

## Nature, and a Social Revolution in Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta*

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### Abstract

This essay is about the agency of nonhumans and its use to achieve a social revolution in Wole Soyinka's play *Alápatà Àpáta*. In Soyinka's dramatic aesthetics, anthropocentrism is undermined to reflect an African natural world where nature and culture are not dichotomous but entangled. Using ideas from African indigenous knowledge system (particularly of the Yoruba ethnic nation) and material ecocriticism, we argue that the play presents nonhuman beings as the protagonist in the revolution against political oppression. The shift from the human to the nonhuman, in the context of social revolution, suggests that such ecocentric readings can give us an alternative dimension of African literature that foregrounds the roles of African nature in societal progress—roles that have been hitherto marginalized in reading practices that have privileged humans over nonhumans. This study will extend the focus of African literary studies from one that is human centred to one that discusses the complexities of human-nonhuman relations.

**Keywords:** Wole Soyinka, *Alápatà Àpáta*, nature, agency, African ecocriticism, social revolution.

### Resumen

Este ensayo trata la agencia de los no-humanos y su uso para conseguir una revolución social en la obra teatral *Alápatà Àpáta* de Wole Soyinka. En la estética dramática de Soyinka se socava el antropocentrismo para reflejar un mundo natural africano en el que la naturaleza y la cultura no son una dicotomía, sino que están entrelazadas. Usando ideas del sistema de conocimiento de los indígenas africanos (en particular de la nación étnica yoruba) y de la ecocrítica material, sostenemos que la obra presenta a los seres no humanos como los protagonistas de la revolución frente a la opresión política. El cambio de lo humano a lo no-humano, en el contexto de una revolución social, sugiere que tales lecturas ecocéntricas pueden ofrecernos una dimensión alternativa de la literatura africana que destaca los roles de la naturaleza africana en el progreso social—roles que hasta la fecha han sido marginalizados en las lecturas que han privilegiado a los humanos sobre a los no-humanos. Este estudio extenderá el foco de los estudios literarios africanos, pasando de la atención hacia lo humano a debatir las complejidades de las relaciones entre humanos y no-humanos.

**Palabras clave:** Wole Soyinka, *Alápatà Àpáta*, naturaleza, agencia, ecocrítica africana, revolución social.

## Introduction

Nigerian literature is rich in presentations of nature as a nonhuman world populated by a diversity of natural biotic and abiotic components that together form parts of the ecosystems. Nature, in most cultures of Africa especially among the Nigerian peoples, comprises all living and non-living, physical and spiritual nonhuman beings such as trees, rocks, waters, animals, ancestors, gods and goddesses, among many others. Authors like Harry Garuba, Cajetan Iheka, F. Fiona Moolla, and Sule E. Egya have brought into view the representations of human-nonhuman relationality in the context of the natural world in Nigerian and African literary works. This human-nonhuman interconnectivity is a way of living for many indigenous societies in Nigeria. Traditionally, most people believe that they are organically linked with nonhuman beings, which might be spiritual or nonspiritual. For instance, in the Yoruba cosmology, a child is a reincarnated ancestor (see Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*). As dramatised in Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, a human is spiritually and materially linked with natural beings such as trees, rocks, and water. Egya in *Nature, Environment and Activism in Nigerian Literature* makes the point that “[w]e hear people [in Nigeria] say I come from a water, from a tree, from a rock, and as such I have to act in a particular way that may appear strange or illogical to another person” (25). This goes beyond a consciousness towards an object; it is rather a submission and concession to the order of nature—the way humans see themselves as parts of the natural world. Moolla notes that these natural beings have been considered active agents in African cultural forms for as long as these forms have existed (9). She makes this point to draw attention to these material bodies and to shift attention from the rubric of environmental justice which has been hitherto driving ecocritical research in Africa. For the authors mentioned above, and in most African belief systems, nature is not only material but ontological. For example, before the onset of modernity, spiritual presences and material bodies or objects were considered as shaping and sometimes subverting the forces that operate in indigenous societies.

The deployment of these natural beings and animals in African proverbs and wise sayings are not only for linguistic and stylistic wordplay, but a communicative strategy to emphasise their roles in the promotion and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems. For example, the African proverb “Whoever will eat the honey in a rock does not worry about the edge of the axe” suggests that when people are focused on the benefits of a situation, they may disregard the potential risks or dangers associated with it. In this case, “eating the honey in a rock” metaphorises enjoying the sweet rewards, while “not worrying about the edge of the axe” implies ignoring the potential damage that may come with it. Importantly, the proverb explores the relationship between humans and the environment, particularly in the context of resource extraction and environmental consequences. Honey is a valuable resource obtained from beehives, often found in trees or natural rock formations. Traditionally, in Nigerian Yoruba society, extraction of honey from the rock or trees

can be challenging, so humans employ the use of tools like axes and cutlasses to get the natural resources at all costs. This suggests that people who aim at obtaining honey are neither concerned about the potential injury to the edge of the axe, nor the harm the edge leaves on the natural environment—the rock. This proverb highlights a theme common in ecocriticism—the examination of ecological or environmental consequences of human capitalists' exploitation of natural resources. Just as observed in the above proverb, the human capitalists in Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta* aim at excavating the natural resources in Alaba's boulder without showing any concern about the potential injury to Alaba or the boulder itself which will be stripped of the characteristics that make it inhabitable.

The example of the proverb above makes Moolla conclude that “the proverbs that constitute the philosophy of Africa cannot be conceived without the natural world and animals” (9). On this philosophical ground, Africans think of themselves as inhabitants of nature and cannot sever themselves from it. From their proverbs, myths, literatures, and spiritualities, nature is conceived as a material being with agency that the human life is inextricably linked with. This view is fundamental to our reading of *Alápatà Àpáta*; we present the interconnection of humans and nonhumans, the natural and the social, from the perspective that the natural world is inseparable from the social world. We argue that the obvious dialectical materialism of this play is built upon the agency of nature and its aestheticisation, which readers are likely to ignore if they fail to look at nature beyond the conception of it as a mere setting of action in the play. Nature in the context of *Alápatà Àpáta* is not just a setting or a supporting platform for the actions and reactions of the people or for the discourse of socio-political and cultural emancipation. Humans, in their anthropocentric dualism, claim to be the centre of the natural, supernatural, and physical environment but cannot explain how spiritual forces strip a political villain and his team of their senses, or how valuable mineral resources are consigned in a boulder. We argue that nature is a character, and it is the main protagonist of the struggle to set the society free from oppression, and until humans realise its agency and recuperate the co-agency of traditional philosophy, humans' progress will be limited. Humans therefore need to begin to imagine that nonhumans possess a future in which humans are co-implicated. Soyinka presents several dramatizations of human-nonhuman entanglements in his work, including *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Interpreters*, and *The Road*. Whilst the focus of this article is *Alápatà Àpáta*, since the text best represents the way in which nonhuman beings are active in the achievement of a social revolution, other texts from Soyinka are drawn on as relevant.

### **African Indigenous Ways and the Agency of Nature**

Long before the birth of ecocriticism as a field of study, African writers like Bessie Head, Chinua Achebe, Okot p'Bitek, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have depicted human-nonhuman entanglements that promotes the agency of nature.

Harry Garuba describes this as an animist unconscious which is “the practice of continually ‘re-enchanting’ the [natural] world” (45). This human-nonhuman interactions or re-enchantments are far beyond the realm of religion and constitute a way of living that demonstrates African rootedness in the natural world, incorporated as a part of nature instead of above it. Though these human-nonhuman entanglements have been viewed as “primitive” by colonialists, most Africans, especially Nigerians, see themselves as part of nature and the human forms they take now as impermanent. Life is viewed as a circle, whereby humans die, go to the ancestral land, and then return to the world through the process of incarnation. Soyinka consistently depicts this human mystical and cyclical interrelationship with nature. For example, in his poem “Abiku,” he refers to the condition of children caught up in an unending cycle of births, deaths, and rebirths in a widely accepted belief among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples of Nigeria. In Igbo community, the phenomenon is referred to as ‘Ogbanje,’ and both terms (Abiku and Ogbanje) literally translate as ‘one who is born, dies.’ Abiku children share bonds with their fellow spirit companions as regards their return date before being born to the world, and they already possess the will of premature death. In some Yoruba and Igbo communities, Abiku children are stigmatized, probably because of their perceived cruelty to their mothers and other members of their earthly families, who spend their earnings to make sure the link between them and death is severed.

In *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Soyinka asserts that present life is filled with “manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn [...] beyond mere abstract conceptualisation” (144). He explains that humans must not fail to recognise the connectivity between themselves and the realms of ancestors, the deities, the unborn and the reality, and must recognise that any gulf (arising from the magnification of any differences) between these realms of existence must be closed by acts of sacrifice. In his words, “this gulf is what must be constantly diminished by sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf” (144). This position is reaffirmed in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), another one of Soyinka's works that depicts human cyclical interrelationship with nature. In the play, Elesin, the King's horseman, is, according to tradition, required to commit a ritual suicide a month after the death of Alafin, the king. Elesin's ritual death, primordial in Yoruba mythology, is an act of sacrifice that marks the cohesive cosmic interrelationship between the living, the dead and the unborn as found in the poem by Soyinka discussed earlier. This intercessory act is for the good health of the human community and its failure can set the world adrift.

Perhaps this ecocentric dimension of the indigenous way of living and its forms of knowledge contribute to Africans' high sense of conservation and sustainability. For instance, in his study of the Abaluyia people of Kenya, Maurice Amutabi makes the point that the people seen as “uneducated” or “uncivilized” in colonial western attitudes, have been able to preserve the environment through their reliance on their ancient folkways (220). Amutabi argues that the practice of conservation, as seen in taboo relationships with natural objects, works much better than the scientific or

modern ways. That is, the social custom proscribing human abuse of some nonhuman beings continues to shape the modern-day Abaluyia's response to the environment. He continues that conservation is "not only a matter of the transaction of space, food, shelters and security and sustainability but of distance, not just a matter of style, but it has profound epistemological value in its critical and reflexive role in the constitution of the modern Abaluyia environment" (220). Senayon Olaoluwa concurs with this view in his ecocritical reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by saying that colonialism subverts African indigenous societies' ecocentric practices: "while the African construal of sacred spaces [in *Things Fall Apart*] enhances biodiversity conservation through forestation, Christian sacralisation of space in Mbata translates into deforestation and biodiversity depletion" (207). In a methodological analysis on on-site ethnographic observation of thirty events at the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties held in Paris, France in 2015, Foyer and Kervran conclude that the introduction of traditional knowledge in the climate regime has contributed to renew and re-enchant the struggle against climate change. And the re-enchantment is the result of different convergent effects: new story telling with new "exotic" figures such as the resilient "victim-hero," and new practical and grounded options that counterbalance and complement scientific abstraction (13). Other scholars like James Ford, Will Vanderbilt and Laura Cameron have called for a repolitization and reterritorialization of the governance of climate change, which will incorporate traditional and local knowledge in the assessment of climate change. In this context, traditional knowledge will be in direct contrast to the mainstream definition of global, top-down sound science and governance. In some cases, like in the supernatural ecology narrative, it even introduces magical dimensions and other ontologies in dominant representations of climate change. Although this re-enchantment may be weak as traditional knowledge is still a very marginal topic in climate talks, its emergence appears to be a golden opportunity in the projects of biodiversity conservation.

In order to acknowledge and emphasise the agency of nature, Iheka in *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* expounds a radical notion of agency which emphasises the effect of action, irrespective of the intentionality. Using "aesthetic proximity"—the term he uses for human-nonhuman entanglements in African environments—he asserts that it is not common to see a complete human action that is not complemented by nonhumans (21). If this is true, then agency, previously claimed to be tied to the intentions of human, is distributed. Iheka laments that African literary scholarship has hitherto neglected the nonhuman roles, and he follows Jane Bennet's idea of agency to propose what he calls "distributed agency"—the idea that humans possess and share agency with the landscape and animals. This idea is premised on the biological and geographical commonalities of humans and nonhumans. That is, "a spatial sense of nearness as well as a form of proximity brought about by similarities and shared characteristics" (Iheka 22). The idea of distributed agency, one of the tenets of material ecocriticism, is driven by a rethinking of the nature-culture dualism. Egya

suggests that material ecocriticism is “perhaps what one might see as a western post-discursive response to its own regime of dualism and discursivity that had earlier regarded human dependency on nature, especially in ‘less civilised’ society, such as African societies, as primitive” (24). The point to extrapolate from the foregoing is that in African indigenous systems, humans, despite their agential capabilities, are not necessarily superior to, or more powerful than, natural beings. While intentionality is not totally jettisoned in this concept of agency, the focus is on effect so that natural beings can receive credit for their roles in the production of agency. As a matter of fact, humans might be rendered helpless by material forces like floods, earthquakes, volcanos, droughts, wildfire, among others. While some modern humans may assume that this human-nonhuman entanglements are in the past, we suggest that this form of co-existence is present even in this age as suggested by Garuba in his notion of the animist unconscious. We deploy the agency of nature to make sense of Soyinka’s ideological vision premised on human-nonhuman entanglements to challenge postcolonial excesses in Nigeria exemplified by, amongst others, corruption, political ineptitude, and abuse of power.

### ***Alápatà Àpáta and the Agency of Nature in a Social Revolution***

*Alápatà Àpáta* centres on Alaba’s rise from obscurity to heroism, but in the process much attention is directed to other nonhuman beings. At the end of a distinguished profession as the best butcher in his community, Alaba decides to have a peaceful retirement by choosing a boulder beside his family house as a place of abode. It turns out the boulder on which he chooses to enjoy his retirement contains valuable mineral resources. From his interaction with animals as a butcher to his reliance on a boulder, Alaba is inextricably entangled with the nonhuman and maintains a rather complicated relations with the nonhuman that do not require us seeing him as the only protagonist of this play. Alaba, with the help of Teacher, designs his butcher’s signpost so it reads “butcher of the rock,” his new title, suggesting that he is also inducted into the power game that surrounds him as both Alaba and the boulder become the points of attraction not only for the passers-by, but also for the corrupt political leaders and religious fanatics who want to excavate the mineral resources for personal gains. To further satirise this power game, the artist who paints the signboard misplaces the accent on the title of Alapata. The Nigerian Yoruba word “Alapata” has three meanings, depending on where the accent is placed: *Alápatà* means “a butcher,” *Àlapáta* means an ‘owner of the rock’ and, thirdly, *Alápata* means “a ruler or chief of the boulder.” The artist, though a native speaker of Yoruba, does not know the correct accent to place on Alapata Apata to signify “butcher of the rock” on Alaba’s signboard. The wrong accent he finally settles for changes the meaning of the words from *Alápatà Àpáta* (butcher of the rock) to *Alápata Àpáta*, which means “Alápata of Àpáta”—the paramount chief of the boulder. In other words, the signboard presents Alaba as one of the chiefs of the community. For running afoul of

the customary law of the land, ascribing a title to himself, and forming a parallel government in the community, the council of elders convicts him of insurrection.

Although the play is a comedy with an intentional ploy to focus on the connection between tone and meaning in Yoruba language, it also stages the absolute awareness of a sense of place that provides a vision for a total redemption from hegemonic control. In African thought, lands, trees, waters, and rocks are categorised as life forms even when their actions are unaccounted for because they lack intentionality. These nonhuman forces are regarded as life forces in various African cultures. Working within this indigenous understanding in *Alápatà Àpáta*, Soyinka dramatizes the vitality of a boulder—its agency, and effects in holding the natural resources that the community needs—and the roles and agencies of Ifa in setting Alaba's community free from political oppression. Confirming the agency of the boulder in holding rich mineral resources, Prospector, one of the foreign agents employed to mine it confesses: "This is going to be a gargantuan operation. After this, we can tell those Delta trouble-makers to go drink their petroleum" (10). This establishes the fact that Alaba sits on natural resources that is much bigger than the amount of crude oil from the Niger Delta which, according to the World Bank (2004), accounts for 40% of Nigeria's GDP, 70% of budget revenues, and 95% foreign exchange earnings. "Trouble-makers" refers to Niger Delta youths, who organise themselves into militant groups demanding for local control over oil resources and development of the region. Besides acknowledging the presence of the boulder, it is equally important to attend to its involvement in the actions of the protagonist. Alaba becomes the centre of conflict and a hero because of his presence on the highly valued boulder. As Prospector confirms, "it's all about Resource Control. Typical of what is happening in our country. Everyone wants to sit on natural resources" (9). The natural resources in the boulder have fortunate and unfortunate effects on Alaba as it turns him to a heroic figure, and also brings him in confrontations with politically, religiously, and morally corrupt individuals. However, Alaba's heroism is questionable in the context of his exploitation of the boulder, which is really the hero here.

Alaba's antecedents show that he is not destined to become a hero by the community's standards. In the eyes of his people, he fails in some endeavours that would have given him a good start. As a primary school student, Alaba accidentally breaks the globe in the school because he thinks the world and the globe representing it need to be straightened and not bent. To attempt to straighten the world by using the globe, a nonhuman object, reflects the kind of deviance or dissidence Soyinka invests in the character of Alaba. He tries his hand at Ifa—the study of Yoruba divination—but he also "dropped the divination bowl, spilt the flour, broke an iroke, an ivory one" (160). As a result of this sacrilegious offence, Ifa concludes that Alaba is not a chosen one. Though Alaba fails at Ifa and primary school, his encounter with the globe and Ifa, two nonhumans, in his formative years have a profound influence in the way he views the world. It is the same Ifa that instructs him to take up butchering profession which later shoots him into the limelight.

In “A Skewed Universe: Tragic Vision of Satire in Soyinka’s *Alápatà Àpáta*,” Nurayn Fola Alimi connects Soyinka’s use of the nonhuman boulder to humanistic geography, the field of geography that is primarily interested in the aspects of human physical and ecological world. According to Alimi, Soyinka’s motif intersects geography to “raise issues about man as the centre of the natural, supernatural, and physical environment” (1). Taking a different view of Soyinka’s dramaturgy in *Alápatà Àpáta*, this article develops Alimi’s argument by asserting that Soyinka’s characters in *Alápatà Àpáta* include both human and nonhuman characters and the play does not subscribe to the dualisms that forms the basis of anthropocentrism. For instance, Alaba does not understand the nonhuman boulder in a subjugated light, but sees it as an actor, an agent and co-participant within active biospheric systems. This demonstrates the boulder’s alignment to him, and a symbolic way of reverencing the communion between the biotic and abiotic elements and humans. The connection between the boulder and Alaba which is personal, communal and humanistic, explains why he sees it as a phenomenological being with a deep affection for himself and his ancestors who at different points rely on it occupationally, spiritually having their lives bond up with it. Alaba clarifies,

My fathers, please wait. That rock, I met it there. Nobody wanted it. Nobody quarrelled with it. My father built his house nearby. As a child, I used to sharpen his butcher’s knives against its face—look, you can see the smooth portion over there. We rested in the shadow of the rock, or the house—that space in between, always cool. Sometimes we ate there. Nobody bothered with the rock. The women never thought it worth their while—they prefer to dry their cassava mash, for garri, on flat surface, not a steep slope where the rain can wash it away. Well, we made it our home. We dried our cloths on its surface, and we fired our catapults at the lizards sunning themselves on it. At night we even told stories, lying around the bottom of the rock, over there, hanging from the slopes. (165 – 66)

Alaba takes himself as part of the natural environment and not the centre around which the natural, supernatural, and physical environment revolves. He simply connects himself to the boulder as a natural being and shields it from abusers having understood its status as one of those beings that contribute to the progress of the community. This connection could also be seen as “an individual awareness of the spirit or identity of place” (Kanhaiya 2017, 124) which explains the spiritual and organic connection between Alaba and the boulder and other natural elements of the environment that he inherits from his father.

As the events in the play unfold, the inhabitants of the community are continuously worried and suspicious of Alaba, who suddenly chooses the top of a boulder as his new abode. While some think he stays there to perpetrate diabolical plans against the villagers, other characters seek to dispossess him of the boulder to exploit the environment. They actually know that he sits there to conceal the natural resources in the boulder. They know that, as a human, Alaba will eventually exploit the boulder for his gains, and that is what they want to deny him by taking it away from him. First to physically challenge him is Pastor, who wants to take over the resources from Alaba in the name of converting it to a house of God. Pastor moves

round the rock, places his ear against it to confirm the presence of the natural resources, taps his rod gently on it and reads from his Bible “On this rock shall I found my church (shakes his rod [at Alaba], teeth clenched) obviously this is it. So, you think the revelation is yours” (9). As Alaba remains unperturbed by Pastor’s religious vituperation, Pastor walks away with his prayer warriors. Pastor symbolises religious figures that use their professed faith to rob people of their hard-earned income. But also, the religious figures that connive with capitalists to dispossess the earth of its resources.

As Alaba successfully repels the foreign Investor and the Prospector—the duo sent to mine the resources— Dàanìlẹ̀bọ, the governor, decides to force him out from the boulder using military and juju (supernatural) power. Knowing that Alaba might have also fortified himself on the boulder with juju because of his knowledge of Ifa, Dàanìlẹ̀bọ invades the scene with higher fortifications, namely *bante*, an amulet skirt, made of fresh leaves, worn underneath his cloth. He is also accompanied by, an armed policeman, and a Figure in Red (a nonhuman being with a headgear like a perched parrot, all in red). Dàanìlẹ̀bọ’s charms, and a Figure in Red, which are spiritual nonhumans are to be used to conjure violence on Alaba. On getting to Alaba’s compound, Dàanìlẹ̀bọ mouths silent incantations and the Figure in Red echoes after him: “What is hidden in the farm belongs to the farmer, what is hidden in the home belongs to the homeowner, let what is hidden in this rock sweep off usurpers...” (144). Dàanìlẹ̀bọ’s plan here resonates with what Rob Nixon describes as “environmentalism of the poor”: a condition that arises when technologically advanced nations exploit material and characteristic natural resources of underdeveloped nations for the benefit of the former, systematically creating a pattern of annihilation. This theory considers the conflict between exploiters of natural resources, driven by greed for immediate wealth and those local inhabitants, whose environmental rights are abused. It therefore centres on local peoples’ susceptibility to ecological degradation, because it is the poor people who are at the receiving end of slow violence, as “their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of slow violence that permeates so many of their lives” (4). In *Alápatà Àpáta*, natural forces contend with Dàanìlẹ̀bọ, the human capitalist who deploys incantation and other nonhuman forces against Alaba. The forces of his incantation and those of the Figure in Red turn against him as The Figure in Red stumbles into Policeman and they both crash to the ground before taking off at full speed. Dàanìlẹ̀bọ follows suit: “Dives headlong over the rear of the rock” (145) and ran naked through the village. Dàanìlẹ̀bọ’s use of different charms, which are spiritual nonhumans, reflects the dependence of humans on nature and, in this case, they work against him because he is a corrupt political villain.

It has to be recognised that both Alaba and those who want to exploit the highly valued boulder are aware of the agency of nature in Ifa which liberates the environment from abusers. Though Alaba does not graduate in the institution of Ifa divination, the little knowledge he acquires as a dropout makes the community to revere him with awe. The usurpers, while confronting Alaba, encountered *Anjonu*—a

spiritual being with mystical power—who demonstrates its nonhuman power over humanity. Being Yoruba, Dàaniẹlẹbọ, Alaba, and other characters are fully aware that Ifa has a great many Orishas (spirits) operating in the universe that can easily destroy humans. They are nonhuman agents that serve as the intermediary between the gods and humans. Among them are Orisha Esu—the force or energy of opportunity, Orisha Ogun—the force or energy of the forest, Orisha Sango—the force or energy of Thunder among others (Judith Gleason). It is these nonhuman spirits that work against Dàaniẹlẹbọ and his team, and make them lose their minds. This rapid, fundamental change of economic and political institutions and the upheaval of powers are characteristic of social revolution and they are all brought about by the agentic powers of spirit forces of Ifa. The metaphor of the skewed globe becomes more meaningful in the play in the way Soyinka aestheticizes the political landscape represented in the characters of a military officer simply called The General, and a politician called Dàaniẹlẹbọ who is the governor of the state. The world they represent is skewed, bent and needs to be straightened. In most revolutions, the elite usually suffer the brunt of the common people's anger and that of *Alápatà Àpáta* is not an exception. The General and the governor of the state, the two major political figures that oppress the citizenry, are ridiculed by Teacher, Farmer, the three Okada (bike riders) and Mechanics. These are common men who feel that they deserve better conditions of leadership.

Alaba's boulder and spiritual nonhumans are agentic; while the former safely keeps valuable natural resources which are important elements of the natural environment, the latter contend with the human forces that want to exploit the environment. These agencies of nature echo Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's words in his forward to *Material Ecocriticism*. Cohen exemplifies storied matter by narrating a story about a catalytic toad, written by historian William of Newburgh before the year 1200. Cohen's parabolic narration is on an attractive stone that some unknown artists seem to have fashioned by conjoining two lithic pieces. Workers in a quarry were excavating building materials when they discovered this perplexing object—the conjoining stones—which they cracked open to reveal the living creature within. The story fully reads:

There was found a beautiful double stone, that is, a stone composed of two stones, joined with some very adhesive matter. Being shown by the wondering workmen to the bishop, who was at hand, it was ordered to be split, that its mystery (if any) might be developed. In the cavity, a little animal called a toad, having a small gold chain around its neck, was discovered. When the bystanders were lost in amazement at such an unusual occurrence, the bishop ordered the stone to be closed again, thrown into the quarry, and covered up with rubbish forever. (*The History of English Affairs* 28, qtd from Cohen, 2014, xi)

This enmeshment of stone-toad-chain seems to exist beyond the dualisms that rule human thoughts and actions, and it undeniably has materiality beyond human explanation. It makes the bishop and his workmen to become lost in bewilderment, “lost in the realization that the world is wider than they had imagined, enliven by stories that are fragments seeking greater connection” (xii). Perhaps the

bewilderment that explains why the bishop ordered that the stones to be reassembled and thrown back into the quarry also explains the reason Alaba decides to spend his retirement days on the boulder watching the miraculous agencies of nature which conceal and protect vital resources in nonhuman boulder. In the public perception, Alaba becomes an enigma that cannot be explained in the way he survives the onslaught and the hegemonic invasion of the corrupt political invaders. Oluwo, the chief priest immediately confers a chieftaincy title on him. His “domain is now official—Alápata of Àpáta [the paramount chief of the boulder]” (182). The villagers troop out in their numbers to pay homage to the new chief who is also the incarnate of spirit beings and an intermediary between the latter and his people. At this point, Alaba has used the boulder to gain some reverence and wealth in his society. But the boulder will fight back spiritually, though the people will mistake the boulder’s agency for Alaba’s agency.

The dynamism of nature, as discussed above is not to be contrasted with “culture” which has been severely criticised in the emergence of ecocriticism. The dynamism of nature as found in *Alápata Àpáta* collaborates with culture. The nonhuman spirits’ attack against the human capitalists arises because human beings fail to comprehend the ways of nature, thereby undermining the powers the nonhumans wield. It can now be concluded that the conflict in the play stems from the fact that humans neglect the materiality of nature by engaging in activities that unwittingly destroy the earth. The play also advises against tagging the spiritual harmless and pristine, and questions the presumed supremacy of humans’ thoughts, deeds, and intentionality, while showing the power that nonhumans have, even to the point of disarming humans, not only through disaster but through spirituality. The above therefore forms the premise on which the point is made that *Alápata Àpáta* is a metaphor of humans’ neglect for the power that the nonhumans wield—their ignorance of the consequential effects of the disregard of nature—which often result in ecological disorder, with humans bearing the devastating losses.

The first dispute that Alaba, in his office as Alápata of Àpáta, adjudicates comes from the three persons from Lagos, a neighbouring city. Having heard of Alaba’s repute as a highly respected Ifa priest and warlord that battles and prevails over tyrannical political figures, Mother brings her daughter and her son-in-law from Lagos to pay homage to Alaba. They also seek Alaba’s intervention on how to resolve the prolonged infidelity case between the couple. After paying their homage with the parcel they bring from Lagos, they sit to tender their case to Alaba, whom Mother sees as a decent personality that should be able to settle the problems between her daughter and her husband:

MOTHER: I told you. We were right to come here. This is not a matter to tackle in a place like Lagos. That city no longer understands the world decency.

ALABA: Ah, Lagos. Anyone who says the world is not bent should just spend one hour in Lagos. If he wasn’t bent himself before he went in, he would come out bent like smoked crayfish. (118)

Before Alaba hears the details of the dispute, he emphasises the ability of the nature depleted environment (i.e. the city) to destroy human lives. That is, the agency of the depleted cityscape does not only denaturalise humans, but it also has the ability to either eat up or have human lives 'bent.' The discussion is not just about the description of Lagos' physical environment but, more importantly, of what one might call the metaphysics of Lagos largely expressed in its human geography. In his ecological reading of Toni Kan's *The Carnivorous City*, a novel about Lagos, Egya asserts that "the city's shortcomings, hinged on its enigmatic nature, is one of the things that makes it consume human in the manner that a carnivore eats up flesh" (*Nature* 76). The nature of the city typified in its uneven developments, the urban population leading to high rate of crime, as well as the improper disposal of wastes resulting in dangerous pollution, are all agencies of the city that can negatively influence the youths and eventually 'bend' their lives. Human beings, most of whom are all frauds in their own ways, and who in their fraudulent ways harm not only themselves but also the Lagos physical and cultural environment are thus the real pollution the city suffers from (Egya 80). Alaba's description of Lagos, as it recaps this discussion, is symptomatic of the lives of many city dwellers, who are fraudulent and corrupt, galvanised by the get-rich-quick philosophy that underlines human interactions. Further, it signifies the bent world created by political leaders in Africa, as dramatized in the text. It is also symptomatic of the ways in which Africans embrace modern life, live in modern landscapes, and forget that African nature remains a crucial consciousness in contemporary life, in that human-nonhuman entanglements cannot just disappear in African societies. In sum, nonhuman agencies impact humans in diverse ways—negatively and positively. This approach of the reciprocity of energy and matter exchanges in which manifold types of agencies engage themselves is rooted in both African indigenous knowledge systems and new materialism.

## Conclusion

This article uses Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Àpáta* to demonstrate the ways Nigerian writers emphasise human imbrication with the natural world in promoting social revolution in their society. In this play, the boulder is not a mere setting. It is a being that towers above other beings, human and nonhuman, and that is why all human activities in the play are influenced by its agency. If the boulder does not exist, Alaba would have had an uneventful retirement life. The spirituality, through which the boulder's agency manifests, shapes the outcome of the crisis among the human characters in the play. By foregrounding the agency of the boulder in this reading, we make the point that actors of revolutionary actions in most African societies are not usually only humans; they can also be nonhumans whose agency is entangled with that of humans. Non-ecocentric reading practices are likely to undermine the agency of the nonhuman, which has always been the case. This study therefore draws attention to the ecological dimension, the marginalised natural participants, in

Africa's project of resistance. If anthropocentric thinking entrenched in enlightenment principles place humans as subjects and nonhumans as objects, inert and passive, attempts to foreground the agentic power of natural elements, such as we have done in this study, have shown points of convergence between human and nonhuman. Literary discourse can make things more comprehensible, and the discussion here illuminates nonhuman agency as a cause/effect, and as a factor of futurity that confronts human exceptionalism.

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