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Research Article

Ecocriticism and Indigenous Knowledge: Environmental Sustainability in Bafanji Proverbs from Northwest Cameroon

Angandze Sheily Ngobalep*

English Department, University of Bamenda, Bambili, Cameroon

Abstract

This paper explores the deep-seated relationship between nature, culture, and environmental sustainability as reflected in the oral literature, specifically proverbs, of the Bafanji people. Through a close analysis of Bafanji proverbs, the study demonstrates that the community conceptualizes humanity not as separate from, but as an integral part of, the natural world—mutually influencing and being influenced by the environment. The research establishes that Bafanji proverbs view nature as the fundamental origin unifying all forms of life on Earth. In doing so, it highlights how oral literature transcends mere entertainment to serve as a vital repository of ecological knowledge and indigenous wisdom. By bridging oral traditions with modern ecological discourse and ecocriticism, the paper illustrates that nature and culture are inseparable, with the natural environment continuously shaping Bafanji cultural identity and practices. Ultimately, this paper argues that the indigenous environmental expertise embedded in Bafanji oral literature offers a crucial resource base for contemporary environmental preservation and sustainable development. It underscores the value of looking to traditional wisdom to foster a healthier, more balanced relationship between human societies and their natural surroundings.

Keywords

Nature, Environmental Sustainability, Proverbs, Ecocritism, Bafanji

1. Introduction

The interrelatedness between oral literature and the environment cannot be overlooked as it is becoming an important aspect of indigenous knowledge systems. Egya Sule [2] looks at nature and literature to be two sides of the same coin. Literature is made alive through the vividness in which nature is portrayed. He states that for one to better understand literature, one has to do so by "Recognizing this need, some strains of deep ecology have stressed the link between listening to the nonhuman world and reversing the environmentally destructive practices modern societies pursues."

In his essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocritism", William Rueckert [11] used the term "ecocritism" to denote the relationship man has with his physical environment as expressed in literary texts. Ecocritism, as used by Cheryll Glotfelty [4] in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. The willingness to revalue nature oriented literature has led many

*Correspondence: Angandze Sheily Ngobalep (ngwefonsheily@gmail.com)

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critics to revalue the aesthetics and morals of the African proverbs. Oral literature has been an undervalued field of study, but recently critics have come to understand that the type of wisdom gotten from Oral literature is raw and unrefined, therefore it stands the test of time. Isidore Okpewho in African Oral Literature states that; If we accept the idea of literature as a creative text, we will find that the other words used for qualifying it are simply attempts to emphasize one aspect or the other of the subject. Oral literature is now the most commonly used term for the subject. It simply means "literature delivered by word of mouth."

African literature is characterized by several dominant strands of influence and literary paradoxes both in its oral and written forms. Much about Africa and its writings have evolved from the continent's long history tinctured by the famous traditions of storytelling and performance aesthetics. Africa's classical traditions going back to the most ancient times in civilization have always been distinct. It was precisely towards the end of the 20th century that African oral literature received worldwide acclamation and recognition due to a systematized process of study and debate fostered by institutions of education and interpretation. Thus African oral literature is simultaneously old and timeless besides acclimatizing itself to the global pressures of change and flux. The desire for a distinct cultural and racial identity free from European domination lay behind much written and oral literary phenomenon. Some of the most compelling literary works of African origin are reminiscent of the most formidable events in Africa's political fortunes, most notably those related to slavery and colonialism.

Ecological sustainability has become a burning issue in our contemporary world, with the rise of global warming and others that are changing the course of nature as we know it is important for one to note the role that green literature plays in trying to bring back the harmony that once existed between man and nature. Ottu George Ekpe views ecological sustainability as; A growing concern today in the body politics of all nations, attracting to its fold all and sundry to play an active role in repositioning our earth. In this twilight, green literature is the form of art that is saddled with a responsibility of celebrating the environment positively to serve as a channel for creating the necessary awareness on the fragility of our environment and the need to handle it in a manner akin to handling a baby.

The oral literary scholar therefore finds himself in a position where he has a duty to help in preserving and maintaining nature and its values.

1.1. Conceptualisation

Due to the fact that the major term used in this work is "Environmental Sustainability", the analysis will be based on the theoretical framework of eco criticism. Environmental sustainability can be defined as, responsible interaction with the environment to avoid depletion or degradation of natural resources and allow for long-term environmental quality. The practice of environmental sustainability helps to ensure that the needs of today's population are met without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. When we look at the natural environment, we see that it has a rather remarkable ability to rejuvenate itself and sustain its viability. For example, when a tree falls, it decomposes, adding nutrients to the soil. These nutrients help sustain suitable conditions so future saplings can grow. Ottu George Ekpe [3] in an article entitled "Green Literature as Fortress for Sustainable development in Africa" views environmental sustainability as; man's deliberate contribution to preserving and maintaining nature. He states; We see that sustainable development cannot be achieved or realized the way a magician conjures a rat out of a black hat, but must tap into and he inspired by both the technical resources of African oral tradition and modern literary works written by Africans about Africa, so as to nurture and develop the required sensibility for a sustainable attitude in relation to our environment. Works that draw from our rich African heritage, encompassing African thought, experiences, folklore, myth, custom and religion. African oral tradition is a medium through which Africans have always expressed their cultures. Folk tales were the first forms of literary expressions used to transmit customs, traditions and general modes of life. Full of wisdom, the stories are meant to convey a real philosophy of life and to teach moral lessons that develop the intellects of moral uprightness. Nowadays, modern short story writing and other literary genres in Africa seems to follow the tradition of folktale in their narrative techniques, style, structure, figurative language and significance with a purpose to entertain, educate and moralize society for better.

Jick and Ngeh [7] asserts that for marginalized Anglophone community in Cameroon to assert itself, they must go back to their roots. They insist that knowledge from oral literature is valuable and very much relevant to the society of today, and for environmental sustainability. For the purpose of this study, environmental sustainability is going to mean a process of conscientisation and deliberate contribution towards the preservation of environmental knowledge.

1.2. Research Problem

Research in this area was pioneered by western critics whose ideas were similar to those of the colonial master. While critics in the former colonies have made their voices heard, it is still clear that there is generalisation at the level of the analysis. This paper therefore focuses on a particular case to show how the micro level of Bafanji can help in environmental awareness. One of the greatest worries of Eco critics over the years has been the quest to discover a means of reconciling man and nature. Environmental sustainability becomes therefore a vital discourse in ecocritism and particularly what is called green literature. This discourse seeks to provide ways through which man can help to reconstruct and uphold the positive values of nature which have been tampered with by phenomenon like global warming and globalisation.

1.3. Objectives of the Study and Hypothesis

The primary objective of this essay is to show how Bafanji proverbs are unique to their context in promoting environmental sustainability. This is because there are certain elements in the Bafanji worldview that cannot be explained or understood by data from elsewhere, and vice versa. This essay also intends to look at how these proverbs educate the people about a better way of life by providing moral lessons to the community.creativity of rigorous cultural criticism. Genuinely interdisciplinary, this is the idea propagated by Becket and Gifford [1]. It stipulates that, inclusive in its discussions of diverse cultural media of different literary genres, art forms and film for instance, which offer thoughtful and thought-provoking critiques of our relationships with the environment, are essential for human co existence. Our ability to transcend the ethical and aesthetic categories and discourses that have contributed to our alienation from our environment is dependant upon our imaginative capacity.

There is also the intension to demonstrate how the wisdom and moral values inherent in Bafanji proverbs teach on the true values of nature. It also looks at how this beauty can be maintained and preserved.

1.4. Rationale for Choosing Proverbs

The primary motivation here is the growing interest in indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) which favours knowledge from the grassroots where culture can be said to begin. Charles Nnolin [9] in an article entitled “What Has Criticism Got To Do With It? Teaching Theory and Criticism in African Literary Studies” clearly outlines the three sub genres of oral literature they include; 1) Spoken (proverbs, riddles, myths. Legends, incantations) 2) Sung (work songs, praise songs, elegies, dirges, war songs, birth songs, lampoons, lullabies, hunting songs) 3) Acted (rituals, festivals, initiations, dances, observations, masquerades). With these one discovers that the spectrum of oral literature is very broad, for the sake of this essay proverbs are going to be used. And to borrow the words of Chinua Achebe, one will be right to say that in Africa, proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Proverbs are short wise sayings. Henry Jick [5] argues that neglecting literature creates a critical gap ("lacuna") in students' holistic development, cultural awareness, and critical thinking amidst rapid globalization is strongly linked to oral literature. This concern is what prompts this study to find out more about oral literature and proverbs in particular. Knowledge imbibed in proverbs is concise and very effective. In my study of the effectiveness of the use of oral literature in Bafanji, I discovered that proverbs are the most used. These can also be seen as a tool used by the people for change and conscientisation. The use of proverbs takes overthrows the traditional, rigid, and centralized models of governance in favor of a more inclusive, pluralistic, and adaptable political framework in the community. Ngam Nkwain [8] advocates for rethinking power dynamics, political participation, and statecraft to better reflect contemporary societal complexities, using oral literature and proverbs in particular.

1.5. Methodology

The primary mode of data collection in this work will be field work; interviews were carried out where the performer (the person telling the proverbs) explained the proverbs and its meaning to the audience (the interviewer). Ecocriticism has also been used as the theoretical base of the work. The main interest of this theory which is the conservation of nature and its interrelatedness to literature which has given birth to green literature made it possible. Ecocriticism has been used to high light the lessons and themes imbibed in Bafanji proverbs most especially as they gear towards environmental sustainability.

Table 1. *INFOMANTS.*

NAME OF INFOMANT	APPROXIMATE AGE	PROFFESSION
MARY TIAPO	70	RETIRED TEACHER
TIEMINDENG CLIFFORD	49	REVEREND FATHER
MR NGWEFUNI MARTIN	69	LAWYER
FON NGWEFON 11	45	FON

2. An Ecocritical Reading of Bafanji Proverbs

MBEI COUT MBIENG NGYIA A COUT NCHIGINKIA

Maggot destroys itself thinking it is destroying the raffia palm

This proverb talks of cyclical nature of things. When the maggot feeds on the fallen palm tree it thinks that it is destroying it, not knowing that it is investing in it by excreting nutrients that will help in fertilizing it for another to grow. In a bid to want to destroy nature, we end up instead investing in it.

NKUNGNKUNG NTARH NCAR MOUH PEUT

The anthill never runs away from fire

Bafanji people are a people that are so close to their environment. They tap wisdom and knowledge from their environment and nature in order to impart their society with new ideas, lessons on morals and about the law of retributive justice. Being a mixed farming group of people the Bafanji people believe that the Ant builds its house on the hills, they use laterite soil to build and during the dry season when the farmers come to prepare against the next farming season, they burn the fields and eventually fire burns the anthill who cannot run away or escape its fate. This proverb castigates and condemns the act of burning the soil which kills all the natural resources and even other living beings like the ant.

The proverb quoted above parallels the postmodern view that projects human life as being fated by a supreme being (God). The concept of destiny is well understood by the Bafanji man. The ant builds its house on the hills and hopes to stay there peacefully but little does it know that the fire can abruptly come and destroy it within the glimpse of an eye. The proverb highlights the fact that man has no influence over his life. Just like Shakespeare in *King Lear* when he says through Gloucester that, humans are like ponds in the hands of the gods, they use them for sports. Man is created by God but he lacks freewill and foreknowledge to avert certain situations in life, just like the anthill by the ants. When misfortune or destiny strikes just like the fire strikes the anthill, man cannot do anything but stand there and watch like the ant does. This proverb sends a strong message about the idea of vanity in life.

SHU LENG LEIH NOH COUT YE GHIGHIE NKIE

Big fishes want to swallow smaller fishes in water

The Bafanji society is a typical postcolonial society, and attributes of postcolonial societies like class stratification and discrimination are very conspicuous. There are people who are very rich and others who are very poor. As a result, the people who do fishing as part of their income generating activity saw that in water, big fishes have the tendency of feeding on smaller fishes. For the sake of continuity even fishes in water have to learn to live mutually a strong message that is embodied in this proverb. Environmental sustainability preaches preservation of nature and here we find an instance where there is a conscious effort in preserving fishes. It is in this light that the fishing of small fishes becomes a taboo in the community. The wisdom in this proverb also touches humans in the society, when people have money they tend to want to control and influence the life's of others, so much so that in most cases of land quarrels the rich always dominate the poor. They intimidate them with their wealth and acquire their land. Also in cases of inheritance in a family where there is someone with wealth, the family tends to change the will of the deceased person in order to favor the person with wealth., this proverb sends a strong message about resistance as Jick and Ngeh [6] articulate that oral literature is an accessible tool for political resistance and social critique. In post-colonial contexts where formal media may be restricted, proverbs gives ordinary citizens a voice to denounce corruption, poor leadership.

OU LAING NJING FEFAH NDIA MBUOTI

One benefits from the wind to pick fire wood

The felling of trees in the Bafanji community is strictly forbidden. The people have come to realize the importance of preserving nature and trees and plants are given the importance they deserve. With the dominance of global warming tress are needed to keep the air safe. The people cook mainly with wood, thus the need for fire wood that is why it is said one benefits from the wind pick firewood. The people have understood that they do not have to cut dawn tress to survive.

MOUMBOU KHU CHIKEH LOUO MBA-YE A NJI PEUGH

The owner of a dog with a short tail does not know when it is happy

The Bafanji society is a dynamic one. There are several income generating activities and hunting is one of them. When these hunters want to engage in hunting they go with dogs. Now it was realized that there were so many dogs and people started trying to identify their dogs by cutting their tails. When the tails of these dogs are short, they cannot wag them. As a result, if the master gives bone to eat, the dog is happy but has no tail to wag in order to express its happiness. So the master does not know when it is happy. This proverb in line with the concept of environmental sustainability became a mockery or a critique to people who cut the tails of their dogs.

O NA KE KONG FI POUT ME NDIUE PEUT

O NA KE KOUT MUKONG PUONG ME KIEN O PEUT

If you don't touch bitter leaves your hands will not be bitter

If you don't eat beans your stomach won't worry you

These proverbs are in line with environment as one discovers that knowledge is gotten from the allusion to touching bitter leaves and the eating of beans. Both proverbs send out a strong message to the community, if you stay virtues you will have nothing to be afraid of. But one who soils his hands with bribe, gossip, witchcraft, adultery and many other vices common to the society should be ready for the consequences. Therefore one sees clearly the concept of environmental sustainability where the virtues of the society are upheld through the cautionary voice of both proverbs.

NGWEH PIH PUSSY

The tiger has given birth to the bush cat

This proverb cautions the idea of cowardice in the society, where one does not live up to expectations and ends up becoming a laughing stock in the community. A child who does not measure up to the bravery of his father therefore is likened to a cat, a lesser animal to the tiger. In line with the concept of environmental sustainability, this proverb cautions the villagers to stay alert and live up to their expectations.

NKI NCHOU NTUO NCHIA PIANG KUTIOU NOUH GO YE

Do not remain arguing with the stick while the snake goes away

This proverb throws a lot of insight on the concept of vainness and being focused. One should not be chasing shadows while the real deal is there but neglected. Focus becomes the key to the community where one has to prioritize his needs so that you do not end up regretting when the real deal is no more. Human kind therefore must learn from the knowledge of sustainability in this proverb in order to thrive.

NDAH MINGWE WESUGU AMBI KE MEH TCHE FIER

Once a woman is pregnant she will surely give birth or miscarry

This proverb sends out a strong message of what will be will be. One cannot hide or distort events that are must happen. For instance, if one writes an exam, the results must come out and it is either you pass or fail in the exam. Therefore nothing lasts forever. This moral from this proverb aids in the preservation of environmental sustainability.

3. Conclusion

This study has argued that human action can determine how nature can be sustained or destroyed; therefore the need for environmental sustainability. Issidore Okpewho's [10] foundational work on African oral traditions underscore the importance of documenting indigenous histories, performances, and governance systems before they are lost to modernization. With the growing awareness of global warming and globalization critics have seen the need for people discover and adapt modes of preserving nature. Oral literature plays a vital role in this process and proverbs in particular by helping us to see how indigenous communities resolved this problem. One can see that there is so much wisdom in Bafanji proverbs and the preservation of nature is one of their main thematic concerns. Thus there is a deliberate and conscious educative medium towards environmental sustainability.

Author Contributions

Angandze Sheily Ngobalep: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the conclusions of this study are available on request from the corresponding authors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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