

USES OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES: SULE EMMANUEL EGYA

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The Uses of Environmental Humanities series explores diverse and creative ways of thinking with the Environmental Humanities in responding to socio-environmental challenges. Contributors address the influence of the Environmental Humanities and ways in which we might use this field of study, offering insights into the interactions between societies, science, politics, and culture. The series is curated by Samantha Rothbart.

“Anglophone Environmental Writing in Nigeria”

By **Sule Emmanuel Egya**

Before I begin, let me point out that Environmental Humanities is yet to take an institutional shape in Nigeria, as I do not know of any department, institute, or center dedicated to it. Only a few of us are engaged in it, although there is a growing interest in it. We had a great impetus last year in the form of a national conference that I convened on 27–30 June 2018. Sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Bonn, it had the theme “Ecology and the Convergence of the Sciences and the Humanities.” It was the first of its kind in Nigeria, attended by enthusiastic scholars, most of them eager to know more and work within the area of Environmental Humanities. In my contribution to this series, I will give an overview of environmental writing in Nigeria in English, and sketch out how it can be read in a context of environmentalist concern.

When did environmental writing start in Nigeria? There are those who believe that recognition of the connection between environment and writing has a historical marker. This preconception underscores the emergence of ecocriticism as a relatively recent field of study. But it is problematic, in my view, to even think of environmental writing, in Nigeria, in Africa, as a recent phenomenon or as a function of the field of ecocriticism.

Environmental writing has existed in Nigeria since the inception of modern Nigerian literature, and has its inspirational roots in the oralities (oral literatures) of Nigeria's indigenous communities.

Concern about the fate of the environment is entrenched in Nigerian literary tradition, which hinges on the notion that creative writing as an art form should be instrumental in shaping human thoughts and actions, and generate transgressive forces capable of confronting the ills in society. Environmental writing in Nigeria therefore hopes to create eco-awareness and eco-consciousness among the people about Nigeria's many environmental problems—ranging from air, water, and noise pollution to oil spillage, deforestation, erosion, and flooding.

Anglophone writing is part of the colonial experience in Nigeria. The British colonial occupation of Nigeria made it possible for Western education to be introduced, with English being the language of instruction. Pioneer Nigerian writers therefore read Greco-Roman and English classics, which influenced their own writing. While the argument can be made that the connection between literature and the environment is a by-product of this colonial contact, the place of nature and environment in the Nigerian literary imagination actually has much deeper roots in Nigeria's diverse oral literary expressions dating back to the precolonial era. The traditional oral poetics of societies, which are still prominent today, have been as crucial as this colonial contact in shaping Nigerian writing. One example is the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, a significant voice in Nigerian literature, which centers on and is inspired by the spiritual connection of his family lineage to a water deity called Mother Idoto. In one of his most quoted poems, *Heavensgate*, Okigbo writes,

Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand;
before your watery presence,
a prodigal.[1]

The water deity resides in the poet's birthplace, and she had existed long before colonialism. The poet's grandfathers have served as priests to the deity, and the poet, in spite of his Western education, returns here as a prodigal (having earlier wandered away into a foreign civilization), now willing to take his position as the next priest. The spirituality of this poem is shaped by nature-human interactions dating back to prehistoric times. Other Nigerian poets such as Wole Soyinka, Tanure Ojaide, and Niyi

Osundare have also connected their poetic inspirations to the natural environments of their birthplaces, suggesting that before they received Western education, they already knew of the link between nature and their family lineage.

It is important to note that Nigerians, like most Africans, perceive the environment in a way that does not differentiate nature from society. In other words, the environment, even nature, is not just a biophysical ecosystem untouched by human existence. It is a vital organ—the nonhuman organism—without which the people cannot live. People are so close to nature—define themselves by nature, feed from and nourish nature in the most fundamental ways—that it is difficult to see them as separate from it. The inhabitants of Umuofia, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, organize their whole lives around nature: they live in, make a living from, and predicate their social status on nature. From nature, they get their food by farming and hunting; they get their medicines and medication. Their mode of worship is animist, objects of worship taken from the flora and fauna. Even in death, nature determines how humans are viewed: if their body is thrown into the evil forest, it means they died in a bad way. The evil forest (ironically named and framed) remains a crucial organ, the other being, against which people frame their legacy. This should not be construed as a form of othering as is the case of colonial discourse that frames Africans as “primitive” because of their closeness to nature. Indeed living with, living inside, nature is a productive aspect of Nigerian life that significantly recognizes distinctive histories. Such interactions of humans and nature, the environment of human existence, is therefore taken as a given in Nigerian literature. This implies that consciously or unconsciously the Nigerian writer, especially in the early days of Nigerian literature, is almost always *writing* their environment.

I have, as a creative writer, written about my immediate environment. My first novel, *Sterile Sky*, is somewhat autobiographical, depicting my childhood environment in Kano City, northwest Nigeria. The novel vividly shows the physical aspect of the environment, with sites of street gutters, potholed roads, roadside trees, city ponds, and the general landscape. It also captures the religious environment marked by tensions between Christians and Muslims, which profoundly influenced my attitude towards religion today. Similarly, my poetry volume, *What the Sea Told Me*, captures the magical experience I had when I lived close to the sea for the first time in my life. This was in Popeguine, Senegal, where I lived for nine months. In emphasizing the connection between the environment and myself, and using such connection to reflect on the postcolonial contradictions in my society, I work within a literary tradition that dates back to the beginnings of African literature.

Although Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*, published in 1986, anticipates environmentalism of the poor (the capitalist subjugation of the environment and its helpless inhabitants), environmental justice as a thematic focus in Nigerian literature came in the wake of large-scale oil extraction in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Specifically, it was the judicial killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer and environmental activist from the Ogoni ethnic nationality in the region, that made writers realize that they had to use their craft as a way to engage with and respond to the eco-destruction going on in the region. This engendered an efflorescence of creative writing in the 1990s, especially in poetry, first as a tribute to the environmental activist, then as a discourse of protest against despotism and petro-dollar capitalism. This coincided with an upsurge in pressure on the military regime to conduct elections and return the nation to democracy. As a result, a strong tone of resistance in the mode of protest aesthetics so traditional in African literature characterizes Nigerian literature that depicts ecological crises.[2]

The aesthetic form of this environmental justice writing largely hinges on what I call militant metaphors that imagine an oppressor-figure bent on destroying the biosphere, ecosystems, and biodiversity, who must therefore be annihilated. The themes/subjects mainly include the air, water, and soil pollution in the Niger Delta region, the erosion in south-eastern Nigeria, desertification and mining in northern Nigeria, as well as industrialization and urban pollution across Nigeria. Militant metaphors presupposes protest aesthetics, an ideology of writing fundamental to the idea of counter-discourse. This too we can trace to the beginnings of African literature when pioneer African writers wrote in order to protest the epistemic violence of the colonial institution. Based on the notion of militant metaphors, I have developed the concept of literary militancy to explain the *aggressive* pro-environment discourse of creative writing emanating from the Niger Delta.[3] Faced with brutal environmental injustice, present Nigerian environmental writers turn themselves into militants, thereby taking their aesthetics as weapons.

To refer to the writers as militants is to dislodge the term from what I see as its misapplication by trigger-happy militias who gleefully call themselves militants (purportedly fighting for the emancipation of the region) when in fact they constitute themselves into a terror by engaging in open robbery and abduction of people for their personal interests. Literary militancy is a creative formation that confronts criminals who parade themselves as “militants”, the foreign oil corporations, the national, state and local governments in collusion with oil corporations, and any kinds of individual or institutional power that cause the destruction and displacement of helpless humans and the biodiversity in the region. In other words, literary militancy is totally against slow violence

(accumulative, attritional acts of violence that destroys the society over a long period of time), and the environmentalism of the poor. But more significantly literary militancy advocates for a just distribution of wealth not only to the humans but also to the nonhumans (the use of resources for the preservation of the natural world).

Today, environmental writing in Nigeria is marked by two trajectories: The first centers on the appreciative connection between humans and nature—the collaborative existence of biodiversity, characterized by indigenous communities who are suspicious of modernity and who maintain and sustain their organic closeness to their natural environment. The second centers on the environmentalism of the poor, depicting helpless locals being systematically annihilated by the global greed of petro-capitalism, and seeking environmental justice. It is this trajectory that engenders literary militants who wage discourse war against anti-environment capitalism.

[1] Okigbo, Christopher. *Labyrinths*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1971.

[2] Examples of this environmental writing, focusing on environmental justice or what postcolonial ecocritics call environmentalism of the poor include Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1997), Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), Nnimo Bassey's *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood* (2002), Tess Onwueme's *Then She Said It* (2003), Aliyu Kamal's *Fire in My Backyard* (2004), Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* (2006), Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2012), Isaac Attah Ogezi's *Under the Darkling Sky* (2012), and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery* (2015).

[3] See Sule Emmanuel Egnya, "Literary Militancy and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*", *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2017, pp. 94-104.
