

David Herbert (DH) Lawrence's "Snake" and its Value in African Indigenous Knowledge.

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Abstract

This paper examines the snake as perceived by D.H. Lawrence in his poem "Snake" vis-à-vis its values in Yoruba socio-cultural milieu. It also examines the connotation of snake from the indigenous African Contexts of Camara Laye's *The African Child* and Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* where the snake is a "guiding spirit" and symbol of a water god respectively. Pragmatics, semiotics and African epistemology are used as theories. The paper concludes that unlike Lawrence's "Snake" with its aesthetics *made manifest* through the poet's descriptions of the snake's colours and poetic structural analyses, the poetics of snake in the indigenous African contexts form part of the people's culture. In other words, it is their worldview and it is extra-somatic.

Keyword: Snake, Value and Indigenous Knowledge

Introduction

A snake is a dangerous reptile and by natural instinct, one may be tempted to kill it when it is too close for comfort and as a predator to animal farming such as Cuniculture/rabbitry, poultry among others. Snakes are natural hermits and they live solitary lives in holes and inhabit cool environments except when they bask in the sun for warmth.

The Judeo-Christian faith states that the snake evolved from the serpent that was causative to Eve's sin against Adam in the creation myth and consequently, God cursed the serpent in Genesis (3:14), "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go. And you shall eat dust. All the days of your life." The curse pronounced on snake in this instance was based on its role as a deceiver.

In another instance in the Bible, the image of snake served as a curative agent. The myth around snake is further elucidated in the Bible, through faith in its healing potency by the children of Israel. In the book of Numbers 21:8-9, The Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live. Moses made a bronze snake and place it on a pole. If a snake bit someone, that person could look at the bronze snake and live." In this case, there exists ambivalence about snake, being poisonous on one account, yet having healing power on the other. Corroborating this, Ramoutsaki, et al., (2000), are of the opinion that the snake figure was associated with Asclepius, the ancient Greek God of Medicine, and possessed benevolent properties. It was believed to be able to cure a patient or a wounded person just by touch. The snake is also connected with pharmacology and antiseptics, as snakes possess antivenom against their own poison. In science, snake

is also associated with poison and death, such as toxicology and toxinology. In some instances, snake implies a metaphysical idea. It is connected with the underworld, not only because it crawls on the ground, but also because it can bring death, thereby, connecting the upper with the underground world.

In some cultures of North Africa and Malaysia, snake's charmers can be seen in markets and on street corners playing music. By playing eerie pipe music, the charmer appears to hypnotise the snake rearing up from the basket (Johnson, 2008:94). Besides, some natural geographic researchers have perfected their skills in the distinctive natures and features of different types of snakes. Some snakes are held in various zoological gardens where visitors can only observe the beautiful nature of these species of animals such as baboons and other ape families. Among the Yoruba, it is believed that *ejo kii bu eniyan je, ayafi ti won ba ran* (the snake does not attack anyone except it is enchanted). The reason adduced for this is that the snake also runs for its life as it beholds humans. This is deduced from the peoples' expression, *orejo sa, ko mo wipe ejo na a sa fun oun* (He who sees the snake and run does not know the snake is runs from him as well). In other words, humans and snakes are not friendly. Perhaps this has its roots from what God says in the book of Genesis, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel" (3:15).

Theoretical Framework

The consideration of contexts is well domiciled within pragmatics. According to Ochs (1979), "the scope of context is not easy to define...one must consider the social and psychological world in which the language user operates at any given time" (1). Different contexts

with which language is used enable profound understanding of the concept or objects under description. Also, the analyses of the single or different components of the concept or object must be meaningful and significant within structure or context in order to bring about appropriateness in interpretations. Here in, lies Semiotics as a Siamese twin to pragmatics.

According to Tyson Lois (2009), "Semiotics examines the ways linguistics and nonlinguistics (or collection of objects or behaviour) that can be analysed as if it were a specialized language. In other words, semiotics and nonlinguistic objects and behaviours operate symbolically to "tell" us something (216). Therefore, semiotic operates on the level of either sight or sound. In David Lodge and Nigel Wood's (2008) view, semiotics is a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. ... By considering rites, customs etc. it will be possible, we believe, to see them in a new perspective (49-50).

D.H. Lawrence "Snake"

David Herbert Lawrence (11 Sept. 1885 – 2 March 1930) an English writer who wrote across all genres of literature including short stories, essays and letters, is considered by M.H. Black as one of the most influential English writer of the 20th century. His poem "Snake", published by E.W. Parker in *A Pageant of Longer Poems* is not only a work of aesthetic, but also, one that resonates across cultures drawing meanings and different interpretations. From lines 1 to 42, the poem is indicative of a snake being an hermit, for he goes to a water-trough to drink water on a hot day. In lines 16-17, the poet says,

He reached down a fissure in the
earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown
slackness soft-bellied down,

over the edge of the stone trough
(Parker, 1956: 256).

Moreover, lines 50, 52, 61 and 69
clearly show the snake lives in a hole.

And as he put his head into that
dreadful hole, ... 50

A sort of horror, a sort of protest
against his withdrawing into that
horrid black hole, ... 52

Into that black hole, the earth-
lipped fissure in the wall front, ..61

Like a king in exile, uncrowned in
the **underworld** (emphasis mine)
... 69

Further analyses of the poem
beside structure, that is, stanzas and lines
can be done through language and sound.
Under language are repetitions, images of
colour representing nature, and similes
among others. For example; lines that have
repetitions include:

line 2, ... *hot, hot*;
lines ... 16 and 17, as cattle do,
... as drinking cattle do,

Lines 31-33 have rhetorical
questions beginning with initial two
similar words,

Was it, cowardice...kill him?
Was it perversity...to him?
Was it humility,...so honoured?

Beginning from line 16 till 72,
there are several repetitions of the co-
ordinating conjunction, *And* in several
lines although it appears intermittently.
Images of colour and nature are found in

line 2, ...*hot, hot day*
line 8, his yellow-brown slackness;
line 20, ..*Being earth-brown, earth-
golden...*
line 21,...*Silician July, with Etna
smoking.*

line 24,...*Sicili the black, black
snakes are innocent, the gold are
venomous.*

ine 40, ...*the dark door of the secret
earth.*

line 52...*with drawing into the
horrid black hole,*

line 61...*Into the black hole,*

line 62,..., *in the intense stillmoon,*

Similes abound in the poem. For
example,

line 15, *And I, like a second corner*
line 16, ...*his drinking, as cattle do,*
line 17...*as drinking cattle do*

line 42...*lifted his head, dreamily,
as one who has drunken,*

line 43...*flickered his tongue like a
forked on the air...*

line 45... *And looked around like a
god,*

line 68... *For he seemed to me like
a king,*

line 69...*Like a king in exile,
uncrowned in the underworld.*

The sounds, in the poem are made
manifest in the alliterations, assonance and
rhymes.

Alliterations are found in the
following lines,

line 2 *hot hot*
line 3 *strange-scented shade*
line 6...*must wait, must stand*
line 8 *slackness soft-bellied*
line 24, *black, black snakes*
line 64...*how paltry, how vulgar,--*

While, assonance are in line 20, ...
earth-brown, earth-golden. From line 2 to
line 72, alliteration and assonance sounds
appear between and within lines. Rhymes
occur in lines 16 and 17, *do* as example.

The mood of the poem is captured
in the words of the poet when he asks and
states the reality about his human nature,
which is, fear, cowardice and innocence

about the snake. The poet declares in line 1, “A snake came to my water-trough,” and in lines 14 and 15, he uses *my* and *me* to emphasise his ownership of the water trough and the snake taking over his place.

Someone was before me at *my*
water-trough,
And I like a second comer, waiting.

**If you were not afraid, you
would kill him?** (Emphasis mine)
... line 36

And truly I was afraid, I was most
afraid, ... line 37

I picked up a clumsy log ... line 57
And threw it at the water-trough
with a clatter line 58

But why would the poet want to kill the snake? The answers are not far-fetched. First, the poet says in lines 22 and 24,

“That voice of my education said
to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black
snakes are
innocent, the gold are venomous.”

Besides the fact that the poet’s “voice of education” which is intuitive and innate knowledge of every person that a snake is dangerous, his description of the snake in line 7 “And trailed his yellow-brown slackness...” and “...earth-golden” is a match with “...the gold are venomous” in line 24, hence, the snake must be killed.

In contrast to the perception of the snake being dangerous by the poet, his mood swings to that of appreciation and aesthetics with the descriptions:

earth-brown, earth-gold ...
line 20
But I confess how I liked him... 27
I felt so honoured ... 34
But even so, honoured still more...
38

That he should seek my hospitality
... 39

At which, in the intense still moon,
I stared with fascination ... 62

And I immediately regretted it .. 63
(that is, regretted attempting to kill
the snake) For he seemed to me
again like a king ... 68

Like a king in exile ... 69

And so, I missed my chance with
one of the lords of life ... 71

Parker (1956), in his notes about the poem “Snake”, says, D.H. Lawrence, “shows the delicacy of his observation of wild-life” (299).

In addition, Lawrence’s “Snake” in this paper could be analysed denotatively within the context of either an unseen or seen poem for examination purposes without extra-somatic reasons. However, Lawrence has unknowingly fore-grounded other poetics for criticism beyond the usual literary poetic devices of stanzas, lines, language and sound that are structural, to include contexts (pragmatics), beliefs (myth), and significance (semiotics).

For in Sicily, the black, black
snakes are innocent, the gold are
venomous
 (“Snake” in Parker, 1956: 579, line
24).

Snake in Camara Laye’s *The African Child* (1959) and Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1964)

In Camara Laye’s *The African Child*, the protagonist, Laye is forbidden to kill the black snake that visits his father. The snake is regarded as the “guiding spirit” (15). He often visits the compound but being ignorant of the significance of the indigenous discernment of this particular snake from many others, Laye thinks it “wise” to kill the black snake. Laye’s mother instructs her son otherwise,

My son, this one must not be killed: he is not as other snakes and he will not harm you; you must never interfere with him (15).

With an inquisitive spirit, Laye asks, his father about the snake:

My father, what is that little snake that comes to visit you? (16).

That Snake,” he said, is the guiding spirit of our race. Can you understand that? (17).

Laye could not fathom the indigenous significance of his father’s speech, which is myth. Laye’s father goes on to explain to his eldest son by way of transfer of indigenous knowledge how the snake facilitates his blacksmithing process through his community and among his peers. According to Laye’s father, he receives the premonition about things that will happen to him from the snake. He says,

It is to this snake that I owe everything, and it is he likewise who gives me warning of all that is to come. Thus I am never surprised, when I awake, to see this or that person waiting for me outside my workshop: I already know that he or she will be there (18-19).

Undoubtedly, the protagonist, Laye, exhibits fear at the sight of the black snake just as the narrator in D. H. Lawrence’s “Snake” and both act on impulse. However, unlike the narrator in “Snake,” Laye appreciates the snake not by his colour, but through myth.

In contrast to the description of D.H. Lawrence’s “Snake” black as innocent in Sicily (line 24), and the black snake in Camara Laye’s *The African Child* as the “guiding spirit” and ought not to be killed (15), black mambas are large snakes that live in Africa. They are the largest and

most dangerous of several species of snake also known as mambas (Jackson, 2008:73).



Figure 1: A Black Mamba

Source: Tom Jackson. *Do you know most Slimy Scaly Deadly Reptiles and Amphibians...in the World?* London: The Brown Reference Group, p.73

In Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, a royal python is the symbol of Idemili, Pillar of Water (41), held in reverence by the entire community and must not be killed. This belief is confirmed in an interview with Dr. Benjamin Anaemene¹ who hails from Awka (Awka South Local Government of Anambra) close to Idemili – where Achebe’s novel is set, thereby creating a faction. However, Oduche, the protagonist’s son, out of his overzealousness for his newly found Christian faith attempts to suffocate the python by locking it up in a box. Oduche, is motivated by what the Bible says in Genesis (3:14), the serpent, is meant to be killed. Oduche says,

It is not true that the Bible does not ask us to kill the serpent. Did not God tell Adam to crush its head after it had deceived his wife? (49)

Oduche attempts to justify his action which is perceived as sacrilegious, but the priest of Idemili does not take the abomination lightly because,

Every Umuaro child knows that if a child kills the python inadvertently he must placate Idemili by arranging a funeral for the snake almost as a man's funeral. (60)

The "funeral" was not performed because the snake did not die, but has only been put in a box by Oduche and released by Ezeulu, his father. Achebe tells us that,

The sacred python now raised its head above the edge of the box and began to move in its dignified and unhurried way. (45)

In similarity to the snake being mythical in Camara Laye's *African Child*, snake in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* is equally mythical, but their colours and species differ. They contrast with the snake in D.H. Lawrence's "Snake" because they are domesticated. The descriptive colours of the snake in "Snake" by Lawrence as "earth brown...earth gold" (line 20) have semblance with royal pythons. According to Jackson, royal pythons live in the forest of West and Central Africa...Royal pythons make popular pets. The snakes are not dangerous. They are smaller and easier to handle than other pythons (85).

A royal python
coiled in a ball.



2a



2b

Figure 2a and 2b: A Royal Python

Source: Tom Jackson. *Do you know most Slimy Scaly Deadly Reptiles and Amphibians...in the World?* London: The Brown Reference Group, p.85

The Snake and its Value in African Indigenous Knowledge

According to Makara, indigenous knowledge is "knowledge that is unique to every culture and society" (37-38). This means that every society develops its own intrinsic knowledge of object, animal, plant, natural phenomenon, religion, and so on, based on the peoples' interpretation.

Mabawonku (2002), also defines indigenous knowledge as, "Those ways of life that are often intertwined with the family, religion, nature and land, and with wisdom gained through generations of observations and teaching" (49-60). The value attributed to snake(s) is inherent in the myriad of perceptions by individuals, groups or communities sociologically, physically, biologically, religiously by way of myth and psychologically. From whichever context(s) one tries to evaluate the adequate or inadequate knowledge about a snake, greater efforts are required to make proper discernment, distinct of types, species, nature, dangers posed, adaptability and attitudes in relation to humans, this time not as predators, but evolvement of applicability of knowledge gained. I believe that just as birds have learnt to fly from one tree to the other without hitting their heads against obstacles, and airplanes have been

designed like birds too with wings and their undercarriages, more values can also be derived from the snake by humans.

In addition to the various values of the snake ranging from colours, movements, shapes and myth, the Yoruba believe that the rattlesnake coils up and hides its tail under its body in order to prevent anyone stepping on it. Except someone deliberately steps on its tail, it is not violent and can be easily killed. This action delineates the snake having enough patience, but will react violently to stepping on its tail as stepping on someone's toes. Moreover, it is further believed that at the sight of the rattlesnake, someone should make a cloth pad and place it at a reasonable distance. The snake acts as an observer and a guard and death betides any other person that tries to remove the cloth pad because the snake will attack him or her.



Figure 3: Rattle Snake

Source: Tom Jackson. *Do you know most Slimy Scaly Deadly Reptiles and Amphibians...in the World?* London: The Brown Reference Group, p.62

The significance of this scenario painted is hinged on the fact that the snake believes that the owner of the cloth pad acknowledges his eminence, and has kept the cloth pad under his watch, hence he has to act as a guard. Also, the cloth pad can be made and positioned by anyone who upon sighting the snake is afraid, while s/he goes to call an adult or any

person bold enough to kill the snake by dealing it deadly blows on its head. More premiums are being placed on the scenario through its application to human behaviours, specifically greetings among the Yoruba. Should any visitor to a strange environment meet elders seated at his or her point of arrival, he greets them, and having parked his or her car or leaves luggage to make enquiries where s/he cannot behold what has been left behind, the people that were greeted have been indirectly left to watch over the stranger's property. This is owing to the earlier acknowledgement of the elders through greeting and should any person get close to the stranger's property, the elders will challenge such a person. The Yoruba further says in the word of Duro Thomas Ayodele, that *Eni ti o ba ki eniyan ko ni fi oju ba oro*² (whoever greets does not walk into danger). It is certain that based on the simple act of greeting, they would be forewarned by the people greeted about any looming danger on the way and thus, the danger will be averted. This can be further extended to sociological values involving adaptability with nature through communal living where everyone is each other's keeper.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the value of the snake is relative. The snake's value in the European context is different from the African context. The analyses in this paper moves from the physical to metaphysical and educational in the indigenous knowledge and if well imbibed, could make individuals to adapt to their communities. In the physical settings, visitors as tourists require guides of the locals who have indigenous knowledge for their safety, while in ontological contexts; it forms the basis of African worldview.

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2. Dr. Ayodele Thomas Duro of the Department of Finance, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. He is from Ipesi-Akoko, Ondo State, South Western Nigeria.

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