

FROM PRISTINE STREAMS TO BROWN WATERS: RECLAIMING CAMEROON'S SILENCED RIVERSCAPES IN JOHN NGONG KUM NGONG'S POETRY

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of rivers, lakes, and oceans in the poetry of John Ngong Kum Ngong, focusing on the collections *Blot on the Landscape* (2015), *The Tears of the Earth* (2018), and *Walls of Agony* (2006). Adopting a postcolonial ecocritical lens, it traces the transformation of Cameroon's water bodies from pristine life-sustaining resources in the precolonial era to sites of pollution, disease, and death in the contemporary period. The study highlights how Ngong employs nostalgia, anthropomorphism, sound devices, and vivid imagery to lament ecological rupture while advocating for reclamation of indigenous relational ethics with the environment. Poetry here serves as an educational tool for raising awareness about environmental degradation and cultural disconnection in Cameroon and Africa.

Keywords: riverscapes, postcolonial ecocriticism, ecological degradation, environmental reclamation, Cameroon Poetry, slow violence

1.Introduction

Cameroon possesses a rich and intricate network of rivers, lakes, streams, and coastal waters that have profoundly shaped its physical landscape and cultural identity. As Patrick McCully asserts in "Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams", rivers are so deeply embedded in the land that it is often more appropriate to speak of "riverscapes" rather than conventional landscapes (McCully, 1996, p.11). These aquatic environments serve not only as vital ecological and economic resources but also as powerful cultural and spiritual symbols that have sustained human communities and inspired artistic expressions across generations. Yet, in contemporary Cameroon

and much of Africa, these once- pristine water bodies are undergoing rapid degradation due to deforestation, industrialization, and globalization.

This article argues that the environmental problems related to aquatic environments in the poetic works of John Ngong Kum Ngong stem from three prevailing ethics imposed on the African/ Cameroonian natural environment. First, the Western capitalist ethic of exploitation implanted in Africa through colonialism, second, the postcolonial governance ethic characterized by dependency and indifference, and the third, the ethic of indifference and pollution that characterises postcolonial African societies. The analyses draw on close textual readings of Ngong's selected works mentioned above. The article is structured in three main sections: The poetics of nostalgia and precolonial harmony; pollution as neocolonial betrayal and ecological rupture; water bodies as sites of disease, destruction, and death. It culminates in the poet's vision for reclamation

Many writers have reflected on aquatic environments in Cameroon Anglophone literature. For instance, Eunice Ngongkum has examined Cameroonian Anglophone poetry for its preoccupation with "ecological degradation, crisis and transformation in Cameroon / Africa as being intimately bound up with colonial and neocolonial practices (2020, p. 94). Other scholars such as Nsah Mala have examined issues of "water pollution and land (ab) use through disorderly urbanization in two plays from the Congo basin" (2021, p. 314). Tem Edwin Nji(2024) projects how African masses have exacerbated water pollution in their countries and how problems like diseases and death are outcomes of slow violence caused by pollution. (2024) Writers like Matthew Takwi have projected the effects of global warming on the aquatic environment in Cameroon through the impact of flood in the Sahel region. Ngong's poetry contributes uniquely by centring aquatic environments through a deeply personal and culturally rooted voice.

John Ngong Kum Ngong is a Cameroonian poet, playwright, and educationist. He was born in Esu village, Menchum Division of the North West region of Cameroon. His close relationship with nature is reflected in his 12 poetry collections. Apart from poetry, he is the author of a play entitled *Battle for Survival* (2006). *Walls of Agony* won the EduArt Bate Besong prize of poetry in 2007. Some of his poems have appeared in "Nedjima", Cameroon Anthology of Poetry" and "The Ngoh Kuoh Review". Most of his works center on themes like globalization, cultural fragmentation, marginalization, colonial, neo-colonial domination, post-colonial dictatorship, corruption, identity crisis and environmentalism.

2.Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial ecocriticism, which is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the intersections of colonial legacies, environmental degradation, and cultural representation in literary texts. (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). Central to this framework is Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence” (Nixon 2011). The study also draws on Elizabeth Deloughrey’s work on the Anthropocene, which frames human activity as a geological force altering earths systems, including aquatic environments (Deloughrey 2019). The framework incorporates indigenous relational ethics, with nostalgia functioning as a decolonial strategy. By combining postcolonial theory with ecocriticism, this article reveals poetry’s role in environmental awareness, cultural reconnection, and resistance against unsustainable practices in Africa.

3.1 Harmonious Riverscapes of Yesterday and the Poetics of Nostalgia.

Eunice Ngongkum asserts that “rivers wield an important influence on the life and traditions of given societies, forming and informing their perspectives on the world at large” (Ngongkum, 2017, p.97). It is in this context that John Ngong Kum Ngong reconstructs the precolonial harmony between African communities and their water bodies through a deeply nostalgic lens. This finds expression in the poem “Before We Ceased to Be” (*Blot on the Landscape, p. 51*) where the poet recollects his childhood experiences and the special bond that existed between him and a particular river. By noting that different streams were sources of drinking water, the speaker stresses the pristine nature of African streams in the past. He then contrasts the streams of the past with those of the present, regretfully noting that the very streams from which they “drank” are now “burdened” with “smells that choke the mind.” These images symbolize the broader erosion of indigenous ecologies under colonial and neocolonial pressures, where African landscapes were commodified for imperial gain, leading to unsustainable practices that persist in modernity. The poem is steeped in nostalgia with the lines “Remember my beloved// the hills from which we come// the streams from which we drank”, (*Blot on the Landscape 51*), which urge a return to memories of a time when hills, streams, rocks, and earth sustained the speaker’s community. In lamenting the community’s disconnection from the land which once defined their identity and autonomy, the poet underscores that pollution of the water made the people of his community “cease to be architects” of their “fate”.

Another poem that projects the speakers yearning for the precolonial aquatic environment is “Gone the Green of Yesterday”. The repetition of the phrase “we fetched water” in “we fetched water here// in and out of season” and “we fetched cooling water” (*Blot on the landscape*, p. 30) evokes a pristine life-giving water body that was central to the community’s survival. The temporal marker “at dawn” and “at twilight” emphasizes the streams’ constant presence in daily life.

The speaker reveals that the river’s purity was maintained by local inhabitants who refrained from eco-unfriendly practices such as “defecating or dumping carcasses into the stream”. Such caution was rooted in an awareness of the “canker that could burst forth” and “spread”, “wiping out countless souls”. This implies that human health and survival are bound to the health of the aquatic environment. The poet personifies pollution as a “squabbling monster” because the disposal of “stillbirths”, and “unwanted babies” in rivers has induced enormous loss of lives in his homeland.

“Carry Me Away”, further idealizes riverbanks as sanctuaries of biodiversity. The speaker who finds himself in a barren and desolate environment implores his memory to “carry” him to the “margins” of a river named “Yemenong”. He prefers that particular location because it is the only place where:

birds and animals breathe in peace,
where grasshoppers, crickets, gadflies,
butterflies, praying mantis, frogs
and soldier ants congregate
to drink water of freedom (*Blot on the Landscape* 48)

the above lines emphasize the symbiotic relationship that prevailed among the members of the biotic community in the past. From the speaker’s tone, the peace and harmony that transpired among the diverse animal species that once inhabited the banks of “Yemenong” could be easily transposed to onlookers. This explains why, the speaker wishes that his “microscopic mind” should take him “away from these dry surroundings//to the “margins of Yemenong”. Thus, the speaker’s desire for his memory to take him to a distant past and to a specific location reflects what Rob Nixon describes as “displacement without moving” (Nixon, 2011, p.19). Although the speaker is physically trapped in an unhealthy environment in the contemporary period, his mind wanders away from that environment to the River “Yemenong”. Thus, Yemenong” played an important role not

only in the preservation of the water's purity in the past but more importantly, in promoting the flourishing of both the biotic and abiotic components inhabiting its surroundings.

3.2 Globalization Cultural Shift and New Forms of Pollution

Racheal Carson in her book *Silent Spring* says: "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials." (Carson 1962, p. 4). In Ngong's poetry, globalization is projected as major contributor to the contamination of aquatic environment in Cameroon. This is evidenced in the poem "Heavy Handed" (*The Tears of the Earth* 10). The speaker testifies that rising death tolls in African countries has risen to the extent in which Africans have neither time nor space to dig graves for their loved ones. Instead, they wrap them in "plastic bags" and "dispatch them into swift water". In the past, throwing corpses into streams was a taboo in the poet's country. The act of throwing corpses into water bodies is commonly associated to funerary rituals in India, particularly in the context of Hinduism. The lines: "we bundle up corpses each day" in// transparent plastic wrappings// and dispatch them in swift water" (*The Tears of the Earth* 35) conveys how through globalization, the traditional African practice of digging the soil and burying corpses is gradually shifting to disposal burial through water. This shift exemplifies cultural hybridization under globalization, where Western-influenced disposal practices erode traditional African taboos and introduce new forms of "ecological violence" through plastic pollution. Although the poet does not overtly critique this form of pollution, it is worth noting that "cremation remains when combine with river water, directly or indirectly impact human health and harms aquatic life.". This is because the disposal of corpses wrapped in transparent plastic bags exposes water ecosystems to dual pollution. The first by the corpses and the second by the plastic bags.

In another poem entitled "Fire in My Head", the poet projects the effects of industrialization on the aquatic environment. The idea that the river "turns oily" only at the moment when the speaker "ready his senses to take a dive of relief", indicates the negative effects of industrial pollution on recreational activities. The questions "how do I quench the fire// in my head or clear the oil? // how do I restrain the storm?" (*The Tears of the Earth* 22) are all pertinent questions". They show the power nature has over human beings. The fact that the poet leaves the questions unanswered sheds light on the pessimistic future that awaits humanity

Apart from industrialization, deforestation occasioned by foreign search for timber has transformed the water environment from a live giving force to a destructive force. Julie Sze's essay *Boundaries of Violence* highlights "the persistent patterns of water contamination and destruction are not accidental but instead endemic and embedded in systems of exploitation, heightened in an era of neoliberalism," (142) This finds expression in the poem "Yemenong" (*Walls of Agony* 44) where the poet laments that the disposition "toxic gases" and "load of rubbish" from wood that is "ferried to Europe" into Yemenong has undermined the river's self-purifying capacity. The color "brown" that describes "Yemenong" in the present dispensation depicts an environment that is actively hazardous to the health of humans and creature's dependent upon it for survival. The speaker further reveals that the healthy animals that once drank from there have "vanished" because the river is no longer a safe source of drinking waters. Instead, the speaker observes "faint children" who "strain to drink" the river's "brown waters". Here, the poem seems to suggest that a well-cared-for environment remains healthy and life-sustaining. Conversely, pollution transforms it into a vector of diseases. Kenneth Toah Nsah equally affirms that "urban sprawl" and water pollution are a consequence of "deforestation" (316).

From the above it can have deduced that in the Cameroon context, rivers, seas, and oceans suffer from pollution induced by factors like globalization, industrialization, deforestation, and physical pollution. Michelle Carson considers it universality when he rightly describes pollution by underscoring that "the most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, rivers, and seas with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable. (qtd by Garry, 95). The irreversible consequences of pollution such as rising sea tides, rising mortality rates, multiplication of natural and artificial disasters will be the focus of the next section.

3.3 From Life-Giving Sanctuaries to Sites of Disease, Destruction, and Death: Water Bodies in Contemporary period

Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes the Anthropocene as an era in which "Human activity has attained the scale of geological force akin to a volcanic eruption or a meteorite changing the Earth System" (2). This changes are also evident in the aquatic environment as reflect by John Ngong Kum Ngong. In the Poem "Desert Heat" the desiccation of rivers is projected as an outcome of anthropogenic activities. This finds expression in the lines Moles no longer come out //and dragon flies have fled //To where water whispers (*Blot on the Landscape* 17-18). These lines underlines that extensive

drought occasioned by global warming has induced the disappearance of the aquatic environment. The disappearance of aquatic environment poses significant threat not only to human being but to dragon flies who reveal this by going close to the near desiccated rivers as a means of survival. The description of the heat induced by global warming as the Sahara heat or the blood thirsty heat underlines that the rapid encroachment of the Sahara Desert has already taken away the lives of many Cameroons and insects and may continue of proper measures are not taken.

The poem “Yemenong” underlines how pollution has transformed healthy sources of drinking water into vectors of diseases. The lines “Faint children sometimes I have met //Straining to drink of your brown waters (*Walls of Agony* 44) suggest not only a broader collapse of nature’s vitality, but equally brings out the theme of environmental justice. Normally, children embody the most vulnerable people. Their “faint nature” underlines their medical condition probably induced by the poor quality of the water they drink. another poem that projects the threat posed by water pollution to human health that is evident in the contemporary period is

Aquatic environment has also provoked disasters that has led to the destruction of lives and property. In the poem “Our Shame”, the speaker ponders on the Lake Nyos disaster that took place in 1986 in Cameroon. Despite enormous loss of lives among humans and animals, the speaker still harbors an unshaken love for the Lake. Although he captures its beautiful scenery, one is surprised to learn that the lake which the speaker describes as “calm”, “innocent”, and “chaste” is responsible for the deaths of thousands of citizens. According to the UN reports, “The 1.6 million -ton cloud of magnetic gas was deadly, and account of the fatalities indicated that 1,746 people, most from villages by the lake, had been asphyxiated by it, along with some 3,000 cattle and innumerable birds, insects and other animals” (1) The poisonous substance that caused the death of people as revealed in the above quotation still threatens the lives of the people in Wum. This explains why, the speaker can no longer “drink” from the silver cup in her hand”, nor seat comfortable in her “chest”. He reminiscences the famous Lake Nyos disaster in the following words:

Beside the drowsy town of Wum

...Sits inscrutable Lake Nyos calm.

She looks so innocent and chaste;

...Death I hear does business with her

Thousands in the throes of stiff death. (*The Tears of the Earth* 30)

By positioning the Lake Nyos beside the “drowsy town of Wum” the poet sets a quiet, almost lethargic scene that leaves readers to deduce that despite the passage of time, inhabitants of that area are still subdued by grief and fear. He describes the lake as innocent and chaste feminine figure. Then he captures her the posture of a god-like figure who holds a silver cup in her hand. This image aligns with the African belief in water deities. Contrarily, the thousand who died because of the lake contradicts the African belief systems as far as the life-giving and nurturing attributes of water deities are concerned. Consequently, the perpetual desire of wanting to “drink water” from the “silver cup in her hand” and at the same remembering that “that death does business with her” stirs in the speaker a feeling of attraction and repulsion towards the lake. Here, the merger of euphemism and paradox underscore the unpredictable duality of nature. The Lake Nyos which was once a source of pride and identity in the past, is now a site of insecurity.

Apart from the Lake Nyos disaster, citizens in many countries around the world have lost their lives due to rising sea tides induced by global warming. The poem “On Drips” reveals how Cameroonian youths “have been swallowed by “the cold gobbling sea// between Morocco and Spain”. These lines echo Nixon’s “environmentalism of the poor”. This is a situation where the displaced poor become the frontline victims of “slow violence”, dispossession, climate instability, and neocolonial debt structures that render local landscapes uninhabitable and force transnational flight as a desperate survival strategy. According to Caminando Fronteras’ annual report of 2024, entitled “Monitoring the Right to life on the Western Euro-African Border”, readers are informed that:

In the first five months of 2024, 5,054 people lost their lives trying to reach Spain by sea, with 95 % of these deaths occurring on the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, where boats disappear without trace, carrying migrants from countries including Cameroon, Senegal, and Mauritania (2024, p.5).

This report from a Spanish NGO that highlights the “Atlantic route’s” extreme danger aligns with Ngong’s view in the above poem.

More profound effects of global warming induced partly by water pollution are reflected in the poem “The Wealth of the Earth”, where the speaker explains that citizens of his country are condemned to experience more earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods because humans have depreciated the “wealth of the earth”. Just like the poet, Deena Robinson et al. reveal that in the contemporary period, “the climate crisis is causing tropical and other weather events such as

hurricanes, heatwaves and flooding to be more intense and frequent than seen before.” (Robinson et al.) The problems are underscored below:

..Even though the sky is sullen
and the environment thick
with the fog of pollution,
...Even though the ocean grow wild
and the nucleus of the earth teems
With the magma of malcontent,

I will plant nothing but life-giving plant (*The Tears of the Earth* 8)

The effects of the disharmonious relationship between humans and the environment, even though provoked on one continent, can be felt worldwide. This idea is made more glaring in the introduction of Helen Caldicott’s book entitled *If You Love This Planet: A Plan to Heal the Earth*. She explains “*The earth has a natural system of interacting homeostatic mechanisms similar to the human body’s. If one system is diseased, like the ozone layer, the other systems develop abnormalities in*” (13) In line with the above quotations, the speaker elevates the “nucleus” of the “earth” to the position of a human being who is discontented that the amount of garbage that contemporary human beings deposit in streams, in the air, and on the land is affecting humanity as a whole. It should be noted that the word “nucleus” denotes the center or the most important part of something. This vocabulary item reminds readers in the words of Gotfelty that: “Most ecocritical work share a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of humans actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems. (Gotfelty, 2004, p. xxi). In this poem, the “wild” nature of the “sea” and the ‘sullen’ nature of the ‘sky’ are other signs that humanity has destroyed their “basic life support systems”

3.4 Beyond Lament: Poetry as a Catalyst for Reclaiming Cameroon’s Aquatic Heritage

John Ngong Kum Ngong’s poetry does more than document loss, it serves as a powerful catalyst for reclaiming Cameroon’s aquatic heritage. The nostalgic returns in the titles “Before We Ceased to Be”, “Gone Green of Yesterday”. “Carry Me Away” and “Yemenong” that echo sharp contrasts between the pristine past with degraded presents is put to good use, it urges a return to indigenous

ecological wisdom and a rejection of unsustainable practices copied from the West. The use of the collective pronoun “our” in the title “Our Shame”, indicts Cameroonians and Africans’ disregard of indigenous knowledge systems. Huggan and Tiffin elaborate on this when they underline that “the environmental degradation caused by colonial regimes has profound long-term effects not just on ecosystems but also on the socio-cultural identity of the colonized” (2010, p.27). In this context, problems like rising sea tides, outbreak of diseases induced by aquatic environments and the disappearance of pristine waterbodies can be read as outcomes of Cameroonians alienation, neglect, or destruction of aquatic environments. Even the lines “the canker that could burst forth //and spread wiping out countless souls” in the poem “Gone the Greens of Yesterday” are a sweeping apocalyptic images that amplify the stakes of pollution. They link the streams’ health to human survival. In “Before We Ceased to Be”, the pollution of waters with “the smells that choke the mind” underlines that it does not only post a serious health risk but causes psychological problems. The projection of the consequences of destruction of aquatic environment in Cameroon serve as stark warning to humanity. The poems call for renewal respect for water bodies as sacred lifeline and advocates for collective action to restore the harmonious relationship between communities and their environment.

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