

## "No Forest, No Water. No Forest, No Animals": An Ecocritical Reading of Ekpe Inyang's *The Hill Barbers*

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### Abstract



This article examines Ekpe Inyang's play entitled *The Hill Barbers* (2010) using postcolonial ecocriticism. Combining postcolonial theory and ecocriticism—in order to foreground the author's postcolonial Cameroonian/African society, the article investigates some of the numerous ecology-related issues raised in the play, among which deforestation, exploitation, capitalism, agency for nature, and the apocalyptic trope. It emerges, from both the play and article, that humans are destroying nature and are consequently suffering from this very destruction. Among the many effects of environmental destruction felt by the Mbungoe human community of the play are acute shortages of drinking water and dwindling animal species on their hills and mountains. One of the major findings of this article is the author's ability to reconcile hitherto opposing ideologies and practices, such as Judeo-Christianity and African religions and Western science and African traditions, in seeking ways of redressing the increasing ecological problems faced within Cameroonian/African communities and elsewhere around the globe, advocating sustainable behaviour and respect for nature. The paper joins ongoing research attempts to apply ecocriticism in reading literature from postcolonial African societies.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, Cameroon anglophone literature, literary criticism, Ekpe Inyang, *The Hill Barbers*.

### Resumen

Este artículo examina la obra teatral de Ekpe Inyang titulada *The Hill Barbers* (2010) usando la ecocrítica postcolonial. Combinando la teoría postcolonial y la ecocrítica, el artículo analiza algunas de las numerosas cuestiones relacionadas con la ecología que se plantean en la obra, cuestiones como la deforestación, la explotación, el capitalismo, la preservación de la naturaleza y el tropo apocalíptico. De la obra y del artículo se desprende que los seres humanos están destruyendo la naturaleza y, por consiguiente, sufren los efectos de esta misma destrucción. Entre las muchas consecuencias de la destrucción ambiental sufridas por la comunidad Mbungoe en la pieza teatral están la escasez aguda de agua potable y la disminución de las especies animales en sus colinas y montañas. Uno de los principales hallazgos de este artículo es la capacidad del autor para conciliar ideologías y prácticas hasta entonces opuestas, como el judeocristianismo, las religiones africanas, la ciencia occidental y las tradiciones africanas, al buscar formas de corregir los crecientes problemas ecológicos a los que se enfrentan tanto las comunidades camerunesas/africanas como otras en diversas partes del mundo. De esta manera, se aboga por un comportamiento sostenible y por el respeto hacia la naturaleza. El artículo supone una contribución a los intentos actuales de hacer una lectura de la literatura producida en las sociedades postcoloniales africanas a través del prisma de la ecocrítica.

*Palabras clave:* Ecocrítica, estudios postcoloniales, ecocrítica postcolonial, literatura anglófona camerunesa, crítica literaria, Ekpe Inyang, *The Hill Barbers*.

## Introduction

Cheryll Glotfelty’s expectation ‘to see ecocritical scholarship becoming even more interdisciplinary, multicultural, and international,’ following her remark that ‘Ecocriticism has been predominantly a white movement’ (xxv), has given rise to many hybrid critical approaches involving ecocriticism. The movement has also gained ground in other societies outside the US—generally considered as its birthplace—including Europe and postcolonial African communities. One of these novel hybrid approaches to the study of literature and the environment is postcolonial ecocriticism, especially as elaborated by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. They contend that “human liberation [which is a hallmark of postcolonial thought] will never be fully achieved without challenging the historical conditions under which human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to other societies, both human and nonhuman, and without imagining new ways in which these societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed” (22). This brings nature, construed as the entire ecosystem including humans, to the fore in an effort to deconstruct vertical dichotomies and seek much more symbiotically intertwined relations between all elements of nature. In a related manner, DeLoughrey and Handley consider postcolonial ecocriticism as ‘a critical engagement with an “aesthetics of the earth” [...] [which] reflects a complex epistemology that recuperates the alterity of both history *and* nature, without reducing either to the other’ (4-5). Nature and humans have to be considered on an equal and complementary basis, not in a domineering or hierarchical relationship favouring the latter. This is similar to what Anastasia Cardone refers to as ‘an aesthetics of the totality of nature, which can be defined as nature’s wholeness and which leads human beings to accept and respect nature for what it truly is, freed from any prejudices’ (85). Bringing this approach closer to Africa, Anthony Vital calls for a ‘[questioning of] the ways modernity in African contexts transforms human relations with nature and, as a result, the impact of societies on natural environments [...] [in order] to enable social worlds to find more equitable, sustainable, and healthy ways of inhabiting their place—as well as strengthen historical self-understanding’ (87). Certainly, literature is one of the areas of human culture in which this questioning and refashioning of the human-nature relation can be (re)presented and examined. This implies that the role of creative writers and literary scholars (critics) in addressing ecological degradation is pivotal and should remain so.

Against this backdrop, the present essay will offer a postcolonial ecocritical reading of *The Hill Barbers*, a poetic play by Ekpe Inyang, written mainly in verse

and set in Cameroon.<sup>1</sup> Adopting an earth-centred approach which is also aware of the socio-political and historical specificities of Cameroon as a postcolonial society, the essay will explore questions of agency and the humanisation of nature, the parallelism between colonisation and the scramble for natural resources, the role of neo-colonial capitalism in environmental destruction, the hybridisation of opposing religious practices in efforts to save nature, and the use of the apocalyptic trope in galvanising pro-nature and sustainable behaviour in the Mbungoe community of the play and, by extension, among its audiences/readers.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to summarise the plot of the play here. *The Hill Barbers* is divided into three acts: Act One is entitled “Yesterday,” act two “Today” and Act Three “Tomorrow.” In Act One, which opens with darkness animated by war drumbeats produced by two masked drummers, Sangu Ngoe, an old man who acts like a visionary/seer for the Mbungoe community, perceives danger in the war drumbeats. He interprets the message as warning his people, both farmers and hunters, against chaos on mountains and forests similar to the havoc which people have wreaked on neighbouring mountains, “precisely seven mountains away” (17). Tabi, the most important farmer in the Mbungoe community, is restless and sleepless but unable to decipher the doom-laden messages from the drummers. Tabi considers their neighbours as great hill “barbers”, who reap bountiful fruits from their labour, but the Seer reminds him that the negative consequences of their neighbours’ actions surpass their benefits. Later on Eyambe, the greatest hunter in the community, emerges and expresses excitement as he goes to the forest to hunt, without worrying about the increasingly bad weather. Meanwhile, Sangu Ngoe continues trying to persuade them that there is looming danger resulting from their agricultural activities, farming and hunting, in their mountainous forests. In the second act, war drumbeats usher in the two greatest warriors of the community, Ndongebidemu and Ntungwa, fighting over a farmland, each of them claiming the land is his family inheritance. Tabi later joins them also laying claim to some portions of the disputed farmland. Emanga and Mesambe, the spokespeople of the womenfolk of the community, tell the disputing men that there are more urgent problems to solve in their community. One of such pressing problems is the acute shortage of drinking water they are facing; the burden falls mainly on women and children, who have to walk long distances to fetch drinking water. The two women explain how the arbitrary “barbing” of the forests and hills, that is logging and farming, is responsible for the water scarcity and an unbearable

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<sup>1</sup> Since the play is written in verse, excerpts from it will be quoted here following poetic conventions, except those from stage directions. Ekpe Inyang comes from Korup in the Southwest region of Cameroon and holds an MSc in Environmental Studies from the University of Strathclyde, UK. He has served in different capacities with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society, the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), and the Pan African Institute for Development—West Africa (PAID-WA) in Cameroon. He has authored more than ten literary works (both poetry collections and plays). *The Hill Barbers* is his eighth play, published in 2010 by Langaa RPCIG.

change in the climate. Then the truth begins to dawn on the men, especially Eyambe, who recalls his late father’s words to him, that “The forest is store of water for us/Like mother is of milk/For her baby” (41). Mesambe reminds Eyambe, the hunter, that without forests there can be no animals and joins Sangu Ngoe in cautioning him against hunting on Rock Hill, which is both their sacred forest and a national protected area. Act Three opens with the drummers sending out enticing sounds to the dancing pleasure of Tabi, Eyambe, Emanga and Mesambe. Sangu Ngoe reminds them that most elements of nature are no longer able to perform their roles. The men and women realise that the macabre image of nature in their neighbouring communities is already taking shape on their own land. Then they start arguing and debating on the causes and consequences of this. They brainstorm on how to stop these undesirable happenings; they suggest stopping certain farming and hunting practices. In the course of their deliberations and arguments, they discuss a Magic Shrub capable of increasing soil fertility that Emanga’s grandmother used to avoid soil degradation in the past. The said plant helped her to harvest more from the same farmland but adversely earned her the name of a witch from her contemporaries. However, they agree that reintroducing this shrub could help them improve their soil fertility and avoid deforestation in the name of farming. They recognise the damage they have been doing to their forests, thereby causing global warming and related ecological problems and consequently making them debtors to future generations. They also realise that the drummers who dictate every aspect of their lives have been deceiving them into exploiting their forests and hills recklessly. After supplicating God through Jesus to help them to stop all destructive activities on their mountains and forests, and promising to perform traditional rites, the drummers flee the stage and the rest of the actors gather round Sangu Ngoe and raise their hands in a sign of victory. This is an indication that the actors/characters have begun to act on behalf of nature. They have now become agents or messengers of the overexploited Earth. Let us now discuss how the agency of nature comes across in the play.

### **Agency for nature, humanising nature**

*The Hill Barbers* foregrounds the agency of nature in intriguing ways; nature is humanised and given voice—through humans—and space on stage. The title of the play transfers human qualities to nature through hills and forests by addressing the human beings wreaking havoc on them as hill barbers. A barber is someone who shaves beards, cuts and dresses the hair on people’s faces and heads in order to make them look good. By referring to farmers (and hunters) in the play as hill barbers, the playwright implies that nature is human—the hills are human and have beards, heads and faces. Unlike barbers in real human life, who are solicited to cut people’s hair and enhance their beauty, the hill barbers are unsolicited by the hills and forests they shave. Consequently, the results of their work become as

undesirable as their work itself; we are told that their actions are turning the hills bald. In an exchange between the spokespeople of the womenfolk in the play, while responding to Mesambe's questions as to why they are facing acute water crises, Emanga says:

They are cutting down the trees  
That cover the hills.  
Like the Hill Barbers  
On the other side  
Of the mountain,  
They are fast turning the hills  
Into bare mounds of earth.  
Bald like vulture heads  
They soon will become. (38)

And this undesirable trend is rather widespread as the barbers in the play are compared to other 'Hill Barbers/On the other side/Of the mountain.' Baldness is both unsolicited and destructive to nature here, especially given the comparison to vultures, which feed on animal carcasses, thereby to an extent encouraging predation. Besides destroying the watersheds for the people of Mbungoe, the barbing action certainly causes soil erosion, implied in the baldness of the hills. There are other instances in which the play humanises nature through the hills and forests. For instance, Emanga appropriates feminine human qualities to nature by comparing the beauty of a hill to that of a woman as she creates an equivalence between the hair on a woman's head and the flora on a hill: "The beauty of a woman/Lies in the style of her hair,/That of a hill/In the cover of its flora" (49). This equally reinforces the trope of Mother Earth, particularly the feminization of the African landscape. One can argue that Ekpe Inyang, despite criticisms of Negritude from some African literary writers and scholars like Wole Soyinka, follows in the tradition of early African writers of the Negritude movement by extolling the African landscape and giving it feminine qualities. Thus the play, generally, provides opportunities for both the womenfolk and nature to express themselves on stage. The current and potential calamities resulting from the human abuse of nature in the play—such as the water shortages that send women and children trekking far distances to fetch drinking water—further make nature appear as an active agent and character in the play, a character whose health or ill health directly affects the lives of other characters. The restlessness that the ill health of nature provokes in the Mbungoe community of the play is an attempt to bring nature on stage. Nature becomes both visible and invisible—visible through the hills and farms cleared on stage and invisible due to its occasional physical absence and the reference to mountains elsewhere—but permanently present by appearing as a serious menace to human life inasmuch as humans continue to misuse it. The Seer Sangu Ngoe, aka Wise One, as well as the two representatives of the womenfolk, Mesambe and Emanga, I argue, are speaking both for themselves as human beings and for nature. Taken together with the playwright, they can be considered as mouthpieces of

nature "which is being threatened by man's selfish interests," to borrow from Brian Ojong (9). The play, in Sarah Ann Standing's words, "make[s] us aware that nature can come to life all around us and become [a] participant[.] with us in the story' (Standing 36). By doing this, nature, that is, "the landscape (and seascape) [is foregrounded] as a participant in [the play] rather than a bystander to human experience" (DeLoughrey and Handley 5). And the wellbeing of both humans and nature is, as many eco-critics suggest, therefore mutually interdependent. This view is further corroborated by Cardone's aesthetics of totality. The earth is considered as an interconnected whole.

However, aside from giving voice and space to nature on stage and thereby bringing its agency to the fore, the play equally raises questions of the inexpressible and subaltern. Can Sangu Ngoe and the two women effectively speak for the nonspeaking or subaltern subject which is nature? Inasmuch as they speak for nature, there can be deficiencies in their speech, given that nature does not use human language or, in other words, given that nature speaks/communicates in ways humans cannot rationally prove to comprehend. Inyang's play, despite the actual inexpressibility of nature's thoughts and feelings, can be considered as one in which humans can speak for nonhumans. They can "speak for nature" or speak for the subaltern subject in a narrative mode that does privilege dualist thought or naturalize the hierarchies between the human and nonhuman (DeLoughrey and Handley 26). One can argue that Sangu Ngoe, in his role as a Seer, is an intermediary and interpreter between humans and nature in the play, being able to relay nature's language to other humans who are not endowed with his supernatural powers, especially the short-sighted hill barbers and hunters. He tells others that "[his] life is a span of wings/Spread over two worlds/Living side-by-side" and he transcends "This simple world of ours/And the one that beats/[their] imagination." He can "hear sounds and see images/Both of this corporal world/And that beyond your reach,/ All at once" (10). He can decipher messages

With unfamiliar undertones  
Weaving in and out  
Of the sounds you hear.  
Those other sounds  
You can't pick up.'  
With mere human ears. (10)

He sees four drummers whilst Tabi sees only two (15-16) and he says the others cannot comprehend "The message of the drums/Rolled out by the naked [... drummers]." And what is the content of that message? It goes thus:

That message is clear warning  
About a terrible picture,  
Picture painted  
By your counterparts  
On the other mountains. (13-14)

By being able to communicate between humans and nature, the Seer adds an interesting layer to the play. This layer makes the play capable of collapsing the dividing lines between the human and nonhuman realms. Based on this, the play, to use Wamberg and Thomsen's words, contributes to the 'blurring of the boundary between subject inside and non-subject outside' (13), that is, the divisions between humans and their Other which has been/is Nature. Humans depend on nature for their survival, sometimes fighting over natural resources for both commercial and feeding purposes. What then is the relationship between the colonial scramble for territories in Africa and the fight over resources in the play?

### **Scrambling for resources like colonialists**

Nature and its resources constitute a zone for conflicting neo-colonial interests in *The Hill Barbers*. The fight and verbal exchanges between the two greatest warriors of the community, Ndongebidemu, Ntungwa and Tabi, in the second act (entitled 'Today,' 28-36), which is animated by war drums, resonate with the skirmishes and petty wars that characterized the colonial struggle over Africa, particularly West Africa where present day Cameroon is found, in the nineteenth century, and which might have escalated into a large-scale European war if the 1884-1885 Berlin West African Conference had not been held. The disorderly manner in which these characters lay claim to nearly or totally the same portions of the forest is akin to the way European colonial powers arbitrarily laid claims to different portions of Africa during colonization. While Ndongebidemu claims that "This stretch of forest/Belongs to me./I inherited it from/My father," Ntungwa lays a counter-claim. He argues, "No, it is mine./My father's father/Leased it to your father's father"(28-29). When Tabi, the greatest farmer in the community, rushes in he does not make matters better for the already quarrelling great warriors, Ndongebidemu and Ntungwa. Without trembling or expressing any fear, Tabi declares that he has come "To mark out a piece of forest/More clearly for [himself],/ Like every wise farmer would." And that "The season's ripening fast,/ And competition's/ Becoming really fierce" (31). Menaced by Ndongebidemu and Ntungwa, Tabi decides to give up his struggle to secure some portions of the forest for himself, declaring that "I give up the forest scramble./ I leave it for you./Every square inch" (34). Tabi's final remarks do not only directly link the interest-driven fight over nature, that is, the forest and its resources, directly to the European race for African colonies by using the word 'scramble,' but equally reveal how some Europeans surrendered their claims in the face of potentially bloody conflict, as in the case of the British, who surrendered the Cameroons to Germany following the signing of the Germano-Duala Treaty of Annexation under the auspices of Gustav Nachtigal on 12 July 1884 (Ngoh 7). Thus, the fight between these three characters over natural resources (parts of the forest for farming and animals for hunting) in the play is similar, in many ways, to how European colonialists vied for territories

in Africa. This fight foregrounds the exploitation of nature by human beings and also re-echoes the past exploitation of colonial subjects and their natural resources—and even their current neo-colonial exploitation. One can argue that this play fits into what Huggan and Tiffin describe as the paradox of postcolonial ecocriticism, as its author explores ‘the impossibility of [postcolonial ecocriticism’s] own utopian ambitions,’ seeking ‘to make exploitation and discrimination of all kinds, both human and nonhuman, visible in the world; and, in so doing, to help make them obsolete’ (16). Inyang’s play successfully attempts to condemn two forms of discrimination and exploitation at the same time: human and environmental exploitation. It further confirms Huggan and Tiffin’s assertion that

the *righting* of imperialist wrongs necessarily involves our writing of the wrongs that have been done – and are still being done – to [nature], and demands our critical engagement with the ways in which both continuing problems of abuse and their potential amelioration are represented in British colonial and Anglophone postcolonial texts. (22)

Among all the factors responsible for human abuse of the natural environment, capitalism and the insatiable human quest for material wealth stand at the forefront.

### **Capitalism and materialism at play**

Related to the double exploitation discussed above, *The Hill Barbers* draws attention to what one could term neo-colonial capitalism and materialism as accounting for the stark exploitation and victimhood of nature. The overwhelming presence of the drummers in the play, whose drumming dictates nearly all the actions on stage, is symbolic of the omnipresence of capitalism, which dictates almost all human actions on planet earth, especially in the present century. Their war tones, which orchestrate fighting between various characters, are reminiscent of the numerous armed conflicts in Third World countries, particularly Africa, that result from clashes of interest over natural resources. Cases in point include the long-standing armed conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria over the Bakassi Peninsula, which ended in favour of Cameroon thanks to the Green Tree Peace Agreement after the verdict of the International Court of Justice (Khadjagala 2-3); frequent deadly clashes between indigenous militants on the one hand and government forces and multinational companies such as Shell over oil and other resources in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria; and the frequent bloody conflicts over natural resources in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The neighbouring communities to Mbungoe which, according to the Seer and other characters, are already experiencing negative effects from the “barbing” of their hills that are worse than those of Mbungoe, plausibly designate the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. Drawing on Andrew Rowell, Huggan and Tiffin describe this region as follows: ‘A fragile riverine ecosystem, the Niger Delta, has effectively been laid waste



by several decades of oil and gas exploration and production, making it one of the most ecologically endangered regions in the world' (40). This description can be linked to the other communities evoked in the play. The Seer paints the following scary picture of the neighbouring communities, warning his people to avoid inviting a similar situation in their land:

And has he for you a word of caution.  
The destruction you now must stop.  
(A pause.)  
The picture of the landscape  
Just three mountains away,  
What ominous colours it casts!  
Such an alien picture  
Must here be painted not! (55)

However, towards the end of the play, the drummers almost entice the Seer, Sango Ngoe, into their capitalist trap, and could have led him too into destroying nature, were it not for the religious intervention of others. According to stage directions in the last act,

Sangu Ngoe remains still, casting angry looks at DRUMMERS. Then he starts to walk away from the clapping crowd, shaking his body vigorously as he tries to extricate himself from the hypnotising forces of DRUMMERS, who have sensed his intention. [...] Drumbeats die into sustained softness and ululation stops. But SANGU NGOE continues dancing wildly. (87-88)

Emanga, one of the spokespeople of the womenfolk, looking keenly at him as he dances to the tune of the drums, suspects some foul play and asks, "Can't we sense something foul?" Mesambe confirms that he "Indeed, indeed/[is dancing] Like one manipulated/By some strange force" (88) and Emanga, another spokesperson for women, quickly suggests that they should turn to God in prayers. At this juncture, the drummers have been identified as enemies of Mother Earth who lure people into destroying her for selfish reasons. The overwhelming presence of the drummers in the play is akin to the omnipresence of capitalist tendencies in today's world; there is no place on earth now where there are no capitalists, that is, profit seekers/makers. Nearly all the human beings in the play, just like human beings in real life, are capitalistic and materialistic in their behaviour, going to all lengths to exploit nature for their survival and often forgetting to be sustainable in their approach. Eyambe makes this point clear when he declares to Wise One that "It's all about survival,/Wise One. Basic survival./How to eke out a living/From the fast dwindling resources" (22). Later on in the play, Sangu Ngoe asserts:

Well, true. True, indeed.  
Human it is to struggle  
For wealth to amass  
And rich to become  
For power to gain. (71)

Perhaps the drummers work in synergy with the ruler of the community, that is, the Great Leopard who, together with his Syndicate, is said to ‘have developed great interests’ in the community forest known as Rock Hill. While the ruler’s animal name suggests a great traditional ruler, given that leopards, lions and elephants and their products are considered as animals and trophies of royalty among many African ethnic groups, especially in Anglophone Cameroon where Ekpe Inyang comes from, and also evokes images of a powerful and voracious dictator—given the predatory nature of the leopard—who connives with multinational corporations to recklessly exploit the people and their natural resources. When Emanga describes the ‘strange machine/Powerful like an eagle,/With wings spinning over its head’ which came ‘Equipped with cameras’ and ‘flew over the huge expanse/of Mbongoe,’ Mesambe is rather excited about what he considers a ‘Great spectacle, [...]’/The wondrous flight’ which has captured images of every square inch of their rich forest, bragging that ‘[their] forest surely will find/A conspicuous place/On the map of the world’ (46). Contrary to this excitement and short sightedness, Eyambe, the hunter, is quick to discern some concealed neo-colonial capitalist agenda behind the ruler’s sudden interest in their forest:

I hear Great Leopard  
And his Syndicate  
Have developed  
Such great interest in Rock Hill  
And adjacent forests  
That they’ve decided  
To carve it away from us. (47)

The term syndicate does suggest multinationals and commerce through its association with trade unionism which is typical of capitalist societies, while the idea of carving the forest away from the community inhabitants points to possible land expropriation by the state in alliance with multinationals. Western neo-colonial imperialism and capitalism are subtly at work in the play, especially through the Syndicate and the sophisticated machines and cameras used in mapping out the Rock Hills. The play unveils some form of “ongoing collaboration between national governments and gargantuan transnational companies whose economies exceed those of all but the largest ‘developing’ countries, and whose financial and technical assistance is provided in terms that continue to favour the West” (Huggan and Tiffin 30). Nature, in all its forms, becomes the (helpless) victim of these capitalist manoeuvres in the play. As Asika and Madu would say it, “nature in many ways is the sacrificial lamb to be slain on the altar of globalization and economic growth” (34).

### **Reconciling opposing religions to save nature?**

In a typical postcolonial style of hybridity, Ekpe Inyang brings together two opposing religious views in efforts to combat environmental destruction and

promote the sustainability of nature. African traditional beliefs and Judeo-Christianity are portrayed as being capable of saving nature from human harm. Through the practice of reserving sacred forests and other African traditional practices, the playwright demonstrates the usefulness of indigenous religious practices in nature conservation in Cameroon and Africa. The dwindling populations of animals in the community compel Eyambe to hunt on Rock Hill. And when he makes this known, Sango Ngoe and Emanga declare that his actions are abominable and blasphemous because that particular hill is the home of their ancestors, the land of their gods. "That particular hill/Deserves to be kept sacrosanct,/Treated with reverence." The animals he hunts are protected by their traditional religion because they are "totems of the god/[..]/ the god with seven great heads" and that forest is a sacred one, a "No-go area it has always been to all./Except for a privileged few/Who, of course, would face death/Should they make a trip there/With any bad intentions." The hill is said to enjoy "double protection", "total protection" from both their religion and the state (44-45). In *The Forest: An African Traditional Definition*, Ekpe Inyang elaborates on the importance of sacred forests in Africa:

In most, if not all rural forest communities in Cameroon and Nigeria (and this may be true also for most of rural Africa), the forest is regarded as home of the ancestors, some of whom are in the form of the great creatures that dwell in it. It is also regarded as the abode of the spirits of the land, including malevolent and benevolent spirits, and a repository of some faith. In this regard, some forest areas are set aside and designated as sacred, forbidding therein the execution of such disturbing human activities as hunting, trapping, and farming. It is held that the destruction of a sacred forest could provoke the occurrence of a windstorm or natural calamities of the like, including epidemics of some dangerous diseases like small pox. (8)

From this excerpt it is plausible to attribute, although partially, the impending catastrophes in the community of the play to the sacrilegious activities of people like Eyambe in the sacred forest on Rock Hill. Chuka A. Okoye also stresses the importance of African traditional religions in environmental preservation when he argues that "The traditional African cares for his environment basically for the human good, either to avoid punishment from the gods or for the future generation" (144). Fear of punishment from the gods accounts for some of the caring actions directed towards nature in African societies, one would say.

Still in relation to African indigenous religions, the Seer suggests towards the end of the play that all the characters should take "a powerful traditional oath" (80) to accompany their resolve to fight against the destruction of their environment. By reading the poaching of animals in sacred forest as emanating from postcolonial and capitalist economic crises and increasing hardships in the Third World, one can argue that Inyang resurrects the notion of "'natural', harmonious precolonial African cultures and of the corrupting impact of colonialism [which] was a prominent figure aspect of Negritude, which began in the 1930s, and remains ubiquitous in African poetry, fiction, and drama" (Caminero-Santangelo 149). While Lynn White indicts Judeo-Christianity for crimes against nature as it makes us

humans believe "We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim" (1206), Inyang rather suggests that this religion can, in some way, save the earth from human destruction. At the end of the play, when it is realised that the drummers have entrapped the Seer with their deceitful tunes, Emanga proposes that they turn to God for help. They pray to the Christian God:

Most merciful Lord,  
The Giver and Taker of life,  
The Alpha and the Omega.  
Let the sun take down with it,  
As it now descends upon the hills,  
All the destructive, old practices  
That now are a source of doom for us.  
[...]  
Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus! Lord of Lords!  
Our only Saviour and Redeemer.  
Our only source of hope. Come down.  
Come down. And rescue. Rescue us. (88-91)

They implore the Christian God to save them from impending ecological doom and help them to stop destroying nature. Although it is difficult to determine if simple prayer can save the earth, a combination of prayer and other measures proposed in the play such as the preservation of sacred lands and the adoption of the 'Magic Shrub' that enhances soil fertility can contribute to redressing the gloomy environmental situation they are experiencing. In the play, Emanga's grandmother was accused of being a witch because she used a certain tree (a tree that came to be called the Magic Shrub) which helped her to increase her farm yields without indulging in shifting cultivation (a practice which was and is still commonplace in their community and which contributes enormously to soil degradation and erosion). While people in that community called her grandmother 'The witch that drew/Fertile soil/From other farmers' farms,' her mother had told her the truth about the shrub her grandmother was using:

Your daughter told me  
You brought the shrub  
From a village where  
Every farmer planted it  
Around their farms  
To increase their yields, eh?  
So it was truly a lie, eh?  
And does it also mean  
Every farmer in that village  
Was a witch or wizard?  
And from whose farms  
Did they draw fertile soil  
To enrich their farm plots? (62-63)

Now in possession of the truth regarding the so-called Magic Shrub, Ntungwa realises that it could also help in their efforts to stop the impending ecological

catastrophes hanging over their community. "Facing the audience," Ntungwa apologetically declares: "Something tells me/There is a lesson/We've refused to learn/From that woman's story" (63). Such statements suggest a readiness to adopt the tree; they also possibly contribute to the hope-filled ending of the play, when all the characters "[raise their] hands up as a sign of victory" (93). It is worth noting that the mixing of traditional and Christian religious beliefs and practices is common in postcolonial societies where Christianity has remained one of the legacies of colonialism, though Christianity is sometimes blamed for the colonial exploitation and current underdevelopment of these same societies, especially in Africa.

### Using the apocalyptic trope to inspire action?

One of the most remarkable strengths of this play is how its author uses the apocalyptic trope not only to convey ecology-friendly messages but also to encourage characters who are initially climate-change-sceptical and nature-destroying to launch a war against the destruction of nature. As Gabriele Dürbeck notes, "In contemporary environmental literature, disasters are often depicted using the dramatizing rhetoric of the Apocalypse which has become a master narrative in this body of texts" (1). The looming catastrophes in the play, already evident in acute water shortages, near extinction of many animal species, rising temperatures, and unpredictability of climatic elements such as rain and sunshine, are mainly perceived and announced by Sangu Ngoe who acts as Seer. Many other characters seem oblivious of this dangerous situation as he says: "So clear are the premonitions,/ Though to them no one pays attention./ But I tell you, simply,/What I see coming/[Is] in leaps and bounds" (51). For Eyambe, there is nothing wrong in asking for the Magic Shrub that was used by Emanga's grandmother, since they now face a "terrible flood of/Life-threatening problems." For Sangu Ngoe, these problems are "A clear sign of global warming,/ A human-induced problem,/With promise of more serious/Life-threatening events" (66-68). He further states that all that he sees is impending and impeding darkness:

Nothing short of darkness.  
Oh, yes, I see darkness!  
Impenetrable darkness.  
Gradually and systematically  
Engulfing our forest landscape.  
Thick, thick darkness. Alien darkness.  
Blurring the vision of my people. (7)

By likening the situation to "an ugly sore" (15) he creates a sense of fear and urgency, as a sore is a sign of ill health which can burst at any moment. Earlier in the play, he declares that nemesis may soon catch up with them, like it has already done with their neighbours, if they do not stop destroying nature (16). Curiously they seem already caught up by nemesis, judging from the long distances their women and children trek in search of drinking water as well as the unbearable heat they

experience, among other problems. In this way, they are already in the midst of the catastrophe they are trying to avoid. However, the magnitude of the present catastrophe is less than that of the looming one which they will avert through the concerted actions announced at the end of the play. These actions include, among others, their agreement to adopt the Magic Shrub in their farming practices, their prayers to God, their resolve to take a traditional oath to bind them as they combat environmental degradation, and the fleeing of the drummers from stage. By warning of impending peril, extinction or apocalypse, the playwright achieves what Downing Cless, the renowned scholar of eco-theatre, calls an "accumulation of foreboding facts" (Cless 89). This pushes the actors to concerted positive action at the end of the play, the last sign of which is their raising of hands as a sign of victory, thereby situating the play within the category of eco-theatre. In this form of theatre, plays help audience members and readers not only to become aware of problems but also to engage with the problems. Eco-theatrical plays allow 'multiple protagonists,' that is, actors and even audiences, to brainstorm or find solutions to environmental problems in their communities. At the end of such plays, Cless asserts, "acting on behalf of their community and joining with the audience in a forum, these multiple protagonists seek solutions that are both economically and ecologically sound" (Cless 81). Furthermore, the use of the apocalyptic trope not only supports the strong presence of both African and Christian religions in the play, which preach the apocalypse as a punitive end, but equally provides some form of mediation between the often conflicting fields of tradition and science. Scientific knowledge and facts about climate are mainly conveyed in the play through Sangu Ngoe, the Seer. His prophetic apprehensions of environmental calamities corroborate scientific knowledge about Sub-Saharan Africa, where Cameroon, the setting of the play, belongs:

A recent report of the UN's Global Humanitarian Forum, for example, calculates that global climate disruption causes 300,000 deaths a year due to increased drought, flooding, and other environmental consequences, a figure that will dramatically increase if mitigation against climate change is not pursued. Ninety-eight percent of all such deaths are occurring in postcolonial nations; in stark contrast, only one of the twelve least vulnerable nations is a developing country. Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and the island states of the Pacific and Indian Oceans have been specifically identified as the most at risk. (DeLoughrey and Handley 27)

Instead of creating a character who works, maybe, for Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) (like the playwright), to convey such scientific information to the people in the play, Inyang has invested this knowledge in the traditional African seer, thereby deconstructing neocolonial epistemological hierarchies that privilege Western-originated science over indigenous knowledge and practices. Far from just deconstructing, he shatters boundaries between these two forms of knowledge, consequently suggesting that a combination of both can be useful in solving real-life human challenges such as the environmental crises in the play.

## Conclusion

The hybrid approach combining ecocriticism with postcolonial criticism has proved fruitful, not only allowing for the exploration of postcolonial issues such as agency, the subaltern, cultural clashes, power abuse, and neo-colonial capitalism, but also helping to illuminate the intricate connections between capitalism-driven human practices and actions in postcolonial Cameroon and their resultant menaces to ecological balance, menaces which cannot even spare their human-inducing agents. Both the play under study and the arguments herein advanced place humans and nonhumans at the fore, shattering the boundaries between them, revealing how some humans wreak havoc on the earth while some others sympathise with her and consequently speak up and initiate actions to safeguard her. Cultural products such as religion often addressed in postcolonial studies have been interpreted here as being capable, to some extent, of contributing to environmental sustainability.

Thanks, particularly, to the apocalyptic trope, not only the characters on stage, but also the reader, by extension, are moved to take positive action to save and sustain the bleeding and nearly collapsing ecological system of which we humans form a part. By emphasising that "No forest" means "no water", and "no animals" (42, 37), Inyang shows how irresponsible human actions on nature deprive humans of the most basic of their needs: water and food. In the absence of these two things human life is bound to discontinue. This corroborates the assertion that "Man's constant abuse of nature is capable of leading to man's destruction" (Asika and Madu 41). Following Patrick Murphy's "distinction between nature-oriented literature, and environmental literature" (qtd. in Naidu 60), this equally locates Inyang's play within the category of environmental literature. He is committed to fighting environmental damage in many ways, particularly through creative writing. In the face of wanton environmental degradation in Cameroon, especially deforestation in and around the Southwest region, and almost acting like Ken Saro Wiwa, the Nigerian Niger Delta-based environmental and human rights activist,<sup>2</sup> Ekpe Inyang lashes out at such manipulative and exploitative collaborations of native Africans with multinational concerns. Inyang can be said to be "unrelenting in his [rather subtle] attacks on the self-consuming body of the African state, 'conceived in the European colonialist interest for imperial or commercial purposes'" (Huggan and Tiffin 38).

Submission received 21 June 2017  
2018

Revised version accepted 12 February

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<sup>2</sup> Ken Saro Wiwa was executed in 1995 under the military dictator General Sani Abacha who ruled Nigeria from 1993-1998.

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