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Mmen Orature and Environmental Sustainability: A Study of Some Selected Mmen Proverbs and Oral Narratives

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Abstract: *Literary scholars have recently been applying the environmentally based approach, ecocriticism, to the appraisal of literary texts. In order to address issues central to local and global ecological sustainability, Mmen Orature and Environmental Sustainability: A Study of Some Selected Mmen Proverbs and Oral Narratives set out to investigate and analyze some proverbs and oral narratives of the Mmen people of Cameroon. This study demonstrates that Mmen Orature can be studied with the aim of questioning and advancing the worth and relevance of the environmental information contained in it. Considering the relevance of the environment in the lives of Mmen people, the study contends that the environment is in crisis and, Mmen Orature can be studied to rescue it and promote environmental sustainability. The problematic here is to ascertain whether Mmen Orature possesses environmental data that can enable the application of the ecocritical framework to their appraisal and advance the contemporary discourse on climate change and environmental degradation, and be a source of inspiration for the awakening of environmental consciousness in Mmen that can help to sustain the environment locally or globally. The analysis here was guided by ecocriticism. The study equally highlighted that, in composing texts, the traditional artists consciously or unconsciously showed environmental knowledge which responded to the ecological needs of their society and can, today, contribute solutions of environmental crisis, currently discussed in international conferences. Methodologically, this work required intense field work and the researcher collected data through interviews, performance contexts and observations. The findings tentatively revealed that Mmen proverbs and oral narratives are instruments that can foster environmental sustainability.*

Keywords: *Mmen, orature, environmental, sustainability, proverbs, and oral narratives.*

INTRODUCTION

Mmen orature in this study undoubtedly constitutes both the oral and written forms. This study seeks to investigate and analyze the impact of orature in a contemporary Cameroonian society. In order to achieve this objective, the study hopes to examine the role that Mmen orature can play in the sustenance of the environment. No one doubts that the environment is plagued by constant environmental degradation and pollution. This has brought about the international cry of climate change and the call for the change of man's attitudes towards Mother Earth (nature). From this premise, one cannot be wrong to underscore the fact that mother earth is a beautiful place that has sustained everything for millions of years. Thus, people are now more than ever before, gaining awareness of the environment and are showing a willingness to change because human expansion, deforestation and pollution have done damage to it. This study is expected to contribute in changing the way man thinks about his environment. This is to be done by encouraging him to create a friendly relationship with his



environment. It emphasizes the importance of orature as it demonstrates that proverbs and oral narratives can be used to sensitize man on the need to manage his environment sustainably.

The evolution in the study of orature has led to the development of terms such as African oral literature or African orature. In Kashim Ibrahim Tala's *Orature in Africa*, orature is considered as "literature that is composed orally, performed orally and transmitted orally." (11) This means that it is a blend of sounds, words, body and rhythmic movement. Here, the composers of the performance are the singers and the dancers. By the same token, the performer usually transforms an oral piece into words, before an audience on a specific occasion and the audience participates and contributes in realizing the oral performance. The composition, performance and transmission of the oral piece, be it poetry, drama, or prose, is done orally. There is no written instruction. This constitutes the core of African oral literature otherwise known as orature. It is therefore, through Orature that the people come face to face with their world view, their environment, their mores, cultural values, philosophy and belief system. orature can be considered as rich and original in knowledge and wisdom. Mbunda Frida Menkam in *Wonder Tales of Oku and the Aesthetic of Storey telling* states:

Story telling is as old as human race...The Oku people like their counterparts the world over, love stories, storytelling among them dates back into time immemorial long before the coming of Europeans, even before the development of writing, Oku people gave artistic expressions to their thoughts, feelings and concerns in myths, legends, allegories, parables, tales, songs, chants, proverbs, riddles and theatres. The folk take which is among the most popular of this genres, flourished most during this period, but with the coming of western civilization, there was a neglect in storytelling due especially to the activities of missionaries which saw storytelling as heathen and not fit for the men of the church. (2002)

In this light, the overzealousness with which the Oku person as well as the Mmen person believed in the colonizer's agenda has led us to the abandonment of our cultural heritage. Thus, the decline in storytelling isn't limited to Oku. Mmen society also witnesses a similar phenomenon with her indigenous wisdom and there is need for it to be revived. The preservation of oral art forms like proverbs and storytelling in Mmen has begun to give way to western recreational facilities such as television and the internet, thus endangering the indigenous native wisdom contained in the tales and proverbs. Nowadays, children spend most of their time playing football, watching television and browsing the internet or even interested only in urban orature like music. Some of these activities have very little or nothing to contribute to environmental sustainability. This means that orature stands out as one of the sources of social, economic, environmental and philosophical knowledge in our culture.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Defining the key concepts will facilitate the understanding of this paper, and dispel ambiguity. It is in this view that one can cite Bernard Fonlon's postulation that: if any discussion, any investigation, is to be fruitful, we must begin with the first principles... and yet, it is the first discourse, this is in order to let our readers know clearly and precisely right from the start, the context in which the terms shall be used. (2013:3)

It is important in a scientific study of this nature to begin by providing operative definitions of terms which situate the researcher(s) and their audience in the context of the study. Operational definitions should, therefore, help readers distinguish one concept from another and see how a study meets up with the definitions offered. The terms 'Mmen' 'orature'



'environment' 'sustainability' 'proverbs' and 'oral narratives' will, therefore, be defined here since they are the key words in the study.

Mmen, the study area is a village found in Fungom Sub-Division in Menchum Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. The population of the study includes all the Mmen people who by the June 28th, 2020 worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nation's data culled from *TOLOKYI Folktales in Mmen Tradition* is approximately 100.000 inhabitants. (2020: xiv) Mmen, is characterized by hot, humid vegetation, and has two seasons. The rainy season, generally runs for eight months and the dry season with four months. The mean annual rainfall in Mmen is approximately 2550mm while the mean annual temperatures are between 27^oC and 34^oC. Day time temperature therefore exceeds 27^oC while temperature falls to about 10^oC at night. It is important to note that, during the dry season the afternoon periods are hot while the nights are cold. The relative humidity exceeds 80% in July-August and it is lowest in January-February (35-40%).

The dry season starts from mid-October to mid-March and the wet season from mid-March to mid-October. There are however, local variations due to other orthographic factors. Rainfall is unevenly distributed throughout the year due to the effect of the two different air masses. The South West winds absorb moisture from the Atlantic Ocean, causing rains from Mid-March to November. Mmen has an uneven or undulating topography made up of hills, lowland as well as level lands. The topography of the place has contributed in making Mmen undoubtedly an enclave area. In that wise, much trekking was done since they neither had accessible roads nor vehicles to ply the road. The aspects of relief are very present in the oral art forms as we would be discovering when we get to the art forms under study. This and other values that are attached to some features like the caves, the rivers, explain the sacred relationship they share with them. Talking about the land situation, Mmen has very fertile soils. Farmers produced crops like maize, beans, millets, vegetables and trees like cola nuts, eucalyptus, palms, together with some medicinal plants that they cultivate and plant. Their farm produce were used for feeding and excesses were sold or exchanged for what they did not have, while herbalists relied on the medicinal plants to heal the sick and other traditional rites. Owning land for the above purposes was free and mostly acquired by the males since women at the time were not allowed to own land but to farm family lands or those owned by their husbands. The size of land owned by a man in the process was another measure of livelihood and man hand and at times determined the title or attributes given to the man in society.

Orature comes from two words, that is; "ora" from oral and "ture" from literature meaning oral literature. The term orature was coined by a Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu in an attempt to avoid an oxymoron but oral literature remains more common both in academic and popular writing. Orature has to do with spoken forms of art like poetry, prose and drama.

The Encarta Encyclopaedia defines Orature as a collective body of oral texts, variously described as folklore of verbal arts.

In a similar vein, Nol Alembong in an article entitled " *Culture, Orature and Personality in Africa* " says, 'orature is a term used to designate what Ruth Finegan has referred to as "unwritten literature" or that branch of literature that is told orally" (2003-2004)

Tala Kashim Ibrahim sees Orature as:

a work of art expressed in carefully selected language, irrespective of whether it is spoken sung or chanted and which deals with the thoughts, concepts and ideas of an individual or a people. Thus whether an individual expresses his joys or sorrows



through language effectively, orature can be said to be in the making. Orature is used for such function as praising, mourning, moral instruction and entertainment and is characterized by creativity beauty and emotion. (Ambanasom2012:252).

Here, one can clearly see the intellectual puzzle that goes with the definition of this term.

In as much as one can agree with such views, it is also important to highlight that, the researcher's intention in this work is not to get into the polemics of the term but to assert as Tala does in *Power And Marginality in Contemporary Cameroonian Orature*, (5) that: 'when a literary piece has been composed orally, performed orally, transmitted orally and is presented in a special literary language, that constitutes Orature'. Henry Kah Jick, also upholds like Tala on orature that 'when a literary work has been composed orally, performed orally and transmitted orally, it is considered orature' From both definitions it is obvious that both art forms fit squarely within the context of this study. This would be my adopted definition for this study. The researcher intends in this work to use Oral literature and Orature interchangeably, given that both need to be seen to carry the same meaning.

Environment/ Nature

When one turns to the meaning of the environment, one would readily agree with Environment in Aslet's view in *The Grolier Library of Environmental Concepts and Issues* is said to: literally mean all things around us, including nature.

Environment is 'all of the surrounding things, conditions, and influences affecting the growth or development of living things... the condition of the air, water, soil, plants and animals; natural surroundings (Clarence L., Barnhart 708). Holly E Brisbane defines environment as 'the people, places and things that surround and act upon someone and influence how that person develops (514) According to Webster's Third New Dictionary, the environment consists of the... 'aggregate of social and cultural conditions (as customs, laws, language, religion, and economic and political organization) that influence the life of an individual or a community (760).

On the other hand, 'environmental' is an adverb derived from the noun-environment. According to the New World Dictionary of the American Language, environment is 'a surrounding, all conditions, circumstances and influences surrounding and affecting the development of an organization or group of organization' (468) Clarence L Barnhart and Robert K. Barnhart consider environment as 'all of the surrounding things, conditions, and influences affecting growth or development of living things... the condition of the air, water, soil, plants, and animals; natural surrounding' (1994: 708).

Generally, therefore, environment will be considered in this study as all the natural surroundings and conditions within which a living thing lives, interacts and is influenced by them. These will include not only the natural but also social and cultural conditions that affect the growth or development of living things. Nature in this study which is synonymous to environment, is also defined by the all *Encarta Dictionary* as: The physical world including natural phenomenon and living things, the forces and processes that collectively control the phenomenon of the physical independent of human volition and human Intervention, sometimes personified as a woman called Mother Nature.(http://Encarta.mms.com/dictionary_18616325/nature. (Html).The western world and Africa have clear views about nature. The western world sees it as an independent phenomenon with an aesthetic reality. In rural Mmen society, nature is strongly woven into the social, economic and metaphysical realities, as it cannot be independent.



Ralph Waldo Emerson sees Nature as: the environment that is free from society's conventional attitude and opinions, a place where one can discover oneself, unique and apart from all other relations. (1985). This means that Emerson sees the natural environment as a place in which we return to reason and faith. This researcher is going to use the word nature to refer to the natural environment composed of man, plants and animals and physical features. This is going to be the researcher's working definition in his analyses in this work. It is important to understand this definition because this researcher would occasionally be referring to it in the thesis. Given that environment and nature can be interchangeably used to mean the same thing, nature can stand for environment or natural ground, unmodified. That is, standing for the summary of everything that has to do with biological, chemical and physical states, and events in the physical universe. It is important to point out that both terms would be used interchangeably in this work to mean the same thing.

The next term to be defined here is 'Sustainability'. Sustainability is a noun from the verb 'to sustain'. From the verb to sustain, we have the adjective 'sustainable' which is also important as an important indicator in this study. Sustainability, according to the online Encyclopaedia Britannica is:

The long term viability of a community set of social institutions or societal practise. In general sustainability is understood as a form of intergenerational ethics in which the environmental and economic actions taken by present persons do not diminish the opportunities of future persons to enjoy similar levels of wealth, utility or welfare
[https://www.britannica.com/search?query= Environmental +sustainability](https://www.britannica.com/search?query=Environmental+sustainability). Assessed 11/07/2022 at 19: 30 pm

From the above definition, it is important to note that the viability of community in which every activity of the society is carried out on the environment, ought to be long term and intergenerational without diminishing any opportunities for future persons. Sustainability is therefore presented as an alternative to short term, myopic and wasteful behaviours. It can also serve as a standard against which existing institutions are to be judged and as an objective towards which society should move. Sustainability also involves an interrogation of existing modes of social organisation to determine the extent to which they encourage destructive practices as well as a conscious effort to transform the status quo, so as to promote the development of more sustainable activities. It is therefore imperative to point out that the institutions in which this term would be judged would be no other locus than Mmen, our case study.

On the other hand, The Cambridge online Dictionary defines 'sustain as 'able to be maintained at a certain rate or level' and 'sustainability' being 'the ability to be maintained at a certain level; or avoidance or the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance'. From the foregoing delimitations, this researcher hopes to consider 'sustainability' in this thesis as a process of change by which attempts are made at maintaining or improving on the environment for the betterment of somebody or a group of people or something. It is, therefore, considered here as the act of continuing on a behavioral pattern or improving on this behavioral pattern by a group of people for their collective environmental betterment for both the present and future generations.

Proverbs

The proverb is one of the prominent genres of oral literature. When it comes to Proverbs, the debate on which should be its right definition still raises an intellectual puzzle. There are as many definitions of the word proverb as there are scholars in the area of proverbial studies.



There is no universality accepted definition of the word. This is true as Peter Grybek, quoted by Nol Alembong in his book *Standpoints on African Literature* opines that 'There is not generally acceptance which covers all specifics of the proverbial genre' This means that each group defines the word from the standpoint of its culture, which is carved on the points of form, brevity, figurative language and comment.

Ruth Finnegan, in *Oral Literature in Africa* notes that those who specialize in the study of proverbs define a proverb as: a saying in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it. (1976:395). In fact, given their in-exhaustive definitions, it is important to note that the experiences of each community as well as their environments remain vital. Indeed, the common thing about them again is the fact that they carry wisdom that is very rich, intended to teach society. This valid prescription can be seen as a parameter through which society can be judged in an attempt to give it meaning.

The proverbs of a people as defined by Webster are 'short sayings in common use, expressing a well-known truth or common fact ascertained by experience or observation.' This means that proverbs are a key to both the language and culture of a people. It is for this reason that the Mmen community pays a lot of attention to it. On the importance of the proverb, leading African writers like Chinua Achebe uphold in *Things Fall Apart* that '...among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.'(1958:6). To support the value of the proverb, Kashim Ibrahim Tala in *An Introduction to Cameroon Oral Literature* opines that 'proverbs constitute a fundamental ingredient in the intellectual tradition of Cameroonians. It stems from everyday activities and is used by elders as a guide to conduct, to express moral lessons and improve on oratory.' (1984) Proverbs constitute literature and literature is a reflection of a given society. It codifies the existence, struggles, philosophies, aspirations etc of the people, seen in this light, proverbs reflect the realities of the society that produce and use them.

John Nkemngong Nkengasong has rightly pointed out in *A Stylistic Guide to Literary Appreciation*, that African cultures have a rich repertoire of proverbs and riddles. In many of African societies effective speech and social success depend on a good command of proverbs .As the Ibos in Nigeria say 'proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten' such treasure sayings express the wisdom of the ages and are also very vital in arguments or discussions, (2007: 61)

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary Encyclopaedia Edition defines a proverb as a short well known saying that states a general truth or gives advice.

In fact, proverbs are short sayings with words of advice or warning, always philosophical and relate more to the author's background and tribe. Just like Achebe uses proverbs to validate the aforementioned assertion, I also wish to do same by focusing not only on proverbs but equally on oral narratives from Mmen. In that light, the use of proverbs is declining with the people's indigenous wisdom and there is need for them to be revived. Given that the debate on the definition of what a proverb should be is yet to have a consensus, This researcher, would for the purpose of this study define a proverb as a popular saying with immunity from censure that carry authority, expressing in a concise manner moral and value judgements, indicating what is right or wrong and what is good or bad.

The Oral Tale/Narrative on the other hand is differently defined by various scholars of Orature. Sir James Frazer sees the oral tales as:



Invented by persons unknown and handed down first by word of mouth from generation to generation, narratives which though they profess to describe actual occurrences, are in fact purely imaginary, having no other aim than entertainment of the hearer and making no claim of his credibility. In short, they are fictions, pure and simple, devised not to instruct or edify the listener but only to amuse him, they belong to the region of pure romance. (1989:14)

Frazer's definition points to the tale as fictional in character and entertaining in quality but less is done on its didactic capacities. His definition can be considered faulty when he says that oral tales are not devised to instruct or edify the listener but to amuse him, because tales are expected to be regarded as containing a lot of didactic materials.

William Bascom considers oral tales as:

...prose narratives which are regarded as fiction. They are not considered as dogma or history. They may or may not have happened and they are not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, although it is often said that they are told only for amusement, they have other important functions as the class of moral tales should have suggested. Oral tales may be said in any time and place. (1989:13)

Bascom in his definition identifies with that of Frazer only at the level of entertainment.

H.O. Chukwuma says:

The oral tale is the traditional folktale. Its characteristics are brevity, terseness, episodic plot and action, climactic heightening of a central conflict and the limitation of character, the oral tale...portrays an aspect of life and reality through varied means. The final goal is to bring to man knowledge and awareness of his environment ...the oral tale is a child of tradition, almost always apocryphal, belonging to the whole community. It enjoys abundant freedom and identifies with anyone in the community who can articulate it creditably. (1989:15).

This clearly shows that the final goal of the oral narrative is to bring to man some valuable knowledge and awareness of his environment.

Tala on his own part, points out that tales are both didactic and entertaining, when he says:

I hold the view that while seeking to entertain, the oral tale also helps man to be a hare of his nature and his environment. In other words, the narrator and his audience use the medium of a storytelling session to examine the important affairs of the society. Seen from this perspective, the most important element in an oral tale will be the impact that a protagonist has on his environment. (1989:44).

This submission and that of Chukwuma are important to this study because they clearly show the dialectical relationship between Mmen orature and the environment and their ability to promote environmental sustenance.

Paul Mbangwana on his own part sees an oral tale as: *a traditional narrative which is embedded in a social context and is composed by the narrator/performer. In other words, the oral tale is a traditional form of art whose artist uses certain entertaining modes to articulate it. (1989:14)* From this definition, it is evident that the oral narrative is an offshoot of a cultural environment and possesses some social functions necessary for the growth of the traditional nature of the material. Having adapted workable definitions for the study, let us now turn to the research problem.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The global environment is in crises and Mmen orature can rescue that environment both locally and globally. In his unpublished Master's Thesis, Sama Festus Ambe states:



All the efforts that have been put in by policy makers, development agents, economists, environmentalists, and others to curb environmental problems have failed to make the environment comfortable. As such, the problems remain a major challenge to man. Even though environmental education has long been established in Cameroon, and efforts are being made by the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife and the Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection to preserve the fauna and flora of the environment through radio programmes, legal prosecution, tree planting campaigns, and liaising with international bodies such as the World Bank and the United Nations' Environmental Programme, the situation remains disturbing (17).

This study therefore, questions the appropriateness of all the approaches used, relative to the efforts that previous scholars and environmental specialists have employed to no avail in seeking to make the environment comfortable. Mmen oral tradition is dying. The oral art forms are declining and the people's language, cultural and social value as well as indigenous knowledge about the environment contained in the tales. Story telling events like proverbial usage are giving way to western recreational facilities such as the television, radio and the internet and as such endangering the native wisdom contained in proverbs and oral narratives. In Mmen, the dying nature of proverbs and storytelling is threatening the natural environment. Environment awareness is on a poor state and the environment can be considered to be threatened.

Although Mmen orature is still vibrant in real life situations it has failed to focus on environmental issues, making its critical voice virtually silent in this domain. Environmental issues affect every human being and are a true global concern. The impact of climate change worldwide and across many areas of life, this includes our food, physical and mental health, where and how we live, wildlife and environmental systems and political direction. We need therefore to explore how climate change affects Mmen people in varying ways and how we can take action to manage such threats, providing possible solutions with regard to effective environmental management. Considering the importance of the environment to Mmen people, scholars of Mmen extraction have carried out studies on other literary genres as if they have not got their own orature. They seem to think that literature is only that of the written text. Literature nonetheless, involves both the oral and written forms. Mmen people in particular tend to abandon their rich, dynamic and important culture in favour of western cultures.

Mmen orature and the role it can play, especially with a focus on proverbs and oral narratives in the promotion of environmental sustainability, would be the main focus of this work. This neglect can be noticed in the attitude of elders and youths alike.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has as objectives to point out how ecocriticism can effectively be applied in the analysis of Mmen orature, Next, how a corpus of Mmen proverbs and oral narratives can help in environmental sustenance. In the same vein, to evaluate how Mmen people think about their environment and its sustenance.

HYPOTHESIS

This work's hypothesis contends that the environment is in crisis, and Mmen Orature can be studied to rescue it and promote environmental sustainability.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF STUDY

This study required intense field work in order to collect the selected proverbs and oral narratives in their original form. Consequently, the researcher conducted interviews with a



specific rank of informants drawn among the traditional authorities, sub-chiefs, king-makers, titled men and women and both the old and young people who are knowledgeable in the Mmen oral tradition. The researcher recorded the proverbs and oral narratives in the target language that is, in Mmen from both live and simulated performances, and then translated them into the English language. Furthermore, the performer, his role, the role of the audience, the performance context, kind of proverb or oral narrative and para-linguistic features were identified during the selection and classification of the proverbs and oral narratives from tapes, photos and from jotted notes. In all, the researchers collected forty five proverbs and twenty five oral narratives. This paper, therefore, limits itself only to 2 of the proverbs and 2 narratives due to the constraint of space. This study paid attention to Ben-Amos's insistence that: the attempt to discover the principles of Oral Literature communication in each culture in Africa must begin with the identification and analysis of the cognitive, expressive and social distinctive features of Oral Literature forms... (2016).

The substance of the foregoing contention highlights the fact that the collection of present day Orature also employs the library search as an approach for data collection which this researcher also used. In the field the researcher collected proverbs and narratives and after their classification worked strictly with those related to the environment. The art forms were collected by means of interviews, context performance and simulation, following the fact that proverbs no longer exist as frequently as before. Interviews were conducted by tape recording, although in the course of this, the researcher jotted a few points on paper to understand better, a camera was also used in which pictures on performances were taken. The researcher visited all of the study areas. So a lot of trekking was done following the fact that the researcher had to walk these distances to get proverbs and carry out interviews. In the course of these sessions, performers were alerted ahead of time, so that they organized themselves, this showed clear evidence that proverbial lore is in decline. During the performance it was noticed that some of the informants did not really understand the interrelationship between them and nature. Hence, the selected proverbs and oral narratives were those that best suited the study. Indeed, it is necessary to state here that such green proverbs and oral narratives are very rare and are thus not readily available.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

I have employed the analytical tools of ecocriticism in my analyses of the selected proverbs and oral narrative 'Ecocriticism' was first coined by William Rueckert (1996) in 1978 in his essay "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*". According to him, the urge was to verify the relevance of aspects of nature to literature.

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent year. (107)

Thus, for Rueckert, to apply ecological concepts to the reading, teaching and writing about literature is to develop an 'ecological poetics to serve both the purposes of experimentation and resolution of the antagonism between science and poetry so that together, they could be generative. By so doing, the human community will not only come to the realisation that 'Everything is connected to everything else', see the need for coexistence, cooperation with natural community, but also will curb the 'Self-destructive or suicidal motive inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature'.(107).



Ecocriticism did not become popular until in 1989 when Cheryll Glotfelty, the American scholar adopted it as an important critical perspective in studying nature writing. However, its application is very common nowadays due to Glotfelty's definition and expatiation:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of 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 awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xviii)

According to Glotfelty, an understanding of Ecocriticism should proceed from asking questions such as: 'How is nature represented in this sonnet? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterise nature writing as a genre?' (Xvii-xix).

It is therefore, against the backdrop of these submissions on Ecocriticism by Cheryll Glotfelty that the selected proverbs and oral narratives under study will be analyzed. Ecocriticism was officially acclaimed by the publication of two seminal works both published in the 1990s; *Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and the *Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. Ecocriticism is an intentionally broad approach that is known by a number of other designations including "green (cultural) studies", "ecopoetics" and "environmental literacy criticism" Ecocriticism, as a critical tool, thus widens the field of literary criticism from traditional literary theory wherein "the world" is synonymous with society, to the notion of "the world" which includes the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism as a literary theory originated from the west and hardly takes the African reality into consideration. There is the need for African scholars to extend its use to Orature which is essentially an African phenomenon. This explains why African scholars must insist on the need to go back to our culture in general and our Orature in particular. This is because African societies are rooted within and dependent on the environment. Ecocriticism started as an Anglo-American literary discourse and has gained ground since the 1990s, especially in Europe Asia and America. As a western concept it has failed in its objectives in the indigenous African context. This is because it focuses mainly on written literature, Hence, we need as a matter of fact and urgency to see Orature too as an important kind of literature because, it can benefit from the indigenous ecological knowledge contained in traditional African culture. Glotfelty, one of the first authorities in ecocriticism, defines ecocriticism as: "*the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment*"

Semantically, the term comes from a combination of the prefix eco- (from ecology ,and refers generally to environment) and the adjective , critical , which refers to the tendency to give comment and pass judgment in a particular situation.

Ecocriticism could then be explained to mean *the tendency to comment on and pass judgment in matters related to the environment .The Ecocritical Reader*

In terms of objectives, ecocritics question how nature is represented in literature, how physical setting influences content and how the values expressed in art are consistent with ecological wisdom. The approach seeks, to underscore the fact that literary studies in an age of environmental crisis may do some good and ameliorate such crises. The tenets to be used in this paper would be *those of human interdependence, interconnectivity and coexistence, ecological relationships between humans and non-humans and dependence, that "everything*



is connected to everything else”. Therefore, this paper demonstrates how ecocriticism can be effectively applied in the analysis of Mmen orature.

Textual Analyses

Mmen Proverb: ghuo ka’ mo’ va+n kuol+ puh

English Translation: *One hand cannot tie a bundle.*

Analysis: A quick look at this proverb from both traditions would definitely paint a picture of unity or better still the need for concerted effort if one needs to succeed in life in any endeavour. When the Cameroon Government enacted laws about the protection of the environment one could hear the late regional delegate for environment-Dr. Che Ngwa Francis constantly using the slogan ‘our environment, a war we must win’. He understood just like the Mmen indigenes that communality was very imperative if this environmental preoccupation of the government had to be supported in terms of environmental education and sustainability. In fact, it is also important to highlight that, apart from such orature being created in the rural milieu; Apart from the function of the proverbs, one can also see how the tenet of eco-criticism has been validated here in the sense that, “everything is connected to everything else”

Mmen Proverb: erghuo tam dz+s+ a ka+yn +sas + mos’ koh f+ka.

English Translation: *If you dress a monkey it must still climb a tree.*

Analysis: In the analysis of this monkey related proverb, one notices that it talks of attitudes that are difficult to do away with. For instance the monkey is so tight to its environment and ways that one can hardly take it off from such ways. Man and the monkey are said to be actors in an environment which they are obliged to coexist. This then calls for some metaphorical use of language within our communities by the elderly people to educate themselves and the younger generation to beware of certain traits that could be negative if not discouraged. When one becomes adamant to counsel or change, he/she can only metaphorically be referred to as a monkey vis-a-vis his waist clothes are naturally worn by humans, as such when the shift is taken to the monkey, it presupposes that man and the monkey can coexist and even share loins or clothes. The tenet of coexistence ecocritically speaking is hinted here. This lo brings to bear in mind that ‘the child of a snake is a snake’, That is, a child takes after his parents especially their negative traits. Conversely to such an acclaimed suggestion, one can also point to the fact that the positive side of the just mentioned proverb can be seen from the point of view of creating their orature which can eventually be replicated by their offspring in future. This proverb of the monkey by extension, suggests that those who might not want to take environmental education seriously they will only have themselves to blame.

Mmen Version of Narrative (À ngwu kaiḡà, ə kaiḡà ngwu) THE STUPID MONKEY

ə fi ndu peyḡ wui phəmi ni tḡḡtə vɛ nə
ni Ngem. yi ti ndamə kàà kuo`o ə peyḡ
kə tuofifə kain ə sə`r yi piem, ghoulə
atiah zi tsou. Kain ə nduo ə fhe wui phəmə
vàà pfə wəsi tsuḡ vi pə fuoməàpfə.
Kain ə nziə kuotə wui phəmə, ghenə pwatə
yi soiyḡ wui phəmə kəmə si nyuḡ sə kaiḡsi kə



ndo ə wusinə nyələ Nəiŋ
ə nduoə ph ə Ngem ə nduoh ssə za`a kain ə
ndə. kaiŋə piə si vəiŋ nə zi nə kwulə pə nduo yi nyam
sisi vəiŋə sə tsə kə ni
. ə nduoə pə ghouł zi tsou,
Ngun yi niəde yi kaiŋsi njousi pə ə phiə kaiŋ
ə mə ə yi nisə nduo à ghucə yi wus. kaiŋ sə mə ə
sə zhitə yi kàə gheizi tsà kə zi tsouffə sə ndamə
ndə mə yi ki, nduo wəsverteiŋ. ghe khà ghe formə
kainsə mə ə sə zhi tə sə pà sə pə yi ti phiə kaiŋ
zə yi ni ti pi yi wuəs. kain ə siə zhi tə njitə nduo
kə yi tipiyi wuəs kə va nə kaiŋ zhitə pi yiwuəs khi
và nyuŋsi. wus və kul vəiŋ wurr! wurr!
Kain zə yi ti ni wus ə puhəà pəŋ, zosə! zəsə! zəsə!
kə kaiŋsə m ə si timəmsə yi wus
ə tēiŋ vi wus kuh na`ə səiŋ si khəm. wuə yi
phəməə kəsə kuulə pə phəsi nyam si tsə kəny.
yi və saŋnə yi gheteiŋ zi . wuiphəmə koŋə faŋsə kain nə tēiŋ
kumə nə yi ti khe ndou si ləsə ghə nyiə
tuhfi mə Ngem ə nduh fhə si nduoə mətə soyŋ, əkə
yi kəsi pēiŋ, ə pəh Fhə nyam ə ndə si tsə kə ni ghenə fanə kə sə soyŋ.
Mmenghain fhəm fə miy. pi z`àəmpa khi kə nduoh Mmenghaiŋ.

English Translation: THE STUPID MONKEY

Once upon a time, there lived a hunger named Ambain. He lived in the forest and spent the rest of his life in the forest. So one day, a monkey went hunting and there was a heavy rainfall. The monkey went and saw the hunter in his small hut with a big bonfire.

The monkey entered and the man welcomed it and they became friends. The hunter shaved the furs of the monkey so that it could go closer to the fire without getting burnt.

One day, Ambain went for hunting and allowed the monkey, I the house. The monkey made a promise to him that it would bring more animals to him. On one fateful day, the monkey and Ataragan were in and there was rain outside. All of a sudden, twelve monkeys appeared in a line in front of the house. The twelve monkeys saw the other monkey, stretching its hands around the fire. They began to converse about how good it could be to live in a house with fire. Their conversation was so interesting that the other monkeys began to come closer and closer to the monkey which was basking in the house. One of the monkeys soon got so closer to the fire that, not know that the first monkey had no fir on its body, flames caught fur: “*EpumEpum, Epum!*”

The monkey which was on fire shouted: “Wipe, wipe, wipe!” As the friends were trying to wipe fire off its fur, the fire also caught their fur, one by one until all of them were in flames and burnt to death. When the hunter came back he was happy to see so much meat in the house. They enjoyed themselves and the hunter loved that monkey dearly because it knows how to lure game into his house. One day, Ambain left home for a brief visit. When he returned, he



saw more animals that had been killed by the boney. They became friends forever. My story has ended.

Analysis: This narrative on the stupid monkey is set in the forest where the hunter and the monkey clearly validate the tenet of interconnecting in that environment. In this narrative we see that the relationship between the monkeys and the hunter is not only that of friendship but also that of predators. Both coexist and at the same time kill other monkeys. The ecological relationship between humans and non-humans is that it doubles standards. One monkey sympathizes with the hunter who is its host to cunningly lure other monkeys in different instances where they end up being killed and eaten. It is evident here that the actions of both the hunter and the monkey friend are non-compassionate with other fellow monkeys. The monkey who hires others to be estimated is not only foolish but is also dishonest. As we can see, foolishness and honesty in the monkey, we also notice wisdom in the hunter and his ill intentions to destroy the animal kingdom. The hunter has caused this foolish monkey to work in his favor. These monkeys are hired and killed in an environmental context of hunting. The image of the fire here is to warn Mmen people to be cautious whenever we find ourselves in situations of fire. Fire does not only help us positively but can also be destructive when poorly handled or approached. There is evidence in this narrative that the fire has caused destruction to the environment by eliminating the monkeys which feel victims to the wims and caprices of the foolish monkey and hen host. At the end of this narrative, the tenet of coexistence is clearly demonstrated in the following words.

“One day NGUM left home for a brief visit. When he returned, he saw more animals that had been killed by the monkey. They became friends forever”

This is clearly a demonstration that when two people share the same vision, their goals can always be attained. In this case, the monkey and the hunter have attained their goals of selfish intentions to destroy the environment and the animals. This researched rather call on the Mmen community and beyond to be united in purpose. In this case, towards the protection of and make it sustainable. Indeed, the ecological relationship between humans and non-humans is demonstrated in the afore mentioned quoted text The physical features of fire, the hunt and rainfall act as an interplay in making us digest and understand the environmental undertones of this narrative.

Mmen Version of Narrative: ənyɔŋ yi tunɔnàa(The Mosquito and the ear)

ə tɛ ndó pəyn nyɔŋ pə tsá a syi tuɔnà a nɔ
zhi kiŋə si malərvɛin. tuɔikə tsahə vein khi
tɛtə kə ni kahnə yi kɔa yi ndam tɛə kə ndomə vein ə?
nyɔŋkə zafsə yi toŋ kuoməyi wamnə tɛin zi
ə ndou ndoh əyi kesɪ pi yi ghɛ. ə za ni yi ghə
zə puo juoh nyɔŋ ki tsɛ yi ti piəh tuŋ ni yɪ pouəà poŋ.
U ziziziii, mm pahə nyəm kwu.əm pa ni ndo’o
ə za ni yi ghə zɛzɛ nə nyɔŋ ki vaa si tsɛə tuɔni
ki tipɪ ndoh ə ki pouh poŋà.nə zhi pàə nyəm kuo`o

English Translation: THE MOSQUITO AND THE EAR

The Mosquito once came to the Ear and told her he wanted her hand in marriage. The Ear laughed this suggestion to scorn. She mocked at the Mosquito’s size and wondered if such a thin fellow would live long as a husband. The Mosquito was extremely vexed by these words.



He went away without another word. Every time the Mosquito passes around the Ear, he shouts, “Wəlililili, I am not yet dead, I am still alive.” As a rule, the Mosquito cannot by-pass the Ear without reminding her of his existence.

Analysis: On the mosquito and the ear, we realize that the plot centers on the mosquito’s desire to get married to the ear. The mosquito’s size according to the ear can never be a good fit for her. There is the tenet of interconnecting and one glaringly sees Glen Love’s idea of everything being connected to everything. The narrative also reminds us of the element of personification whereby inanimate things are given the status of humans. In this tale we realize that the tiny mosquito is trying to play the role of a male (in that Case a husband) whereas the ear takes on the role of the wife. In the same vein, when we look at the last line of this narrative “As a rule, the mosquito cannot by-pass the ear without reminding her of his existence. This ties with the tenet of interconnecting and coexistence. This is a veracious statement because in our daily lives, we live the experiences stated in this narrative. It is clear here that even if they cannot live together as husband and wife, they still can coexist. Although they haven’t been able to get married as a couple, they continue to coexist, especially given the fact that everything the mosquito passes around the ear we shouts that he is not yet dead. Isn’t it ironical that a mosquito should want to get married to an ear, from a husband?

CONCLUSION

This research paper entitled *Mmen Orature and Environmental Sustainability: A Study of Some Selected Mmen Proverbs and Oral Narratives* set out to show that Orature can play an essential role in promoting a peaceful coexistence between man and nature. Next, that the global environment is in crises and Mmen orature can rescue that environment both locally and globally. In short, the selected but rare Mmen proverbs and oral narratives have been treated within the backdrop of the sustenance of the environment. In addition, the study also reveals that environmental problems are predominantly a matter of attitude, hinged on man worldview. The work has strongly highlighted the fact that the African by way of his culture has an innate and harmonious attachment with his environment, which the impact of Western Civilisation and development has destroyed. Mmen orature is borne out of the environment and that the environment is also a crucial component in the literary analysis and interpretation of the data under study. By the same token, this paper has equally been to answer the following vital questions like: What the role of Mmen orature is in shaping environmental sustainability, How c Mmen orature can provide solutions to environmental crises, How ecocriticism can effectively be applied in the analysis of Mmen orature, How a corpus of Mmen proverbs and oral narratives can help in environmental sustenance and how Mmen orature shows a decline in moral values vis-a-vis environmental sustainability.

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