



## Consciousness and Identity as Environmental Realities in Mbuh Tenu Mbuh's *In the Shadow of My Country*

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### Article History

Received: 18.03.2023

Accepted: 25.04.2023

Published: 29.04.2023

**Abstract:** This research work investigates through Mbuh Tenu Mbuh's *In the Shadow of My country* the different natural and social factors that influence human consciousness and identity. These factors include the elements of the physical world such as trees, mountains, and lakes, and politics, custom, tradition, and crime and punishment for the social factors. After a close reading of the novel, one gathers the impression that Mbuh's characters are interconnected with their environment to the point that their behaviour and actions are determined by their immediate surrounding. Thus, the way characters perceive and treat their environment and what becomes of them after is one of the focuses of this write up. The research endeavour also analyses the political, cultural and traditional influences on the characters as well as the changes that take place in characters when they change their environment to say that nature and society are vital in the development of a character and human beings in general. To this effect, the theories chosen for the analysis are New Historicism and Ecocriticism.

**Keywords:** Nature, Consciousness, and Identity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the intricate relationship of man, nature, and society has caught the attention of many writers (Ruse, Ford E. B., Krech, Farbarman). This is because man influences nature and his society and in turn is influenced by both. Nature refers to:

*"...the material world, esp. as surrounding man and existing independently of his activities...the universe with all its phenomena...the natural world as it exists without man or his activities...the elements of the natural world, as mountains, trees, animals, rivers, etc... (The Random House Dictionary, 953).*

This shows that for anything to be considered nature, it must remain in its primitive state. However, man's excessive dependence upon

nature has led nature to be devoured. The natural environment has been misused by man's activities such as deforestation. Also, the continuous emission of gasses from the industries has led to the depletion of the ozone layer and hence global warming. Poor sewage disposal may have also led to poor drainage system and consequently over flooding in some cases. Crude farming practices such as burning and application of fertilizers has destroyed the natural elements of the soil thus rendering it infertile.

Despite the prevailing effects of the misuse of the environment, measures can still be taken to preserve nature. Some of these measures include afforestation (planting more trees) and using organic manure in farming. Also, there should be proper waste disposal (separating waste, using compost degradable and recycling plastics. Also,

**Citation:** Flora N. Manjo (2023). Consciousness and Identity as Environmental Realities in Mbuh Tenu Mbuh's *In the Shadow of My Country*. *Glob Acad J Linguist Lit*; Vol-5, Iss-2 pp-22-27.

some farmers are advised to avoid bush burning in order to preserve bio-manure. Thus, human actions become centered on nature since it is the secret behind his existence and survival. In the text, we find a number of characters who interact differently with nature. While some like Tipoung'he live in harmony with nature, we find the government on the other hand destroying bushes in order to construct roads as a form of development.

It is not only the natural environment that influences man's activities but also, the social environment plays an important part in determining human behaviour and identity. The social environment is what is immaterial and includes economic, political, religious, cultural, and traditional factors. These factors in one way or the other contribute in determining why an individual or a community behave the way they do at a particular point in time. In any given community, members of that community speak a particular language, dress in a particular manner and are bound together by certain customs and traditions that define them and equally give them their unique identity. Being a member of a particular community automatically determines how a character talks and dresses and how he behaves towards the others. All these are elements of the social environment that contribute in shaping the identity if a character through the process of socialization. According to Green W., "Socialization is the process by which the child acquires a cultural content, along with selfhood and personality" (*Sociology: An Analysis of Life in Modern Society*, 135). Thus, an individual becomes the product of the society in which he is born but at the same time, the same society helps him to be able to develop his own unique identity.

In as much as man sometimes violates nature through his activities, sometimes he can go against certain social norms when he finds out that his interest is at stake. This explains the reason for some deviant behaviour that is sometimes evident in societies as the individual has to break certain norms in order to be able to succeed. This is because some societies have so many constraints that sometimes, the individual has no choice than to break and do what he deems necessary. Thus, characters' as well as individuals' actions must not always be in conformity with what the society demands. This is a similar thing that is evident in Bamenda with Form Five students who rally against punishment and boycott the assembly. It is this harsh environment that leads to deviant behaviour.

It is therefore evident that the interconnectedness between man, nature and society demands that man should be conscious of the way he perceives and relates with them.

Consciousness is defined as perceiving, apprehending, or noticing with a degree of controlled thought or ostentation. (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 482). This implies that a conscious individual is one who is aware of what one is doing; present to consciousness sometimes deliberate, or intentional. (*The Living Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 216). Thus, the type of environment will determine the way a character behaves. The environment conditions a character to do one thing and not the other and consequently, that individual or members of that community turn to be identified with certain characteristics. These characteristics turn to constitute what can be now described as their identity. Hence identity like consciousness emanate from the environment in which characters find themselves.

According to *The Living Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary*, identity refers to "the state or fact of being the same; the state or fact of remaining the same; the condition of being oneself and not the other. Identity equally incorporates the idea of persistence, personality or characteristics essentials to that person's self awareness. Since these traits may vary according to environment, identity and human consciousness are therefore closely related as would be seen in the analysis. Human consciousness has to do with awareness of an action and these actions define a person thereby giving him/her an identity. Hence, the paper analyses the behaviour of either individual characters or the community as a consequence of the natural and social environment in which they find themselves.

## 2. Nature and Human Consciousness and Identity

*In the Shadow of My Country* has two main physical settings which are the rural and the urban setting. The settings are contrasting basically in terms of development. According to Faber and Goode,

*the main source of variation between societies is technology. Societies whose members have not developed the techniques of growing food and who rely on foraging on nature are called hunting societies. They turn to be most primitive and inefficient technologically which means that nearly everyone in that society must work hard to keep himself alive and fairly comfortable. (Social Reality, 161).*

From the explanation above, we can clearly understand that hunting societies are rural areas. When *In the Shadow of My Country* begins, we are introduced to a purely hunting society. This is a society in which people are still very close to nature. In Nyenmechop and Aghem which are the villages mentioned in the text, we hear of common practices

like hunting, fishing, farming, as the main activities of these villages. The choice of activities are determined by the availability of natural resources like the forest, the Marshy areas, farms and enough grazing land. A good number of characters in the text show close connection with matter. For instance, Tipoung'he and his friends are able to visit bird nests because they are in the village which is near the forests. During the rainy season, Meuh harvests a variety of mushrooms, and during the dry seasons, they fetch tadpoles. Thus, nature serves as a form of comfort and entertainment and a source of food respectively. Their choice of food as is the case with eating of mushrooms is solely determined by the fact that it grows around that area.

We come across three generations and realize that as time moves ahead the characters gradually detach themselves from nature as urbanization creeps in. Alioum's father does not appear in the novel but mention is only made of him when he is sick and is about to die. He is also mentioned after his death when Alioum begins to realize the negative effects of urbanization by remembering his father's words or warning which state that, "a man who only farms abroad exposes his entire family to famine if there was war in the other village" (43) He becomes conscious of the fact that displacement from ones village can come with disastrous consequences. He therefore resorts to planting plantains as a way of combating famine.

Early on, we hear of the government's new design of Regroupement of scattered hamlets and the pressure from the officials in Bamenda for the people to leave the bushes and found townships "(9). The consequence of this is that the villagers lost contact with nature to some extent. Before then, we are told that Tipoung'he and his friends go to the streams to fetch water in their calabashes and while in the stream, they see tadpoles disappear into the muddy banks. Sometimes they place it on their foreheads and watch how it dances and tickles them. Now, with the government's policy of urbanization, the characters gradually tilt their interest towards the new things that can be realizable in their new environment.

Alioum, Tipoung'he's father, happens to be one of those characters whose choice of profession (interest) is determined by his natural surrounding. It is said that he runs away from school and chooses a nomadic way of life. In his opinion, "school routine is dull and unadventurous (32). The place in which he finds himself conditions the way he perceives life and what he does after. He chooses to move behind cattle because it is what is commonly done around his area. However, Alioum gradually becomes a chief butcher and grows to prosperity. Because of

development, he realizes the need to go back to school. The author says: "He was determined to complete what he had abandoned in searched for nomadic mysteries – so that no one will cheat him over his money like his friend was cheated" (40).

Alioum's consciousness changes as his society changes. With urbanization, the society shifts from a nomadic society to an economic society. In this kind of society, people's interest shift from ordinary activities like hunting, farming, fishing for basic consumption to business and politics. That is why it is stated in the text that the government's major reason for "Regroupement" was political. Thus self-interest creeps in as people become possessive and would want to do anything to maximize profit. Alioum wants to complete his education because he does not want to be cheated like his friend. This is one of the disadvantages of development. People become more individualistic and all forms of evil begin to surface.

Alioum also changes his way of behaving when he becomes rich. Initially, he has been friendly and humble to people, but when he buys a bicycle, becomes a chief butcher with three boys under him, he no longer talks to the inhabitants saying: "What has the bicycle got to do with a petrol station" (34). As his status changes, his behaviour towards other villagers changes as well. Instead of the humble and friendly Alioum that we meet at the beginning of the text, we see a proud one as the novel progresses.

Farberman and Goode in *Social Reality* states that:  
*With growing technology through the invention and utilization of tools for exploiting nature, particularly agricultural advances, comes greater wealth and larger surplus. And the larger a society's surplus the greater the differences in stratification between the rich and poor, powerful and powerless, honoured and dishonored (161).*

Evidently, Aghem becomes stratified as is the case with Alioum who climbs the social ladder because of his achievement. We equally realize that the society is growing in wealth as the villagers start farm meeting houses where they can save their money. So, at this point in time, it is the society that has made them to be conscious of the fact that they need a banking system and they do that at their own level.

Another interesting character that evolves as he changes from the rural to the urban setting is Tipoung'he. Being the son of Alioum, he is of the third generation in the novel. In Ntoh village, we find him in constant contact with nature. He enjoys visiting bird nests with friends, carrying water from the stream, playing with tadpoles. The harmony that

he experiences in nature is extended to his family and to the entire village and even in school where they live in peaceful coexistence. At home, they perform 'dodokido' harlequin dance. When Tipoung'he shifts away from nature by going to Bamenda, he is faced with lots of challenges. The author says that "...he was often startled by the electric bulb in the evening when, switching on the light, he listened for the magical 'click". His greatest shock comes when he is shocked by current. According to the author, "an invisible hand hit him at the back of his head with a numb blow that connected the jarring tremor down his spinal cord and a stifled cry escaped him as he struggled at the same time to steady the tray of plates and dishes from crashing onto the floor. This amongst others demands that Tipoung'he has to adapt to his new environment which is not easy for him. Life is equally not very entertaining for Mboujou and Anderiya when they arrive Bamenda. They cannot perform their 'okokoriko' carols because they are in the city. Thus, environment contributes in giving them another identity.

### Consciousness and Identity as social realism

As aforementioned, the society has a big role to play in the development of a character both physically and psychologically. This is because the society "is an organized collectivity of interacting people whose activities become centred around a set of common goals and who tend to share common beliefs, and modes of actions" (*Individual in Society*, 308). For the fact that they have common goals directly implies that an individual must work in conformity with society's laws in order for the society to attain its objectives. In the society, individuals also share common beliefs which tend to define them and determine how they interact with one another. This therefore explains why Kroeber indicates the wide range of human (American) behaviours as what an individual learns from his culture. As he says:

*That he (the American) speaks, say, English and not Chinese is the result of where he is born or raised, that is of which language forms part of the culture where he grows up. Similarly, with his being a Christian instead of Buddhist casting his vote in November, observing Sunday. Celebrating the New Year on January 1 instead of in February eating with a fork and not with chop sticks, and bread and butter in place of rice, tucking his shirt in and not out (in Kipling's day at least) saying hello to his parents instead of a thousand logograms.....the mass of what any person receives from his culture is so great as to Make it look at first glance as if he were nothing but an individual is an Exemplar of his culture, a reduction of it abbreviated to the scope of what*

*One person can contain* (Kroeber qtd. in *Individual in Society* 339-340).

As the quotation rightly puts, society influences an individual's being greatly though not completely. These cultural factors include politics, religion, custom, law, language, tradition, dressing, greetings and feeding. This phenomena is also observed in *In the Shadow of My Country* through religion, politics and some of those that we have already mentioned

### 2.1. Politics and human consciousness and Identity

The novel is a political novel by essence that discusses the socio political history of Cameroon and how it accounts for the present day problems that plague the Cameroonian society. According to the author, the government's new design of Regroupement of scattered hamlets and the pressure from the officials in Bamenda for the people to leave the bushes and form townships (P.9) is political. They however meet with resistance from the 'bororos" who do not want to lose their grazing land. The author gives meaning to this resistance when he presents Alioum as one of the characters who resist the Whiteman's education. He is aware that independence has not yielded any fruit as he laments that "...the new adventurers promised everything from Nyenmechop to Jericho" (31). The 'bororos' are therefore justified in fighting against government's policy of development.

Though Alioum like the bororos resists initially, he later understands the need for education and that explains why he sends Tipoung'he and his two elder sisters to school. As Tipoung'he studies in Bamenda, he becomes revolutionary because of the academic environment. He changes from the humble obedient fearful character to a bold and daring character when he dares call Sammy 'Sonofabitch'. He later takes part in school rallies against dictatorship. For the fact that Tipoung'he starts noticing injustice in Bamenda and later Yaounde, he grows to be an activist. The society in which he finds himself provokes him to fight and emancipate his identity.

### 2.2. Custom and Tradition as Determinants of Human Behaviour and Identity

According to Green W. Arnold, "culture exerts a powerful and consistent pressure in the development in personality of common and socially approved traits and values (131). In preliterate societies like Aghem in the novel, the people have a shared system of traditional beliefs that have been made customary and must be abided to. This is mostly common with issues of marriage crime and punishment, and farming.

Marriage in most African societies is guided by certain principles and beliefs. Farberman and Goode in an introduction to *Social Reality* write that:

*.....most societies urge their female members to marry and raise children. The option of not marrying and not raising children (or of marrying and not raising children –or of not marrying and raising children) are not considered viable, legitimate, and reasonable. Thus by accepting the “myth of motherhood”, every woman alienate themselves from the non-mother selves that they (might) be. The alienated woman therefore restricts herself to the single option (dictated) to her by mainstream social options (5).*

From the above, it is evident that society stipulates that a woman must marry and have children. We have the example of Mezor in the text who is betrothed to Alioum by her parents, and she cannot object to that. Her options are dictated by her community. Thus, she is conditioned by her society to think and accept that a woman’s attention should be focused on marriage once she is mature. Once incorporated in that society, she learns their cultural dances thus developing a new personality. She is also given a farm where she can cultivate her own crops and feed her family.

Farming is an important aspect in African societies as we find in the text. The people of Aghem and Nyenmochop do a lot of farming. It is believed that a real African woman should work in the farm, and that is why Mezor is given a farmland. However, she gradually becomes conscious of the fact that she must not always do what her community dictates to her. It is said that she was offered farmland in abundance and after three months of fattening bridehood she launched into farming, but shocked the night-farming community by refusing to abide by that ‘tradition’ (37). This is an act of deviance which is instigated in the character and other individuals by a society that is governed by strict rules and expectations. Thus, the society sometimes does not only influence a character to respond positively, but equally causes the individual at times to be deviant.

According to Farberman and Goode, newer sociological conceptions have approached deviance and crime from quite a different perspective by stressing the deviant’s act or experience from the deviant actor’s point of view. Instead of asking questions like: “What problems do the deviant cause for conventional society? they ask: What problems does mainstream society cause for the deviant?” (*Social Reality*, 228). Because society sometimes causes problems for characters, deviance becomes the only alternative. Thus, Mezor’s stubbornness is borne by her community. However, Mezor

emancipates her identity by asking her husband to buy her a sewing machine. She breaks from mainstream options given her and chooses to be a seamstress. She allows her passion to override instead of what society expects her to do. In that way, she is able to raise money for the upkeep of the family. She does not only remain a traditional woman who is an asset to her husband but she is equally a helpmate. Thus, her reason for not conforming with society’s rule are justified.

Also, the option of bearing children is not given Mezor as she must do since she is already married. That explains why the Aghem community insists in the “ritual of skipping over the bride, forwards and backwards seven times...” (36). She eventually bears children for her husband thereby accepting the “myth of motherhood”. Her identity as a housewife and a child bearer are therefore determined by the society in which she finds herself.

In as much as the Aghem tradition has laws binding women, they also have expectations from men of that community. The community believes that men should marry once they come of age. Alioum and the brother are conscious of the fact they need to marry and ensure the continuity of their father’s lineage now that he is sick and is ready to join his ancestors. Because of this belief, Alioum takes just two weeks to settle down with Mezor. That society also believes that men must be hardworking in order to provide the needs of their families. Alioum settles down immediately he acquires wealth. When his children increase in number, he starts thinking of planting plantains so that his family does not starve in the future. He is a hardworking man thanks to his community. His identity as the bread winner of the family is as a result of his culture.

Once the characters change their environment, they forget their values. This is the case of Melongfam whom Ndimagha compares with Alioum. According to him:

*The said fool had spent a decade and a half ploughing plantations in East Cameroon in the hope, year in year out, to return home with a bag of money, but always, the fortune and the returns were re-scheduled every Bonne Anée as part of his resolution. One thing was certain in his mind, he shall return homelike a ‘moneymen’ and a wonder so strong that people shall forget to lock their doors at night after shaking his hand (34).*

Thus, once out of Aghem, Melongfam becomes useless as he gets initiated to the francophone culture of spending without saving. He is not a real man according to the Aghem culture because he is not able to raise a family. Not only

does he become useless but he equally develops a sense of pride. That is why in his mind, he only thinks of coming back home when he has money that will confuse the villagers. Thus, Melongfam becomes a contrast to Alioum and other able bodied men in Aghem because of a change in environment.

### 2.3. Crime and Punishment

It is one of the aspects that make up a community. Green W. Arnold states that "human society is maintained by this web of should and ought [because] only through an elaborate system of mutual moral obligation, can each and thus survive" (*Sociology: An Analysis of Life in Modern Society*, 41). Thus, when an individual commits a crime such as theft, he/she is sanctioned by the community in different ways. The villagers of Aghem pound on Toroki when he steals but as soon as they realize that he has been overbeaten, they stop at once. Like the author puts it go back in "...silent steps in retreat and denial, a spontaneous reaction of communal consciousness..." 26-27). The community sanctions theft by beating, but acknowledge the fact that killing is already a crime that supersedes punishment. The society has moulded them to understand that human beings deserve pity and a second chance.

### CONCLUSION

Human consciousness and identity are therefore borne by the environment in which characters find themselves. These environmental factors are natural and cultural as evident above. The fact that an individual does one thing and not the other is as a result of the fact that he or she is exposed to particular elements of nature. That characters marry in the text and bear children,

cultivate crops, and are punished whenever they commit a crime is as a result of their culture. This being the case, it is possible to say that Mbuh's characters will behave and act differently if they were born in a different Geographical location with a different culture. That is why it is also important to study and analyse this text alongside with another text from across the country or continent so that one can compare these realities.

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