

Out of Africa: Ecocriticism beyond the Boundary of Environmental Justice

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to present a broader view of ecocriticism in Africa. Ecocriticism, in theory and practice, appears to have limited itself to the notion of environmental justice, rooted in a protest aesthetics, traditional to African literature, with the aim of raising consciousness against institutional powers behind ecological crises. The reason for this is not far-fetched. International scholarship on African ecocriticism tends to focus on the activism of the Kenyan Wangari Mathai and the Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa; and on the fiction of a few writers concerned with environmentalism and conservation. This *kind* of ecocriticism, under the rubric of postcolonialism, is, in my view, narrow, too human-centred, and should, in fact, be decentred for an all-inclusive mapping of African ecocriticism. I attempt to shift this paradigm by foregrounding a narrative that stages the role and agency of nonhuman and spiritual materialities in practices that demonstrate nature-human relations since the pre-colonial period. I argue that for a proper delineation of the theory and practice of ecocriticism in Africa, attention should be paid to literary and cultural artefacts that depict Africa's natural world in which humans sometimes find themselves helpless under the agency of other-than-human beings, with whom they negotiate the right path for the society. I conclude by making the point that a recognition of this natural world, and humans' right place in it, is crucial to any ecocritical project that imagines an alternative to the present human-centred system.

Keywords: Africa, literature, natural world, spiritual practices, decentredness.

Resumen¹

Este ensayo tiene como objetivo presentar una visión más amplia de la ecocrítica en África. La ecocrítica, enraizada en una estética de protesta, tradicional de la literatura africana, parece haberse limitado, tanto en teoría como en práctica, a la noción de justicia medioambiental, pues su objetivo ha estado dirigido a promover una conciencia en contra de los poderes institucionales detrás de las crisis ecológicas. Sin embargo, sus razones no son desatinadas. Los estudios internacionales sobre la ecocrítica africana tienden a centrarse en el activismo del keniano Wangari Mathai, el nigeriano Ken Saro-Wiwa, y las obras de algunos escritores interesados en el ecologismo y la conservación. Esta forma de ecocrítica bajo la rúbrica del poscolonialismo es, en mi opinión, limitada y centrada exclusivamente en el ser humano, y debería, de hecho, estar descentralizada para un mapeo inclusivo de la ecocrítica africana. Por ello, intento cambiar este paradigma poniendo en primer plano una narrativa que escenifica el papel y la agencia de las materialidades no humanas y espirituales en las prácticas que demuestran las relaciones entre la naturaleza y los humanos desde el período precolonial. Sostengo que para una descripción adecuada de la teoría y la práctica de la ecocrítica en África, se debe prestar atención a los artefactos literarios y culturales que representan el mundo natural de África, en el que los humanos a veces se encuentran indefensos bajo la agencia de otros seres-más-que-humanos, con quienes se negocia el camino correcto para la sociedad. Concluyo señalando que el reconocimiento de este mundo natural, y el lugar correcto de los humanos en él, es crucial para cualquier proyecto ecocrítico que imagine una alternativa al actual sistema centrado en el ser humano.

¹ I would like to thank Alejandra Castellanos Breton and Michal Musialowski who helped translate the abstract and keywords into Spanish.

Palabras clave: África, literatura, mundo natural, prácticas espirituales, descentralización.

Introduction

With the increasing number of publications, including major studies, on literature and the environment in Africa, we can safely say that something in the direction of an African ecocriticism has begun to emerge.² By this, it is meant an ecocriticism that is based on specific natural, cultural and social particularities of the continent—more specifically, those of sub-Saharan Africa, which this article is concerned with. I argue that in theory and practice, this ecocriticism should recognize the commonalities between the natural and human worlds that have been understood to exist in Africa. In other words, it should be one formulated from within, rather than outside, the continent. This is not a gesture towards insulating the continent from the world. It is rather a call to let the continent speak for itself in discourses about the connections between the human and the nonhuman, and between literature and ecology. Departing from this premise, the essay seeks to rethink the ecocriticism rooted in western epistemology, which has tended to approach African writing from the point of view of environmental justice and the environmentalism of the poor, and within the framework of postcolonial criticism. Such emphasis on the environmentalism of the poor is not totally misplaced, since the people of the continent have on the whole remained, in the words of Frantz Fanon, among the wretched of the earth. Environmental justice ecocriticism, especially as expounded by Caminero-Santangelo in *Different Shades of Green*, has revealed the institutional powers, from within and outside the continent, responsible for environmental catastrophe. However, this emphasis on environmental justice has suppressed a crucial dimension of environmental literature in Africa, by failing to foreground natural worlds and their role in shaping thoughts and ways of living, as well as in the preservation and conservation of diverse life-forms. Although scholars such as Iheka, Moolla and McGiffin have directed attention to the representation of the nonhuman world in African writing, more remains to be done. With reference to literary works from parts of sub-Saharan Africa, this essay considers the depiction of nonhuman worlds and their nuanced agency in human society, and asks how studies of such writing can enrich African ecocriticism.

The Nonhuman Realm

At the risk of what some may see as unnecessary particularism, I would like to contend that nature, the natural world, does not imply the same thing to sub-Saharan Africans as it does for non-Africans, especially those in the so-called developed societies. The west in particular appears to have turned full circle: from a civilisation based on a

² I have in mind, among others, Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa*; Ogaga Okuyade's *Eco-Critical Literature*; F. Fiona Moolla's *Natures of Africa*; Byron Caminero-Santangelo's *Different Shades of Green*; and Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers' *Environment at the Margins*.

Cartesian dualism that severs the human from the nonhuman, thereby inferioritising nature, it appears to have returned to nature, in that today “[nature] has come to occupy a central place on the political agenda as a result of ecological crisis” (Soper 2). With new materialism and material ecocriticism, nature is being *negotiated* back into western civilisation through what appears to be a regime of discourse rather than reality. Arguably, Africans, whether in the precolonial time or in the present state of struggling modernity, do not see nature as the *other*, against which to define themselves. What appears correct is that Africans, especially those born and raised on the continent, understand the connections between physical and spiritual (seen and unseen) entities. They tend to see themselves as part of nature, in that nearly all social life is viewed as starting from the past and culminating in the future. In other words, present life is spiritually and materially a product of past life, and the source of future life through the process of incarnation. Past life is nature, i.e. spiritual materiality, represented by natural life-forms such as waters, trees, stones, anthills, and so on. This is a well-known cycle informed by the organic link between the dead, the living, and the unborn.³ An individual is therefore necessarily reincarnated, linked to a previous life, besides having a spiritual life-guide in forms of gods and goddesses, usually represented by material nature (wood carvings, iron objects, animal images, and other diverse natural forms).⁴ All of this has been dubbed as primitive and heathen under the influence of European/Arab civilisation and religion. And although the influence of Islam and Christianity, whose oppressive monotheism suppresses African spiritualities, may be growing, it would be naïve to suggest that Africans have become so “civilised” that they totally abandon their natural-spiritual folkways.

Perhaps there have been no African thinkers that have captured the dead-living-unborn connectivity and aspects of natural worlds like African writers, especially the pioneer ones. To properly read texts such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between*, Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth My Brother*, Christopher Okigbo’s “Idoto,” and Okot P’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*, to mention just a few, is to seek access to African natural worlds beyond the textuality of the writing. Aside from the infusions of myths, legends, and traditional belief systems, all of which are rooted in natural worlds, in the texts above, their diverse representations of traditional cultures, often in contradistinction to the colonisers’ culture, remain a rich source of information about understandings of the natural world in Africa. Indeed, the counter-discourse of early African literature, which confronts the colonial discourse that undermines the humanity of Africans, is built on the abundance, vivacity and dynamics of nonhuman as well as human lives in all parts of the continent.

Gabriel Okara’s poem “Piano and Drums” is an extended metaphor in that regard. The poet-persona places the *environment* of his birthplace side by side with the

³ Wole Soyinka writes of the connection between the dead, the living, and the unborn as the cycle of life among the Yoruba people in his *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

⁴ I am referring here to what is called *chi* in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, translated as a personal god or a guardian spirit. Nearly all ethnic nationalities in sub-Saharan Africa have a similar spirit.

environment, or rather the *atmosphere*, imposed by the colonising powers. His environment is ecologically diverse; a place

Where at break of the day at a riverside
I hear jungle drums telegraphing
the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
like bleeding flesh, speaking of
primal youth and the beginning
I see the panther, ready to pounce
the leopard snarling about to leap
and the hunters crouched with spears poised. (1-8)

The rich environment here is contrasted with the ‘civilisation’ of the west due to colonial invasion:

Then I hear a wailing piano
solo speaking of complex ways
in tear-furrowed concerto;
of far away lands
and new horizons with
coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
of its complexities, it ends in the middle
of a phrase at a daggerpoint. (17-25)

Situating itself within the colonial discourse that Africans are simple-minded and can become humanly complex only when they embrace western culture (its religion represented by the “wailing piano”, its government by the violent “new horizons”), the poem is an ironic inferioritisation of the western way, seen by the poet-persona as singular and monotheistic (“solo speaking”). Western culture lacks the plurality and diversity of his birthplace, even if the latter is dubbed a “jungle”, where humans, nonhumans, and other life-forms co-exist. Notice that the co-existence is not unproblematic, as the humans are always in the process of instrumentalising the other life-forms. And yet the mysticism of life (“mystic rhythm”) is a rope that binds humans with the nonhuman in such a way that humans are compelled to obey the code of co-existence.

This is the kind of view of Africa—what some may see as romantic—that informs the gospel of Negritude developed by Francophone African writers at the beginning of African literature.⁵ Negritude emphasises the riches of biodiversity, the entangled mode of living between the humans and the nonhumans, and the dynamism of such life in traditional communities. The works of Negritude poets (Leopold S. Senghor, David Diop, Gabriel Okara, among others) remain among the most ecologically sensitive texts of African literature. Negritude as an aesthetic movement is therefore a great resource for exploring the nonhuman dimension of African writing.

⁵ For a detailed account of the Negritude movement, see Abiola Irele’s *The Negritude Moment*.

The Question of Nonhuman Agency

Ecocritical engagement with natural worlds should be, as I see it, two-dimensional. There is the non-spiritual dimension encapsulating human understandings of our physical place in nature. In this premise, life is lived in traditional African society under the unspoken code of interdependence between the nonhuman and the human. Humans' instrumental use of the natural world is moderated by a high sense of responsibility and conservation. This is captured in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*, where Ngotho feels a strong attachment to his ancestral land, which has been taken away from him. So much so that he agrees to be employed as a labourer to work on the same land. Tending the land, even if for a foreigner, is one way of acting on the feeling, even if misplaced, that he is the best person to take care of the land that was bequeathed to him by his parents. He therefore tends it with passion. Similarly, people in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the local communities, grow up to own and preserve farms, trees, bodies of water, animals, natural objects, and so on, which they have inherited from their ancestors. These materials or objects of natural worlds inherited from ancestors constitute a meaning-making means through which humans understand their backgrounds. The objects often have a history of interdependence between humans and nonhumans. That is, someone may decide to plant a particular tree for a particular purpose, or may choose to preserve a particular natural object because of the benefit derived from such objects. In this case, the objects are of benefit to the person, just the way the person is of benefit by the way they preserve and conserve the objects. To this extent, there is co-existence, and with it co-agency. The agential power and exertion work both ways: the nonhuman exerts agency as much as the human. If a man or woman plants and tends trees on their farm boundary, the agency of bounding the farm is from the trees as well as from the planter. This age-long practice, just like others, in Africa demonstrates that the nonhuman has always had agency, although this is often undermined or suppressed by human hubris.

In the spiritual dimension, however, human hubris is, in most cases, undermined. Here, objects or animals from natural worlds are invested with spirits whereby they are worshipped or considered sacred, thereby exerting some power over human existence. Although as we see in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, humans can question the authority, even existence, of their gods/goddesses, most traditional worshippers in Africa are totally obedient to the spiritual beings, to the extent that their agency is tied to the agency of the gods/goddesses. A man or woman who carries a cowrie, a piece of iron or wood, or a herb as a talisman, and relies on it to perform an action, cannot claim sole agency, since the object has no doubt contributed to the effectuation of the action. It is the same with the example often given that an animal such as a dog can claim agency in a situation where it assists a human being to perform an action. Some Nigerian poets (Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide, among others) have in their works given credit to what one may consider their personal gods (Okigbo's Idoto; Soyinka's Ogun; Ojaide's Aridon) for giving them

artistic inspiration, and it would only be proper that these spiritual materials (the gods are of course represented by natural objects) also share in the artistic agency of the poets.⁶ The spiritualisation of natural objects in Africa offers a meaningful avenue for ecological inquiry. Consider the notion of taboo as captured in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Designated as an evil forest, a portion of the forest is neglected and feared and thus left alone. In other words, it is a forest uninvaded by human hubris in form of technological instrumentalisation. Wood loggers, firewood seekers, farmers, hunters, etc. avoid it because of the belief attached to it. Because of this frame of belief, the forest becomes conserved and its diverse life-forms enjoy longevity and sustainability. Until the colonial invasion, the evil forest was preserved. Senayon Olaoluwa therefore concludes, in his ecocritical reading of the novel, that "while the African construal of sacred spaces enhances biodiversity conservation through forestation, Christian sacralisation of space [...] translates into deforestation and biodiversity depletion" (207). That is, invading the evil forest and building on it, as the missionaries have done in *Things Fall Apart*, amounts to depleting it. In the same vein, Maurice Amutabi studies "the role of tradition and taboos in the preservation of environment among the Abaluyia of western Kenya, showing that their culture preserved certain plant and animal species" (228) before the practice "started to change with the arrival of Christian missionaries from Europe and North America" (232). The point is that a focus on the depiction of the natural world in Africa would unveil such practices that have had ecological implications.

Conclusion: Towards a Comprehensive African Ecocriticism

James Graham makes the crucial point in his review of *Environment at the Margins* that the book anticipates an African ecocriticism built on texts which "range from critiques of colonial accounts of African peoples, landscapes and animals [...] to the writing of post-colonial anthropology and ecology as fiction" (1). He cites the aspiration of the editors in their Introduction that "'African ecocriticism' might emerge performatively through such an encounter, rather than be prescribed as an addendum to a generic, first world-issued 'postcolonial ecocriticism'" (1). The juxtaposition of ecological poetry and fiction with anthropological writing is of significance for the development of African ecocriticism from within the continent. In other words, an African ecocriticism aiming to analyse depictions of the natural world ought to embrace anthropological, cultural and historical texts paying attention to peoples' spiritual engagements, forms of worship, customs, and the objects embodying them, as well as novels and poems.

Although Graham, writing in 2013, foresaw what I would like to see as a comprehensive African ecocriticism (examining representations of landscapes, natural environments, and animals, the spiritual and the nonspiritual), what has continued to prevail as ecocriticism in Africa is lopsided through its focus on environmental justice. Fossil fuel sites in Africa, such as Nigeria's Niger delta region, the dispossession and

⁶ For more on Nigerian poets' attachment to spiritual beings, see Egya.

displacement of the poor in zones of modern mining and constructions, and other zones of technology-driven eco-destruction have received substantial ecocritical attention. Much of this ecocritical discourse, however, seems to be too exclusively concerned with the fate of human beings, however poor and dispossessed. Cajetan Iheka, examining ecocritical studies on the delta region of Nigeria, points out that they have “focused primarily on the effects of environmental tragedies on humans in the affected areas, often leaving out the nonhuman world or merely glossing over its relevance for the human population” (1).

A few studies from South Africa, in addition to Iheka’s *Naturalizing Africa*, have shown the pathway towards a comprehensive African ecocriticism. I am referring here to Wendy Woodward’s *The Animal Gaze*, F. Fiona Moolla’s edited book *Natures of Africa* and Emily McGiffin’s *Of Land, Bones, and Money*. These works should inspire further studies of literary depictions of the natural world and nonhuman agency, which are as robustly present in today’s Africa as they were in the past. As Moolla points out, “the natural world and animals have been active agents in African cultural forms for as long as these forms have existed. This is because environment and animals fundamentally constitute the worldviews and lifeways [sic] that have created [African] cultural ‘texts’” (9). This implies that a focus on natural worlds should be in fact preeminent in African ecocriticism.

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