the oracle announced yesterday that the enormous boulder resting on two other rocks at its source was about to fall and would take a softer pillow for its head. Until the *alusi* who owned the stream and whose name it bore had been placated no one would go near it" (Achebe 7). This taking of "a softer pillow for its head" implies human sacrifice that requires placatory rituals to avert it. Sacrifices to appease the gods bind people to their land and streams or forests believed to be inhabited by gods and/or spirits are protected. Kanu (2021) posits that among the Igbo, the "universe is made up of a myriad of spirits. These spirits have their abode on mountains, hills, rivers, seas, oceans, trees, roads, markets, caves, brooks, lakes and forests" (35). What this implies is that natural resources in these places are protected. Kanu further observes that "in a particular water body [...] the fishes are considered the children of the water spirit. The crabs, crocodile, tortoise, snakes, water birds and frogs were seen as messengers of the water spirit and

so are not to be harmed” (38). The African spirituality plays a critical role not only in environmental conservation but also in ensuring a unitary worldview of the interconnectedness of the human and non-human worlds that in turn, ruminates human affinities to nature mediated by mythopoeia.

In *Arrow of God*, affluence is explained in terms of myths that bind people to their land. Eru, is the god of wealth has his own abode in “the Bush That Ruined Little Birds” (Achebe 8) and “[w]hen he [Eru] likes a man wealth flows like a river into his house; his yams grow as big as human beings, his goats produce threes and hens hatch nines” (Achebe 9). Wealth here is not calculated in terms of dollars or national currencies, but in terms of agriculture, crop production and animal rearing. A man’s wealth is reflected in how his wives are clad. At the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves, a ritual symbolic of women’s involvement in religio-cultural activities in Umuaro, each of Nwaka’s five wives:

[...] wore not anklets but two enormous rollers of ivory reaching from the ankle almost to the knee. Their walk was perforce slow and deliberate, like the walk of an Ijele Mask lifting and lowering each foot with weighty ceremony. On top of this the women were clad in many coloured velvets. Ivory and velvets were not new in Umuaro but never before had they been seen in such profusion from the house of one man (Achebe 68).

Nwaka, the richest man in Umuaro of Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, has his riches displayed by his wives. These riches in anklets, bangles, beads, velvets, silks, pearls, shells, horns, jewelleries and ivory, are some of the natural resources from the African continent well-managed in indigenous ways before colonisation and Christianisation; to say nothing about forests, animals, rivers, lakes and minable mineral resources. Pathetically, in Augustus Ferryman’s book, *British Nigeria: A Geographical and Historical Description of the British Possessions Adjacent to the Niger River, West Africa* (1902), as the title suggests, the natural resources in the British colonies are referred to as “British Possessions.” In the prefatory note, Mockler-Ferryman provides a reason why the book was re-written and re-revised several times, “with a view to supplying reliable information about what is undoubtedly the most interesting section of *our West African possessions*” (iii, italics mine). These “possessions” include humans in the form of slaves. This contextualises how Christianity and colonialism in what Frantz Fanon

in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) calls “the organisation of Manichean world” (84) and through “a perverted logic” (210) of psychic numbing have turned the colonised people’s past and the pre-colonial metaphysical cosmos into amnesia.

Although the jewelleries of Nwaka’s wives in *Arrow of God* can be read in terms of gender as impeding their free movements, “[t]heir walk was perforce slow and deliberate, like the walk of an Ijele Mask lifting and lowering each foot with weighty ceremony” (Achebe 68), as symbolic of Mother Earth, women are dignified in the riches from their own natural environment that coloniser misappropriated to themselves. Ferryman (1902) describes the manner in which women in West Africa clad:

In the manner of anklets, [there are] curious varieties worn by the women of different tribes of the Niger delta. The wealthier of the [Igbo] trading women wear massive anklets of ivory, formed from a hollow tusk, through which the foot has to be passed before it has stopped growing. The weight of the ivory is, of course, very considerable; but it is nothing in comparison with the weight of the anklets worn by the girls and women of the [Hausa people]; those of the [girls] consist of brass rods formed into a huge spiral spring from ankle to knee; while those of the [adult women] are even more cumbersome, being cymbal-like plates of brass, often more than a foot in diameter. These are welded round the women’s ankles on her marriage, and are never removed, causing her to walk with a most awkward gait, and allowing her but little comfort in life (228-229).

Rather than focusing on the difficulties in walking for the women due to the weighty jewelleries as depicted in this passage tinged with colonial mentality, the point is, African men and women enjoyed their natural resources before they were “possessed” by the coloniser. Achebe’s *Arrow of God* is replete with the depiction of fertile land, mountains, rivers, streams, forests, animals, both wild and domestic, and mineral resources through which the people generated ecological wisdom. Nwaka’s Mask is called Ogalanya or Man of Riches and it is “bedecked with mirrors and rich cloths of many colours” (Achebe 39). For both women and men, the wearing of jewellery symbolises not only honour and dignity, but it also symbolises power. Kanu (2021) notes that “[t]he African world is one in which trees, forests, animals, mountains,

rivers, canals, [including wealth], represent or symbolise one spirit force or the other. It is on the basis of this symbolising, representation, expression, revelation and indication that symbolism plays a fundamental role in Africa eco-philosophy” (7). Among the Igbo, riches symbolise being favoured by Eru, god of wealth, a spirit just as mammy water is. Among the Igbo, the principle of cause and effect is explained by the proverbial expression, “For when we see a little bird dancing in the middle of the pathway, we must know that its drummer is in the nearby bush” (Achebe 40). Riches are thus, explained in terms of interrelatedness with the spiritual world. The metaphor of the bird that dances on the road while its singer/drummer hides in the nearby bush, carries the wisdom of cause and effect in African eco-philosophy.

Lizards, snakes and the colonial factor on nature in *Arrow of God*

This section focuses on metaphors of lizards and snakes as they are interrelated with human experience in *Arrow of God*. Lizards and snakes play important roles in generating indigenous ecological knowledge since humans have experientially coexisted with them from time immemorial. Different species of lizards and snakes occupy particular niches that foster the generation of ecological wisdom in traditional settings. Time is reckoned in terms of the evolution of lizards, for example, the expression, “In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between” (Achebe 14). The fewer the lizards the longer the period counting the years backwards to their origin. The saying that “I was born when lizards were in ones and twos” (Achebe 222) implies that the person was born many years ago where the rarity of lizards is primordial. Lalremsanga (2021) explains that:

The origin of the reptiles lays about 320 – 310 million years back, in the steaming swamps of the late Carboniferous, when the first reptiles evolved from advanced reptilomorph labyrinthodonts. [...]. It was a small, lizard-like animal, about 20 to 30 cm (8-12 inches) long, with numerous sharp teeth indicating an insectivorous diet (1).

Reptiles are poikilothermic or ectothermic animals whose body temperatures adapt to the environment and they bask in the sun as body temperature regulating mechanisms. Besides indigenous knowledge about their evolution “in the distant past,” reptiles are loaded with indigenous ecological wisdom. There are different species of lizards and each has specific niches in the ecosystem. Indigenous ecological imagination employs this classification in the proverb, “If

the lizard of the homestead should neglect to do the things for which its kind is known, it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland" (Achebe 17). This proverb hints at identity for which one's kind is known and therefore, the need to display behaviour as culturally expected. When Ezeulu ridicules Oduche as "a lizard that ruined his mother's funeral" (Achebe 221), it means Oduche's behaviour at the mission school is contrary to his father's expectations. Due to affinities to nature, indigenous ecological imagination reflects sensibility about the feeding habits of lizards as Nwaka says in the proverb, "a man who brings ant-ridden faggots in into this (sic) hut should expect the visit of lizards" (Achebe 144). Lizards are adapted to feed on insects and here, indigenous knowledge recognises that the more the insects or ants there are in one's hut the more frequently lizards will visit that hut. This confirms scientific evidence that lizards are entomophagous.

Generally, the ubiquity of animals and different forms of life expressed proverbs in *Arrow of God* provides fertile ground for discussing nature as a carrier of indigenous ecological knowledge. In *Extraordinary Animals: An Encyclopaedia of Curious and Unusual Animals* (2007), Ross Piper observes that "[t]he extraordinary diversity of life on earth today reflects the relationship between organisms and their environment – an intricate web of interactions with the continual processes of adaptation and change, fine-tuning every species over time to its environment" (xvi). The earth is full of life, the basis of which is water, and this is depicted even in folklore. Based on the knowledge of the various niches of animals, proverbial lore utilises animal metaphors that can be analysed in contextualising how organisms interact with their environment. Terrestrial and aquatic organisms find expressions in proverbs that reflect people's perception of the environment. Animals, plants, water and land are critical in people's ecological imagination which is passed from one generation to another as a bequeathal. The ellipsis nature of proverbs is appropriate in incantations and rituals that conjure spirits in burial rites. When Obika, for example, engages in *Ogbazulobodo* (a burial rite spirit run) for the death of Ogbuefi Amalu, he profusely utters one proverb after another (Achebe 225-226). Every proverb is generated from the elements of nature and it is loaded with indigenous ecological wisdom.

Lizards are metaphors of self-praise. There are tree-climbing lizards that sometimes fall from high trees onto rocks and despite the pain they suffer on such occasions, they endure. Lizards are therefore, in this sense, metaphors of environmental adaptability and resilience as in

the proverb, “the lizard who fell down from the high iroko tree he felt entitled to praise himself if nobody else did” (Achebe 115). Humans should not undermine their own efforts and accomplishments. Family pedigrees are important and proverb, “The lizard who threw confusion into his mother’s funeral rite, did he expect outsiders to carry the burden of honouring his dead?” (Achebe 125), is informed by personal responsibility. An irresponsible child who does not provide for his/her mother’s proper burial rites is likened to a confused lizard. This confusion thwarts every parent’s prayer “*May children put their fathers [parents] into the earth and not fathers [parents] their children*” (Achebe 6, original italics). Culture borrows a leaf from nature in learning to do things with uniformity. Animals suffer from different kinds of body ailments, but they rarely show signs of agony. What humans observe as deformity in nature, nature itself has not publicised it. For example, the proverb “Every lizard lies on its belly, so we cannot tell which has a bellyache” (Achebe 171), implies that sickness should not be made public lest witchcraft interferes with healing. Uniformity, unity, courage, responsibility and cooperation, *inter alia*, are vital precepts that humans learn from behaviours and actions of animals.

Snakes are primordially interrelated with humans in different cultures. Among the Igbo of Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, snakes have significant symbolic meanings in addition to being religious symbols. The imprisonment of Ezeulu at Government Hill in Okperi coincides with the serious illness of Captain Winterbottom. Rumour has it that Winterbottom’s illness is the handwork of Ezeulu who has allowed himself to suffer humiliation “for thirty-two days” (Achebe 178). John Nwodika likens Ezeulu to “a puff-adder which never struck until it had first unlocked its seven deadly fangs one after the other” (Achebe 178). This metaphor of Ezeulu as a puff-adder focuses on the snake’s temper; it is not fiery. However, it bites venomously when it has been transgressed beyond limit (Bakker 1999). Puff-adders are peaceful snakes unless they are provoked; an apt metaphor for Ezeulu’s vengeance on Umuaro later in the novel.

Eason (2008) observes that “snakes hold a certain fascination for humans. They have the ability to shed their skins and seemingly emerge reborn, so they are identified with the symbol of regeneration and immortality” (19). Although snakes have been worshipped as gods and goddesses in different cultures of the world, they also symbolise evil and cunningness. Jackson and Mirick (1914) explicate that “Judeo-Christian culture has been less kind to snakes. Tales of the Garden of Eden and the serpent’s role in “man’s fall from grace” have contributed to a

negative image of snakes in western culture” (2). This illustrates why in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the Umuofian Christian convert, Enoch, kills a royal python. The point here is that the advent of Christianity and colonialism changed the ways indigenous people related with their inherited metaphysical cosmos, the physical and spiritual environments.

When Ezeulu sends his son “to join the new religion” (Achebe 43) little does he imagine that Oduche will be indoctrinated into suffocating his cultural values. The teaching of Mr Goodcountry, the new teacher in Achebe's fictional village of Umuaro, demonstrates the Christian hatred of snakes. He tells the new and young Christian converts that:

If we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith,” he said. “You must be ready to kill the python as people of the rivers killed the iguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian (Achebe 47).

This anthropocentric Christian standpoint is environmentally devastating. The python and iguana are reptiles that have been venerated as gods or goddesses in different cultures (Oestigaard 2019). With the advent of Christianity, as the passage above suggests, and in addition to other environmental hostile factors (Goetz *et.al.* 2023), these animals are threatened. For a Christian like Mr Goodcountry, killing an iguana or a python counts as being “ready to die for the faith.” This kind of Christian psychic numbing about the traditional Igbo culture gives impetus to Oduche to lock in his wooden box the smaller python of the two sacred pythons that roam about in Umuaro so that “the python would die for lack of air, and he would be responsible for its death without being guilty of killing it” (Achebe 50). By suffocating the python using the box, a work of art he has learnt at the church, Oduche suffocates his own traditional values, his people's spiritual affinities to nature. Oduche's interaction with the British colonial-Christian culture when his father, Ezeulu, sends him to school exposes him to western influence which results in his loss of personal identity and sense of individuality. This is the vortex of colonial psychic numbing of the colonised native.

Conclusion

In the foregoing paragraphs, this paper has demonstrated how people's affiliations to nature are embedded in their mythic ecological imagination. Myths about creation and the origins of natural phenomena consider the people's interconnectedness with the nonhuman worlds. The various ways through which indigenous people perceive their interrelatedness with nature are hinged on the inherited cosmovision in which animals and/nature are intertwined with mystic forces and the spiritual environment. The functions of celestial bodies such as the moon, the sun and the stars are explained in terms of how they influence human existence. Similarly, fauna and flora play important roles in indigenous people's ecological imagination. *Arrow of God* is a richly textured novel in which the main tensions focus on land, the agricultural calendar and forces in nature. Long before the advent of Anglo-American ecocriticism, Africa has had rich mythopoeias through which the people lived close to, and listened to mystic the language from the environment. In *Arrow of God*, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, rivers, streams, bushes, shrubs, pumpkin leaves, palm fronds, dry clay, spirits, gods and trees find their way in human language in the form of proverbial expressions not only to spice words, but also to carry wisdom of great repute. African eco-philosophy is a body of knowledge derived from the African environment and it is produced by indigenous people whose metaphysical cosmos is inherited from their ancestors. Unless recourse is made to the indigenous ways of ecological imagination to supplement and complement the scientific ways of environmental conservation and natural resources management, modern science remains a sham in environmental restoration. As observed in the Christian hatred of snakes epitomised by Oduche's attempt to suffocate the royal python in *Arrow of God*, the suffocation of indigenous ways of environmental imagination, has dispirited human affiliations to nature and ecological mythopoeia. Indigenous communication systems are rooted in different forms of natural occurrences and sounds from the environment in addition to drums, gongs and flutes.

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