



Revisiting Ecological Precarity in Southeastern Nigeria and the Igbo Poets' Response

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Abstract. This paper examines the intersection of ecological degradation and poetic response in Southeastern Nigeria, focusing on how Igbo poets engage environmental crises through literary imagination and advocacy. Drawing on Reed's culturally grounded ecocritical model, the study explores how selected poems articulate ecological precarity and construct an indigenous ethic of environmental sustainability. Four poems were purposively selected and subjected to close textual analysis to assess their ecological orientation and symbolic structure. The analysis demonstrates that Igbo poets move beyond aesthetic celebration of nature to critically interrogate its degradation, transforming poetry into a site of environmental consciousness and ethical reflection. Environmental decline is represented simultaneously as material devastation and moral rupture: gully erosion is metaphorically rendered as a corporeal wound upon the land; polluted rivers signify spiritual desecration; and biodiversity loss is attributed not only to ecological pressures but also to culturally mediated neglect shaped by aesthetic bias and symbolic prejudice. Through nuanced poetic devices, Igbo poets recast environmental concerns as a disruption of reciprocity between humans and the natural world. Sustainability is therefore framed not as a purely technocratic intervention but as a moral imperative grounded in indigenous cosmology. The study concludes that Igbo ecopoetry constitutes a significant indigenous contribution to environmental thought, advancing a model of sustainability rooted in relational balance, communal accountability, and ethical renewal. Igbo poets thus emerge not only as chroniclers of environmental crisis but as critical agents in shaping an environmentally conscious cultural imagination.

Keywords: Ecological degradation, Environmental realities, Igbo poets, Sustainability, Southeastern Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation remains one of the most pressing challenges confronting contemporary Africa. Across the continent, the pressures of rapid urbanisation, population growth, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources have intensified ecological instability. In Southeastern Nigeria, this crisis manifests most visibly in escalating environmental degradation, posing severe risks to human safety and well-being. This includes issues such as persistent flooding, the destruction of natural habitats, soil degradation, and aquifer depletion, all exacerbated by climate change impacts (Kalu and Zakirova, 2019). These environmental disruptions imperil not only the physical landscape but also the cultural, spiritual, and existential foundations of Igbo communities.

The Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, whose cosmology is deeply rooted in environmental interconnectedness, have experienced the collapse of both ecological and cultural systems due to these environmental pressures. While these concerns are often addressed within scientific, policy-oriented frameworks, and environmental studies, literary texts particularly indigenous poetic traditions offer critical insights into how environmental crises are experienced, interpreted, and contested at the cultural level. Despite growing scholarship on African ecocriticism, the ecological dimensions of Igbo literary works remain comparatively underexplored. Much literary analysis has focused on themes of colonialism, identity, gender, politics, and cultural revival, often sidelining the environmental dimension. Against this backdrop, this study therefore seeks to fill that gap by examining how Igbo literature articulates environmental concerns and advance a culturally grounded quest for sustainability in Southeastern Nigeria.

Igbo poets in particular have persistently engaged these ecological transformations through creative expression. Their poetry constitutes an important archive of environmental consciousness, documenting lived experiences of ecological trauma while articulating culturally grounded visions of sustainability. Notable Igbo ecopoets, including Obienyem, Nzeako, Ubesie, Maduekwe, Chukuezi, and Ikwubuzo, have made environmental issues central to their literary creations. They deliberately craft literature to stimulate public awareness and propel debates concerning the environment. Thus, the study explores how Igbo poets reflect and respond to environmental degradation. It investigates how ecological crises are represented, how indigenous cosmology shapes environmental perception, and how poetic strategies function as forms of environmental advocacy. By drawing from selected poems, the study aims to demonstrate that Igbo poets construct a literary ecology of resistance – one that calls for environmental responsibility grounded in indigenous epistemologies. Their contributions are essential in highlighting instances of environmental degradation within creative narratives and advocating for change.

1.1 Environmental Realities and Issues in Southeastern Nigeria

Southeastern Nigeria constitutes one of the country's six geopolitical zones and is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group. The region comprises five states: Abia State, Anambra State, Ebonyi State, Enugu State, and Imo State. According to the 2006 national census, the zone had a population of approximately 16.32 million people, composed of 8.31 million (50.92%) males and 8.01 million (49.08%) females; a near-equal gender distribution (NPC, 2006; Ike, 2017). Given subsequent demographic growth trends in Nigeria, current population figures are likely significantly higher, thereby intensifying pressure on land and ecological resources.

Geographically, Southeastern Nigeria lies between latitudes 4°10'N and 7°08'N and longitudes 5°30'E and 9°27'E. Its location within the humid tropical rainforest belt confers relatively high temperatures throughout the year, with an average of approximately 80°F (about 27°C). The region experiences a tropical climate characterised by two principal seasons: a rainy season, typically from April to October, and a dry season, generally from October to March. A distinct harmattan period -marked by cool, dry, dust-laden northeast trade winds from the Sahara which usually occurs between December and January, sometimes extending into February. However, climate variability associated with global climate change has increasingly

disrupted established seasonal patterns, producing irregular rainfall distribution, extended dry spells, and heightened rainfall intensity. Ecologically, the region encompasses tropical rainforests, river systems, wetlands, and fertile agricultural land. Traditionally, its soils have supported the cultivation of staple crops including cassava and yam. Yet, despite its agricultural potential, Southeastern Nigeria is widely regarded as one of the most environmentally vulnerable regions in West Africa. High annual rainfall, undulating topography, fragile sandy soils, and exceptionally high population density combine to create structural ecological fragility. Scholarly analyses consistently identify land degradation, soil erosion, deforestation, and climate-related impacts as defining environmental challenges in the region (Ike, 2017; Kalu and Zakirova, 2019; Joe-Ikechebelu et al., 2023).

Erosion and flooding represent the most severe and emblematic environmental crisis in Southeastern Nigeria. The region is widely recognised as Nigeria's epicenter of gully erosion, with thousands of active sites distributed across the five states. Empirical assessments indicate that Anambra State alone hosts several hundred major erosion sites, followed by Abia State, Imo State, Enugu State, and Ebonyi State. In his statistics, Anolu (2015) avers that Anambra, Abia, Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi states have over 750, 650, 500, 400 and 250 major erosion sites respectively. He further notes that the above gully figure is without smaller and young gullies which shall with time definitely progress to major gullies. These figures exclude numerous minor and emerging gullies that are likely to expand over time.

The formation and expansion of gullies are driven by the interaction of intense seasonal rainfall, highly erodible sandy soils, steep and dissected terrain, deforestation, inadequate drainage infrastructure, and poorly regulated land-use practices. Recent studies demonstrate that erosion in the region is structural rather than episodic (Egboka, 2004; Ezezika and Adetona, 2011; Nwagbara et al., 2015; Iwuchukwu et al., 2023). Once initiated, gullies expand rapidly, permanently removing arable land, undermining transportation networks, and destabilising residential structures. Entire communities have experienced displacement as homes, roads, and farmlands collapse into deep erosion channels. Communities such as Agulu, Nanka, and Oko in Anambra State have become emblematic of this crisis, facing recurrent landslides and severe infrastructural damage. The persistence of gully erosion underscores the urgent need for integrated watershed management, sustainable land-use planning, and climate-adaptive engineering interventions.



Figure I: A typical gully site in Southeastern Nigeria

Source: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/south-east/452915-special-report-communities-groan-as-erosion-ravages-farmlands-threatens-food-security-in-south-east-nigeria.html>

Beyond land degradation, environmental pollution - encompassing air, water, and soil contamination constitutes a significant and measurable concern. Although Southeastern Nigeria is less industrialised than the oil-producing Niger Delta region, rapid urbanisation has generated substantial ecological pressures in major cities such as Aba, Onitsha, Owerri, and Enugu. Key pollution sources include inadequate solid waste management, agrochemical runoff, untreated sewage discharge, vehicular emissions, quarrying, and small-scale mining activities (Agbebaku, 2015). River systems including Njaba River, Urashi River, and Imo River have experienced declining water quality due to sedimentation, waste disposal, and chemical contamination. These processes compromise aquatic ecosystems and reduce the availability of safe water for domestic and agricultural use.



Figure II: A collage showing environmental pollution in Onitsha and Imo state respectively.

https://www.oceansplasticcleanup.com/Oceans_Seas_Rivers/Imo_Nigerian_Rivers_Plastic_Waste_A_To_Z_Index_Top_Ocean_Polluters.htm

<https://tribuneonlineng.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/onitsha-pollution2.jpg>

Air pollution is particularly acute in commercial hubs. Studies have identified vehicular emissions and the widespread use of gasoline-powered generators as primary contributors to degraded air quality (Kalu and Zakirova, 2019). Onitsha has recorded extremely high concentrations of particulate matter (PM10 and PM2.5), with reported annual averages far exceeding the World Health Organisation's guideline limits. PM10 refers to inhalable coarse particles (between 2.5 and 10 micrometers), while PM2.5 consists of finer particles capable of penetrating deep into the lungs, increasing risks of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Similar air quality concerns have been documented in Aba and Umuahia. These pollution

burdens disproportionately affect low-income urban populations, reinforcing the nexus between environmental degradation and socio-economic vulnerability.

Deforestation constitutes both a driver and consequence of environmental instability in Southeastern Nigeria. Forest clearance for subsistence agriculture, fuelwood extraction, urban expansion, and infrastructural development has significantly reduced vegetation cover across the region. Case studies from forest reserves in Anambra State, including Ezekoro Forest, document measurable declines in tree density and canopy cover (Joe-Ikechebelun et al., 2023). The

loss of vegetative cover diminishes soil cohesion, increases surface runoff, and accelerates erosion processes. Moreover, the erosion of indigenous environmental governance systems has compounded ecological decline. Historically, Igbo communities maintained sacred groves and culturally regulated land-use practices that functioned as conservation mechanisms. The weakening of these traditional institutions, alongside demographic expansion and market pressures, has reduced community-based environmental stewardship (Obiakor et al., 2018).

Overgrazing is also an additional and increasingly visible dimension of environmental degradation in Igbo land. The expansion of livestock production by local farmers driven partly by growing urban demand for meat has intensified pressure on fragile ecosystems. In many rural communities, grazing practices exceed the natural regenerative capacity of grasses and herbaceous vegetation. Critically, post-grazing land management measures such as reseeding, rotational grazing, or controlled pasture rehabilitation are rarely implemented. As a result, vegetation cover is progressively depleted, exposing topsoil to direct solar radiation, heavy rainfall, and erosive surface runoff. Given the region's sandy and easily erodible soils, overgrazing compounds existing land degradation and contributes to declining agricultural productivity and gully formation. In addition to locally managed livestock systems, the expansion of transhumant pastoralism particularly free-range grazing by Fulani herders has generated environmental and socio-ecological tensions in several Igbo communities. Unregulated grazing routes frequently traverse farmlands, fallow plots, and forested areas, leading to trampling, vegetation loss, and the destruction of both cultivated crops and natural flora. Continuous grazing without spatial or temporal controls inhibits ecological recovery, diminishes biodiversity, and alters species composition within affected landscapes.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in literary textual analysis. It integrates close reading of selected Igbo poems with interdisciplinary environmental scholarship to establish the relationship between poetic representation and ecological realities in Southeastern Nigeria. The primary corpus comprises four (4) poems purposively drawn from three poetic texts namely: Ubesie's "Uṣu" in *Akpa Uche* (1975); Maduekwe's "Mgbomgbo" and "Okukọ Abuke" in *Nka Okwu* (1979); Ikwubuzo's "Njaba" in *Okpọkọbara* (2005). The selection criteria were based on their explicit

thematic engagement with identifiable ecological crises; sustained deployment of indigenous cosmological symbolism; and representativeness within the trajectory of modern Igbo poetic production. These criteria ensured both thematic coherence and literary significance within the corpus.

Secondary sources including scholarly literature and environmental data on Southeastern Nigeria were examined to establish the empirical grounding of the study. Particular attention was given to documented ecological challenges such as gully erosion, river pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity decline. The integration of environmental data enables a correlation between poetic imaginaries and verifiable ecological conditions. Analysis interrogates how ecological degradation is moralised, how cosmological disruption parallels environmental decline, and how poetic strategies function as forms of environmental advocacy. Interpretations are framed through Igbo relational ontology and ecocritical theory in order to elucidate the environmental ethics and cosmological assumptions embedded in the texts.

3. Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism is chosen as the study's analytical framework due to its relevance in addressing and ethically engaging environmental concerns. Ecocriticism interprets texts as cultural responses to ecological conditions, revealing how literary art mediates human-nature relationships (Buell, 1995; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Garrard, 2012). However, not all ecocritical models sufficiently account for intersection between indigenous worldviews and environmental realities. While ecocriticism broadly enables the exploration of literary responses to environmental concerns, many of its mainstream formulations are rooted in Western epistemologies that risk marginalising indigenous ecological perspectives. Reed's (1997) model is particularly apt for analysing Igbo eco-oriented poetry because it offers a culturally grounded, ethically engaged, and spiritually attuned framework. Central to Reed's approach is the belief that environmental texts must be read within the specific cultural and ecological contexts from which they emerge. This aligns seamlessly with Igbo cosmology, where the natural environment is conceived as an active benevolent, therapeutic, sublime, and spiritual entity in constant interaction with human. Unlike other ecocritical models, Reed's approach respects indigenous ontologies, enabling a reading of Igbo poetry that captures the significance of the environment, the moral obligations toward nature, and the deeply rooted environmental ethics embedded in literary traditions.

Moreover, Reed's emphasis on place-based interpretation allows for critical engagement with the ecological realities specific to Southeastern Nigeria as represented in selected Igbo poems. By foregrounding the indigenous ecological specificity of the Igbo world and its literary expressions, this theoretical model enables the study to trace how poets use nuanced poetic devices to articulate ecological issues and advocate sustainable environmental practices. Thus, this approach provides a culturally grounded and ethically robust foundation for the study.

4. Environmental Concerns in Selected Poems and Igbo Poets' Quest for its Sustainability

Igbo poets' engagement with the natural environment transcends pastoral admiration and relevance to a profound articulation of ecological anxiety. Their works register deep ecological anxiety, foregrounding the fragility of landscapes across Igboland and dramatising the lived consequences of environmental degradation. It also constitutes a sustained poetic

Sòro m̄ gáruo Àgùlù na Nankā,
Ebe ọnya dī ukwu tārà ala!
Ọ̀ bughī ọnya ntà ka ala ahu nà-arịà,
Ọ̀ bụ ọnya àkwùma na-agba ọ̀bàrà...
(Nka Okwu, pp. 42-44)

(Follow me to Àgùlù and Nankā,
Where a great sore plagued the land!
It is not a minor sore that happened to the land,
It is a bleeding yaws...)

The poet's metaphoric description of the land as a festering sore: *Ọ̀ bughī ọnya ntà ka ala ahu nà-arịà, ọ̀ bụ ọnya àkwùma na-agba ọ̀bàrà* (It is not a minor sore that happened to the land, it is a bleeding yaws/pus) literally portrays the land as a wounded organism. This metaphor encapsulates both the physical devastation of the land and the psychological trauma of the people who inhabit it. The imagery transforms gully erosion into a symbolic wound, a festering injury that corrodes not only soil and vegetation but also erodes the very foundations of communal life.

Scientific and historical data reinforce the gravity of this poetic depiction. The Agulu-Nanka erosion complex lies within the Awka-Orlu uplands, a region characterised by gently undulating topography with slopes ranging from 20-50 degrees and scarp points reaching 50-70 degrees. Originally covered by dense vegetation, the area has undergone extensive anthropogenic deforestation, leaving predominantly secondary regrowth. The tropical humid climate marked by approximately eight months of intense rainfall annually further accelerates soil instability. According to Ajaero and Mozic (2010), the erosion zone spans multiple communities, including Agulu, Nanka, Ekwulobia, Oko, Amaokpala, Ezira, and Ogboji, affecting an estimated 2.5 million residents. Earlier research by Egboka and Okpoko (1984) traces the origin of the Agulu-Nanka gully system to around 1850, noting its expansion to approximately 1,100 km² and an alarming annual advancement rate of 20-50 meters. These statistics substantiate Maduekwe's metaphor: the "bleeding sore" is neither hyperbolic nor symbolic excess but an empirically verifiable catastrophe.

Ecologically, gully erosion entails the stripping of fertile topsoil, destruction of vegetation, alteration of hydrological systems, and long-term soil infertility. The removal of arable land undermines subsistence agriculture – the economic backbone of rural Igbo communities. Farming in places like Agulu and Nanka is not merely an occupation but a cultural practice embedded in lineage, inheritance, and seasonal ritual. When farmland becomes uncultivable, food security declines, household incomes shrink, and intergenerational continuity is disrupted. The erosion of soil thus parallels the erosion of social cohesion.

Contemporary journalistic accounts further illuminate the crisis. Reporting in *Premium Times*, Iruoma (2021) recounts the testimony of a farmer from Agulu who lamented that she has been unable to cultivate her four hectares of farmland

interrogation of ecological precarity and environmental injustice. Through imagery of eroding landscapes, destabilised ecosystems, and diminishing biodiversity, these poets simultaneously celebrate the vitality of nature and expose the socio-environmental crises that imperil its continuity.

Among the most poignant ecological crises bemoaned by Igbo poets is menace of gully erosion, which has reduced large portions of Southeastern Nigeria into zones of environmental despair. This phenomenon has destroyed fertile farmlands, homes, and roads disrupting not only the environment but also endangered livelihoods and cultural rhythms of rural life across Igboland. For agrarian communities whose cosmology and economy are intimately tied to the land, such degradation signifies not merely environmental loss but existential dislocation. A striking poetic representation of this crisis appears in Maduekwe's "Mgbomgbo" in *Nka Okwu* (1979, pp. 42-44), which draws attention to the erosion-ravaged communities of Agulu and Nanka in present-day Anambra State, Nigeria. The poet invites the reader into a landscape marked by devastation:

for over five years due to the inaccessibility and destruction caused by advancing gullies. According to her “each rainfall, worsens the gullies, further cutting off access routes and disrupting livelihoods.” Similarly, coverage by *Daily Trust* (Elekwe, 2023) documents local recollections of how minor streams gradually evolved into vast ravines that have swallowed homes and displaced families. These narratives underscore the progressive nature of the disaster: what begins as a narrow channel can, through neglect and environmental mismanagement, evolve into a community-wide calamity.

Governmental acknowledgment of the severity of the situation reinforces these accounts. During a roundtable meeting with the Nigeria Erosion and Watershed Management Project in Awka, Governor Chukwuma Soludo identified Agulu, Nanka, and Oko as epicenters of active erosion sites. Reports published by *The Cable* (2025) indicate that lives have been lost, properties worth millions of naira destroyed, and institutions such as Federal Polytechnic, Oko placed under serious threat, with segments of infrastructure already collapsing into expanding gullies.



Figure III: An image showing the impact of gully erosion in Agulu-Nanka area in Anambra

Source: <https://www.thecable.ng/tackling-erosion-menace-in-anambra/>

These practical and verifiable testimonies lend factual weight to Maduekwe’s portrayal in his poem. They reveal that the impact of this environmental crisis is not only ecological but also socioeconomically severe, displacing families, disrupting agriculture, and intensifying rural poverty. Roads washed away by erosion isolate communities, cutting them off from markets, schools, and healthcare facilities. Entire communities live with the fear of sudden collapse during heavy rains, leading to forced migration. In poetic terms, such dislocation signifies the fragmentation of the communal body, where the rupture of the land parallels the disintegration of cultural life.

In “Njaba”, Ikwubuzo (*Okpokobara*, 2005, p. 33) advances an eco-poetic meditation on flooding, water pollution, and the desecralisation of aquatic landscapes in Southeastern Nigeria. The poem moves beyond descriptive lamentation to articulate a culturally embedded environmental ethic in which ecological damage constitutes both material devastation and cosmological disorder. Through apostrophe, rhetorical interrogation, proverbial wisdom, and ritual symbolism, Ikwubuzo reframes environmental degradation as a crisis of relational ontology – an erosion not only of water quality but of moral equilibrium.

The Njaba River which is dominant motif in the poem, is a geographically and culturally significant waterway within the Niger Delta Basin. It is a major tributary of Oguta Lake in Imo State, meanders through several towns including Isu Njaba, Amucha, Ekwe, Okwudor, Awo-Omamma, and Izombe, before emptying into the lake (Onu and Opara, 2012; Ejiagwa et. al., 2018). Beyond its hydrological importance, the river occupies a central position in Igbo environmental thought. This river is central to the environmental consciousness of the Igbo people, not only because of its economic and hydrological significance, but also due to its cosmological and spiritual symbolism. Within Igbo cosmology, rivers such as Njaba are revered as sacred entity, custodian of moral order, and ancestral presence.

Ikwubuzo structures the poem as an apostrophic lament, directly addressing the river in tones that interweave reverence and grief. The opening stanza deploys a catalogue of kinship appellations:

Nwanne Urashì	(Sibling to Urashi River)
Àgbatàobi Imò	Neighbour to Imo River
Enyi Anyịm Atlantik	Friend to the Atlantic Ocean
Ọjẹzùrùwà	One who traverses the world)

(*Okpokobàrà*, 2005, p. 33)

The kinship terms – *nwanne* (sibling), *àgbatàobi* (neighbour), and *enyi* (friend) encode a principle of relational ontology foundational to Igbo metaphysics: all entities, animate and inanimate, participate in an interconnected web of reciprocity. Each epithet expands Njaba’s identity beyond a static geographical feature, an entity whose essence flows across local (Urashi, Imo River) and global (Atlantic Ocean) spaces. However, this affectionate invocation shifts

to interrogative anguish, as the poet laments the river's level of degradation and indicting communal complicity. The subsequent stanzas are structured around a sequence of rhetorical questions that probe the river's altered condition:

Gini gbarùrù gị ihu?	(What ruffled your face?	
Ọnye kpasuru gị iwe?	Who provoked you to anger?...	
Ọ bụ Isunjàba	Is it Isunjàba	
Èbe i dotere isi?	Where you laid your head?	
Ọ bụ Amùcha?	Is it Amùcha?	
Okwuùdò na Èkwè	Okwuùdò and Èkwè	
Ebe ị kwàrà òkpò?	Through which you flow?)	
Ọ bụ n'elu ide a	Was it on this flood	
Ka m gbàra igwe mmiri	That I once swam joyfully	
Ọ bụ n'ime uzuzu à	Was it within this sandy surface	
Kà m kpòrò ùmị azụ?	That I swam as a fish?	
Ọ bụzi n'akùkù eze nwaanyi à	Is it beside this water goddess	
Egwu ekweghị guzo	Where one dreaded to stand	
Kà ụmụazị na-àma ùkwa?	That children now wash off the detritus of breadfruits?	
Ọ zị n'elu okwute à	Is it upon this rock	
Anyà ahughị ebe o zoro	Whose hidden location no eye has seen,	
Kà ndiòmù na-àsà akwà?	That the women now wash their clothes?	
Ụkwu jie agū	If the leopard's foot gets broken	
Mgbàdà àbịara yā ugwo.	The antelope comes for recompense	(Okpokòbàrà, 2005, p. 33)

These interrogatives perform several functions simultaneously. Structurally, they generate rhythmic insistence; emotionally, they convey grief; ethically, they imply culpability. The degradation of the river is personified as an injury or offense inflicted upon a sentient being. By asking “Who angered you?”, the poet suggests that ecological collapse is neither accidental nor purely natural but emerges from human negligence, exploitation, or mismanagement. In the third stanza, the lament becomes deeply personal as the poet recalls with great nostalgia his childhood intimacy with the river. The contrast between the remembered purity of the river with the present condition marked by *uzuzu* (silt and sandy residue) reflects ecological decay. This juxtaposition dramatises sedimentation and pollution as tangible markers of decline.

Ikwubuzo further heightens ecological dissonance through the juxtaposition of sacred and profane imagery. References to a water goddess and to a hidden, consecrated rock evoke ritual geographies once governed by taboos and communal restraint. Against this sacred backdrop, he depicts mundane activities: children washing breadfruit debris and women laundering clothes in spaces formerly imbued with awe. The imagery does not only document everyday life rather it signals the erosion of ecological reverence – the paradox of a river once venerated as life-giving now rendered toxic. Actions once regulated by spiritual consciousness now unfold with unreflective familiarity, symbolising a desecrated environment. The river's pollution thus signifies both ecological contamination and spiritual desecration. The proverbial lines concluding the stanza: *Ụkwu jie agū / Mgbàdà àbịara yā ugwo* (If the leopard's leg gets broken / The antelope comes for recompense) function allegorically. In Igbo proverbial logic, animals encode moral hierarchies and ecological insights. The leopard (*agū*) a powerful and territorial predator symbolises nature's wounded majesty, while the antelope (*mgbàdà*) a gentle herbivore signifies the smaller entities emboldened by imbalance. The trapped leopard (*agū*) and the opportunistic antelope (*mgbàdà*) demanding recompense are metaphorical representations of nature's suffering when exposed to certain undue conditions/state. In sum, the poet intention in these descriptions/imageries is to capture the loss of the ambience, awe, and perplexity that once defined this natural phenomenon as a result of the current state of despoilation.

In the final stanza, the poet shifts from mourning to urgent hope, transforming despair into a call for restoration and cosmological renewal. This transition is not merely emotional; it is ideological, signaling a deliberate appeal for restoration of cosmological balance. The imagery of “*Ọze gwùrùgwùrù*” (One who makes a rumbling sound) and “*Ọgba wàràwàrà*” (One who runs swiftly) reactivates the elemental ideophones of the poem, invoking water as agent capable of renewal despite the fact that its vitality has been compromised. By commanding the river to “rebound” and “fill up again,” the poet imagines ecological revival as a collaborative process between humans and the natural world. Central to this invocation is the call for the return of *Eke Njàbà* (the sacred python associated with the river) which symbolises a full restoration of the river. Its absence signifies ecological rupture; its return promises both environmental healing and cultural rebalancing. Thus, the plea for the python's return carries symbolic urgency: ecological degradation is intertwined with cultural loss, and restoration must address both dimensions.



Figure IV: Recent image of the Njaba River

https://web.facebook.com/groups/725679167452427/posts/9007975319222729/?_rdc=1&_rdr#

Aside soil erosion and hydrological degradation, Igbo poets also confront a more insidious ecological crisis: the gradual loss of biodiversity. In their poetic imagination, biodiversity represents the variety and balance of life forms that ensure ecological stability and the continuity of natural processes essential to human survival. Igbo poets frame its deterioration as a consequence of human negligence, indiscriminate exploitation, and culturally conditioned prejudice toward species deemed undesirable or insignificant. Maduekwe’s “Òkukò Abùke” exemplifies this ecological consciousness through its focus on the near extinction of *abùke* (short-winged chicken), a species of domesticated poultry once prevalent in Igbo communities. Unlike well-feathered and visually appealing domestic fowl, the *abùke* is characterised by sparse plumage, truncated wings, and what is often perceived as an awkward or unattractive appearance. Its physical peculiarity renders it socially marginalised within poultry-rearing practices, leading to neglect in breeding and, consequently, to its gradual disappearance. The poem’s opening lines foreground this disappearance:

Ha dịzị oke ụkọ n’oge ùgbu a “They are very scarce these days”
 Anya adighị àhụkwadị ha mà otù. They are hardly seen around
 Òkukò à ibè ya kpòrò dibjà... (p. 32) This chicken others refer to as medicine man...”

Here, the poet’s diction underscores the species’ disappearance and rarity. Scarcity here is not merely demographic but symbolic: a species fades not only from farms but from communal memory. The reference to the chicken as *dibjà* (medicine man or spiritualist) is particularly significant. In Igbo cosmology, animals and humans alike may be assigned symbolic identities that exceed biological classification. The label *dibjà* evokes ambivalence – simultaneously reverent and suspicious. By associating the *abùke* with esoteric or mystical connotations, the poem reflects a cultural mechanism whereby physical difference is conflated with strangeness or spiritual ambiguity. Maduekwe thus, exposes the stigma associated with difference and the cultural tendency to equate physical peculiarity with the mystical or diabolical. This association metaphorically accentuates a broader pattern in which aesthetic and cultural prejudice shape ecological outcomes. Such stigmatisation contributes to ecological neglect: species that fail to meet aesthetic expectations are neither valued nor preserved. In the third stanza, the poet’s concern intensifies through rhetorical questioning:

Kà mgbu ọkukò ò biela ha ajọ aka? (Could it be that a deadly poultry disease has struck them?)
 Orịà ojọ ò asachapụkwa abùke a? Has this terrible epidemic wiped out the short-winged chicken?)

The inquiry into disease as a possible cause reflects anxiety over ecological imbalance. However, the rhetorical structure suggests that the threat may be deeper and more systemic. The poem reveals that biodiversity loss is not always the result of catastrophic disease or habitat destruction; it also arises from subtle patterns of preference and neglect. When communities prioritise certain breeds for commercial or aesthetic reasons, less favored species gradually vanish. Extinction, in this sense, becomes a

socially mediated process. An appeal for spiritual intervention: *Dibjà ahụ b́jara Iyi Enu chuo àkwùma; ùdị ya ọzọ b́ianu chụọ orịà ọkukò à* (The medicine man that came to *Iyi Enu* to stop *àkwùma*; should come again and get rid of this epidemic), symbolises a desire for the survival of their destruct species of chicken, a quest for environmental restoration, positioning ecological well-being within the Igbo spiritual framework that links human, natural, and metaphysical harmony. Even amid the threats, the

fourth stanza introduces hope. Maduekwe expresses confidence that the *abùke* species is not entirely extinct: *Ò dighị ka orịa o gbuchaala abùke a, ebe ndị ozo fọduru, o ga-afọkwal Lèe, o buladi okukò ayaghiriya dīcha!* (It doesn't seem like this epidemic had wiped out all the short-winged chickens, some must still remain/ See, even the frizzle chickens still exist!). The reference to *okukò ayaghiriya* (frizzle chickens) broadens the scope of concern to encompass other rare or unconventional breeds. By juxtaposing the *abùke* with another marginal species, the poet underscores the fragility of biodiversity as a whole. The survival of one rare breed becomes emblematic of hope for ecological continuity. His nostalgic recollection of the its awkward gait in the concluding stanza: *Kemgbè m hùdèwerè ya na oso kpukpuke ya! O gbaa o kweghị ya, o sùo ike n'ala,* recast the short-winged chicken not as an oddity but as a species worthy of affection and protection. In essence, Maduekwe's recollection transcends mere observation; it is an ecological advocacy for the preservation of a species fading from both physical and cultural memory.

Ubesie's poem titled "Ụsụ" extends this ecological discourse by centering on the bat, another species culturally burdened with negative stereotypes. While other poems foreground species marginalised for aesthetic reasons, Ubesie addresses a more complex form of ecological exclusion rooted in inherited cultural bias. Through a quasi-dramatic voice that grants the bat reflective consciousness, the poet destabilises entrenched stereotypes and reframes the animal as a dignified, adaptive being navigating human hostility. In many Igbo communities, bats are associated with mystery, ambiguity, and, at times, malevolence. Their nocturnal habits, inverted posture, and hybrid physical features (mammalian bodies with winged flight) render them symbolically liminal creatures that defy categorical boundaries. Rather than affirm these inherited suspicions, Ubesie subverts them. The bat's preference for nocturnal existence is presented not as an affinity for darkness but as an enforced adaptation: *Ụsụ mà kà ya sì dī njō wèrè àbàlì àkpa/ Ò bughị nà àbàlì àmaka n̄kè nà o jì ya àkpa.*

Here, the intrinsic behavior of the bat reframed it as socially conditioned. The bat's retreat into nocturnal space becomes a strategy of survival for minimising exposure to persecution rather than an emblem of darkness. The poem thus foregrounds how human misperception reshapes animal habitats and behavioral patterns. Ecologically, such forced adaptations mirror real-world phenomena in which species retreat into marginal or less optimal environments to evade human disturbance. The bat becomes emblematic of life forms

compelled to contract their ecological range under anthropogenic pressure.

Ubesie intensifies this critique through rhetorical interrogation: *Ụsụ ana-adị njo mà umu uwa àna-èri yā eri?* (If the bat is truly evil, why do people eat it?) This question exposes a fundamental contradiction within communal logic. In Igbo society, food taboos are typically governed by spiritual and moral considerations; animals believed to be spiritually dangerous or contaminated are avoided. The routine hunting and consumption of bats therefore undermines claims of their inherent malevolence. The poet exposes demonisation as a rhetorical pretext that legitimises exploitation rather than reflects genuine metaphysical conviction. Once labeled "vile," the species becomes expendable, hunted without ethical restraint. Through this irony, Ubesie critiques the moral inconsistency embedded in cultural prejudice. The bat is stigmatised symbolically yet valued materially as food. This duality reveals how symbolic narratives can coexist with utilitarian practices that accelerate species decline. The poem thereby links discourse to ecological consequence: misrepresentation enables overexploitation.

In its closing stanzas, the poem dramatises ecological distress. The bat is depicted as hounded in daylight and pursued at night, deprived of refuge and rest. The imagery conveys relentless pressure, evoking a habitat saturated by human intrusion. This imagery mirrors contemporary ecological concerns regarding habitat encroachment, deforestation, and overexploitation push wildlife toward ecological stress and eventual disappearance. By urging the people: *Umu ibè hapunụ usụ kà o zionụ ike* (You people, leave the bat so that it will rest), Ubesie makes a direct plea for environmental restraint and respect. The imperative voice transforms poetic reflection into communal injunction. "Rest" here signifies more than physical repose; it implies ecological reprieve – space for reproduction, regeneration, and continuity. Importantly, Ubesie's strategy is neither sentimental nor purely defensive. He does not romanticise the bat; rather, he restores it to ecological normalcy. By stripping away superstition and exposing logical inconsistency, he repositions the bat as an ordinary, harmless component of the ecosystem, performing its natural functions within a delicate web of life. In doing so, Ubesie calls for a cultural re-evaluation of inherited biases that distort ecological perception.

5. Summary of Findings and Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that selected Igbo poems articulate a coherent and philosophically

grounded ecological consciousness in which environmental degradation is represented as both a material and moral crisis. Across the analyses, ecological challenges such as gully erosion, water pollution, flooding, and biodiversity loss are not treated as isolated environmental phenomena but as multidimensional disruptions affecting land, livelihood, spirituality, and communal identity. The poets portray ecological damage as a rupture in the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world, thereby framing sustainability as an ethical imperative rather than a purely technical concern.

A key finding is that Igbo ecological poetry operates within a relational ontological framework. Nature is consistently personified and addressed as kin, moral agent, and participant in communal life. Rivers, land, and animals are not inert resources but interconnected beings within a shared cosmological order. Environmental decline is thus interpreted as a breakdown of reciprocity and reverence. The degradation of sacred landscapes and waterways signals not only ecological imbalance but also cultural and spiritual disorientation. The study further reveals that biodiversity loss is frequently linked to cultural perception and symbolic prejudice. In the poetic representations of marginalised species such as the short-winged chicken and the bat, extinction is shown to arise not only from disease or habitat destruction but from aesthetic bias, stigma, and selective valuation. Species deemed unattractive, strange, or symbolically ambiguous become neglected and overexploited. By exposing contradictions in communal attitudes, particularly the simultaneous demonisation and consumption of certain animals, Igbo poets challenge anthropocentric hierarchies and call for a reassessment of inherited narratives that justify ecological disregard.

Stylistically, the poets employ metaphor, apostrophe, rhetorical questioning, proverb, and other poetic techniques to transform ecological observation into ethical advocacy. These devices intensify emotional engagement while embedding environmental concerns within familiar cultural logic. Importantly, although the poems register profound anxiety over environmental decline, they do not culminate in despair. Instead, they gesture toward restoration through appeals to restraint, healing, and renewed reverence. Sustainability is imagined as achievable through moral recalibration and cultural self-reflection. In conclusion, Igbo ecopoetry emerges as a significant indigenous contribution to environmental thought. It advances a model of sustainability rooted in relational balance, communal accountability, and respect for all life forms. By integrating ecological

awareness with cultural and spiritual frameworks, these poems affirm that environmental restoration is inseparable from ethical renewal. Igbo poets therefore function not merely as chroniclers of ecological crisis but as critical agents in shaping a consciousness oriented toward environmental balance and harmony.

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