



Eco-literacy and the Planetary Crisis: Nigerian Protest Drama and the Niger-Delta Dynamics

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Abstract: This paper investigates the preoccupation of theatre practice in Nigeria and its relevance to the eco-challenges of the sub-Saharan African nations. It further makes a case for the engagement of Nigerian theatre in the global quest for peace in which sustainable development thrives. The study is a textual analysis of selected plays written in the past fifty years that examines their relevance in the eco-discourse that has taken the centre stage in contemporary literary criticism. It establishes areas of critical engagement in the field of eco-drama for Nigeria and also explores opportunities for academic discourse in Nigeria's participation in the green revolution using drama as a pedagogic tool. The paper concludes that the planetary crisis calls for not only a concerted effort but also a radical paradigm shift in re-interrogating the sustainability of the global life world. If Nigerian drama must remain relevant in the next decade, the subject of human ecology, climate change and the planetary crisis as it affects the nation must be an immense thematic concern.

Keywords: Ecopedagogy, Ecocriticism, Drama, Conflict and Ecology

1. Introduction: Greening the Arts: The Global Praxis of Nature and the Connections between Drama and Human Ecology

Climate change, global warming, ozone depletion – all these have become popular clichés that have characterized various global summits aimed at confronting the environmental challenges of the 21st century. Nations of the earth have risen in one testament: the Earth's Charter. This document is aimed at forging a common cause and addressing the eco-degradation occasioned by the absolute disregard

for nature. The first paragraph of that document reads:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must stand together to bring forth a sustainable global society

founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations (*thecharter.org*).

Natural and man-made disasters such as snow storms, tsunamis, earthquakes, forest fires, oil spills among others are being experienced all across the entire globe. In Africa, humans grapple with the twin-devils of both natural and man-made disasters as well as conflicts and their attendant natural consequences of hunger, destitution, disease and poverty.

Amidst these realities is the question of the relationship between drama and ecology and more significantly the role of drama in addressing both human ecology and the ecological concerns of the earth. According to Standing (2008), ecological victory will require a trans-valuation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present and the arts and humanities, including the theatre, must play a role (p.12). McKibben (1999) equally adds his voice to this, believing that playwrights, poets and artists need to create works that will place climate change deeply in the imagination. He further argues that “our human identity and the identification of what we refer to as nature, are now

forever intertwined and dependent” (p.11).

To understand the relationship of drama and nature, one must first refigure the relationship between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ that all humans inevitably inherit. Modernist traditions of European ‘enlightenment’ pitched nature and culture, ‘man’ and the environment against each other in what Kershaw (2007) says has turned out to be a potentially disastrous opposition (p.12). Nature is human and humanity forms the whole ensemble that nature represents. Since drama is said to be life, then it only amounts to the fact that all human life is theatricalised and dramatised, including, crucially, its interactions with other species and the environment. The performance paradigm was thus a major generative force of an age of ecology that emerged in the final five decades of the second millennium (p.14).

The concept of “Green” and the “green” terminology spans across several disciplines, for example – Green Capitalism, Green Consumerism, Green Theory, Green Socialists, Green Ecology, etc. However, the concept of ‘Green’ today has developed into a universally understood notion that non-human nature is given status, and that to protect it, the concept ‘ideology’ has come to include socio-political ideology (Wall, 2007:1).

No doubt the state of affairs calls for a social revolution and theatre is one tool for such. Boal (1995) validates performance as a weapon for social revolution, a means by which identity can be initiated (p.14). Contemporary Green practitioners have always sought for revolutionary change not only in behaviour but also in the structures that give ambivalence to nature and the whole concept of a safe earth. Green theatre therefore presupposes a performance that is socially relevant and maintains its efficiency as a tool for creating widespread socio-ecological change (Heinlein, 2006:25).

The environmental challenge in many parts of the Third World especially Africa is not the same with developed nations. Gare's (1995:114) argument that global capitalism dominated by transnational corporations and financial institutions, and controlled by a new international bourgeoisie has exposed some of the most basic cultural structures on which Western European civilization in general are based is quite timely. If this be the case, then we argue that there is a need for a new kind of civilization – a Green civilization that is not only trans-historically and culturally relevant but also challenges this global hegemonic culture of transnationalization. This challenge can only be met when people are oriented in practice and in their daily lives to pursue the pathway of creating an environmentally sustainable civilization and drama as

stated earlier is one such weapon that has the potential to meet this challenge.

Already, there are contradictions in the global quest to solve the world's eco-crisis. The concept of sustainable development seems to globalize environmental problems and consequently only global solutions should be sought for 'local' eco-problems. This partly explains the seeming eco-hesitation by African critics to the global eco-crisis as conceptualized by the West. Africa today stands on the wrong side of the divide in the futile attempt to globalize the eco-crisis. While the continent continues to writhe in pain of the worst kind owing to a degenerating environment orchestrated by decades of exploitation of natural resources, increasing poverty has no doubt exacerbated bloody conflicts, genocide and terrorism. This trend puts the respect for life and nature in utter disregard. Wangari Maathai, a renowned African environmental activist was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in recognition of her efforts to halt deforestation in Kenya. For her, "peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment". She was arrested and jailed at different times by the Kenyan authorities for her doggedness in challenging the very institutions that encouraged the continued plundering of Kenya's forest reserves. It is quite ironic that in Africa, those who challenged the forces that perpetuate eco-

degradation have been met with stiff opposition. Nigeria also shares a similar story in Ken Saro Wiwa who was summarily executed alongside eight others by the then military authorities for daring to challenge the continued devastation of the Niger Delta ecosystem by oil merchants. Since then, this region which holds the key to Nigeria's survival has remained the main issue in Nigeria's social stability and socio-economic growth.

African efforts at sustainable development have been targeted at fighting poverty by enriching scarce resources. We further argue that the only way to guarantee peace in Africa, which is one of the goals of sustainable development is by meeting the needs of the current generations without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. This was the motivation for Wangari when she founded the Green Belt Movement that succeeded in planting 30 million trees in an effort to halt deforestation in Kenya. For her, "people are fighting over water, over food and over other natural resources. When our resources become scarce, we fight over them. In managing our resources and in sustainable development, we plant the seeds of peace." (See

<http://www.Womeninworldhistor.com/contemporary-01.html>).

Glover's (2006) analysis of Escobar's work captures the current contraptions of sustainable development which he said is a

"saving the world mentality", which promotes the global at the expense of the local; a belief that the world's poor create environmental problems, but which ignores how capitalism creates poverty in the first place; a faith that capitalism's market structures can resolve ecological problems (p.54). To overturn these structures and engender a pathway for development that is Africa friendly, drama is and should be seen to be in the forefront to secure an environment of peace that guarantees the wellbeing of all peoples of the earth.

This research seeks to provide answers to the following questions:

- (i) How has drama in the last fifty years engaged the eco-crisis question in Nigeria?
- (ii) To what extent is Nigerian drama engaging in the resolution of eco-conflicts being experienced in the Niger-Delta?

2. Eco-pedagogy: Contextual and Theoretical Overview

Eco-pedagogy as a function of eco-literacy emanates from a body of scholarly discourses in the field of critical pedagogy. Martin and TeRiele (2011:23) believe that it is an outgrowth that is not older than 30 years and owes a lot to works done by Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. It has been at the centre of efforts "to construct social alternatives that are both credible and compelling. This has included creating new social contexts and encounters that value alternative meanings, knowledge and actions"

(p.23).

For Gonzalez-Gaudio and Meira-Carter (2010), environmental education is a multi-discursive field (p.14). It is a space of both struggle and opportunity for the reconstruction of a web of relations between humans and the environment and with each other. "This web has faded with the advance of civilization, but could enable us to develop new treaties between cultures, societies and nature and give rise to new values, languages, and meanings that could lead us responsibly to the social change that is so critical at this time" (p.14).

Eco-pedagogy is also a form of non-formal popular education which Kahn, (2010:5) says is borne out of developed ideas and practices of environmental preservation and conservation that centres on self-consciousness, awareness and the need for action by self-realization. As an outgrowth of critical pedagogy, it questions the status quo, and liberates the mind towards change from dehumanization to humanization. He argues that the world's economic structure as well as the adoption of globalized capitalism has no doubt created a serious dichotomy not only in the distribution of wealth but also in the human environment. Such is the challenge which Freire (2006:44) says marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those

who have stolen it. This he said, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human and "this distortion occurs within history; but it is not a historical vocation" (p.44). He further believes that the world as we have come to terms with it today is engaged in a struggle led by the oppressed peoples of the earth against those who made them less human and was quick to advise that this struggle to regain their humanity must not turn the oppressed to become oppressors of the oppressors. This is quite reminiscent of the flashes of several agitations that occurred in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The militarization of the struggle and the seeming criminality this struggle has become all in a bid to free the area of further exploitation takes the wind off the sail of genuine efforts at resolving the evident eco-crisis in the region. For Freire, both the oppressed and the oppressor have lost their humanity and the struggle should be aimed at restoring the humanity of both (p.44). This is one area eco-literacy and eco-pedagogy seeks to address.

One strong strand of the concept of eco-pedagogy is the love of all 'life'. The last three decades have witnessed dramatic changes in the earth's climate and hence, there is need for all peoples of the earth to consciously embrace lifestyles and attitudes that promote the sacredness of life. For McLaren (2005:20), "gobbling up the global life world in the quest for an endless accumulation of surplus value has

produced some world – historical excretory excesses, turning the world into a global toilet of toxic waste while adding legions of Marx’s reserve army of labour.” While this remains the true story of many developing nations, the arts in most cases have celebrated the apollonian heights humans have achieved but at the expense of a dying earth. This is what brings to light the need for an eco-literacy that is place – efficient and can serve the needs of local communities.

Nanda and Warms (2011) in this light draw us to the position that national narratives show history as a march of progress:

They celebrate the founding and development of corporations rather than the violence that often accompanied such events. They focus on the lives of the wealthy and powerful or sometimes, the infamous. The lives, the struggles of families, of members of ethnic and religious minorities, of women, and of children are often omitted from the record. Their voices are silenced (343).

Such is the scenario with an art that is not only classicist but marks the semblance of the ethos of a bourgeois society. Eco-pedagogy hence seeks the reversal of this trend and pursues the emergence of a new body of knowledge and the awakening of a multi-disciplinary approach to peace, safe earth and sustainable development. As the

world continues to grapple with the reality of depleting resources, the battle rages on for the remaining natural resources. Standlea (2006:1) for instance, believes that an unprecedented expansion of human population coupled with an American-styled propagation of unlimited economic “growth paradigm” is forcing a critical historic transition portrayed by ruthless competition over Earth’s remaining natural resources. “It is unlikely that the current state of affairs and the rate of greed and acquisition, especially characterising American economic consumption, will prevail at this pace without forcing severe environmental and social conflict and chaos” (p.1). It is quite obvious as recent global events have proven that where there is oil, there is war and where there is diamond, there is blood. We cannot extricate the world’s deadliest conflicts from the quest and struggle for natural resources as exemplified in Nigeria’s Delta regions and elsewhere in other African countries as well as the Gulf nations. The politics of these conflicts have been the continued desperate quest especially by Western nations for these resources. Sadly enough, these conflicts or wars have left in its wake environmental havoc of the worst kind not to mention the devastation the continued exploitation of these resources brings to local communities.

3. The Eco-foundations of Drama

Drama emanates from man's interaction with nature. The anthology of most dramatic traditions share a similar story of a continued struggle with 'life' that eventually gives birth to what we now call drama. From the dithyrambic processions of the Greeks to the rituals of Africa, all share a similar performative eco-history. Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (Act III, Scene 2) says "the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now was and is to hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (Shakespeare 108).

It is however not accidental that drama finds its root in nature and human's continued struggle to dominate and control the environment. The Greeks refer to the feast of Dionysus as the birthplace of drama. As recorded by Lee (2005), the renewal of life after winter was celebrated in the Greater Dionysia in the spring, and that "Dionysus is a god who dies and is reborn, his return the creative root bursting into literal flower" p.193). In Aristophanes *The Frogs* (405 B.C.), Aeschylus referred to Dionysus saying: "How say'st thou, Son O' the goddess of the Greens? (Dukore, 1973:5). Nature no doubt gave birth to drama. Drama all over the world is traceable to human's continued interaction with the forces exuded from the environment. As captured

by Giannachi and Stewart (2005:20), nature is always performed and can only be appropriated by means of performance. The ontology of nature lies in the performance of nature – in nature's capacity to appear as action, or in our capacity to act within it. The reciprocity of the relationship is quite obvious – nature echoes drama and drama echoes nature.

Nature has always been in the art. She has always represented not only a major point of reference for art but also a substantial means to provoke politically and aesthetically. For Giannachi and Stewart (2005):

It is in great part through its engagement with nature that art has time and again proven that it can subvert the social and political status quo. This is because nature marks a complex phenomenon that is utilized to define the real, with all its political and ethical implications, whilst also embracing culture, with all its aesthetic and philosophical relevance (p.21).

In Africa, where there is a dramatic tradition that predates her contact with Europe, the primitive roots of all theatrical tradition is sought in the numerous religious rituals and festivals that mark the African conquest of the forces of nature. As can be deduced from documentary evidence, African drama is an embodiment of the first struggles, first preoccupations, first successes and setbacks of the African

(Ogunbiyi, 1981: 3). Drama in this clime grew out of man's acquired knowledge of his environment. It is an art that celebrates the sharpened awareness about nature.

Shakespearean drama also offers self-consciousness about literary invention that can help renovate narratives about human beings and the natural world. Shakespeare's plays model a mutable system for coming to terms with change and catastrophe, and they help shape future conversations about remediation and stability (Mentz, 2011:156). The interplay between nature and humanity and the resultant consequences either for good or for bad forms the bedrock of the foundations of drama all over the world.

4. The Theoretic of Nigerian Drama and the Protest Ideology

Recent studies have revealed that dramatic traditions across Nigeria are traceable to pre-colonial times. Ogunbiyi (1981) in his critical profile of Nigerian theatre and drama proposes that the primitive root of Nigerian robust theatrical tradition must be sought in the numerous religious rituals and festivals that exist in many Nigerian communities. It is an embodiment of all the rites that became ritualized as a result of regularity in performance (p.3). With greater awareness, it was possible to isolate the myths which have developed around the rituals and to act them out as drama.

However, drama and performance in the postmodern period has been largely a protest drama. The drama of the 19th century is a searching examination of the soul of modern man, torn between good and evil and consumed by a fatal spiritual disease. The spiritual emptiness is characteristic of modern western man in general. Ato Quayson (2009:647) relates the postmodernist literary tradition to a philosophical representation which could be said to have its own peculiar historical and social trajectory in Western thought. He further typifies this theory as a vigorously anti-systemic mode of understanding with pluralism, borders and multiple perspectives being highlighted as a means of disrupting the centralizing impulse of any system (p.649). The 20th century saw the emergence of the avant-garde drama – a reaction against established forms. The avant-garde artist leads a constant minority battle against the serious artistic expression of his day. Burns (1981) believes that the concept implies renewal, opposition, and revolutionary experimentation.

The avant-garde can never be composed of too great a number of writers and its work cannot win widespread acceptance, for should such a movement win to it a great number of creative artists or should its output become generally accepted by the literate public, then the movement has ceased to be a true avant-garde: loses its

revolutionary usefulness
(p.201).

The post-modern artist reflects the perspective of groups who felt marginalized or disenfranchised because of their race, gender, sexual preference or political point of view. Wilson (1998:236) believes that most of them emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s – a period characterized by social and political protest and by a growing awareness of the rights of minorities.

This was the era of protests against the Vietnamese war; of civil rights marches; of women's movements; of Native American advocacy. In this atmosphere, theatres began to appear that expressed the anger and aspirations of social populations (p.201).

In Nigeria, the culture of protest is not new to the country's socio-political space. It precedes even the people's contact with colonialism or the 1960s or 1970s mentioned by Wilson. In Nigeria's pre-colonial political system, there were avenues through which the people vexed out their disenchantment even in a feudalistic society. During the thriving periods of the kings, Obas and Emirs, there were court jesters who through satire encapsulated in praise-singing, exposed the ills of the ruling and hegemonic classes. There also arose certain individuals otherwise known as 'heroic figures' who took the challenge of upstaging political arrangements not favourable

to the generality of the people. Interestingly, most of these heroic figures are women. Notable for this are

Princess Moremi, Emotan, Queen Amina, Idia Esigie among others.

Protest is a statement or an action that shows one's disapproval or disagreement (Hornsby, 1996:1002). Embu (1999) defines protest drama as that which is motivated by issues and policies in the society that tend to alienate, dehumanize, exploit and suppress the masses politically, socially, economically, as well as culturally (p.57). What is of interest here is that political, economic and social exploitation cannot escape the prying eyes of drama in the 21st century so long as the ruling elites and politicians continue to perpetuate injustice, fraud and misrule in any society. The semblance of these as seen today is the environmental degradation and the eco-exploitation that has further fanned the embers of conflict and poverty across Nigeria.

One cannot discuss protest drama in Nigeria without allusion to the Ogunde travelling Theatre. Widely regarded as the first modern theatre company ever to grace the Nigerian soil, this group was instrumental in protesting against colonialism and its exploitative tenderness. Between 1945 and 1960, Ogunde's works, which include *Worse than Crime* (1945), *Bread and Bullet* (1950), *Hunger and Strike* (1945), engaged the colonial authorities and took them up on several ills perpetrated

against hapless Nigerians. The plays which were staged in Jos, Kano and several Northern states of Nigeria irked the government. Ogunde was subsequently arrested and fined; his plays were banned from being staged anywhere in Nigeria. This confirms the efficacy of drama as a tool for change and that a play can indeed serve as a tool for social revolution. *Bread and Bullets* for instance was a vivid re-enactment of the Enugu crisis in which eighteen coal miners were shot and killed by the police for demanding a pay rise.

The social conditions in which Nigerians found themselves soon after independence necessitated the adoption of a protest ideology by post-civil war dramatists. Gbilekaa (1997) argues that:

The enormous wealth as a result of oil boom dichotomized and intensified class struggle in Nigeria as the gap between the economically privileged and their grovelling proletarian and peasant class yawned abominably. The aggressive and dehumanizing capitalism which the nation pursued called for a serious examination of our past, the present and the future (p. iv).

In the last four decades there have been the contributions of radical scholars and the growth of the protest ideology in Nigerian drama in the wake of debilitating social, economic and political developments.

5. Methodology

Critical drama texts that are examined in this study are Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers*; Chris Nwanmuo's *Wisdom of the Kings* and Tess Onwueme's *Then She said it*; Clark-Bakederemo's *The Wives' Revolt* and *All for Oil*; Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground*; Ojo Bakare's *The God's and the Scavengers* and Emmanuel Dandaura's *Venom for Venom*. The study compares the exploration of eco-literary concerns of old woks (e.g. Soyinka's and Clark-Bakederemo's) with new ones (e.g. Yerima's and Dandaura's).

6. The Eco-dimensions of Soyinka's Drama

Soyinka's principle of thought as a major ideologue of contemporary Africa naturally reflects the realities of the African environment. Some of the writings on Soyinka have clearly demonstrated that his life is "inseparable from his work, much of which arises from a passionate, almost desperate concern for his society. This concern is apparent in his poetry, drama and essays" (Jones, 1973:11). Soyinka sees the African world as an integral cosmos with a unique fluidity that makes unbroken continuity possible. There is an unbroken connection between the human, the spirit (gods) and nature (the environment). It is a state of perpetual transmutation, which he refers to as 'a state of transition' (Soyinka, 1974:5). Much of this is reflected in his play *Death and the*

King's Horseman; here, the cosmos is seen as possessing a nerve centre that holds all aspects of existence including the environment in place, but which, at the same time gives each being free access to self-determination and volitional involvement in life without jeopardizing the existence of others. There is a certain mystic union which encourages amicable co-existence of all forces both spiritual and physical and which at the same time makes truncation or indefinite suspension of transmutation impossible. This is the essence of the dark centre where the mysterious continuum of transition and inter transmutation of life both essential and material occur (p.7). Illah (2007) illustrates this thus:

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* speaks volumes about the complex nature of the modern African. It depicts the ability of the African, to adapt easily to the trans-racial, trans-lingual and trans-historical situation that made up part of the environment that the African operates within. For us to be able to curb these contestations, we must be able to create a conducive environment for communal progression (Illah par 2).

This is the world in which the African lives, a world Soyinka passionately captures in his drama –

a world in which the present is the meeting point between the past and the future, the past is transmitted to the future. He believes that most of the problems Africa faces today are as a result of a disconnect from ancestral heritage including a rich and abundant eco-life with all its spiritual and material significance. Hence, humanity's quest for survival in the current ecozoic era calls for a rethinking and repositioning of the human consciousness along sustainability lines. This is what Sullivan (1999) calls an exercise in cosmology which shows "our attempts to situate ourselves as humans in the matrix of the earth and further in the universe" (p.78). The absence of this reality marks the tragedy of the modern African caught within the web of globalization.

The main task of the dramatist is to constantly remind the people about their history, the trans-historical link that existed among them from creation. Soyinka believes that, Africa's present is a reflection of its past and that "a solemn future casts a backward glance over drooped shoulders" (Illah par 6).

For this to be possible, Ogbong (1994) proffers that the process will entail an intense imaginative return into the African cultural matrix - an imaginative return capable not merely of synthesizing but also appreciating and interpreting the forces controlled by the African environment. "The whole body of myths, customs, legends, rituals,

taboos, and other beliefs have always held the communities in African villages together and provided a sense of shared experience and belonging (p.48). This body of cultural matrix was eco-friendly as they foster the preservation or conservation of endangered species and provided a conducive environment where all life could be sustained. Sullivan (1999) stresses the need to return to this reality. According to him:

It is time to evoke the emergence of a new earth period that can be identified as the ecozoic era. Even now the shift is beginning to take place in which a relationship of mutual enhancement between humans and the natural world is regarded not only as possible but essential to planetary survival (p.46).

This is clearly reflected in Soyinka and his plays. It is an ideal which he lives and speaks for. A closer look at his works reveals the deep yearnings of a man who wants to see the rejuvenation of the African spirit lost in the abyss of western imperialist ideologies.

Soyinka's drama particularly *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers* echoes the reality of the planetary crisis that the world now grapples with. The Yoruba culture which forms the clime of these plays is nature sensitive, eco-friendly and nature protective. The plays show the bond between humans and the

spiritual forces of their environment. Fai (2010) re-echoed this strong belief stating that this inter-dependence presupposes that the absence of one indicates the end of the other. The perpetual conflict between humans and spiritual forces is a result of human encroachment (p.95). In *A Dance of the Forests*, there is the portrayal of an intricate relationship between humans and the spiritual forces of the land. In African cosmology, the abode of spiritual forces remains the forests and for any human-spirit mediation to be possible the forest is of inestimable value. In the semblance of a court that seeks to adjudicate the devastation done to the forests, the *Crier* summons all forest dwellers to what he called "Dance of Welcome":

To such as dwell in these forests, Rock devils, Earth Imps, Tree demons, ghommids, dewilds, genie, Incubi, Succubi, windhorls, bit and halves and such sons and subjects of Forest Father, and all that dwell in his domain, take note, this night is the welcome of the dead... (Soyinka, 45).

The above call by the *Crier* presents a scenario that all is not well and to find a solution, there is need to go back to the very essence of life for the African – the forests. This is further captured by the opening scene of the play – an empty clearing in the forest. *Eshuoro* captures the gloom of the forest thus: "Have you seen how much of the forest has

been torn down by their petty decorations? The forest stings. Stings of human obscenities” (Soyinka, 41).

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka was more apocalyptic about what the so called “civilization” would bring to the African eco-system. The bridges and roads brought western-styled development but along with it came the destruction of the flora and fauna. In the play, *Bale’s* statement captures the wiping out of the eco-life of Africa saying:

I do not fear progress, only its nature which makes all roofs and faces look the same. And the wish of one old man is that here and there, among the bridges and the murderous roads, below the humming birds which smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of the snake-tongue lightning; between this moment and the reckless broom that will be wielded in these years to come, we must leave virgin pots of lives, rich decay and the tang of vapours rising from forgotten heaps of compost, lying undisturbed ... (Soyinka, 47).

In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Soyinka draws the attention of the world to the impact of continued exploitation of African natural reserves and its attendant effects on the inhabitants of the land. *Makuri*, one of the characters says: “The land is big and wide, Alu, and you were often out by yourself digging for crabs. And there

were all those shifty-eyed traders who came to hunt for crocodile skins (p.83). After this *Makuri* further reminds the reader all of what today has become a regular occurrence – floods. “He came for his crops. Now that he knows they’ve been ruined by the floods” (p. 87).

These plays were some of the earliest works of Soyinka and eco-issues have formed new parameters from which we can begin to assess these plays in terms of their eco-pedagogic relevance. An eco-critical examination of some of his earliest works reveals that the cosmogenic roots of the African cannot be extricated from his umbilical connection to the environment.

7. Issues and Contradictions in the Eco-Struggles of Nigerian Drama and the Niger-Delta

In the closing stages of the last century and now, we have noticed flashes of concern by Nigerian playwrights for the eco-crisis that stares the country in the face. Nigerian dramatists are beginning to question the issues and facts of the global environmental melt-down as it affects the Nigerian landscape. While many of the dramatic works in the last decade have focused on the Niger Delta, a lot of such works however, have thematically preoccupied themselves with the issues of ‘resource control’, militancy, economic exploitation and social justice. Seldom have there been the critical issues of conservation, air pollution and

environmental degradation brought to the front burner of such plays.

Over the years, Nigerian playwrights were seemingly eco-hesitant in their thematic preoccupation. This is quite understandable as the primary motivation that gave birth to the first eco-struggle anchored by the Boroist Movement (i.e. a pre-civil war struggle spearheaded by Isaac Boro) was largely the control of Niger-Delta resources. Oil spills, air pollution or loss of biodiversity were secondary and were treated as offshoots or consequences of a supposedly wrongful control of indigenous wealth. This is however not to say that the concern for the safety of the Niger Delta environment was not an issue but quite obvious is the struggle for control of a fairer share of the proceeds of oil money.

Clark-Bakederemo's (1999) *The Wive's Revolt* and *All for Oil* reinforce and pursue social and political themes bordering on the fate of humans plagued by predators from within and without (Asagba, 2009:45). The play *All for Oil* sets out to correct certain historical anomalies, perceptions and positions concerning socio-political happenings and developments in the Niger Delta. The discourse of this playwright as reflected in the two plays dwells more on economic exploitation and dehumanization of the people of the region who should naturally live better from the natural resource – oil, even if the

environmental circumstance remains the same.

In Yerima's *Hard Ground*, there is a different twist to the environmental agitations in the Niger Delta. In this play, we are confronted with consequences of the conflicts arising from issues of militancy, national resource control, poverty and marginalization in this region. The play brings to light the fact that in the continued quest to right the wrongs in these depleted zones through armed struggle, much pain is still being inflicted on life and living. Women and children remain the most vulnerable in times of protracted hardships.

In Bakare's (2006) *The Gods and the Scavengers*, the author vividly presents the conflicts in Nigeria that is tied to the environment. The play brings to light the fact that depleting resources and the desperate scramble for what is left has pitched the biggest black nation on earth on war path. It presents the preoccupations of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria whose livelihood is tied directly to the environment such as cattle rearing, fishing, blacksmithing and farming. In most cases conflicts also arise when those in political power use their offices to reclaim landed property belonging to these 'scavengers' and convert same to personal use. Dandaura's (2010) *Venom for Venom* reawakens humanity to issues of environmental degradation, youth restiveness and the need for peer-to-peer education

and collective action towards sanity in the Niger Delta.

Nwanmuo's (1996) *Wisdom of the King* brings a different dimension to the eco-discourse in Nigeria. The play challenges all Nigerians irrespective of where they are domiciled to imbibe conservatory habits since "our bushes and natural environment provide us with most of what we need to survive" (p.21). Onwueme's (2002) *Then She Said It* brings a feminist twist to the discourse of the eco-crisis in the Niger Delta. It is one play that breaks down the realities of every day experience in the creeks, shanties, and hamlets of the Niger Delta. The play chronicles the harsh and deplorable condition of the environment and its effect on women as captured in this dialogue:

Obida: They've killed everything with their pollution and oil spillage. We cannot breathe clean air. Fish die or get fried in the simmering rivers. Water-water everywhere. But we have no clean water to drink! And now we have no land too?

Niger: No firewood because the plants and trees are soaked in oil. What do they expect us to cook with? (p.15).

Two distinct voices are echoed in Nigerian drama when it comes to the Niger Delta. There is the voice of those who have sided with the clamour for resource control as a

way out of the Niger Delta crisis. This group of playwrights have amplified the clamour for a fairer share of the oil spoils to those who generate it – a call whose legitimacy gained international relevance in the last decade. The sympathy for this voice is predicated on the quest for social justice, economic empowerment and freedom from slavery, exploitation and dehumanization. Amidst this seemingly dominant voice in Nigerian drama is also the sublime whisper of the 'Earth' – a hush tone that speaks against the continued plundering of nature's reserve such as trees, farmlands, water, seafood and air. Unfortunately, this voice is spoken by a numerical minority who champions the very essence of life – nature, from which humanity finds existence. It is a voice that is heard daily from women, children, farmers, pastoralists and all those whose livelihood is tied to the earth as they grovel through the filth to eke out a living.

8. Conclusion

Drama is communication and part of the goals of communication especially in the 21st century Africa is development and Nigerian drama in the last three decades has toed the path of development. It has questioned Africa's and indeed Nigeria's development strategy and fought on the side of people. It is our belief that Nigerian drama should be seen to be interested in the concepts and ideas of a safe earth and further interrogate the environmental

challenges in the Niger Delta and elsewhere.

Nigeria stands at a critical stage where it must address issues surrounding its development strategy. The nation has reached the cross-roads and the question is whether to follow the path of sustainable development that guarantees the future of generations yet unborn or remain on the wrong side of history by pursuing an agenda that puts both the human race and the environment under peril. The planetary crisis calls a radical

paradigm shift in re-interrogating the sustainability of the global life world. We conclude that if Nigerian drama must remain relevant in the next decade, the subject of human ecology, climate change and the planetary crisis as it affects the nation must be immense thematic concern. It is our belief here that Nigerian drama should be seen to be interested in the concepts and ideas of a safe earth and further interrogate the environmental challenges facing the country now

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