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An Eco-Critical Study of Tanella Boni's *La Terre* and Titinga Pacéré's *Tu me donneras l'eau*

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Abstract

The abuse of nature has emerged as a pressing global issue in recent times. The moral and ethical dilemmas surrounding human impact on the ecosystem cannot be readily disregarded in the context of the contemporary global environmental crisis. Consequently, this study investigates two African eco-poems written in French. The specific objectives are to explore the themes that connect humans to their physical environment, to examine the stylistic elements employed in representing nature, and to convey messages regarding the ecological crisis. The study adopts a qualitative paradigm and embraces the theory of ecocriticism, particularly that articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty (1996). Our findings reveal themes of ecological responsibility, reciprocity, and harmonious coexistence with nature. Literary devices such as personification, metaphor, and synecdoche project the relationship between nature and humanity. Tones of counsel, appreciation, and admonition are noted in the portrayal of the interplay between nature and humankind. The researchers advocate for nature to receive as much attention as humanity does.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, literature, poetry, eco-poetry

Introduction

Humanity's lackadaisical attitude toward nature and the environment has been a concern of literary scholars from the remote past. As far back as 1807, William Wordsworth's poem "The World Is Too Much with Us" projects a tone of criticism against humanity's total addiction to materialism and negligence of nature. Wordsworth's lamentation is clear evidence that humans have not paid adequate attention to the natural world. Until recently, the natural environment has been treated as an ordinary passive backdrop or setting in literary works. The central interconnection between humans and the ecosystem has not received sufficient scholarly attention, and this neglect has perpetuated anthropocentrism — the view that humans are paramount and nature subordinate.

If the gap created by this anthropocentric attitude is not adequately addressed, environmental degeneration and injustice will likely remain on the increase. Literary scholars and their works play vital roles in reflecting and critiquing global issues of every age. They capture human experience in creative modes and pleasurable expressions that engage feeling and attention. Creative writers address global challenges in styles that cannot be easily overlooked.

This study investigates how literary works address environmental and human-nature relationships as captured in two Francophone African poems. The specific objectives are: (1) to explore the themes that connect humans to their physical environment, and (2) to examine the stylistic elements employed in representing nature and the ecological crisis in relation to humanity. The study is delimited to two African poems written in French — "La Terre" by Tanella Boni and "Tu me donneras l'eau" by Titinga Frédéric Pacéré.

This research contributes to the growing corpus of climate literature and eco-literary studies. Its findings may serve students, academics, teachers, and researchers. Beyond raising public awareness about the significance and techniques of climate literature, the study also acts as a reference for future research.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literature and the environment. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneer in the field, ecocriticism "takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural articulation of nature" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). William Rueckert is credited with coining the term in 1978. Akaeze et al. (2023) note that the term combines "eco" (from ecology) and "criticism," and that ecocriticism is also known as environmental criticism or green criticism. Ugwoke and Udechukwu observe that ecocritical studies pay close attention to the relationship between literature and the environment, applying ecological concepts to literary analysis. Ecocriticism investigates themes such as environmental ethics, the representation of nature, and the impact of human activities on the ecosystem.

Literature derives from the Latin *littera*, meaning "writing." However, the concept has expanded beyond written works to include oral and verbal art. Egudu (cited in Akaeze et al., 2021) presents literature as a mode of expression, suggesting it encompasses not just *what* is expressed but *how* it is said — the quality that distinguishes literary art from ordinary writing. Akaeze (2021) describes literature as a powerful artistic rendering of human experience that conveys its message through language, while Ihedigbo (cited in Akaeze et al., 2021) views it as imaginative art embodying important ideas for the culture that produces it.

Poetry derives from the Greek *poesis*, meaning "to make" (Strachan & Terry, cited in Akaeze et al., 2021). It is the literary genre that most widely deploys sound and imagery to evoke meaning. Kirzner and Mandell (cited in Akaeze et al., 2021) distinguish poetry by its use of individual lines, its reliance on sound devices, and its dense deployment of imagery, symbolism, and figurative language. Emelda (cited in Akaeze et al., 2021) adds that poetry can stand alone or combine with other art forms — giving rise to poetic drama or prose poetry — and is characterized by repetition, verse, rhyme, and rhythm.

Eco-poetry is a genre stemming from ecocriticism that focuses on representations of nature, the environment, and the non-human living world in poetic texts. According to Bate (2000), "The task of the eco-poet is to find a language that will enable us to hear the voice of the earth, to be sensitive to the pain of the planet and to be moved to action by

that pain." Eco-poetry seeks to represent nature and the human-nature relationship in ways that promote understanding of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living things.

Empirical Studies

Gogoi (cited in Akaeze et al., 2023) examined Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* through an ecocritical lens, focusing on the environmental changes caused by colonialism. The study demonstrates how the imposition of European religion destroyed indigenous eco-spiritual practices — the killing of pythons (previously prohibited in Igbo culture), the abolition of burial rites for those who died by suicide, and the replacement of earth-deity offerings with church thanksgiving. Gogoi's work is relevant to the present study in its ecocritical approach, though it focuses on the novel genre and Anglophone African literature rather than Francophone poetry.

Eni (cited in Akaeze et al., 2023) studied the devastating effects of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) on the natural environment through Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. The analysis identifies political crisis, greed, and the scramble for oil as root causes of war, and documents the destruction of lives, blood, wealth, and natural resources. Eni's recommendation — that public education on peaceful conflict resolution replace violence — aligns with the present study's concern for ecological preservation, though Eni's focus is war rather than the reciprocal human-nature relationship explored here.

Javed et al. (cited in Akaeze et al., 2023) researched the role of literature in raising climate change awareness through Omar El Akkad's *American War*. Their qualitative analysis shows how the novel portrays a future American society ravaged by climate change, highlighting the urgency of healthy environmental habits. The present study differs in its geographical focus (Africa rather than America) and genre (poetry rather than the novel), but shares the conviction that literature is a vehicle for ecological consciousness.

Research Gaps

Despite growing scholarly interest in ecocriticism, several gaps remain. First, Francophone African poetry — particularly from West Africa — is underrepresented in eco-literary research. Second, few comparative studies examine Tanella Boni and Titinga Pacéré together, despite their shared West African context and complementary ecocritical visions. Third, existing research often focuses on environmental degradation or sustainability but less on the complex, reciprocal relationships between humans and nature that African eco-poetry frequently foregrounds. This study addresses these gaps by offering a comparative ecocritical analysis of two Francophone West African poems, with attention to the mutual interdependence — not merely human impact on — the natural world.

Text Presentation and Analysis

The Poems

"La Terre" by Tanella Boni (from *Labours de braise*, 1984)

La terre est notre mère
Elle nous porte et nous nourrit
Ses fleuves sont nos veines
Ses montagnes nos épaules

Les arbres sont nos frères
Ils nous donnent l'ombre et l'oxygène
Les fleurs sont nos sœurs
Elles nous donnent leur beauté et leur parfum

La nature est notre maison
Nous devons la protéger et la respecter
Car si nous la détruisons
Nous nous détruisons nous-mêmes

"The Earth" (English translation)

The earth is our mother
She carries us and feeds us
Her rivers are our veins
Her mountains our shoulders

The trees are our brothers
They give us shade and oxygen
The flowers are our sisters
They give us their beauty and fragrance

Nature is our home
We must protect it and respect it
For if we destroy it
We destroy ourselves

"Tu me donneras l'eau" by Titinga Frédéric Pacéré (from *La poésie des tréléphants*, 1991)

Tu me donneras l'eau
Pour étancher ma soif
Et je te donnerai mon chant
Ma louange et ma reconnaissance

Tu me donneras la terre
Pour cultiver et pour vivre
Et je te donnerai ma sueur
Pour la rendre fertile

Tu me donneras les arbres
Pour bâtir ma maison
Et je te donnerai mes soins
Pour les protéger et les garder

Tu me donneras les animaux
Pour me nourrir et me vêtir
Et je te donnerai mon respect
Pour les préserver et les honorer

"You Will Give Me Water" (English translation)

You will give me water
To quench my thirst
And I will give you my song
My praise and my gratitude

You will give me the earth
To cultivate and to live
And I will give you my sweat
To make it fertile

You will give me the trees
To build my house
And I will give you my care
To protect and keep them

You will give me the animals
To nourish and clothe me
And I will give you my respect
To preserve and honor them

Thematic Analysis

Theme of Love, Honour, and Kinship

In "La Terre," Boni addresses the earth as mother, the trees as brothers, and the flowers as sisters — invoking intimate family relationships that command love and high esteem. The possessive adjective *notre* (our) appears five times, creating a collective identity that binds all humanity to the earth. The poet thereby calls on readers to handle the earth with the same regard they afford family members:

La terre est notre mère (stanza 1, line 1)

Les arbres sont nos frères ... Les fleurs sont nos sœurs (stanza 2, lines 1 & 3)

Pacéré employs a different but equally intimate register. The repeated second-person address — *tu* — positions nature as a trusted interlocutor, a "you" worthy of direct address and covenant. Where Boni builds kinship through naming, Pacéré builds it through dialogue.

Theme of Care, Nurture, and Reciprocity

Both poems foreground a symbiotic relationship: nature provides, humans respond. In Boni's poem, the earth "carries us and feeds us" — a maternal image of total provision. In Pacéré's poem, each stanza follows a precise dialectical structure:

Tu me donneras l'eau ... Et je te donnerai mon chant
Tu me donneras la terre ... Et je te donnerai ma sueur

This is not a one-way extraction but a mutual exchange. Nature's gift (water, earth, trees, animals) is met with a human gift (song, sweat, care, respect). The future tense (*donneras ... donnerai*) establishes this not as a past debt or present negotiation but as an ongoing, permanent covenant.

Theme of Reliance and Interdependence

Both poems insist that the human-nature relationship is not optional. Boni makes this explicit in the final stanza:

La nature est notre maison
Nous devons la protéger et la respecter
Car si nous la détruisons
Nous nous détruisons nous-mêmes

The consequence of destroying nature is self-destruction — not punishment from an external force but the logical outcome of breaking an interdependent system. Pacéré's parallel structure reinforces the same point: every stanza balances what humans receive with what they owe, suggesting that taking without giving breaks the cycle on which life depends.

Theme of Strong Bond

The relationship between humans and nature in both poems is portrayed as indissoluble. In Pacéré:

Tu me donneras la terre
Pour cultiver et pour vivre (stanza 2, lines 1–2)

The earth is not merely a resource but the condition of existence itself — both livelihood (*cultiver*) and life (*vivre*). In Boni, the warning that destroying nature destroys the self implies a bond so fundamental that the two cannot be separated.

Theme of Nature's Supremacy

This is the most distinctive finding and deserves fuller treatment. Both poems, implicitly or explicitly, position nature as the ultimate ground of human existence. Boni's closing lines locate humanity *within* nature — "Nature is our home" — making nature the container, not the contained. Humanity does not possess nature; nature shelters humanity.

Pacéré's poem deepens this: "You will give me the earth / To cultivate and to live." The earth is the precondition for both labour and life. The verb *vivre* carries existential weight

– to live, to dwell, to be. Nature is portrayed as ontologically prior to humanity; it is the giver, humanity the receiver. The final return of all life to the ecosystem – the body returning to the earth – reinforces this supremacy. Nature does not end in humanity; humanity ends in nature.

This theme resonates with African cosmological traditions in which the earth is not inert matter but a living, spiritual force. In Igbo cosmology, for instance, *Ala* (the earth goddess) is the custodian of morality, fertility, and the ancestral realm. The supremacy of nature in these poems, then, is not merely ecological but philosophical: it challenges the Western anthropocentric assumption that nature exists for human use and instead positions humans as participants within – not masters of – a larger order.

Stylistic Analysis

Tone

The poets deploy a range of tones to project the human-nature relationship.

Tone of appreciation: Boni catalogues nature's gifts – carrying, feeding, providing shade, oxygen, beauty, fragrance – with an unmistakable note of gratitude. Pacéré begins each stanza with *Tu me donneras ...*, framing human existence as the beneficiary of nature's generosity.

Tone of love and praise: The maternal and fraternal metaphors in Boni's poem create warmth and endearment. Nature is not a resource to be exploited but a mother who "carries us and feeds us."

Tone of pedagogy: Both poems instruct. Boni teaches that the earth's rivers are "our veins," making ecological destruction a form of self-harm. Pacéré models the proper response to nature's gifts: song, sweat, care, respect.

Tone of admonition: Boni's final stanza shifts to warning – "We must protect it ... For if we destroy it / We destroy ourselves." This is not a gentle suggestion but an ethical imperative.

Personification

This is the most prominent device in both poems. Boni personifies the earth as a mother (*elle nous porte et nous nourrit*), giving nature agency, intentionality, and nurturing capacity. Pacéré's entire poem is structured as a direct address to a personified nature – the repeated *tu* treats the natural world as a conscious interlocutor capable of giving, hearing, and responding. Personification serves an ecocritical function: it collapses the subject-object distinction between humans and nature, making nature a subject with whom relationship is possible.

Metaphor

Boni's poem is especially rich in metaphor:

Ses fleuves sont nos veines — rivers as veins, making the earth's circulatory system identical to humanity's

Ses montagnes nos épaules — mountains as shoulders, linking the earth's strength to the human body

Les arbres sont nos frères / Les fleurs sont nos sœurs — extending kinship to all living things

La nature est notre maison — nature as dwelling, the ultimate container of human life

These metaphors do not merely decorate the poem; they construct an ontology of interconnection. If the earth's rivers *are* our veins, then polluting a river is bleeding. If nature is our *home*, then destroying it is homelessness. The metaphors carry ethical force.

Apostrophe

Apostrophe — addressing an absent or non-human entity as if it could respond — is most visible in Pacéré's poem, where nature is addressed directly throughout. The entire poem is a speech act addressed to *tu* (nature). This device creates the illusion of dialogue and reciprocity, reinforcing the theme of mutual covenant.

Synecdoche

Both poets use the part to represent the whole:

- *Water* (Pacéré, stanza 1) represents all natural resources and life itself
- *The earth* (Pacéré, stanza 2) represents soil, territory, and sustenance
- *The trees* (Pacéré, stanza 3) represent forest and vegetation
- *The animals* (Pacéré, stanza 4) represent all fauna
- *Rivers* (Boni, stanza 1) represent the earth's circulatory system
- *Mountains* (Boni, stanza 1) represent the earth's strength and stability

Synecdoche creates concreteness: abstract ecological relationships become tangible through specific, sensory images.

Repetition

Boni uses anaphora (repetition at the start of lines): the possessive *nos* appears seven times, binding humanity to nature through grammar itself. The structural pattern "The ... are our ..." creates rhythm and reinforces the cataloging of kinship relations.

Pacéré's poem is built on the parallel structure "*Tu me donneras ... / Et je te donnerai ...*" repeated across four stanzas. This repetition is not merely decorative — it models the cyclical, reciprocal relationship the poem advocates. The grammatical parallelism enacts the thematic balance.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how two Francophone African poems address the relationship between humans and the natural world through the lens of ecocriticism. The analysis demonstrates that both Tanella Boni's "La Terre" and Titinga Frédéric Pacéré's "Tu me donneras l'eau" are sophisticated eco-poetic works that deploy a range of stylistic

devices – personification, metaphor, synecdoche, apostrophe, and repetition – to construct a vision of human-nature relationship based on kinship, reciprocity, and interdependence.

Several key findings emerge. First, both poems challenge anthropocentrism not by arguing against it but by offering an alternative ontology: nature is not a backdrop or resource but kin (Boni) and covenant-partner (Pacéré). Second, the poems demonstrate that eco-poetry need not be polemical to be effective – their power lies in the beauty and precision of their imagery, not in didacticism. Third, the theme of nature's supremacy – most clearly articulated in Boni's claim that "Nature is our home" and in Pacéré's positioning of nature as the giver and humanity as the receiver – offers a genuinely counter-anthropocentric perspective that resonates with African cosmological traditions and challenges Western assumptions about human dominion over the earth.

The study has limitations. It examines only two poems by two poets, and generalizing to Francophone African eco-poetry as a whole would require broader sampling. Additionally, the analysis is limited to textual interpretation; reader-response or ethnographic research on how these poems are received in West African communities could enrich understanding. Finally, the absence of a full comparative framework with Anglophone African eco-poetry limits the study's scope.

Future research could extend this work in several directions: (1) a comparative study of Francophone and Anglophone African eco-poetry, examining how colonial language traditions shape ecological consciousness; (2) an ecocritical analysis of the full collections from which these poems are drawn (*Labours de braise* and *La poésie des tréléphants*); (3) investigation of how African eco-poetry engages with oral traditions and indigenous ecological knowledge; and (4) pedagogical studies examining the use of eco-poetry in environmental education at secondary and tertiary levels.

The continued scholarly attention to literature's engagement with the natural world is urgent. As the global environmental crisis deepens, the voices of poets who insist on the kinship between humans and the earth – who remind us that destroying nature is destroying ourselves – deserve not only analysis but amplification. This study affirms that African eco-poetry, particularly from the Francophone tradition, is a rich and under-examined resource for reimagining the human place in the more-than-human world.

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