

Original Paper

Ecoculture and Spirituality in the Poetry of Nol Alembong and Bongasu Tanla-Kishani

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Received: June 13, 2023

Accepted: July 9, 2023

Online Published: July 27, 2023

doi:10.22158/sshr.v4n4p64

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sshr.v4n4p64>

Abstract

*This study set out to demonstrate how spirituality is declining in African ecoculture, and how Nol Alembong and Bongasu Tanla-Kishani have handled the problem in their collections of poems entitled, *The Passing Wind* and *Konglanjo! Spears of Love without Ill-Fortune* respectively. The study employs the tenets of Ecocriticism and Afrocentricity to argue that, the poetics of Alembong and Kishani reposition the ecological, cultural and spiritual links that have been distorted by the New World Order accentuated by capitalist greed, and the evolution and advancement of modern technology. The study revealed that a thorough study from the Romantic through the Transcendental eras shows that there has been a decline in the link between humans and nature as humans are systematically shifting away from nature. Given that Africa is spiritually tied to nature as Mazisi Kunene, Chinua Achebe, Kashim Ibrahim Tala, Nol Alembong etc. have argued, it becomes problematic when human/nature link begins to wane. Analyzing some selected poems from Alembong and Kishani's collections against the backdrop of Ecocriticism and Afrocentricity, this study revealed that: African spirituality is earth-centered and this makes Alembong and Kishani to reaffirm the interconnectedness among nature, humans and spirituality. The poor treatment of nature thus leads to a decline in African spirituality. The second main finding of this study is that, the continuous decline in African spirituality persists because when it comes to mores and ethos governing nature and spirituality, focus is largely on Western notions which are capitalistic and individualistic in nature. The ultimate revelation of this study is that, man's search for spiritual meaning has contributed to the physical destruction of the earth, thereby causing the disruption of the order of the universe and the essence of beings. The study recommends the need to include African communalistic approach in the fight against human destruction of nature and spirituality.*

Keywords

Ecoculture, Spirituality and Culture

1. Introduction

The encroachments of humans on nature have taken a different turn with mass aggressions of nature by humans. Nature, as it were, has witnessed the numerous human activities that pose a threat to both nature and humans. In this regard, it is increasingly becoming difficult to come across nature which has not experienced human aggressions. Rolston III (1999) succinctly captures this when he argues that, “with the arrival of humans, their cultures, and their technologies, pristine nature vanishes” (p. 155). This affront on nature has been addressed in subjects like philosophy, sociology, economics etc., and literature, in the last few decades has been providing fundamental thoughts on the subject matter too. The English Romantics and American Transcendentalists are among those who have carried out studies on this relationship between humans and nature in literature. Teke (2015) posits that, “the English Romantics are among the precursors of eco-critical thinking and the conceptualizations and critical construction of the relationship between man and his environment” (p. 38). Both Romantics and Transcendentalists believed in the importance of the relationship among human cultures, nature and spirituality. The relation between human cultures and nature form ecoculture. In fact, Ecoculture as used in this study is the interplay between the human culture and the environment that it exists in. Spirituality as used in this study looks at the relationship between humans and higher beings. Romantics and Transcendentalists were concerned about these relationships. However, the Westerner at some point started distancing himself from nature. Teke attributes this distance to “Western powered postmodernist and poststructuralist thought” (p. 36). This opened the floodgate to massive destruction of nature and the essence of beings.

This perpetual problem did not end in the Western World because the Westerners migrated, explored and conquered territories in which they spread their philosophies and ideologies. African countries were victims of such circumstances in the 19th century. The Westerners came to Africa with their philosophies and ideologies such as capitalism, individualism, world evolution, and technological advancement. The arrival of Westerners immediately caused a paradigm shift with respect to human-nature or human-spiritual link in Africa. According to Mamdani (1985), “Africa’s pre-capitalist past was ignored in favour of its capitalist present” (p. 178). This paradigm shift has been discussed by a good number of scholars who argue mainly that Africa’s pre-capitalist past is sharply contrasted with her capitalist present. Ndalilah (2021), for example argues that, pre-capitalist Africa was natural, calm and serene, but the invasion of the west created a dystopic scenario in the continent. Unfortunately, capitalism came with commercialization which disrupted African cosmology, ecology and disoriented adaptation to the environment. He further notes that, African societies were not only close to nature, but to them, the environment symbolised life, a departure from western view that this world is not my home. Andrews (2017) supports the opinion that capitalism with its attendant ills has caused great harm to African nature or environment. He posits that, “current strategies of overcoming racial dispossession on the basis of capitalism rely on increasing an unbridled exploitation of natural resources.” (p. iii)

Before the arrival of Westerners and their capitalist ideology, Africa had their communal, Ubuntu, Ujamaa, and cultural values which helped to protect their nature and spirituality. In fact, communalism had existed in Africa not only before Karl Marx was born, but before Europe came into existence. Chibvongodze (2016) posits that, “environmental conservation in traditional societies of Africa has been effectively achieved through the epitomes of Ubuntu such as taboos, totems, clan names, folklore and proverbs” (p. 157). The emergence of capitalism and individualism is to the detriment of Ubuntu and Ujamaa values because capitalism came to Africa and the aggression on nature took a different turn. Given that Africans believe that nature is spiritual, a decline in nature means a decline in spirituality, and this decline constitutes a huge threat to their collective existence. Thus, this study shows how Alembong and Kishani address this issue in their poetry collections entitled, *The Passing Wind* and *Konglanjo! Spears of Love without Ill-Fortune* respectively. In fact, the preoccupation of this study is to demonstrate how spirituality is declining in African ecoculture, and how Alembong and Kishani have handled the problem in their poetry, and their conscious effort to restore the African cosmic sphere.

2. Statement of the Problem

The existence, being and essence of the African is embedded in his spirituality which is the nucleus of his culture. The increasing decline of spirituality in the African cosmic, accentuated by colonialism, imperialism, modernism and globalization poses a huge threat to the collective existence of the Africans. This compromise is attained because, under the influence of Western ideology, Africans are shifting from nature which carries their spirituality and culture. Against the backdrop of this perspective, this study sets out to examine how Alembong and Kishani in their poetic imagination try to revitalize, valorize, revive and restore African Ecocultural Spirituality because it is a support system to the collective existence of Africans. It is the contention of this paper that, African Ecocultural Spirituality constitutes the life-wire to African collective existence. The two poets in their poetics proffer a panacea to this increasing decline in African spirituality. This research problem has been broken down into the following research questions;

- 1). What is the cause of the decline in African spirituality?
- 2). How can the suggestions and proposals from Alembong and Kishani restore the African cosmic sphere?
- 3). Of what environmental relevance is modern technology and globalization in African cosmic sphere?

Based on the research problem and questions posed above, this paper relies on the assumption that Alembong and Kishani reposition the ecological, cultural and spiritual links that have been distorted by world evolution and technological advancement which undermine core spiritual values, ethos and mores that hold the Africans together. It is the contention of this paper that the interruption of the link between nature and culture by modern technology poses a huge threat to the collective survival of the indigenous people of Africa.

3. Theoretical Consideration

Two theories inform the analysis and interpretation of this study, namely, Ecocriticism and Afrocentricity. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) define ecocriticism as, “The relationship between literature (art) and the physical environment.” (p. xviii). They add that:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (p. xix)

One pertinent part of this definition worth noting is the inclusion of the nonhuman aspect. This nonhuman aspect does not limit itself only to the physical, but it includes the spiritual aspects. In addition, we must note the inclusion of culture. This is because our attitudes toward the environment are reflected in our cultural beliefs. Tala (2015) contends that, ecocriticism is, “a literary approach which analyses and promotes oral or written literature which raises moral questions about how humans interact with nature” (p. 141). Tasic (as cited in Forbang-Lo-oh (2015) states that, “ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between literature and environment or how man’s relationship with the physical environment is reflected in literature” (p. 83). It follows that, in reading the poems required for the analysis in this work, we pay close attention to how literature relates to the environment, and how humankind’s relationship with the physical environment is rooted in his spirituality as reflected in the various poems. Garrald (2011) argues that in addition to examining the idea of nature and critiquing anthropocentrism in literature, eco-criticism ...is marked by a suspicion of the excessive emphasis on texts and their relationships to each other in poststructuralism and New Historicism, that is, their interest in semiosis and inter-textuality rather than literal reference to reality. Relating to the texts under study, we do not only focus on relating our texts to other texts which treat similar issues, or limit them to their historical realities, but we also strive to tie them to their environmental realities. William Ruerkert is of the opinion that, ecocriticism should experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature (as cited in Forbang-Lo-oh, p. 83). The question which apparently comes to mind here is: what are some of these ecological concepts? We shall examine ecological concepts such as Ecoculture and Ecospirituality in the texts under study. According to Buell (2005), “The majority of ecocritics... look upon their texts of reference as refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artifactual properties of textual representation and their mediation by ideological and other socio-historical factors” (p. 30). In a sense, the texts under study are scouted from particular societies, about those societies and capable of reshaping the societies. However, given that Ecocriticism is a Western theory and it has deficiencies in its application in the African context, we shall use it alongside Afrocentricity which views things from an African perspective.

Afrocentricity was first propounded by Molefi Kete Asante in the 1980s. Alembong (2015) opines that, Afrocentricity, an ideology propounded by Molefi Kete Asante (1987), places African ideals at the centre of discourses that involve African culture and behaviour. It proposes a cultural

reconstruction that incorporates the African perspective as a part of an entire human transformation. (p. 128)

What Alembong means is that, the theory is committed in finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, or religious phenomenon. It focuses on the defense of African cultural elements as historically valid. The theory also makes use of a powerful imperative from historical sources to revise and review the collective text of African people. According to Milan (1992), “Afrocentric researchers pay attention to symbols, affect, instinct, intuition, and imaginary as multiple ways of knowing” (p. 13). It categorically rejects the notion of art for art’s sake. That is, one which puts a lot of emphasis on form. It is against this backdrop that both Ecocriticism and Afrocentricity have been employed for analysis of this study.

For the sake of convenience, the analysis of this study is done under two thematic clusters, namely; Mankind’s Quest for Spirituality and Nature; The Hybrid Concept: The Meeting Point of Western and African Ecocultural Spirituality.

4. Mankind’s Quest for Spiritual Meaning and Nature

A good number of critics have argued, and naively too, that religion and spirituality only strive to protect nature which is the nucleus of African spirituality. Kala (2014), for example, finds religion as a wonderful tool for nature protection. He places great value on religion as a direct way of eradicating environmental hostility with the primary premise that environmental problems can be, or at least may be, solved from a religious angle. He says, “The growing interests among society in spiritual ecology, which focuses on the interrelationship between religions and environment may help to address various environmental issues and problems within the realm of religion” (p. 24). This increases the tendency of believing in the power of religion as an answer to ecological crisis.

Just like Kala, Singh (2013) opines that, the intensity of feeling and following of the spiritual and religious customs is closely tied with natural resources and livelihoods which go a long way to protect nature. In Singh’s words, “Conservation of biodiversity and other natural resources over a long period of time has been possible because of the cultural, spiritual and other social institutions that have guided the relationships between local communities and their resources” (p. 2). In further arguments, he adds that, “Cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity have always been decisive factors in conserving and maintaining the biodiversity and ecosystem and these values can sometimes be more important than monetary values in conserving some wild-lands” (p. 20). Singh supports the view that religion and spirituality lead to environmental protection and sustainability.

However, our argument in this point is that, there is a degree to which clinging to religion in order to search for meaning in life only leads to the destruction of nature, leading to a decline in African spirituality which relies on nature. It is a good thing to search for spiritual meaning, but it is bad to do it to the detriment of the ecosphere because the ways of some spiritualities like that of the Africans rely on nature. In the poem “The Gospel Singers”, Alembong presents a very complex argument in a poetic

language which is full of metaphors. In this poem, there is a strong clash between western religion and African culture/nature. The Christians spend their time in church singing, dancing and praying while their crops get bad in the bush. The irony here is that, they could be praying for their crops to do well instead of taking care of the crops. The poem opens with these Christians in church, singing. We are told that,

One, two, three, go
And metallic voices
picked up the celebrated jingle
in mid air
apostrophizing
eulogizing
deifying
earth (Alembong, 1991, p. 16)

These singers are so enthusiastic in the singing process that they ignore other happenings around them. They find pleasure in singing and they completely forget the actions that humans are supposed to take to make the world better. In fact, their crops get bad in the bush while they spend their time in church singing and seeking for miracles. The persona says this about singing and praying:

And the sounds rippled
The surface of the wind
While corn decayed in the fields
with neglect.
They sing,
With speckled eyes riveted on the sun
and a riptide running rife
how can manna be a gain
or the boat be brought ashore? (pp. 16-17)

This is the complexity of the whole show. Humans are in a state of two imperatives; —the imperative of praying and waiting for manna to fall from heaven, and the imperative of making things happen. In the domain of nature, humans have the imperative of hoping for it to get better and the imperative of bettering it. Based on the excerpt above, the Christians have chosen the imperative of praying when in reality, God has already given them the power to take control of nature and protect it. This is an existentialist criterion. Existentialists make a choice, take actions and assume responsibilities of their actions.

The poem is a religious satire which depicts the concept of misplaced priorities. The people spend all their time singing instead of protecting their nature which is falling apart. Nature here embodies their cultural realities. The poet uses a plethora of poetic devices to demonstrate how humans make wrong choices which cost them more in their whole existence. The persona consciously uses metaphors to

demonstrate these wrong choices which lead to the destruction of nature. The second stanza of the poem qualifies the voices of the singers as metallic. The persona says,

One, two, three, go
And metallic voices
picked up the celebrated jingle
in mid air (p. 16)

Qualifying their voices to metallic voices portrays the high magnitude of the tones that they implement in the singing process. The crux of the matter is that, as they sing, their crops decay; nature perishes. They rely only on singing and praying as moving forces that can shape their communities. This forces them to believe in manna that can fall from heaven as rewards for their songs and prayers. The speaker uses the rhetorical question, “how can manna be a gain/ or the boat be brought ashore?” to satirize these gospel singers who feel that prayers alone can change the narrative. Unfortunately, while they pray, the irony is that, nature decays; their livelihood is jeopardized. The sense of responsibility which is very eminent in the African cosmic becomes so evident here. There is the need for collective responsibility in the fight to protect nature which holds African spirituality in anchor. This is the African communalistic approach to nature; it has no bias against religion, but it focuses on a collective approach of sustaining religion by preserving nature.

We admit that Religion, irrespective of its type such as Christianity, is a great tentacle. Its primary motive is to spread the word of God. In another poem captioned, “The Christmas Chicken”, Alembong invokes the images of the story of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ to relate to the activities of humankind that lead to the extinction of animals (destruction of nature and spirituality). The poem begins with the persona demonstrating how he got/gets hold of the chicken and the children were/are so happy waiting for it to be prepared. He says,

I caught hold of it-
The grip was firm.
The cock-a-doodle-doo
Was plaintive enough to let it go
But the children were there (p. 13)

The happiness of everyone in this society relies on this killed chicken that is deprived of life to honour someone who is said to have died so that all can live. The persona tells us that, “that pot was our yearly joy/ The joy that opened our eyes to/Our naked ignorance” (p. 13). The principal complexity resides in the fact that the celebrated man’s blood is believed to have washed away the sins of people so too must the innocent chicken’s blood. The persona in the poem says,

For the man whose birth we celebrate
Washed down our sins with his blood
So too must we offer innocent blood
To welcome this great washerman. (p. 13)

As a matter of fact, this poem is about the myth of Jesus Christ who is believed to have sacrificed his life and blood for the salvation of all humans. The irony is that we need to celebrate the birthday anniversary of this Christ by killing animals. The persona makes use of a myth and a folktale, linking the story of Jesus to that of the fowl which is also an element of nature. This intertextuality narrative underscores the threat posed by western religion on Africa's ecosphere. To reinforce this point, the persona brings in the story of the tortoise that borrowed winds from birds to attend a party in the sky.

The message had been swallowed
With the greed of Tortoise in the sky.
Unknown to him he was in foreign lands
With the bird's feathers stuck on him.
And so we folded our arms and closed our eyes
And swallowed this strange communion
Forgetting we could be stripped of our borrowed feathers
And abandoned in mid air. (p. 13)

According to this folktale, animals were invited for a meeting in the sky. There in the sky, the tortoise tricked the birds in order to eat all the food offered them alone. It had to suffer the consequences alone too as all the birds took back their feathers when it was time to come down. The tortoise had to jump from that sky and that explains why its body is full of cracks. Bringing these mythical stories into poetry in order to demonstrate ecological issues is a stylistic device par excellence used by Alembong. These stories are African mythologies which are rooted in African spirituality because they attempt to explain things that cannot be scientifically explained/ proven. The aim of bringing in these mythologies is to project African cultural elements which contrast with the West. Ngeh (2017) subscribes to this when he argues that, "The Christmas Chicken" demonstrates the use of "African cultural aesthetics to contrast two ways of life and recommend the building of a national culture" (p. 6). This aligns with Afrocentrism which focuses on the defense of African cultural elements as valid.

Contrary to Western religious precepts that lead to the destruction of nature, African spirituality evidently conserves nature because it is nature that holds the spirituality. There is the belief among some, if not all, tribes in Africa that when we offer sacrifices and atonement to the spirits through nature, for example, our earth will do well and it will blossom. This belief underlies the sacred beliefs of the people. It is profound in the cultures of the two authors under study, that is, Nso and Nweh. Kishani demonstrates this in the poem, "Konglanjo". The poem is divided into two sections, namely, "Calling" and "Answering". In the calling part, the people of the community in the text are led by a priest who makes a prayer request to the Supreme Being, pleading for his blessings on the land. The Supreme Being answers in the calling part, assuring them that if they continue with the good ways of the ancestors, then He will continue to bless the land. From the wordings of the persona we are able to deduce that, as the people offer sacrifices and atonement to Ngàà-Mbóm through the earth, they expect him to bless the land in return. This transcends to being in harmony with the spirit realm through nature. One of the ways to preserve and

conserve nature is by aligning with the spirit world so as to prevent any natural disasters which may lead to damage. The persona tells us that they move,

To a sacrificial grove with palm-wine,
camwood, basket of black fowls, a tethered goat,
corn-loaves and bags of unmasked capsules of Kola nut,
We stitch 'd and webb'd
All the edges of smiles, to season
The smouldering log fires of incense
Invoking mighty Ngàà-Mbóm. (p. 11)

This poem contains cultural symbols which help to project the African culture, aligning with Afrocentrism. These symbols include: palm-wine, camwood, basket of black fowls, a tethered goat, corn-loaves and bags of unmasked capsules of Kola nut. One pertinent thing about these symbols is that they are all fashioned from nature and then used to appease nature. This depicts the link among natural elements and the smooth flow of nature when these elements work in collaboration. Also, palm-wine, camwood, basket of black fowls, a tethered goat, corn-loaves and bags of unmasked capsules of Kola nut are all traditional symbols which project local colour. The mention of these words creates a mental picture of a ritual process which can help curb nature. These elements are culturally significant in that, they are used to connect with the spirit world through sacrifices. In fact, these people are on a sacrificial mission with sacrificial properties which go a long way to placate the world beyond. Here, we note the extensive use of local colour to present the metaphysical dimension of nature. With the elements, the ritual is performed as the priest/persona in the poem sacrifices and atones:

Nay! Ngàà-Mbom!
Once more take and pour fortune on our lands!
Let him that goes, go with the peaceful steps of fortune!
Let him that comes,
come with the tidings of a good harvesting season!
Let these trickles sprinkle fortune on our lands and times! (p. 25)

Ngàà-Mbom here is the Creator among the Nso people. This gives us a sense of the author's origin thereby supporting the Afrocentricity tenet which says that we can know the author's place of origin by understanding his/her etymological use of words. He (Ngàà-Mbom) is the creator of the created. Every creature depends on Him for survival. The people rely on Him for their daily needs. This is the reason why they have to offer sacrifices to Him through nature while making their atonement. Lines two as quoted above says "Once more take and pour fortune on our lands!" This immediately suggests the habit of mutual understanding among Africans. They give and take and this makes life simple. This keeps the complications of individualism far from the people and promotes communalism. A communalistic way of life leads to collective effort in directing spirituality towards the preservation and conservation of nature.

Our spiritual capacity should be directed towards the preservation and conservation of nature rather than destroying it as depicted in the poems above. A more accurate way is to say that even though man's search for spiritual meaning has contributed to the physical destruction of the earth and the essence of beings, it is important to redirect spiritual quest to the preservation and conservation of nature. This can best be done by mediating between spiritual values and natural values. The essence of this is to boost human relationships with nature and spirituality. We can only do this by situating each religion in its specific cultural context.

5. The Hybrid Concept: The Meeting Point of Western and African Ecocultural Spirituality

This is contrary to the claim that everything which is not Eurocentric is Afrocentric as postulated by John H. Milan. He says, "Everything which does not come out of Afrocentric perspective is believed to be Eurocentric" (Milan, 1992, p. 9). If we accept this claim blindly, we will lose sight of the hybrid concept which combines the two worldviews. It is against this backdrop that in this section of the work we discuss the meeting points of Afrocentric and Eurocentric attitudes towards ecocultural spirituality. This is the contribution of this study to knowledge as the work proposes that we should accept good qualities or elements of Western and African views that can help protect nature and consequently protect African Spirituality. Alembong and Kishani suggest that, when Western and African cultures meet, the ideals (positive aspects) of each culture should be taken into consideration. Therefore, the West has something to learn from the Africans and they must be humble enough to learn and acknowledge the relevance of those positive aspects of African cultural values.

Just like Transcendentalism and animism that perceive the notion of a dual essence of nature, the African cosmology is believed to be dual in nature too. Nature is spiritual in Africa. The idea of the divinity of nature is practically African inclined. Africans from the beginning of the world have always considered the divinity of nature. It is important to restate that, African Traditional Religions are earth-centered. Alembong's poem entitled "Exchanging Planes in Mid-Air", demonstrates that African spirits reside in nature. The poem depicts two worldviews: Western and African which are in constant clash because of diversity in perceptions. In the poem, the mother who they say is the persona's small aunt is in constant ideological hostilities with the persona. They have differences in terms of ritual processes, belief systems, nature, worship days etc. Through these differences the divinity of nature is projected.

I am the child of the black god.

The black god

Who lives in rocks

And in streams

And in baobab trees. (p. 35)

For the persona to affirm that his god lives in rocks, streams and trees is just a reaffirmation that nature is divine, divine in the sense that it inhabits divinities. Mbiti and Alembong have supported this argument fully. Mbiti (1969) for example, says "the majority of the people hold that the spirits dwell in the woods,

bush, forest, rivers, mountains or just around the village. Thus, the spirits are in the same geographical region as men” (p. 79). In order to understand African spirituality, you must understand its nature. Its nature is embedded in its philosophy. Its philosophy transcends its spirituality. Therefore, it is a whole process of interconnectedness which must be understood holistically. The collective consciousness of the African people is embedded in their philosophy. Their philosophy shows a cross-section of relationships: relationship with God, relationship with ancestors, relationship with nature, relationship with other people/cultures etc. The transcendental forces in the African context consist in the ability of Africans to maintain these relationships with nonhuman species, beings and essences.

Given that human/nature relationship transcends the physical realm, it becomes clear that nature in itself can be said to be metaphysical. In fact, nature is metaphysical in nature. Everything which exists in the physical world has its spiritual layer. Nature is the fundamental location for African spirituality. Since they don't believe in paradise or hell after death, they consider the earth as the basis for their spirituality. Africans offer sacrifices to ancestors on earth. They believe that the ancestors are underneath the earth and that they will absorb the sacrifices underneath the earth. This means that what happens here on earth has its spiritual equivalence underneath the earth. In addition, Africans believe that all the components of the earth are inhabited by spirits. In fact, Africans hold the view that there are spirits all over the earth, be it in the sea, trees, caves, river banks or any similar places. On earth, there are herbalists who constitute part of the chain of African spirituality. They link the common man with other components of the spirits like the ancestors and gods. In a sense, the earth inhabits the living, the death and the unborn. The metaphysical nature of the earth allows it to operate in two layers which are diverse, but also closely related because what happens in one layer happens in another, or at least has effects therein.

Both Afrocentric and Eurocentric views consider nature as divine and spiritual. Hence, it will not be wrong for us to argue that, there is a meeting point in the perception of African and Western Ecocultural Spirituality. This meeting point, however, does not immediately suggest a hybrid state. The hybrid state emerges from the attitudes of these cultures to nature which affect their spirituality. This means that when African and Western cultures meet in relation to ecoculture and spirituality, it is the interaction of the cultures that can lead to a hybrid concept. If each culture is operating on its own norms of the connection between nature and spirituality, no hybrid state will be formed. A hybrid state is mostly formed when the two cultures begin to interact and one culture begins to copy the attitudes of another towards ecocultural spirituality. In the poem, “Exchanging Planes in Mid-Air” the persona is worried that the mother whom they call his mother fears his perceptions because he is doing things contrary to their culture. The persona is an African who has been subsumed by the attitudes of different cultures and is bent on manifesting a hybrid state because he has two cultures embedded in him. This is because when two cultures meet and mix, there is high probability of the emergence of hybrid states. It is difficult to experience pristine African ecocultural spirituality because of the meeting and mixing of cultures. This act of cultures meeting and mixing is called interculturality. This has both positive and negative consequences. For

example, it reevaluates and rehabilitates different belief systems. As Fisher, Emery and Wilkerson (1997) put it,

More than a non-problem, the modernity/tradition opposition is the work of a long ideological rerouting that continues in the so-called postcolonial period, wherein both Eurocentrism and “inverted-Eurocentrism” combine ... Indeed, as Memmes specifies, the road to modernity calls for a crossing of epochs and an errancy within cultures in order to define mentalities and unveil underlying ideologies. (p. 98)

As seen from the extract above, many misconceptions have been in the perception and presentation of modernity (Western system) and tradition (Global South system). This is due to lack of good knowledge of interculturality. With interculturality, people get to acquaint themselves with cultures aside theirs. This helps in establishing and improving the perceived differences between modernity and tradition. The poem “Exchanging Planes in Mid-Air” is a typical *mélange* of modernity and tradition. The speaker in the poem represents tradition while the mother whom they say is his aunt; the sister of his mother is a metaphorical representation of modernity. She sees the speaker as an embodiment of backwardness because he does not see things from her perspective. The irony here is that he is highly educated and his education has made him to understand that Western perceptions of things have gradually transformed African mentalities. The persona tells us that,

She says
Big book has
Ruined me like faggots
That have been ruined by black ants.
She says
I don't go to church,
The white man's house of worship,
Because my books teach me
Strange things,
Things that make me
Turn my back to the god
Who they say lives in the sky.
Things that make me
Follow the black path
That leads to satan's chiefdom,
Things that shall make me
Feast in fires
In the country of wizards.
When I try to picture this mother of mine-
This black skin with white blood-

Sleep finishes in my head. (p. 34)

This poem depicts this persona and a woman. These two metaphorically represent two cultural worldviews. The persona stands for the African worldview which is detested by the woman/ West. The persona's attachment to his cultural roots strengthens his culture, the African culture, but the West sees this as a threat. The persona has studied and this has liberated him from mental colonization and slavery. However, through simile in the first line quoted above, he tells us that the woman thinks that, "Big book has/ Ruined me like faggots/ That have been ruined by black ants." The transformation here appears like destruction because it opens his eyes. Even the church, the white man's house of worship, is no longer where he worships probably because he has seen the usefulness of his ancestral shrines. Through this, we see how interculturality reevaluates and rehabilitates different belief systems. In this way, interculturality makes life easier. When there is the meeting and mixing of ecocultural spirituality, life gets easier because knowledge is shared when cultures meet and mix. In fact, the overall idea of ecocultural spirituality meeting and mixing from different cultural backgrounds suggests exchange of knowledge thereby making life easier. When this knowledge is shared, identity boundaries are broken. Fisher et al. see interculturality as a way of breaking identity boundaries as it wipes out the limits brought in by alienations and restrictions. Hence, with interculturality, there is free interaction of persons and cultures.

The interaction of cultures cannot be effective if one culture places negative qualities on the other without fully understanding it. For example, false conclusions by Europeans put forth the description of African spirit world as evil. It incarcerated African eco-cultural spaces and identities. It should be noted that Western perceptions of traditional religions initially depended upon a Christian framework for understanding variations in religious beliefs and practices, which often resulted in the characterization of non-Christian religions as somehow unfit to be called religions or to be the work of the devil. In such light, no serious attention was given to African traditional religions which are earth-centered and bent to preserve the earth. According to them (Eurocentric critics), Africans worship many gods, do not believe in a supreme God, worship dead spirits and are pagans in nature. They did this without understanding that our ways are different from their ways and for there to be interculturality, they need to accept cultural diversity and difference. Kishani makes it clear in the poem "Our Way" that our ways are completely different from Western ways, per se. This poem is about two cultural worldviews. It places the Western worldview alongside the African worldview and comments that each is unique in its ways. The poem begins with the persona encouraging his people to protect their culture like a child protects his toys; to make it capable of moving people in the same way that a xylophonist does. His people have to do this because the culture is their precious valuable. The persona says about it that,

It's your grace
Before your face
It's our gold
Within our fold (p. 40)

Because of the valuable nature of this culture, the persona compares it with the Greek god of war and the best artist, insisting that they cannot stop the people from upholding this strong culture. The persona in the poem says,

Not even the Grecian Mars can forge
Your gongs
Nor can the “lunar artisan” carve
Your old doors
Nor the Beatles belittling
Or Händel handling sing
Your songs
Sound
Your drums
And dance
Your dance. (p. 40)

In the lines above, the words “songs”, “drums” and “dance” are typically used as metaphorical symbols for the things that Africans do. These things are tied to their cultures, thus, working in line with the Afrocentric tenet that, Afrocentricity is committed in finding the subject place of Africans in everything. In order to understand these things, one needs to belong to the cultures or at least, do an in-depth study of the cultures. Unfortunately, the Westerners did not really do this and this explains why they made false claims about Africa spirituality instead of encouraging interculturality. In the poem, the persona creates an atmosphere of interculturality by using natural rivers which depict two different cultural backgrounds. He says:

Mongo may meet the Thames
And both shake hands
And wed in the encircling
Depths of the seas; But
Mongo rains fall not on the Thames. (p. 40)

Mongo represents river Mungo which is in Cameroon, Africa while Thames represents river Thames in London, England, West. To say that “Mongo may meet the Thames/ And both shake hands/And wed in the encircling/Depths of the seas; But/ Mongo rains fall not on the Thames” is a poetic way of saying that the Western and African cultures can meet and mix (interculturality), but African ways will never become purely Western. The ways of the African remain African no matter the negative assumptions of the West. The persona tells us that “Ours is our Culture” which means that the African ways emanate from African cultures. The irony in the whole show is that, the persona insists that the meeting and mixing of cultures cannot blur the pristine lines of the cultures. Generally, a thorough reading of the stanzas above leaves us with the impression that, even though African and Western ecocultural ideologies have come in contact with each other, there is still high probability of Africanness in African ecoculture. The

implication of this is that, two cultures can coexist without one outstripping the other. We should therefore build bridges to link cultures together. This will go a long way to sustain African ecocultural spirituality. This poem clearly depicts two cultural possibilities: their way (Western cultures) and our way (African cultures). Our way is in direct contrast with their way even though we can coexist. Ngeh (2017) posits that Kishani in this poem, “appeals to contemporary audience to conserve and preserve the positive aspects of their time-honoured cultural heritage without which there will not be any national culture” (p. 11). By doing this, they situate it within the context of the ethics which clearly valorises African ways. In fact, ecocultural spirituality is not left out in this cultural heritage. African spirituality is so unique and rooted in African cultures that, “not even the Grecian Mars can forge” “nor can the ‘lunar artisan’ carve” “nor the Beatles belittling or Händel handling sing” (p. 40). The poem means that we should fall back and rebuild our ideals: our culture, our spirituality, our ecology etc.

We must mention however that, interculturality does not go without negative aspects. When people of different cultures come together, it leads to binaries such as acceptance and rejection, ascendancy and descendancy, skepticism and suspicion, acculturation, cultural marginalization and intercultural conflicts and social alienation.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the decline in African spirituality and demonstrate how Alembong and Kishani have handled the problem in their poetry. We have been able to discuss two thematic clusters, namely: Humankind’s Quest for Spiritual Meaning and Nature, and the Hybrid Concept: the Meeting Point of Western and African Ecocultural Spirituality. Within these thematic clusters, we have argued that, African spirituality is earth-centered and this makes Alembong to reaffirm the interconnectedness among nature, humans and spirituality. Poor treatment of nature thus leads to a decline in African spirituality. We have also argued that, the continuous decline in African spirituality persists because when it comes to mores and ethos governing nature and spirituality, focus is largely on Western notions which are capitalistic and individualistic in nature. The ultimate revelation of this study is that, man’s search for spiritual meaning has contributed to the physical destruction of the earth, thereby causing the disruption of the order of the universe and the essence of beings. The study recommends the need to include African communalistic approach in the fight against human destruction of nature and spirituality.

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