The Screaming Forest: An Ecocritical Assessment of *Le Cri de la forêt*[1]

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Abstract

From a postcolonial ecocritical standpoint, this essay analyzes the play *Le Cri de la forêt* (2015) co-authored by Henri Djombo, a cabinet minister from Congo-Brazzaville, and Osée Colin Koagne, a stage director and environmental activist from Francophone Cameroon. Mindful of the rich biodiversity of the Congo Basin where the playwrights originate, the essay interrogates why the forest in the play is screaming and moves on to engage with related ecological questions such as the scapegoating of witchcraft and doubtful traditional beliefs amidst climate change. It examines the controversial ways in which the play simultaneously promotes indigenous knowledge systems and capitalism. Furthermore, the essay grapples with the oft-debated role of overpopulation on climate change and ecological degradation, particularly in regions of the global South such as Africa. And, finally, it explores the playwrights' depiction of women and children as both victims and combatants of environmental collapse, stressing their important role in fighting climate change as opposed to some critics' claims that they are merely helpless victims. The essay therefore constitutes a double intervention in ecocriticism in the Francophone African world: both the playwrights and the present author seek to intervene in ecological discourses and actions.

Keywords: Postcolonial ecocriticism, deforestation, Francophone Africa, Henri Djombo, Osée Colin Koagne.

Resumen

Desde un punto de vista ecocrítico y poscolonial, este ensayo analiza la obra *Le Cri de la forêt* (2015) co-escrita por Henri Djombo, ministro de gabinete de Congo-Brazzaville, y Osée Colin Koagne, director de escena y activista ambiental del Camerún francófono. Consciente de la rica biodiversidad de la Cuenca del Congo, de donde se vienen los dramaturgos, el ensayo cuestiona por qué el bosque de la obra grita y se involucra en cuestiones ecológicas relacionadas como el chivo expiatorio de la brujería y las dudosas creencias tradicionales en torno al tema del cambio climático. Examina las formas controvertidas en que la obra promueve simultáneamente los sistemas de conocimiento indígenas y el capitalismo. Además, el ensayo aborda el papel tan debatido de la superpoblación en relación al cambio climático y la degradación ecológica, en particular en regiones del Sur global como África. Y, finalmente, indaga sobre la representación que hacen los dramaturgos de mujeres y niños como a la vez víctimas y combatientes del colapso ambiental, destacando su importante papel en la lucha contra el cambio climático en contraste con las afirmaciones de algunos críticos de que son simplemente víctimas indefensas. Por lo tanto, el ensayo constituye una doble intervención en el ámbito de la ecocrítica en el espacio francófono africano: tanto los dramaturgos como el autor actual buscan intervenir en los discursos y acciones ecológicas.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica postcolonial, deforestación, África francófona, Henri Djombo, Osée Colin Koagne.

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Nature has the capacity to meet man's need but not man's greed.
Let's give nature the ability to meet our needs by protecting and conserving nature.[2]
– Tansi Godwill Tansi

Introduction

How can a forest scream? In other words, what kind of forest would be able to cry and why? For this to happen, the forest would need to be a living being, with a body and mouth, to express its feelings. Beyond the myths and/or realities of evil and sacred forests in Africa and elsewhere, such a forest may be hard to find. But literary texts, such as the play *Le Cri de la forêt* (2015) by Henri Djombo and Osée Colin Koagne, for instance, have the power not only to creatively imagine such forests but also to proffer possible explanations for why they may scream. This article will focus on Djombo and Koagne's play, but I start with another fascinating example of personified forests found in the poetry collection *Forest Echoes* (2012) by Cameroonian poet, literary scholar and chief Nol Alembong. Inspired by the biblical account of the Word which was with God and was God (John 1:1), Alembong paints the picture of a living and wholesome forest in his poem "The Beginning":

In the beginning was the forest,
The forest was with the earth,
The forest was the earth.

The Forest was one.
It had one head.
It had one mouth.
It had one eye.
It had one ear.

But the fire came,
The fire came … (Alembong 1)

The obvious biblical allusion in the poem confers a sacrosanct nature on the forest, elevating it to a God-like status in order to underscore its importance to humanity. As the last stanza of the poem suggests, in particular with the use of the conjunction "but," the coming of fire signals the forest's end or its transformation. This raises the questions: Who brought the fire? What does the fire symbolize in the poem? Given the poem's publication date of 2012, in what may be called the century of climate change and environmental destruction, there is one obvious answer to these questions. Humans, in their quest to satisfy their greed, brought and continue to bring the fire that destroys nature, embodied by the forest in the poem. Perhaps these humans should remember that nature is meant to provide for their needs and not their greed, to echo this article's epigraph. In

[2] This epigraph is taken from the Facebook page of Environment and Community Development Association (ECoDAs), posted by its founder Tansi Godwill Tansi at www.facebook.com/ecodasforabettertomorow. Accessed 28 November 2018.

Alembong's poem, fire becomes a symbol of deforestation, but also other forms of anthropogenic destruction of the natural environment and ecosystems.

Alembong is not the only literary artist in Francophone but also Anglophone Africa[3] whose work engages with environmental or ecological questions. The situation depicted in his poem points to environmental collapse within and beyond his native Cameroon, which forms part of the Congo Basin forest together with the following countries: The Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, and the Central African Republic (CAR). Measuring around three hundred million hectares, the Congo Basin is the second largest tropical rainforest on earth, after the Amazon Basin in South America (Megevand et al 1). Home to about seventy-five million people and one hundred and fifty distinct ethnic groups, the basin has many animal and plant species. Given its immense ecological importance, especially with respect to the regulation of greenhouse gasses and the numerous species that inhabit the basin, it is often referred to as the second lung of the earth.

Cognizant of the rich biodiversity of the Congo Basin, the present essay adopts an ecocritical perspective to analyze *Le Cri de la forêt* (2015), co-authored by Henri Djombo from Congo-Brazzaville and Osée Colin Koagne from Francophone Cameroon. Both authors are directly involved in environmental movements and policies of their respective countries. Djombo studied forestry management in the former USSR and has held many ministerial positions, including the Minister of Sustainable Development, Forest Economy and Environment and the Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishing. Koagne is a Francophone Cameroonian playwright and stage director currently residing in Congo-Brazzaville where he runs an NGO called *Association pour la Culture de Protection de la Faune et de la Flore* (ACPF) which promotes environmental protection. The authors' co-written play raises complex, sometimes controversial, and fascinating questions related to deforestation and climate change which lend themselves well to an (postcolonial) ecocritical analysis. Such issues include, but are not limited to, blaming climate change on witchcraft and questioning traditional beliefs, promoting Indigenous knowledge practices, evoking the debate on demographic explosion and climate change, and portraying women and children as both victims and combatants of environmental collapse.

To examine these various issues in the play, I will draw on postcolonial ecocriticism and the French and Francophone variant of ecocriticism known as *écocritique*. According to Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth A. Myers, postcolonial ecocriticism strives to "make ecocriticism more responsive to historical relations of power, to colonial history and its effects, and to cultural difference," with an emphasis on "both the inextricable intertwining of cultural, political, and natural history and 'the role of mediation in representing the environment'" (5). This approach prioritizes both socio-cultural difference and global interconnectedness to analyze ecologically-oriented arts and literature, in contrast to much of first-wave ecocriticism which did not attend to

[3] Cameroon has two official languages, English and French.

histories of Indigenous peoples, colonial conquest, and migration despite the fact that these factors also heavily influence climate change and ecological degradation (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 4). Similarly, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin assert that postcolonial approaches are important as they encourage the ongoing struggle for global environmental justice, ensure that cultural differences are considered in the building of bioregional models of sustainability and resilience, and promote the development of new ways of thinking about and beyond the human. In doing so, they acknowledge the intersectionality of social and ecological factors in the age of the Anthropocene (viii). This constitutes part of third-wave ecocriticism's efforts to deconstruct the Anglo-American focus of earlier studies in the field.

In this respect, Rachel Bouvet and Stephanie Posthumus's work on French and Francophone ecocriticism emphasizes difference while also underscoring the importance of transnational approaches to environmental problems. "A French *écocritique*," they write, "carefully considers the role of linguistic, historical, political, and socio-cultural differences, not in order to reconstruct national boundaries, but so as to better understand the plurality of perspectives that will be needed to address a global environmental crisis" (389). Both postcolonial ecocriticism and French *écocritique* argue for the study of nature and the arts in ways that are attuned to specific places as well as to the forces of globalization; that is, they argue for a literary criticism that has both a sense of place and a sense of planet, to borrow from the title of Ursula K. Heise's 2008 book. Looking more specifically at African Francophone literature, Etienne-Marie Lassi explains that when questions of human development and environmental protection are transposed to the literary field, they lend themselves to a multitude of critical approaches whose pertinence varies according to the social, cultural and ideological predispositions of different theorists (3). It is worth noting that ecocriticism in all—or nearly all—of its variants is premised on the assumption that art and literature can stimulate change and political action in the real world, that they can contribute to the mitigation of climate change and environmental problems.

Synopsis of the play

Le cri de la forêt is a comedy in four tableaux set in Mbala, an imaginary village in Congo-Brazzaville.[4] Chief Kamona of Mbala forces his subjects (the villagers) to illegally log firewood, with almost all the revenue going into his pockets. Kamona orders his servant and confidant Tambou to bring firewood to the market in a wheelbarrow and run errands for his wife Mamie, while Kamona spends his time sleeping lazily and daydreaming about wood and dollars. The government of this fictional country dispatches an emissary, a forest guard[5] called *le Fonctionnaire*, to caution the people against excessive deforestation and inform them about new forestry legislation, in particular

[4] The name is not completely fictional. There are villages in CAR and Zambia as well as a language in DRC called Mbala. Given that CAR and DRC both belong to the Congo Basin area, Djombo and Koagne may have chosen this name so that the play would appeal to a wide audience in the basin and beyond.

[5] Forest guard refers to a forest ranger.

prohibition of, and heavy sanctions regarding, illegal tree cutting and poaching. Unreceptive to the guard's message and mistaking his insistence for impoliteness toward their chief, the inhabitants of Mbala nearly kill *le Fonctionnaire* in a mob action, but they are stopped by Kamona who then orders the man to leave their village, even as they threaten to cut down all the trees in their village. Kamona's young nephew Toubouli agrees with *le Fonctionnaire* that the forest needs to be sustainably managed and is ordered by his uncle to leave the meeting. But before leaving the meeting, Toubouli promises to study and become a forest guard. A few days later, Kamona and the villagers learn from a radio announcement that the national Council of Ministers convened to discuss forest exploitation in the country and decided to strip Kamona of his role as chief of Mbala and charge him in court for his village's aggression against *le Fonctionnaire* and the continuous, illegal felling of trees.

While Mamie attempts to rally the villagers to defend her husband's cause, Tambou and other village woodcutters discuss who might replace Kamona as their chief, some of them acknowledging the havoc they are wreaking on the forest because of tree cutting and bushfires. Later in the play, a calamity befalls Mbala: rain stops falling on the village and its population suffers from hunger. Continuing to exercise his functions until his arrest later in the play, Chief Kamona offers numerous sacrifices to their ancestors but they do not improve the situation. Toubouli returns to Mbala after his studies, with a PhD in ecology, and tries to dispel the unfounded suspicions of witchcraft as the cause of the calamity, scientifically explaining how deforestation is the main cause. Chief Kamona then receives a newspaper with his photo and a letter which his nephew reads for him. Among other things, the letter from the sub-prefecture indicates that the government has declared Mbala a disaster zone and orders the villagers to quit their village and relocate to a big village 500 kilometers to the north. Persuaded by Toubouli to not pick another fight with the government, the villagers leave for the North with heavy hearts. Even Kamona, who wishes to stay where his ancestors were buried, must go. The chief of the big village is *le Fonctionnaire* who was enthroned when he went there on a state mission and the villagers heard about his ordeal at the hands of Kamona and his villagers. Kamona apologizes to him, regretting what he calls their ignorance and behavior. Coincidentally, they arrive in the big village on a day when a national tree-planting operation named "Green Country" is being launched. Invited by *le Fonctionnaire*, the villagers of Mbala join the inhabitants of the big village to plant trees.

Why is the forest in Mbala village screaming?

As its title makes explicit, the play revolves around the scream of a forest.[6] The title employs the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia which bestows a voice on inanimate objects or entities that cannot really speak (Simpson 131). It is true that many African spiritual practices are based on the belief that trees (and other plants and animals) can actually communicate or speak, but the villagers of Mbala do not consider the forest sacred in this

[6] As I will explain later in the article, humans are also subject to much pain in the play, responding with crying and screaming.

play. After *le Fonctionnaire* is chased away from Mbala, amidst hypocritical cheers, Chief Kamona instructs the villagers to go into the forest and cut down all the trees, promising them (or *le Fonctionnaire* and the government?) that they will hear the forest scream: "The forest will bleed this year. (*With determination*) Count on me, the forest will scream from pain. You will hear the scream of the forest. Dear inhabitants of Mbala, worthy woodcutters, we must increase the production of wood this year" (All translations are mine.) (33).[7] In an interview after a stage performance of the play in Congo-Brazzaville, Djombo explains:

> Throughout the spectacle, the forest suffers from the aggressions of humans. She is cut in disorder. She can no longer regenerate. She is wounded every day. And she dies bit by bit, until she disappears. And it is only afterwards that humans understand the importance of the forest. The role that the forest plays on earth is for humans. And afterwards it is too late to repair the damage caused…[8]

This interpretation based on the author's original message or intention is, however, quite simplistic. A closer look at why and how the forest in the play is screaming reveals much more.

The forest is depicted as a victim of conflicting, misguided human emotions and interests. The anger of the Chief and the villagers toward the forest guard is misdirected at trees in the forest simply because *le Fonctionnaire* advises them to practice care and caution when cutting down trees. Kamona further tells the villagers: " Since the famous forest agent has been impolite to us, take your axes, your chainsaws! Go into the forest, by day or at night. Whatever the name, size or height of the tree, cut it down! Here I am the chief, have confidence in me!" (33).[9] The forest screams from the pain of deforestation led by an irresponsible chief who is driven by greed and power abuse. The forest is a bone of contention between hostile groups of humans. Even if humans, too, suffer when drought strikes the community of Mbala as a result of their mistreatment and misuse of the forest, the question remains: how do the playwrights communicate the screaming of the forest?

Given the play's title, one would expect the forest to actually scream or the playwrights to lend voice to the forest to scream in more striking ways. Perhaps, the forest could scream through the sounds of engine saws and axes felling trees or trees could literally speak in the play. Surprisingly, the playwrights do not adopt any of these options. Instead, the forest sounds are conveyed by the inhabitants of Mbala. When explaining to two other woodcutters how deforestation has left the remaining trees isolated in the forest and consequently vulnerable to strong winds, Tambou imitates the noise of wind and the falling of trees (38). His action partly evokes the violence that the forest suffers as a result of unregulated human exploitation. Symbolically, the emotions and sufferings of

[7] "La forêt va saigner cette année. (*Avec détermination*) Comptez sur moi, la forêt va crier de douleur. Vous entendrez le cri de la forêt. Chers habitants de Mbala, dignes bûcherons, nous devons augmenter la production de bois cette année !"

[8] "Tout au long du spectacle, c'est la forêt qui souffre des agressions de l'homme. On la coupe en désordre. Elle ne peut plus se reconstituer. Elle se blesse chaque jour. Et elle meurt à petit feu, jusqu'à disparaître. Et c'est après seulement que l'homme comprend l'importance de la forêt. Le rôle que la forêt joue sur la terre est pour l'homme. Et après c'est trop tard pour réparer les dégâts. (YouTube Video)" See the second half of the YouTube Video on www.youtube.com/watch?v=eemmYGM_si8. Accessed 10 December 2018.

[9] "Comme le fameux agent forestier a été impoli envers nous, prenez vos haches, vos tronçonneuses ! Entrez dans la forêt, de jour comme de nuit. Quels que soit le nom, la grosseur ou la hauteur de l'arbre, abattez-le ! Ici c'est moi le chef, faites-moi confiance !"

the people provide clues to the pains of the forest and nature. For instance, Kamona is said to be addressing a famished and desperate crowd (population) following the drought in Mbala (43). In a later scene, Kamona is described as tired, almost desperate, but struggling to maintain good humor when he greets Toubouli who has just returned from the city with a PhD in ecology (49). The most symbolic representation of the screaming forest (or the pain of nature) in the play occurs near the end of this same scene. When protracted drought strikes Mbala village, its inhabitants cry both for themselves (directly) and on behalf of their depleted forest (indirectly). Stage directions at this point in the play are telling:

> As if forced by a bomb, the villagers stand up, frown and become emotional. Then a long procession takes the direction of the North. A funeral melody accompanies the procession. Children and women cry. They walk and before them lays the hopelessness of a deserted horizon. (54)[10]

The funeral melody accompanying the crying children and women also speaks for the forest and nature. Just as the people are transformed into climate/environmental refugees, so too the forest—now a desert—has been transformed. Shortly before the above excerpt, stage directions show Chief Kamona in another highly symbolic gesture. When he finally decides to quit Mbala with his people, Kamona "collects a handful of earth, while hiding his tears, at the foot of the sacred tree, contemplates regretfully and puts it in his pocket" (53).[11] Kamona's attempt to hide his tears is suggestive of his attempts and those of his people not only to destroy the forest but to silence it; that is, to conceal nature's sufferings, and continue to exploit it for economic gains.

I would further argue that market forces, particularly increasing demand for wood, are also responsible for the screaming forest in the play. In this regard, Chief Kamona announces to the villagers: "Given that demand and prices have increased greatly in the market, we are going to double wood production" (33).[12] As the demand and price for wood increases, Kamona and his people are bent on supplying more wood, regardless of the consequences of their unchecked exploitation on the forest in particular and the environment as a whole. The forest is suffering from economic forces beyond the control of the local inhabitants of Mbala, which raises the question of the government's role in regulating the economy. Although the current economic system, in which capitalism thrives, operates largely beyond the borders of nation-states, one is tempted to ask why the government would allow the demand and price for wood to increase if it wants to reduce deforestation. Better still, why would the government not provide, or encourage the use of, alternative energy sources to (or by) its citizens? In this regard, Tambou even wonders why the government cannot plant baobabs in Mbala and its environs since these trees do not produce fuelwood and no one will cut them except to feed wood factories

[10] "Comme sous l'effet d'une bombe, les villageois se lèvent, se contorsionnent et tombent d'émotion. Puis une longue procession se meut en direction du Nord. Une mélodie funeste l'accompagne. Les enfants et les femmes pleurent. Ils marchent et devant eux le désespoir d'un horizon désert."

[11] "ramasse en cachant ses larmes une poignée de terre au pied de l'arbre tutélaire, la contemple avec regret et la met dans sa poche."

[12] "Étant donné que la demande et les prix ont fortement augmenté sur le marché, nous allons décupler la production de bois."

which will bring "development" to the village (38-39). The First Woodcutter, for his part, confirms that Tambou is right and suggests that leopards and lions could be introduced into the forests in order to terrorize wood exploiters (39). Such suggestions implicate both the people, who think that it's solely the government's responsibility to impose regulations, and the government, for its lack of conservation strategies beyond the enactment and enforcement of laws. Some of these or other measures could be taken, especially given that the wood cut from the forest in Mbala is sold locally and used as firewood. Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to determine the degree to which local consumption of wood as fuel can be responsible for the total annihilation of a forest. More likely causes are the mass exportation of timber from the Congo Basin to industrialized economies in the West or the destruction of large swathes of forest for palm oil production to serve Western markets.

In reality, fuelwood exploitation follows many other more important causes of deforestation in the Congo Basin, including infrastructural expansion, industrial timber exploitation, agriculture, and oil palm cultivation, amongst others. Some contend that small-scale, nonmechanized forest clearing for agriculture is the leading cause of deforestation in the Congo Basin (Alexandra Tyukavina et al. 1). Others hold that infrastructural and agricultural expansion are the leading causes of deforestation in Central Africa (Carole Megevand et al. 59). Four major groups of factors have been identified as immediate causes of deforestation and forest degradation in the Congo Basin namely: (a) expansion of infrastructure, (b) expansion of agriculture, (c) extraction of timber, and (d) other factors, in descending order (Bérenger Tchatchou et al. 16). Within the category of timber exploitation, industrial exploitation is followed by artisanal logging or small-scale timber exploitation (in descending order) and finally charcoal and fuelwood exploitation (Bérenger Tchatchou et al. 19-20). Regarding oil palm production, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) asserts that "the Congo Basin now represents the new palm oil frontier," adding that "since the early 2000s, nearly 1.1 million hectares of land have been signed in the region" (2). According to some, 67% of oil palm expansion from 2000-2015 happened at the expense of forests in Cameroon (Elsa M. Ordway et al. 1). As demonstrated above, fuelwood exploitation is certainly a cause of deforestation in the Congo Basin, but it is far from being the leading cause as the play under study suggests.

Interestingly, the play indirectly points to the destructive web of international exportation of timber by naming the dollar (not the local franc CFA) as the currency with which firewood from Mbala woodcutters is bought (9-10). How or why would local firewood buyers use dollars and not the local currency? It would appear that both playwrights—or particularly Djombo in his capacity as a cabinet minister—consciously but unsuccessfully try to downplay how bad governance at the level of the State impacts environmental protection in Mbala and elsewhere in the Congo Basin. The play also seems to vindicate the government by including scenes in which some characters openly accuse witchcraft for the environmental disaster that befalls them. One might, therefore, ask whether witchcraft makes the forest scream.

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Scapegoating Witchcraft, Questioning Traditional Beliefs

As a number of African literary texts illustrate, witchcraft is often blamed when irresponsible behavior provokes calamities such as illness or when traditional science cannot explain certain natural phenomena.[13] In the face of severe drought preceded by heavy rains and flooding in Mbala, Chief Kamona performs sacrifices to the ancestors in vain. While his wife Mamie urges him to continue offering sacrifices, Tambou claims to have heard that an angry woman had cursed nature in a distant village and that the malediction caused an unprecedented famine in that village and neighboring lands (43). He cites a community proverb according to which the ancestors used to say that the surface of the lake only moves when an object has been thrown in it or when one blows on it (43). At the end of Tambou's story, only one villager responds, cursing the angry woman. But the silence of the others does not mean they reject the possibility that their plight may have resulted from some spiritual or metaphysical causes. Chief Kamona embarks on a new and lengthy ritual, aimed at appeasing the ancestors so that rain will begin to fall on the land again (43-45). The ritual consists of a long monologue of lamentations and incantations during which the Chief confesses his guilt with respect to what has befallen them, evoking the large family he has to feed as one of the reasons for his irresponsible cutting of trees, and pleading with the gods to pardon them, thus perceiving the drought as punishment from the ancestral world. He ends the ritual by pouring palm wine from his cup under the guardian (sacred) tree in the palace courtyard. Clearly, Kamona and his people respect the sacred tree in the center of the royal courtyard, but they show no sign of acknowledging or listening to what Sarah B. Buchanan calls more generally "environmental wisdom shared around the palaver tree" (123).[14] Furthermore, unlike some of the characters in Ekpe Inyang's play *The Hill Barbers* (2010) who acknowledge the sacredness of the forest (cf. Nsah 2018), the inhabitants of Mbala venerate the guardian tree in the palace, but forget or neglect the possibility that the trees in the forest also have sacred dimensions.[15] In this play, the forest is not shrouded in mystery as is the case for forests in many other African literary texts (Essomba 146).

Early on in the play, when *le Fonctionnaire* explains that deforestation leads to soil erosion and wonders if the villagers have ever seen their houses carried away by floods, Chief Kamona's wife Mamie dismisses these catastrophes as the work of wizards and walks out of the meeting in anger (21). In response, *le Fonctionnaire* asserts that the villagers use scapegoats to console themselves, whereas they are their own gravediggers

[13] See for example Ekpe Inyang's play *Water Na Life* (2002) where some characters blame witchcraft for deaths and sickness arising from water pollution and Nsah Mala's poetry collection *Bites of Insanity* (2015) where deaths resulting from malaria are blamed on witchcraft.
[14] "la sagesse environnementale partagée autour de l'arbre à palabres."
[15] Through the guardian tree, one perceives a certain hierarchy of trees in Mbala since the villagers venerate the sacred tree and cannot cut it like the trees they fell in the forest. Their attitude towards the sacred tree vis-à-vis trees in their forest probably stems from the world view of the playwrights or the places which inspired their play. For instance, it might be that those particular places that inspired them do not have the practice of owning sacred forests. Or that they do not consider forest trees as spiritual beings.

(21).[16] The inhabitants of Mbala, like many African traditionalists, consider nature as sacred and conscious; consequently, ancestral punishment is meted out on those who break norms and destroy it (Eguavoen 14; King'asia 2018). Such views constitute some of the positive dimensions of spiritual and magical belief systems in Africa. Nevertheless, the response of the villagers in the play is based on ignorance of the (Western) science behind climate change.[17] The fact that their numerous sacrifices bear no fruit undermines some of their traditional beliefs and practices. After *le Fonctionnaire* makes it clear that anyone who violates article 114 of the Forest Code (e.g., failure to obtain a logging license and to respect timber regulations) will be liable to a fine of one thousand to ten thousand dollars and a prison term of at least one year (17-18), Chief Kamona retorts: "This forest you see here and around is our own heritage. Our ancestors exploited it, our fathers too. Today, we are exploiting and tomorrow our children will exploit it, and so forth, from generation … to generation …" (18)[18]. The villagers complete his phrase with the words "… to generation." The inhabitants of Mbala show concern for future generations. But so do conservationists like *le Fonctionnaire* who remind them of the vast expanses of forest and animal species they are destroying, to the point that their grand-children will know animals only as images and will live in hostile environments (20-21). Both the inhabitants of Mbala and *le Fonctionnaire* think of future generations, but they differ fundamentally in their approach: the villagers indulge in unrestrained woodcutting and ignore their ancestors' teachings about how to manage the forest, while the State and conservationists choose sustainable management of forest resources.

When *le Fonctionnaire* explains that the State prohibits the unregulated cutting of trees in large quantities, but not the felling of trees for domestic purposes such as cooking, heating and lighting, Chief Kamona is quick to respond: "We've been woodcutters for generations" (20).[19] When Kamona then asks how they are going to live without cutting or selling trees, it is clear that he has not fully understood the government measures. His words also cast doubt on his claim: What kind of woodcutters have they been for generations? Were they cutting wood for household use or for sale? If for sale, to whom were they selling the wood and for what purposes? Where did these buyers come from? Were they fellow tribesmen or outsiders?[20] As illustrated earlier, fuelwood exploitation is not the leading cause of deforestation in the Congo Basin. Moreover, it is reported that industrial logging concessions cover about 44-60 million hectares of forest (of the 200-

[16] There have been many reports of heavy rains and floods in recent years in Congo-Brazzaville (the country where the fictive village of Mbala is found), which have resulted in the loss of human lives and the destruction of property, especially in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noir (see for example "Congo: Les inondations fons six morts and la capitale" and "Pointe-Noire démunie après une vague d'indondations").

[17] It should be noted that upholding the sacredness of nature doesn't imply the complete rejection of Western science, especially in hybrid postcolonial societies such as Africa. Elsewhere, for instance, I have discussed Ekpe Inyang's play *The Hill Barbers* (2010) where he brilliantly reconciles Western Science, Christianity, and African Religious Practices in advocating nature conservation. For details, see Nsah 2018.

[18] "Cette forêt que vous voyez ici et alentour est notre propre patrimoine. Nos ancêtres l'ont exploitée, nos pères aussi. Aujourd'hui, nous exploitons et demain nos enfants l'exploiteront, ainsi de suite, de génération."

[19] "Nous sommes des bûcherons depuis des générations."

[20] My own experience in my native village of Mbesa and surrounding villages in Cameroon attests to the fact that most, if not all, African villages hardly ever traded in wood in the past; they largely used it for domestic purposes such as cooking, heating, lighting, and marriage (bride price) rites.

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300 million hectares of total forest area, depending on the classification) in the Congo Basin (Global Forest Atlas). In 2007, more than 600,000 km^2 (30%) of forests were under logging concessions, whereas just 12% were protected (Laporte et al 1451). Given the fact that colonialists introduced industrial logging in Africa, one wonders which African tribe was selling wood in the past and in dollars. Moreover, Kamona contends that the trees in the forest can never be exhausted and he feigns ignorance about greenhouse gases and climate science (24). However, he ends up betraying his complex and cunning character when he argues with *le Fonctionnaire* about compensation from Western industrialists, accusing them of treating the villagers as fools (26) by continuously failing to honor their financial pledges. In his cunning role, the Chief also sheds light on the (sometimes) slow nature of the repercussions of climate change when he tells his subjects that "Mr. agent didn't want to tell us that the factories which pollute the air we breathe kill, slowly, all the poor of the earth. Is that normal?" (28).[21] The villagers join him in saying that this is unjust; they consider polluters from the global North as solely responsible for the slow violence that the earth and the global South are experiencing, or what Rob Nixon calls "imperceptible" forms of violence (10). They do not, however, acknowledge that people involved in deforestation like themselves are also responsible for slow forms of violence associated with climate change.

Promoting (Selling?) Indigenous Knowledge Practices, and Capitalism

In the field of climate change studies, Kyle Whyte defines Indigenous knowledges as "systems of monitoring, recording, communicating, and learning about the relationships among humans, nonhuman plants and animals, and ecosystems that are required for any society to survive and flourish in particular ecosystems which are subject to perturbations of various kinds" (157). Such knowledge systems, as his definition shows, are very much geared toward harmonious living with nature. Whyte adds:

> Indigenous knowledges range from how ecological information is encoded in words and grammars of Indigenous languages, to protocols of mentorship of elders and youth, to kin-based and spiritual relationships with plants and animals, to memories of environmental change used to draw lessons about how to adapt to similar changes in the future. (157)

Although Whyte refers to Indigenous peoples in the USA, his definition is applicable to Indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world where colonization has happened, including Africa. However, what is absent from Whyte's definition is a description of the processes of production and consumption. One thing that is common among Indigenous peoples is that they possess alternative methods of interacting with nature, despite the increasing influence of Western capitalist patterns of production and consumption.

Djombo's and Koagne's play introduces the idea of palm wine as an alternative drink to Western-originated soft drinks, beers, wines and whiskeys. In most countries in West

[21] "monsieur l'agent n'a pas voulu nous dire que les usines qui souillent l'air que nous respirons tuent, à petit feu, tous les pauvres de la terre. Est-ce normal ?"

Africa, palm wine is a local drink tapped from palm trees—either from the buds of a live tree or from the trunks of felled trees—or from raffia palms. When *le Fonctionnaire* arrives in Chief Kamona's palace in Mbala, he is offered palm wine, which the Chief describes as their most priced drink. Enthralled by the good taste of the local drink (stage directions indicate that *le Fonctionnaire* clacks his tongue as he drinks), the forest guard asks why breweries and lemonade companies are not producing it (15). The villagers seem interested in his suggestion, and he further asks " Why don't they put it in bottles to commercialize it in the big towns of the world?" (15).[22] The villagers confirm that he has spoken well, and a visibly flattered and excited Kamona orders his wife Mamie to give five additional liters of palm wine to the forest guard. To a certain extent, *le Fonctionnaire*'s suggestion that breweries and lemonade companies could mass produce and commercialize palm wine could be read as an attempt to promote Indigenous knowledge and avoid Western-originated, pollution-causing drinks such as Coca-Cola. According to Whyte, "Indigenous peoples see their knowledges as containing important insights about how to negotiate today's environmental issues; they often see the renewal of their knowledge systems as a significant strategy for achieving successful adaptation planning" (157). As the play suggests, the Indigenous practice of palm wine tapping could grow into a large-scale industry for palm wine production and replace the felling of trees to sell as fuelwood.

Nevertheless, aside from the promotion of local knowledge systems, the forest guard's suggestion about palm wine raises two equally grave problems related to environmental/ecocritical thought. First, one can ask what types of material he is suggesting the villagers use for bottling palm wine. If the breweries or Mbala community (or even real-life communities in the Congo Basin and elsewhere in Africa) were to commercialize palm wine using plastic bottles, the environmental pollution already caused by Coca-Cola and similar companies on the continent and in the world would be aggravated.[23] Second, the guard's suggestion clearly supports the processes of capitalism, which are already ubiquitous throughout the play. Given that breweries are mainly out to maximize profits and produce drinks in large quantities, they have a significant impact on the environment in terms of pollution and deforestation for the production of raw materials such as barley and maize. In short, they promote capitalism which is the main driving force behind ecological collapse—leading to screaming forests. Paradoxically, the suggestion comes from a forest guard, who is presumably knowledgeable in environmental matters. Moreover, the Poet who sings the glories of the utopic village in the North reinforces the theme of capitalism in the play. In professing his admiration for the "green" village, he adds that its beautiful natural reserves, parks and beaches are awaiting tourists (57). He is based in the new village and works for *le Fonctionnaire* who is the village leader. While their intentions to promote eco-tourism are environmentally friendly and could generate revenue for the community and the State, the capitalist undertones of such initiatives cannot be overlooked in ecocritical studies.

[22] "Pourquoi ne la mettent-elles pas en bouteilles pour la commercialiser dans les grandes villes du monde?"
[23] Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Nestle are among the list of top plastic polluters. See for example Josh Gabbatiss 2018; Martinne Geller 2018; and Greenpeace 2018.

Growing Demographics versus Deforestation and Resource Depletion

One of the crucial environmental issues raised in Djombo's and Koagne's play, albeit less explicitly, concerns population growth. While deploring the proliferation of reserves and protected areas in their community, Chief Kamona and the villagers complain that without felling trees they cannot pay for their children's education. Kamona, in particular, goes further by bragging that he will marry even more wives with proceeds from the sale of wood (32). But later in the play, when confessing to the gods and pouring libations to avert drought in the land, he complains about the number of his wives and children as unsustainable:

> If I had only one wife, I would be able to feed her. If I had only two, I could still support them. But I have many, where do I find food in this time of drought? (*He stands up and sits again.*) If I had only one child, I would be able to feed him. If I had only two, that could still be fine. But how do I feed a whole battalion of children? (44)[24]

The issue of population growth is evoked, as it is in the first scene of Ekpe Inyang's play *The Sacred Forest* ([1998], 2006) when Arera's and Oroka's two children scramble for their food and one bursts out crying (210).[25] This has significant implications in terms of debates about overpopulation and environmental decay in the third world and in Africa in particular. Kamona's illegal logging is motivated in part by the fact that he has more wives and children than he can support through his illegitimate economic activities. There is no doubt that unregulated population growth has adverse effects on ecosystems and nature. While the play alludes to the frequently-made observation that families in the developing world can improve their standard of living by limiting the number of children they have, it also offers the opportunity to further discuss the correlation between demographic growth and environmental problems in Africa.

Ecocritics have tried to take up this extremely delicate issue with more or less success. Drawing on works such as Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb,* the Meadows's *Limits to Growth,* and Lester Brown's *Twenty-Ninth Day,* Ursula Heise notes that there is a "possibility of catastrophic collapse on a planetary scale if contemporary trends in demographic growth, resource use, and pollution continue" (25-26). Inspired by John Malthus's population theory, other scholars within the environmental humanities emphasize the negative impact of uncontrolled human population growth on natural ecosystems and its role in contributing to climate change (e.g., Bergthaller and González 2018). Lawrence Buell recommends "fewer unwanted pregnancies and births through truly comprehensive non-coercive propagation of both the knowledge and means to those who lack them, and more persuasive cultural reinforcement of smaller-family ethics," describing this as "a readier-to-hand, inexpensive, and potentially even less controversial means of countering Anthropocene environmental derangement" (10). But developing

[24] "Si je n'avais qu'une femme, j'aurais pu la nourrir. Si je n'avais que deux, j'aurais pu encore les supporter. Mais j'en ai plusieurs, où trouver de la nourriture en ce temps de sécheresse ? (*Il se lève et se rassoit.*) Si je n'avais qu'un enfant, j'aurais pu le nourrir. Si je n'en avais que deux, cela aurait pu encore aller. Mais comment nourrir tout un bataillon d'enfants ?"

[25] The page number comes from Ekpe Inyang's *The Swamps and Other Plays*, an unpublished collection compiled in 2009.

parts of the world such as Africa contribute less to global carbon footprints when compared to the capitalist, consumerist and industrialized countries of the global North. As Christopher Doll notes, "Western Europeans get 10 times the calorific intake from meat than do those in the least developed countries of the world. The US has 25 times as many cars per 1,000 people as China. Norway consumes around 50 times the amount of household electricity than does Indonesia" (n.p.). Citing figures from David Satterthwaite of the International Institute for Environment and Development, Doll adds that

> Between 1980 and 2005, sub-Saharan Africa increased its global share of population by 18.5% but its CO_2 emissions by only 2.4%. China's share, on the other hand, increased by 15.3% for population and 44.5% for CO2 emissions. This is one example of why, in the truest sense, there is no population but populations.

Ecocritics would do well to heed this point about populations in the plural when speaking about growth, consumption, and forms of government control.

Coming back to Djombo's and Koagne's play, one wonders again why the identities of those who buy wood from the inhabitants of Mbala are not disclosed and why the wood is sold in dollars and not in the local currency. It becomes, therefore, hard to gauge the extent to which external influence or pressure from foreign groups and populations drives deforestation and resource depletion in Mbala and the Congo Basin. This line of thought is particularly pertinent given that most of the multinational corporations in Africa that export timber and those that bring down swathes of forests yearly for palm oil and rubber plantations are owned by foreigners from the global North. Moreover, nearly all wars over natural resources such as cobalt and gold in DRC are engineered by Western industrialists, as noted by Rob Nixon who uses the expression "resource curse" (69). In this respect, while one may partly agree with Buell that "environmental sustainability goals should assign a higher priority to curtailing world population increase; that responsibility for so doing should be proportional to the size of the ecological footprint, with the primary onus on rich world nations and privileged socioeconomic groups everywhere" (12), one would also acknowledge the pertinence of Doll's argument that "when talking about climate change, which is an issue of consumption, it is lazy thinking to imagine that limiting the population of the most populous or fastest growing nations will be a magic solution to the problem." Besides, Doll affirms that "[t]here are of course sound reasons for family planning, particularly local environmental ones." Rapidly increasing populations may very well compromise developing countries' ability to feed, educate and provide healthcare for their citizens (Bergthaller and González 4).

Having said this, it is important to repeat that the key causes of deforestation and ecological degradation in the play are bad governance, greed, laziness and lack of sustainable methods, and not overpopulation. While Chief Kamona's number of wives and children suggest population pressure on natural resources, the question of deforestation and environmental crisis is not framed as solely contingent on demographics. Instead, population appears alongside consumerist pressures from the global North as factors responsible for ecological collapse and climate change in countries of the global South. This point is more evident when one considers the play's complete silence about the population size of the utopic village in the north. In this regard, Erle C. Ellis makes an

important point when he states that "our planet's human-carrying capacity emerges from the capabilities of our social systems and our technologies more than from any environmental limits," further contending that "the social and technological systems that sustain us need improvement" (n.p.). One-size-fits-all solutions are not tenable when it comes to resolving ecological crises and climate change.

Women and Children, Victims and Combatants

Le Cri de la forêt and other African literary works such as Ekpe Inyang's *The Hill Barbers* (2010) generally cast women and children as the worst-affected victims of climate change and environmental degradation. In Inyang's text, women and children bear the burden of deforestation by trekking long distances to fetch potable water while suffering from unbearable heatwaves (Inyang 26, 29, 42; Nsah 105-106). In his discussion of Wangari Maathai's activism for women and the environment in Kenya, Rob Nixon notes that "rural Kenyan women contribute little and can do very little to avert" human-induced climate change (131). He further asserts that these "women inhabited most directly the fallout from an environmental violence that is low in immediate drama but high in long-term consequences" (131). Nixon's claim that women (and children) are the most affected by climate change is indisputable. But by declaring that "they can do very little to avert" it, he seems to miss the point about the potential of these vulnerable groups to help combat the crisis. In the first place, the very Maathai who Nixon celebrates in his work has played a key role in helping groups of women work toward averting anthropogenic climate change. Maathai initiated the Green Belt Movement which brought together large numbers of women to plant trees and fight deforestation as well as dictatorship in Kenya, to the extent that she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. This example speaks volumes about what women can do to resolve environmental problems.

Furthermore, literary works such as Inyang's *The Hill Barbers* (2010), Assitou Ndinga's *Les Marchands du développement durable* (2006), and Djombo's and Koagne's *Le cri de la forêt* (2015) demonstrate the useful contributions of women (and children) in the fight against ecological collapse. In Djombo's and Koagne's play, for instance, Kamona's nephew Toubouli, who is described as a child, speaks truth and wisdom to his uncle when he agrees with *le Fonctionnaire*'s explanations about the dangers of deforestation, confirming that they are only left with skeletal trees. He promises to study and become a forest and water guard/agent (20-21). Although Toubouli's courage is greeted with signs of discontentment from the people, and especially from his uncle who orders him to leave the meeting, *le Fonctionnaire* immediately perceives wisdom in the boy's words, telling the people: "You are wrong by not listening to this child's innocent voice and heeding him. Meanwhile this voice should rather inspire wisdom" (21).[26] When Toubouli returns to his disaster-stricken village of Mbala after he has gone to the city, studied and become an environmental expert with a PhD in ecology, he continues to teach his people about the harmful effects of deforestation and challenges the superstitious beliefs that witchcraft is

[26] "Vous avez tort de ne pas écouter la voix innocente de cet enfant et de ne pas le suivre. Pourtant cette voix devrait plutôt vous inspirer sagesse."

responsible for their catastrophe (49-51). Curiously, his uncle is proud of Toubouli's educational achievements but still refuses to believe his nephew's scientific explanations for the drought affecting their village (51). It is interesting to note, however, that Kamona's wife Mamie pays keen attention to Toubouli's lectures, apparently acquiescing to his explanations when she exclaims "Ah bon !" (50).

At the end of the play, *le Fonctionnaire* invites the inhabitants of Mbala to join the villagers in planting trees. The action of women and children vis-à-vis the men is telling. After all the inhabitants of Mbala answer in chorus that they will join the tree planting campaign, the last stage direction indicates women and children taking the lead, "hurrying to plant their trees and guarantee their future" (60).[27] The women and children are followed by Toubouli, but the (other) men are said to be advancing nonchalantly toward the cleared field, their faces turned to watch the national police arrest Kamona. One might ask if the nonchalance or hesitation of the Mbala men suggests that African men are less supportive of conservation efforts. On the tree planting site, a group of young people animates the ceremony with a concert of rap music (60). According to this scene, women and children (youth) can and should be instrumental in leading efforts to combat climate change, species extinction and resource depletion. Their enthusiasm and eagerness to plant trees suggest that they can play a key role in stopping forests from screaming.

Conclusion

Djombo's and Koagne's play *Le Cri de la forêt* explores the issue of climate change and environmental degradation with a special focus on the abusive extraction of forest resources—deforestation. By employing the metaphor of a screaming forest, the play raises many pertinent questions worthy of ecocritical examination. To find out why the forest is screaming through human beings who destroy it and suffer from the same destruction, this essay has analyzed a gamut of thematic concerns in the text. The play questions some of the traditional religious beliefs of the people of Mbala, in particular their tendency to blame the consequences of anthropogenic climate change on witchcraft and superstition while ignoring the effects of their own destructive activities on the environment. It also valorizes Indigenous knowledge practices related to the making and sharing of palm wine, while problematically reinforcing capitalist systems of globalized circulation. Moreover, the play raises ecocritical debates about the exponential growth of the African population and its relation to environmental crises on the continent. Finally, rather than just stressing the victimhood of women and children/youth in relation to climate change, the play foregrounds the role these groups can play in mitigating it. The play's ending implies that men seem to have failed in this respect, so young people and women should be invited to help in solving Africa's numerous challenges, especially environmental ones. Otherwise, these groups and the forests will continue to scream. Overall, by engaging with these many issues, the play clearly complicates and expands our understanding of what counts as an "environmental" problem.

[27] "pressés de planter leurs arbres et garantir l'avenir."

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