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## Women and eco-spirituality in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958): A symbiotic relationship with nature

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#### Abstract

This study discusses the woman's earth-based spirituality in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It focuses on the woman's physical and spiritual connection to the environment. Achebe, in this novel, venerates the woman symbolically as a goddess and spiritually as a Priestess. He connects the woman's spirituality to the land and uplifts her image to that of a priestess, a goddess, and an educator. This paper is built on the assumption that though Achebe's main character Okonkwo seems to be sulky and unruly, he obeys and respects the iconoclastic woman who is a symbol of the gods. From an ecofeminist interpretation, the study reveals that the woman as a goddess and priestess is more dignifying in the Igbo community. This study, therefore, is linking ecofeminism to African mythology that relates womanhood to nature. The study is discussed in two clusters – the woman as nurturer and the woman's spiritual strength as exhibited in the text.

**Keywords:** African mythology, goddess, earth-based spirituality, ecofeminism, priestess

#### Public Interest Statement

This study is linking African Traditional religion, which is built on African ethos to the environment. It is linking ecofeminism back to its root in Africa where women are 'supposedly' closer to nature. This is demonstrated using Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a referral text to justify this argument. Ecofeminism is used as an analytical tool to examine, interpret and analyze this claim.

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on Achebe's edification of the woman, through her earth-based spirituality (as exemplify through the gods/goddesses and priestess) and her ability to nurture. It is built on the assumption that Achebe respects the spiritual connection of the woman and her ability as an educator and a nurturer. From her reproductive role, the woman is physically and spiritually linked to nature through her fecundity and spirituality. This relationship is profound in Africa where African mythology relates womanhood to nature and the environment. Chinua Achebe, the cultural nationalist, reverence the African woman through her earth-based spirituality. Earth based spirituality, otherwise known as eco-spirituality, sees the Earth/Nature as sacred, where immanence replaces transcendence to reiterate Judith Plant. Earth-based spirituality, as elucidate by Starhawk, in *The spiral dance* 'is rooted in three basic concepts [...] immanence, interconnection, and community' (2011, p.113). To her, 'immanence – names our primary understanding that the Earth is alive, part of a living cosmos' (p.113). She explains that spirits, sacred goddesses and gods are embodiment of the world, they are the world, and they are in us. She reiterates that 'Our deepest experiences are experiences of connection with the Earth and with the world' (p. 113). Starhawk's explanation of earth-based spirituality impresses us in reading *Things fall apart*, a prehistoric text which commemorates the different phases of life in human and non-human, especially as it gives credence to the gods/goddesses, priestesses and the different seasons as indicated by the moon. Achebe presents the priestesses as a healer, who is a go-between man and the gods, thus rendering her spiritually strong. This spiritual connection that the woman shares with nature is a microcosm of the macro term ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a movement which has re-appraised the relationship between the woman and nature/environment. Its roots are deep in feminism and environmentalism.

Although the idea of ecofeminism came up in a conference organized the world over, some literary critics acknowledged the French writer Françoise D'Eaubonne as the founder of the term ecofeminism in 1974 when she published her book *Le féminisme ou la mort*. This book explains that there is a strong relationship between women and nature, an argument which triggers ecofeminist movements in various parts of the world, as other women writers came up with works that establish the relationship between women and nature. In 1980, Carolyn Merchant also came up with *The death of nature: Women, ecology and scientific revolution* (2008) which serves as a contemporary stimulus for ecofeminist movements. She argues that patriarchal prerogative has always been to control women and nature. D'Eaubonne like Merchant holds fast to one dominant notion, 'that women and nature were oppressed, commodified and ultimately abused by the same dualistic patriarchal system' (quoted in Cook, 2008, p.26). The above quote is in line with ecofeminist discourse which associates women and nature as victims of patriarchal systems, thus rendering them closer to each other. Being closer to nature 'gives women a particular stake in ending the domination of nature – in healing the alienation between human and non-human nature' (King, 1989, p.18).

However, it is important to note that ecofeminist have identified different connections between the woman and nature. Karen Warren and a host of other ecofeminists assume that the earth and woman share the same history of oppression and maternity. That is why the earth is referred to as Mother Earth. Thus, the domination of the earth has links with the domination

of woman. This takes us to the symbolic connection which is linked to earth-based spirituality. Charlene Spretnak in *The spiritual dimension of green politics* has explored the symbolic association and devaluation of women and nature that appears in religion, theology, art, and literature. Documenting such connections and making them integral to the project of ecofeminism is often heralded as ecofeminism's most promising contribution to the creation of liberating, life-affirming, and post patriarchal worldviews and earth-based spiritualities or theologies. Ecofeminism is then presented as offering alternative spiritual symbols.

In *Things fall apart*, the woman's status as priestess, goddess and educator is inferior to non in the Umuofia community. However, this feminine prominence is gradually challenged with the infiltration of westernization (government, courts, judges, court messengers and more). As a result, the woman starts experiencing a veritable spiritual decline to re-echo Cheik Anta Diop. This decline is at two levels – physical and spiritual. The woman is physically linked to nature through her fecundity, menstrual cycle and reproduction, Achebe links this cyclical nature of the woman to the moons and harvest seasons.

Spiritually, the woman's connection to nature is through her earth-based spirituality. As a patriarchal society, Umuofia is traditionally stratified with the spirit beings (celestial bodies) at the top, followed by the man, the woman and finally the children. This stratification places the man above the woman, but ironically, most of the gods this society reverence or consult are female deities through their priestesses respectfully. Achebe confirms that:

Umuofia was feared by all its neighbours. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priest and medicine-men were feared in all the surrounding country [...] the active principle in that medicine had been a woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadi-nyayi*, or old woman. (1959, p.11)

Umuofia's physical and magical strength was assessed from the supernatural strength of the old woman. However, these goddesses/gods served as 'spiritual judges' in the communities. Their messages were appreciated and their judgements respected. Okonkwo's exile is a case in point. However, these societal guidance spirits were eventually replaced by court judges and the priestesses by court messengers. Nonetheless, this paper is interested in the woman's strength before the advent of the new government and its cohorts.

The Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* is a traditional setting with its rules and regulations governing the community. This community is weaved with people who have a strong attachment to the gods of the land. In this traditional scenario, the woman is an extension of the land/earth, which is sacred (goddess). So, disrespecting the woman is indirectly disrespecting the goddess. It is on this note that defiling the land will automatically mean demeaning the woman, and edifying the land metaphorically is edifying the woman. Ecofeminists further observe that the woman's physical connection to nature strengthens her reproductive role of birthing, nurturing, care-giving, and more. Achebe recognises these qualities in the woman in his text *Things Fall Apart*.

### **The woman as nurturer**

By emphasizing the relationship that exists between women and nature or the natural environment,

ecofeminists add a new dimension to feminist critical theory in a fascinating way. Feminism has focused on power and equality, but ecofeminism is reclaiming space not through recognition by men, but by women, reaffirming themselves and their relationship with nature, as evident in women's natural ability as nurturers and givers of life. This section focuses on the woman's caregiving, nurturing and grooming ability.

Things fall apart opens with the Umuofia clan planning to go to war with their neighbouring village Mbaino or ask as recompense 'a young man and a virgin' (1959, p.11), because a daughter, mother and 'wife of Ogbuefi Udo' (1959, p.11) is killed. Being a great orator, Ogbuefi Ezeugo declares:

... those sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia". He threw his head down and gnashed his teeth, and allowed a murmur of suppressed anger to sweep the crowd. when he began again, the anger on his face as gone and in its place a sort of smile hovered, more terrible and more sinister than the anger. And in a clear unemotional voice he told Umuofia how their daughter had gone to the market at Mbaino and had been killed... the crowd then shouted with anger and thirst for blood. (1959, p.11)

Fighting back is a sign of feminine protection. The idea of protecting the woman who is also an image of Mother Earth is apparently protecting nature too. Nonetheless, the woman's spiritual strength 'would never fight what the Ibo call a fight of blame' (1959, p.12), which is in accordance with reproductive role of nurturing, life giving and life affirming.

Achebe recognizes the nurturing ability and strength of the woman in his novel Things fall apart through Nwoye's Mother; Okonkwo's first wife. Okonkwo, his beautifully weaved patriarch, confirms this woman as the mother of the clan when he hands Ikemefuna to her, saying 'he belongs to the clan... look after him' (1959, p.14). Handing over the clans' property to this woman implies that she is the confidant of the clan. The clan, represented by Okonkwo and the elders admits that this woman is a woman of valour, with extra ordinary abilities to groom children. The narrator explains thus, 'At first Ikemefuna was very much afraid. Once or twice, he tried to run away, but he did not know where to begin... Nwoye's mother was very kind to him and treated him as one of her own children' (1959, p.27). Nwoye's mother shows love and compassion to the young lad. She nurtures and cares for him as if he was her own. In less than no time, 'Ikemefuna begins to feel like a member of the family' (1959, p.34).

Nwoye's Mother is Okonkwo's first wife. In most African communities, the first wife is very respectful both by the husband and other wives. Some critics have argued that Achebe did not give her a name and claimed it is disrespectful to her person as a woman. However, she derives her name from her first child 'Nwoye' who qualifies her as a mother. Motherhood remains one of the greatest and respectable institution in Africa. Achebe starts by identifying her as Okonkwo's 'most senior wife' and later in the text 'Nwoye's mother'. She is not the only bearer of children in the text, but her 'mother' image as nurturer is appreciated. There are other women in the text who are wives and mothers as well, but are identified with names, such as Ekwefi, Ojiugo and more. This is because they are younger wives whose status are incomparable to that of the first

wife in a traditional African community such as Umuofia. She is a mamie (mother) figure who is respected by the clan and even her co-wives. In Africa, a mamie is an honourable title given to some women who have come of age and are regarded as the mother of the clan. This mamie image is different from the Mammy in America in the days of slavery who is supposedly a nanny. The Mamie figure in Africa does not limit motherhood to biology but is extended to her nurturing ability.

Okonkwo's first wife (Nwoye's mother) is the gatherer of the family, and like a Mamie in Africa, she protects her children and that of her maids. This is evident when she looks after Ojuigo's children when the later goes to plait her hair. She feeds the children and shield their mother from the wrath of Okonkwo, the patriarch/husband. She, as a mother and nurturer understand that motherhood must not necessarily be biological but entails nurturing and grooming abilities as well. This divide and emphasis on biological motherhood is usually projected by men, to communicate worthlessness in women. Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and a host of African women writers have resounded the obsession of biological motherhood due to socio-cultural stereotypes. When Okonkwo noticed that Ojuigo's children were comfortable eating in his first wife's abode, he questioned: 'did she ask you to feed them before she went' (1959, p.29). Such questions help in promoting sisterhood divide because the children belong to the family and by extension to the clan. Her nurturing and care-giving ability is extended to other children of the clan and her community at large.

Nwoye's mother did not hesitate to show love to the stranger child, Ikemefuna. She 'was very kind to him and treated him as one of her own children' (1959, p. 27). The passion and love of the woman to protect a child, an object of nature is resonated when Ikemefuna 'went behind the house and began to vomit painfully. Nwoye's mother went to him and placed her hand on his chest and on his back' (1959, p. 28). Placing her hand on his back and chest is a symbol of love and assurance of protection to the miserable boy whose greatest worry has been 'when shall I go home' (1959, p. 27). This woman never stopped treating this boy as her own, and within three years, he has grown 'rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life. He had become wholly absorbed into his new family' (1959, p.52). During this period, Nwoye's mother told the children beautiful stories with moral undertones to groom their minds. One of such stories was to show the significance of the earth and sky on the African mythology. However, Okonkwo's nurturing ability was to make the boys 'men' by telling them about 'stories of tribal wars, or how years ago he had stalked his victim, overpowered him and obtained his first human head' (1959, p.54). These stories are destructive to the young minds of the boys, as well as to man and nature. The patriarchal symbol that destroys the woman is at the helm of nature's destruction. This takes us back to the interconnection that nature share with the woman (ecofeminism). Ecofeminism links the woman to nature, physically and spiritually, physically through her reproduction and spiritually through the goddesses and the priestesses.

Chielo—the priestess of Agbala, a widow in ordinary life is fond of Ezinma, Ekwefi's daughter. She sees her as her own and treats her with love. 'Quite often she bought beancakes and gave Ekwefi some to take home to Ezinma' (1959, p.49). We see the nurturing qualities of a mother through the priestess of the Hills and Caves. She acts as a mother both in the physical world and in the realm of the spirits. The narrator emphasises on this when he states the 'Anyone

seeing Chielo in ordinary life would not believe she is the same person who prophesied when the spirit is upon her' ((1959, p.49). Ani the Earth goddess natures and nourishes the land to the bounty of everyone.

In a time when all the grass had long been scorched brown, and the sands felt like coals to the feet, and green trees wore dusty coat of brown and birds silenced in the forest, Ani gives hopes to man, plants and animals by sending rain to nourish the land— “At last the rain came... the earth quickly came to life and the birds in the forests fluttered around and chirped merrily. (1959, p.130).

The blessings from the goddess are a sign of growth, and rejuvenation which is important for environmental sustainability. This takes us to the woman's physical connection to nature, which is through her reproductive ability. The life cycle of man in general and the woman in particular is linked to the life cycle of nature. The woman of course becomes more protective of the environment as well as of her offspring. Her life-giving/life affirming ability confirms her as a nurturer. The act of nurturing usually comes along with grooming and consequently teaching. As a life-giver, any act that destroys the life of the environment and everything therein ('man' inclusive) is tantamount to a crime against the woman who is a symbol of Mother Earth/Mother Nature. The Earth Goddess, otherwise known as Mother Earth, protects her own, this explains why Okonkwo's act of killing the young boy during the funeral is considered as a female crime against Ani, the Earth goddess. Thus, killing a human being is tantamount to desecrating the land or the spirits of the land. The Igbo people of Umuofia holds this remarkably close to their chest, thus, they considered such a crime as an abomination, and anyone who commits such an act is expected to leave the land. It is on this premise that Okonkwo's act was considered heinous and he had to leave the land. The narrator concurs:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan... that night he collected his most valuable belongings into head-loads. his wives wept bitterly and their children wept with them... Obierika and half a dozen other friends came to help and to console him... before cock crowed Okonkwo and his family were fleeing to his motherland. (1959, p.124).

Notice that when Okonkwo is punished by his people, he takes his family with him to his motherland—Mbanta. This is significant again because mothers are very consoling. It's also an indication of the supportive role of the woman in traditional African society. It is believed that a mother can never abandon her own in times of crisis and misfortune. 'Mother indeed is supreme' (1959, p.133). The supremacy of the mother here can be seen in two aspects; firstly, in the love the woman shares with the children, and secondly through the symbol of the goddess. This brings in the concept of eco spirituality, which links the woman's spiritually to nature.

### **The spirit woman**

Achebe venerates the woman symbolically as a goddess (earth goddess). The earth and woman

share the same history of oppression and maternity. The domination of the earth has been linked to the domination of the woman (Warren, 1997; Plant, 1989). The woman's spiritual connection to the environment is better understood under the concept of eco-spirituality as profess by Starhawk and Charlene Spretnak. Ecofeminism is then presented as offering alternative spiritual symbols. These spiritual symbols are represented in *Things Fall Apart* as gods/goddesses and priest/priestess. The symbol of the woman as a goddess stretches as far back as in prehistoric days when this deity was known for her fertility, and her intervention both in the visible and invisible worlds. With that in mind, 'the Igbo people and Africans in general worship with the consciousness of all the realities in their visible world and the invisible world' (Okoro, 2020, p.34). They strongly believe that 'there is always an unhindered intervention of the spirit world to the physical world' (Okoro, 2020, p.34). Thus, in this community, Ala also non as Ani, the Earth goddess is powerful and important because she is 'regarded as the mother of plants, animals and other terrestrial creatures' (Okoro, 2020, p. 35). Okoro, in line with Achebe's view states that, this deity 'remains the point of entry and the point of departure in the lives of the Igbo people as discussed in *African Women and the Shame and Pain of Infertility*. Austin Shelton in *The Igbo-Igala borderland: Religion and social control in indigenous African colonialism* (1971, p.126) also confirms that 'The most powerful and well-known deities in Igboland are females.' The earth goddess (Ani), the river goddess (Idemilli) amongst other female deities are venerated and highly esteemed.

The existence of the deities and spirits does influence the life of humanity, Wole Soyinka argues that humanity does compliment the essence of the gods as explained in the Yoruba proverb that 'if humanity were not, the gods would not be' (1996, p.10). This can be explained in man's relationship with the spirits and the gods where humanity is at the mercy of the gods. Shakespeare had understood this when he said, 'as flies to wanton boys, so are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport' (1998, p.34).

The Umuofia community that Achebe describes in *Things fall apart* harbours the Igbo clan in Nigeria. This people's religious belief is built on their traditional ethos. 'Igbo people and Africans in general worship with the consciousness of all the realities of their visible world and the invisible world' (Okoro, 2020, p.34). Ikenga E. Metuh corroborates when he explains that 'the visible world is peopled by men and contains material surroundings familiar to man. The invisible world is the spirit world. Here is the abode of the creator Chukwu, the deities... and the ancestors' (quoted in Okoro, 2020, p.34). This religious view of the Igbo people is linked to their cosmology which is similar to the Judeo-Christian belief. They belief in a supreme being God, which they called Chineke (the creator God) or Chukwu (the great God) and a 'collection of other gods who could be seen as messengers of the great God Chukwu' (Okoro, 2020, p. 35). These messengers are deities amongst which is the goddess of the Earth (Ala/Ani). According to the Igbo religious view, Ala is 'regarded as the mother of plants, animals, and numerous other terrestrial creatures. She remains the point of entry and the point of departure in the lives of the Igbo people' (quoted in Okoro, 2020, p.35).

Ala (Ani), the earth goddess, is the most important deity in Ibo social life. She is the guardian of morality, the controller of the minor gods of fortune and economic life... It is she who works in conjunction with the spirit of the dead ancestors to order the prohibitions and ritual avoidances... Because of her importance in ensuring health, agricultural fortune and hunting successes, she is

well-known all-over Igbo land. (Okoro, 2020, p.35). Ala exemplifies the community's fundamental values which are peace, love, and justice and as such her impact on the way life is lived and celebrated is enormous. She is the Mother Earth in all ramifications.

Ani the earth goddess has spiritual strength and valour— 'She is in charge of fertility and human morality. The earth goddess is duly pacified when the earth does not produce a rich harvest, as could happen when the land is being defiled...' (Okoro, 2020, p.40). Because of this, Okonkwo is forced to leave Umuofia when he sheds the blood of a son of the soil. This is an insult to Ani and of course a sacrilege to the land. The goddess of the earth holds a high spiritual authority in the Igbo community. To appease her, a crowd of men stormed Okonkwo's house to clean the land of his callousness. It is recorded that,

As soon as day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his ban. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend Obierika was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. (1959, p.125)

To the people of Umuofia, going against the earth goddess is like biting the finger that feeds them. This explains why Okonkwo is chastised to appease Ani— 'the will of the gods' (1959, p.125). It is highlighted in the novel that 'if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others' (1959, p.125). Okoro adds that 'For Igbo people who practice deep veneration of Ani, any form of defilement of Ani is met with grave consequences' (1959, p.40). It is therefore of no doubt that the spiritual strength of the woman in *Things Fall Apart* cannot be over emphasised.

This explains why Okonkwo's act of beating his wife during the week of peace is seen as a crime against Ani. The week of peace is interpreted as a holy week during which Ani is venerated. However, Okonkwo is reprimanded for his rashness and violation of the custom. The gods/goddesses have priest and priestesses as intercessors between the spiritual and the physical world. Okonkwo's act invited the priest who in anger refused to accept kolanut from him:

Take away your kolanut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors... You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbour. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil... The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase and we shall all perish. (1959, p.30)



Okonkwo's violation of the Earth goddesses is a call for purification and cleansing of the earth. He is asked to 'bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one 'she goat', one 'hen', a length of cloth and a hundred cowries' (1959, p.31). The listed items are indisputable when avoiding the wrath of Ani. The fearless Okonkwo recognises the values of this great goddess and performs the rituals as demanded. Ani, is not only a goddess, but also a symbol of a mother who cares for her progeny. Like any other mother, she protects the land (clan) and punishes her stubborn children. It should be noted that she is a just goddess, and so her justice shapes the communal functioning of the people. As a spiritual being, Ani interacts with the people through her priest and priestesses. As mentioned earlier, these priests and priestesses are intercessors between man and the spirit world. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe valorises the woman figure through her spiritual connection as a priestess.

Chika was known to be the priestess of Agbala. 'she was full of the power of her god, and she was greatly feared' (1959, p.17). Unoka, Okonkwo's father consults her for his misfortune—to find out why he always had bad harvest. Before Unoka could finish his lamentation the priestess slams, 'Hold your peace'...you have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm' (1959, p.17). This priestess is like the eye of the gods and can predict the cause of a calamity and vice-versa. It is on this note that the people/community seek the consent of the gods/goddess through her for their better functioning. At the time of her prediction, Chika, (the woman) is transformed spiritually with supernatural strength and tendencies that are possessive and fearful.

Eventually, Achebe presents Chielo who is also another priestess of Agbala, after Chika. Ordinarily, Chielo is a loving and caring woman. This is exhibited in her relationship with Ezinma and her mother Ekwefi. She used to send the little girl, Ezinma bean cake from the market through Ekwefi. She also encourages Ekwefi to take proper care of her only daughter Ezinma. Ezinma's health situation has not been stable, because she is purported to be an 'obanje', children with spiritual eyes (my interpretation). As the priestess of Agbala, Ezinma's healing prediction to the oracle came through her (Chielo) spiritually. The narrator elucidates:

It was Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, prophesying, there was nothing new in that. Once in a while Chielo was possessed by the spirit of her god and she began to prophesy. But tonight she was addressing her prophesy and greetings to Okonkwo, and so everyone in his family listened... Agbala do-o-o-o Agbala ekeneo-o-o-o" came the voice like a sharp knife cutting through the night. Okonkwo Agbala ekene gio-o-o-o Agbala cholu ifu ada ya Ezinma-o-o-o"... she was saying... that Agbala wanted to see his daughter Ezinma. (1959, p.100)

Okonkwo tries to stop the priestess from taking Ezinma to the oracle on the basis that she is asleep. The priestess in anger screams 'Beware Okonkwo' 'Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware' (1959, p.101). Chielo spiritual strength subdues Okonkwo. The priestess 'walked through Okonkwo's hut into the circular compound and went straight towards Ekwefi's hut... 'Ekwefi'... Agbala greets you. Where is my daughter,

Ezinma? Agbala wants to see her' (1959, p.101).

In this cultural setting, one does not go before the Oracle of the Hills and Caves on their own except with the priestess. To ensure the safety of her daughter's life, Ekwefi tells the priestess; 'I will come with you' (1959, p.101). Chielo exclaims 'Tufia-a ... how dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strikes you in his anger. Bring me my daughter' (1959, p.101). Chielo's exclamation demonstrate that it will be an abomination for Ekwefi to follow her. At this point, Chielo was not the ordinary woman who used to sell with Ekwefi in the market, but has been transformed to a supernatural being who is being controlled by the gods. The narrator concurs:

In ordinary life Chielo was a widow with two children. She was very friendly with Ekwefi and they shared a common shed in the market.' She was particularly fond of Ekwefi's only daughter, Ezinma, whom she called "my daughter." Anyone seeing Chielo in ordinary life would hardly believe she was the same person who prophesied when the spirit of Agbala was upon her. It was a different woman—the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Cave... Chielo never ceased in her chanting. she greeted her god in multitude of ways—the owner of the future. (1959. p.102)

The god here is described by Achebe as the 'owner of the future' of the Umuofia people. Little wonder, Ezeani reminder Okonkwo that the crime he has committed might ruin the entire clan, and that Ani might refuse to bless their harvest for that year.

Chielo as a worshipper of Agbala performs her duty by taking the child, Ezinma late at night to present her to the oracle. Okonkwo though hot-tempered and rash could not flex his muscle with the priestess, neither could he argue with the instructions from the goddess. On the contrary, he followed her with unnoticed steps and struggled for the priestess not to see him.

He had felt very anxious and did not show it. When Ekwefi had followed the priestess, he had allowed what he regarded as a reasonable and manly interval to pass and then gone with his machete to the shrine, where he thought they might be. It was only when he had got there that it had occurred to him that the priestess might have chosen to go round the village first. (1959, p.112)

Okonkwo's humility to the priestess demonstrates the prowess and respect that the Igbo people have for the deities and priests/priestesses. The fact that she goes 'round the village first' shows her commitment towards her course as a priestess. It also communicates to the population that the gods have spoken. Assigning this task to Chielo as a priestess, endows her with supernatural power that is reflected even on her physical body. The narrator concurs:

...How a woman could carry a child of that size so easily and for so long was a miracle... Chielo was not a woman that night... Ekwefi could already see the hills looming in the moonlight. They formed a circular ring with a break at one point through which the foot-track led to the centre of the circle. As soon as the priestess

stepped into this ring of hills her voice was not only double in strength but was thrown back on all sides. It was indeed the shine of a great god. (1959, p.107)

Being the priestess of Agbala, even her path is directed by the god. Her spiritual manifestations render her fearless.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this paper has been on the edification of women through her earth-based spirituality in Achebe's *Things fall apart*. Ecofeminists maintain that the oppression and exploitation of women that usually prevails in patriarchal societies are often like the domination and exploitation of nature by man and these dominations are detrimental to the society, at least ethically. Thus, understanding ecofeminism helps one to comprehend the ethical values, that shape the society. Ecofeminism gives a new standpoint on structures and processes of social change. From this perspective, the issue of equity and diversity, and its promotion of social and environmental justices, will go a long way to help reinforce the balance between men's and women's rights and responsibilities in the society. This will clarify ties among gender, and environment, in ways that benefit both women and men. In doing so, it addresses economic and political barriers to environmental sustainability and social justice.

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