

AJOFIA IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S METAPHORICAL PRESENTATION: A CASE FOR SACRED SPACES IN IGBO TRADITIONAL ECOSPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

This work viewed *Ajọ Ohia* from the prism of its ecological value which translates to religious, social and economic benefits and from the etymological and morphological significance of the words that make it up – “*Ajọ*” and “*Ohia*”; and gave a dimension that has always missed out in the understanding of that space among the Igbo. It also explored through literary analysis, the metaphor of *Ajofia*, the chief masquerade among the *Egwugwu* of Umuofia in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The conceptual framework of the research is taxonomical, in a sense that it weighed *Ajọ Ohia* in the scale of the entire conservation and preservation systems among the Igbo using socio-religious tools and in other cultures of the world which are empirically proven. The work understands “*Ajọ Ohia*” as an Igbo code name to designate a space whose preservation is critical to the survival of species and the integrity of the human environment as could also be found in many ancient cultures, like the “The Cedars of Lebanon” and “The rain forests of Amazon”. *Ajọ Ohia* is the most imposing symbol of *Nsọ* among the Igbo, whereas *Nsọ* is the nucleus of Igbo morality and spirituality. True to its African-ness, all aspects of Igbo life are dependent on human-spirit dynamics. The work, therefore, questions “Evil Forest” as the proper translation of “*Ajọ Ohia*” and averred that the elimination of *Ajọ Ohia* is predicated upon a mistranslation/misunderstanding and spells the devastation of Igbo ecospirituality. Data collected from literatures and reading of the human and environmental codifications in the Igbo environment was accessed through participant observation, consulting with existing texts and oral interviews; assessed through textual analysis and multidimensional approach.

Keywords: Environment, Africa, Environmental Preservation, Ecology, Ecospirituality, Chinua Achebe, Igbo Land

Introduction

In the African classic of all times, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe presented two concepts, which to every Igbo speaking reader, translate each other. They are ‘*Evil Forest*’ and ‘*Ajofia*’. Note that ‘*Ajọ Ofia*’ (contracted by Achebe to ‘*Ajofia*’) is the same thing as ‘*Ajọ Ohia*’; the difference is about dialect since different Igbo cultural areas speak different dialects, but the meaning in whatever dialect or cultural area remains the same. Chinua Achebe is from Ogidi which is currently the headquarters of Idemmili North Local Government Area of Anambra State. In the dialect of Ogidi and environs, ‘*Ajọ Ofia*’; is used. Elsewhere in Anambra, Imo and Abia States, ‘*Ajọ Ohia*’ is used. In Enugu and Ebonyi States another form can be found – ‘*Ajọ Osha*’. These are the five Igbo speaking States in Nigeria; cognizant of the fact that Igbo speaking peoples can also be found in Delta, Rivers, Cross River and Bayelsa States, all falling into any of these dialectical categories. In any case, all nuances may mistranslate ordinarily to ‘*Evil Forest*’. In this work, we use ‘*Ajọ Ohia*’, its rendition in *Igbo Izugbe* which is central

and most accepted in literary circles. Meanwhile, Chinua Achebe presented the ‘*Evil Forest*’ as an important part of every community’s landscape and ‘*Ajofia*’ was the chief of *Egwugwu* masquerade in Umuofia.

Yet in Igbo Language (which is the Language of the communities of Achebe’s creation), ‘*Evil Forest*’ translates as ‘*Ajo Ofia*’ ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ or ‘*Ajo Osha*’, at least in their everyday usage. Why did Achebe create these two imageries without making it clear that they translate each other? Why did he name the Chief of *Egwugwu* masquerade ‘*Ajofia*’ which any everyday Igbo speaker will translate as ‘*Evil Forest*’? It would appear that this was deliberate or that Achebe did not see the curiosity or even mislead this may engender especially for an Igbo-speaking reader of his book. For instance, in Nnewi community of Anambra State, Nigeria, which is an Igbo speaking area, his narrative inspired the institution of a masquerade called ‘*Ajofia*’ and even the founder called the masquerade ‘*Evil Forest*’. But is ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ ‘*Evil Forest*’? The answer to this question to everyday Igbo person is likely to be ‘Yes’. The present researcher thinks that there is more to ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ not known to that everyday Igbo speaker. The work is an investigation into the significance and function of ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ within the Igbo natural ecology. The work recognizes the Igbo environment as fundamentally religious. It, therefore explores the religious functions and significance of ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ to derive that ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ is the sacred space of Igbo ecospirituality. Finally, the work questioned the veracity of the translation of ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ as ‘*Evil Forest*’ leveraging on the absence of this linkage in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and understanding his creation of ‘*Ajofia*’ as a metaphor which captures the significance of ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ in the Igbo religious culture.

Traditional Igbo Religion sustains rituals and practices that re-inaugurates and retains a primordial harmony and unity of the two regions of the Igbo world – *Uwa Mmuo* (Spirit World) and *Uwa Mmadu* (Human World), (Okpalike, 2008). The traditional institutions, sacrificial systems, ritual prescriptions, moral demands, architecture, landscape designs, arts and culture all aim at bringing about this harmony, unity and conviviality of humans, spirits, plants, animals, rivers, mountains, rocks, celestial bodies and chemicals together in a community of sustainable ecosystem (Onunwa (2005), Ogbukagu (1997)). The present researcher believes that ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ is a material symbol and physical manifestation of that harmony; a veritable case for ecospirituality in Igbo religious culture. This researcher used the method of textual analysis to investigate the socio-religious/ecological function and metaphorical significance of ‘*Ajofia*’ in Chinua Achebe’s novel. In as much as Achebe understood ‘*Evil Forest*’ as an indispensable part of every community’s landscape which serves for the disposal of dangerous or life-threatening materials (including dead bodies of humans), there are other purposes of a more socio-religious and ecological nature it served and which even those disposals signify and symbolize. At the same time, the work did analysis of the formational etymology and morphology of the compound word, ‘*Ajo Ohia*’, to eke out other nuances in the transliteration of the word and a comparative analysis of ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ vis-à-vis forest reserves in other cultures and climes. The work employed taxonomical analysis in its conceptual framework which is spread out throughout the work.

Finally, there was an ontological investigation into *Afa* – a device that preserves ciphered information and data about everything important to the Igbo in the past, present and future time to find out what it coded ‘*Ajọ Ohia*’ to be. In doing so, this work belongs to that category of research in Igbo studies that recognizes *Afa* as a reliable source of information about Igbo life, world and philosophy, past, present and future.

Methods and Approaches

A multidimensional approach is effective in African studies, and have come highly recommended. In the study of African Traditional Religion, Madu (2002) recommends:

African Traditional Religion permeates every fabric of the African life – politics, economics, history, ecology, etc.... Based on the above backdrop, it means that the study of African religion implies the study of its perception of the universe. It becomes very impossible to use only one methodology in doing this, since this cannot do any justice to the subject.

In accord with this, this work adopted a phenomenological approach by investigating *Ajọ Ohia* entirely on its own terms and not from the prism of the common folk, popular opinion or established interpretations of its nature and functions among the Igbo. The work also deployed a comparative approach by viewing *Ajọ Ohia* side by side other forest reserves in the world, from the point of view of their *raison d'être*, social, religious, environmental and ethical significance. It also went beyond historical and traditional representations into evolutionist approach by identifying the locations of *Ajọ Ohia* in the contemporary Igbo societies; chiding its present occupants to the restoration of their ecological and spiritual values.

The conceptual framework employed in this work is taxonomical. The work examined the systems of preservation and conservation of spaces among the Igbo and found the customary deployment of socio-religious tools of consecration, abominations, totems and taboos in that exercise. The researcher understood *Ajọ Ohia* more as a code of a religious nature which the code system of *Afa* could shed more light on. It went further into the taxonomical evaluation of *Ajọ Ohia* from other spaces guarded by the same religious restrictions in the Igbo landscape – *Ohia Isigwu*, *Ohia Ogovu*, *Ohia Mpamaorụ*, *Ohia Ezekoro* and so on. Textual analysis was the tool of examining Chinua Achebe’s creation of *Ajofia* and its metaphorical implication for his Igbo reader for whom this translates to ‘Evil Forest’.

Textual Analysis of Achebe’s Narrative about ‘Evil Forest’ and ‘Ajofia’

In his narration about the allocation of land to the missionaries at Mbanta, reasons and expectations, Achebe (1994) wrote:

Every clan and village had its "evil forest." In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An "evil forest" was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. It was such a forest that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the

missionaries. They did not really want them in their clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept.

Achebe graphically presented the “*Evil Forest*” and stated its use and purpose among the Igbo. Clearly, Achebe did not make enough case to come to the conclusion that an “evil forest” was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness, though it is curious why he had to render it in parenthesis. Was it evil merely because portent fetishes of great medicine men who died were dumped and the dead bodies of victims of evil diseases were buried in there?

Achebe’s use of ‘Evil’ disease and ‘Fetishes’ were suggestive of bias against the Igbo cultural practices which in the period of this composition was prevalent. If it were not so, then what makes disease “Evil” and why would religious objects be referred to as “Fetish”? However, it is important to note that this description did not capture all the landscape he is describing stood for. No doubt his perspective is the perspective of a western-trained Christian who inadvertently did not give himself the extra task of unbiased analysis of even what he knew or could it be that Achebe knew something he was not just saying? For instance, Achebe knew that “the potent fetishes of great medicine men” were re-positing in the “*Evil Forest*”, but did not go further to inquire into it and that was why he used the word “Dump”. He might have thought that such were discarded. On the other hand, we found that they were rather preserved for possible recycling. Achebe could have thought that such portents were dangerous to be kept in a living environment because no living person may have the knowledge of their operations, not because they were evil. Otherwise the questions may be asked: Were the services of those medicine men among the people evil? Were they regarded as evil men? What could have justified in Achebe’s mind this unwholesome assertion: “An “evil forest” was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness?”

However, it is true that the traditional Igbo culture often used fear and scare to mask a great deal of reality which sometimes may not be related to the scary or fearful. In this matter, Achebe may also be a victim of those fear and scare factor since he has only a gentleman’s knowledge of ‘*Ajọ Ohia*’. Like Achebe, many Igbo who do not have access into the exclusive knowledge of the Igbo religious world and who suffer from bias induced by western education and Christianity would have the same understanding about *Ajọ Ohia*. Curiously, Achebe came up with another spin when he introduced *Ajofia*, the leading *Egwugwu* masquerade of Umuofia. According to Achebe (1994):

Ajofia was the leading *egwugwu* of Umuofia. He was the head and spokesman of the nine ancestors who administered justice in the clan. His voice was unmistakable and so he was able to bring immediate peace to, the agitated spirits. He then addressed Mr. Smith, and as he spoke clouds of smoke rose from his head.

Ajofia masquerade is one of Chinua Achebe’s fictitious creations. Nevertheless, its role and feature can relate to many other masquerades in different real Igbo cultures. It is curious why Achebe had to reinvent that role and feature of a masquerade and named it *Ajofia*, thereby creating either the question or acceptance in the mind of the Igbo reader

about the relationship between “Evil Forest” and “*Ajo Ohia*”; it is the question which this work escalates beyond the acceptance.

In the mind of an everyday Igbo speaker, *Ajo Ohia* translates as *Evil Forest* and is understood exactly as Achebe described it above. Why then did he choose to use that which connotes evil as spokesperson for the people of Umuofia? Are they evil people or do their ancestors ultimately represent evil? Or did Achebe imply that *Ajofia* was not evil? At this point in Achebe’s narration, this researcher finds it difficult to dismiss him as a product of western education and Christianity who is ignorant of the religious culture of his people. Achebe could have created *Ajofia* as a metaphor for the desecrated and lost sacred space which symbolized Igbo ecospirituality. He could have figured out that the revitalization of *Ajo Ohia* was necessary to restore moral sanity, absence of which the character Enoch was emboldened to desecrate *Egwugwu*. Achebe knew that the action of Enoch was *Nso* (anathema) among the Igbo.

Meanwhile to thread in the “Evil Forest” was also *Nso* which can bring *Odachi* (calamity). In spite of that, Achebe knew that the “Evil Forest” is an indispensable part of the Igbo community. Therefore, to the traditional Igbo, it was *Nso* (anathema) to clear ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ so as to avoid *Odachi*. However, having cleared *Ajo Ohia*, the principal symbol of *Nso* was gone and the people suffered a fatal moral injury; people were no longer scared of abominations, anathemas and taboos. Enoch’s outrageous audacity was a case in point to buttress this new consciousness. Meanwhile, according to Okpalike (2015):

In morality *Nso* is made up of prohibitions or taboos which must be strictly avoided. Keeping away from or avoiding *Nso* certainly guaranteed the enhancement of life in the social and spiritual sphere.

Every Igbo know the consequences of violating *Nso* and no one readily bears through those consequences. Okonkwo’s seven years exile was consequence of the violation of *Nso* and those years contributed in weakening his moral strength for fighting what he considered threat to his existence as Igbo. Clearing the “*Evil Forest*” and building a church on it amounts to *Nso* - desecration - and evidence that things fell apart indeed. Enoch’s action was classical demonstration that the traditional moral ethos has been compromised and this necessitated the creation of *Ajofia* to spearhead the restoration of the environmental integrity.

Achebe seemed to impress that it was only the revival of the ‘Evil Forest’ which can restore sanity in the mind of the people to connect back to their sense of moral obligations; it was for this revival that he created in the character *Ajofia*. The subsequent failure of *Ajofia*’s intervention and the aftermath of the burning down of the Church built by Mr. Brown which all signaled the mortal loss of the ‘Evil Forest’, contributed to the frustration of the character Okonkwo which ultimately resulted to his tragic end. However reserving forests as part of the ecosystem or dedicating such reserve to God or spirit is not exclusive to the Igbo. It is, therefore, important in this work to examine forest reserves in other environments and cultures.

Types of *Ajo Ohia* in Other Cultures: A Comparative Approach

In this section we examine types of *Ajọ Ọhia* in European literature and Oriental religious practices. This research presupposes that Dante Alighieri's mind was influenced by the ideas available in his European cultural environment about the woods captured in the themes of eeriness and weirdness of the forests and woods. In his epic trilogy - *Divine Comedy*, Dante described the journey of the sinful soul in the first part, *The Inferno*.

In middle of the journey of our days
I found that I was in a darksome wood
The right road lost and vanished in the maze.
Ah me! how hard to make it understood
How rough that wood was, wild, and terrible:
By the mere thought my terror is renewed.
More bitter scarce were death (Canto 1).

Dante referred to the wood (Forest) as 'Darksome', "Maze", "Rough", "Wild", "Terrible", "Bitter" and "Desired death scarce". His description sounded scarier than Achebe's of evil forest. In literary analysis, "*Darksome wood*" represented "*Sin*". Some authors like Warner (1995) had suggested an overwhelming influence of St. Augustine's *Confession* on Dante for which the "*Darksome wood*" represents "*Scripture*":

For the dark wood, I propose, represents not Dante's errant will,
but instead the salvific obscurities of holy scriptures, its dark
appearance does not signal its inherent danger, but instead
reflects the darkness that is the pilgrim's mind.

Although he acknowledged the more unanimous interpretation of it being a metaphor for sinfulness, error, errancy, alienation from God, however, he believed that critics should have taken cue from the condemnation of former philosophical ways by Cato and Beatrice in the *Purgatorio*, to realize that it was the newly found devotion to the "Divine Word" that presented the difficulty which the "*Dark Wood*" was its allegory. On the other hand, Adlawan (2019) belonged to that more popular interpretation of Dante:

The dark forest is a metaphor for everything that Dante thought was wrong in 1300. It includes sin and other imperfections of the world. His *Inferno* contains his hatred for the people who had been "evil" in his time especially during his exile, as opposed to *Paradiso*.

Dramatically, the experience of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* took place in the same area of the "*The Dark Forest*," but the references to the defining concepts can only be understood as the experience of the soul-pilgrim in traversing the regions which ultimately lead to a wholesome fulfilling Christian experience. Beyond the analysis of the correct or incorrect interpretation of Dante's allegory, the present researcher is more interested in the imagery of the dark wood, its content and the experiences Dante brings in his poetry. Clearly, it was a place of sinister forces, torture, illusion, suffering and frustration whose opposite is *Paradise*. This does not invalidate the fact that the same tortuous road inexorably leads to *Paradise*; Dante did not miss out on that. In other

words, beyond the veil of darkness, torture, sinister forces and suffering which the darksome wood represent lies the value/ treasure of paradise. The different excruciating encounters of the pilgrim were understood as stations of purgation for the ultimate good of Christianity. In other words, that which was havoc, disaster, pain, torture and easily goes for evil, was not evil of essence. Consequent upon this, by “*The Dark Forest*,” Dante does not imply “*Evil Forest*,” either as essentially opposed to good or morally deficient of good. He rather expressed the picture of a soul mired in the region of darkness on its path to the light. “*The Dark Forest*” becomes a necessary evil only on the presupposition that it necessarily orientates towards the good sought by the soul.

On another instance, Kumar (2008) gave an insight into the religious idea of production, conservation and management of forests in India.

Starting with the days of the Vedas and extending into the post-Vedic and Puranic times (200BC – 100AD)... environment consciousness besides natural resource and biodiversity conservation were intrinsic features of Hindu rituals and religious practice. Both productive as well as protective aspects of forest vegetation were emphasized in Vedic forestry.

Hindu myths made copious references to forests as if the world was an endless forest. Rajan (2013) alluded to three categories of forest life in the Hindu tradition:

Shri Van, a forest which provides you prosperity; Tapo Van, where you can contemplate as the sages did and seek the truth. The third is Maha Van – the great natural forest where all species of life find shelter.

As a result, it is common to find forest reservations mentioned in Hindu mythology as well as in the *Puranas* and *Itihasas* like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. For instance, one can find the Takata, Chitrakoota, Madhavana, Pushkara forests and Kamyaka woods. These serve spiritual purposes and sustain the ecosystem. Certain kinds of Hindu religious rituals and practices were also tied to forests. It is also known that around 500BC, Gautama Buddha was said to have taught that man should plant a tree every five years. Groves were also marked around the temples where certain rules and regulations applied which aimed at the conservation and preservation of life in there. O’Brien (2018) traced the attraction of the Buddha to trees to the fact that he was born under the Sal tree and at enlightenment was also under the Bodhi tree and at Nirvana surrounded by the Sal tree. The Thai Forest Monk tradition was founded in the 20th century against the backdrop that ancient Buddhist monks lived on top of trees, not in houses. The whole idea is that the forest offers the environment of unity with nature. The preservation of forests for trees which enhanced spiritual life is even today an integral part of Buddhism.

In the Old Testament of the Christian Scriptures, Ezekiel 31:8 referred to “the cedars in the garden of God”, which is actually located at Mount Lebanon up till today. The cedars became the national symbol of Lebanon and even features on their national flag. However, the garden of God is a vast forest that conserves the cedars which is one of the best timbers given by nature. To preserve it, it was dedicated to God. The need to

protect and preserve the Amazon rainforest has been on the front burner for most conservationists. It is the largest tropical rainforest in the world; bigger than North America. Baranski (2019) elaborated on the ecological/environmental, social and economic importance of the rainforest. Various studies have also shown that the rainforest is rich with pharmaceutical properties for cures. Throughout the world, there is renewed effort to conserve the forests and make the human environment greener; the Igbo knew this, centuries before this age and each community, no matter how small, has this conserved area referred to as *Ajo Ohia* precisely for the purpose of this preservation and conservation. It appears to the present researcher that it is the story of *Ajo Ohia* which is told in different cultures where human beings were experiencing and doing the same things as the Igbo did in the past. The understanding of the ordinary Igbo today is that these spaces were evil in the moral sense of the word and as Chinua Achebe had described, it contained sinister forces and powers of darkness. For this reason, they applaud the work of missionaries who desecrated and cleared off most of those areas in Igbo land as having liberated the Igbo people from the dangers and contamination of those evil. The present researcher is uncovering the most often slurred over relevance of these spaces in the life of the Igbo.

The General Notion of ‘*Ajo Ohia*’

There are two ways of understanding the Igbo world. This is captured in the Igbo adage “*A tuoro Omara, o mara; a tuoro ofeke, o fenyé isi n’ohia*” (the knower easily deciphers the hidden meaning in a proverb, the ignorant beats about the bush when presented with the same proverb). In other words, the Igbo people are divided between the ‘Knowers’ (*Omara*) and the ‘Ignorant’ (*Ofeke*). The best of the Knowers among the Igbo are the *Dibia*. To understand the hidden meaning of things, the Igbo consult the *Dibia*. In former days, this consultation (most times done by those frustrated by and who despaired from problems and life conditions and those who simply are seeking direction towards life decisions that must be made) were for ready-made solutions, which gave the class of *Dibia* a lot of power and control of the world and affairs. Today purposes of inquiry have changed. Researchers desire to lay knowledge bare and give anyone who craves, access to it for the improvement of the world. This researcher does not live in the denial that the *Dibia* has that knowledge that can be accessed. It is on this note that the general notion of ‘*Ajo Ohia*’ will be examined in two levels.

First Level: Omara’s Notion of Ajo Ohia

The ideal *Omara* is *Dibia*. The *Dibia*, especially the *Dibia Afa*, are the holders of the wealth of knowledge among the Igbo. It takes conscientious introspection to access the depth of their knowledge. According to Umeh (1997):

The terminology *Dibia*, in demotic Igbo language, is made up of two words, namely *Di* and *Abia*. *Di*, means husband, Adept or Master. *Abia* means knowledge and wisdom. So while Igbo call *Chukwu* (God) *Abia Ama*, that is, the Knowledge and the Wisdom that reveals Himself, they call *Dibia* the Adept or Master of Knowledge and Wisdom.

The *Dibija* are principally nature-operators. The *Dibija Afa* through varied media read the sheet of nature mystically spread before them to see more than the ordinary human eye. The best of manifested nature is a balanced ecosystem. It is this balanced ecosystem that the ancient Igbo reserved spaces for and tried in their daily lives to minimize activities that might harm nature. This is in line with the essence of the religion which is the harmonious coexistence of every element that constitute the environment, including spirits. These *Dibija* are the active users of *Ajo Ohia*; these are people who need all the roots and herbs possible, many of which they believed only preserved nature, completely rid of all human interference, can offer.

Ajo Ohia is a deliberate scheme of the Igbo to create the environment for the portents of *Dibija*. Such environment also become the nature epicenter of pure and natural energies and powers which interact without interference within programmed nature. The *Dibija* tap into it even from outside of it in a remote sense, inside of it, he is availed of the material elements which generate those energies and powers. Apart from the conservation and preservation of species, *Ajo Ohia* also preserves and conserves spiritual and mystical powers which serves either positively or negatively. Their existence, uses and dynamics are known to the *Dibija* who appropriates, harnesses and utilizes them. Such powers/forces may be dangerous to people who do not have good knowledge of them. One of the commonly used Igbo proverb goes thus: “*Enyejuo Dibija afo o buo mgborogwu n’Ajo Ohia*”. (It is only when *Dibija* is handsomely paid that he gets his medicinal roots from *Ajo Ohia*). So, some roots and herbs potent for the *Dibija* are preserved in *Ajo Ohia*, so they do not go extinct or lose their potency through human activities and disturbances. The patent of dead *Dibija* were deposited in *Ajo Ohia*, not because they were evil as Achebe seemed to suggest, but because the only person who may be able to handle them had to discover them himself/herself in such safe/sacred environment where only his/her kind can access. There they are both preserved and rediscovered/recycled for reuse by *Dibija* who may journey through *Ajo Ohia* to discover them; this journey they do from time to time referred to as “*Mbija Dibija*” (Ezeliora, 1994).

Meanwhile, the instrument at the hands of this *Dibija* which codes his knowledge of nature and things is *Afa*. In the course of undertaking a number of research in Igbo Traditional Religion, this researcher discovered that the codification of *Afa* is a reliable means of discovering the real sense behind the jealously guarded secrets by the experts of the religion. In other words, *Afa* preserves the hidden meaning of things which are often known outside *Afa* very differently. It is also a common practice among the Igbo that this hidden meaning is kept away from folks other than *Dibija*. Onwuejeogwu (1997) had described *Afa* thus:

Afa may be translated as prediction, the process of reaching a judgement of the unknown or future through the study of physical and ‘metaphysical’ evidence found in various signs. Nri predictors agree that *afa* operates on the principle of mediating the known by the unknown and the unknown by the known.

Afa is often transliterated as divination (Shelton (1965), Anedo, (2014)), but for the present researcher, *Afa* is a reference code-repository of past, present and future

knowledge among the Igbo. Knowledge of its readings reveal a lot which otherwise were secret, and interestingly shed light on very obscure areas and phenomena which previous anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, random researchers and religious scholars easily dismissed as either curious, incomprehensible/meaningless jargons or out rightly evil; not worth the trouble exploring.

As a repository, *Afa* consists of entities codified in generic binary concepts which in a systematic and programmed interaction yields information on inquiries posed to it (*Afa*). *Afa* may even also generously generate further questions about a subject of inquiry. It is this systematic and programmed interaction that is often referred to as divination; *Afa* itself is a codification system. The interaction is a process known as *Igba Afa* (deciphering *Afa*) which is a complex combination of generative codes. For instance, a practitioner of *Afa* system in Nnobi, Anambra State, Ezeulukpu Omelanyanwu asserts that the generic binary concept to depict *Ajo Ohia* in *Afa* is “*Otule Aghali*” which translates to “*Anugo Iyi*” or “*Okwu ekwuru nugo iyi*” (“Oath was taken” or “a proclamation sealed by an oath”). What this simply implies is that *Ajo Ohia* was “sealed in oath”, no one says or even knows what it actually is; the rest of men can only keep its rules. Again, *Afa* often veils its secret at the back end of the generic binary code when flipped. To flip “*Otule Aghali*”, will give “*Aghali Otule*” which translates as “*Uzu*” or “*The aka mere*” (“Craft” of “hand crafted”). In other words, *Ajo Ohia* holds the essence/models of craft or the archetypal craft. Craft here is understood as essential principle of craft which the *Dibia* only replicates or brings to bear on other humans as *Ogwu* in its physical and metaphysical forms.

Second Level: Ofeke’s Notion of Ajo Ohia

In Igbo parlance, Chinua Achebe presented the typical *Ofeke*’s version of *Ajo Ohia*. The *Ofeke* is the everyday Igbo whose objective is survival, but who is also abundantly aware of and affected by the debilitating factors as to that survival. *Ofeke* in turn relies on the knowledge and services of the *Dibia* who operates a repertoire of age old secrets jealously guarded by his ilk for inquiries into knowledge that was otherwise closed to him. To be *Dibia*, one is initiated into the cult, and engages in a lifelong mystical journey interacting with elements of nature. Of course the stringent sanctions against whoever trespasses *Ajo Ohia* would obviously impede *Ofeke* who certainly fears for his life from exploring its interiors. Furthermore, given years of preservation of species in *Ajo Ohia*, it is risky to go in there unarmed and unguarded and the draconian nature of the consequences of flouting the regulations on *Ajo Ohia* constituted enough deterrence for any who may want to seek more without having the commensurate power and authority to do so. It then can be understood why a non-*Dibia* will shy away from *Ajo Ohia* and relish on the fear which keeps him safe. The *Dibia* constitute a tiny/negligible number of the Igbo population which means the notion of *Ajo Ohia* according to *Ofeke* is the most popular and known. For the *Ofeke*, *Ajo Ohia* is an Evil Forest. It is the abode of evil forces and spirits. The rejected spirits of rejected bodies thrown into *Ajo Ohia* flutter angrily and restlessly around seeking vengeance. For the *Ofeke*, “*Ajo*” is “Evil” or “Bad”, no more no less, while “*Ohia*” is “Forest”.

Taxonomy of *Ajo Ohia* in the Igbo Landscape

Preservation and Conservation of spaces among the Igbo: From the private domestic spaces to the public community spaces, the Igbo dedicate spaces for specific purposes. The physical spaces in the domestic area in a typical Igbo family compound may include Obi (the man's space), Mkpuke (the woman's space), Oba (the storage space for agricultural products), *Ogbu/Oha/Ogirisi Chi* (grooves for religious exercises) and other spaces. The number of religious spaces vary from family to family. Ukpokolo (2010) studied these spaces in terms of gender and power in socio-political organization among the Igbo. However, the existence of such spaces underscores the deliberate practice among the Igbo to dedicate spaces to specific purposes for the organization, administration and enhancement of life. Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu (2022) noted the public spaces dedicated to remarkable events and their social importance to the life of the people in their comparative study of two out of Chinua Achebe's Trilogy and Charles Nnolim's verisimilitude narrative of Umuchu's history which fitted into Achebe's fictional narratives, to create the utopia of a pan-Igbo world. In that work "*Ugwu Ntiji Egbe*" (The Hill of Breaking of Guns) and Ogbunike Oracular cave were specifically mentioned. Although Chinua Achebe alluded to similar spaces as fictitious, Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu physically identified those spaces and even interchanged Umuaro for Umuchu. Most importantly for the present work, these were dedicated spaces which had socio-religious relevance for the people; not evil-laden.

Among the people, these spaces retain and sustain a sense of awe, eeriness and scare. These spaces have reputation for being life-threatening and bear the red flag that keeps people off their vicinity. Yet that is not enough to dismiss them as evil in a sense that it represents nothing else. *Ajo Ohia* was one of those community spaces which had its socio-religious symbolism among the Igbo, but has been blacklisted for lack of adequate attention to the *raison d'être* of its erection in the first place. The Igbo have the culture of preservation and conservation of spaces mostly dedicated to spirits for more purposes than the common folk may know.

Preservation and conservation of Things: This also include spaces. Among the people of Aguata South, nay other parts of Igbo land, there is the practice of *Izi ihe Mmṛnwu* or *Ido ihe Arusi*. *Izi ihe Mmṛnwu* literarily means "Showing something to the masquerade". The idea is that the thing shown, from then on belongs to the masquerade. No one tampers with it without the masquerade's presence or permission. Sometimes the consequence of going against that rule may be dire. Masquerade among the Igbo is a spirit form believed to be exhumed through the ant hole from the spirit land. They evoke the presence of spirits believed to be more powerful than humans; having overwhelming and over-powering influences on human affairs (Amaechi, 2018). Yet the whole idea of *Izi ihe Mmṛnwu* was to conserve those things so handed on to surrogate spirit owners against misuse or abuse. Also *Ido ihe Arusi* simply means "Invoking *Arusi* on something". This can be a tree, space or farmland. By that practice, they hand on these things to a surrogate spirit owner. *Arusi* are spirit forces or personalities often understood as gods or deities. Metuh (1981) categorized *Arusi* at the third level of spiritual hierarchy. Curiously, Mbaegbu (2012) did not include *Arusi* in his categorizations of spirits among the Igbo. Metuh may have understood *Arusi* as

localized or even equivalent to its effigy. To the present researcher, *Arusi* is purely spirit distinguished by its special energy. They often serve as custodians, guardians or keepers of whatever is entrusted to their care.

Ajo Ohia was often consecrated to at least a single *Arusi* and in many cases, multiple *Arusi*. Such *Arusi* guard the space and deal decisively with whoever violates the regulations of the space. Given the retributive/vindictive nature of many an *Arusi*, traversing *Ajo Ohia* should not be an all-comers/wilful affair. Again the idea here is that *Ajo Ohia* was dedicated to *Arusi* for conservation and preservation; whatever the *Ajo Ohia* harboured enjoyed the natural ecosystem which such conservation and preservation brings about. This is the import of the Igbo proverb: “*Osisi choro ndu, o puo n’Ajo Ohia*” (Any three that values life, sprouts in *Ajo Ohia*).

Preservation and Conservation of Vegetation: Igbo traditional medical practices make ample use of roots and herbs. Therefore, the need to preserve their variety cannot be overemphasized. There are also some of these important plants that are rare and not commonly found in human habitat. Some which grow in human environment may sometimes be ill-treated and made to die away or even go extinct. These may even be within the family compound. It is therefore common to find vegetation dedicated to *Arusi* here and there within the community or even in the family compound. Such spaces are even perceived as evil by common folks especially in this era of Christianity. In the past, it sufficed for people to know the taboos associated with that space and keep it. Of course violating those taboos had dire consequences. More than the scare for the possible violation of those taboos, it is important to seek their purpose. In his work, *The Nature and Origin of the Taboo* (1897), Emile Durkheim understood Taboo as defining, protecting and isolating what he termed the sacred, it was a means of preventing its pollution by the profane. He identified it as a distinguishing mark of religion which has a sociological manifestation. Giving taboo a sociological functionality in the African environment, Onebunne (2021) averred:

In the traditional African society especially in Igbo society, taboos played significant and positive roles. They provided a set of rules serving as a moral guidance or a law in the community. These laws unintentionally helped a great deal in the preservation of lands and wildlife.

These taboos among the Igbo are referred to as *Nso*; they are actions that must be avoided or abominable. Consequence upon violating them can be dire and sometimes draconian. Yet it is not about the evil that may befall a violator, but the preservation and conservation which observing it effects which mattered. *Ajo Ohia* was a mega version of such vegetation; its size may be overwhelming for the ordinary folk and the animal and plant species it preserved remarkable.

The Etymology and Morphology of *Ajo Ohia*

Ajo Ohia is made up of two words “*Ajo*” and “*Ohia*”. “*Ajo*” means “Bad” or “Evil” and “*Ohia*” means “Forest/ Bush”. Yet it is important to call attention to the fact that in everyday spoken Igbo “*Ajo*” can also be used to express a superlative quality. For

instance “*O mara ajo mma*” (She is very beautiful), “*O buru ajo ibu*” (She is very fat), “*O maara ajo ihe*” (He is very intelligent), “*O pere ajo mpe*” (It is very small), “*Hanwere ajo ala*” (They have very vast land) and so on. Therefore, “*O bu ajo ohia*” may also mean “It is a thick/vast forest”. Interestingly, the word “*Ezigbo*” (Good) is the opposite of “*Ajo*” (Evil/Bad), and can also be used in the same manner as “*Ajo*” to depict superlative quality. For instance, “*O buru ajo ibu*” and “*O buru ezigbo ibu*” translate to the same thing - “She is very fat”. In terms of describing a superlative quality, “*Ezigbo*” and “*Ajo*” which were antonyms, become synonyms. In this sense, “*Ajo Ohia*” and “*Ezigbo Ohia*” mean one and the same thing, even though “*Ezigbo*” was not in common use to depict such spaces.

Meanwhile, a journey through every singular community in Igbo land shows that spaces reserved in the manner of *Ajo Ohia* (even those which are not expansive) and dedicated to spirits are quite a number in each community. Some of them were barred from human interference for the preservation of some species of animals. Tens of such sacred groves may be found in one community preserved with strict religious laws/prohibitions and underpinnings with dire consequences for offenders; even within living spaces. Remarkably, these are not referred to as *Ajo Ohia*; they mostly bear the names of the spirits to which they are dedicated. However that may be, whether *Ajo Ohia* or these other smaller bushes, they are all dedicated to one spirit or the other. It is not therefore out of place to understand them as religious spaces which they are, proved by the religious activities which take place in their vicinity, especially sacrifices. It is based on these, therefore, that this work built on the hypothesis that the ancient Igbo environment was basically a space for uninterrupted spiritual activities and engagements where scores of sacred groves called *Ajo Ohia* symbolized the nexus between humans and spirits as a spiritual ecosystem which in turn preserves natural spaces for the survival and thriving of varieties and species of plants and animals in a healthy symbiosis with humans.

Analysis

The experience painted by Dante of the “Darksome Wood” corresponds to Chinua Achebe’s picture of *Ajo Ohia* experience. However, it did not miss on the researcher that even from the first Canto of *The Inferno*, Dante acknowledged:

At large of good which there by me was found,
I will relate what other things befell.

In order words, even before elaborating the joyful experiences of the pilgrim in the third part of the *Divine Comedy – The Paradiso* – Dante already highlighted the good side of the “Darksome Wood”. Why is *Ajo Ohia* wholesomely darksome? The significance of the forest was clearly demonstrated in Hindu religious experience and the deliberate efforts to preserve and conserve the forest emphasized. The Buddha himself and the forest monks in Thai Buddhism were shown to have connection to trees as important element of their mystical journey. The case of the Cedars of Lebanon underlined the aspect of dedication to God, which is also seen in the preservation and conservation of *Ajo Ohia* using also religious tools of dedication to spirits. The case was also made for the Amazon rainforest for the existence of rich pharmaceutical materials

in its environment. In comparing *Ajọ Ohia* to these, one wonders why a different narrative will be proposed.

It is true and Chinua Achebe stated it clearly, every autonomous community in Igbo land had a space called *Ajọ Ohia*. Why would every Igbo community need a space for evil? Every space called *Ajọ Ohia* in Igbo land is dedicated to a spirit-force especially *Udo*. *Udo* is one of the spirit-forces among the Igbo characterized by ruthlessness in serving justice. The spirit-force can never be placated until it serves the full measure of justice to deserving individuals or communities. Sometimes its vengeance spans beyond prescribed consequences and its victims may never be unfettered from its wrath. To dedicate a space to the spirits, there has to be some forms of consecration. According to Ekwunife (1990), Consecration is:

That process through which time, spaces, persons and things, in response to prior actions of the creator or his created spiritual agents, are publicly and privately set aside and dedicated to either all or one or some of these spiritual beings for spiritual services of mediation, purification, healing, supervision and adjudication.

By consecrating a space referred to as *Ajọ Ohia* among the Igbo, the people aimed at setting aside and dedicating to either all, one or some of the known spiritual forces among them for environmental, social, religious or ecological purposes. These spirit forces are known as *Arusi* and are the symbols of spiritual presence among the people and their objects of worship too. It is also true that sometimes *Ajọ Ohia* are referred to as *Ohia Arusi* (Some may contend this on account of small reserves many of which are found in every community and are properly called *Ohia Arusi*, but are not *Ajọ Ohia*). Nevertheless, *Ajọ Ohia* is also *Ohia Arusi*. Are these spirit-forces also forces of evil? Given that the Igbo replicate the same sense of decorum, sacredness and anathema in handling some other micro reserves other than the known *Ajọ Ohia* in every community. What is the relationship between *Ajọ Ohia* and *Ohia Arusi*. In this researcher's local community of Akpo, Aguata Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria, *Ohia Isigwu* are in their tens. There is *Ohia Ogulechi*, *Ohia Ogovu*, *Ohia Okwaraku* etc. These are not quite five hundred yards apart and are treated with the same decorum sacredness and anathema as *Ajọ Ohia*. Kanu (2021) captured these kinds of spaces thus:

These forests, remain storehouse of the life gas oxygen in Igbo traditional societies. They also improve the soil stability and act as soil binder, thus preventing erosion. Among the Igbo, they were regarded as abodes of the spirits and deities and places for worship, sacrifice, etc. Examples of these forests or bushes include: *Ofia Udike* (dedicated to *Udike*); *Ofia Aro* (dedicated to *Aro* deity); in Abatete, *Ofia Omaliko* (dedicated to *Omaliko* deity); in Nnobi, *Ofia Idemili* (dedicated to *Idemili* deity). Umannachi, there is *Ofia Okpimodu* (dedicated to *Okpimodu* deity). And because spirits dwell in them, these sacred places possess great power and are respected

Consecrating places, persons and things to spirit forces is one of the commonest practices among the Igbo. There are varieties of such consecrations; some are even more social than religious, but always have religious leaning in as much as spirit is involved even if it is in a symbolized form. For instance, in the course of this research, we came in contact with a family in Achina, Aguata Local Government Area, Anambra State where a prayer group was having a prayer session to clear a little reserved area in the compound where the modern Christians in the compound believed was an abode of evil by which a lot of calamity befall them. From them we found out that the only remarkable thing there was two phenomenally flourishing shrubs of *Denntia Tripetala*, commonly called *Mmimi* among the Igbo. They said that their grandfather had his *Agwu* right there, and no one else went there to pluck *Mmimi* except him.

Meanwhile, *Mmimi* is highly priced among the Igbo, and in the whole community he was the only owner of *Mmimi* plant. The simple idea was that this was their grandfather's goldmine and he did not want anyone to interfere with it. He consecrated the space to *Agwu* and specifically commissioned it to deal ruthlessly with any person who dares pluck *Mmimi* from there. Among them, that sacred spot was called *Nwa Ohia Ishigwu*. Now he was gone, his Christian progenies saw nothing but evil. This kind of story are everywhere among the Igbo today. Sometimes, by merely getting a masquerade to mark a fruit bearing tree with a palm leaf, no one else except the owner is permitted to pluck such fruit. *Ajo Ohia* is the largest physical expression of this kind of exclusivity and dedication couched in religious frames with lots of anathemas and taboos. They are not random, but deliberately cut out for specific reasons and purposes which all boils down to preservation for the ecological health of human beings and environment.

Conclusion

The modern day Igbo Christianity thrives on the demonization of the former Igbo Traditional Religion. Among them, associating the former religion with the devil and demons is commonplaces that the religion in their terms can easily go for demon worship. This has created scare for the old religion, loath for anything associated with it and delight in dissociating themselves from their ancestors. Studies of and encounters with developments in western cultures have exposed African scholars to the fact that there existed heinous, criminal, evil and anti-social elements, many of which were more serious than could be found anywhere in Africa. Yet the narratives around them do not evoke scare, loath or hatred. Furthermore, the newer generation of Africans have begun to pose more critical questions as to the credibility of the information they get about the former religion, their ancestors and old African civilization; many of them even return to practicing that former religion as a sign of revolt.

This work is an effort to change the narrative by posing very critical questions about a matter that has been taken for granted for more than a century. Chinua Achebe gave the spark to this work by the curious way he presented this subject matter. Knowing full well that the "Evil Forest" is alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness, Chinua Achebe still found it expedient to create the character of "Ajofia" and allotted it the all-important task of negotiating and restoring the moral integrity of a people battered by

an invading culture which cared nothing about their customs and tradition. Being an Igbo reader, the present researcher could read further meaning in this fictional creation. In the course of the research, we discovered that *Ajọ Ohia* was much more than a space where “those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox” were buried, “the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died” and “alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness”. In the first instance of describing *Ajọ Ohia*, Achebe could easily be given away for an Igbo Christian who is reluctant to penetrate the depth of Igbo ancient practices, but in the second instance of the creation of *Ajohia*, one begins to read the metaphorical expression recanting his former description of the “Evil Forest”

This research was based on the fact that among the Igbo of today, “Evil Forest” is the accepted translation of *Ajọ Ohia*. The researcher found that *Ajọ Ohia* is rather “Wild” or “Vast Forest” or better still “Reserved Bush”. Apart from those things the ordinary Igbo thinks that *Ajọ Ohia* serves in the environment, the *Dibia* know that it serves for the greater good of preserving rare plants needed for their services among the people, which they access easily and freely according to need; unlike the ordinary folk who for no reason may make his/her way into *Ajọ Ohia*. The ancients know that the preservation of some species of animals was very important and a reserved area served that purpose. In doing this, they followed the natural patterns and characteristics of these species and their corresponding affinity to their environment. Given that the Igbo basically operates the world as a religious space and only with the tool of religion, they also employed religious measures in preserving these useful spaces. One of the potent checks in that religion is secrets held under draconian sanctions. The fear it generated caused the loss of some valuable truths in the religion. Researches like this, traversed the intricate regions of age long held secrets to find the truths hidden in symbolic ways. Beyond being a proscribed space to which a lot of evil and sinister is attributable, *Ajọ Ohia* is a space deliberately preserved with profound sense of sacredness, consecrated to spirits (especially those that had the capacity for summary justice on defaulters), for the purpose of preserving plants, animals and portents of past *Dibia* for the good of the community.

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