

Dramatic Representation of Environmental Justice in Chris Nwamou's the Wisdom of the King

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dramatic representation of environmental justice in Chris Nwamou's the Wisdom of the King using wilderness ecocriticism as the theoretical lens. A theory that asserts nature as unspoiled, innocence, and free from human interference. Wilderness ecocriticism, which focuses on the inherent value of the natural environment and critiques its exploitation, offers a robust framework for examining how Nwamou dramatises the tension between human ignorance, ecological degradation, and communal survival. The play's narrative engages the ignorance of deforestation, resource exploitation, and the displacement of communities issues that echos with broader struggles for environmental justice in Nigerian/African societies. By situating forest as cultural, spiritual and ecological space under threat, the study reveals the ways in which the playwright deploys symbolism, dialogue, and conflict to critique anthropocentric destruction and calls for a sustainable, ethical relationship between humanity and the environment. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how The Wisdom of the King not only reflects the socio-ecological realities of contemporary Nigeria but also agrees with global debates on environmental conservation, indigenous rights, and sustainable development.

KEYWORDS: Dramatic, Representation, Environment, Justice,

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INTRODUCTION

Nigerian plays have consistently demonstrated a profound engagement with environmental themes, reflecting the nation's complex relationship with its natural landscape and the environmental challenges facing contemporary Nigeria. From the pioneering plays of Wole Soyinka to the contemporary voices of Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, Bode Sowande, Chris Nwamou, and others, Nigerian playwrights have utilized play texts to explore environmental degradation, cultural displacement, and the intersection of traditional ecological knowledge with modern industrial pressures. This paper examines how Nigerian playwright have represented environmental issues through various techniques, analysing the ways in which landscape, natural imagery, and ecological themes function as both setting and character within the plays.

The dramatic representation of environment in Nigerian plays operate as a dynamic force that shapes character development, drives plot progression, and provides commentary on social and political issues. Through careful analysis of Chris Nwamou's The Wisdom of the King, this study shows how Nigerian playwrights have employed environmental imagery to address themes of colonialism, postcolonial identity, urbanization, and globalization's impact on traditional societies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT

The representation of environment in Nigerian plays finds its roots in traditional performance practices where the natural world was not merely a setting but an active participant in the dramatic experience. Traditional festivals and ritual performances often occurred in natural spaces: sacred groves, village squares, under ancient trees, or alongside rivers where the environment itself became part of the theatrical event (Okagbue 67). This indigenous understanding of the symbiotic relationship between performance and environment has significantly influenced modern Nigerian plays.

In A Dance of the Forests, Wole Soyinka shows the intricate bond between man and the spiritual forces of the land in which he lives. In the world of the play, there must be reconciliation between man and these forces before progress is possible. Man gets into direct contact with supernatural forces through ritual and sacrifice. One of the abodes of these forces is the forest. No wonder that A Dance of the Forests has two settings. The main event which is the Gathering of the Tribes, a metaphor for Nigerian Independence

celebrations, takes place in two arenas. The secular events take place in town while the spiritual concerns which involve introspection, repentance and reconciliation take place in the forest.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Wilderness Ecocriticism. The concept of wilderness is tensed with plurality, often interpreted differently across cultures, disciplines, and historical periods. For the purpose of this study, the notion of wilderness is considered through the paradigm of New World environmentalism, a construction that posits nature as unspoiled, innocence, and free from human interference. Greg Garrard aptly observes that in this context, wilderness is conceptualized as “nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization,” serving both as a site for ecological preservation and a refuge for those fatigued by urban industrialism and moral decay (Garrard 69).

Such a construction of wilderness is not merely symbolic but instrumental. It supports environmental activism and conservation policies aimed at safeguarding ecologically significant habitats and species. While Garrard's interpretation aligns with the deep ecological desire to sanctify nature, this study adopts a more integrative approach, one that acknowledges the intrinsic value of wilderness while also accommodating sustainable human presence. This holistic perspective aligns with the view advanced by Vance Martin and Ian Player of the WILD Foundation, who define wilderness as both “biologically intact” and “legally protected” from industrial infrastructure, while remaining open to traditional, low-impact human practices (4).

Within this framework, the wilderness is not perceived as a spotless void devoid of human influence but rather as a biologically functional and resilient landscape where natural processes are dominant and minimally disrupted. Hence, the presence of indigenous or subsistence communities does not invalidate the wilderness status of a landscape. Instead, their symbiotic relationship with the land often reinforces ecological integrity. This view moves away from the anthropocentric binaries that historically pitted humans against nature, towards a more ecocentric model of stewardship.

ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN CHRIS NWAMOU'S *THE WISDOM OF THE KING*

The play opens with King Duke of Umuhu convening a meeting of the Traditional Rulers' Council outside his drinking hut. The purpose of the gathering initiated by the king himself is to inform the village elders of two crucial decisions he has made in response to an unexpected crisis. The first decision concerns the safety of his son, Nnamdi. To shield the young prince from possible harm, the king decrees that he will be accompanied to and from school each day. Referring to a recent incident, King Duke declares, “Last Tuesday, my son, the prince of Umuhu, was called a ‘bushman’ by his classmate, Ette, son of Nwohu, strangers to this land... I have decided that Nnamdi must from today be accompanied to and from school every day.”

Ironically, the second decision, though intended to preserve the dignity of Umuhu, poses a grave ecological and social risk. In a misguided attempt to counter the “bushman” label ascribed to his people, King Duke proposes the complete clearing of the village's forests and bushes. He assumes that such an action would dispel external perceptions of backwardness. However, the elders, though respectful, express deep reservations about this plan. They request additional time to consult with the broader community before offering a definitive response. Though initially disappointed by their hesitation, King Duke agrees to their appeal and asks for their final decision the next day.

When the council reconvenes, the elders present their perspectives on the vital role nature plays in the life of the community. Despite their reasoned arguments, the king remains unconvinced. At the height of their deliberations, a local councillor bursts in, dragging a labourer accused of cutting down a palm tree, a transgression he deems severe. The labourer, visibly shaken, faces the councillor's call for harsher punishment. Yet, King Duke, outraged by the councillor's cruelty, intervenes, ordering the man's immediate release and chastising the official for his harshness. He subsequently dismisses the councillor, the labourer, and the elders.

Later, in a moment of solitude within his palace, King Duke reflects deeply on the ramifications of his decisions. Seeking guidance, he summons Jide, the village's spiritual healer, to consult the gods regarding the consequences of deforestation. Queen Elsie, pregnant and haunted by troubling dreams, pleads with her husband to proceed with caution. When Jide arrives, he conveys the gods' clear verdict: the natural environment of Umuhu must be preserved. Ultimately, King Duke submits to this wisdom, aligning himself with the will of both the gods and his people. His choice is affirmed by a clap of thunder, an auditory sign of divine approval, bringing the play to a harmonious and redemptive close.

To commence the ecocritical analysis, it is instructive to consider the play's title, *The Wisdom of the King*, which functions ironically in light of King Duke's early actions. Despite the title's suggestion of sagacity, the king initially displays a profound lack of ecological awareness. Throughout much of the play, he remains misguided, with his transformation occurring only toward the end. His initial decision to eradicate the natural environment underscores his ignorance of the ecological and cultural value of forests, trees, and wildlife. Notably, King Duke equates progress with the absence of natural vegetation, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Last Tuesday, my son, the Prince of Umuhu, was called a bushman by a classmate, Ette, son of Nwohu, strangers to this land... The idea of strangers calling us bushmen has bothered me since then... I have instructed that all forests and bushes within our county be cleared and burnt down (Movement One 14-16).

Further emphasizing King Duke's ecological ignorance, the three chiefs return to the palace to convey the community's response and to enlighten the king on matters of environmental conservation. In the course of their discussion, the Second Chief challenges the king's erroneous assumption, stating, "...it is not because of the bushes and trees in Umuhu that the prince is called a bushman." Rather than reconsider his stance, King Duke reacts with indignation, exclaiming: "I am sick and tired of our neighbours comparing the rate of development in their counties with that of our communities... This land will not be insulted while I am king... Those bushes and trees in our communities must be cleared. This is my decision" (21).

The portrayal of this ironic situation underscores the notion that ignorance serves as a barrier to meaningful progress, perpetuating ecological destruction and necessitating a therapeutic intervention. This context explains King Duke's eventual transformation brought about through environmental education which leads him to become a committed advocate of nature conservation. As a result, he enacts decisive measures aimed at protecting the environment: "From today, no citizen shall cut down a tree, kill an animal, burn bushes, or destroy wildlife in our environment without permission" (38). He further mandates punitive actions, including the confiscation of farmlands belonging to violators: "...anyone who destroys the environment arbitrarily will have their farmlands seized" (38).

This shift in policy exemplifies, to a significant extent, the integration of environmental concerns into governance, a process known as environmental mainstreaming, and the stringent enforcement of ecological laws. It initiates a ripple effect that transforms Umuhu's environmental landscape. However, Nwamuo's vision extends beyond the fictional realm of the play. Acknowledging the pedagogical and therapeutic dimensions of ecodrama, he notes in the prefatory remarks that *The Wisdom of the King*, originally conceived as part of a mass literacy initiative, seeks to sensitize adults often complicit in ecosystem degradation on the imperative of environmental stewardship (Nwamuo 7). In alignment with this perspective, the present analysis supports Chris Egharevba's contention that ecocidal behaviors are frequently rooted in a lack of ecological knowledge, and thus require both education and healing. As Egharevba observes, "The play serves as drama therapy, addressing humanity's ignorance about the natural world and its reciprocal relationship with humans. This is crucial for advocating environmental conservation" (176).

Moreover, *The Wisdom of the King* aligns with ecocritical thought by positioning the natural environment not merely as a backdrop, but as a dynamic presence essential to the thematic fabric of the play. It affirms the notion of wilderness as a biologically intact space, minimally affected by human intervention. This vision echoes the ecological sensibilities in Bongo Ikwe's iconic jingle from *Cock Crow at Dawn*, a popular television program broadcast on the Nigerian Television Authority in the 1980s. The lyrics of Ikwe's song resonate strongly with the play's stage directions, suggesting a shared appreciation for the acoustic and visual richness of undisturbed nature. For instance, the line "You can hear the birds sing" is mirrored in the play's direction, "Sounds of early morning birds swelling their throats with songs dominate the air" (35). Likewise, "You can hear the water splashing down the hills, kind of roaring" corresponds with "The sound of the village stream washing the rocks in the background" (18), while "You can see the sun going down" finds a parallel in "The setting sun casts a brown wash of light on the eaves of the drinking hut" (11).

In Nwamuo's ecodrama, trees and other non-human elements are central to the dramatization of ecological balance. The play emphasizes the intrinsic value of these natural entities and their indispensable role in sustaining human life. This ecological sensibility is further reinforced in the opening stage directions of Movement One, which establish a tone of interconnectedness between human society and the environment. The chiefs are depicted sitting on wooden chairs with a gourd of frothing palm wine before them, served by a fifteen-year-old boy dressed in a green adire jumper. The quiet atmosphere is punctuated only by the distant chirping of birds (11). The use of natural materials like wooden chairs, a gourd, and palm wine and the boy's green attire symbolize the deep symbiosis between people and their natural surroundings. The birdsong during the chiefs' deliberations subtly reminds the audience of nature's omnipresence and the reciprocal benefits it offers to a community that lives in harmony with it.

This emphasis on symbiosis contrasts sharply with parasitic relationships in the natural world, such as that between the dodder vine and the nettle. Instead, the play celebrates mutualistic interactions, exemplified in nature by the relationship between the acacia tree and certain ant species, each benefiting the other's survival. This ecological insight is encapsulated in the Councillor's assertion: "Our environment should not be destroyed, for our bushes and natural environment provide us with most of what we need for survival..." (24). The community's collective outcry following the falling of a palm tree by the king's labourer further underscores this sentiment. The palm tree is not merely a plant; it is a vital resource that yields oil, kernel, fiber, and palm fronds (24), all of which are essential to the people's livelihood.

Through such interactions, Nwamuo's ecodrama underscores the imperative of striking a balance between human development and environmental preservation. Forests, in particular, are portrayed as crucial ecological assets. They play a central role in mitigating climate change through carbon sequestration, the process by which trees absorb and store atmospheric carbon dioxide. While this occurs naturally, afforestation and reforestation represent anthropogenic strategies that replicate and enhance nature's ability to sequester carbon, thereby helping to combat global warming. Furthermore, trees contribute to the hydrological cycle through

transpiration, returning water to the atmosphere and regulating both local and global precipitation patterns. This affirms the necessity of forest conservation for sustainable water management.

Given these multifaceted ecological benefits, the Councillor rightly cautions, "To destroy the bushes and forest is to threaten our existence" (24). Beyond their climatic and hydrological roles, plants and trees possess significant medicinal value. As the Second Chief notes, "A good number of the plants in our environment are medicinal... used in curing diseases" (23). The bark, leaves, roots, and stems of various plants contain healing properties that are essential to traditional medicine.

Equally important is the exceptional biodiversity supported by forest ecosystems. Such habitats sustain numerous species of flora and fauna, including birds, squirrels, and rodents, which play crucial roles in pollination and seed dispersal. These natural processes are vital for germination and biodiversity conservation, and they function most effectively within healthy, sustainable ecosystems characterized by rich biological diversity. The sensory landscape of *The Wisdom of the King*, rustling trees, chirping crickets, and the songs of morning birds evokes a vivid image of Umuhu as an ecologically thriving village nestled within lush forests and grasslands.

King Duke acknowledges the presence of numerous wild animals inhabiting the forests and bushes of Umuhu, yet he dismisses these natural spaces as undesirable due to the perceived threats posed by mosquitoes and snakes (22). However, this narrow view fails to consider the ecological interdependence of species that sustain the food web. For instance, mosquito larvae serve as a critical food source for fish, which are in turn consumed by humans as a primary source of protein. Similarly, reptiles such as lizards and geckos, which feed on mosquitoes, constitute prey for snakes. Beyond their ecological role, snakes also offer significant benefits to humans. Their skin is used in the production of fashion accessories, and their venom is essential for developing life-saving anti-venoms. These examples underscore the necessity of preserving natural ecosystems, not only for their ecological functions but also for their economic and aesthetic value.

Nonetheless, when it becomes imperative to safeguard human populations from harmful interactions with mosquitoes and snakes, the use of environmentally friendly strategies is preferable. Such methods should avoid jeopardizing the ozone layer, which plays a vital role in shielding the Earth from the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. Harmful practices such as the excessive use of insecticides and pesticides, as well as indiscriminate bush burning pose significant risks to grassland ecosystems and contribute to environmental degradation. In contrast, eco-friendly alternatives can provide effective mitigation without compromising ecological integrity. This principle is exemplified in *The Wisdom of the King*, where natural remedies are promoted. The Third Chief notes that "some plants from the bush drive away snakes and mosquitoes when you plant them for house" (22), thereby advocating the use of botanical repellents as ozone-friendly solutions.

Additionally, the play issues a strong condemnation of bush burning, highlighting its adverse consequences for air quality and public health. As the Councillor observes, "Bush burning pollutes the air we breathe and so constitutes a health hazard" (24). This concern reflects a broader national issue in Nigeria, where bush burning particularly prevalent in the northern regions has, led to extensive damage to agricultural lands and crops. From an ecocritical perspective, this study denounces bush burning as a destructive practice that significantly contributes to air pollution and exposes communities to serious health risks.

This view is echoed in the Councillor's forthright response to King Duke when the latter challenges the legitimacy of the Council's concern regarding bush burning and deforestation:

King: Yes! (Silence), Go on, learned Councillor.

Councillor: (Trembling and cautious). We use trees to beautify our roads, homes, and important places. Certain trees around our homes help to drive away spirits.

King: (Slowly) Yes!

Councillor: My Lord, the list is endless.

King: (Turning to him) So?

Councillor: We should not destroy our environment or burn bushes (24-25).

This exchange underscores the profound environmental and spiritual significance ascribed to trees within the context of the play. It reveals that indiscriminate practices such as bush burning and tree-falling are not only ecologically destructive but are also culturally perceived as acts that invite malevolent spiritual forces. Conversely, the preservation of trees is associated with spiritual vitality and communal well-being. Historically, African societies have long recognized the sanctity of wilderness areas. Prior to colonial intrusion, certain forests were designated as sacred spaces, protected through spiritual taboos and traditional customs, not merely as ecological reserves but also as sources of non-timber products and sustainable hunting grounds. Although some of these sacred groves have survived the erosion of time, they now face increasing threats from the encroachment of modernization and urban expansion.

This scenario highlights the urgent need for a conservation ethic that avoids privileging immediate economic gains over long-term ecological health and intergenerational equity. Pursuing development at the expense of environmental sustainability undermines the core principles of sustainable development. Within this framework, the centrality of wood to human existence further affirms the importance of sustainable forest management. As the Third Chief aptly states, "na dem de give us timber for build and roof house

and many furniture..." (22). Wood remains indispensable in everyday life, particularly for constructing household and office furniture, as well as key architectural elements such as doors, windows, and roof supports. In many developing countries, wooden materials are especially crucial in housing construction.

The ecological necessity of conserving woodland ecosystems is reinforced through Chief Nzeribe's observation that "trees protect our houses from wind and storm" (22). Here, trees are portrayed not only as structural shields against wind and severe weather events but also as essential contributors to soil health through nitrate fixation, nourishing the soil for both agricultural and ecological productivity. The manifold benefits of preserving forests and grasslands are difficult to overstate. These natural environments offer shade for humans, livestock, and aquatic ecosystems, thereby regulating microclimates and providing thermal comfort. As the play further suggests, "Trees also help to arrest ecological problems like erosion and earthquakes" (22), emphasizing their role in stabilizing the land and mitigating natural disasters.

The inestimable value of vegetative cover finds its most poignant articulation in the playwright's voice, channelled through the Second Chief's declaration: "Them say them like their land as e be bush because na him de sustain them. Lizard we ignore tree, na inside dog belly e de rest" (20). This metaphor speaks to the tragic consequences of disregarding nature's worth. It is further reinforced by the Third Chief's assertion: "Only a man reside whose brains inside his feet will support clearing bushes and cutting down trees" (20). These proverbs function as rhetorical strategies to critique environmental ignorance and to promote a philosophy of ecological wisdom deeply rooted in communal knowledge and traditional ecological values. "The man whose brains reside inside his feet" symbolizes a leader who fails to appreciate the imperative of harmonizing development with environmental and spiritual stewardship, an indication of moral and spiritual decline. Such a leader, blinded by short-sighted ambition, requires intervention from a higher moral authority to facilitate a transformative, divine encounter. This notion is validated in the pivotal interaction between King Duke and Jide, the seer, which affirms the necessity of spiritual guidance in restoring ecological consciousness:

King Duke:(Pause). Tell me. Should I allow the bushes around us remain? Or should I order that they be cleared? What are the implications? Find out for me...

Jide: (Opens his bag). Spreads a white cloth on the floor, makes the king to step into the Ashy area. He removes imaginary cobwebs from all around his body and asks him to return to his seat. He then places all kinds of oddments associated with witch doctors. On top of a red cup, he places a flat mirror. He lights 3candles and places two at CDR and CDL and the third beside his shrine. He rubs some oil on his face carefully and puts on a black robe. He asks the king to stand facing the candles while he kneels looking into the mirror. (Silence. The owl hoots). You. You stand against a wall. Alone (Looking into the mirror intensely). You stand for; tree with blunt cutlass. You look sick. You no get help.

King Duke:(Stammering). Look again and tell me what you see.

(Still looking) Your son important (Pause). No block him happiness. Make you no cut tree. I see you sleep under big tree. Blood dey for the tree.

King Duke:Whose blood?

Jide:I no know (Pause). I see you walk for desert. No tree. (The owl hoots again.

Silence). Them don go (Begins to rise slowly)

King Duke:What does that mean?

(Undressing). I no know (Takes shots of gin. Begins to gather his wares into the bag). Ikeogu! Make you be careful with the forest. In light of the foregoing, the owl's hooting in the play functions as a symbolic omen from the supernatural realm, warning against the disregard of both spiritual and environmental values. This warning, directed specifically at the king, carries far-reaching implications for human conduct. The seer's vision of the king lying beneath a massive, blood-stained tree further intensifies the message, serving as divine counsel that urges the adoption of sustainable forest management practices.

King Duke's swift response to this spiritual admonition, as he begins to address the ecological crisis afflicting his community, reflects the pressing necessity for environmental conservation. Furthermore, the thunder that accompanies the gods' approval of his decision affirms the intrinsic link between human responsibility, spiritual guidance, and ecological balance.

CONCLUSION

The dramatic representation of environment in Nigerian drama reveals the profound interconnectedness of ecological, cultural, and political concerns in Nigeria. From Soyinka's pioneering exploration of the Niger Delta's symbolic landscape to contemporary works addressing environmental degradation, Nigerian playwrights have consistently used environmental imagery to address ecological issue facing Nigeria.

This theatrical tradition shows that environmental representation in plays serves multiple functions: it preserves the people's culture, calls out social and political injustice, educate audiences about their environment, and bring to their consciousness the relationships between humans and their environment. The success of Nigerian ecodrama in achieving these diverse goals while maintaining artistic excellence demonstrates the power of drama to address complex social issues. As environmental challenges become

increasingly urgent, the insights offered by Nigerian dramatists about the interconnectedness of ecological and social justice issues become increasingly valuable for Nigeria global audiences.

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