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Ecopoiesis and econoesis of Okam's *Difu*

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In loving memory of Dr. Chinyere Lilian Okam (born on July 15, 1975, died on August 15, 2022).

ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is a reaction to the increase in environmental consciousness. It is a kind of literary criticism that focuses on how literary writings contribute to ecology. Ecological theory is used to examine the interaction between the biological environment and the text. It looks at the aesthetics of literature and the philosophical connections between people, the environment, and texts. This article within the domain of ecocriticism aims at analysing Okam's writing style as it interplays with the propensity of Ameshi villagers in *Difu* to confirm the people's *raison d'être*. However, Hubert Zapf's theory of imaginative literature is employed to interpret the nature of cultural interconnectedness and diversity in the masterpiece under the aegis of the hypothetico-deductive method and the literary cultural-ecological approach. These methodologies imply that new hypotheses are derived from spontaneous relational conversations between the characters in the drama and their environment, which serve as reservoirs of cultural-ecological knowledge. This study begins with a discussion of ecocriticism in literature, followed by a description of the theory of creative literature to expand on Hubert Zapf's ideas and confirm results from evaluating the playwright's ecopoiesis and characters' econoesis in certain extracted samples of *Difu*. Finally, it shows the interconnectedness of nature in the play vis-à-vis Ameshi's culture.

Keywords: ecopoiesis; econoesis; cultural ecology; drama; literature; *Difu*; theory of imaginative literature (TIL).

INTRODUCTION

From the time immemorial drama is known for its impacting ethical values via entertainment in the amphitheatre. Every drama is always contextual and deals with

issues within cultural ecosystems because it is one of the most popular and age-old literary genres. Hence, I coined the term “econoesis” in this study to refer to an act of thinking within the physical and metaphysical environmental parameters that inform people’s worldviews in time and space to set out patterns for traditions and culture. As for ecopoiesis as an idea of Roberts Haynes re-echoed by Landis as “terraforming or the establishment of an ecology” (1997, p. 43). In literature, Zapf (2016a) refers to ecopoiesis as the:

differentiations of narrative structure, complexities of character relations, the interaction between external environments and interior worlds, chronotopes of time and space, compositional arrangements of motifs, symbolism, language, and rhythm, as well as to the intertextual dynamics from which any new individual text is composed (p. 92).

In this study, based on Zapf’s thought, I conceive ecopoiesis as a knitted literary write-up about environmental experience in which the author create two distinct utopic environments where natural world and metaphysical world interlinked to form the intrigue of the story or the poem. This article aims at analysing Okam’s writing style on the environment as it interplays with the propensity of Ameshi villagers in *Difu* to confirm the people’s *raison d’être*. However, Hubert Zapf’s theory of imaginative literature is employed to interpret the nature versus cultural interconnectedness and diversity in the masterpiece under the aegis of the hypothetico-abductive method and literary cultural-ecological approach. These methodologies imply that new hypotheses are derived from spontaneous relational conversations between the characters in the drama and their environment, which serve as reservoirs of cultural-ecological knowledge. This research is structured to begin by clarifying some terms while introducing the study; then, it describes the theory of imaginative literature to build on Hubert Zapf’s thoughts and validate findings from examining the playwright’s ecopoiesis and characters’ econoesis in some extracted text samples of *Difu*. Finally, it summarises the interconnectedness of nature in the play vis-à-vis Ameshi’s culture.

ECOCRITICISM IN LITERATURE

The planet’s climate is changing as a result of global warming; the oceans are becoming more acidic; the rate of extinction of species is approaching a critical threshold; the frequency of extreme weather events appears to be on the rise; and there are serious discussions about water and food security. Partially due to a catastrophic fire in the Amazon rainforest in August 2020, which produces 20 percent of the world’s oxygen and controls global temperature, the Earth is on the verge of a catastrophe (Alencar *et al.*, 2020). Due to the above, some regions of the world experience excessive drought, while others experience heavy rain and floods. The reason for these maladies is that since the industrial revolution, humans have altered the atmosphere of the Earth. Human activity as caused - extreme weather rises sea levels, melts polar ice caps, and causes mass extinction (Hanna & Hall, 2020). This age of demonstrable human influence on Earth’s ecosystems is referred to as the “anthropogenic era” (Crucifix *et al.*, 2005). To combat ecocide, scientists are identifying issues and providing remedies. Scientists are also assessing the cost of a transition to a green revolution economy, depending on the market. Above all, business analysts, scientists, and engineers collaborate to develop post-carbon growth-promoting technology. However, what is the function of academics who belong to

scientific fields that are frequently lumped together under the category “humanities”? How can they help come up with solutions to this multifaceted environmental crisis?

In response to the above inquiries, the subject matter of ecocriticism. Through the analysis of literature, ecocriticism as a subject matter tries to bring to attention the essential concerns of environmental deterioration (Johns-Putra, 2016). Many ecocritics believe that rapid economic growth is not synonymous with inclusive economic development. They believed that it was important to consider the negative effects of industrialization, mechanisation, globalisation, privatisation, and liberalisation in literature. Since ecology is the study of the link between the natural world and human existence, ecocriticism and ecocritics investigate the function of “location” in literature and other cultural materials through the use of theoretical methodologies (Murphy 2013). Ecocritics often examines the subtext of literary works, revealing anthropomorphic, patriarchal, and capitalist views toward non-humans, women, the environment, and landscape (Iheka 2018). Ecocritics also analyses dualism in texts such as nature versus culture and reason versus emotion since these ideas lead to certain perceptions of the environment (Grewe-Volpp, 2006). Thus, literary studies and environmental action are linked through ecocriticism.

An increasing number of literary critical theories have transitioned from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism in recent years. This is due to the fact that literary criticism is a mirror of modern society. At the initial stage, most theories were human centric, concerned with human value and not with non-human nature (Coulton & Lindley, 2019). These theories originated due to socio-economic changes in society. For instance, in the field of literary critical theories, through Sigmund Freud, the inner complexities of the mind came into focus, leading to the discovery of the sub-conscious and the unconscious mind (Mondrzak *et al.*, 2018). Sigmund Freud’s research gave birth to psychoanalytic criticism that was later developed by critics like Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan. The theories from the above authors were basically anthropocentric in nature because they focused on the psychic lives of the characters and paid no regard to their external environment. The theories were aimed at researching the hidden, repressed motives of characters or the author behind the story. The psychic context of the literary work received more attention than its social, historical, or environmental context. Hence, psychoanalytic criticism is anthropocentric rather than ecocentric. Modernist Western writers like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce delineate their era as “man’s rootlessness, his neurosis, and his moral degradation” (May, 1997). In their writing, there is nostalgia for the past world of faith in fixed values where there was peace, harmony, and certainty in life. There is only a sense of despair and hopelessness in modernist writing. The modernist writings are chiefly anthropocentric because their focus is on human beings.

In contrast, postmodernism accepts all modernist impulses but with a distinct perspective (Jameson, 1985). It embodies no nostalgia for the past, unlike modernism. It outlined topics such as multiculturalism, hybridity, displacement, consumerism, globalization, and the industrial-economic and urbanised existence of the present while also reflecting the rootlessness of human identity in this setting. Structuralism and deconstruction are the two critical ideas that evolved in France in the late 1960s from the works of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida (Kurzweil, 2017). According to these ideas, “word” is a linguistic and social construction, and the connection between the text and its

setting is one of approximation, fluidity, and delay rather than correlative referentiality. A “word” in a language has meaning in relation to another word; similarly, a literary book has meaning in relation to other writings and not in relation to its congruence with a fixed reality outside of literature. Consequently, this postmodern philosophy is likewise human-centered.

Post-colonialism was another groundbreaking thesis that garnered widespread acceptance. The major work of postcolonial thought is *Orientalism* by Edward Said (Lewis, 2007). Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak are among the most prominent postcolonial theorists. The theory addresses issues related to gender, racism, and class. The primary purpose of their ideas was to show the injustice committed by colonists towards the inhabitants of the colonised globe. V.S. Naipaul, William Harris, Salman Rushdie, James Ngugi, Joseph Conrad, Patrick White, and Raja Rao are well-known authors whose works have often been analysed from a postcolonial viewpoint. Only a few postcolonial authors describe both ecological issues and environmental racism. Native American authors reveal injustices committed against them on the grounds of race, class, and gender, preceded by land and resource exploitation. However, postcolonial authors’ primary concerns remained anthropocentric. On the other hand, eco-critical theory recognises external reality and rejects the idealistic tendencies of the other 20th-century critical theories.

However, understanding of the five relationships between literature and nature among critics has risen in recent years. Nature and literature have long had a tight association, as proven by the works of poets and other authors throughout the years and in almost every civilization on Earth. Today, the tight connection between the natural and social worlds is celebrated and emphasised across all fields of study. Literary critics try to figure out how authors have written about this close relationship between nature and civilization. Thus Chinyere Okam’s work *Difu* explicates her being both a social pedagogue and an ecocritic. Her social pedagogy preoccupies with the environment and how it influences life chances, quality of life, and opportunities in life. Being a critical pedagogue, her *Difu* demonstrates social mechanisms that control people as well as keep them in a certain place in the social structure. That is the reason I chose her masterpiece, owing to her literary and imaginative prowess. Chinyere Okam was also a Janusz Korczak fellow. Janusz Korczak is a Polish medical doctor who took care of children during the Polish-Nazi war. One can learn about his ideology through his 1928 book, *The Child’s Right to Respect*.

THEORY OF IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE (TIL) IN DRAMA

The Theory of Imaginative Literature is a new ecocritical theory in literature championed by the Anglo-German literary scholar Hubert Zapf since the early 2000s. This twenty-first century theory principally validates literature as a paragon synergistic model of cultural ecology in regard to its relative literary production and aesthetic creativity. To simplify further, Zapf stipulates that the pivotal claim of the theory of imaginative literature (henceforth TIL) is reflected in the fact that “literature acts like an ecological force in the larger cultural system” (2016b, p. 135). This theory stands on three functional models, which are “culture-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counter-discourse, and a reintegrative interdiscourse” (Zapf, 2016a, p. 95), to describe literary artefacts based on their changes over time within cultural and discursive systems. These discursive models deal with the intensity of imagination, the complexity of stylistic aesthetics, and the

prosodic semantics of our dramatic texts in order to interpret the symbiotic transformative relativity between culture and nature.

The functional model of a culture-critical metadiscourse explores literature to reflect dominant discourse by revealing social decay, vices, trauma, imprisonment, and peer pressures owing to the trending civilization, whilst literature as an imaginative counter-discourse converts symbiotically the social maladies or excluded culture of the culture-critical metadiscourse into dynamic imaginative stimuli and energy for the drama. As for the third functional model of this theory, it presents literature as a reintegrative interdiscourse, that is, it harmonises both the civilizational system and its dark side with transformative roles to foster continuous renewal of the cultural centre from its margin (Zapf, 2016a, pp. 104–114). Therefore, TIL is applied in this study to validate the possible environmental triggers of the behaviours and worldviews of the characters in *Difu* as probable evidence of the source of the playwright's creative imagination and idiosyncratic textual potency, which renew cultural values via storytelling and critique modern civilization. This theory invokes the literary cultural-ecological approach to *Difu*, a dramatic imaginative work and a social-environmental critique. In this play, cultural ecology is perceived as the study of the ways in which culture is used by people to adapt to their environment (Sutton and Anderson, 2014, p. 3). Hence, I shall examine, among others, the night marriage, dream, and syncretism in Ameshi village as they reflect in the text, which mirrors probably the south-eastern Nigerian society today.

OKAM'S ECOPOIESIS AND CHARACTERS' ECONOESIS

Difu is Okam's first published African drama, premiered in 2017 by a group of students at Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, Nigeria. It is an eponymous 16-sequence play that narrates the story of Difu, the only child of a widow, Ajanupu, in Ameshi village. Her love and care for the only child's future made her unknowingly tie Difu's destiny via diabolical means with the help of a wicked witch doctor, Onyukwe. Later, the spell cast on Difu boomerangs to delay his marriage up to 50 years of age, which is perceived as absurd according to the *Ameshi* (village) norm. His singlehood provokes his friends, family, and relations to consult two mystical powers: the Ameshi traditional priest Ogbunigwe and a Christian prophetess, Ejine, in order to liberate him and restore his destiny. At the end, Difu was liberated by the Christian divine and mystical intervention and married happily to Adaku.

Difu as an eponymous play, i.e., a play captioned after the principal character or a proper noun, has its poetics inherited from common practises among the classical French and English playwrights and also African Francophone playwrights, such as Molière's *George Dandin* (1668), Corneille's *Polyeucte* (1643), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599), and Nénékhaly-Camara's *Chaka Zoulou* (1954). *Difu* may have been inspired most recently by *Shehu Umar's* adapted novel, written in 1975 by Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the first Prime Minister of Nigeria, in terms of destiny restoration by mystical interventions (Umaru and Lyndersay 1975, p. 24). This literary composition reveals the syncretized beliefs of the *Ameshi* villagers due to colonial influences of deracination. Consequently, Ameshis are deprived of their Oru-Igbo and absolute traditional practises due to colonial influences. *Difu* is stylishly written in bilingual intra-translation, code switching, and code mixing of English and Oru-Igbo (for example, "OGENE: Umu m, nbona ni. Thank you my children" (Okam, 2021, p. 91), interpolating with a handful of African proverbs as some

of the characteristics of post-independence African literature, which are sort of “linguistic rape,” asserted Onyemelukwe (2016, p. 170). Thus, this classified *Difu* as a twenty-first century post-colonial African drama. Okam’s writing style is equally structured, like a screenplay made of 24 characters, including the narrator, the announcer, and the crowd.

Night Marriage

Marriage and its ceremony are prevalent sacred practises accepted across the whole world, likewise among *Ameshi* people. It is done at night, such as among Jews, Arabs, and some Margi people of northern Nigeria. In this dramatic masterpiece, the playwright presents a counter-discourse of the age-long practises upheld by the Ameshi customs and norms, whereby they are fading away due to socio-cultural integration with other tribes and clans of the region.

IDU: Onaku, I saw one marriage in the afternoon recently.

OGENE: Yes, it is for people who come from outside. Usually, Ameshi people do not marry from outside then. But civilization has integrated everyone. They do it, so that the outsider in-laws can go early since it is not advisable for in-laws to sleep over in their in-laws’ place. Though, this must be negotiated (Okam, 2021, p. 95).

The Ameshi cultural ecology is transforming to fit into the global community by being considerate about their relationship with in-laws to foster peaceful conviviality. Okam, as a forerunner of cultural evolution through attitudinal display in her characters Ogene, Idu, and Oputa, She is warning about the disappearance of Ameshi core values in night marriage, which she sees as the loss of Ameshi distinctive identity. In other words, Ameshi who were nocturnal due to their agriculture, geographical location, and natural features such as rivers, still stuck to the night marriage culture. It is rightly stipulated thus:

IDENU: Our people are really nocturnal. I see fishermen going to fish at night with their headlight.

OGENE: Yes, we care nocturnal, agrarian, we fish well. You catch the big fish at night (Okam, 2021, p.94).

The playwright is insinuating that changes in the environment trigger new thought patterns (econoesis) of the people within the ecosystem in order to create a new world different from the previous or a continuation of the former (i.e., ecopoiesis). The previous world of the Ameshi was nocturnal. However, their philosophy was patterned after the environment.

OGENE: (laughs), Yes, even now. So, when they gather like that, everything will be discussed and marriage date will be fixed. On the day of marriage, they will still gather at the same time because it is more convenient for them. There is no hurry to go back to farm, no reasonable excuse for not coming. No sunshine to disturb (Okam, 2021, p.94).

The environment has impacted Okam’s style in employing the characters in her play to behave that way. Hence, humans behave according to their environment, as asserted by Goldsmith and Reiter (2015). This is my conception of econoesis whereby humans reason only within the parameters of their ecosystem. It is the reason languages are limited by the peculiar registers and vocabulary of our surroundings. On the other hand, our discursive narratives suffer due to limited lexicons to express ideas. Therefore, night marriage and day marriage are co-jointly accepted today in the Ameshi village and, by extension, among the Igbos of Oguta, Imo State, Nigeria. This makes the drama

heterotopic, whereby two imaginative worlds are married to each other to connect nature and culture. This interconnectedness features even in Ajanupu's dream, the adjutant of the protagonist.

Dream and Syncretism

In Ameshi village, a sort of Christianity and African religions are both practised by some characters as a similar means to reach God in order to get issues resolved. Okam claims through her eco-aesthetic composition that the metaphysical solves social and ecological challenges. It was evident when Ajanupu dreamed of seeing Difu in the river surrounded by many ladies, thus:

AJANUPU: the dream goes like this. Light reveals dream land. Difu is inside the water surrounded by many girls. Difu opens a box filled with money, gives out to the different girls wearing white with maiden hairdo. When his money finishes, they make a path for him to go through. As he steps out, he sees a very beautiful girl coming along his path. The girl seductively walks pass him, and Difu stops her (Okam, 2021, pp.49-50).

Oneirological experience of Ajanupu gave the prophetess Ejine insight into Difu's delayed destiny. It is evident that even the metaphysical environment communicates to us only within the confines of human physical ecology. Shokrollahi justifies that "most, if not all of the world's religious traditions have regarded dreaming as a potential source of creative inspiration, especially great ones, i.e., Islam, Christianity, and Judaism claim that some dreams are the sources of insight" (Shokrollahi, 2016, p.88). This Okam's Difu is probably a rewrite of Shehu Umar by Tafawa Be Lewa, where the messianic mission to fulfil a destiny with the help of divinity is explored. Ejine helped Difu, while Rauhani was the messiah who protected Shehu Umar, which made Shehu Umar fulfil his destiny, according to Okam (2020). In Okam's philosophy, a dream is a divine intervention in human sociological ecology.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the imaginative creativity displayed in Okam's masterpiece reflected the interplay between the hybrid cultures of the Ameshi people: modernity and tradition mixed. Thus, their propensities are nurtured by nature and the cultural ecology. The TIL is vividly validated because Okam stands as a harbinger of the progressive transformation of Ameshi village, tilting towards the narrative of embracing non-members of their society under the aegis of intermarriage. This conviviality brings even nature and culture to integration, from the metaphysical to the physical environment, as demonstrated in Ajanupu's and Okonya's dreams. This means Okam employed reintegrative interdiscourse to reconsider an excluded culture and make it inclusive now. Hence, Zapf's thought is validated. I have discovered that the behaviour, worldview, and culture of the Ameshi people are shaped by the nature and features of their village ecosystem. Thus, it is translated to our present world as environment keeps providing us with the opportunities of survival.

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