Nigerian Poetry, Nature, and the Decolonial Imagination of Water

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Though Nigeria gained its independence from Britain in 1960, the legacies of colonial rule are still with us today, especially in neocolonial patterns of exploitation of Nigeria's resources. From the late colonial period to the present, writers have developed their anti-colonial aesthetics and politics through engagement with the African natural world – a space of nonhuman-human entanglement ruled by the natural order of things. The pioneers of modern Nigerian literature such as Christopher Okigbo in "Idoto", J.P. Clark in "Olokun", Wole Soyinka in "Abiku", Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, among others, ushered in this aesthetic of nature and tradition upon their emergence in the Nigerian literary scene. In confronting colonial discourse, these writers, in most cases, resort to deploying nature represented by nonhuman spiritual beings, such as ancestral spirits and sea deities, as embodiment of African natural and cultural identity. This perspective – often dismissed in colonial principles as "primitive animism" – is at the heart of the natural order in that it goes beyond a belief system; it is a way of life, of consciously coexisting and intra-acting with the environment. I argue that the recourse to nature is a decolonial strategy in that the writers deploy the natural world to counter the Western civilisation imposed on their epistemological order. In the end, the natural world remains the forte of the African writer in presenting a civilisation that claims to embrace both humans and their nonhuman others.

This return to indigenous nature, knowledge, and culture has been sustained by younger writers, and it has now become a major

characteristic of Nigerian literature, especially poetry. The poets I am showcasing orchestrate their deep connection to their natural environments and are interested in problematizing the pressure of modernity on them. Rivers and bodies of water are significant elements of the Nigerian environment and fundamental to the functioning of all ecosystems, and these poets often valorise the past, recalling clean, pristine waters before the impact of colonial and neo-colonial modernity. With the environmental turn in Nigerian literature in English, poetry has acquired more instrumental force in its decolonial aesthetics and become more concerned about the Nigerian environment – including its waters – a phenomenon that can be called decolonial ecology.

The embeddedness of African natural forms into Nigerian literary works is not inadvertent; nature is an integral part of Nigerian ecological thought, and it comprises not only the biotic and the abiotic components of the environment, but also the spiritual bodies like gods, goddesses, and other natural beings. The explication of Nigerian ecological peculiarity to exploring nature decentres Euro-American ecocriticism and offers further correctives to the limitations of ecocriticism, which before now has seemed to ignore the environments of the Global South. Though it may appear that the interest of material ecocriticism does not include spiritual species, David Abram confirms that «every visible facet of the world speaks to us of dimensions that are not visible» (124). African cosmologies often perceive nature as alive and imbued with spirits. In animist perspective, natural elements such as Òrìṣhà (deities or spirits in Nigeria, particularly in the Yoruba religion and culture), and water bodies are not inert, but active with diverse spiritual manifestations. In the representation of the African community as a wide ecosystem, Nigerian oral culture and mythology emphasize moments of close human relationships with these beings. This explains why nature or the natural world – nonhuman natural beings – could not possibly have the same meaning for Nigerians and Africans as it does for the protagonists of Western epistemology. The indigenous peoples of Nigeria, especially those who live in local communities, may be bold to confess that they «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» (EGYA 25). This goes beyond consciousness towards an object. It is a submission and concession to the order of nature – the way humans see themselves as parts of the natural world. In their decolonial praxis, the writers are

conscious of this natural order; they invoke traditional spirituality, particularly African knowledge and human interrelationship with nature and oracles, blending modernist poetics with indigenous religious imagery in their works.

By foregrounding water as a significant element intertwined with nature, decoloniality challenges neo-colonial extractive practices and reclaims indigenous ecological knowledge, balance, and reciprocity. Heavily influenced by thinkers such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, and by subaltern studies, decoloniality discusses the possibility that there is a capacity for «representation and speech for the formerly colonized as well as for those beyond the West» (Matthieu Renault, quoted in Ferdinand 176). Decolonial ecology represents an ecology of struggle. It challenges the colonial ways of inhabiting the earth, and confronts ecological destruction, and can happen only when there are equality and emancipation. «It is a double healing that is expressed both by *another way of thinking about decolonization* and by *another way of thinking about the struggles against the environmental degradation of the Earth*» (176, emphasis in the original). The central aim of decolonial ecology is to liberate the world from the colonial frame of mind. Following the tenets of decoloniality, a crucial proposition of this study is to make a case for the inclusion of lessons and knowledge about Nigerian natural forms, the nature-human interdependence, interspecies coexistence, and planetary balance depicted in Nigerian poetry. Nigerian poems, often concise and hardly in the shape of long narrative verse, appear to be more sensitive to nature than other genres. The poets' aesthetic strengths on nature are deeply linked with place, mostly their birthplaces. Place and landscape, for these poets, are distinctive features on which they rely for their identity formation. It is this interrelationship between poets and place that has come to define Nigerian poetry.

Nature, Decolonial Ecologies, and the Poetics of Water Degradation

There is a lot the world can learn from the African natural world, and indeed from knowledge embedded in indigenous ecologies across the world, and this is the thrust of the selected Nigerian poems in the present article. My discussion will reveal how water bodies remain the elements of the biophysical nature to which the poets connect their poetic aesthetics. I will start with Christopher Okigbo's poem "Idoto", as it succinctly conveys the ideas that are central to my discussion on decolonial ecology. Okigbo versifies his interrelationship with "Mother

Idoto", a water goddess in his community. This connection implies recognising the attributes of the goddess and interacting with her spiritually and physically whenever he visits the river to perform certain rituals:

Before you, mother Idoto
naked I stand,
before your watery presence,
a prodigal
leaning on an oil bean;
lost in your legend … (lines 1-6)

The poetic persona (most likely the poet) sees himself as a prodigal, like the Biblical prodigal son who abandons his roots for corrupt city life. Having strayed away from tradition to taste Western modernity, the writer compares the benefits from the two worlds (tradition and modernity) and realises that he has taken a wrong path. He now decides to return to the water goddess, to the native ways of life, privileging nature over the failed attempt at modernity. It is this interdependence between Nigerian poets and nature that seeks to destabilise the rationality of enlightenment/modernity in the present time whereby literary works suggest a return to nature by offering indigenous epistemologies as a way forward for societal progress. Okigbo's idea of "a returned prodigal son" metaphorizes Nigerian writers' rendering of the urgent need, since the colonial era, to return to traditionalism after the most cherished venture into modernity has failed.

In the same vein, Tanure Ojaide's "In the Omoja River" further versifies the beauty of the Nigerian rivers. The poet sings of his dependence on Omoja, a river in his birthplace.

In the Omoja River we washed body and tool
As we crossed the farm after the day's work.

There two, young, we listened to murmuring water
Before taking tracks into the forest to pick fruits;

The sun wriggled between leaves whose shadows
Danced on water; a spectacle of correspondence.
(Lines 1-6)

Ojaide's interrelationship with the Omoja River embodies Nigerians' organic, primal, and spiritual connection to nature through their rivers. The capital initials of "Omoja River" suggests the poet's reverence for, and prioritization of, the natural world and its biodiverse nonhuman beings, who gave him and other local inhabitants a memorable childhood experience. Being rooted in the natural environment, Nigerians have grown up to become adults with a connection with their birthplaces. Thus, nature and culture – land and farming – are intertwined, and human beings are located at the centre of this interrelationship. The poetic persona and other local inhabitants cannot be fulfilled Without the Omoja River. They need to wash by totally immersing themselves in the river before they can commence their farm business. However, this physical and spiritual connection to the Omoja River has been tragically brutalised and severed by colonial exploration. This is presented in the following lines:

> But they brought affliction to the cheerful river;
> They brought flames of fear to the marvellous forest.
>
> They pissed and pissed barrels of arsenic into the currents
> Until it was no longer the ageless river but a cesspool.
> (Lines 7-10)

In the above, Ojaide bemoans the invasion of the Nigerian indigenous communities by multinational oil companies in collaboration with the Nigerian government. The invasion breeds water pollution, which severs the local inhabitants' spiritual and cultural attachment to and dependence on the river. As the Omoja River loses its cleansing power, the locals can no longer wash their bodies and tools before commencing their daily work. Either through physical displacement or spiritual disconnect, the colonial destruction of the indigenous ecological practices such as human relationships with the Omoja River is invariably the impoverishment of the community as human inhabitants feel disconnected and displaced from their land. Rob Nixon refers to this as «displacement without movement» (2011, 19), a radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the forceful movement of people from their birthplaces, refers rather to the loss of the water resources, lands, and wealth – a loss that leaves local communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made them inhabitable.

The above resonates strongly with the water, air, and land pollution experienced in the Nigerian Niger Delta – a densely populated region – whose tragic experience with the colonial exploitation of palm oil trade has metamorphosed, in this postcolonial era, into crude oil exploitation. In spite of the campaign for economic diversification, the Niger Delta still powers the Nigerian oil-based economy. The crude oil from the region generates more than 65% of its revenue and about 80% of the nation's export income. The fact that the region remains one of the poorest parts of Nigeria and one that is mainly characterized by water pollution is saddening. The total disregard for human and nonhuman rights is endemic all through the Niger Delta area. Poetry, and maybe literature generally, become a powerful tool for conveying resistance – raising a counternarrative by way of confronting the powers that institute environmental pollution. The act of writing is a form of activism for the liberation of the oppressed nature and human inhabitants. Many Nigerian writers and scholars have taken to activism, demanding change and compensation. Ken Saro-Wiwa is perhaps foremost in this regard, being one of the first to establish a pressure group – the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, or MOSOP – which has brought the struggles of the Niger Deltans to the attention of the global community. Saro-Wiwa is exemplary of the notion of the writer-activist, who assumes not only the role of writer to change the narrative, but also of activist who takes practical steps to fight injustice.

At this juncture, I would like to state that Nigerian poets have taken the fight against water pollution further by representing the fate of Nigerian waters in the wake of the neo-plastic invasion of the global environment. With his poetry collection titled *Plastics, Plastics Everywhere: Poetics of Environmentalism and the Paradox of Our Polymer Age*, Greg Mbajiorgu is notable as one of the first Africans to have dedicated a whole poetry collection to this discourse. In a defiant poetic tone, he versifies the effects of plastics in the poem entitled "Marine Plastics":

> Tell me no more tales
> Of oceanographers
> In an endless voyage
> Searching and toiling
> And combing in vain

But have hardly found
A pristine belly of water
With no plastic debris
Or any terrestrial space at all
Where littered waste could not be found

Not one single aquatic world
Or recreational beach
Devoid of human-induced junk
Of different shapes and sizes (lines 1-14)

One may agree with the above poem that the neo-colonial capitalists are not the only ones to be blamed for plastic pollution. The ordinary people on the street, who have abandoned their indigenous ecological practices of personal hygiene and have taken up the modern culture of eating junk food and discarding the plastic everywhere, are also responsible. These individuals might be oblivious to the hazard caused by «junks of all kinds and forms / Thrown out by humans on lands and sea» (lines 15-16). These «junks» and plastics congest the river belly. Scientists have proven that there is «no pristine belly of water / with no plastic debris» (lines 7-8). This brings to mind a haunting moment captured in a video titled *Plastic Seduction*. The voice-over in the video elucidates, «Every year, thousands of tons of plastic end up in our oceans. Plastic doesn't biodegrade in the sea. Over time it breaks up into tiny particles. Like sponges, these attract pollutants from surrounding waters, accumulating a highly toxic chemical load before they contaminate the marine food chain». In her analysis of the video, Stacy Alaimo infers that *Plastic Seduction* dramatizes a trans-corporeality in which humans ultimately consume the surprisingly dangerous objects they have produced and discarded (pp. 197-198). Marine life forms, such as sea turtles, fish, seabirds, and whales eat up these plastics, mistaking them for food. This global phenomenon causes a lot of havoc to the ecosystemic order, «Forcing mermaids to moan with tears / As they watch plastic debris now / Destroy their deep precious castles» (lines 45-47). The encounter of whales, sea turtles and sea birds with undigested plastic may explain why most of them develop internal bleeding which finally bursts their innards. Line 45 in the poem above further highlights human harm to the sea world, with its grave consequences on the mermaids – water spirits – and other nonhuman aquatic beings. Mbajiorgu reminds us to contemplate the idea of victimhood and reconsider the exceptionalism

and air of superiority that often characterize human relationships with other beings of their shared ecosystem.

Engaging with the African natural world, as poetically rendered by Nigerian writers, is strongly advised for those seeking to challenge colonial epistemology. This anticolonial politics hinged on nature dismantles the epistemic, scientific, political, legal, and philosophical colonial structures which continue to relegate and dominate the once-colonized society. It is shown that Nigerians, in their relational ontology, share the belief that humans are inherently part of nature, including the African natural forms like spirits, water bodies, trees, gods and goddesses. With Material Ecocriticism, the global society appears to have started sharing in this African ecocentrism (or animism) and indigenous ecological consciousness, as Stacy Alaimo confirms, «…several ocean scientists and conservationists, including Rachel Carson, Sylvia Earle, and Julia Whitty, evoke a sense of connection between terrestrial humans and the seas» by suggesting that the sea is present in our very blood (CARSON), by emphasizing that every breath we take contains oxygen produced by plankton (EARLE), or by contending that we see the ocean through the ocean – since our eyes are surrounded by saltwater (p. 188).

This selection of poetry on the human relationship with water bodies in the Nigerian environment is by no means exhaustive. Gabriel Okara, Christian Otobotekere, Ogaga Ifowodo, Nnimmo Bassey, Ebi Yeibo and a host of others seek to draw attention to the fate of both humans and waters in the face of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation of the Nigerian environment and of the negative consequences of this exploitation in the nation. As Nigerian writers and critics pursue the vision of decolonial ecology further, humans will fully realize that the disconnection between them and their evolutionary origins in the seas requires an urgent, epiphanic realization of kinship.

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