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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reclaiming the Natural World: Ecological Unconscious and Anti-Colonial Counter-Discourse in Early African Literature

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Abstract

This paper argues that African cultural context is fundamentally grounded in ecological materiality—both spiritual and non-spiritual. It critiques how the notion of "culture" in literary criticism has often obscured the ecological dimensions that underpin African worldviews. By unveiling this ecological substrate, the study repositions nonhuman entities as active participants in traditional African life and in the counter-discursive strategies deployed by early African writers. Previous critical interpretations have treated ecological elements as mere background to cultural practices; this paper challenges that view by foregrounding the ecological imagination as central to early African literary aesthetics. Through an analysis of literary strategies used to rewrite Africa's image in the wake of colonialism, the study highlights the interdependence between humans and their environments as a site of cultural resilience and philosophical depth. In doing so, it not only exposes the limitations of anthropocentric readings of African literature but also demonstrates how ecological materiality serves as a powerful tool in resisting colonial narratives. Ultimately, this approach offers new insights into the literary and intellectual heritage of the continent by centering nature as a constitutive force in African life and thought.

Keywords: African literature; Ecological unconscious; Anti-colonial discourse; Ecocriticism; Nature and culture; Negritude; Indigenous epistemologies

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Introduction

Modern African literary writing emerges as a potent response to epistemological injustices inflicted by colonialism. Colonial narratives systematically depicted Africans as savages, dehumanizing them and undermining their relationship with their environment. Early African writers responded by directly contesting these distorted representations. They confronted the pervasive colonial discourse embedded in educational texts, media imports, and the global circulation of knowledge. Encounters with the West further reinforced the realization of their cultural misrepresentation, confronting them with deeply entrenched stereotypes. Yet this injustice was not confined to intellectual domains; it was deeply intertwined with the material realities of colonial oppression. Those who would become the vanguard of African literature experienced colonial dehumanization firsthand, enduring its systemic violence. Their writings, therefore, were not merely intellectual rebuttals; they became acts of reclamation—recovering African identities, histories, and cultures from the erasures of colonialism. In articulating their own experiences and worldviews, these writers asserted the dignity, agency, and humanity of African peoples, contributing meaningfully to broader struggles for justice and decolonization. Such lived experiences fundamentally shaped early intellectual movements like Negritude and Pan-Africanism, both of which drew on the collective trauma and resilience of colonized societies. These movements were not merely theoretical; they were born from the intimate knowledge of suffering and the ardent desire for autonomy. As Simon Gikandi perceptively observes, modern African literature was forged "in the crucible of colonialism," its energies fed by the profound realities of oppression and the necessity of resistance (54). Thus, modern African literary traditions emerged as vibrant, assertive forces that continue to engage and challenge global discourses today. In confronting colonial injustice, African writers drew upon one of their most potent resources: their ecological consciousness. Their natural environments, spiritual ties, and material relations with the land provided a powerful basis for resisting colonial epistemological violence. Ironically, it was precisely Africans' closeness to nature that colonial ideology sought to weaponize against them, casting them as primitive and bestial beings. As Brendon Nicholls notes, colonial narratives subjected Africans to a form of "representational bestialization," associating them more with animality and earthliness than with civilization (33). However, rather than rejecting this connection, early African writers reappropriated it. They transformed their proximity to nature—initially used to justify their dehumanization—into a site of cultural strength and philosophical depth. They foregrounded a vision of civilization based on human-nonhuman interdependence, positioning African societies as repositories of profound ecological wisdom. Their works valorized the material and spiritual dimensions of African landscapes, revealing a mode of being that starkly contrasted with the exploitative ethos of Western colonialism. Through this ecological sensibility, African writers crafted a counter-discourse that not only defended African humanity but also proposed an alternative model of civilization: one rooted in harmony with

nature, sustainability, and reverence for life. In doing so, they not only resisted the ideological violence of colonialism but also contributed to broader conversations about the human relationship with the environment—a contribution that remains urgently relevant in the contemporary world.

The Imperative of Articulating Colonial Counter-Discourses

For methodological clarity, this study deliberately situates the emergence of African written literature in the twentieth century, acknowledging, however, that African literary traditions predate this period. As Obiwu notes in *The History of Nigerian Literature*, African literature might have had origins long before colonial incursions. The focus here is on what may be termed the "colonial moment"—the historical juncture when Africa not only became acutely conscious of its colonized condition but also consciously sought to culturally confront colonialism. It was during this moment that African writers, thinkers, and intellectuals began to feel an urgent impulse to rewrite, and by rewriting, to right the colonial misrepresentations of the continent. Among these early literary figures, Chinua Achebe stands as an undisputed pioneer of anti-colonial literary discourse. His novel *Things Fall Apart* is emblematic of the broader decolonial orchestration. Achebe's counter-discursive engagement is partly inspired by his encounter with colonial representations of Africa, notably Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In his influential essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," Achebe famously asserts:

> Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. (*Hopes and Impediments* 45)

Achebe's acerbic critique captures the profound sense of betrayal and disillusionment experienced by early African students encountering colonial images of their homeland. It is reasonable to surmise that many who would later become the first generation of African writers first confronted colonial stereotypes as students—forced to internalize them, yet inwardly revolting against their distortions. This period of formal education served as a gestational phase: not only absorbing colonial knowledge but simultaneously acquiring the linguistic and discursive tools that would eventually be repurposed against colonial domination. This paradox resembles Caliban's learning of Prospero's language in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a language he ultimately uses to curse his oppressor. As Simon Gikandi rightly observes, "The men and women who founded the tradition of what we now call modern African writing, both in European and indigenous languages, were, without exception, products of the institutions that colonialism had introduced and developed in the continent" (54).

Thus, the colonial educational framework inadvertently laid the groundwork for the very resistance it sought to suppress. An important psychological dimension of anti-colonial discourse can be gleaned from the "prodigal son" motif, as articulated in Christopher Okigbo's

poem *Heavensgate*. The poem opens, "Before you, mother Idoto, / naked I stand; / before your watery presence, / a prodigal" (1–4). Here, the persona symbolically returns to his ancestral roots, seeking forgiveness for straying into foreign lands and civilizations. Produced during a time of intense cultural conflict, the poem is often interpreted autobiographically: Okigbo, raised amidst indigenous traditions, later embraces Western education and civilization, only to realize its insufficiency for spiritual fulfillment. His eventual return to his roots mirrors the existential journey of many first-generation African writers—initially seduced by Western modernity, only to become disillusioned and seek reconnection with indigenous identities. This experience resonates broadly. The "prodigal" model characterizes much of the early African literary consciousness: born into traditional societies, educated in colonial institutions, and ultimately critical of the very modernity that shaped them. These writers, such as Achebe and Okigbo, embody the contradictions of cultural hybridity—simultaneously entranced by and critical of Western civilization. Their writing captures not only the external conflict with colonialism but also an internal struggle to reconcile divergent cultural inheritances. The figure of the prodigal son in *Heavensgate* thus offers a powerful theoretical model for understanding African anti-colonial literature. At the moment of "prodigal consciousness"—the realization of betrayal and the will to return—the African writer embraces authorship as a form of agency. This consciousness underpins literary movements like Negritude, which marked a critical juncture of self-assertion during the colonial period. It is at this moment that African writers recognize their capacity to produce counter-narratives, reasserting Africa's humanity, civilization, and historical agency. Walter Rodney's warning that Africa must not be "removed from history" (245) becomes a rallying cry for this intellectual generation. Achebe's literary project, explicitly articulated in his essay "The Novelist as Teacher," captures this mission, "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (105).

While African writers such as Achebe and Leopold Sédar Senghor often explained their projects in manifestos and essays, a close examination of their literary outputs reveals a fundamental anti-colonial impulse at work. It may even be argued that, at this historical juncture, there was little else for them to write about other than the colonial encounter—albeit in diverse tonalities and styles. These tonal variations are, in many instances, rooted in an ecological imagination—a dimension of early African literature that has yet to be fully theorized and appreciated.

Decolonial Thought and the Ecology of the Unconscious

The early generation of African writers found themselves confronted by a singular imperative: the necessity of writing back against colonial narratives, in line with what has been described as the "empire writing back" framework. This cultural project overwhelmingly shaped the consciousness of nearly all literary minds of the period, although its manifestations varied in tone and tenor. The imperative to embark on a decolonial project formed a powerful counter-hegemonic aesthetic that defined early African literature. Possessing the gift of writing

almost inevitably meant taking up the cause of decolonization. Given the intellectual climate—charged with movements like Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa campaign, the rise of Negritude in Western Europe, and the clamour for African independence, animated by Frantz Fanon's militant intellectualism—ignoring the project was almost inconceivable.

For these writers, the crucial question was not whether to engage with decolonization but rather how deeply and in what manner. Intense debates arose among them, notably at the first conference of African writers at Makerere College, Kampala, in 1962. Recalling the event in his essay, Chinua Achebe admits, "In the end, we gave up trying to find an answer [to the question of definition] partly – I should admit – on my own instigation. Perhaps we should not have given up so easily" ("English and the African Writer" 27). The core of the debate centered on whether African literature should be geographically and culturally rooted in Africa, and whether it could be authentically created in colonial languages. The definitional crisis reflected broader anxieties over ensuring that African literature was not a derivative appendage of European traditions but a force of cultural self-assertion.

Obi Wali's controversial essay "The Dead End of African Literature?" forcefully articulated these concerns. Wali argued that true decolonization must begin with the rejection of colonial languages, asserting, "Literature, after all, is the exploitation of the possibilities of language" (283). Wali contended that English, French, and Portuguese inherently lacked the decolonial capacity necessary for authentic African expression. Beyond language, he criticized African writers' fascination with Euro-American modernism, their marginalization of Amos Tutuola's aesthetics, and what he perceived as an unwarranted repudiation of the Negritude movement at the Makerere conference. In short, Wali inaugurated the rhetoric of nativism, identifying it as the most potent tool for cultural decolonization.

Both Tutuola's aesthetics and the Negritude movement share a reliance on African traditional philosophies and practices. Despite criticism of Tutuola's English, his storytelling style—oral, mythic, and deeply rooted in African modes of narration—offered a counterpoint to Western literary conventions. *The Palmwine Drinkard* exemplifies a storytelling tradition unaligned with Aristotelian plot structures, thus foregrounding an indigenous aesthetic imagination. Significantly, both Tutuola's and Negritude writers' works are marked by a profound ecological consciousness: their portrayal of human-nonhuman interdependence and spiritual materialism arises from deeply rooted ecological imaginaries.

The common thread between these traditions suggests that an *ecological unconscious* undergirds early African writing. Whether explicitly articulated or not, this unconscious connects cultural self-assertion with the land, the environment, and ancestral practices. Writers drawing from indigenous traditions—what some critics term nativism—implicitly foreground Africa's ecological heritage as a counterpoint to colonial modernity. To reclaim African humanity from colonial denigration, many writers imaginatively journeyed into the precolonial past, celebrating native philosophies, wisdom traditions, and ecological interconnectedness.

The notion of an ecological unconscious is critical: it posits that African writers need not have been consciously aware of their ecological framing. Rather, their imaginative worlds were

inevitably shaped by the natural environments of their societies. Efforts to reclaim cultural uniqueness naturally involved evoking flora, fauna, and human-nonhuman relations embedded in traditional socio-cultural practices. This dynamic is evident across genres, from the oral storytelling structures of Tutuola to the stylistic traditionalism of Okot p'Bitek's *The Song of Lawino*, and even within modernist-inflected works like Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*—texts that, despite stylistic variation, consistently foreground nativist and ecological elements.

The ecological unconscious also influences language and style. While thematic concerns generally revolve around challenging colonial hierarchies, stylistic innovations—especially the use of indigenous linguistic forms within colonial languages—serve as formal expressions of decolonization. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o grappled with the question of linguistic appropriation. Achebe famously advocated the domestication of English, arguing that the African writer, "should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" ("English and the African Writer" 29).

Ngũgĩ, adopting a more radical stance, maintained that "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment" (285). He argued that language is the "carrier of culture" (291), and thus African writers must either write in their own languages or consciously subvert colonial ones to convey their cultural realities.

Achebe's transliteration of Igbo speech patterns into English, particularly in his early novels, represents a stylistic decolonization. Gabriel Okara similarly adapted English to mimic Ijaw linguistic rhythms in *The Voice*. Although not all writers achieved this balance successfully, the practice has endured, influencing contemporary African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Helon Habila, and Sefi Atta. These writers frequently insert vernacular words, idioms, and cultural references into their English prose. Bill Ashcroft describes this strategy as creating a "metonymic gap," "unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references which may be unknown to the reader" (75), arguing that such insertions resist colonial interpretation and assert indigenous cultural presence. Importantly, these vernacular insertions often reference the natural environment—plants, animals, landscapes—further affirming the ecological unconscious shaping African cultural identity. Thus, contemporary African writing continues to reflect an underlying ecological sensibility rooted in ancestral traditions.

One of the central aims of this study is to interrogate how early African writers deploy the concept of culture. Discussions of "cultural context" or "cultural clash" in early African criticism often implicitly refer to the natural world as the foundational ground of culture. Traditional African societies rarely conceptualized culture in opposition to nature, in contrast to Western metaphysics. In early African narratives such as *The Palmwine Drinkard*, *Things Fall Apart*, and *Weep Not, Child*, human civilization is portrayed as deeply interwoven with

the natural world. Thus, even amid the pressures of Western modernity, African writers often reaffirmed their ecological rootedness.

This broader understanding aligns with developments in material ecocriticism, which challenges rigid separations between culture and nature. As such, reading early African literature through the lens of the ecological unconscious not only enhances our understanding of its anti-colonial aesthetics but also situates African literary production within global conversations about the inseparability of the human and nonhuman worlds.

New Materialisms and the Evolution of Ecocritical Thought

At the risk of inviting charges of excessive particularism, it is necessary to argue that the concept of "nature" holds significantly different meanings for sub-Saharan Africans compared to its interpretation within the developed world. Historically, Western thought, grounded in a Cartesian dualism, constructed nature as inferior by severing the human from the nonhuman. In recent decades, however, Western engagement with nature appears to have undergone a discursive transformation. In the context of mounting ecological crises, as Kate Soper notes, "[nature] has come to occupy a central place on the political agenda" (2). Nevertheless, this renewed attention remains largely rhetorical and ideological rather than existential. By contrast, African ontologies—both in traditional societies and in the conditions of modernity—rarely conceive of nature as a distinct or oppositional entity. Within traditional African worldviews, particularly among those raised within indigenous epistemological frameworks, there persists an organic interconnection between the material and the spiritual realms. Physical existence is perceived not as discrete but as part of a continuum that links the past, present, and future. Life in the present is understood as both materially and spiritually a product of ancestral existence and simultaneously a progenitor of future generations, mediated through processes such as reincarnation. Past life is materially embodied in natural phenomena such as rivers, trees, stones, and anthills, establishing a cyclical, organic relationship among the dead, the living, and the unborn. Wole Soyinka, in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, discusses this cycle within Yoruba cosmology. Similarly, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* describes the *chi*—the personal god or guardian spirit—demonstrating the material-spiritual interconnectedness that pervades African cultures.

Nearly all ethnic nationalities in sub-Saharan Africa share similar beliefs. Despite the growing influence of Islam and Christianity, with their suppressive monotheisms, it would be naïve to assume that Africans have wholly abandoned their natural-spiritual traditions. Few have captured this complex connectivity between the dead, the living, the unborn and the natural world as vividly as early African writers. Texts such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother*, Christopher Okigbo's "Idoto," and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* invite readers to engage with African natural worlds beyond their textual surfaces. Through myth, legend, and traditional belief systems rooted in nature, these works articulate a counter-discourse to colonial narratives that undermined African humanity. Gabriel Okara's poem "Piano and Drums" epitomizes this counterpoint through an extended metaphor. The poet juxtaposes the ecological richness of his

ancestral environment— "Where at break of the day at a riverside / I hear jungle drums telegraphing / the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw / like bleeding flesh..." (1–4)— with the alien complexities of Western civilization: "Then I hear a wailing piano / solo speaking of complex ways... / lost in the labyrinth / of its complexities, it ends in the middle / of a phrase at a daggerpoint" (17–25). Here, Okara subverts the colonial discourse that posited African simplicity against Western complexity. The indigenous environment, depicted through interconnected human and nonhuman life, contrasts sharply with the dissonance and alienation of colonial modernity. Although human-nonhuman relations are not without tensions—hunters poised against predators—there remains a profound "mystic rhythm" binding all life forms. This romanticized view of Africa also informs the aesthetic philosophy of Negritude, initiated by Francophone writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and David Diop. Negritude celebrated the entangled relationships between humans and nonhumans in African societies and remains among the most ecologically sensitive currents of early African literature.

A robust ecocritical engagement with African natural worlds must recognize both non-spiritual and spiritual dimensions. Non-spiritually, traditional African societies operate under an unspoken code of interdependence between humans and the environment. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* exemplifies this when Ngotho, though displaced, continues to nurture his ancestral land with care and reverence, seeing it as integral to his identity. In these societies, natural objects—trees, rivers, animals—are inherited as part of familial and communal legacies. The co-agency of humans and nonhumans is evident: humans plant trees for boundary demarcations, while the trees themselves participate actively in shaping the land and community life. Thus, human hubris is tempered by a sustained recognition of nonhuman agency. In the spiritual dimension, this interdependence deepens. Natural objects and animals are often imbued with spiritual force, exerting agency over human lives. In Achebe's *Arrow of God*, even as humans occasionally question their deities, traditional worship remains profoundly reverent, recognizing the mutual agency between humans and spiritual beings manifested through natural forms. Nigerian poets like Christopher Okigbo (*Idoto*), Wole Soyinka (*Ogun*), and Tanure Ojaide (*Aridon*) acknowledge their artistic inspiration as deriving from personal deities, rooted in natural objects—thus demonstrating shared agency between human and nonhuman realms (Egya 257–275).

The spiritualisation of nature offers fertile ground for ecological inquiry. Achebe's depiction of the "evil forest" in *Things Fall Apart* illustrates how spiritual beliefs could lead to environmental conservation: "while the African construal of sacred spaces enhances biodiversity conservation through forestation, Christian sacralisation of space […] translates into deforestation and biodiversity depletion" (Olaoluwa 207). The missionaries' invasion of the evil forest, previously untouched due to its sacred status, parallels broader patterns of colonial ecological degradation, as noted by Maurice Amutabi's study of the Abaluyia people of Kenya. James Graham, reviewing *Environment at the Margins*, advocates for an African ecocriticism grounded not merely in imported postcolonial frameworks but in the continent's anthropological, spiritual, and historical engagements with nature. He emphasizes the editors'

aspiration that "'African ecocriticism' might emerge performatively through such an encounter, rather than be prescribed as an addendum to a generic, first world-issued 'postcolonial ecocriticism'" (1).

While recent African ecocriticism has largely focused on environmental justice issues—such as ecological devastation in the Niger Delta—it often remains anthropocentric. As Iheka notes, such studies, "focused primarily on the effects of environmental tragedies on humans... often leaving out the nonhuman world or merely glossing over its relevance" (1). Nonetheless, important shifts are underway, as works like Wendy Woodward's *The Animal Gaze*, F. Fiona Moolla's *Natures of Africa*, and Emily McGiffin's *Of Land, Bones, and Money* highlight nonhuman agency and eco-spiritual traditions in African literary and cultural forms. Moolla, significantly, insists that "the natural world and animals have been active agents in African cultural forms for as long as these forms have existed. This is because environment and animals fundamentally constitute the worldviews and lifeways that have created [African] cultural 'texts'" (9). Thus, a genuinely comprehensive African ecocriticism must foreground depictions of natural worlds, spiritual engagements with nature, and the nonhuman agency historically embedded within African cultural and literary expressions.

Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a modest but necessary intervention in repositioning the natural world as central to the critical discourse on African literature. It has argued that the ecological landscape is not merely a backdrop but a foundational element in the anti-colonial literary imagination that emerged in Africa during the second half of the twentieth century. Colonial discourse often constructed African identities through a framework that dehumanized and devalued the continent's peoples, in part by associating their perceived "primitiveness" with an intimate closeness to nature. Such representations served to relegate Africans to the margins of "civilization" by invoking a binary that separated the human from the nonhuman, the cultured from the natural. In response, early African writers developed a strategic counter-discourse that revalorized the very attributes used to justify their subjugation. By foregrounding the deep interdependence between human and nonhuman life within African societies, they reasserted the humanity, complexity, and civilizational depth of African cultures. This entanglement of thematic focus and stylistic innovation reveals what may be termed the *ecological unconscious* of early African literature—an undercurrent of thought shaped by the lived realities of coexistence with the natural world. Ultimately, this study suggests that ecological sensibility is not merely an aesthetic or thematic device in African writing but a vital epistemological framework through which African writers confront colonial ideologies. Continued critical attention to this ecological dimension holds the potential to significantly expand the scope and depth of African literary studies, offering new ways to engage with both canonical and contemporary texts.

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