

Ecological perspectives from Igbo sung-tale Awanjenje: an anthropo-linguistic inquiry

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Abstract : Folk songs in Igbo are essentially used for entertainment, education and a good resource for projecting cultural identity. Several studies have focused on Igbo folk songs in relation to child development and societal cultural development, with inadequate attention paid to the aspect of folk songs and ecosystem. Consequently, this study examines Igbo folk song with a view to delineating the Igbo perception of the ecosystem. A sung tale titled "Awanjenje" from Nnabuenyi Ugonna's *Abu na Egwuregwu Odinala Igbo* was purposively selected for analysis. The result shows that traditional Igbo society paid much attention and placed a huge premium on the ecosystem. From the examination of the tale-song, it was seen that simple, ordinary activities by animals (symbolizing humans) were sufficient to upset the environmental balance and threaten the existence of all species. It was shown that, the animals reacted as a community and in time to confront the ecological challenge facing them. It is recommended that contemporary Igbo society and others should emulate the pristine Igbo world and holistically fight threats to the environment, as well as take practical steps to avoid acts that degrade the ecosystem while engaging in activities that preserve natural habitats.

Keywords: Ecosystem, Igbo culture, folk song, folk tale, Awanjenje

Introduction

The environment is the physico-ethereal space that encapsulates entire humanity; all animates operate within the environment, where they live out their lives, hence the primacy of the environment. An important aspect of human existence is not the acknowledgement and recognition of the environment, but how humans respond to it. In traditional societies, people reacted to the environment in awe and fear, out of ignorance. For instance, among the Igbo, at the flash of lightening during or before rainfall, people make some cultural smacking of the lips to ward off the dangers of the lightening. In the event of a draught, flood, or erosion, the cause is attributed to the gods of the land who may have been offended, through one infraction of the custom or the other, and who reacted by withholding rain, unleashing water to destroy things, or causing the physical land to give in some places. In spite of the dread with which the Igbo held aspects of the environment, the fact remains that traditional Igbo, and even present-day Igbo had respect for the environment and highly evaluated it. For instance, the Igbo always looked forward to the change of seasons and welcomed each season with excitement and sometimes fanfare. The rainy season is welcomed for reasons of planting, while the dry season is well received for reasons of harvest, in addition, the harmattan is received with so much excitement due to the dry wind in the day and cold in the night. During the dry season, and especially the harmattan period, it is forbidden to burn things for fear that the fierce winds will extend the fire to the forest, resulting in bush-burning. This rule attests to the value attached to vegetation as a source of life and food. Due to the medicinal cum spiritual value seen in

certain trees, such as *ngwu*, *ogirisi*, *udara*, they are seen as sacred, which is a subtle way of preserving them.

A paramount dimension of Igbo attitude towards the environment is the veneration of the earth; among the Igbo, the earth is almost everything, as it is regarded as sacred and revered as a goddess, or the spiritual mother of humans. This veneration is premised on the understanding that, the earth gives life and nurtures it. All the food that man eats are from the earth, as well as all medicine, like herbs and roots. Additionally, when man dies, they are buried in the same earth, hence, the earth doubles as the sustainer of the living and the custodian of the dead. It is for this reason that, in almost every Igbo community, there is a shrine dedicated to the earth goddess, *okwu ala*, where sacrifices are made to honour her or appease her during violations of her principles. It is also for this reason that, during invocation or libation, Igbo throw a piece of cola nut on the ground before sharing it and pour a little of palm wine on the ground before drinking it. And in the morning, the first thing women do is to sweep their kitchen, followed by sweeping the compound, and thereafter, throw the debris into the farmland to act as manure. The dumping of refuse into farmland is deliberately done as a recycling process to boost the productive fertility of the earth while maintaining a clean environment.

The evaluation and reaction of the Igbo to the environment is reflected in their language through proverbs and names. Beyond these, Igbo folklore is the medium where many Igbo environmental ethics is reflected. Based on this construct, this study examines an Igbo tale-song *Awanjenje*, with a view to critically estimating Igbo idea of the eco-system.

The eco-system and ecocriticism

The term 'ecosystem' was coined by A.G. Tansley, an Oxford botanist and ecologist, in 1935 to explain the interactions among components of the environment at a given site. Odum et al, (1971) views ecosystem as, "an unit that includes all the organisms, i.e., the community in a given area interacting with the physical environment so that a flow of energy leads to clearly defined trophic structure, biotic diversity and material cycles, i.e., exchange of materials between living and non-living, within the system". In corroboration, the Convention on Biological Diversity, (1992) defines the ecosystem as "a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment, interacting as a functional unit"

The definitions suggest that the eco system encompass the living community of plants and animals in any area together with the non-living components of the environment such as soil, air and water. Natural ecosystems include the forests, grasslands, deserts, and aquatic ecosystems such as rivers, lakes, ponds, and the sea. It is a unit of nature that encompasses interaction between biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) elements. The biotic elements refer to biological component of the ecosystem, such as plants, animals and microorganisms. Abiotic elements include climate, temperature, rain, snow, hill, soil (Thirmurthy, 2004)

In these definitions, the idea of interaction is paramount signifying that the ecosystem is the aggregate of nature where living and non-living elements co-exist and interact with each other for the overall good of each species. The entire elements in the ecosystem are interlinked so much there is a chain reaction effect in the event of a missing link. For instance, if there is insufficient water, sun or water or if the soil is deprived of the right

nutrients, the plants will die. If the plants die, animals that depend on the plants for food will die. All the components in an ecosystem are integrated as they work together to achieve symmetry; every species has a role it plays in its ecosystem that helps to maintain the system (Singh et al, 2017).

The importance of the ecosystem to life and nature cannot be overemphasized; The natural ecosystem are instrumental to sustaining earthly life in the following ways: maintaining biodiversity and the production of ecosystem goods, such as seafood, wild game, forage, timber, biomass fuels, natural fibers, and many pharmaceutical and industrial products. The harvest and trade of these goods represent important and familiar parts of the human economy. Other benefits include mitigation of droughts and floods, partial stabilization of climate, moderation of weather extremes, detoxification and decomposition of wastes, pollination of crops and natural vegetation, dispersal of seeds, protection of coastal shores from erosion by waves, protection from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays, provision of aesthetic beauty and intellectual stimulation that lift the human spirit, cultural, spiritual and recreational services (Gretchen et al, 1997; Corvalan et al, 2005)

However, ecosystems are frequently disrupted by human actions because of population explosion that needs to sustain itself on resources, coupled with the growth of affluent societies, which consume and waste a very large proportion of resources and energy. These disruptions lead to the extinction of species of plants and animals whose elimination seriously affect the ecosystem. Some of these human actions are deforestation for timber, draining wetlands to create more agricultural land, using semi-arid grasslands as pastures, pollution from industries and waste from cities. Others include oil spillages, carbon emissions from automobiles, poor waste management, gas flaring, bush burning, mass production of non-biodegradable substances such as plastics and nylon, etc, (Raven et al, 2015). It is evident that, humans have contributed more to disrupting the ecosystem and leaving in its wake conditions and situations detrimental to human existence and the existence of other species.

The term 'Ecocriticism', was coined by William Rueckert in 1978. However, as a systematized branch of study, it was founded in 1980s in USA by Cheryll Glotfelty (Ghosh,2018). The seminal works of scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, , and Simon C. Estok laid the foundation for ecocritical inquiry, emphasizing the interface between the environment and literature (Buell, 2005; Glotfelty, 1996; Estok, 2011). In the late 20th Century, ecocriticism emerged as a significant mode of literary analysis. It was in this period that concerns about environmental degradation began to influence scholarly discourse. Based in the connection between ecology and literary studies, ecocriticism makes inquiries how nature, the environment, and non-human life forms are represented in literature (Shamim , M., Sahu, U & Dwivedi, V.K. 2025). According to Tajane, Shree, Pathak, Saluja, & Srikanth, (2024), ecocriticism, as a theoretical model investigates the complex relationships between literature and the natural environment. Aside exploring how literary texts represent nature this interdisciplinary approach evaluates the cultural, social, and political implications of these representations. This approach is premised on the understanding that literary texts go beyond merely depicting nature; they actively engage with environmental issues, offering insights into humanity's symbiotic links to nature and ecology.

In recent decades, ecocriticism has gained significant traction, motivated by the growing urgency of environmental issues across the world and the increasing recognition of the role literature plays in influencing human perceptions, ideologies and behaviour towards the natural world (Tajane, Shree, Pathak, Saluja, & Srikanth, 2024). Generally, ecocritics focus on how humans handle nature and how they treat the environment in which they live. By this means ecocritics are fixated on finding out if humans understand that they are intrinsically connected to the earth and that both humans and the environment benefit one another. Precisely, Das (2020) states that Ecocritics investigate the following things: how nature is portrayed in a work of art or literature (written or oral); what role the geographical or physical surroundings play in the structure of a text; how the metaphor of the land influence the way we treat it; how all life forms are interconnected as expressed in literary works; and how modern science affects the environment, etc. It is for this reason that, for many years, environmental agents and ecocritics have acknowledged the importance and supremacy of using folklore by means of poetry, songs, tales, drama, puppetry, proverbs, etc. to communicate environmental messages to communities the world over (Habib, 2020; Selim, 2019; Bracke, 2018). The present study aligns with the view of ecocritics by examining the Igbo ideology of the ecosystem from the lens of traditional folklore.

Igbo folk songs

Folk song is a vital dimension of the life of traditional societies including the Igbo; all traditional societies have their folk songs and tales. As the name 'folk' suggests, it is the music and story of the people, that is, citizens or kinsmen. It is created by ordinary people, sung and told by all members of the community. Such songs encapsulate the mores, beliefs, myths, of the people. In other words, folk songs are a repository of the culture and worldview of the community, a reflection of the way of life of the community. They are native products, arising spontaneously from the imaginations of simple folk, and not crafted to convey any definite expression of meaning as seen in modern songs (Echezona, 1966; Ojukwu et al, 2014). Accordingly, they are used by members of the community to express their culture and are passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. Okwilagwe (2002: 105) describes folk song as music that 'derives its origin and versatility from oral tradition or the folk lore of the different ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian nation'. Accordingly, folk song can be referred to as the expression of the totality of a people's way of life, their tradition, indigenous practices which are peculiar to them without the interference of other cultures

In traditional societies, the folk songs are one of the means communities entertain themselves. Beyond entertainment, in Igbo society, songs and stories are a way of life; it is an integral part of Igbo culture and resonates with the feelings, emotions, and experiences of the people. Agu (2011: 2) affirms that 'the musical tradition surrounding his birth begins as soon as he is born. From the age of two, he starts listening to and enjoying music, especially the lullabies the mother or the baby-sitter sings to lull him to sleep'. Ekwueme (2004: 59) corroborates by stating that, 'music accompanies the life of a black man from the womb to the tomb, being featured at celebrations; to announce the birth of a baby, at children's games, at peer group functions, at work and leisure, in religion and death'. Fitting traditional music is principally used as a form of entertainment during festive occasions such as title taking, new yam festival, funeral rites, marriage rites, age-grade festivals, childbirth and naming ceremonies, etc. But it also used during other non-entertaining events such as

during work in the farm, chores at home, fetching water from the stream, milling palm oil, etc. Music constitutes an important aspect of the life of the Igbo people. It is known to possess cultural and spiritual values. In Okafor's (2005) opinion, Folk songs play a very important role in Igbo traditional society; through both of them young and old are taught good morals and social responsibilities. Through these songs also, the younger generation are informally introduced, sensitized and exposed to their environment and its ethics.

Igbo folk tale

Folk tale is one of the primary dimensions of a peoples' culture; it is a means used by societies to tell their stories which resonate with their life in regards to belief system and world view, and which is handed down from generation to generation. Nwaozuzu (2006:29) views folktales as, "a traditional prose narrative which evokes several images in the minds of the audience." In the opinion of Ogbalu (2011), the folk tale is the oral form of literature, fictitious and full of moral lessons, containing the traditional beliefs, customs or stories of a particular people and imbued with everything that makes up the culture. In support, Akporbaro (2012: 51) opines that the folktale is "An imaginative recreation of a memorable experience that is intended essentially to entertain rather than record history or social experience". These definitions suggest that the folk tale is a repository of the knowledge system of a community.

Scholars agree that folktales are used to instruct and inform the young, so that they will grow up and become responsible citizens. To this effect, Nwaozuzu (2007, 28) asserts that "the widespread human tendency to teach, entertain and satirise by indirect means seems to be the root and evolution of folktales." This opinion is corroborated by Ibeh (2016) who opines that folktales are used to teach manners, character and values basic to their culture while highlighting those attitudes and behaviour that societies regard as unacceptable. In addition, Uba-Mgbemena (1982:55) opines that 'Ifo tales were among the chief means of moulding the character of the Igbo child'. As a result, folktales emphasise values such as honesty, obedience, hard work, morality, patience, respect for elders, etc. By these means, children are weaned and familiarised with the values and behaviours expected of members of society. This fact is emphasised by Uzochukwu (2001), who holds that the folktale is made up of lessons used to discourage antisocial behaviours among children. This is achieved by making evil to be rewarded by punishment and good behaviour to be rewarded by blessings. In this way, children would usually tend towards doing that which is good and avoiding that which is wrong. The implication is always a warning for people to adhere to the norms of the society or else, they meet an undesirable fate.

Igbo Folk tale can be classified into three categories. The first category is the tale by skillful performers told in plain speech known as *ikpakukọ* in Igbo. The second category is a solo recital with chorus or refrain form where the song comes at intervals referred to as *akukonaegwu* (tale and songs). The third category is the common musical tale where the story is sung from beginning to end, known as sung-tale (Egudu & Nwoga 1974; Okafor & Ngandu 2003). It is the third category that this study is concerned with. Much has been written about the first two forms of the folk tale but not much studies has been carried out in the third category, and this is the gap the present study intends to fill in the literature.

Method

One folktale-song was purposively selected for this study; the tale-song is one of the songs in Nnabuenyi Ugonna's *Abu na Egwuregwu Odinala Igbo*, a book of traditional Igbo poetry. Out of the number of songs in the book, "Awanjenje" was chosen due to its relevance to the issues of the ecosystem and incidentals in man's natural environment. Although there are other tale songs in the anthology, a single tale was selected because it was deemed adequate for reasons of its length, details and inclusivity. The selected sung-tale was written in Igbo but was translated into English for clarity purposes, especially since potential scholars and critics may not be Igbo. Being native speakers of Igbo, as well as teachers of same in a Nigerian university, the translation skill of the researchers is not in doubt. Content Analysis was used to examine the data. Qualitative or textual analysis is an adequate method used in the evaluation of text (McKee, 2001). According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) qualitative content analysis pays attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of phenomena rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts. This method is inclusive of stories, spoken and written words, and visualized narratives, which makes it suitable for this study

Data and analysis

The tale-song *Awanjenje* is a song that is rendered by one person, while the listeners deliver a chorus, which incidentally is the title of the story. By its name, *Awanjenje* is a depiction of a journey that starts from one point to the other. It is a story of animals in their natural habitat but who were upset by a singular incident that had a chain reaction effect in the entire animal kingdom. The analysis will follow the trajectory of events from the beginning of the story to the end. The data is presented below.

Kwa danda ka-akpuruisi Awanjenje.	Ant was barbed; Awanjenje.
O wee riraa aka n'isi Awanjenje.	He rubbed hands on itshead; Awanjenje.
Si nke a o dika e gburuyaichi Awanjenje.	Said this one is like a scarification; Awanjenje.
Okeokpaetikepuochi; Awanjenje.	Cock burst into laughter; Awanjenje.
Wee turunkukweochi; Awanjenje.	As it shook in laughter; Awanjenje.
Mai onuyan'oku; Awanjenje.	It put its mouth on a coal of fire; Awanjenje.
Rui yan'oguede; Awanjenje.	It put it off in a cocoyam trunk; Awanjenje.
Mabiejijiabuba; Awanjenje.	and cut off fly's wings; Awanjenje.

The story begins with an ant (*danda*) who had a haircut; the poor ant described the hair cut in glowing terms, comparing it with the beauty of the scarification done on the face of a titled

Igbo man. On hearing the ant's description of the haircut, the cock burst into laughter because it (cock) thought that reverse is the case. The humour in the ant's description can only be understood in the context of *igbuichi* "scarification"; in traditional Igbo world, *igbuichi* is an incision carved on the two sides of the cheek of an Igbo man who had taken the *ozo* title, which is one of the highest titles in the community. The incision, which comprises of diagonal lines of varying numbers is actually a mark of honour and greatness. Evidently, the ant is arrogating greatness to itself, which is countered and negated by the reality of its diminutive and miniature size. The fact is that, in the animal world, where the rule is, the survival of the fittest, the ant is one of the weakest and down-trodden species; therefore, any attribution of importance to it, by any means, can only be ridiculous. It is not fortuitous that, out of the entire animals in the land, it is the cock that overheard the ant's description and reacted. In the food chain, the cock is one of the beings that eat ants. Therefore, it is possible that the duo met during the cock's food hunt. Incidentally, the cock's uncontrolled laughter led it into trouble; it inadvertently picked a burning coal of fire with its beak, which triggered a frenzied attempt to temper the heat in its beak. The cock ended up cooling its beak in a water-logged leaf of a cocoyam. Unfortunately, while doing that, it severed one of the wings of a stray fly. It is interesting that this story began in a domestic setting; it appears to be a cooking scene, either within the kitchen or in the open, which explains the possibility of the cock, a domestic bird, burning its beak in a hot coal.

Ijjiapu tom tomtom;	Fly hops here and there;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Fekwuru mbe onu;	Flew into tortoise's nostril;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Si n'ike ya puo;	Flew out through the anus;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Mbe onye ime na-eme;	The tortoise that is pregnant;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Mbe eyie ala kirima mma;	Tortoise trods about frantically;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Yibiri agwoaka odu;	Treads off the tail of a mamba
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Agwoaka eburu ngusi mme;	Mamba ran with dripping blood;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Bakwu ewi na umu naasato;	Intruded into rabbit with eight children;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.

From the domestic setting, the drama shifts to the wilds. The fly, without part of its wing, and therefore flying haphazardly, without as much control and balance as it used to exercise, flew into the mouth of a tortoise and came out through its (tortoise) anus. In another version of this oral tale-song, the fly flew into the big nostril of an elephant and came out through its anus. Incidentally, the female tortoise was in labour pains at the time; compounding labour pain with the distress occasioned by the fly's entry into its mouth, the mad tortoise treads about and eventually severed a mamba's tail with its foot. Smear in

its own blood, the snake loses control and inadvertently runs into the hole of a rabbit which has eight little ones.

Ewiagbaa, gbaa, gbaa;	Rabbit runs, runs, runs;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Gbakpuru be enwo;	Enters the house of monkey;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Enwo aha n'elu gororom;	Monkey jumps about on the tree;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Wee gwejiri nku uko;	And breaks a dry tree branch;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Gwejirikwa nku uga;	And also breaks a wet tree branch;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Wee tuwaa akwa okwa;	And the branch broke Hawk's egg
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Okwa achia, chia, chia;	Hawk, cackles, cackles, cackles
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Chitee obu n'ura;	Woke up Falcon with its cackling;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Obu ekuo, kuo, kuo;	Falcon howls, howls, howls;
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.
Were kusasia chi;	And upsets/disperses the weather with howling;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.

The interesting part of this aspect of the tale-song is the dimension of the birds of prey; from domestic animals to land animals, and now to birds of prey in the jungle, the tale is inclusive of different species of animals and birds. The tale continues with the upset Rabbit intruding into Monkey's domain on a tree. The shocked Monkey runs, jumping from one tree to another, and in the stampede breaks both dry and wet twigs or branches of trees. The broken twigs fall and break Hawk's eggs in a nest. The enraged Hawk cackles in mourning for its unhatched eggs and wakes up a sleeping Falcon with its cackling. The Falcon howls in anger at the disruption of its sleep that it upsets the natural order of the weather and by extension, the season. In another version of this tale-song, which coincides with the present one, the Falcon howls so much and precisely puts the weather into a stalemate, where there is no dawn and no dusk, or, no day and night (*chi efoefo, chi abo abo*). It is not accidental that the events culminate in the Falcon upsetting or disorganizing the natural order of the weather and seasons. In Igbo cosmology, it is believed that, the Falcon is the bird that controls time, with particular respect to announcing the dawn. It is believed that it is its howling that disperses the darkness of the night and gives way to the light of day. The idea of *kusasia* 'upset/disperse' seems to connote the same effect of a stalemate in weather conditions where there is no sunrise and no sunset. The implication of this confused weather condition is that nature is at a stand-still, and there is no more time. What began as a joke has culminated in an environmental disaster that threatens the life and existence of all species, plants, birds, animals, man, and therefore entails an emergency meeting to resolve the crises.

Umuanumanu ezukoo;	All animals are summoned;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Were bido ikpe ikpe;	And starts to judge the matter;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Juo 'Nwaobu gini mere gi?'	Asked 'Falcon, what happened to you?'
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
'Ano m nwa nga m no;	'I was quietly in my place;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Okwa achitee m n'ura;	Hawk cackled and woke me from sleep;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
'Nwaobu na o maghigi';	'Falcon it was not your fault';
Awanjenje	Awanjenje.

The assembly of all animals is aimed at finding a solution to the environmental crises; the assembly began by interrogating the latest actor in the chain of events, the Falcon. The assembly, without much ado pointedly asked Falcon to say what happened to him and Falcon narrated its experience and it was absolved from any blame, and from the falcon, the Assembly asked the Hawk, monkey, snake and down to *danda* (ant), in that same order of events. When it came to the part of *danda*, the ant explained that what he said was simply an irony; it did not, by any stretch of the imagination, suppose that it was beautiful nor equate itself to the prestige of an *Ozo* title holder.

'Danda gini mere gi?'	'Ant what happened to you?'
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Danda akwaa aka n'akpa korokoro;	Ant foraged in its bag;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Wee weputa ofo ya;	And brought out its ofo;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Kwuo gwa anumanu niile;	Said to all animals;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Mu na unu onye huru ihe di mma;	You and I, whoever sees a good thing;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Si ihe ahu na o di mma;	And said the thing is good;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Ofo a yagbuo ya;	May this ofo kill them;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Onye huru ihe di njo;	Whoever sees an evil thing;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Si ihe ahu na o di njo;	And says the thing is evil;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.
Ofo a ya gbuo ya;	May this ofo kill them;
Awanjenje.	Awanjenje.

The ants respond in this inquiry is full of irony; it is not what he said that he meant but the other animals understood the point. The ant brought out its *ofo*, a stick symbolizing truthfulness in Igbo epistemology, and swore to an oath involving its life and that of other animals. What the ant actually said was 'if anyone sees a good thing and says that it is

good, may the *ofò* kill the person'. But what it actually meant is 'if anyone sees a good thing and says that it is evil, may *ofò* kill the person'. The reason why *danda* adopted that approach in responding to the inquiry of all the animals is its spiritual nature as the medium through which the ancestors visit their kindred in the form of masquerades. As a matter of fact, ant is, to a large degree, equated to masquerades, because it is believed that masquerades turn to ants before they go back to the underworld through ant holes, until the next communal festival. Masquerades talk in ironies, unlike ordinary mortals who use language in a straight way. When a masquerade speaks, it is understood that, it means the opposite, especially when people who are not initiated in its cult are present. In this present case, the ant used irony to explain to the assembly of animals, constituting of initiates and non-initiates that, he used irony while describing its hair cut. Implicit in the speech of the ant is the need to prioritise the truth in matters that concern life and the ecosystem. By including all animals in the oath, it was imploring all of them to be objective and realistic in dealing with the ecological crises challenging their corporate existence. If any animal saw another animal engaging in acts capable of endangering the environment, and keeps silent instead of condemning the act and raising alarm, the concerned animal will be damned. His response brings the inquiry to a close. In sum, the tale-song is a narrative of the Igbo perception of the ecosystem and how they react to challenges posed by the environment, particularly climate change.

Discussion

The discussion will follow the order of findings in this study with respect to Igbo perception of their place in the ecosystem, premised on the tale-song, *Awanjenje*. First, the tale-song is used to project Igbo ecological ethics that sees the environment as an embodiment of varying species that interact with each other, for the benefit of all. All species, animate or inanimate, such as plants, birds, fire, animals and humans are all interlinked in a metaphysical sense. The tale-song starts from and involves elements such as the barber (human), ant, fire, cocoyam, house fly, tortoise, snake, rabbit, trees, monkey, shell/egg, hawk, falcon, and the weather. It is inclusive of domestic animals, animals that live underground, such as ant and rabbit, animals that live on the ground, such as snake and tortoise, animals that live on trees, such as monkey, and birds of the air. Thus various components of the abiotic and biotic elements are involved in this ecological network. The chain of events in this story underpins their connectedness to one another, despite their intrinsic differences. It is noteworthy that biological difference is not social or cultural difference; that two species are different by nature does not mean that they have nothing in common. The Igbo proverb, *okesorongwere maa mmiri, mmirikoongwere, o ga-akooke* 'if rat joins lizard to play in the rain, if lizard's body dries, will rat's body dry?' is used to suggest that, though two animals may not share the same nature, nevertheless they interact in the social space. Ekwealor (2012:92) states that, the concept of "complementary dualism in African epistemology" stresses that one species does not live in isolation, but species are in some sense related to other species, and hence, there is no distinction between man and the environment. The Igbo idea of *ndummirinduazu* 'life of water, life of fish' is used to establish a symbiotic relationship between two different environmental elements, *mmiri* 'sea/water' and *azu* 'fish'. In the understanding of the Igbo, there is no difference between the sea and the fish; the two elements are inter-dependent. The life of the fish is water, and the life of the sea is fish; the two cannot be separated without the extinction of one or both.

The fact is that, as far as the ecosystem is concerned, fish is as important as the sea; fish receives its nourishment from the sea, while the sea is boosted and evaluated by the presence of fish. Notably, the fact that, all species are involved in a war of attrition for survival, due to scarce resources, does not negate the idea of connectedness; the point is that all species share the same ecological space and therefore are condemned to share resources, even if they have to compete for them.

The second outcome of this inquiry is the idea of respect for habitats; all animals in the jungle live and thrive in their unique habitats without interfering with the habitat of other animals. This is evidenced in the explanation provided by each animal during the interrogation by the Assembly *a no m nwanga m no* 'I was quietly in my place'. This response underscores the understanding shared by the animals about mutual co-existence, or the idea of 'live and let live' in the ecological space. The Igbo emphasize the idea of mutual co-existence with a prominent epithet: *egbebereugobere, nkesiibeyaebela, nkukwaaya* 'may the kite perch, and may the eagle perch; the one that says that the other will not perch, may its wings break'. Igbo employ this proverb to stress mutual co-existence, even in cases where the status of those in the relationship is lopsided. The eagle, seen as the king of all birds, represents nobility and prestige against the kite which is a common bird. The understanding is that mutual co-existence is not conditional and does not depend on status of the parties involved. The emphasis is on the common humanity, hence all species are admonished to allow other species to exist, without encroaching or intruding into their spaces. In the tale-song, it was intrusion into other species' spaces or habitats that led to the socio-ecological cataclysm, and when the Assembly of animals gathered, a major concern of theirs was delineating why one animal should intrude into another's habitat. It is in this context that human invasion into the private habitats of other species would be properly interpreted. A practice such as bush burning is an intrusion into the animal world, plant world, and even an assault on the ozone layer, with all its adverse implications on earth life. Humans engage in this practice based on the illusion that they are in control of the world, and therefore free to do as they wish with earthly resources. The possession of knowledge and technology by humans should not be a means of subduing or exterminating other species, but a means of preserving and enhancing the life and existence of all species in the ecosystem. The reality is that, animals are as much entitled to live in their wild habitats as humans, and therefore should be allowed to thrive, as long as they are not intruding into human space. If humans understand the mystical exchange between man/animals and plants or vegetation, they will find more compelling reasons to maintain the principle of live and let live in the ecosystem. The fact is that, all species have intrinsic value, and therefore allowed to thrive for the benefit of all.

A third result of this study is the approach adopted by the animals to investigate the immediate and remote cause of the environmental disaster that afflicted them. First, all animals were summoned to a meeting, reminiscent of the United Nations general assembly on climate change. The environmental problem was seen by all as a common challenge and a threat posed to each species in the ecosystem. The traditional Igbo idea of dealing with ecological issues is that all persons, big and small, must be involved. This is because of, all are vulnerable in the existential threat from an abused environment. In pristine Igbo world, cases of drought, famine, erosion, hurricanes, etc are seen as communal problems

and it is the *umunna* 'kinsmen' that assemble to tackle them. There was a high level of understanding among the Igbo about the effect of the environment on human life that necessitated the all-inclusive approach to addressing it. In contemporary times, this is no longer the case, as most people are more engrossed in their existential pursuits than in dealing with environmental challenges. In poor, developing African polities citizens are so challenged and plagued by unemployment, poor housing conditions, stifling inflation, malnutrition, and other social deprivations that they pay little or no attention to environmental issues that concern them. Incidentally, and ironically, poor citizens who constitute most of the population are the ones directly affected by ecological degradation. The truth is that, matters of the environment are matters that concern all in the polity, state and citizens, and requires a generic and holistic approach towards providing solution. Second is expedition of time in the matter; it was seen by the animals as an emergency that should be promptly addressed, to avoid compounding the problem. As soon as obu 'falcon' reacted and the weather changed, all the animals were summoned and they all assembled to address the issue. Traditional Igbo approach to ecological issues is to declare a state of emergency in the community. Such an approach implies deploying all resources, especially time towards providing solution to the crises. In contemporary times, the state would be more willing to declare a state of emergency because of insecurity or a putsch, than on issues of environmental devastation. It is customary for states in Sub-Saharan Africa to spend time and resources organizing seminars and symposia where environmental experts deliver speeches, then tackle the problem, at its budding stage. Meetings are important, but what is more important is timely deployment of resources to solve the problem. It is not perceived as a crisis that demands urgent attention. The truth is that environmental insecurity is as much a threat to life and existence of citizens as political insecurity, and therefore requires immediate response from the state. The difference is that, whereas political insecurity is obvious and overt, environmental insecurity is subtle and covert. Terrorists and bandits wielding AK47 rifles elicit fear in the eyes of citizens than ocean surge, desert encroachment, ozone depletion, oil spillage into aquatic systems, improper refuse disposal, etc.

Conclusion

This study has focused on Igbo perception of the ecosystem as reflected in a tale-song, *Awanjenje*. The tale is a narrative that involved quite a few animals in a chain of events that ultimately led to climate change in the community, providing the need for a holistic action to handle the crises. It is evident that, climate change or environmental degradation have their root in simple human activities. Going by the tale-song, it was a joke that sparked off the chain reaction that negatively impacted the environment. This study holds that, economic growth that tampers with natural habitats can create huge costs to humanity in the long run which may exceed the earlier short-term economic gains of the development. On the contrary, the social, health and spiritual benefits of preservation of natural habitats result in a balanced society where nature and technology cooperate to preserve life of all species.

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