

## **Environmental theatre for change: a study of three performances in Cameroon**

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### **Abstract**

Theatre (dramatization, rituals, story-telling sessions, songs, dances, mimes and choreography) originated from man's quest to understand his emergence, nature and environment. Besides this motive, theatre was used as a medium through which artists transmitted knowledge to members of a society, to the gods and ancestors as well as entertaining members of the society. Today, theatrical performances are enacted with the intention of educating people about politics, religion, culture, economy, society, nature and the environment. Given the importance of conserving nature and protecting the environment, theatre practitioners and environmentalists are untiringly using theatre as a medium through which they can educate Cameroonians about the different methods of conserving nature, protecting the environment as well as developing positive attitude towards nature and the environment. This paper therefore sets out to analyze three theatrical performances which aimed at educating Cameroonians about the advantages of conserving nature and protecting the environment, thus inadvertently leading to positive attitude towards nature and the environment. Ecological critical approach is used in this paper.

**Keywords:** Environmental, theatre, change, attitude.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at analyzing three theatrical performances whose targets were firstly, to educate the different audiences about nature and the environment, and secondly, to call upon spectators to conserve nature and look after the environment; thus, develop positive attitudes towards nature and the environment. These Theatrical performances include the performance of Alice Esambe Tatah's "I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide" (Unpublished) by the University of Yaounde 1 Theatre Troupe in 1997, the performance of Bubbles Theatre Troupe's "Which Way Forward?" (Unpublished) by Bubbles Theatre Troupe in 1998 and the performance of Ekpe Inyang's "The Sacred Forest" (Unpublished) by Bubbles Theatre Troupe in 2001. Prior to analyzing these performances alongside audiences' responses, it is important to briefly discuss the theory that is used in the paper, describe briefly the different regions where these plays were performed. These regions are Nguti in Nguti Sub-Division, South-West Region and Yaounde in Mfoundi Division, Centre Region. The paper is divided into four sections. Section one briefly discusses the theory used in the paper. Section two locates the two regions in Cameroon. Section three analyzes the performances concomitant with audiences' responses. Section four is the conclusion. Ecological critical theory is used in the paper.

### A Brief Discussion on Ecocritical Theory

Cicero's *In the Nature of the Gods* believes in anthropocentrism, stating that "plants exist for the sake of animals; animals for the sake of man, and man for the sake of worshipping God, thereby, concluding that all things in the universe of ours have been created and prepared for us humans to enjoy" (qtd in Borlik, 2011, p.4). Keith Thomas does not share this view. In his *Man and the Natural World*, he asserts that "inhabitants of early modern England were very much preoccupied with their natural surroundings" (qtd in Borlik, 2011, p.4). This is an

indication that ecocriticism has existed but with little progress. Today, the entire world is concerned with man, his environment and nature. It is in this context that ecocritics such as Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism simply as:

... the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii).

This definition is apt in that ecocriticism is concerned with literature that deals with the interaction of man with his environment and how the environment reacts to man's activities. For instance, Alice Esambe Tatah's "I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide" (Unpublished), one of the plays under analysis clearly states that fishermen fished all the fishes in a stream and gave little thought to the future. Later, they faced the consequences of their actions. Another ecocritic, Garrard Greg asserts:

Ecocriticism explores the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production, from Wordsworth and Thoreau to Disney and BBC nature documents. It is inspired by, but also critical of, modern environmental movements...pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals and the earth. (Greg, 2004, p. i).

The above definition incorporates many of the concerns of ecocritics. Garrard calls on man to review his contribution in either enhancing or destroying the environment and nature. Ekpe Inyang's "The Sacred Forest" (Unpublished) which is examined in this paper is concerned with man's destruction of the forest, and Bubbles Theatre Troupe's, (1999) "Which Way Forward?" (Unpublished) deals with the consequences of polluting the environment. Due to the fact that ecocriticism deals with the relationship between man and his environment, I consider it appropriate in this analysis.

## **LOCATION OF YAOUNDE AND NGUTI SUB-DIVISION**

I will begin with the location of Yaounde in Mfoundi Division in the Centre Region and proceed with the location of Nguti sub-Division in The South-West Region.

### **Location of Yaounde**

Yaounde is located in Mfoundi Division in the Centre Region. It is the Administrative Head Quarters of Cameroon. Ministries, national and international organizations, the national assembly, foreign embassies and many higher institutions are located in Yaounde. It is in Yaounde that decisions concerning the management of the country are taken. It is in this light that theatre performances aimed at persuading present and future decision makers to take good decisions or review previous decisions relating to the conservation of nature and protection of the environment are enacted in Yaounde. Therefore, it is not surprising that lovers of nature and the environment such as the organizers and lecturers of the University of Yaounde 1, who launched *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: VOLUME 3 Africa*, in Yaounde in 1997 asked the University of Yaounde 1, Theatre Troupe to perform a play based on the preservation of nature. Furthermore, the American Cultural Centre in Yaounde which believes in the preservation of nature and the protection of the environment requested Bubbles Theatre Troupe to perform a sketch dealing with the preservation of nature and the protection of the environment on World Environmental Day in 1999.

### **Location of Nguti**

Turning to Nguti Sub-Division, Nguti is the headquarters of Nguti Sub-Division. The Sub-Division is located in the thick forest zone which extends to Manyu Division and Ndian Division in the South West Region. The people of Nguti Sub-Division are referred to as the Bassosis and they speak a common language known as Bassosi. The forest in the Sub-Division is dotted with scanty populated villages. The main occupation of the Bassosis is farming, fishing and hunting. Most of the villages in Nguti Sub-Division are found in the hinterland. There are no roads leading to the hinterland except footpaths. To get to some

of the villages, twine ropes and hammocks are hung across rivers and streams. Because the villages in Nguti Sub-Division are in the hinterland, the people are very concerned with having their footpaths bulldozed and transformed into earth roads, so that vehicles might carry their food and cash crops to Nguti town where there is a market.

The forest in Nguti Sub-Division is considered as one of man's greatest and unblemished gifts. Wildlife Conservation Society (W.C.S.) which protects wildlife has interest in this region. It has carved out some section of the Forests which it calls "the park". The indigenous people are prohibited from hunting animals in the park. However, people who want to enrich themselves are indiscriminately felling and exploiting huge timbers and also degrading the forest. It is in this perspective that the director of W.C.S in Cameroon requested Ekpe Inyang who worked with W.C.S. to write a play based on the indiscriminate exploitation of the forest and the general environmental degradation in Nguti region. Ekpe Inyang Wrote "The Sacred Forest" which was produced and performed by Bubbles Theatre Troupe in 2001. The play was also filmed.

These three performances will be analyzed alongside the audience's response.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE PERFORMANCES**

I will begin with the performance of Alice Esambe Tatah's "I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide" (Unpublished) by the University of Yaounde Theatre Troupe in 1997 and proceed with the analysis of the performance of Bubbles Theatre Troupe's "Which Way Forward?" (Unpublished) by Bubbles Theatre Troupe in 1998 and lastly, the performance of Ekpe Inyang's "The Sacred Forest" (Unpublished by Bubbles Theatre Troupe in 2001).

### **Analysis of the Performance of "I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide" (Unpublished).**

The first performance that we examined in this paper is based on Alice Essambe Tatah's "I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide" (Unpublished). The play was directed by Emelda Samba (a member of

the University Theatre Troupe) and performed at the university campus on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1997, during the launch of *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre Volume 3 Africa* in Yaounde. It was an open-air performance; thus many people watched the performance. Seats were lined up in a circle. The organizers, lecturers, the university administrators and invitees sat on the seats. Students and passers-by stood. The actors and actresses performed in the middle of the circle.

The play is about a certain village which is surrounded by streams and rivers. The villagers' main occupation is fishing and farming. They have been fishing for a very long time to the point that there are no more fishes in the streams and in the rivers. The people cannot understand why there are no more fishes. They start wondering whether their gods and ancestors are angry with them and, as a consequence, have taken away all the fishes in the streams and the rivers. They consult the gods and ancestors but do not receive positive responses. One of the villagers listens to the radio and hears that another village is facing a similar problem as theirs. The villagers have caught all the fishes in the streams to the extent that there are no more fishes in the stream. He relates the story to his fellow villagers. The villagers understand why there are no more fishes in their streams. They decide to stop fishing indiscriminately and also to protect their streams and rivers.

The performance began at 3.00 p.m. with two fishermen fishing. They have caught only a few fishes. They were frustrated. Find the dialogue given hereunder:

Ndely: How was your catch yesterday? I didn't see you after ...

Sango: In fact, I left earlier. I was discouraged. After five hours of tedious fishing, I caught only three fish.

Ndely: Same thing with me ... What's happening these days? Fish is as scarce as a dog's tears. (Tatah, 1997, p. 1).

The Wachide people fail to understand that they have caught all the fishes in the streams and rivers. If they had fished wisely, they would not have protected only the fishes but inadvertently ensured that there

were enough fishes for themselves and for subsequent generations. They are suffering as a consequence of their own action. The Wachide people were ignorant of the fact that their actions towards nature would rebound on them. The ecologist, Cheryll Glotfelty maintains that “... all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as a subject the interconnections between nature and culture...” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix). The people of Wachide are not aware of the fact that their actions affect nature and nature also responds to their actions. They no longer have fish and the lack of fish creates problems in households as seen in the following dialogue:

Dione: (*Cleaning her grinding stone in her kitchen*). Wallah! My spices are ready. Let me get some leaves ready before Sango returns. I hope today’s catch will be better ... Enhh! Who’s that coming? ... Sango!

Sango: Don’t hurry so much and hit your toe. There isn’t anything for you ...

Dione: (*Furious*). No fish and you are coming back?

Sango: What should I do if no fish comes my way? Sleep in the river? (Tatah, 1997, p. 2).

Some spectators laughed and others said “die in the river”. Dione was only concerned with having fish. Women could not understand why their husbands could not catch fish. The absence of fish led to constant quarrels in matrimonial homes. Neh (the chief of Wachide) noticed with dismay the violence in most homes and decided to summon a meeting. During the meeting, the people made several suggestions. Some said they should sacrifice to their gods and ancestors who were angry with the people, “The ancestors are angry with us and have taken away the fish ... We need to give them food ...” (Tatah, 1997, p. 5). After pondering over the issue, the chief related a story where water dried up. The consequence was that trees could no long bear fruits, animals and human beings died. The few people who survived left the land and searched for a new land. But Sango narrated a story related by a journalist over the radio. The story stated that the absence of fish in

some streams was as a result of the fact that the inhabitants in the area caught all the fishes in the streams:

Sango: Yesterday, I heard from the radio that some other people were suffering like we are doing now. Their own fish too disappeared ... It said if you have a plantation, every day you harvest plantain and you don't plant more, what will happen?

Hon: Plantain will get finished.

Sango: That's exactly the answer which was given. The radio said, they were harvesting fish every day without planting more. (Tatah, 1997, p. 6)

The people unanimously nodded and agreed that they too have indiscriminately caught all the fishes in the streams and the rivers. The Wachide people believe in anthropocentric. They believe that man is in the center of existence and is lord over God's creation. From this perspective, the Wachide people caught all the fishes in the streams and ignored the fact that fishes too have a right to exist. Timothy Clark writes:

An anthropocentric' view of the natural world thus sees it entirely in relation to the human, for instance as a resource for economic use, or as the expression of certain social or cultural values – so, even an aesthetics of landscape appreciation can be anthropocentric ... (Clark, 2011, p.3).

The radio gave the Wachide people the chance to reconsider their previous views and actions towards nature. They should protect nature and also understand that everything that God created is important to the entire creation. Therefore, man should live in harmony with nature. Failure to do so would definitely have an enormous repercussion on man.

After the performance the spectators, discussion was held on the content of the performance. The students who watched the performance were very concerned with pouring *gammalin* (a substance used in



killing fishes and other animals in streams and rivers). They blamed their parents who pour *gammalin* in streams and rivers. They maintained that *gammalin* is not only dangerous to animals but also to the people who eat the dead fishes and animals. They also blamed fishermen who do not discriminate between small fishes and big fishes. It is believed the students who watched the performance educated their parents about the disadvantages of using nets to catch all the fishes in streams as well as pouring *gammalin* in streams. All this is in a bit to change people's attitudes towards nature.

As mentioned earlier, this play was performed at the campus of the University of Yaounde I. The intention of this performance was to educate the audience which was made up of people of all walks of life to protect nature, hence, change their negative attitude towards nature. Having analyzed "I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide" (Unpublished), I will now proceed to "Which Way Forward" (Unpublished).

### **Analysis of the Performance of "Which Way Forward" (Unpublished)**

The second performance to be analyzed in this paper is Bubbles Theatre Troupe's "Which Way Forward?" (Unpublished). The Director of Public Relations of The American Cultural Centre, Yaounde requested Bubbles Theatre Troupe to perform a sketch during the celebration of World Environmental Day in 1998. The troupe wrote, produced and directed "Which Way Forward". The sketch was performed during the celebration of World Environmental Day 1998.

The play deals with many issues. First, it portrays the negative consequences of burning bushes which are: the destruction of the nitrogen fixing bacteria in the soil, the destruction of flora and fauna and the loss of wildlife habitat. Secondly, the play deals with the consequences of keeping dirt. Dirt stinks and attracts flies, mosquitoes, rats and snakes. Lastly, the play portrayed the advantages of looking after the environment. Indeed, the play intended to enlighten people about the problems that arise if nature and the environment are not looked after.

The sketch was the first on the program during the celebration of World Environmental Day at the American Cultural Centre. Find below an excerpt of the sketch:

Mr. Epie: ... I know you burn the bushes to get manure for your plants, but let me explain how destructive this is. Bush fires destroy the nitrogen fixing bacteria in the soil, thus impoverishing it. The better way is to allow the cleared grass to decompose naturally. In this way, the soil will be enriched and your crops will perform better ... Even hunters, you burn bushes just to trap animals. Don't you know that this is another way of destroying our flora and fauna? This also leads to the loss of wildlife habitat (ecosystem).  
Bubbles Theatre Troupe, 1998, p. 3).

In the above dialogue, Mr. Epie calls on man to protect nature and the environment. Failure to do so creates a disastrous environment for man's wellbeing. Mr. Epie draws the attention of the people to the fact that when the flora and fauna are destroyed, the source of happiness is also destroyed as there is food scarcity which creates hunger. Mr. Epie's message is similar to the message in "I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide". The people of Wachide starved because there were no more fishes in the streams and rivers. They have caught all the fishes. In fact, people should live in harmony with nature. People should learn from Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, that "Everything is connected to everything else" (Qtd. in Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix). Greg Garrard relates the harmony that existed between man and nature as narrated in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*:

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings' and, invoking the ancient tradition of the pastoral, goes on to paint a picture of 'prosperous farms', 'green fields', foxes barking in the hills, silent deer, ferns and wildflowers, 'countless birds' and trout lying in clear old streams, all delighted by those who pass the town. (Carson, 1999, p. 21)

Mr. Epie is fully aware of the causes of environmental degradation. So, he sets out to educate people who are not yet aware to change their

attitudes towards nature and the environment. His awareness is in line with the proclamation of Cheryll Glotfelty that "... recognizing that current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xxi), is already a solution. Bubbles Theatre Troupe is adding its own voice in the environmental discourse.

After all the teaching of Mr. Epie, the villagers are glad to learn that nature and the environment must be protected. Find dialogue:

Mbakwa: We are very satisfied Mr. Epie with your concern and teaching. We thank you immensely. We must protect our environment, mustn't we?

All : We must.

Mbakwa: (*Intones a song and the others join in as they leave the stage*). The song goes:

Our Environment needs protection

We must conserve and protect our environment

It is our duty ... (Bubbles Theatre Troupe, 1998, p. 7)

The audience was glad with the messages of the performance. Nature and the environment must be protected for the benefit of the present and future generations. Some spectators maintained that the performance enabled them to learn more about the environment than they would have learnt from reading voluminous text books. H. E. K. Mundemda maintained that predecessors discovered that the most effective methods of education amongst others, was through audio-visual aids – that is, if a person only hears, he forgets, but if he hears and sees, he remembers. He further said that predecessors also realized that by presenting ideas through a variety of media, such as songs, dance, mime, poetic recitals and dramatization, one is able to capture the imagination of the people (Qtd. in Kamlongera, 1982, pp.207-222). Other spectators maintained that the papers which were presented after the performance only repeated what the performance had dealt with.

The audience that was made up of people of different professions became fully aware of the different ways of degrading the environment

and destroying nature. Spectators said they will protect the environment and nature by changing their negative attitudes towards the environment and nature. They added that this change of attitude will benefit the present generation as well as future generations. Spectators reacted in this manner because everyone suffers the consequences of a destructive environment. The people's reaction is in consonance with Helen Nicholson's assertion that "theatre that seeks to engage young people looks to the future, [...] often articulates a vision of social change and educational aspirations" (Nicholson, 2009, p. 13). We shall now proceed with the analysis of the Performance of "The Sacred Forest".

### **Analysis of the Performance of "The Sacred Forest"**

The third performance to be examined in this paper is the performance of Ikpe Inyang's *The Sacred Forest* (2001). Ikpe Inyang is an employee of Wildlife Conservation Society (W.C.S.). He writes plays that deal with forest conservation. His first environmental play "The Sacred Forest" is about the people of Ekon and their forest. The people of Ekon are farmers, fishermen and hunters. They live in the forest zone in Nguti Sub-Division where there are many timber trees. Timber exploiters promise to construct a road from Nguti town to Ekon village if Chief Osere of Ekon allows them to exploit timber in his village. Chief Osere and his people accept that the timber exploiters should exploit timber, and in return construct a road. Arere (the traditionalist) and Elder (the oldest man in the village) realize that the timber exploiters are deceiving the villagers. Timber exploiters have bulldozed a road which is only transporting timber. Arere and Elder draw the attention of the villagers to this. But Chief Osere insists that timber exploitation must continue because they need a road in order to transport their food and cash crops to Nguti town. The people agree with their chief. They sing, dance and jubilate. In the end, the Chief and his people agree with Arere and Elder. The people made a mistake by allowing timber exploiters to exploit timber in their region. Their forest is completely ruined. The trees that protected them have been felled and the animals and birds have run away. Above all, their land is exposed to excessive heat from the sun. Thus, in spite of their hard work, the harvest is always scanty. They lament because the timber exploiters have deceived them; they have not constructed the road.

In July 2001, Wildlife Conservation Society (W.C.S.) requested Bubbles Theatre Troupe to produce, perform and film “The Sacred Forest”. The play was produced, filmed, and performed in E 114 at the University of Yaounde I, for the benefit of the students of the University of Yaounde I. In this paper, I will analyze the hilarious scenes which attracted very much some spectators. The performance opened with a prologue. Philosopher (also known as Madman) is disgusted with the noise of the caterpillar and the exploitation of timber in the region. Find dialogue below:

Madman: What a tree! Every day you invite a new breed of birds to come and sing songs ... It is my God-given house! Why should someone try to push me out of my house? Why should someone come to inherit my house? No one wants to see me at his doorstep, yet every day my house is used as a hotel for everyone. What do they pay for all this? ... Greed had eaten their souls. They reap where they did not plant. They harvest where they did not toy for ... (Inyang, 2001, p. 1).

Although Philosopher dressed and acted as Madman, the audience understood his worries and sighed. Madman’s assertion was a summary of the plight of all his people. Their land which is their natural heritage is destroyed by timber exploiters. Madman laments “No one wants to see me at his doorstep, yet every day my house is used as a hotel for everyone” (Inyang, 2001, p. 1). ‘Everyone’ refers to the African upper class and their peers in the west who do not worry about the plight of African masses. Timber exploiters sell the timber at very low prices to the west which uses the timber to develop the west, while developing countries live in abject poverty.

Madman is not the only one who is disgusted with the indiscriminate manner in which the forest is exploited. Environmentalist such as Annette Kolodny is exceedingly sad as she watches the fast disappearance of the forest. She writes, “... what we need is a radically new symbolic mode of relating to “the fairest, frutefullest, and pleasauntest [land] of the world. We can no longer afford to keep turning “America the beautiful” into “*America the Raped*” (Kolodny, 1996, p.178).

To return to the performance, 1<sup>st</sup> Woman also laments... “Women have lost their main source of income. They can no longer please their men at Christmas. Not a single tree of njabe or poga was left untouched (Inyang, 2001, p. 8). When the trees are felled, birds and animal run away. The people no longer listen to the sweet melody of birds, the different sounds of animals and the sweet breeze from trees. The people are also exposed to excessive sunlight. This is detrimental not only to man but also to nature. Meanwhile, the various species of nature had lived side by side in harmony. The three playwrights “I Rather Die Than Leave Wachide” (Unpublished) “Which Way Forward?” and “The Sacred Forest” call on harmony.

Timber exploiters do not only destroy the forest, they also destroy the spices which women use in making nice dishes for their husbands, thus, destroying the very fabric of existence. 1<sup>st</sup> Woman and her community are facing the same plight as the people of Batwa of south-western Uganda. Timothy Clark relates the story of the Batwa of south-western Uganda where the people were expelled from the dense Montane forest where their ancestors had lived unobtrusively for thousands of years, and now living in shacks to the Bwindi park border. He adds that in one more generation their forest, culture – songs, rituals, traditions and stories will be completely gone (Clark, 2011, p.121).

1<sup>st</sup> Woman, like Madman, is disgusted but helpless. It seems that people who live in dense forests (particularly in the hinterlands) in developing countries share the same fate. They are victims of the powerful class in the world.

After the performance, students from the forest zone said the play portrays the truth. They maintained that timber exploiters only exploit the forest; they do not bother about the living conditions of the local people. They regretted the fact that rural communities are never consulted by timber exploiters. The latter only discusses with government officials who show very little interest in the plight of villagers. Some spectators also regretted the fact that the trucks exporting timber trees destroy the already fragile bridges in the locality. Therefore, local people cannot leave their villages particularly during the heart of rainy season.

During an interview with the playwright after the performance of “The Sacred Forest”, he maintained that his intention was to use theatre to galvanize the people in the forest zone to bring to a halt the continuous exploitation and degradation of their forest (Interview with playwright in 2001). Furthermore, on the blurb of his play “The Game” (Unpublished), he says “he is an environmental educator who is naturally inclined to using drama in sensitization and mobilization of local communities for conservation action and responsibility.” The performance gave the students the chance to discuss burning issues relating to forest exploitation. Since the students are leaders of tomorrow, it is hoped that when they become decision makers, their attitude towards the exploitation of nature and the environment would be different from that of their predecessors.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that theatre practitioners are producing and performing plays that deal with environment and nature. Their intention is to educate people about the preservation of nature and the protection of the environment with the view that spectators would change their negative attitudes towards nature and the environment, and develop positive attitudes towards nature and the environment. Furthermore, the responses of the various audiences proved that the different audiences grasped the messages raised in the performances. Therefore, theatre has an invaluable role to play in the domain of environmental protection and the conservation of nature. A theatrical performance is like a sermon in church. If two churchgoers change their attitudes after listening to a performance, the sermon has served a purpose. So too if after watching a performance, two spectators change from negative attitudes to positive attitudes, it is a positive step.

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