

ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN IGBO POETRY: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF NKA OKWU

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Abstract

This study critically examines the ecological consciousness embedded in Nka Okwu (1979), through an ecocritical lens. It explores how the poet integrates nature imagery and environmental themes to reflect the profound connection between the Igbo people and their ecological landscape. Employing a qualitative approach, this study investigates Maduekwe's representation of the natural environment, his critique of environmental degradation, and his underlying advocacy for its preservation in selected poems. Six (6) poems were purposively selected and closely read to delineate the ecological sensitivity of the poet. The findings reveal that Maduekwe's poetry functions not only as a literary aesthetic but also a means of connecting ecological realities with human experiences, reinforcing the intersection between humans and the natural environment. Furthermore, the poet immerses readers in the natural world through the use of vivid imagery by personifying natural elements and making them an active participant in human existence rather than a passive entity. The study concludes that through an ecocritical analysis Maduekwe's poetic engagement with the environment transcends mere description but awakens ecological awareness, allowing readers to experience the beauty and fragility of nature firsthand. It also contributes to the broader ecocritical discourse and underscores the profound role of nature in shaping ecological consciousness by demonstrating how indigenous poetic works engage with environmental issues.

Keywords: Ecological consciousness, Igbo poetry, Maduekwe, Nka Okwu, Ecocriticism.

Introduction

Environmental consciousness in literature has gained significant scholarly attention globally, with African writers playing a pivotal role in ecological discourse (Okuyade, 2013; Egya, 2020). Literature has long been engaged with environmental themes, utilising various literary forms including poetry as powerful medium for articulating ecological concerns, advocating for sustainable practices, and preserving indigenous environmental knowledge. In African literary traditions, poets have extensively engaged with environmental themes, integrating them within their creative expressions to reflect both the lived realities of ecological degradation and the imperative for environmental sustainability. Among these diverse literary traditions, Igbo poets have distinguished themselves by demonstrating social commitments and sensibilities in various ways as they create works that both sensitise and conscientise people about environmental issues in their milieus. Their poetry functions as both a reflective and activist tool, addressing critical environmental issues such as deforestation, erosion, climate change, and the broader human-nature relationship. This is evident when we read some poems like those of Obienyem and Amasike (*Akpa Uche*, 1975), Chukuezi (*Akọ Bu Ndu*, 1988), Nnabuihe (*Ekenegwurugwu*, 1996) and Ikwubuzo (*Okpọkọbara*, 2005) to mention a few.

A compelling example of this tradition is the poetic oeuvre of Joseph Chukwu Maduekwe, whose collection *Nka Okwu* (1979) exemplifies the convergence of nature, humanity, and culture. Through the deployment of evocative imagery, symbolism, and allusions to Igbo cosmology, Maduekwe constructs a poetic tapestry that foregrounds pressing environmental concerns. His work resonates with the thematic preoccupations of other African eco-poets, such as Christopher Okigbo, Niyi Osundare, Zakes Mda and Tanure Ojaide, who similarly use poetry to critique environmental exploitation and advocate for ecological justice. Drawing from traditional Igbo beliefs and environmental ethics, Maduekwe underscores the necessity of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. His poetry reflects the fundamental principles of African environmental philosophy, which posits that nature is not merely a passive entity but an active participant in the socio-cultural and spiritual lives of people (Iheka, 2018). Such perspectives align with contemporary ecocritical frameworks, which interrogate the representation

of nature in literature and examine how literary texts engage with environmental sustainability and ecological consciousness (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996).

This study aims at exploring the ecological perspectives embedded in *Nka Okwu*, analysing how Maduekwe's poetic voice contributes to contemporary environmental discourse. Employing ecocriticism as a theoretical framework, this paper examines the thematic concerns, linguistic choices, and literary devices used in his poems to convey ecological sensitivity. In line with the objectives, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How does Maduekwe portray nature in *Nka Okwu*? (2) What ecological concerns are prominent in the poems? By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the broader understanding of the intersection between Igbo literature and the environment in ecological discourses.

The Igbo and their Environment

The Igbo concept of the environment, as articulated by Oguzie (2022, p. 80), presents a profoundly holistic and integrated worldview in which the environment encompasses both human and non-human entities. This philosophy is underpinned by the belief in a deep interconnection between humans and nature, where the health and flourishing of humanity are inseparably linked to the well-being of the broader natural world. In Igbo cosmology, natural elements such as mountains, rivers, stones, forests, and valleys are not mere physical phenomena; rather, they are manifestations of a deeper spiritual reality. Each natural feature embodies sacredness and serves as a medium through which the divine interacts with the material world.

In contrast to dominant Western ontologies that often compartmentalize nature as a backdrop or a repository of exploitable resources, Igbo thought maintains a relational ontology where nature is integrally woven into moral, social, and religious structures (Nwaigbo, 2015; Okafor, 2016). The natural environment is perceived as a living entity infused with moral significance, animated by spiritual forces known as *chi* according to Onwudinjo (2015, p. 509). This sacred animism demands that humans interact with their environment not as superior but rather a part of it, requiring relationships of mutual respect and reciprocity. Recognizing the interdependence of nature, Onwudinjo (2015) notes that the Igbo advocate for an ethic of relationality, which minimizes the risk of biological extinction. This is based on their sacred interpretation of the environment as a vessel of divine favour and a sacred realm that houses all life entities. The truncation of life in Igbo cosmology, be it vegetative or animal life, is believed to bring serious consequences on both the offender and the community since every individual or thing, including stone, has its *chi* or spirit-force, therefore, it is believed to have life which should be respected. This is evident in all their deeds and activities which have ecological undertones. Therefore, they endeavour to care and protect life in all forms of creation in order to ensure the survival and unity of all living things and the longevity of the earth through diligent and beneficial actions. Igbo writers on their part, often draw from these traditional beliefs to emphasize the importance of preserving the environment and living in harmony with nature.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a textual analysis approach, to examine the environmental themes present in *Nka Okwu*. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of textual meaning, cultural influences, and poetic techniques that contribute to environmental discourse in Igbo poetry. Six poems were purposively selected and analysed based on their ecological tendencies, nature imagery, and the environmental concerns they addressed. The analysis focuses on Maduekwe's representation of the natural environment, his stance on ecological issues, and advocacy for environmental sustainability.

Additionally, a number of existing studies that are relevant to the present study's objective were also used as secondary sources of data collection. The relevant literature were examined and critiqued in order to extract relevant information that served as the study's guide. These materials include scholarly articles, books, and critical essays on ecocriticism and Igbo literature. Furthermore, the research employs close reading techniques to identify recurring environmental themes, their symbolism and significance in the poems.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Ecocriticism, a literary and cultural theory that examines the intricate relationship between literature and the environment, as a theoretical approach to the present study. The term 'Ecocriticism' was first used in writing by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). However, it was not until the 1990s that it gained widespread recognition, particularly through the efforts of Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), whose edited volume *The Ecocriticism Reader* solidified its place in literary studies. According to them, ecocriticism emerged as a critical response to the increasing ecological crisis and seeks to understand how literary texts reflect, challenge, or contribute to environmental concerns.

Glotfelty (1996) also provides a foundational definition that establishes ecocriticism as a field concerned with how literature represents and interacts with the environment. She defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (p. xviii). This definition emphasizes literature's role in engaging with environmental concerns and the importance of analysing texts through an ecological lens. She further explains that just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. This implies that, as other modes of criticism have focused on the human realm of society and culture, ecocriticism demands a paradigm shift from the human-centric to the biocentric, requiring a serious consideration of the non-human world.

Rooted in ecological thought, ecocriticism investigates themes such as nature representation, environmental ethics, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities. Buell (1995) argues that literature has the potential to shape ecological awareness by presenting nature as a central force that influences human experiences and cultural narratives. One of the central concerns of ecocriticism is the representation of nature in literary texts. It offers a unique lens through which the natural environment can be examined. Ecocriticism also challenges Western conceptualisation of nature and anthropocentric perspectives that nature is a passive or external entity, instead, it advocates for a biocentric worldview, which sees the natural environment as possessing intrinsic value beyond its utility to humans (Garrard, 2012). This aligns with Igbo (African) environmental philosophy, where environmental elements are considered, living entities intertwined with human existence.

In the context of Igbo literature, this concept is crucial in understanding how Igbo poets construct their ecological worldviews and how these representations reflect broader environmental discourses. The analysis of nature imagery, metaphors, and symbols in Igbo poetry will illuminate how the environment is framed in relation to cultural and historical contexts. Thus, ecocriticism is particularly relevant to the analysis of *Nka Okwu*, as Maduekwe embeds nature within its thematic and aesthetic structure, portraying the environment as an active force in Igbo literature and also reflect the interconnectedness between the Igbo people and their environment.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the selected eco-oriented poems that form basis of the analysis, emphasizing their thematic significance and literary devices that align them with ecological concerns.

Nature Imagery in *Nka Okwu*

The natural environment manifests in diverse and intricate forms in Maduekwe's poetic oeuvre, each serving a distinct purpose in enhancing meaning and reinforcing thematic development. *Nka Okwu* is replete with imagery that evokes the beauty and vulnerability of nature. Through evocative descriptions of flora, fauna, celestial bodies, weather patterns, waterscape, and varied landforms, the poet immerses readers in a sensory experience that highlights the profound significance of the natural world within the Igbo cultural and ecological landscape.

A vivid example is the poem "N̄gwèrè" (p. 8) where the poet lauds the nature and attributes of the Lizard. As one of the animal species commonly seen in the Igbo environment, the Lizard search for insects and other edible things to eat without causing harm to it environ. Firstly, Maduekwe describes

the Lizard's strength as reflected in its capacity to endure pain as captured in the Igbo anecdote in the first and second stanzas of the poem.

Ngwèrè!	"Lizard
Siri n'elu oji dàa	Fell from an iroko tree and
Wara ọsọ,	And ran off,
Si,	Saying,
Onye etòghì yá,	If no one praises it,
Yà etòò onwe yá	It will praise itself
"Nwadike dàrà elu oji,	A great man fell from iroko tree,
Gbawara ọsọ." (p.8).	And ran away"

In the anecdote, the Lizard's expectation of eulogy from people is based on the fact that, it takes a being with strength to fall from a height such as the iroko tree and still run away. No human being will survive such a fall. Examining the experience of the lizard, the poet validates its view and praises the Lizard by ascribing greatness to it, and using an attribute commonly used to describe great men in Igbo - *Nwadike* - a subtle means of equating it with humans, which suggests a positive perception of the Lizard, although it is an animal. Thus, the poet places a high value and premium on the animal for this outstanding performance.

The third stanza exposes another attribute of the Lizard, in comparison with another animal: *Ngwèrè! Òke sòòrò maa mmiri, mmiri kọọ ngwèrè, mà ọ kọzighi òke* "Lizard! The rat joined to swim, lizard shakes off the water, but the rat was still drenched." In this stanza, the poet applauds the Lizards ability to adjust to different environments, in this instance, the aquatic and the terrestrial. Specifically, the rat joined Lizard to swim in the river; thereafter, while it was easy for Lizard to dry its body, it was not easy for rat to do same. The reason for Lizard's ease of getting dry after swimming is its nature, as it does not have hairs like the rat, which enhances its ability to survive the effects of any environment. In the fourth stanza, the poet highlights yet another attribute of the Lizard; an attribute which renders it mysterious to humans: *Ngwèrè! Ha dum màdòrò afo n'àlà, òkè afo na-atà, ọnye mààrà?* "Lizard! All of them lie on their stomach, the one that has a belly ache, who knows?" This is an Igbo proverb used by the poet to mystify the Lizard. In Igbo world view, it is those who have stomach ache that lie on their belly, showing that they are in pains. In the case of the Lizard, all of them are flat on their belly, making it difficult to single out one with a belly ache. The poet uses this unique attribute of the lizard to distinguish them from humans who are *homo erectus* by nature, and by so doing, accord respect to the Lizard species.

Maduekwe encourages the Lizard to act according to its nature, for the purpose of surviving in the environment, *Ngwèrè, mee ihe i jiri buru Ngwèrè, Ka umuaka ghara iri gi, okochi udummiri* "Lizard, do that which makes you Lizard, so that children will not eat you, dry season, rainy season" in the last stanza. The poet understands that the environment is a wild zone where only the fittest survives. As animals prey on one another in the jungle, in the human environment, man hunts for game or animals which include the Lizard. In Igbo world, children are the ones who hunt for lizards as fun or sport. The poet implores the lizard to exhibit its trait such as climbing up a tree in order to escape from child hunters. The last line *okochi, udummiri* "dry season, rainy season" is part of the poet's admonition to the lizard, to run whether in dry season or rainy season as a means of self-preservation. By encouraging the Lizard to run for its life, the poet is taking a position for the preservation of the Lizard species in the environment. The poet's quest for preservation of the Lizard is based on its intrinsic attributes, especially that uncanny will to survive a fall coupled with adaptation to varying ecosystems, which is uncommon. Although unstated, the position of the poet is based on the understanding of the positive contributions of the Lizard in the ecosystem, given the interrelatedness of all ecosystems.

In "Ji" (pp. 20-21), the poet highlights the values of a particular crop, and by extension, the forest ecosystem. Ji (yam) is regarded as the king of all crops in Igbo world as described by the poet in the first stanza *Anyi putara uwa kwudo mkpuru ubi à chiri eze* "We came into the world and met this crop that is king". In the first of the three-stanza poem, the poet traces the etymology of the yam, citing its origin to the beginning of times ... *Ji à putàrà mgbe ahia mbu pùurù anyi n'àlà* "The yam sprouted

when the first grass grew for us in the land”. The idea of the grass growing ‘for us’ demonstrates the understanding of the poet that the plant world exists or were made to satisfy human need. Clarifying the creation account of the yam, the poet submits that the Igbo god of fertility, *Ufiojiokū* (sic) used the yam to sustain the life of those inherited to live in this land, that is Igbo, hence *Ufiojiokū jiri ya chere ndị ketara ibi n’ala a*. In addition, the poet gives credit to the Creator for creating yam as a staff of sustenance *Mkpara iji chedo ndụ kà chi kere ji kèrè*.

In the second stanza, the poet shows the interdependence between man, yam and the earth. While stating the obvious that the earth holds the yam, *Àlā chédòrò jì*, and yam sustains humans in the world *jì chedoro mmadụ n’elu ụwa*, the poet went on to show that man also sustains the life of the yam. *A kòọ ya, à ruọ ya, gwuo ya, kee ya, chewe ya* “It is planted, worked, harvested, tied in the barn, protected. In essence, it is man that plants the yam; in Igbo world the planting is done by raising mounds of earth where the yam seed will be planted. Thereafter, it is worked by clearing weeds, and raising stakes with bamboo and cassava sticks to aid the growth of the yam stem and also avoid certain pests. Later, at maturity, it is harvested and preserved in barns where they are protected from animals and pests. Thus, the process of cultivating yam in the farm from planting to harvesting represents the untiring effort of humans in caring and preserving the life of the crop. The Igbo makes these sacrifices for the yam because they understand the value of the yam in their life, hence *Ọkukò ghàrà kwòm, ọ ga-ejì gịnī zùọ ụmụ ya?* “If the fowl fails to work, with what will it feed its chicks?”

Maduekwe continues to showcase the value of the yam in human life in the last stanza, by suggesting that sustenance of life is inextricably tied to the sustenance of the yam. In the first line of this stanza, the poet highlights the prayer said by the farmer before planting *Nye anyị jì n’afọ a, nke ga-egbòrò anyị aguī* “Give us yam this year that will save us from hunger”. The prayer by man to the Supreme Being underscores the value placed on yam by man, and that human life depends on plants in the forest. In the prayer, the farmer is asking for food sufficiency for the year, based on the understanding that human population is dynamic and ever increasing. Hence, the poet signified that increase in human population requires a corresponding increase in yam production to enable satiety, hence *Mmadụ na-àmụba, jì na-àmụba kà o zùò òkè*. In the last line, the poet shows the primacy of human preservation to the god of fertility *Ọ dī Ufiojiokū mkpa ka jì chedo ndị ya, mmadụ* “It is important to Ufiojiokū that yam will preserve his people”. The point in this poem is the connection between different species and their interdependence in ensuring the survival and preservation of species in the ecosystem.

In another poem titled *In Ụgùrù* (pp. 41-42), Maduekwe celebrates a special season called “harmattan”. The harmattan is a season characterized by dry and dusty wind in the day and cold in the night across the West African coast. From the rainy season and dry season, the harmattan is a remarkable season within the dry season that shows significant change in the climate and environment. In this ode to Ụgùrù, the poet highlights the features of the season, particularly the adverse effects and the benefits to man and the natural environment. He personifies Ụgùrù as a strong man with dry throat, ...*òdogwu à àkpịrị kpòrò nkụ* in the first of the seven-stanza poem, with equal number of lines. The idiom personifying Ụgùrù as a great man shows the strength of the weather in the environment. In Igbo belief system, to say that one’s heart is dry (*obi ikpò nkụ*) connotes heartlessness and the ability to do terrible and heinous things. Associating this dryness to the weather (Ụgùrù) underlines its capacity to do terrible things in the environment. Thus, the Poet’s description of Ụgùrù is paradoxical, which sums up his view of the weather condition as seen in the rest of the poem. Secondly, the use of *àkpịrị kpòrò nkụ* “dry throat” to qualify Ụgùrù could also be the poet’s means of describing the effect of the weather condition on humans’ during the harmattan, humans experience dry throats due to dry wind that blows all over the place.

Maduekwe proceeds to describe its trajectory in the following lines:

Ụgùrù, fere mmiri asaa, fèe mbà àsaà; “Harmattan that crossed seven seas and seven lands;
Wakasịrị, tikasịrị na-èje na àcho, Scattering and devouring going and searching,
Ihe gwụnahịrị ya ò wee zòlie ijè. (p.41) For what it lost and then begin its journey.”

In Igbo ideology and folklore, the number seven is used to show extremity, infinity or boundlessness; legends in tales in search of valuables or in the expedition or mission to rescue someone are often said

to have crossed seven seas and seven lands, meaning that they went to extremes in the quest, which frail mortals cannot undertake. Thus, the poet sees Ugùrù as a legend traversing sea and land in its coming. The poet also uses this idiom to suggest that Ugùrù must have come from a very distant land, thus perceiving it as a visitor. In the same sense of a traveler, the poet describes the nature of its movement, as ‘scattering and devouring’ thereby portraying Ugùrù as an outraged and vicious being tromping and ravaging through the land leaving destruction in its wake.

In the second and third stanzas, Maduekwe outlines several side effects of Ugùrù; first, *o dọla m mbọ n'egbùgbere ọnụ, nye ya ọnya* “It has dried my lips and gave it a sore”; second, *o fùọla m ọnụ n'oghere imi, kpoo ya nkụ* “It has dried my nose”; third, *...ma o fuchàghị m ahịhịa o kpònyèrè m n'anya* “the grass it flings on my eyes”; fourth, *ya nà ntu o bọliri fee m n'ahụ* “the dust it raised and flung on my body”; fifth, *ngafè o gafèrè n'ọbù ukwu m wàrà ya ụzọ idei* “its passage on my heels gave it cracks”. All these adverse effects of the Harmattan on the body are indirect outcomes of the fierce wind commonly experienced by humans during the dry period.

However, while stating the adverse effects of Ugùrù, the poet admitted its benefits such as, changing the weather from hot to cold, thus inducing night sleep through personification; *O siri mu nùriwa n'ihioyi abali o nyèrè* “He asked me to rejoice because of the cold it gives at night”. It is important to note that Igbo society, like other African society in the tropics, known for the severity of the sun, which consequently causes intense heat or rise in temperature in the environment. Such rise in temperature has effects on the human body such as sweating, irritability, weakness, and particularly sleep disruption at night. In contrast, a change in weather during harmattan changes the temperature from hot to dry and cold at night, which promotes sleep, as stated by the poet. Maduekwe further shows that the weather helps to chase away diseases *...Ahụ mgbu m na ọrià m aghòlara gị nrị ụbọchị* “My body pain and sickness has become your food”. He also states that the period helps to ensure that plants produce fruits and seeds bountifully, *Ifuru osisi i chuputara n'osisi ka i biara ...Mkpuru osisi unu ga-amị pitipti n'ime afo a* “The leaves you blew away from trees ...Your fruits will produce bountifully this year”. In addition, the harmattan is shown as a blessing to farmers, *Ugùrù bịa n'iwe, kùchaa àlà ubi, onye ọrụ ubi fùọ ume n' ọrụ maka a gà-èrì urù* “When harmattan comes in anger, blows across farm land, the farmer should work hard because there will be gains”. The poet's position is that harmattan is beneficial to plants and trees, crops and farmers, as it favours growth and productivity. It is due to these benefits that Maduekwe expresses a strong inclination towards Ugùrù, stating it should come again *...Biko, i laa, bịa ọzọ mgbè afo gwurù...* “Please, when you go, come again at the end of the year...”. In spite of the adverse effects of harmattan, the poet desires for its return, thus showing that its positives far outweigh the negatives. In sum, the poem is aimed at demonstrating the affinity between the environment and humans and precisely the influence of the weather on human beings.

The poem “Anwuntà” (pp. 50-51) clearly shows that the existence of some natural entity are not beneficial to humanity or the environment in which they exist. In this poem, Maduekwe wonders on the value and worth of one of the common insects in the Igbo and African environment, *anwuntà* “mosquito”. Scientifically, the mosquito is known as the agent that carries plasmodium to the human body resulting in malaria fever, which is a deadly disease. In this seven-stanza poem, with four equal lines each, the poet wonders at the usefulness of the insect. In the first stanza, Maduekwe describes it as small but mighty, *A chọwa ndị dī ntà dī ike n'ụwà, anwuntà dī nà ya* “If you look for things that are small and strong, mosquito is one of them”. Moreso, the poet states that the mosquito's quest is to dominate the world, *...ògù o nà-alù ka o wèe kèta ụwà*. At the same time, it is described as fearful but smart in stanza two, *A chọwa ndị dī ụjọ, dī nko n'ụwà, anwuntà dī nà ya*. In stanza three, the poet states that the mosquito is hated in the world, and wonders why it is not like *danda* “beetle” which works in the farm.

After stating that the mosquito is huge in population, as one of its features in stanza four, in the next stanza, Maduekwe states categorically that the mosquito has no value on earth, *A chọwa ndị dī n'ụwà na-adighi urù ha bàrà, anwuntà dī nà ya* “If there are things in the world without value, mosquito is one of them”. The poet goes ahead to explain reason for its worthlessness; first, *...ò nyeghīrī osisi aka ka mkpuru ya mịa* “It does not aid trees to bear fruit. Second, *...ò rughī ikpobà ubi kà o ghọọ nri àlà* “It

is not worth pouring into farm to act as manure”. In this stanza, the poet laments that mosquito is neither beneficial to plants nor beneficial to crops in the farm. It is because of its lack of value that he advocates for its extermination in stanza six, *A chowa ihe dum kweširi mgbucha n'ùwà, anwuntà dì nà ya* “If there are things that should be wiped off, mosquito is one of them”. Maduekwe further wonders if it is the same Creator who made all things good that created the mosquito, implying that since mosquito has no value, it may not have been created by the Supreme Being who created good things, implying that mosquito may be a fallout of creation. In the last stanza, the poet prays to the Supreme Being to graciously eradicate all mosquitoes by casting all of them into the depth of the ocean where they rightly belong ...*N'àla òsìmiri kà ahụ gà-àdị ozu ha mma* “The depth of the sea is the right place for their corpses”.

In sum, this poem is a question mark on the existence of certain beings in the environment that has no value, such as the mosquito. The position of the poet is that anything that does not support life in the environment in one way or another should not exist. This is because those species that do not add to the quality of life for humans, plants and animals subtract to the quality of life in many ways. In contrast with the mosquito, Maduekwe lauds *danda* “beetle” the burrower and predator that aids the farmer in the farm. The beetle plays important role in the pasture ecosystem; as decomposers, they reduce the population of pests, particularly caterpillars and also contribute to pollination. He also expresses a wish that the mosquito is involved in the food chain by being helpful to trees in the forest or crops in the farm. Thus, the interest of the poet is that all species that promote life in the environment should be preserved, while species that do not have value should be exterminated.

Environmental Concerns and Advocacy in *Nka Okwu*

Maduekwe's engagement with nature extends beyond mere description and appreciation to a critical awareness of ecological vulnerability. His poems subtly underscores the consequences of environmental degradation, whether through imagery of withering landscapes, disrupted ecosystems, or metaphors that allude to the despoilation of nature. In doing so, *Nka Okwu* transcends poetic admiration of the natural world to become an urgent call for environmental preservation and stewardship.

Some poems in *Nka Okwu* also reflect deep environmental concerns, including deforestation, land degradation and climate change. For instance, the poem “Mgbomgbo” (pp. 42-44) mourns the loss of natural landscapes due to gully erosion. In this poem of fourteen stanzas and two lines each, the poet takes the reader on a journey to a certain location in Igboland where there is gully erosion through these evocative verses:

Sòro m'gàruo Àgùlù na Nanka,
Ebe onya dì ukwu tàrà ala!
Ò bughì onya ntà ka ala ahu nà-arịà,
Ò bụ onya àkwùma na-agba òbàrà...(p. 42)

“Follow me to Àgùlù and Nanka,
Where a great sore plagued the land!
It is not a small sore that happened to the land,
It is àkwùma sore that bleeds...”

This particular location (*Àgùlù and Nanka*) are in present-day Anambra State in Nigeria. According to the poet, this location is known for a very deep gully erosion, which he views as a sore or wound on the land. He described the erosion as *onya* “sore” because it is damage to the land. In so doing, the poet personifies the land, seeing it as someone that has a sore on its body. In the second stanza, the poet further describes the depth and gravity of the erosion, *Ò bughì onya ntà ka ala ahu nà-arịà, Ò bụ onya àkwùma na-agba òbàrà!* “It is not a small sore that happened to the land, it is àkwùma sore that bleeds”. Here Maduekwe likens the sore to a certain degenerative, and life-threatening skin lesion known as àkwùma characterized by watery and bloody effusions from the sore. He uses this imagery to describe the magnitude of the erosion and its danger to the environment.

In the third stanza, the poet uses a rhetorical question to inquire if the people of Àgùlù thought that the erosion happened naturally or by accident, *Ndị òbòdò, hà chere nà àlà ahụ dàrà elu dùàm, tibia ahụ mà ò bụ kwòhịa otù akùkù?* “People of the land, did they think that something opened the land; broke its body or scratched a part of it? (p.43)” With this rhetorical question, Maduekwe posits that the erosion did not happen by accident; rather there is a cause. At this point, the poet refers to a certain folk tale

about the origin of that erosion and other geographical features in Igboland, *Kà ò dī eziokwū dī n'akukò a dī ochiè, bụ nke ndị mūrū anyị kòròrò ndị ha mūrū* “Or is there truth in these parts that is old, told by our ancestors to their offspring”.

The myth, as told by the poet is that, long time ago, there was a battle between Eke “Python” and Mbèkwù “Tortoise” in Àgùlù river. There was no mediator in the battle until Igwè “Sky” sent its servant Àmùmà “Lightning” to separate the fighters in the river. At the strike of the lightning, the python rose from trying to strangle the tortoise and fled, passing through different lands such as Nankā, Nnoòbì, Ojoòtò until it slithered into the River Niger at Onitsha. As a result of the rough trajectory of Python, erosion followed the same course tracing the path of Python to arrest it so that it will come and cure Tortoise of the wounds inflicted on him during the battle. The outcome of the search of mbize “erosion” for Python is the presence of gullies all over the place, ... *wèe waa mgbomgbo aka nrī na aka èkpè* “and dug gullies left and right”.

On its part, Tortoise recovered from the injury inflicted on it by Python and took off from the location to other places such as Achi where it defecated, *Ò gbaruo Achī na Ògù, nyuo nsi ede*. The result of the stool of Tortoise is the rising of the earth in the form of a hill at Achī, Ngwoò, Okigwe and Obolo Àfò. Thus, the poet posits, based on the myth that the high hills in Igbo land were the outcome of the stool defecated by Tortoise in its quest to save its life after the battle with Python. In contrast, the gullies and ravines found in Igbo land were all outcomes of the mbize “erosion” as it tried to follow the path of the fleeing Python.

In this poem, Maduekwe attempts to use a myth to explain the cause of gullies or ravines found across Igboland. The myth clarifies that all elements in the universe are connected; the sky sending lightning to mediate in the fight between Tortoise and Python underscores the integration of the forces of nature. While the chase for Python resulted in environmental devastation such as gullies, tortoise’s stool resulted in altering the geographical landscape of Igboland by creating such features as hills all over Igboland.

In another poem, “Òkukò Abùke” (pp. 32-33), Maduekwe bemoans a species of domesticated birds which is almost extinct in the Igbo society. It is a unique chicken named *Abùke*. The major feature of the chicken is the fact that it does not have as much feathers as other common chickens. In addition, the feathers are disheveled so much that it makes the chicken look physically haggard, unpresentable and undesirable. Unlike other chickens that look radiant either in all white or black plumes or multicoloured, this one is generally unattractive. It is for this aesthetic reason that so many people do not fancy keeping it or nurturing it to produce offspring. Consequently, the chicken species is endangered as described by the poet in the five-stanza poem:

*Ha dịzị oke ụkò n'oge ùgbu a
Anyị adighị àhụkwadị ha mà otù.
Òkukò à ibè ya kpòrò dibà... (p. 32)*

“They are very scarce these days”
They are hardly seen around
This chicken others refer to as native doctor...”

The poet emphasised that they are hardly seen in the environment and also states the fact that, due to its nature, other chickens refer to it as native doctor or spiritualist, *Òkukò à ibè ya kpòrò dibà*. This reference shows the degree to which this species is shun and unwanted; if other chickens deride it because of its nature, how much more humans. Associating it with native medical practitioners is a way of depicting it as weird, unkept, sickly, spiritual, and even diabolical. People are usually scared of native doctors due to their visage and mien, thus depicting the chicken as scary.

In the third stanza, Maduekwe wonders at the fate that may have befallen Abùke with two rhetorical questions, *kà mgbu òkukò ò biela hā ajọ aka?* and *Orịà ojọ ò asachàpùkwàlà abùke a?* In the two questions, the poet wonders if a dreaded chicken diseases had decimated this species. In the next two lines of this stanza, the poet prays for a solution, *Dibà ahụ bịa Iyi Enu chuo àkwùma; ụdị ya ọzọ bíanu chụọ orịà òkukò à*. The poet expresses a wish that since a certain native doctor once came at a place called *Iyi Enu* to stop *àkwùma* (a ravaging infectious disease), another native doctor should come

to arrest this disease decimating the *abùke* species. This wish or prayer by the poet underlines his passion for the preservation of this species

In the fourth stanza, the poet expresses confidence that the *abùke* species is not completely extinct. There is no certainty that the dreaded disease had killed all chicken since other chickens are still available, *Ò dighì kà orìà ò gbuchaala abùke à, ebe ndì ọ̀zọ̀ fòdùrù, ọ̀ gà-afọkwa*. The poet's faith on the availability of a remnant of this species is boosted by the presence of a similar chicken species named *òkukò ayaghiriya*, ...*Lèe, ọ̀ bụladi ọ̀kukò ayaghiriya díchà* "See, even *òkukò ayaghiriya* is still available". Thus, the poet is hopeful that a remnant of *abùke* has survived. In the last stanza, the poet shows his love for this endangered species; based on a strong feeling of nostalgia, the poet recalls the time he used to see *abùke*, ...*Kemgbè m hùdèwèrè ya na ọ̀sọ̀ kpukpukè ya! Ọ gbaa o kweghì ya, ọ̀ sùọ̀ ike n'àlà*. In these lines, the poet shows *abùke*'s awkward running style which makes it to fall at intervals, hence it is called a native doctor that sits to prepare its medicine.

On the whole, it is the uniqueness of *abùke* that arouses the interest of the poet for its preservation. The quest for the preservation of *abùke* is captured in the last line of each of the five stanzas, The wish of the poet is for the preservation of *abùke*, not because of any values or benefits (of course he did not state one) but the fact that they are different from others. This is a call for diversity and inclusion among the chicken family.

Maduekwe's poetic work call for a return to ecological balance, urging the society to adopt more sustainable environmental practices. The poet's advocacy aligns with global calls for environmental preservation and stewardship, thereby, positioning *Nka Okwu* within the broader context of environmental activism in literature.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

Maduekwe's poetic oeuvre *Nka Okwu* presents a profound interconnection between literature, culture, and ecology, illustrating the significance of nature in the Igbo worldview. The study's findings indicate that *Nka Okwu* is deeply embedded in ecological consciousness, with elements of nature serving various thematic and symbolic functions. The poet employs nature imagery not only as an aesthetic device but also as a means of connecting ecological realities with human experiences. Through vivid description of nature, Maduekwe highlights the resilience and harmony of nature, using animals like the *Ngwèrè* to symbolize adaptation and balance. The depiction of nature's endurance and self-sufficiency promotes an environmental ethic that discourages harm to nature. Thus, aligning with Igbo ecological ethics, which advocate for harmonious coexistence with nature and sustainable ecological practices.

Findings also reveal that Maduekwe's use of vivid imagery immerses readers in the natural world, making them see, hear, and feel the environment through poetic descriptions. Natural elements are personified to give them agency, making nature an active participant in human existence rather than a passive background as seen in the poem titled "*Ugùrù*" His evocative descriptions awakens ecological awareness, allowing readers to experience the beauty and fragility of nature firsthand.

In conclusion, the ecocritical analysis of *Nka Okwu* underscores the profound role of nature in shaping ecological consciousness within Igbo literature. Maduekwe's poetic engagement with the environment transcends mere description; it advocates for environmental awareness, preservation and sustainability. Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader discourse of African ecocriticism by demonstrating how indigenous poetic traditions engage with environmental concerns. Future research can expand on this analysis by exploring comparative studies between *Nka Okwu* and other African literary works that address ecological concerns. Such studies would deepen the understanding of how literature shapes environmental narratives and influences ecological policies across different cultural contexts.

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