BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

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Abstract

The research paper intends, not only to highlight how nature or the physical environment appears to be the essence of the Igbo socio cultural life in *Arrow of God*. The study also unveils the interactions between the Igbo people and the environment in which they live. On the one hand, the result of this analysis illustrates that the Igbo socio religious and cultural values as well as their crops are deeply rooted in the physical environment that stands for their essence and source. One the other hand, the article demonstrates that the physical environment is threatened to destruction due to the humans' non eco-friendly attitude, liable to be detrimental to Igbo socio religious symbols.

Key words: culture – eco-friendly – environment - humans-Igbo

Résumé

Ce travail de recherche tente non seulement de mettre en lumière comment la nature ou l'environnement physique constitue l'essence de la vie socio culturelle des Igbo dans *Arrow of God;* mais aussi met à nu, le lien bilatéral du point de vue impact entre les Igbo et l'environnement physique dans lequel ils vivent. D'une part, le résultat de ce travail élucide les valeurs socio religieuses et culturelles des Igbo. Les activités agricoles de ce peuple dépendent fortement de l'environnement physique qui apparait comme l'essence et la source de cette communauté. D'autre part, l'analyse démontre que l'environnement physique est menacé de destruction à cause de l'attitude non éco-amicale des humains, susceptible d'être préjudiciable aux symboles socio religieux des Igbo.

Mots clés : culture – éco-amical – environnement- humains – Igbo

INTRODUCTION

"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children[1]". This African proverb means that the earth, the soil, the water, and the air should not be considered as a gift from our parents, but the property of our children who accept to lend to past generation. This saying addresses our collective responsibilities in saving the resources of the earth for future generations. It also raises the issue of environmental consciousness that people must develop, because the natural landscape provides human beings and animals with the necessity in their respective lives.

In Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God (A.O.G)* the environment is diversely depicted. This picture suggests the interconnection between the Igbo people and the non-human world. All their main activities that include farming, socio religious ceremony of the Pumping leaves Festival[2] and the kola nut tradition, draw their origin from the environment. The ancestors the Igbo venerate are buried into the earth; the deities or masks they worship are carved from the wood: "…what did I tell you about carving the image of gods?"(*A.O.G*, p. 4). This question by a character in Chinua Achebe's novel provides in itself one certitude: the Igbo's magic-religious beliefs are generated by and enriched with the natural environment they live in. Likewise, the python viewed as a religious symbol lives in water, another main component of environment. The evidence is that the term "Idemili means the pillar of water" (*A.O.G*, p. 41). As it can be noted, the novel portrays the physical environment as space where Igbo people live and from which all their cultural traits are drawn. Their use of the environment, especially the forest, is highlighted by Harisson Robert Pogue who argues that:

> …There can be no question of the forest as the consecrated place of oracular disclosures; as a place of strange monstrous enchanting epiphanies; as an imaginary site of lyric nostalgias and erotic errancy; as a natural sanctuary where wild animals may dwell in security far from the havoc of humanity going about the business of looking after its 'interests.' There can be only the claims of human mastery and possession of nature – the reduction of forests to utility. (Pogue 1992

Pogue highlights the destruction of the environment, especially the forests, when animals are victim of massive hunting. The wild life is no more in security, and people cannot find anymore the pleasure and the contemplation of the forests. These forests even lose their touristic features, because the overexploitation of the fauna and the flora operated by human actions.

[1] www.proverbshub.com. Accessed on August 16th 2026 at 8h 32 am.

[2] "As this is the new moon of planting, may the six villages plant with success" A. Chinua 1964, p6. Ezeulu in a prayer, evokes farming as undeniable source of life. Then, the pumping leaves are also found in environment, precisely in the forest. This indicates the Igbo's deep link to the physical environment.

Pogue's opinion about the relationships between human beings and the environment is shared and reinforced by Mc Kibbenfor. The latter insistently notes that this type of connection between the human and the non-human worlds is detrimental to nature:

> We have changed the atmosphere; thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather we make every spot on the earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature independence is its meaning, without it there is nothing but us. (Kibbenfor 1990:54)

Mc Kibbenfor denounces the aggressive action of people against nature. For him, human beings are responsible for the climate change and global warming caused by the change of weather and atmosphere due to people hostile attitude towards environment. Like Mc Kibbenfor, Thoreau is critical of the attitude of some farmers of his time towards the land. He points out their use of nature, one that equates with selfishness and avarice. Such attitudes, he adds, cause damages to the physical environment:

> By avarice and selfishness, and grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property…the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows nature, but as a robber (Thoreau 1992, p. 131)

This article raises some fundamental questions:

- What is the Igbo people's understanding of the natural landscape in *Arow of God*?
- How is the relationship between the human world and nature built in *Arrow of God*?
- How does *Arrow of God* help depict the link between the Igbo people and nature?

These questions disclose the objective of the article, that is, to point out the cultural items of the Igbo whose philosophy reads that the physical environment constitutes the essence of the socio cultural life. Thus, the discussion unveils the bilateral link between the Igbo and the environment in which they live. What is underlined so far indicates that humans and nature, that is to say the physical environment, are interconnected, and they influence each other. Embedded in the theory of Ecocriticism, this discussion focuses on how the relationship between humans and the environment are imagined in *Arrow of God*. In his 'Introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Glotfelty C. defines Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment…ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty 1996: xix).

Greg Garrard's book *Ecocriticism* puts a particular emphasis on the methodology of analysis of the text from the perspective ecocriticism: "ecocritics tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda. In this respect, ecocriticism is closely related to

environmentally developments in philosophy and political theory" (Glotfelty 2004, p. 3).

By these terms, Garrard the moral and political agenda concerned with the reading of the text. In other words, the ecocritic reader seeks to investigate the ethics of the exploitation of natural resources, the politics that foregrounds that use of these resources. The questions in this case are about the issues of safety, global warming. The text, then, is read as a vehicle of warning people against the danger of destruction of the physical environment. The ecocritic reader raises people's consciousness about the depletion of the physical environment and suggest the right attitude to adopt in order to make people adopt ecofriendly behavior.

The choice of this theory is justified by the fact that Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* depicts the Igbo's socio religious traits in relation with the physical environment. This relationship between the Igbo and the physical environment is analysed according to the following articulation: the physical environment as the pedestal of Igbo socio-religious life, on the one hand, and the negative effects of the connection between human beings and the physical environment, on the other hand.

1. THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AS THE IGBO SOCIO RELIGIOUS LIFE

The environment has always constituted the dwelling place for people in general and particularly for the Igbo. It is the biotope in which they give orientation to their existence in terms of culture, agriculture, religion and socio religious celebrations. Therefore, this section underlines the relation between the Igbo religious and socio cultural symbols and the environment from which these practices and symbols are taken. The term 'nature' will be used in this section interchangeably with the word 'environment'. The study of African traditional religion in the novel *Arrow of God* is adequate when evoking issues related to nature or environment that impulses life and dynamism to African traditional religion. In his description of African religion, the Ghanaian theologian Kwesi Abotsia Dickson who published the book *Theology in Africa* emphasises the connection between the gods and nature:

> Usually the gods of Africans are interpreted as "nature gods", and on the surface, at least, it appears that they are: the supreme Being is the creator of all things, giver of the sun and wind and rain; Spirits have their abode in rivers, rocks, mountains and trees; medicines are extracted from roots and leaves; and charms are usually made of physical substances. Nature, then, is the background against which religion is expressed and deity contracted (Kwesi Dickson 1983, p. 112).

Kwesi's a 'theology of nature' means that there is a close relationships between African religion and nature from which all its symbols originate. These symbols reside in the natural environment. These natural elements that give life and orientation to African religion prompt to scrutinise the relationships between nature and religion.

In addition, the link between nature and time is established through the close watching of

environment, in the search of the moon by Ezeulu, the Chief Priest. Indeed, Ezeulu as a scrutiniser of the sky in search of the new moon, appears to be the suitable individual in the months' indication: he is a kind of custom promoter. He is he who gives the first information of the moon's appearance. So, at the end of the month, every villager pays attention to this moment. Even the children are very concerned with this socio-cultural event:

> He beat his ogene GOME GOME GOME GOME …and immediately children's voices took up the news on all sides Onwa atwo!...onwa atwo!...Onwa atwo!..He put the stick back into the iron gong and leaned it on the wall. The little children in his compound joined the rest in welcoming the moon. Obiageli's tiny voice stood out like a small ogene among drums and flutes. He could also make out the voice of his youngest son, Nwafo. The women too were in the open, talking (A.O.G, 2).

Ezeulu is portrayed as the first responsible for the moon searching. His helped in his mission by the children whose noises and voices express joy. Ezeulu manages to inform the whole village about the appearance of the new moon within a short time. As an eloquent symbol standing for month and appearing in the physical environment, the moon has a significant role in the Igbo communities. It describes periods corresponding to the indigenous people's socio cultural activities and ceremonies. These manifestations follow an organised rhythm and chronology that must be respected. Ezeulu who is in charge of watching the moon, reminds the village people of respecting the society's calendar in terms of organisation in time and space.

Another cultural trait is linked to the physical environment that favours the development of the festival of yam, the Igbo staple crop. It is all the more important as it is celebrated through the New Yam Festival. This celebration is concerned with the harvesting of the yam organised every year. The objective of this celebration is to secure annual good harvest of yam, thank the deities for ensuring the good harvest. The festival also aims at offering sacrifices to the departed of the clan, or the ancestors buried into the earth. In *Arrow of God*, this tradition is also promoted. In fact, following the announcement of the new moon occurrence, Ezeulu completes his mission by eating a piece of yam at the appearance of every month as described by the narrator:

> Ezeulu rolled the yam nut out of the fire with the stick and quickly felt it between his thumb and first finger, and was satisfied. He brought down a two-edged knife from the rafters and began to scrape of the coat of black on the roast yam. His hands were covered in soot when he had finished, and he clapped them together on few times to get them clean again. His wooden bowl his near at hand and he cut the yam into it and waited for it to cool. When he began to eat, Obiageli started to sing quietly to herself. She should have known by now that her father never gave even the smallest crumbs of the yam he ate with palm oil at every new moon. But ceased hoping. He ate in silence. He had moved away from the fire and now sat with his back against the wall (A.O.G, 5).

It can be inferred from the narrator's description that the moon observation and the 'sacred yam's

eating[3] are closely connected, because none of these two cultural symbols is valuable alone, and none of them works without the other. They work in pair and are significantly tributary to the physical environment.

The earth equally plays a key role as an element of the physical environment. In the Igbo community, it appears to be the dwelling place of the ancestors whose lives are juxtaposed with the life of the earth. The ancestors or the living-dead in the Igbo world are undeniable cultural figures in the Igbo community. For Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, the African community includes the dead, or the living-dead, because a person who has passed away "remains an active participant in the religious life of the community" (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010, p. 51). That is why, these ancestors are honoured through festivals and sacrifices by the Igbo. These festivals and sacrifices are given cultural and religious dimensions when kola nuts are broken and eaten during these celebrations.

As it can be noticed, all the African religious symbols are taken either from nature, reside in nature or are part of the physical environment. These symbols come from the forest around the people. The python for instance that lives in the forest and in water is a key religious symbol among the Igbo. It represents the god Idemili:

> The custom of Umuaro was well known and did not require anyone to instruct him. Every child in Umuaro knows that if a man kills a python inadvertently he must placate Idemili by arranging a funeral for the snake almost as elaborate as a man's funeral. But there was nothing in the customs of Umuaro for the man who puts a snake in a box. (AOG, 60)

The sacred Python is considered as a human being who is attributed particular privileges, because it lives among the people. It is praised during the ceremony of Igbo *Eke*, and it is said to represent *any*, or our mother. It is the symbol of ancestral spirits, wisdom, earthily bliss and benefaction. But the promiscuity between the snake and the villagers raises an ecological issue that leads the analysis to investigate the relationship between the physical environment and human beings.

2. THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The focus of this section to show how the meeting between the Igbo people and the physical environment becomes an undeniable impediment to their socio religious and cultural harmony. This connection between the human and the non-human worlds often causes the destruction of the physical environment. The first cause of this perturbation is urbanisation that has negative impacts

[3]The yam that Ezeulu has to eat every month or at a new moon' occurrence is said to be sacred since it is chosen customarily and culturally *very à propos*. The yam sacredness is all the more evident since Ezeulu refuses to share it with Obiageli, his daughter who was eager to eat some.

on the python's biotope. Owing to the growth of cities, the python's natural habitat gets closer and closer to people. That is why, Oduche can put the python into a box (*AOG*, 50). The image of the python in a box implies that the existence of Igbo religion is threatened. Oduche is representative of human actions that abuse one of the major religious symbols in traditional society. The destruction of the forest can bring about the gradual disappearance of the sacred python that will be bound to live nearby people's houses. Consequently, it can be killed by some people who do not know about the sacredness of the python.

The divinities and masks are represented by wooden figurines that also imply the use of the forest, or nature. In his book entitled *Myth Literature and the African World* Wole Soyinka explains the cycle of life of the masks representing the gods and the forest:

> When gods die – that is fall to pieces – the carver is summoned and a new god comes to life, the old is discarded, left to rot in the bush and be eaten by the termites. The new is invested with the powers of the old and may acquire new powers (Soyinka, 87).

Wole Soyinka shows that deity material representations made of wood can fall to pieces. When that symbolic death occurs, they return to nature from which they are made. The termites constitute the factory workers that give back to nature the pieces of the masks whose existence is renewed. The gods have ephemeral existence since the wood will fall to pieces in the long run. The ecological problem that sheds light on the possible disappearance of Igbo religion proportionally to the destruction of the forest. This fact could be an impediment to activities of the carver since he could run short wood for the representations of the deities.

As another religious symbol, the kola nut is sometimes offered to deities and ancestors during religious rites and other ceremonies. For instance, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (*NLAE*) pinpoints the significance of the kola nut during Obi's welcoming ceremony: "Obi, show the kola nut round, said his father. Obi had already stood up to do so, being the youngest man in the room" (*NLAE*, 47). But such types of religious ceremonies with the kola nut are doomed to disappear due to the ecological reasons. The prevailing ecological issue is the climate change due to deforestation and the emission of carbon dioxide. This perturbation provokes global warming. When that occurs, the existence of African religious symbols that require the preservation of nature can be in danger, and they can disappear.

Like the kola nut ceremony, the Evil Forest is threatened to disappearance as a socio religious symbol. In fact, in parallel with the destruction of the forest due to urbanisation, the Evil Forest experiences the same misfortune. The "new road which Mr. Wright was building to connect Okperi with its enemy, Umuaro" (*AOG*, 75) resulted in forest destruction, impacting religious symbols. In the same vein, the project of building roads and drainage in Umuaro supported by captain Winterbottom is an undeniable threat to the environment. These infrastructures considered

aspects of necessary programme of modernity:

> There was at that time a big programme of road and drainage construction following a smallpox epidemic. Chief James Ikedi teamed up with a notorious and drunken road overseer who had earned the title of destroyer of the compound from the natives (*AOG*, p. 57).

The achievement of this "big programme", as the narrator calls it, parallels the destruction of vast forests comprising precious trees, animals and medicinal plants. Although, modern infrastructures help fight against epidemics and improve people's living conditions, they seriously impact the environment and the village people's socio religious and cultural values.

The destruction of the forest can also lead to the disappearance of socio-cultural symbols that are very important in the celebration of the Pumpkin Leaves Festival and the New Year Festival. The former requires the use of the leaves of a special tree called Pumkpin, whereas the latter needs the unceasing beat of a big drum named Ikolo that "was fashioned in the olden days from the giant Iroko tree at the very spot where it was felled" (*AOG*, 69). He who destroys the forest, destroys the soil. The destruction of the soils brings about national tragedy as illustrated by Franklin D. Roosevelt who addressed all the governors of the USA: "A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself."[4] In the same vein, yam that stands for a key religious symbol in Umuaro, can also disappear in the long run due to global warming. These natural elements that value and skyrocket the Igbo socio religious life, are threatened to extinction:

> The year Okonkwo took eight hundred see-yams from Nwakibie was the worst year in living memory. Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late. It seemed as if the world had gone mad. The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment (*TFA*, p.18).

The novel *Things Fall Apart* undoubtedly highlights the effects of forests destruction also chronicled in *Arrow of God*, in prelude to the construction of roads and drainage in Umuaro. This forest destruction has an undeniable impact on the production of yam, the Igbo's staple crop.

Even if it is minor, another indicator of the destruction of the natural landscape is evoked in *Arrow of God*. Indeed, the phenomenon of deforestation can be caused by extensive agriculture and the growth of human habitat. For instance, Okonkwo's uncle gives him a piece of land to grow crop and build his house as he arrives in Mbanta after committing a homicide:

> Okonkwo was given a plot of ground on which to build his compound, and two or three pieces of land on which to farm during the coming planting season. With the help of his mother's kinsmen, he built himself an obi and three huts for his wives (*TFA*, 103).

[4] This quotation is from Franklin D. Roosevelt the 32nd president of USA, who addressed it through letters to all the governors of the USA.

The fact of giving Okonkwo a portion of land guarantees his economic and social empowerment. Noticeably, the type of society described in the novel *Things Fall Apart* is one based on husbandry. In other words, the degree of deforestation is not significant, as people use nature for subsistence. In addition, the village people in the novel who use the resources of the land develop some ecological consciousness. Although this consciousness is an unwilling attitude, it is effective through practices. Like Oknonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, the farmers in Umuaro, a village pictured in *Arrow of God* also use the land to build huts and practice agriculture. No matter the type of activities that necessitate the resources of nature, human actions bring about negative effects on nature. One of these effects is deforestation that can possibly become a danger against the physical environment. In this case, the existence of religious symbols might be equally in danger.

The process of evangelisation chronicled in *Arrow of God* also cause the loss of such symbols in traditional religion. When the Christians arrive in Mbanta, they clear the Evil Forest. As the poem "The Cathedral" by the Ghanaian writer Kofi Awoonor exposes, the missionaries cut the trees in the forest of the village in order to build their church[5]. They settle at a portion of the Evil Forest:

> Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They boast about victory over death. 'Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory'. They laughed an agreed, and sent for the missionaries, whom they had asked to leave them for a while so that they might 'whisper together' (*TFA*, 119).

The missionaries' occupation of the Evil Forest constitutes an ecological problem, to the extent that the forest is destroyed. This occupation also appears to be a threat to one of the Igbo's major religious symbols, the Sacred Forest. Thus, the African religious symbols: the sacred python, the kola nut, the shrine, the mask and the Evil Forest, the pumpkin leaves, which stand for the most important aspects of Igbo religion and culture, all these religious items are doomed to disappear. So, one has to wonder about the future of African cultural and religious values when the forest will be entirely depleted, leading these symbols to disappearance. Hence, people should think about the wellbeing and the safety of the physical environment, keeping in their minds that "He that plants trees loves others besides himself."[6]

CONCLUSION

In her classic book *Silent Spring* Rachel Carson posits: "But Man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably against himself" (Carson 1999, p.189). By this statement, she lays

[5] The poem "The Cathedral" can be read in K.E. Senanu & T. Vincent's anthology *A Selection of African Poetry*, p.209.
[6] This proverb is drawn from the selected proverbs *Gnomologia* by Thomas Fuller.

the emphasis on the fundamental relationship between human beings and the physical environment. Thus, the ties between the human world and nature are not something of the rhetorical. Human life is dependent on the non-human world, and it is vital to preserve the harmony between them.

This contribution has tried to demonstrate that the Igbo people owe their socio cultural life to the physical environment. To unveil the bilateral impact through the relationship between nature and the Igbo, the close relationships between the Igbo people's religious, cultural and social realities are pictured prove to be deeply rooted in the physical environment. Indeed, the Igbo's socio religious and cultural symbols come from nature and reside in the physical environment that appears to be the essence of their life. The outcome of the analysis also stresses that the misuse of the natural environment, especially the fauna and the flora, becomes detrimental to the people's socio religious life in the long run.

The physical environment is indispensable for human life in general, and particularly for the Igbo people. The interest of this discussion on the novel *Arrow of God* is concentrated on environmental consciousness, one that impends threat. In the terms used by the English writer William Shakespeare, "one touch of the nature makes the whole world akin."[7]

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[7] William Shakespeare wrote this contents in his play *Troilus and Cressida* Act III, Scene iii. There, Ulysses is speaking to Achilles. The playwright meant that Nature unites human beings; so humans must build up their unity and solidarity through the protection of environment.

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