

https://dspace.org/

Ecocriticism and environmental knowledge of Asante oral traditional poetry

Asante-Darko, Kwaku

2008-03-07T12:03:52Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/4603

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

> *environmen*t – these are the interrelated building blocks of human, and therefore national, security.[359] (emphasis added).

The conjugation of the two similar endeavours of Ecocriticism and development should, therefore, produce the type of insight which Anthony Tatlow observes in the conjugation of the roles of Anthropology and Literature. He notes: "To my mind, some of the most interesting recent comparative criticism has been written by anthropologists who have applied the insight of literary theory to their own discipline, thus helping us all to understand better the nature of creative and communicative processes."[360]

5 : 3 Research Concerns

The linkage between different disciplines in matters concerning environmental research has seen great advances in recent times. Such advances have been a great background inspiration to the advent of the activism of Ecocriticism. For example, in a 1980 pioneering-work entitled "Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development" Brokensha, Warren, and Werner advocated that local knowledge should not be ignored in the formulation of schemes of socio-economic and environmentalism development. It is interesting to note that a literary aspect of the issues raised had been addressed two years earlier by William Rueckert's book, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Both works had been prompted by concerns for environmental degradation the world over. Evidently, works[361] in other disciplines had linked economic decline in

---

[359] Kofi Annan, "Secretary-General Salutes International Workshop on Human Security in Mongolia." Two-Day Session in Ulaanbaatar, May 8-10, 200. Press Release-SG/SM/7382. <www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/20000508.sgsm7382.doc.html>

[360] Antony Tatlow, "Comparative Literature as Textual Anthropology", in Steven Totosy de Zepetnek (ed.), *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2003, p. 208.

[361] Such works include : Réne Dumont, *Stranglehold on Africa*, London: Deutsch, 1983; Jean Ziegler, *Sociologie de la Nouvelle Afrique*, Paris : Gallimard, 1964 ; Jean Ziegler, *Les Nouveaux Maîtres du Monde*

Africa to aspects of the environmental crisis. Such works have given rise to a vigorous search for alternative knowledge systems capable of solving problems related to the ecological aspects of the developmental effort in the Third World. Works which sought the incorporation of local knowledge into the development processes ignited research in disciplines including agriculture, anthropology, fisheries, forestry, ecology, biology, botany, and medicine. In this regard Beal, Dissanayaka and Konoshima (1986) indicated that environmental degradation and its concomitant economic underdevelopment in the Third World was attributable to the fact that technology is made in research institutes, laboratories, and universities in the developed world and then transferred to the underdeveloped world. They underlined the fact that such technologies (and their underlying values and perceptions of development) were more often than not, ill-suited to local conditions when applied in the practices of areas such as oil exploitation, mining, dam building, timber logging, and mono-cultural agriculture of cash crop, cattle ranches, and the establishment of national game parks. The contention that technology should be tailored to suit cultural reality and local needs obtained a boost from the Brundtland Report (1987)[362] which equally advocated such ideas and underlined the element of "grassroot participation" as central to the achievement of environmental "sustainability".

---

et Ceux qui les Résistent, Paris : Seuil, 2003 ; Jean-Yves Carfanatan and Charles Condamines, *Qui a Peur du Tiers Monde : Les Rapporst Nord-Sud, Les Faits*, Paris : Seuil, 1980 ; Tibor Mende, *From Aid to Recolonization : Lessons of a Failure*, London : Harraps, 1973 ; Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, Washington, D. C., Howard University Press, 1981 ; Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, Paris : Maspero, 1961.

[362] A Report in 1987 by the United Nations Committee on the Environment and Development. The report was led by the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. It was entitled: Our common Future (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987).

Following this inspiration Chambers, Posey and Thrupp (1989)[363] emphasized the need to rely on the local knowledge of farmers on the ground. Other researchers such as Bebbington[364] studied farming methods and came to the conclusion that indigenous knowledge is "a dynamic response to a changing context constructed through farmer 'practices', indicating the political importance of indigenous knowledge as a local point of identity."[365] C. Adams added to this need by specifying that indigenous knowledge is "a definition and appropriation of knowledge and meaning […] a central issue of empowerment."[366] Posey et al. (1994) went on from there to specify that this knowledge is usually manifest in the areas of gathered products, game, aquaculture, agriculture, resource units and cosmology. Since then a legion of works[367] has followed the quest of taking seriously the field of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).

It is significant to note that all the above active expression of interest in the study of the connection between Nature and development is linked to the issue of ecological

---

[363] R. Chamber, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, London and New York: Longman, 1983; D. A. Posey, "Indigenous Knowledge and Development: an ideological bridge to the Future?", Ciencia e Cultura 35, pp. 877-894, 1983; L. A. Thrupp, "Women, Wood, and Work", in *Kenya and Beyond*, Unasylva. FAO Journal of Forestry, December 1984.

[364] A. J. Bebbington, "Modernization from Below: An Alternative Indigenous Development?", in *Economic Geography* 16, 1993, pp. 274-292, p.275.

[365] L. Jan Slikkerveer, "Ethnoscience, 'TEK' and its Application to Conservation", in *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, Darrel Addison Posey (ed.), United Nations Environmental Programme, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999, p.172.

[366] C. Adams, *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, New York: Continuum, 1993, p. 146.

[367] Examples of such works are: M. Wells and K. Brandon, with L. Hannah, *Peoples and Parks: Linking Protected Area Management with Local Communities*, World Bank, WWF-US and US Agency for International Development, Washington D.C., 1992; K.B. Ghimire and M. P. Pimbert, *Social Change and Conservation: Environmental Politics and Impacts of National Parks and Protected Areas*, Earthscan and UNRISD, London, 1997; A. Kothari, P. Pande, S. Singh, and R. Dilnavaz, *Management of national Parks and Sanctuaries in India, Status Report, Indian Institute of Public Administration*, New Delhi, 1989; P. C. West, and S.R. Brechin (eds), *Resident People and National Parks: Social Dilemmas and Strategies of International Conservation*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991.

literacy[368] and hence the scheme of Ecocriticism. In the specific instance of Asante this responsibility toward Nature necessitates the urgent tackling of problems such as the one Mika Vehnamaki describes as follows:

> "…Ghanaians have received education that has not much emphasized Ghanaian indigenous particularities but rather attempted to root in and even superimpose the dominant, alien 'Western way of thinking' among local students. … This coexistence has surely been unbalanced and more or less uneasy, at times alienating and at times conscientizing the people with their own cultures."[369]

Part of the problem is that here the options are varied as to what constitutes the best way to approach the issue of environmental education. Thomas Schaaf, for example, notes that: "It would be good if environmental education were targeted specifically at young people in informing them that the beliefs of the elders can be very beneficial for the preservation of the environment for future generations."[370] But one of the problems raised by this vision is that, I think it is likely that even if there existed a galvanised common or unified perspective on what to do with local knowledge one would still have to toe a fine line. Maj-lis Follér draws our attention to this fact:

> But also within the 'greening' discourse there seem to be two extreme ideas of which future we are aiming for: on one hand the idea of throwing the whole [Western] developmental paradigm away, thus just seeing the negative impacts of modernization, and on the other hand, seeing the local ecological knowledge paradigm as a magical solution for the future of the indigenous people and for sustainable development.[371]

---

[368] Capra explains that: "…being ecologically literate, or 'ecoliterate", means understanding the principles of organization of ecological communities (i.e. ecosystems) and using those principles for creating sustainable human communities" (ibid.)

[369] Mika Vehnamaki, "Culture and Economic Development in Ghana: The Conventional Wisdom Revisited", in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, vol 8, Issue 1, pp. 57 –79, p. 64 –5.

[370] Thomas Schaaf, "Environmental Conservation based on Sacred Sites" in Darrel Addison Posey (ed.), *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, United Nations Environmental Programme, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999, p. 342.

[371] Maj-Lis Follér, "Are Indigenous Groups and Local Knowledge Threatened in today's World Society", in Darrel Addison Posey (ed.), Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity, United Nations Environmental Programme, Intermediate Technology Publications, 1999, pp. 199-203, p.202.

Here, one finds a succinct statement of the disputing approaches to the realization of the environmental consciousness which is central to the realization of the objective of development.

As regards Asante, it is hoped that more work on Ecocriticism and development will feed into the discourses and policy debates and strengthen the already existing practice which Mzo Sirayi commends when he note:

> …in Ghana the relations between cultural policy and development have been emphasised through the use of custodians of the oral tradition to educate their children in these traditions, as well as by using the other forms of knowledge and skills that modern education has to offer. This was seen as a means of revitalising rural areas in Ghana.[372]

Thus, in its activism (which has inspired the analysis of the social, developmental and literary essence of these proverb-poems) Ecocriticism attests to the manner in which the literary artistic endeavour feeds into the general developmental efforts in society through environmental consciousness-raising. It is equally important to underline that the type of link that the analysis (around Ecoriticism and development) has inspired attests to the literary input to environmental perception. An observation from Bakhtin is appropriate in this regard:

> Literature is one of the independent parts of the surrounding ideological reality, occupying a special place in it in the form of definite, organized philological works which have their own specific structures. The literary structure, like every ideological structure, refracts the reflections and refractions of other ideological spheres (ethics, epistemology, political

[372] Mzo Sirayi, "Municipal Cultural Policy: A missing link in Urban and Rural regeneration" in *Southern African Journal of Folklore*, vol. 14, no.1, 2004, pp. 19-31, p. 26.

> doctrine, religion, etc). That is, in its 'content' literature reflects the whole of the ideological horizon of which it is itself a part. [373]

[373] M. M. Bakhtin, and M. Medvedev, *The Formal Method of Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, (Translated by Albert J. Wehrle), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 4.