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## The Uniting Cultural Topoi In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Czeslaw Milosz's *The Issa Valley*

The Digger Indian proverb states, “In the beginning God gave every people a cup of clay, and from this cup they drank their life [...]. They all dipped in the water, but their cups were different” (Benedict: 21–22). Ruth Benedict referred to this saying in *Patterns of Culture* to chart the ways that cultures formed and changed, shaping diversity among people across the globe. In its early manifestations, culture emerged nearly simultaneously with the formation of humanity. To this end, culture maintains an important role within processes of social development. A related study advances that culture is both the spiritual foundation of a society and simultaneously regulated by the development of a society (Tien, 2021). Cultural diversities, according to Ruth Benedict, ‘can be endlessly documented’ as they form a significant part of daily life, consisting of domestic rituals such as eating, ceremonial rituals, and the structures of economic systems, among many other examples. This statement captures Czeslaw Milosz’s cultural representation of the people of Gine in Lithuania in *The Issa Valley* and Chinua Achebe’s characterisation of the Igbo people of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*, two novels that form the focus of this present study. The differences in language, customs, values, and even the geographies of these two cultures are too obvious to be ignored, the former being European and the latter African. In accordance with Edward Sapir, who argued in *American*

*Anthropologist* that people live in a variety of cultural worlds, they are worlds apart; their actions, needs, and desires have to be understood within these diverse worlds. A humanistic notion of culture centres on modes and works of cultural expression, defined in anthropological terms as a socially inherited element in the life of man, material and spiritual (Rosenblatt: 459). Culture, in the broadest sense of the term, can be defined as the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

Despite numerous differences in kind, diverse cultures frequently share similarities and even function in similar ways. Related words, art objects, industries, social structures and customs, folktales, beliefs, divinities, and literature often connect disparate cultures (Mason: 101). As G. Staniland Wake once remarked, the “possible in social life may reasonably be expected to occur somewhere or other on the Earth’s surface.” The possible occurrence of a given phenomenon is not exhausted when it has first appeared elsewhere (Wallis: 51). It may thus be correct to assume that religious practices associated with the people of Gine have some semblance with those of the Umuofia community and vice versa.

Let us quickly establish that topoi are ways of expressing truths in similar places regardless of context, both within single cultures and between cultures. A topos provides a general category for the development of arguments rather than a fixed set of rules, standards or axioms (Hunter: 191–203). As defined in the *Literary Encyclopaedia*, the term derives from the Greek word for ‘place’, and particularly from Aristotle’s realization that it is by associating ideas with places, or in groups, that we make sense of the world. For Aristotle it follows that rhetoric, what we today refer to as discourses, depends on the particular configurations of words and their meanings, which over time develop into standard patterns of association. Obvious topoi may be physical places, whether generalized (gardens, desert islands, bowers of bliss) or particular (London, Los Angeles), or they may be mental or emotional concepts, such as ‘the Gothic house’, ‘romantic love’ or ‘Christian devotion’. Topoi had been first associated with distinct physical spaces, but by Aristotle’s time they had acquired a new

technical definition related to dialectic and argumentation (Drehe: 129–130). He outlines an important category of topoi in Rhetoric that contains instructions for developing arguments to define a state of being (e.g., that something is good, honourable, or just, or contributes to happiness, etc.). While those topoi are still used to build arguments, the term ‘topos’ also refers to non-argumentative means of persuasion (Rapp, 2021). Cultural topoi, for example, provide an insight into the significant values and behaviours that define diverse communities and unite various cultures. Most cultural topoi are meant to teach morals and disseminate cultural traditions from one generation to another. To members of a specific community, such topoi are revered as major tools for instruction, often used by writers to convey meaning in their works.

The two books analysed in the present study both explore cultural topoi that relate to existential experience, which includes the spiritual realm, to consider the issue of theism and its precepts, interpretations and laws. According to Edward Taylor, religion is the belief in spiritual beings (Taylor: 336). It can also be said to be a socio-cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics or organisations, that relates humanity to the supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual (“Religion”...). Culture and religion have usually been understood as closely related (*The Nature of Religion...*). For example, Paul Tillich examined religion as providing a “soul” or purpose for culture, and culture as providing a framework for religion to operate. In other words, religion is the substance of culture; culture is the form of religion. Such a conceptualisation prevents the establishment of a duality between religion and culture, as every religious act, not only in organized religion, but also in the most intimate stirring of the soul, is culturally formed (Tillich, Kimball: 213).

In their writings, Milosz and Achebe frame how the cultural topoi of religious belief unites European and African cultures. A focus on the ways that religious beliefs are assimilated and come to shape constituent communities and cultures forms the content and context of most of Milosz and Achebe’s works. Mircea Eliade posited that religion belongs to a universal consciousness, introducing his concept of *homo religiosus* (the religious man) to claim that all humans are religious and only someone who is able to experience contact with the divine is a human in the fullest sense of the word (Eliade: 20–22). Eliade’s

thesis summarises the ways religion operates at the cultural centre of the two communities described by Milosz and Achebe. While rituals and practices certainly differ between the two, the presence, power, and impact of the supernatural is shared as a valuable element that defines each culture.

Czeslaw Milosz's *The Issa Valley* follows the main character Thomas from his childhood years to the age of fourteen. During that period, Thomas becomes familiar with the political situations and the diverse characters that surround him. The setting of the novel is a combination of the pastoral and the rural. The author describes the forest, the lakes, and the river in idyllic terms, but also mentions the peasants that inhabit the forest, as well as their vibrant folklore. Tales of demons and ghosts shape their attitude towards the spiritual world and their religious beliefs. Thomas is influenced by pastoral and rural scenery, as well as his specific social, religious, and political environment. In the book, the village of Gine is inhabited both by Poles and Lithuanians. Balthazar, another character, later visits the Jewish Rabbi, suggesting the significant presence of a Jewish community within the village. Milosz has therefore created a distinction between the lifestyles of diverse religious and cultural communities despite the fact that they shared the same geographic space. For instance, due to their advanced education, the Poles regarded themselves as high-class citizens. They also considered that their Catholic faith granted them superior status than the Lithuanians, whom Milosz characterises as peasant pagans, uneducated, and working in the service of the Poles, attributes that led them to be considered as second-class citizens. Milosz's text also includes a passive recognition of Islam, as Thomas' grandmother claimed to have seen the ghost of Mohammedan (the Prophet Mohammed, descended from the hill known as the Tartar Cemetery). The plurality of faiths referenced in Milosz's text suggests a universal human belief in the spiritual world, despite specific differences in belief system and religious practices. Milosz has therefore perceptibly depicted the cultural heterogeneity of the people of Gine, even amidst other political conflicts and issues of inculturation.

Of particular interest to this present study, however, are the pagan beliefs of the Lithuanians, in many ways similar to traditional beliefs of the Igbo community as described by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, analysed below. Lithuania was the last state in Europe to accept Christianity; officially, pagan

Lithuanians converted to Roman Catholicism in 1387 (Baronas, Rowell: 2). Their Christianisation was initiated by the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania Władysław II Jagiełło and his cousin Vytautas the Great, an historical event that perhaps contributes to the Polish belief in their superiority. Until then, they had served many gods, such as Kovas (Kawas) the god of war; Ragutis the god of beer, vodka, and mead; Santvaras or Sotvaras (Sotwaros) the god of daylight, poets, and doctors; Atrimpas (Atrimpos) the god of sea and water; Gardaitis (Gardeoldiis) the god of wind, storm, and protector of ships; Žiemininkas (Ziemenikas) the god of earth, harvest, and darkness; Patelas (Patelo) the flying god of air, similar to an angel; Šneibratas (Szejbrato) the god of birds and hunting; Kibirai (Kabiry) the trinity. Their female goddesses, among many others, included Pilvytė (Pilwite) the goddess of money, riches, and good luck; Lietuva (Liethua) the goddess of freedom, pleasure, and joy; Veliuona (Wellona) the goddess of eternity and the afterlife; Pergrubė (Pergrubie) the goddess of spring, flowers, and gardens; Krūminė (Krumine) the goddess of grain and agriculture; and Nijolė (Nijola) the mistress of the underworld, wife of Poklius (Godchecker). By the early sixteenth century, Lithuanian society was essentially the same as the rest of Latin Europe. Some differences remained and some peculiarities were retained, as had been the case in every country of Europe, during the “long-fifteenth century” (Baronas, Rowell: 2) Lithuania closely came to resemble the cultures of Western Christianity.

In chapter 36 of *The Issa Valley*, Milosz introduces the gods and goddesses that the Lithuanians once worshipped. Among those mentioned were Ragutis, the corpulent god of drink and lusty living, who was said to be hewn out of an oak tree and exhibited a tendency to leer mischievously at unsuspecting passers-by, his giant feet clad in clogs, unsupported in all his assiduously carved indecency – *in naturalibus* (TIV<sup>1</sup>: 143). Also mentioned was the goddess Varpeia, who sat in heaven spinning the threads of fate with a star dangling at the end of each, as well as the goddess Liethua, the guardian protector of freedom. Even though it is sometimes difficult to connect the attributes of these gods and goddesses to their characters, Milosz clarified those possessed by Liethua (Lietuva), the goddess pleasure and joy, by stating that some of her qualities

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<sup>1</sup> TIV: *The Issa Valley* by Czeslaw Milosz, 1978.

are similar to the Scandinavian goddess Freya. According to Tord Olsson (Olsson: 2), Freya or Frejya is the ideal goddess of love; erotic and amoral by nature, she is the giver of wealth and riches and the protectress of carnal passion and fertility. Olsson emphasised her major role in the male-governed pantheon, and her tendency to act with authority and independence. It may be assumed that the two female pagan goddesses, Varpeia and Lieuthua, highly revered in the Lithuanians pagan practices, are of the same rank of importance as Freya.

Pagan practices are hardly devoid of magic, divination, superstitions, sorcery and communion with mediums and spirits. This was certainly the case in Milosz's description of Gine, so much so that despite the predominance of Christianity as the village's main practiced faith and related attempts to convert pagans, some still found occasions to practice paganism, while others practiced both Christianity and paganism. Such was the case for Thomas's grandmother Michalina, who, when she finally decided to attend the Sunday Mass, still carried her instruments of divination in case her services were to be requested. According to Milosz, "Her ruling passion was magic, the world of spirits and the hereafter [...] she was more on the side of the spirits, not men." Enduring pagan beliefs gave birth to strong superstitions, as in the case of the woman who rushed to offer a sacrifice to snakes after Mass:

[...] after singing hymns in church, the women ran and offered sacrifice to snakes, convinced that if they didn't, their men would not be up to fulfil their conjugal duties. Fables took the place of Holy Scripture, fables about a god of water and a god of wind who shook the world. And pagan rites, such as those observed when hunters assembled before the hunt. And the furniture meetings under the oaks.

(TIV: 110–111)

Pagans' proximity to nature both inspired strong belief in the occult presence of demons and ghosts and allowed them to cultivate magical abilities to banish supernatural beings. Milosz described a standard exorcism on the exhumed corpse of Magdalena, whose ghost tormented the Catholic priest; a medicine woman had been summoned at an earlier point to address his haunting. Crucially, this situation involves either a conflict of faith or an acceptance of an alternate belief system, as it seems unusual for the representative of the village's dominant religion to seek such unorthodox aid. Milosz carefully explains the process of pagan exorcism:

[...] When that didn't work, they came right out and declared it was time to put an end to all these spooky goings-on, and that there was only one way to do it... By cutting off her head and crushing her ribs, they had put an end to her bodily pride, to that pagan attachment to her own lips, arms, and belly. Skewed like a butterfly on a pin, her skull brushing the soles of the little shoes given to her by Father Peiksva as a present, she surely must have realised that she, like everyone else, was meant to dissolve into saps of the Earth. After that, no more disturbances were reported by the rectory, and nothing was ever heard of Magdalena staging any more of her exhibitions [...].

TIV: 56, 61–62

According to pagan belief, as described by Milosz, people were known to possess powers capable of exorcising any illness from the body. Their incantations, laced with threats, fragments of Christian prayers, and chants derived from antique sayings, immediately lost their power once revealed; those who knew their words were only allowed to transmit them to a single person before death. Such was the religious culture of the pagan Lithuanians in Gine.

In comparison, Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* describes everyday life in a small fictional Igbo Nigerian village named Umuofia. Achebe tries to show the beauty and complexities of the cherished rites and customs of this Igbo society. Most importantly, Achebe emphasises how the Igbo religion is a fundamental pillar of this society; the Umuofia people draw on their religious beliefs in the ways they conduct their day to day lives. Religion frames their politics, their government, their education, their family lives, and even figures in friendly conversations. Like the pagan Lithuanians of Gine, they also have and believe in different of gods to serve and worship, including gods of trees, caves, rivers, and clay, among others. These gods are also of different sexes, status, rank, and are responsible for different functions. For example, Ani, the Earth goddess, is responsible for fertility and bountiful harvests. As an agrarian society, Umuofia observed a week of peace before the beginning of the farming season, usually by worshipping or praying to Ani for blessings and a bountiful harvest. The week of peace was a sacred week dedicated to the Earth goddess during which no one worked and villagers maintained peace with each other at all costs, so as not to anger the Earth goddess and lead her to refuse to bless their crops and efforts. The goddess Ani was also considered to be in close communion with the spirits of departed fathers, who were represented by the priest Ezeani. In a way, by

encouraging the observance of a week of peace, the goddess appeals for a peaceful coexistence among the villagers of Umuofia, for the breach of such peace, if not appropriately atoned for, certainly brought about grave consequences:

Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by the youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal. [...] After waiting in vain for the dish he went to her hut to see what she was doing. There was nobody in the hut and the fireplace was cold [...]. And when she returned, he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the week of peace. [...] Before it was dusk Ezeani, who was the priest of the Earth goddess, Ani, called on Okonkwo in his obi [...]. The evil you have don can ruin the whole clan. The Earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us increase and we shall all perish [...] you will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries.

(TFA: 23–24)<sup>2</sup>

By portraying Ani as a female goddess among a male pantheon, Achebe acknowledges the importance of women in the Igbo society. Ani's power and attributes are not only active in the realms of the gods; villagers were expected to emulate her in various societal domains. As Queen of the Underworld, Ani is also connected with the cult of the ancestors (Parrinder: 49). She is responsible for public morality, and legal offences are also considered crimes against Ani (or Ala, depending on different Igbo lands), who makes the law and to whom oaths are sworn. Ani may thus be considered the invisible leader of the society. In this way, the patriarchal Igbo traditional society is in fact ruled by a supernatural woman (Nduka, Nwamah: 281).

Achebe also introduces Chukwu the supreme God; Amadiora the god of lightning and thunder; Agbala the oracle of the hills, caves, and spirits of dead ancestors, considered as equal to gods in terms of worship and whom the villagers consult from time to time; Ikenga, the strength of a man's right hand; and Efejioku the god of yams as well as the villagers' personal gods, called *chi* among other names. By considering the functions and attributes of these gods, it is easy to understand the villagers' strong relationship to nature, as each deity represents the natural elements: the Earth, the sky, the hills and caves and even rain. The villagers' rituals and sacrifices include offering kola nuts, palm

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<sup>2</sup> TFA: *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, 1958.

wine, chicken, goats and cowries to the gods or goddesses, depending on what specific occasions warrant. The text describes how Unoka consulted Agbala, the oracle of the hills and caves, to understand the reason behind his poor harvest:

Every year [...] before I put my crop in the Earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani; the owner of all the land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams [...]

(TFA: 14)

Okonkwo also kept statues of his personal god and the spirits of his ancestors, which he displayed on a special altar and worshipped with offerings of kola nuts:

Near the barn was a small house, the “medicine house” or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children [...].

(TFA: 12)

Such interactions with the statues are considered important modes of communicating and enhancing relationships with, as well as soliciting favours from the gods and ancestral spirits. They also served as ways to pacify and appease such divine intermediaries for crimes committed. For although such statues may be viewed as harmless inanimate objects, they were believed to have emotions, to be angered, to give instructions to the villagers, or to pass verdicts when necessary. Sacrifice to one's ancestors was considered a very important ritual, one that the villagers' looked forward to participating in upon their death, when they would rejoin their ancestral spirits in the spirit world. Such a complex relation to the ancestral world explains why Okonkwo angrily exclaims that when he dies and comes to the ancestral shrine where his children are supposed to offer him and other ancestors sacrifice, to nothing there, he will wipe the children off the face of the Earth. As a spirit, he believes he would have the power to do so.

Superstition rules within the society of Umuofia. Belief in the presence of evil spirits (demons) and ghosts characterises most pagan societies. Apart from believing in the perpetual presence of ancestral spirits who also harbour the power to make good or create harm, the Igbos believe that evil spirits have the ability to enter a woman's belly and be reborn as children. Such children,

known as Ogbanje, meaning “children who come and go,” do not live long. According to superstition, their purpose is to plague a family with deliberate misfortune from the moment of their birth. It is believed that the Ogbanje would deliberately die and then return to repeat the cycle, causing its family grief. This was the ordeal experienced by Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s second wife, who had borne ten children, nine of whom had died in infancy before the age of three. In cases where the dead child needs to be discouraged from returning, the dead body is cut or mutilated, as was the case of Onwumbiko, Ewefi’s second child.

[...] the medicine-man then ordered that there should be no mourning for the dead child. He brought out a sharp razor from his goatskin bag slung from his shoulder and began to mutilate the child. Then he took it away to bury in the Evil Forest, holding it by the ankle and dragging it on the ground behind him. After such treatment, it will think twice before coming again, unless it was one of the stubborn ones who returned carrying the stamp of mutilation.

(TFA: 62–63)

According to this superstition, some Ogbanjes still returned bearing the physical scars of their mutilation. Some, however, tired of the back and forth from death and life, or beginning to sympathise with their family, decided to stay alive. Such was the case of Ezinma, Ekwefi’s only surviving child, who provoked another form of exorcism practiced by the people of the village in order to discourage such evil spirits from returning. Implied by this belief is a supposed continuity between pre-natal and post-mortem existence and experience. In fact, one could argue that Ezinma acquired these two experiences before finally deciding to live. Viewing this through the lens of Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, perhaps Ezinma is one of those children who had died and returned

The religious topos that unites the two fictional communities described by Achebe and Milosz involves the worship of pagan gods and goddesses, of earth, caves, woods, rivers, sky, rain and thunder. These pantheons of gods are diverse in nature, with each seeming to hold distinct responsibilities never contradicted by their believers. A strikingly commonality in these two texts is the presentation of the female goddesses Ani (or Ala) from *Things Fall Apart* and Liethua (or Lietuva) from *The Issa Valley*, whose common responsibility is that of fertility. Interestingly, another narrative commonality involves the mutilation of death bodies as a form of exorcising ghosts or evil spirits, as in

the case of Magdalena in *The Issa Valley*, and Onwumbiko in *Things Fall Apart*. A third shared superstition surrounds sacred snakes, believed to harbour the supernatural power to harm people whenever offences are committed against them. While *The Issa Valley* describes the water snake as a sacred being, whose killing risks tempting fate, *Things Fall Apart* sees Enoch, a Christian convert whose father is the snake priest, defy this superstition by killing the sacred python, dying as a result. Both communities maintained strong beliefs and superstitions about their respective pantheons of gods and spirits. This shared attitude confirms Richard Lewis' belief that "deep down all people are alike" and Eliade's hypothesis that "religion belongs to the cultural universals."

## Conclusion

In his critique of Von Hornbostel's attempt to demonstrate cultural contact between South America and Melanesia, Sapir made the following assertion, as quoted by W.D. Wallis in his 1917 article on "Similarities of Culture" in *American Anthropologist*:

The absolute 'pitch of a tone is, musically speaking, an irrelevant matter, the essential thing being always the intervallic relations between the tones. Thus, while intervals and scales are "constitutive" or technically essential factors, absolute pitches are "accessory" and fulfil the second requirement of "absence of purpose." Two scales that are similar need not for that reason be historically connected. If, however, to similarity or identity of scale is added practical identity of pitch of the homologous tones of the scales, it becomes impossible or, at least, exceedingly difficult to believe that they are independent in origin. And if, lastly, parallel scales of practically identical pitches are found associated with musical instruments of nearly identical construction, the certainty of historical connection is certainly beyond reasonable doubt.

(Wallis: 50)

*Things Fall Apart* and *The Issa Valley* were both written in the mid-twentieth century. Overall, Milosz's work, marked by child-like symbolism, is a personal escape from adulthood, social rejection and isolation, and poetic atrophy. The protagonist's entry into the Christian-pagan world represents a personal struggle with the poison of Manichaeism, a philosophy upheld by

his uncle Oskar Miłosz, the rejection of which distanced him from the rational order of Western civilisation and Christian orthodoxy. In Achebe's book, pagan beliefs are not so personalised, but rather treated as a cultural phenomenon. His novel is a sober self-reflection of his own cultural upbringing, on shaped by the Anglo-Saxon education he received at Ibadan, a Nigerian branch of the University of London. Miłosz's work strongly focuses on the protagonist's personal history and experiences, whereas Achebe's text takes a wider perspective on the struggle between Christian and pagan beliefs. Miłosz's text instead figures the writer's internal struggles, rather than conflicts created by external circumstances.

Despite the different experiences and cultures of Miłosz and Achebe, it is significant that both authors are concerned with the relationship between traditional religious practices and Christianity, whether those of the African Igbo or the Polish-Lithuanian cultural borderland. This seemingly coincidental overlap may be the result of a specific historical development. Twentieth-century Europe witnessed the twilight of Christian hegemony in culture and society, which were increasingly marked by significant secularisation and departures both from faith and Christian practices and rituals. In Africa, the opposite occurred. Christianity became an emerging religion, integrating societies and providing fragmented cultures with a means of cultural cohesion.

Cognitivists have argued that human belief in supernatural beings that is characteristics of religion is a natural result of cognitive mechanisms that have a long evolutionary history and find their applications across various fields of human action (Atran, Ara: 713). Religiosity is a fundamental and archetypal human condition, unifying many cultures such as Gine and Umuofia. Though differences in motivation and practice characterise distinct religions, the fulfilling existential value of spiritual belief may be considered universal. For example, despite the cultural plurality of *The Issa Valley*, one may still draw similarities in the diverse ways religion is practiced, particularly in rituals performed. Evidently, religion is highly upheld by these two fictional societies and has been enshrined in the fabric of its peoples' cultural lives. Most importantly however, is how religious systems govern each society and forms a vital part of its culture. Miłosz and Achebe emphasise how the strengths of these societies emanate from their dependence on religion and faith, while still drawing

attention to the flaws produced by religious practices. By and large, religion is the order that sets the tone of these societies.

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## **Cultural Topoi Uniting Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Czeslaw Milosz's *The Issa Valley***

### **Summary**

This paper explores religion beliefs as the cultural topoi connecting the People of Gine in Lithuania to the People of Umuofia community in Nigerian via the books *Things Fall Apart* and *The Issa Valley* by Chinua Achebe and Czeslaw Milosz respectively. Both writers have earned global reputation in passionately disseminating their cultural values and experiences. Comparative Literature Studies have been employed as the theoretical base for identifying the points of similarities in religious beliefs and pagan practices in these cultures. They particularly discovered that among the deities that these people serve, both communities have female goddesses responsible for fertility, these are the goddess Liethua for Gine, and Ani for Umuafia, among other superstitious beliefs and accompanying practices.

**Keywords:** cultural topoi, religion, superstition, Chinua Achebe, Czeslaw Milosz

**Słowa kluczowe:** toposy kulturowe, religia, przesąd, Chinua Achebe, Czesław Miłosz

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