

## ECOPOETICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO POETRY

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### **Abstract**

*Ecological concerns have become increasingly central to literary scholarship, particularly in studies that explore how African indigenous texts encode relationships between humans and the natural environment. Despite the growing body of ecocritical studies in African literature, limited attention has been devoted to the ways contemporary Igbo poetry constructs ecological meaning within its cultural and symbolic imagination. This paper, therefore, examines how selected Igbo poets represent and reimagine the natural environment through diverse thematic and symbolic configurations. It also interrogates the extent to which these poetic texts articulate an indigenous ecological consciousness grounded in Igbo cosmology, cultural values, and environmental ethics. Anchored in ecocriticism, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on close textual reading and thematic analysis of eleven (11) modern Igbo poetic anthologies. Findings revealed that contemporary Igbo poets consistently portray the environment as spiritually charged, morally significant, and deeply intertwined with communal life, healing practices, and cultural continuity. The poems further construct nature as paradoxical and multivalent, possessing both life-sustaining and destructive capacities. Natural phenomena are represented not merely as physical realities but as symbolic forces that shape human experience and ecological consciousness. The study concludes that contemporary Igbo poetry encodes a distinct indigenous ecological worldview premised on the interconnectedness of humans and the non-human world. It argues that Igbo poetic texts preserve and transmit ecological values that remain relevant to contemporary environmental discourse. The paper therefore advocates increased scholarly engagement with African-language eco-poetics, particularly Igbo literary texts, as important contributions to global ecocritical scholarship and environmental humanities.*

**Keywords:** Contemporary Igbo poetry, Ecocriticism, Ecological consciousness, Natural environment.

### **Introduction**

One of the most pressing concerns of the contemporary world is the preservation of the natural environment in the face of escalating climate change and other ecological threats. Across the globe, communities are increasingly confronted with the devastating consequences of deforestation, pollution, desertification, flooding, erosion, and the depletion of

natural resources, all of which threaten both human survival and ecological balance (UNEP, 2022; IPCC, 2023). In Africa, and particularly within indigenous societies, these environmental disruptions extend beyond material destruction to affect cultural systems, spiritual worldviews, and communal identities that are deeply intertwined with nature (Nixon, 2011). The Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, whose cosmology is deeply rooted in environmental interconnectedness and coexistence between humans and non-human entities, have also experienced the collapse of both ecological and cultural systems due to these environmental pressures (Ossai, 2024).

Although environmental concerns are often addressed within scientific and policy-oriented frameworks, literary texts equally possess the capacity to capture the emotional, philosophical, and symbolic dimensions of environmental experience within specific cultural contexts that transcend empirical discourse. Recently, environmental issues have increasingly become dominant themes in literature, especially in poetry across different cultures. In expressing their concern for the environment, contemporary Igbo poets increasingly deploy ecological imagery and symbolism to interrogate the relationship between humans and the natural world. Through poetic imagination, they reconstruct nature beyond utilitarian frameworks and foreground its agency, sacredness, and vulnerability. This paper explores how the natural environment is reimagined and represented in modern Igbo poetry. Specifically, it investigates how poets conceptualise nature's duality and ambivalence as: benevolent nurturer, mystical force, therapeutic agent, sublime, and at times destructive presence. The study argues that these representations reveal a deeply rooted indigenous ecological consciousness in which human existence is inseparable from environmental harmony. Through these representations, the poets not only demonstrate the indispensability of nature to human existence but also inspire environmental awareness and ecological preservation.

### **The Environment as a Concept**

The environment remains a fundamental concept in ecological, philosophical, legal, and literary discourse because it encompasses the totality of conditions that shape the existence and interaction of living organisms. Broadly defined, it includes both natural and human-modified conditions

that influence ecosystems, biodiversity, and human behaviour (Chiras, 2020). Etymologically derived from the Old French *environner* (to surround), the term reflects the encompassing and relational nature of the environment as the totality of external conditions surrounding life (Meena, 2017; Singh, 2022). Consequently, the concept is inherently dynamic, multidimensional, and context-dependent. The complexity of defining the environment has generated extensive scholarly debate across disciplines. Albert Einstein's oft-cited observation that "the environment is everything that isn't me" (cited in Kumar, 2018, p. 314) succinctly captures its all-encompassing nature. Likewise, Ball and Bell (1996) argue that the concept resists a singular, universal definition because its meaning varies according to disciplinary, cultural, legal, and philosophical contexts. Contemporary understandings of the environment generally incorporate the physical surroundings of human existence, including air, water, land, climate, flora, fauna, and the ecological systems that sustain life. Such interpretations also recognise the intricate interdependence between human and non-human entities within ecological systems.

Scholars have approached the concept from diverse disciplinary perspectives. In ecology, the environment includes air, water, land, climate, flora, fauna, and ecological systems that sustain life (Odum & Barrett, 2005). Fatubarin (2009) describes the environment as the totality of external conditions affecting the growth, survival, and adaptation of organisms, while Obasola (2013) highlights its atmospheric, climatic, and geographical dimensions. Legal and policy frameworks similarly define the environment broadly to include natural resources and the relationships existing among organisms and their surroundings, especially in response to increasing environmental degradation and climate change concerns. Contemporary environmental discourse generally classifies the environment into three interrelated categories: the natural environment, comprising physical and biological systems; the built environment, consisting of human-made structures; and the social environment, which encompasses cultural, economic, political, and ideological realities. This tripartite classification demonstrates that the environment extends beyond physical geography to include social relationships and human activities that influence ecological systems.

### **The Environment in the Igbo Worldview**

The natural environment occupies a central position in African thought, where it is often understood beyond purely scientific or material definitions. Traditional African cosmologies generally perceive nature as sacred and inseparable from communal existence. Rather than treating the environment as an object of domination and exploitation, African worldviews conceptualise it as a living continuum in which humans coexist with visible and invisible forces (Tangwa, 2004; Kanu, 2021). This ecological orientation reflects an indigenous philosophy grounded in interconnectedness, reciprocity, and harmony between humanity and the natural world. Among the Igbo, the environment possesses profound cultural and spiritual significance. Unlike Western conceptions that often separate humans from nature, the Igbo concept of the environment is “all-encompassing,” extending beyond the physical realm to include metaphysical and spiritual dimensions (Oguzie, 2022). This implies that, Igbo ecological worldview perceives the environment as a living spiritual and communal continuum in which humans, nature, and supernatural forces coexist interdependently. Thus, the environment is understood not merely as geographical space but as a complex relational network involving both human and non-human. This holistic conception positioned human and non-human entities as integral components of a larger cosmic order that binds together the spiritual, ecological, and communal realms. Such a worldview challenges anthropocentric assumptions common in Western environmental thought by foregrounding coexistence, reciprocity, and ecological balance. Echema (2010) and Uzukwu (2012) observe that life in Igbo thought is inherently communal and interdependent, since no individual being can exist in complete isolation from the wider network of life. This relational ontology is reflected in Igbo cosmological reflections on creation, existence, morality, and the continuity of life.

Recognising the interdependence of all entities within the ecosystem, the Igbo advocate an ethic of relationality that minimises the risk of ecological destruction and biological extinction. The environment is perceived as a sacred vessel of divine favour and a spiritual domain inhabited by both visible and invisible life forces. Consequently, the destruction or unjustified truncation of life (whether human, animal, or vegetative) is believed to attract spiritual and communal consequences.

Within Igbo metaphysics, every being possesses its own *chi* (personal spirit-force), and this spiritual vitality confers dignity and sacredness upon all aspects of existence (Onwudinjo, 2015; Okafor, 2016). Even natural objects such as stones, rivers, and trees may possess spiritual significance and symbolic agency within communal consciousness. This ecological spirituality is evident in virtually all dimensions of Igbo life, including agriculture, rituals, festivals, naming systems, oral traditions, and literary expressions. Environmental ethics are encoded in proverbs, myths, taboos, songs, and rituals that regulate relationships between humans and the natural world. Such ecological consciousness underscores the Igbo understanding that the survival of humanity is inseparable from the well-being of the environment. Hence, care for nature becomes both a moral obligation and a spiritual necessity aimed at ensuring the continuity of life, communal stability, and the longevity of the earth itself. This worldview provides an important philosophical foundation for understanding environmental representation in modern Igbo poetry, where nature is frequently portrayed as morally significant.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual and ecocritical analysis. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study is interpretive in nature and focuses on thematic constructions and representations of the natural environment in modern Igbo poetry. The primary data consist of 25 poems purposively drawn from eleven (11) written Igbo poetic anthologies as shown below:

| S/No | Poetic Anthologies   | Authors/Editors                     | Year of Publication | No. of Poems selected |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1    | <i>Akpa Uche</i>     | R.M Ekechukwu                       | 1975                | 2                     |
| 2    | <i>Nka Okwu</i>      | J.C. Maduekwe                       | 1979                | 3                     |
| 3    | <i>Utara Nti</i>     | E.N. Emenanjo                       | 2                   | N.D                   |
| 4    | <i>Akọ bụ Ndu</i>    | A.B. Chukuezi                       | 1988                | 2                     |
| 5    | <i>Ekenegwurugwu</i> | C. Nnabuihe, M. Onuegbu, & E. Obike | 1996                | 2                     |
| 6    | <i>Akọ na</i>        | G.N. Echebima                       | 2001                | 3                     |

|    |                           |                                    |      |           |
|----|---------------------------|------------------------------------|------|-----------|
|    | <i>Uche</i>               |                                    |      |           |
| 7  | <i>Ije Uwa</i>            | P.C. Okediadi                      | 2003 | 2         |
| 8  | <i>Okpokooba<br/>ra</i>   | I. Ikwubuzo, L.<br>Okoro, & E. Eze | 2005 | 1         |
| 9  | <i>Akɔnuche</i>           | I. Nwadike                         | 2006 | 2         |
| 10 | <i>Nka dī<br/>n'Uburu</i> | M. Asogwa                          | 2007 | 1         |
| 11 | <i>Abụ Ụto</i>            | N.R. Ezejesi                       | 2015 | 5         |
|    | <b>Total</b>              |                                    |      | <b>25</b> |

Table 1: Sample size of selected poetic texts

The poems were selected based on their ecological relevance and their engagement with environmental themes. While secondary sources, including books, journal articles, dissertations, and scholarly studies on ecocriticism, African literature, and Igbo cosmology, provided theoretical and critical support for the analysis. Data were analysed through close reading and thematic interpretation. Attention was paid to the poets' use of nuanced poetic and stylistic devices in constructing ecological meaning and articulating human–nature relationships. Ecocritical theory served as the major theoretical framework, particularly Reed's culturally responsive model, which enables the interpretation of environmental representation within the context of indigenous Igbo ecological thought.

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopts ecocriticism as its theoretical framework because of its relevance to the analysis of environmental representation in modern Igbo poetry. Ecocriticism is an environmentally oriented literary theory that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2004). Emerging in the late twentieth century– in response to global ecological crises, the theory advocates an earth-centred approach to literary studies. Coined by William Rueckert in 1978 and later popularised through *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996), ecocriticism shifts critical attention from anthropocentric assumptions toward a biocentric perspective that recognises the intrinsic value of the nonhuman world. Glotfelty (1996, p. xviii) defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, thereby positioning it as an earth-centred mode of literary analysis. In contrast to critical approaches such as Marxism or feminism,

which foreground class and gender respectively, ecocriticism shifts attention from anthropocentric assumptions toward a biocentric perspective that recognises the intrinsic value of the nonhuman world.

Central to ecocriticism is the assumption that literature reflects and shapes ecological consciousness. The theory examines how texts construct environmental meaning, promote ecological ethics, and represent the interconnectedness between humans and nature (Hutchings, 2007). Howarth (1996) identifies ecology, ethics, language, and criticism as key dimensions of ecocritical inquiry, while Buell (1995) emphasises that nature should function as an active presence rather than a passive backdrop in literary representation. As the field evolved, ecocriticism developed diverse strands, including deep ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology, eco-Marxism, and environmental justice criticism (Reed, 1997; Garrard, 2004; Bertens, 2014). Reed's (1997) culturally responsive model is particularly relevant to this study because it integrates ethical, ecological, and cultural concerns within specific indigenous contexts. The model aligns closely with Igbo cosmology, where nature is perceived not just as a physical environment but as a living, spiritual, and morally significant presence in constant interaction with humanity. It therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining how modern Igbo poets construct ecological meaning and articulate indigenous environmental ethics.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

The natural environment is vividly represented in written Igbo poetry, where it performs significant thematic, symbolic, and cultural functions. Through evocative portrayals of flora, fauna, celestial bodies, weather conditions, water bodies, and landscapes, Igbo poets foreground the beauty, significance, and vulnerability of nature within the Igbo ecological worldview. These poetic representations create immersive sensory experiences that underscore the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. This study examines selected modern Igbo poems, focusing on depictions of nature as benevolent, mystical, therapeutic, destructive, and awe-inspiring.

### I. The Natural Environment as Nurturer and Benevolent

One of the most prominent ways modern Igbo poets engage with the natural environment is through the portrayal of nature as a nurturing and benevolent force. In their poems, ecological elements are imbued with sustaining, protective, and life-giving qualities that reinforce humanity's dependence on the natural world. Poets such as Obienyem and Okediadi, for instance, elevate cassava beyond its ordinary nutritional function, transforming it into a powerful symbol of resilience, continuity, and communal survival.

In Obienyem's 'Akpụ' (Poem 1), cassava is personified as "*O jì Ìgbò ndù, jiokō, ọ mààrà onye agụ*" (That which sustains the life of the Igbo, cassava, the one who knows the hungry), a description that foregrounds its intimate relationship with human sustenance and survival. The poet further emphasises cassava's adaptability and enduring value in lines 10–12:

*È bèrè gị ebè, a kwòrò gị ākwọọ* (Were you sliced, were you grounded,  
*À bàrà gị āba, à hùrù gị n'ọkụ.* Were you fermented, were you roasted.  
*Ihe ị bụ kà ị bụ;* You are what you are;)  
(Obienyem cited in Emenanjo, n.d., p. 64)

Whether processed into *fufu*, *garri*, *abacha*, or roasted directly, cassava retains its essence and usefulness despite transformation. Through this imagery, the crop emerges not merely as food but as a metaphor for resilience, adaptability, and cultural continuity. Its enduring relevance within Igbo society symbolises the sustaining capacity of nature and underscores the deep ecological relationship between the people and their environment. Similarly, Okediadi's 'Akpụ' (Poem 2) reinforces this image, presenting it as an egalitarian resource accessible to all:

*Ọ bụ nri na-azụ imerime mmadụ,* (It is food that nourishes multitudes,  
*Ma ogbenye ma ọgaranya,* for both the poor and the rich, *Mmadụ*  
*inweta gị anaghị efu oke ego* Obtaining it does not require much money  
*Ị na-azụ ezinaụlọ nri...* You nurture families  
*Onye nwere gị anaghị na agụụ* Whoever has it knows no hunger)  
(Okediadi, 2003, p. 46-47).



This image transcends its utility, framing cassava as a companion, one that knows the hungry and does not require wealth to access. Hence, nature is framed as a levelling force that transcends socio-economic boundaries. This nurturing capacity is further extended in Nnabuihe's 'Nne na-azụ ụmụ' (Poem 3), where he anthropomorphised staple crops as maternal figures: *Nne na ede nakwa akpụ bụcha nwaanyị na-azụ ụmụ* (Mother and cocoyam and also cassava are women that nurture children), thereby invoking the maternal archetype of sustenance. Just as mothers nourish and protect offspring, these crops nurture human communities with food. This gendering echoes broader literary and cultural traditions where crops, particularly those crucial for subsistence, are often feminised to highlight their nurturing and regenerative capacities.<sup>1</sup>

This poetic alignment of botanical reproduction with maternal care reinforces the nurturing capacities of both women and plants, reflecting ecofeminist perspectives that interpret the nature-femininity nexus as a cultural strategy for valuing regenerative forces in patriarchal contexts (Reed, 1997; Esamagu, 2024).

Beyond crops, other natural elements such as air, sun, and water are also portrayed as life-sustaining forces. Onuoha's reflection on 'Mmiri' in *Akọnuke* (cited in Nwadike, 2006, p. 194) (Poem 4), emphasises its nurturing role in the existence of human and non-human. Through rhetorical questions, the poet probes the existential dependence of what life would be without water: *kedụ k'anyị gaara ịdị ma ọ bụrụ na Chukwu ekeghị gị?* (how would life have been like if God had not created you?), *...anyị gaara na-esi ka nsi* (we would have been stinking like faeces); *ahụ anyị gaara ịbụ etuto etuto* (our body would have been full of boils). Chukuezi's 'Ikuku' in *Akọ bụ Ndụ* (1988, p. 16) (Poem 5) presents the wind as a vital life-sustaining force, declaring: "Ọ bụ ya jì ndụ" (It is the sustainer of life) This assertion is grounded in the poet's observation of the wind's tangible effects on the body, particularly its capacity to provide physical relief in times of extreme heat: *Ọ nà-eme āhụ jùù mgbè*

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<sup>1</sup> Although *Utara Ntị* contains no publication date, historical and bibliographic evidence situates the anthology within the formative period of contemporary written Igbo poetry between 1975 and 1980 (cf. Ugonna, 1982; Nnabuihe, 2005; Ikwubuzo, 2007).

*oke anwụ̀ nà-àcha* (It cools the body the sunshine is scorching). Despite the harsh effects of the wind on biotic systems and human-made structures in the opening verse, Chukuezi still sees the wind as an agent of life. The poet thus offers a balanced ecological vision in which the wind is both destructive and sustaining, underscoring its intimate connection to human comfort and survival.

The sun is likewise portrayed as a nurturing and life-sustaining force. In Ndunagum's 'Anyanwụ̀' (cited in Nwadike, 2006, p. 258) (Poem 6), where the poet recognises its centrality to existence: *I dī mkpa maka ndụ ihe niile* (You are very important for the survival of all living things). The poem attributes both human nourishment and agricultural productivity to the sun: *I na-azu anuahu mmadu n'otu ụzọ* (You nourish the human body in one way) and *Ihe akuku si na gi adi ndu* (Plants derive their life from you). These lines implicitly reference the ecological process of photosynthesis and foreground the interconnectedness of all life systems dependent on solar energy.

Through these expressions, Igbo poets foreground the indispensable ecological functions of natural elements, reinforcing humanity's dependence on them.

## II. The Natural Environment as Mystical and Spiritual

In addition to its nurturing capacity, the natural environment is also conceptualised as a mystical and spiritual entity. The Igbo, in particular, uphold a worldview in which every element of nature possesses a spiritual force or essence (Onwudinjo, 2015; Kanu, 2021; Ossai, 2024). This sacredness is reflected richly in Igbo poetry, where elements such as trees, rivers, mountains, and animals frequently assume liminal or transitional roles between the physical and metaphysical domains. A notable example appears in Chukuezi's 'Ọfọ' in *Akọ bụ Ndu* (1988, p. 48) (Poem 7), where the sacred *Ọfọ* tree is portrayed as a spiritual and moral authority. The poet personifies the tree as the embodiment of truth and righteousness: *Ma aha m bụ ezi okwū* (But my name is truth). Through this metaphor, the *ọfọ* transcends its botanical identity and becomes a symbol of justice, morality, and ancestral authority. Its association with *ogù* (the Igbo principle of innocence and justice) further reinforces its sacred status: *Mụ nà ogù bụ nwannē* (I am sibling to ogù).

The poem also presents the *ofọ* as a bridge between the living and the ancestral realm. The lines: *Mụṓ niile ēteta n'ura / Ndị nna ānyị hà èsì n'ìlì kùlie* (All the spirits will awaken from their sleep / Our ancestors will rise from their graves) portray the tree as a spiritual conduit capable of invoking ancestral presence. Chukuezi further elevates its metaphysical authority in the declaration: *Osisì kà m bù mà akpàkàrìrì m mmadụ niile n'ike* (I am a tree, yet I possess greater power than all humans).

Echebima's portrayal of "Mamịwọta" in *Akọ na Uche* (2001, pp. 47-49) (Poem 8) exemplifies this dimension, as the water spirit is invoked in reverential and devotional language: *Igolo gbanyurū ọnwā... mma gị enweghị atụ..., lee otu iru gị na-egbu bam bam ka anwụ* (A tall woman that outshines the moon... your beauty is unmatched, ... behold how your face dazzles as the sun). Here, the poet engages the mythical water spirit not as fiction, but as spiritual reality, entreating her presence with a ritualistic invocation. The anthropomorphic depiction of this aquatic deity transforms nature into a living spiritual presence, capable of evoking awe, desire, and reverence.

Similarly, Ezejesi's poem titled "Ụdara" in *Abụ Uto* (2015, p. 30) (Poem 9) presents the *Ụdara* tree as a sacred entity that thrives only in pristine and untainted environments: *ụdara bụ osisi dị nsọ/ ebe dị ọcha na nso ka ọ na-epu* (ụdara is a holy tree/ it flourishes only in clean places). The association of the tree with spiritual encounters, such as hearing the footsteps of spirits at midnight, further reinforces the idea of nature as a liminal space where the physical and metaphysical intersect, as seen in the following line: *ndị ji ndèèrì achọ ụdara na-anụ ikirị ukwu ndị mmụọ*. The spiritual efficacy is also reinforced when the poet mentions that a barren woman picked the *ụdara* fruit in the dream and immediately became pregnant as she ate it in the dream: *ibiriachi tụtutara ụdara na nrọ, afọ ime ahawaputa mgbe ọ rachaa ụdara na nrọ*. These representations illustrate how modern Igbo poets sustain traditional beliefs by embedding spirituality within the natural environment.

### III. The Natural Environment as Therapeutic and Restorative

Modern Igbo poets also foreground the therapeutic and medicinal capacities of the natural environment, reflecting indigenous knowledge systems and ethnomedical practices. In Maduekwe's "Ugùrù" in *Nka Okwu* (1979, p. 41) (Poem 10), harmattan – a unique meteorological occurrence in West Africa – is portrayed not only as a climatic force but as a source of physical relief. Its cooling effect is captured in the line: *O siri mụ nùrịwa n'ihì oyi abàlì o nyèrè* (He asked me to rejoice because of the coolness it brings at night), highlighting its alleviation of tropical heat and associated discomforts. This statement is particularly significant within the geographical and climatic context of the Igbo society, situated within the tropical zone of sub-Saharan Africa. Here, the dry season is marked by excessive heat, which exacerbates discomfort through dehydration, profuse sweating, irritability, and disrupted sleep patterns. Contrastingly, the harmattan introduces a drop in nighttime temperatures and reduced humidity, which creates an environment more conducive to restful sleep. Beyond thermal regulation, harmattan is imbued with restorative power: *àhụ mgbū m na ọrịa m aghoqlara gị nrī ubòchị* (my body pains and sickness have become your daily food), suggesting that environmental conditions can absorb and neutralise illness. This representation underscores nature's role as a restorative agent. It is due to these benefits that Maduekwe expresses a strong inclination towards harmattan, *Bikō, i laa, bịa ọzọ mgbe afọ gwùrù* (Please, when you go, come again at the end of the year). Maduekwe's poetic appreciation of this seasonal transition reflects a broader cultural awareness of nature's cyclical healing properties.

Ezejesi's *Abụ Uto* (2015) further elaborates this therapeutic dimension through explicit references to medicinal flora and fauna. In 'Oji' (Poem 11, p. 27), is celebrated for its curative properties: *mgborogwu m bu ogwu* (my root is medicine) and *akwukwo m na-agwo iba* (my leaves cure malaria), firmly situating it within indigenous pharmacology. In 'ùkpākā' (Poem 12, p. 38), the seeds of the oil-bean tree is been praised for their curative effects on visual ailments, as captured in the line: *Ita gị bu ogwu anya nye ndị anya na-egbu* (Eating you is eye medicine for those with eye problems), while the snail in 'Ejula' (Poem 13, p. 34) is linked to fertility and antipyretic use: *nwaanyị na-achọ nwa rie gị...* (a woman seeking a child should eat you) and *ejula ọcha na-agwo akom*

(the white snail cures malaria). Likewise, ‘Azụ’ (Poem 14, p. 31) presents fish as a symbol of nourishment and vitality: *onye ji gi eme ututu na-amuke amuke* (those who eat you in the morning glow), while its absence results in deficiency: *onye hapu gi, kwashiokoro abata* (whoever neglects you, kwashiorkor follows). Fish is also associated with postpartum recovery (*E ji gi eme nri omugwo*), and even enhanced vision (*I bu anya na-ahu uzọ n’ochichiri*). Together, these representations construct nature as a repository of medicinal resources, integral to traditional healthcare and holistic wellbeing.

#### IV. The Natural Environment as Harmful and Destructive

Despite the predominantly positive representations of the natural environment, modern Igbo poets also foreground its ambivalence and destructive potential, thereby avoiding a purely romanticised depiction. This duality is captured in Maduekwe’s poetic oeuvre *Nka Okwu* (1979). In the poem ‘N’ohia nta’ (Poem 15), the forest ecosystem is described paradoxically as both nurturing and perilous: *ihe a na-eri nọ ya, ma ihe na-eri nòkwa!* (What is to be eaten is there, what eats is also there!). This paradox encapsulates the predatory logic of the natural world, in which survival is defined by simultaneous consumption and vulnerability. The presence of predators intensifies this sense of danger: “*Eke o na-èlo mmadu; agb, o na-amị òbàrà; agwọ, o na-atā mmadu; odum, o na-aga mbō*” (the python swallows man; the leopard drinks blood; the snake bites; the lion attacks). Through such imagery, nature emerges as a site of mortality and existential threat. A similar exploration of nature’s destructive capacity appears in ‘Ikpurikpu’ (Poem 16), where the jigger flea (Tunga penetrans) symbolises parasitic invasion and bodily suffering: *Mgbe nri putara, o rie echegharighi... Bazie mkporo mkpuru oka n’ulo obara* (When food comes, it eats without restraint... it establishes a prison within the house of blood). The imagery of imprisonment underscores both the parasite’s entrenchment within the human body and the inescapability of its affliction.

Maduekwe further personifies harmattan in Poem 10, as an intrusive and violent force that inscribes itself on the human body. The season’s impact is rendered through visceral imagery of physical discomfort:

*Kemgbè o rùtèrè, àhụ abūghikwa m ahụ* (Since it arrived, my body has not known peace)

*Ọ dọọla m̄ mbọ n'egbùgbere ọnū, nyē ya ọnya* It has cracked my lips,  
and given them sores  
*Ọ fùọla m̄ ọnụ n'oghere imi, kpọọ yā nkū,* It has blown into my  
nostrils and made them dry,  
*Aka o bitùrù m̄ mètè àhụ dum na-àgbakasị m̄.* The hand it struck me with  
made my whole body uneasy  
*Ọ siri mụ nùriwa n'ihì oyi abalì o nyere!* It told me to rejoice  
because of the night's coolness it gives!  
*Mà ọ fuchaghị m ahịhia o kpònyèrè m n'anya* But it did not expunge the  
grass it flung into my eyes  
*Ya nà ntụ ọ bọliri fee m n'ahụ n'ehihè* Along with the dust it  
hurled onto my body during the day  
*Ngafè ọ gáfèrè n'òbù ukwù m wàrà ya ụzọ idei* Its passage over my  
heels left them splintered and crooked)

Although the harmattan offers nocturnal coolness, this benefit is overshadowed by its harsh effects (cracked lips, desiccated nostrils, splintered feet, and destabilised bodies), highlighting the paradox of relief and affliction inherent in climatic conditions. Beyond human affliction, Igbo poets also depict nature as capable of self-devastation, reshaping landscapes and destabilising ecological balance. For instance, Nnabuihe's 'Igweudu mmiri' (Nnabuihe, et.al., 1996, p. 62) (Poem 17) portrays torrential rainstorms as forces of ecological violence. The effect of this rainstorm is fierce wind or hurricane, onomatopoeically described as sounding *Wuuu! Wuuu! Wuuu!* – a visceral invocation of the storm's ferocity. Its force is so terrible that it causes a lot of damages in the environment. Such damages include reversing the direction of vehicles, *Buuru ụgbọala chehie ihu;* and mothers and children crouching in a corner in dread: *Nne na ụmụ adakwụwala isi.* Not even the smallest occupant of the environment is spared: lizards, rats, and cockroaches flee or burrow in desperation, *Ebe mgbaba oke na ngwere, uchicha na mkpukpo, tinyere aragha na nchikị....* Even the aftermath of the rain-storm delivers no reprieve, only evidence of nature's brute force. Grasses and plants bow broken to the earth, *Ahịhia akpọọla isi ala;* palms and raffia palms lie uprooted, *Nkwu na ngwò eruo ala;* and even the enduring branches of the iroko and oil bean trees are shattered, *Alaka ojì na ugba adọkworo.* These images trace a trail of ecological devastation, marking the rain-storm as an instrument of obliteration, leaving behind a

disorganised environment. Okediadi reinforces this motif in her treatment of harmattan in ‘Ugùrù’ (Okediadi, 2003, p. 13) (Poem 18), emphasising its destructive impact on nonhuman life and the environment. Her description of vegetation during harmattan: *akwukwọ na-akponwu* (leaves dry up) evokes the image of forests stripped of vitality as foliage withers under the season’s harsh conditions. The drying of leaves signifies not just natural decay but a heightened vulnerability to wildfire and deforestation. This ecological danger is captured in the warning: *Oku ugùrù adighị mmenyū* (harmattan fire is not easily extinguished). The expression underscores the uncontrollable and destructive nature of wildfire, a recurrent environmental hazard in Igboland and other parts of West Africa.

Likewise, Asogwa’s ‘Anyanwụ’ (Poem 19) presents the sun as a paradoxical force within the ecosystem, reflecting its dual capacity to sustain and threaten life. Rather than offering a one-dimensional portrayal, the poet emphasises the ambivalent nature of the sun as both beneficial and destructive. Its harmful effects are conveyed through images of blinding sunlight: *ka ị ghara imakpọ m anya* (so that you may not blind my eyes) and intense dryness caused by heat: *...anọrọla m ndụ kpọọ nkụ ebe i ji ụtari gị gbuo m* (my life has dried up where you struck me with your whip). Here, the sun assumes an oppressive presence, its intensity becoming a threat to human wellbeing and survival. In sum, these poems reflect the Igbo ecological worldview wherein nature is understood as a multivalent force capable of both nurturing and harming life depending on circumstance.

## V. The Natural Environment as Awesome and Sublime

Igbo poets consistently represent the natural environment with a profound sense of awe, emphasising both its aesthetic and metaphysical depth. Landscapes, rivers, animals, and other natural phenomena are not merely described as physical entities but as symbolic expressions of divine power and cosmic mystery, reflecting an understanding that nature holds truths beyond human logic. This sense of sublimity is particularly evident in the poetic representations of landscape. In Nzeako’s ‘Ugwu’ (cited in Ekechukwu, 1975, p. 15) (Poem 20), the mountain is celebrated as a majestic creation of a supreme being, valued for both its grandeur and ecological functions in regulating rainfall, supporting habitation, and

moderating climate: *Mgbe mmiri ozuzo na-ezo n'ụwa, ugwu na-achupu mmiri ahụ./ Mgbe ndagwurugwu na-anara ya*. Similarly, Obienyem's 'Miliken Hill' (cited in Ekechukwu, 1975, p. 20) (Poem 21) and 'Ugwu Jos' (cited in Emenanjo, n.d., p. 58) (Poem 22) reiterate this theme of sublimity. The former foregrounds the mystery of natural formation through rhetorical questioning:

*Ọnye kèrè àlā à kà ọjị?... (Who created this land that is taller than the Iroko tree?...*

*Ọ bụ ọnye kpùrù aja à kà ọjị ànọ elū, Who moulded this sand as taller than four Iroko trees,*

*Miliken Hill –ọrụ ebube Chineke Miliken Hill – the glorious work of God.)*

Through these lines, the poet frames the hill as an ontological enigma beyond human construction, ultimately attributing its existence to divine agency. While the latter poem construed the mountain metaphorically as a life-sustaining force, suggestively described as the site from which the nation derives its breath: *Bikō, ọ bụ ebe à kà Nàìjíríà sì ekupụ umē?* (Is this where Nigeria draws it breathe?). Here, the mountain is elevated beyond physical geography to a cosmic entity – a “lung” that sustains national vitality.

Echebima in *Akọ na Uche* (2001) similarly encode sublimity in celestial imagery in his duo poems on the star and moon. In 'Kpakpando' (Poem 23), the star is rendered as both aesthetic and functional: *Mpe mpe ọlā ọcha na ọlā edo nke igwe*, (Pieces of gold and silver of the sky); *onye ndu onye ije* (companion to the traveller). The star thus becomes a symbol of guidance and continuity. In 'Ọnwa' (Poem 24), the moon is portrayed as a divine source of illumination that activates communal life. Its appearance signals joy and cultural renewal: *Ndu ọhụụ a na-amuke n'abalị* (New life starts to gleam in the night); *onye ọbụla obi anụrị* (everyone is happy); *Uzu na egwuregwu* (noise and play); *Uri na nkwa na akukọ ifo* (songs and music and folk tales). These lines present elements of the natural environment as affective and cultural catalysts, stimulating celebration, reinforcing social bonds, and sustaining oral tradition. Herein, the moon and stars are portrayed not just as astronomical bodies but as cultural and communal forces that sustain



storytelling, music, joy, and social interaction. Reed's culturally responsive ecocriticism recognises such representations as evidence that indigenous ecological systems integrate nature into communal identity and cultural continuity.

Ikwubuzo's 'Iyi Eziekwu' in *Okpokwobara* (Ikwubuzo, et. al., 2005, p. 35) (Poem 25) foregrounds the sublimity of a natural spring in Igbo land. The spring is introduced through the metaphor: *Ota kporokporo gbajuru ite* (That which drops but fills a pot), a paradoxical image that evokes gentleness and abundance. Though the spring flows quietly, it possesses immense sustaining capacity, reflecting nature's mysterious depth and generosity. Its source within rock "*N'okwute ka obi ya di*" further intensifies this sense of mystery, presenting the landscape as a repository of concealed vitality and enduring force. The poem deepens this sublime quality through the poet's recollection of the struggle associated with obtaining water from the spring. The repeated experience of returning home with an empty pot: *Mgbe m di na nwata, ughoro ole m gara gi bu ughoro ole m bu mpekele ite laa*, transforms the spring into an object of awe whose value is heightened by difficulty and endurance. The concluding line, *Iyi Eziekwu, i bu ike kete o nuo* (Iyi Eziekwu, you are one that can only be drunk through struggle), encapsulates the sublime duality of nature as both life-sustaining and formidable. The spring is therefore represented not just as a water source but as a powerful ecological presence that inspires admiration, reverence, and endurance. In sum, the above poems reject mechanistic views of nature by portraying the environment as spiritually meaningful, emotionally affective, and culturally generative.

### Summary of Findings and Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that modern Igbo poetry offers a rich and nuanced representation of the natural environment within the framework of indigenous ecological thought. Through ecocritical analysis, the study revealed that Igbo poets portray nature as an active, spiritually charged, and culturally significant presence that shapes human existence. Environmental elements are represented not only as physical entities but as symbolic and existential forces embedded within Igbo cosmology. The findings further revealed that the selected poems construct nature as

paradoxical and multivalent. While the environment is frequently depicted as mystical, therapeutic, life-sustaining, and sublime, it is also portrayed as destructive and overwhelming through images of wildfire, rainstorms, and harsh seasonal conditions. This dual representation reflects the Igbo ecological worldview, which recognises the interdependence between humans and the nonhuman world and emphasises the delicate balance necessary for coexistence. The study also establishes that modern Igbo poets employed varied literary devices such as imagery, symbolism, metaphor, personification, and anthropo-morphism to foreground the agency and vitality of the natural environment. The research concludes that modern written Igbo poetry functions as a repository of indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental ethics that advocate respect for nature, ecological harmony, and sustainable coexistence.

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