DOING ECOTHEOLOGY IN AFRICA WITH CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract

Although African and western literary scholars have explored diverse themes and issues in Chinua Achebe's classic novel Things Fall Apart, there has been a general neglect of the theme of ecology in the literary work. This neglect is more evident among African Christian theologians who have mainly studied and analysed themes such as God, religion, morality, and violence in the novel. On account of the ecological silence in scholarly engagements with Things Fall Apart, this article explores the rich ecological motifs in the novel in dialogue with African and Christian theology. It argues that a rediscovery of the ecologically grounded and sustainable ways of living portrayed in the novel can provide African and non-African ecological thinkers and practitioners with spiritual and ethical resources for addressing the ecological crisis facing Africa and the world. At the heart of this article therefore is the new possibilities that Things Fall Apart offers us for thinking theologically about sustainable ecology and ecological harmony in the age of Anthropocene.

Keywords: Christianity, Africa, ecology, theology, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart.*

1. Introduction

In the sixty-five years since Chinua Achebe, the father of modern African literature, published his first novel *Things Fall Apart*[2] (hereafter *TFA*), one would expect that scholarly engagements with the novel would have sufficiently uncovered and dealt with the persistent ecological motifs present in the novel. This, however, has not been the case. Although literary scholars, critical theorists, and postcolonial

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[2] Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 5-158. Hereafter cited in-text by page number.

authors have studied and analysed the novel through the lens of diverse themes such as colonialism, violence, gender, tribe, language, family, marriage, patriarchy, masculinity, taboos, traditions, religion, identity, work, fate, and freewill, ecological themes, though ubiquitous, have mostly been neglected. This neglect is also seen in African Christian theological engagements with *TFA* where attention has mostly focused on themes such as conceptions of God in African tradition religion and missionary Christianity, communal moral decision-making, and colonial disruption.[3] Only recently have ecocritical scholars begun to pay attention to the ecological dimension of the novel. As Chengyi Coral Wu, a scholar of African environmental literary criticism, notes, *TFA* can be read as 'an environmental novel.'[4] This thematic shift toward environmentalism in Achebe's *TFA* is not unconnected to the rise of planetary ecological consciousness in our time. However, attention to environmental themes and issues in the novel has been scanty and, more so, affected by analytical tools of ecocriticism, which are limited in their ability to discern and grasp the finer details of theological, spiritual, and moral value in literary texts. As such, the portrait that emerges from ecocritical engagements with *TFA* has been rather hazy, fragmentary, and incomplete.

Given the ecological silence in African Christian theological engagements with *TFA*, this article initiates a dialogue between Achebe's novel and African Christian theology. This aligns with recent calls for the rediscovery of indigenous African ecological wisdom conveyed through narrative myths, ethical practices, and spiritual commitments that have been systematically eroded in the process of colonial encounters. As Stan Chu Ilo argues, 'there lies in the heart of Africa some rich ecological wisdom and traditions which need to be recovered and reappropriated by Africans in order to begin—in small ways—to protect, preserve, and guard the rich human, cultural, and natural wealth of the continent.'[5] The claim of this paper is that *TFA* is

[3] Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 1-32; Odozor, *Morality Truly Christian Truly African*, 240-268; Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 125-131.
[4] Wu, 'Toward an Ecocriticism in Africa,' 141.
[5] Ilo ed., *African Ecological Ethics and Spirituality*, 6.

a vital resource in the task of recovering some of Africa's rich ethical and spiritual treasures that can respond to the ecological crisis facing Africa and the world. For if our present ecological crisis is, theologically speaking, the result of the collapse of the intimate bond between God, human beings and the earth, as Pope Francis argues in *Laudato Si'*,[6] then *TFA* teaches us how that bond sustained our ancestors and why it is still relevant for us today. Indeed, the novel can show us new possibilities that abound for thinking theologically about sustainable ecology in the age of Anthropocene.

I will present my argument in three parts. In the first part, I will provide a detailed overview of the ecological plot of *TFA* in order to contextualize how the people of Umuofia prioritized ecological harmony within a tripodal paradigm of relationship with deities and spirits, human beings, and the land. In the second part, I offer a theological reading of the ecological plot of *TFA*, analysing more closely some of the environmental, spiritual, and social issues that arise in the text. In the third and final part, I will conclude by pulling together all the strings of the discussion to highlight how the advent of colonialism and missionary Christianity brought a disruption in the way of life of Umuofia and the implication of this disruption on ecological harmony.

2. The Ecological Plot of *Things Fall Apart*

That Achebe portrays precolonial Igbo society in Umuofia (a pseudonym for Achebe's native town of Ogidi in south-eastern Nigeria) as one shaped by three intertwined relationships—to the deities and ancestral spirits, to human beings, and to the land—is not in doubt. *TFA* open with a portrait of Unoka, the father of the novel's protagonist Okonkwo, set within the cosmology of time and place. Of him, Achebe writes: 'Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship, and he loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty. And it was not too hot either, because the cold and dry harmattan wind was blowing down from the

[6] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 2, 66.

north' (6). If Unoka is lazy and unprosperous, as we see in the novel, he nevertheless knows that the good blessings of the deities and ancestral spirits were to be besought through prayers. When his friends visited him and he had to pray over kola nut before offering hospitality, he asked his ancestors for life, health, and protection (7). In this opening chapter of *TFA* the reader already begins to appreciate the religious spirituality of the Umuofians and how this shaped their relationships with one another and with the land which produced their food. To fully mine the richness of these three forms of relationship in *TFA*, I will discuss the ecological plot of the novel through six key markers: i) agrarian life; ii) spiritual belongingness; iii) respect for and peace with the land; iv) family and communal fellowship; v) ecological and cultural epistemology; vi) landscape and forces of nature.

Agrarian life

The people of Umuofia were grounded in the land. The occupation of most people in the village was farming, animal husbandry, and palm wine tapping. Wealth was measured mostly by hard work and the bounty of one's farm. We see this through the lens of Okonkwo: 'During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. He was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue' (13). On one end of his compound, he had two barns where his 'long stacks of yam stood out prosperously' (13) and at the opposite end 'a shed for the goats' (13-14). Seen through agrarian eyes, Umuofia esteemed hard work and loathed laziness or idleness. This was the point of contrast between Okonkwo and his father Unoka. For in a culture where parents ceded landed inheritance to their children, Unoka 'had no yams' (19) talk more of handing land or other property to his children. This was why when he was prepared to start his own farm, Okonkwo had to appeal to Nwakibie, whose farm he had worked, to loan him some yams (19). To own a personal farm was highly esteemed in Umuofia. Not only was it a mark of respect, it was also a man's way to prosperity. For as Achebe tells us, sharecropping was 'a very slow way of building up a barn of one's own. After all the toil one only got a third of the harvest' (19). It should also be noted that agrarian culture in Umuofia was gendered. Yam, 'the king of crops, was

a man's crop' (20) while women grew coco-yam, beans, cassava, maize, and melons (20, 27). Like himself, 'Okonkwo wanted his son [Nwoye] to be a great farmer' (27).

Spiritual belongingness

If the people of Umuofia worshipped their gods and goddesses (Ani, the earth goddess in charge of fertility; Amadiora, the goddess of the sky and thunder; and Idemmili, the goddess of water) and revered and sacrificed to their ancestral spirits, these forms of obeisance served to cement the bonds not just between the living and the living-dead (ancestors) but also between the deities, the people, and the land. The protagonist 'Okonkwo kept a wooden symbol of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children' (14). Okonkwo followed the example of his father Unoka who also paid obeisance to their ancestors (7). During times of misfortune, the Umuofians go to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to inquire about the reason for their ill-fate, as Unoka did because 'he always had a miserable harvest' (15).

Although Umuofia had many gods and goddesses, at the center of its spiritual cosmology was Ani, the Earth goddess who regulated both interpersonal relationships and relationship with the land (25). Indeed, Ani was 'the source of all fertility' and 'played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth' (30). To show how connected the people of Umuofia were to Ani, they would always beseech her before the planting season. After a bountiful harvest, they also returned to Ani to give thanks to her (30) and then to the ancestors (32).

Respect for and peace with the land

If the Umuofians recognized that fertility and bounty were gifts of Ani, the Earth goddess, they also imagined their relationship with Ani in relation to peace with the land. Between harvest and when the next

planting season begins, Umuofians observed a sacred week called the Week of Peace where the land is left fallow to heal and replenish. It was a sort of sabbath of the land. During the Week of Peace, it was customary for Umuofians to maintain peace with one another. Violence of any sort was frowned at. 'It was unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week' (25). Thus, when Okonkwo beat his youngest wife Ekwefi because she went to plait her hair and did not return in time to prepare his afternoon meal, Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess showed up at his *obi* (living quarters) before dusk and told him of the grave consequences of his action (25). Okonkwo had to offer sacrifice of 'one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries' (25) at the shrine of Ani to appease her and the land.

Worse still when Okonkwo killed Ikemefuna, a boy that had been given as ransom to Umuofia by Mbaino for an Umuofia woman that was killed at the Mbaino market. Although the Oracle had decreed that Ikemefuna be killed, Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, and another elder Ezeudu cautioned him to have no hand in the boy's death—a warning that Okonkwo failed to heed. Consequently, after the act, Obierika told Okonkwo, 'What you have done will not please the Earth' (52). From the time after the murder of Ikemefuna, a series of misfortune began to befall Okonkwo, which would eventually culminate in his being exiled from Umuofia after his gun accidentally killed a 16-year-old boy at a funeral. Narrating this episode, Achebe said: 'It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land' (94). The banishment of Okonkwo and other punishments meted out on him were meant to cleanse the land 'which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman' (94).

Family and communal fellowship

The maintenance of ecological harmony that underwrite the Week of Peace in Umuofia had a social dimension. 'No work was done during the Week of Peace. People called on their neighbors and drank palm-wine' (26). The period between the planting and harvest season was another important occasion for family fellowship: 'At such times, in each of the countless thatched huts of Umuofia, children sat around

their mother's cooking fire telling stories, or with their father in his *obi* warming themselves from a log of fire, roasting and eating maize' (28). This rhythmic pattern of work and rest which ordered the family and communal life of Umuofia came to its climax during the Feast of New Yam which was held every year just before the harvest began (30). The festival took place over the course of several days. It was a celebration of life, abundance, friendship, and fellowship as well as a time for rest and relaxation after an exhaustive agricultural season. During the communal celebration, young men took part in wrestling contests while the young girls of the village participated in cultural dance. Food and drinks were provided in abundance. Families were expected to invite their in-laws, friends, and neighbors from surrounding villages to join them in the celebration of the feast (32).

This convivial ecology in Umuofia was not restricted to the new yam festival. It also pervaded the celebration of marriage during which the whole community would gather at the home of the bride's parents. Women brought various food items such as coco-yams, plantain, and fish to supplement the preparation of food and also took part in the cooking. The men brought pots of palm wine, and while the women were cooking they sat together drinking and conversing among themselves. The children went to the stream to fetch clean water which was used for the cooking (84-85). Achebe describes the family compound of the bride during this period as 'busy as an anthill' (86) with people flocking to the celebration. There is no way to talk about ecological harmony in Umuofia while overlooking this social ecology. Indeed, if any member of the community was celebrating, it was the whole community celebrating.

Ecological and cultural epistemology

In several places in *TFA*, Achebe illustrates how grounded Umuofia's children are in the knowledge of their ecosystem. Although we first get a sense of this from Ikemefuna, the boy who was brought from Mbaino to Umuofia, the Umuofians display this distinctive quality as well. The basic reason Okonkwo's first son Nwoye was inseparably drawn to Ikemefuna was because 'he seemed to know everything. He could

fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even from the elephant grass. He knew the names of all the birds and could set clever traps for the little bush rodents. And he knew which trees made the strongest bows' (23). Ikemefuna's knowledge went beyond his familiarity with a wide range of tree and animal species or with the creativity of making bows. 'Ikemefuna had an endless stock of folk tales. Even those which Nwoye knew already were told with a new freshness and the local flavor of a different clan…. Nwoye even remembered how he had laughed when Ikemefuna told him that the proper name for a corn cob with only a few scattered grains was *eze-agadi-nwayi*, or the teeth of an old woman' (28).

There can be no doubt that this cultural knowledge was passed on from parents to children. Achebe tells us that Okonkwo invited the boys of his household to his *obi* and told them 'stories of the land' (42). The women did same to their girl children. Some of the stories transmitted by parents to their children include tales of the tortoise and his cunning, the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the world to a wrestling contest and was finally defeated by the cat, the quarrel between Earth and Sky and how Sky withdrew rain from Earth for seven years until the Vulture was sent as emissary to plead with Sky (42). The story of why Tortoise's shell is rough and not smooth is perhaps the most captivating of the folktales that Okonkwo's children knew and told (74-76). Although these folk stories were mostly about the animal world, they were told and retold in order to convey deep and abiding moral truths and lessons such as the importance of cultivating virtues such as truth, honesty, wisdom, solidarity, compassion, fortitude, and valor. The cultural knowledge of the people of Umuofia is further demonstrated by their keen awareness of the plants, roots, and trees with healing and medicinal properties (59, 65-66).

Landscape and forces of nature

From the opening page of *TFA*, Achebe introduces his readers to the environmental landscape of Umuofia. Almost every page of the first sixteen chapters of the novel is brimming with graphic intimations of the nature, beauty, and process of life in the ecosystem. Early on, we

find Unoka talking with his friends about the 'dazzling beauty' of the morning sun (6) and about 'the heavy rains' (7). The sun was an object of communicative proverbial wisdom, as we hear Unoka say to his friends, 'Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them' (80). Achebe writes a lot about the 'moonlit night' (10) when the 'happy voices of children playing in open fields would then be heard' (10). Some nights, silence envelopes the village, 'a vibrant silence made more intense by the universal thrill of a million, million forest insects' (10). Achebe speaks about 'dangerous animals' such as a snake which 'was never called by its name at night, because it would hear' (10). The biodiversity of Umuofia is conveyed in *TFA* from insects, kites, birds, locusts, ants, and chickens, to banana, palm, udala [African star apple], and iroko trees, including various species of roots, trees, grasses. The dawn of day is marked by the first crow of the cock (83). Achebe describes the coming of locusts during the cold harmattan season as 'a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty' (44). Cosmic elements such as the sun, moon, rainfall, thunder, and wind as well as landscapes such as bushes, forests, rivers, and streams are so deeply vital in Umuofia such that Achebe does not mind occasionally personifying them (99-100).

Although the elements of nature can be benevolent, as we see in the above quotation, they also can occasionally exhibit caprice. Achebe conveys this unpredictability through an eight-week period of drought at the beginning of one planting season, which led to Okonkwo's loss of four hundred seed-yams (20). Worst of all was a torrential rainfall that again dealt a heavy blow to Okonkwo the year that he took eight-hundred seed-yams from Nwakibie. It was, as Achebe wrote, 'the worst year in living memory' (21). Umuofia never interfered with these extreme forces of nature even though it had a rainmaker who could intervene (28).

3. Ecotheological Hermeneutics of *Things Fall Apart*

Having explored the ecological motifs in *TFA* in the foregoing section, it is necessary to offer an ecotheological appraisal. Like the foregoing

section, I will undertake this appraisal through the same six ecological markers that I have outlined.

Agrarian life

The agrarian life of the people of Umuofia conveys a deep appreciation of an important element in the Genesis creation stories. Norman Wirzba makes this evident when he speaks of God as an agrarian God who not only loves the soil but also works with the soil from which he fashioned the first man and woman (Gen. 2).[7] Scripture characterizes God as a farmer, gardener, shepherd, and carpenter. These identities reveal 'the divine power that creates, sustains, nurtures, liberates, and heals the world.'[8] From Christian scripture, we learn that humans are invited to share in God's love for creation through the discipline of tenderness and loving care for all that God has created. If the earth is being degraded today, it is because humans have lost a sense of their vocation to love the soil, to till, and care for it. What we are suffering from is the result of '*ecological amnesia*' caused by our turning away from the land.[9] To counter human alienation and loss of connection to the earth, from which we came and to which we shall return (Gen. 3:19), the relationship of the Umuofians to the land can provide some helpful glimpses. Through farming and animal husbandry, Umuofia was able to provide food to feed and sustain its people. The fact that wealth was measured by hard work on the land and the reward from the land's bounty offers a theological glimpse of work as sacred and dignified and as man's way of participating in renewing and building up God's creation. Today's humanity needs such 'a rich and balanced understanding of the meaning of work.'[10] This vision of agricultural life needs to be recovered in Africa where colonial modernity has cast village life and farming as primitive and backward, thus contributing to the migration of many of Africa's young people from rural communities to urban centers in search of white collar jobs. This situation is hurting the prospects of food security in Africa as farming is looked down on

[7] Bahnson and Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land*, 16.
[8] Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit*, xi.
[9] Bahnson and Wirzba, 28.
[10] Pope Francis, *LS* 125.

as less dignifying and has been practically abandoned by many.[11] Agricultural life in precolonial Umuofia is an antidote to this estrangement from the land, which feeds into the crisis of unemployment that is also ravaging Africa today. Addressing this situation requires 'a recovery of a spirituality that affirms human beings' connection and belonging to the earth.'[12]

Spiritual belongingness

If there is one important truth that the people of Umuofia embodied, it is their firm belief in the existence of deities and spirits that order their lifeworld, especially Ani, the goddess of the Earth. Although African Christian theology affirms belief in one God and not many gods, the spiritually enchanted world of the Umuofians can help today's Africans to appreciate the intimate relationship of the supernatural with the natural, the world of the living and the living-dead. African Christian ecotheology must therefore begin with the fundamental assertion of God as creator, 'that this world and its life are sacred gifts of God that are meant to be cherished and celebrated.'[13] This affirmation of God as creator of the world and all life provides an explanation for the deep interconnection of everything—human and nonhuman—in the universe and helps us to see God's creation beyond the instrumentalist way of thinking—as something out there, a resource to be exploited—to seeing the world as 'a sacrament of communion.'[14] Pope Francis points out that it is no longer acceptable to practice a spirituality 'which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator.'[15]

If African Christianity will make a significant contribution to ecotheology today, it will entail recovering the centrality of the Creator God and Father of Jesus Christ as the *owner* of all creation. Indigenous African spiritual practices, even as we find among the Umuofians, such as prayers, worship, and sacrifices to the deities and spirits was in view

[11] Katongole, *Who Are My People?*, 132.
[12] Katongole, 135.
[13] Wirzba, 3.
[14] Pope Francis, *LS* 9.
[15] Pope Francis, *LS* 75.

of this acknowledgment. If, as Bujo proposes, Jesus is Africa's proto-ancestor, it inevitably means that to pay obeisance to this proto-ancestor is to acknowledge his God and Father 'the source of life [who] not only supports life but rather produces life before people themselves know.'[16] Thus, when we honor the land, we honor the good ancestors, and thus honor God.

Respect for and peace with the land

In traditional African setting, land was not merely a place for the extraction of resources, as has become dominant with the advent of colonial, liberal capitalist modernity. As we see through the lens of Umuofia, precolonial Africa held the land as a deeply sacred and spiritual entity. The importance of land in Africa transcends economics into a breadth of social, spiritual, and political significance. It is 'considered as the place of birth; the place where the ancestors are laid to rest; the place which the creator has designated to be passed down to successive generations; and the final resting place for every child born on its surface.'[17] For these reasons, it is understandable why Umuofia's inhabitants had moral norms for regulating behaviours and practices that might honor or dishonor the land. For instance, when Okonkwo's gun accidently killed a 16-year-old boy during the burial of a village chief, Okonkwo was exiled from the land for seven years.

This precolonial African understanding of land as a spiritual reality can also be seen in the opening pages of the Bible. After the disobedience of Adam and Eve, they were both banished from the Garden (cf. Gen. 3:23-24). When Cain killed his brother Abel, his punishment was presented as estrangement from the land and from God (cf. Gen. 4:12-16). In fact, the Lord God said to Cain, 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand' (Gen. 4:10-11 RSVCE). Drawing from *TFA* and the Bible, African Christian theology needs to recover an understanding of ecological violence as not just a grievous sin against God and against

[16] Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 19.
[17] Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa*, 63.

human dignity, but also against the land. The Christian notion of reconciliation must therefore integrate practices of reparation and healing of the land, or to borrow Leonardo Boff's words, 'a yearning for a way of redemption.'[18]

Family and Communal fellowship

TFA illustrates the beauty of family and communal living in Umuofia. The convivial atmosphere where parents and children sit together, eat together, and tell one another stories extended beyond the family to the whole clan. Children often gathered under the moonlight to play. The *ilo* was the green area in the village where assemblies for sports, dance, fellowship, and discussions were held. Through feasts such as New Yam festival, marriage ceremonies, and funerals the entire community and its neighbors celebrated life, industry, friendship, and fellowship. A strong social bond existed the people and avenues for frequent interpersonal encounters were created. The example of Umuofia helps us to see that the idea of integral ecology is not just about protecting the physical environment but also the social ecology. If environmental and social degradation go together, as Pope Francis tells us, 'a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach.'[19] This social approach is very much needed in our times. Despite the global networks of integration of people, our modern world has not succeeded in overcoming isolation and social fragmentation. Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken about the 'globalization of indifference' which rears its head in a lack of concern for the good welfare of others.[20] This isolationism is also seen in the way modern urban planning in Africa and other parts of the world has failed to create spaces for socialization, recreation, fraternity, and friendship.

We do not necessarily have to return to precolonial Umuofia to appreciate the beauty of cultivating a shared identity as a people and a notion of commons that includes everyone, especially the poor who are mostly the victims of ecological degradation. It is in the context of

[18] Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 4.
[19] Pope Francis, *LS* 49-50.
[20] Pope Francis, 'Overcome Indifference and Win Peace.'

community life, as Umuofia exemplifies, that 'relationships develop or are recovered and a new social fabric emerges.'[21] Nowhere is this shared communal life well expressed in *TFA* than when Okonkwo invited his kinsmen in Mbanta to his new yam feast. As they drank palm-wine, one of the oldest members of the clan rose to thank Okonkwo, leaving a wisdom that continues to resonate in modern African appreciations of the text. He said: 'A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so' (127). Norman Wirzba has explored the value of eating together as a biblically grounded practice of reconciliation in an age of social dislocation. He calls Christians to reclaim the deep connection between food and faith which, theologically speaking, has a capacity to reveal hidden signs of our human longing for sacramental life and communion.[22]

Cultivation of ecological and cultural epistemology

A distinguishing mark of the children of Umuofia was their rootedness in their ecological world. As we saw through Ikemefuna, Nwoye, and Ezinma, not only did these children of Okonkwo know a range of plant and animal species, they also were grounded in the folk stories and myths of their people. It was therefore understandable that Umuofia would be incensed when Enoch, the son of the snake priest, who had adopted 'the white man's religion,' desecrated a masked spirit (142) or when an *osu* (outcast) from Mbanta who had become Christian killed a sacred python (120-21). In contrast to Okonkwo's children who were grounded in the cultural epistemology of their people, Enoch and the *osu*'s embrace of Christianity had made them turn their backs on the customs and traditions of their people.

Several African authors have written copiously about how the advent of European colonialism and missionary Christianity played a key role

[21] Pope Francis, *LS* 232.
[22] Wirzba, *Faith and Food*, 40-74, 194-235.

in the disruption of the ways of life of the African people. Writing about the experience of the Kikuyus of Kenya at the onset of colonialism, the Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai argues that the demonization of African indigenous religious and ecological conservation practices were part and parcel of colonial policy of conquest and occupation.[23] By deconstructing indigenous beliefs as pagan, primitive, and demonic, missionary Christianity also got entangled with the destruction of sacred symbols, sites, and species of plants and animals that Africans considered untouchable for ecological conservation purposes. The displacement of African religious and ecological myths by Christian narrative myths led to the abandonment of environmentally friendly conservation practices. With the ascendancy of extractive capitalism, this has led to the reckless exploitation of Africa's resources. In this light, the Kenyan ecological educationist Kinikonda Okemasisi has raised concerns about how the loss of biodiversity is leading to the ecological impoverishment of Africa and her young people.[24]

In *Laudato Si',* Pope Francis observes that two patrimonies are under threat today: the patrimony of nature and the patrimony of culture. These patrimonies are part of the shared identity of each community and place, and are the foundation upon which we can build our common home. He calls for greater attention to local cultures and traditions and respect for the rights of indigenous communities, which are important for the way we think about the relationship between human beings and the environment.[25] Similarly, Karen Armstrong has pointed out that human history has been shaped not just by scientific, instrumental logic but more importantly by the myths and stories through which people were introduced to deeper truths that could not be apprehended by science. Armstrong stresses that 'we may be unable to return wholesale to a premodern sensibility, but we can acquire a more nuanced understanding of the myths of our ancestors because they still have

[23] Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth*, 95-97.
[24] Okemasisi, 'Ecological Education and Spirituality,' 136-137.
[25] Pope Francis, *LS* 143.

something to teach us.'[26] 'The great myths of the past presented the natural world as imbued with sacrality.'[27] A rediscovery of this love for nature that animated the minds and souls of our ancestors can help deepen our spiritual commitment to the environment, as the people of Umuofia did.

Landscape and forces of nature

In *Laudato Si',* Pope Francis writes that 'The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish.'[28] This situation, which Francis reads as a symptom of the throwaway culture, is partly the reason for the loss of interest in the beauty of creation in all its human and nonhuman dimensions. Wirzba has drawn attention to the truth that 'every created thing—ranging from soils, waters, and clouds to earthworms, fish, and people—is loved by God.'[29] This awareness can shape our attitude to the environment beyond the extractive logic that looks at nature from a narrow utilitarian and economic perspective. Achebe's deliberate focus on the beautiful landscape of Umuofia counters the logic of instrumentalism. His portrayal of nature as a gift from the deities for common use can also help to resist the politics of resource privatization that now orders the global liberal capitalist economy.[30] A rehabilitated ecological imagination will help us to appreciate the mutual coexistence of the human and nonhuman creation in a community of fellowship.[31] And while the caprice of natural phenomena, as we see exhibited in Umuofia, might be beyond human control, attention needs to be paid in our own time to the underlying human causes of environmental disruptions and climate change and the consequences of these on the poor. In this regard, our societies need to build a new solidarity in the face of the sufferings of the victims of environmental tragedies.

[26] Armstrong, *Sacred Nature*, 24.
[27] Armstrong, 24-25.
[28] Pope Francis, *LS*, 21.
[29] Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit*, 4.
[30] Maathai, 101.
[31] Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 21.

4. Conclusion

Although this article has focused on the ecological harmony that existed in precolonial Umuofia, illustrated by the intertwined relationship between deities and spirits, human beings, and the land, it is important to state that Umuofia was not altogether an ideal society. *TFA* brings this to light in several ways. It provides narrative intimates about practices such as killing of twins, gender-based violence against women, caprice of the deities, banishment of clans-people suffering from certain diseases to the evil forest, and prevalence of inter-tribal wars. Against this backdrop, the coming of missionary Christianity marks a turning point. The activities of the missionaries in Umuofia and Mbanta cover the final chapters of *TFA*. Achebe is eager to show that both British colonialism and missionary Christianity brought disruptions to the way of life of the people of Umuofia and her neighbors. To put this disruption in context, Achebe narrates the content of the preaching of one of the white missionaries in Mbanta, which denigrated the pluralistic local deities as 'gods of wood and stone' and affirmed the supremacy and unicity of the Christian God (110-111). It is therefore understandable why some converts to Christianity become impudent and went as far as 'killing the sacred python, the emanation of the god of water' (120). Against this backdrop, an elder of Mbanta describes Christianity as an 'abominable religion' (128).

Generations of modern African Christian theologians have grappled with the method of missionary evangelization in Africa. Although a discussion of African Christian theological engagement with this issue is not within the scope of this article, it needs to be stated that most scholars agree that European colonialism and missionary Christianity brought profound changes to Africa that are still being felt to this day. I bring up this discussion at the end of this article in order to score two points. The first point is that precolonial African societies were not perfect but they socially embodied spiritual and ethical commitments to the deities, to human beings, and to the land. The second point is that while missionary Christianity introduced the God of Jesus Christ as a personal God who loves all human beings equally and cares about the

dignity of all, the method of missionary evangelization brought about religious and spiritual disenchantment in Africa which was felt at the ecological level. Alfred W. Crosby makes this point when he argues that the most profound changes caused by imperialism were not political but environmental and biological.[32] Just as Umuofia searched for values to assure its stability in the face of violent colonial encounters and a period of rapid changes, so is contemporary Africa battling for its survival. Thus, what Willene Taylor refers to as a 'crisis of the soul'[33] in his description of the travails of Umuofia is an apt metaphor for Africa today amidst the crisis of human and ecological degradation.

The urgent task facing Africa today is how to resist the assault of ecological imperialism on the continent. This will require a bold and courageous commitment to rediscovering those ecologically sustainable ways of living that our ancestors and their societies embodied. This is not a call to return to a Stone Age but certainly points to the need to retrieve the sacrality that imbued the way our ancestors looked at and related with created nature. Such retrieval can raise our ecological awareness and motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of the earth. The goal of this article has been to argue that African literature plays an important role in this task, as the ecotheological analysis of Achebe's *TFA* illustrates.

[32] Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*.
[33] Taylor, 'The Search for Values Theme in Chinua Achebe's Novel,' 27-39.