

## **The Poet as an Eco-critic: A Reading of Alex Kodjovi Kangnivi's *The Blood, Echoes from Ancestral Lores*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

It is generally believed that literature gets inspiration from actual life. And the consciousness of living in a world constantly threatened by tremendous hazards such as global warming, with its fallouts, the fast melting of the glaciers, tsunami, floods among others, does not leave the poet indifferent. Taking Alex Kangnivi Kodjovi's *The Blood, Echoes from Ancestral Lores* as its basis of analysis, this study examines the eco-critical drive of the poet who attempts to broaden the general understanding about the real dangers of the destruction of the environment and the subsequent irreversible consequences. Further, this study pinpoints the importance of involving everyone in the protection and preservation of the environment since it is a common heritage whose loss will spare no one. Resort to Eco-criticism in this study appears to be the most appropriate critical torchlight that helps reconsider the place of human beings in the destruction and conservation of the environment.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, environment, protection, poet, responsibility.

The social relevance of African literature is a generally admitted fact. Thus, literature in Africa has always been and will always be a "socio-historic commitment in the face of fresh challenges in third-world societies, which continue to ravage the lives of the people" (Coker 106). In other words, literature in Africa is always approached with the sense of relevance and usefulness to African societies. Indeed, from time immemorial, the African bards and griots have always played the role of awareness-raisers and educators in their different communities. Today, modern African writers

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have continued to draw material for their creativity from these traditional cultural sources.

Razinat Talatu Mohammed, quoting Karen Winkler, argues that even though “we have always known that literature relates to man and his environment, this new association draws the world to understand ... what they do to the physical environment in which they find themselves” (Mohammed 79).

Alex Kangnivi Kodjovi, a Togolese poet, is part of that tradition of education and awareness-raising in modern oral poetry. Kodjovi uses his poems drawn from the Ewe oral tradition he comes from to educate his readership about the necessity of protecting the environment. He raises the alarm about the fast destruction of the environment and the subsequent consequences that are befalling the planet earth and its inhabitants because he “recognizes the interconnectedness of people and planet” (O’Donovan et al. 93). In so doing, he asserts himself as an eco-critic and defender of the environment. The preoccupation of this paper, therefore, is to show to what extent Kodjovi uses his poems to raise the consciousness of his readers about the emergency of the protection of the environment. This paper examines the literary strategy used by the poet towards the realization of his creative vision.

Unlike what many people seem to think, Africans have long been concerned with the protection of their environment. After all, “all literature is about its milieu: the flora and fauna of the human communal location which yields food, shelter and the abundant offerings nature makes to existence.” (Osugwu 175). Alex Kangnivi Kodjovi embeds this commitment through his poems. For example, in his poem titled “The Voyage of the Eagle”, kodjovi has the persona assert:

In trance Agbasiviwo proclaimed  
Our death  
Throwing their Gumaga , Bokono revealed  
A great danger on humanity  
Looking in their magic water, Mamisiwo predicted  
The death of the Eagle  
Watching in their mysterious mirror, Dansiwo saw  
The falling of the Eagle’s feathers  
Making their calculations, Scientists remarked  
The starvation of the Eagle (45)

Through this introductory stanza of the allegorical poem under scrutiny, it is clear that Kodjovi's poem stems from Ewe oral literature which is as old as the Ewe community itself. The speaker uses Ewe words, the local language of the poet in West Africa, in his narration of the poem. In the first verse, *Agbasiviwo*, "disciples of the traditional priest", predict the imminent death of the people. Even the assistants of the spiritual priest know about this oncoming disaster. The throwing of *Gumaga*, "a kind of rosary, sometimes, made of cowries" by a *Bokono*, "diviner", connotes the traditional practices among the Ewe community which consists of searching into the future for any good or bad fortune. But after casting the "Gumaga", the diviner foretells a "great danger on humanity" not just on the Ewe community. This denotes that Ewe people have always had the consciousness of the oneness of this earth in spite of racial and ethnic disparities in the world.

Even *Mamisiwo*, "priestesses of the water goddess", predict the death of the Eagle, which connotes the mother earth, thanks to "their magic water." Also, *Dansiwo*, "the followers of the Serpent god", foresaw the imminent destruction of the earth. There is no doubt that, if the speaker finally mentions the point of view of the "Scientists" after this long list of different actors, he means that the first ones had been concerned about the fate of the earth long before the modern era. In other words, scientists became aware of the gravity of the situation long after the traditional priests. The poet blames them, in "Where are you Going" for

Searching hard  
To escape the balance of their financial transactions  
Their home, Mars, the next planet will be  
After their dirty games of science and technology  
Development (97)  
It must be already apparent from what is said so far  
that,

In a way, we could say that the consciousness of supernatural at the earliest time serves that betterment of mankind. It becomes a kind of check on the display of destructive tendencies by humankind, making them fear consequences for

such actions and making them expect goodness and natural blessings (Na'Allah 33)

At this stage, the poet's rhetorical question : "But where will they be when their prophecies become reality" (45)? reframes the challenge. To state it differently, the issue is beyond what one knows; what matters is what one does with what one knows. What this means is that the eco-consciousness is not an end in itself but a means towards turning the situation around as far as the degradation of the environment is concerned lest we all perish. For Kodjovi, "the gospel" of eco-consciousness has been sufficiently preached worldwide, only the implementation is yet to follow. But unfortunately, as the persona says:

the Eagle will flutter! The Eagle will surely flutter.  
Then it starts  
The Eagle shivers  
To remind us of the revelations  
Adamant and reluctant we are;  
The journey is slowly taking place (45-46).

Here, the persona laments about the imminence of the fluttering of the Eagle. The word "flutter" as used by the poet foreshadows the move or fall with somehow an irregular or trembling motion out of extreme fatigue. It is a general knowledge that the planet earth is one of the planets of the solar system. The speaker refers to it as "the Eagle." This metaphor is understandable, for the eagle is known to be a powerful large bird with long broad wings and powerful soaring flight which has all of a sudden started to "shiver to remind us of the revelations" (46). It is obvious that the poet uses "us" as a form of inclusion. In fact, the speaker wants the reader to feel concerned about the issue; the warning is for everyone because we all live on the same planet and the protection of the environment is or perhaps should be a general concern.

The persona tells us that in spite of the warnings, we are stubborn and hesitant about abandoning our old ways and practices that are liable to contribute to the imminent destruction of the environment and by the same token our own destruction since we are part and parcel of the environment.

The last verse in the quote above tells the reader that inevitably the so much dreaded "VOYAGE OF THE EAGLE" has commenced. Slowly but surely,

The Eagle fucks the air and  
Those sitting on its tail fall but  
Those on the wings adjust and revisit their seats  
(46).

In the first verse, the sexual language is used to compare the back and forth movement of the Eagle through the air to the sexual intercourse. But this analogy refers to the extreme fatigue of the eagle and unlike the sexual intercourse where the partners derive pleasure, the earth only groans with pain. The falling of "those sitting on its tail" (46) refers to the people who live in those parts of the world which experience regular and countless catastrophes such as earthquakes and tsunamis due the global warming caused by the destruction of the ozone layer, the massive destruction of the flora to mention but these. But if the falling of some people creates imbalance and causes the rest of the passengers to "adjust and revisit their seats", such is not the case of the other inhabitants of other parts of the world in real life situation. What the last line suggests here is that other people of the world whose areas have not yet experienced these disasters seem to be unconcerned; they keep destroying the environment. One should not be misled by the ironic tone of the speaker here. The verbs "adjust" and "revisit" which respectively mean to "improve" or "rearrange" and to "consider (a situation or problem) again from a different perspective", are used by the poet here to mean that the other people, in spite of the disaster, settle more comfortably in their ignorance and stubbornness. In other words, they keep on making the same mistake again and again.

The next stanza even amplifies the speaker's pathetic narration of the misfortunes:

The Eagle stretches and nods tiredly and  
We are now hanging on the Eagle's nails  
But still more and more callous we are  
Of the Eagle's sufferings (46).

In this stanza, the persona stresses the Eagle's, that is the earth's, suffering and subsequent oncoming agony but most importantly, the ruthlessness or

the insensitivity of the passengers or inhabitants who are now at the edge of the final disaster described in the following:

Just a clapping! Yes, just a clapping of the Eagle  
And everything will be over.

Death's music, we all like it and  
Expect more.

Mother! Mother!  
Oh! Mother Earth,  
Please swallow us all at your last clapping  
At your last flapping, for  
You are tired of our greed (46-47).

From the above lines, it is crystal clear that the earth which is designated as "Mother" by the speaker is mysteriously not an entity outside human beings; it is part of human beings and it is human beings in the sense that, among its inhabitants, the only species that can care for it or destroy it and themselves is the human race. In fact, if one refers to the Bible, God created the world and entrusted it to the care of Humans. And in the perception of the poet, the human race has failed to protect the earth which gives them food, water, shade, shelter etc. and the consequence is clearly irreversible. Through the last verse: "you are tired of their greed", the poet subtly but persistently forces the reader to consider the ethical commensurability between humankind and nature, to at least think of extending ethical considerability to nature (and, similarly, to think of what it means to extend the lack of ethical considerability for nature to humankind (Estok).

Put differently, the earth should not be commodified by humans to the point of considering it only for what it can give them and never for what they can do to protect it. So, a point of interest here, from an eco-critical perspective, is the prominence in the poems of the earth as "itself an actor, a presence, a subject that needs to be taken into consideration as an equal rather than just as an object, as being integral rather than background." (Estok) Kodjovi "depicts and foregrounds landscapes as entities in their own right." (Wahu-Muchiri 67)

But quite unfortunately, people, in spite of the numerous threats and warnings, have never considered the earth as a partner or as an end in

itself but as a mere means to an end. "Mother Earth" has been so patient with the people who remained passive and insensitive until the prophecies have been accomplished. Unfortunately and as can be logically expected, considering the stubbornness of human beings, only the climax, the apocalypse is "around the corner", at the "last flapping" of the Eagle.

The persona's begging of the "Mother Earth" to "swallow us all" at the "last clapping" should not be interpreted as a form of callousness or wish but rather a sentiment of extreme anger and disappointment about the fact that human beings have not been responsible enough to heed the repeated revelations of the "Agbasiviwo", the "Bokono", the "Mamissiwo", the "Dansiwu", the Scientists and the warnings of the "Eagle" herself. It is therefore important to underline the fact that the persona wants human beings to understand that the consequences of the destruction of the environment are inevitable. In fact, the anger expressed in the poem by the persona is a kind of fear of the disappearance of human species who are confronted today with the problems they have consciously or unconsciously provoked at the early beginnings of the development of science and technology (Bafana 139). They have acted as foils for the environment.

The last verse of the poem translates a form of sympathy to the Eagle and an accusation to the humans for their "greed." And the question which needs to be answered here is "WHERE ARE YOU GOING", which is rightly the title of the second poem under scrutiny. This poem appears as a continuation of the first "THE VOYAGE OF THE EAGLE." This poem puts into scene the plan of the people to flee from the consequences of their deliberate actions. In the first stanza, the speaker invokes God to intervene:

Oh Mawu!  
Enough!  
I say  
Enough!  
These shitters, the earth polluters  
Anew are plotting  
But they will fail  
fail they must (97).

The speaker calls Mawu", "God", to intervene and put an end to the conspiracy and plot of "the earth polluters" who are getting prepared to

escape the imminent disaster that will befall humanity as a consequence of their own behavior. He blames the “shitters,” that is, those who spread feces and pollute the environment. But, it must be stressed that “shitters” here are symbolical of those who pollute the environment by “defecating” refuse, industrial smoke, electronic waste and all kinds of waste that choke the earth and prevent it from “breathing”. So, here, the persona is comparing the production of waste to passing the shit, for after all both come from humans. In the next stanza, the speaker discloses the nature of the plot thus:

Mawu!  
 Be my eye-witness  
 These shitters, life destroyers  
 Are searching hard  
 To escape the balance of their financial transactions  
 Their home, Mars, the next planet will be  
 After their dirty game of science and technology  
 development  
 But who will give the passport for such a voyage?  
 What will be the conditions? (97-98)

The persona calls attention to the important question how the aftereffects of the destruction of the earth are going to be coped with. Again, he reaches out to the supernatural, God, to make sure “these shitters, life destroyers” are denied the “passport” to the planet Mars where they intend to flee. At this stage, it is important to state that, when one considers the verse “After their dirty game of science and technology development” it is easy to understand that the target of blame here is the “Scientists who remarked the starvation of the Eagle” but did not do anything to redeem it. And it is common knowledge that researches are being conducted in western countries about eventual life on the planet Mars. This is the “passport” the persona does not wish God to give to the Scientists, who must be prepared to reap the consequences of what they have sown. Indeed, the persona does not wish the possibility of human life on the planet Mars to be confirmed. The western countries which are abusively called developed countries (development is all encompassing; it includes spiritual, cultural, human and mental plans) must receive “the balance of their financial transactions.” In other words they must pay the price for their reluctance to abandon the actions that destroy the environment. An accent is put on the developed countries because, to a large extent, they are the ones which produce larger quantities of



greenhouse gases even though they wrongly claim that they were the first to develop eco-consciousness. Ndubuisi Osuagwu makes a cogent point when he appropriately points out that:

whereas “North Nations” recognise to the world of their drive for industrialization, they are unwilling, or at best reluctant, to make the needed sacrifices to protect the environment. Such sacrifices must come from “South nations” that must abandon their own needs for industrialization and collectively retain the forest reserves for the already industrialised nations of the North (Osuagwu 179).

Osuagwu has actually thrown light on one of the most sensitive issues of international relations regarding the implementation of international agreements. In fact, making the needed sacrifices to protect the environment will have less harm, if any, to the developed nations whereas the livelihoods of developing nations would be seriously crippled. Then arises the question of ethics and that of balance of power which unfortunately weighs too heavy in the scale. The persona, like Osuagwu, blames them and terms their industrialization “dirty games of science and technology development” (97) because it does not take into account the perpetuation of humanity. In his view, for science to be fully profitable to humans, bioethics needs to be observed in order to reconcile the scientific undertakings and their moral acceptability. But these scientists seem to neglect the moral aspect and they must be there to pay the price since they fail to humanize their science. As it is argued in the *Forum of the Literatures of the Environment*

Human beings are obligated to monitor the technologies they have the intelligent capacity to create out of natural processes. Herein is a moral commitment that the humanities can engender among the best and brightest minds of the future. Indeed, with technological freedom comes responsibility. Western culture must increase its awareness of the consequences of its beliefs and actions and must recognize that any action toward the natural world is eventually an action toward oneself and toward one's culture. If a mysterious nature resides outside our expanding human knowledge, the natural and cultural whole we do understand must be seen for the enclosed system that it is. It is time for all of us together to examine (...) our own attitudes toward nature and to engender a sense of

accountability for the havoc the culture's left hand wreaks on its right hand through shortsighted technological practices (Arnold).

In the following stanza, the speaker encourages the earth to avenge:

Mother Earth,  
Do not allow any escape  
Swallow and punish them (98)

Through the above, an alert reader feels the anger of the poet at the neglect of the scientists. In the stanza, he has the persona personify the "Mother Earth" in order to instill in the reader the sense of empathy for the earth, which, like a good mother, gives mankind everything good but receives in return nothing good. Consequently, the persona wants the earth to "swallow and punish them" (98). The symbolic swallowing here is done through disasters such as mud flows and earthquakes during which the victims are literally buried. But unfortunately this extreme punishment will only serve the survivors who will learn it the hard way. But at the last resort, the persona leaves the fate of the scientist in the supreme hands of "Mawu", the Creator of everything:

Mawu!  
You have the last word  
Do as you please (98).

What this seems to mean is that the same way the persona is eco-conscious, he is also conscious about the existence of God who created the world and everything in it and entrusted them to humans to take care of. He believes that human beings "are sinners who must be punished in order to redeem them" (Nabutanyi 74), but at the same time, he seems to conclude that God has the final decision.

### **Conclusion**

This article has argued that Alex Kangnivi Kodjovi boldly exposes in his poems the irresponsibility of the human race vis-à-vis the natural environment and brings to the fore the issue of accountability. In his condemnation of the commodification of the earth, he presents it (the earth) not just as a passive object which can eternally bear humans' countless acts of destruction, but as a partner in the win-win relationship and ready to break this contract of providing for and protecting humans if

they, in return, do not take steps toward its conservation. In so doing, he condemns the excessive greed of the scientists who are represented by the developed nations, as the first to break the contract. In the main, however, Kodjovi's poems address the urgent need for the entire human race to protect the environment and this is done through several techniques including personification, irony, allegory and the use of "we" as a marker of inclusion.

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