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## A Critical Reflection on African Ecology, Religious and Cultural Ideologies in Ben Okri's Novel *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the intricate portrayal of African ecology, religious and cultural ideologies in Ben Okri's novel, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021), as a major contribution to the ongoing conversation on ecology, religion and culture. By closely analysing the narrative, the paper makes two major interventions. First, it argues that ecology and ecological crisis are a major preoccupation of the contemporary African novel, hence it focuses primarily on the eco-criticism of the genre in line with the issues relevant to African studies. Secondly, it centres religion as a resource for cultural ideological conflicts, which have had an impact on cultural identity. This, in turn, addresses the problematic religious and cultural ideological differences and acknowledges the most contemporary ecological and cultural sensibilities in order to pave the way for a way forward. Drawing on Morton's (2007) eco-criticism, the paper offers a comprehensive exploration of how Okri's novel serves as a literary conduit for narrating the relationship between African ecology and its religious and cultural frameworks, by mapping three core concepts: dark ecology, hyperobjects, and ecological entanglements. Dark ecology is used to trace the ambivalent "haunted" landscape that Okri depicts, revealing how ecological degradation coexists with spiritual reverence. Hyper objects guide the identification of the novel's persistent, globally-scaled threats (climate change, resource depletion) that surface through localised, phenomenological experiences of characters. Finally, the notion of ecological entanglement informs a close reading of the interweaving of flora, fauna and ritual practice, demonstrating how ecological relations are inseparable from religious symbolism and cultural memory. The paper adopted a qualitative research approach where a purposively sampled novel, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, was critically analysed. The data gathered was presented in the form of thematic concerns: ecological crisis as a narrative engine, religion as an ideological conduit and cultural identity negotiated through ecological and spiritual terms. The findings contribute to a deeper comprehension of the nuanced interplay between Literature, ecology, religion and culture in African contexts.

**Key words:** Ecological crisis, eco-centralism, eco-criticism, ideological conflict.



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## INTRODUCTION

Ben Okri's novel, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021), explores the intricate interplay between ecology, African religion, and cultural ideologies. Set against the backdrop of a vibrant and diverse African landscape, Okri weaves together these elements to create a rich tapestry of spirituality, human connection, and environmental consciousness. By delving into the complexities of ecology, African religious practices and cultural ideologies, Okri invites readers to contemplate the profound interconnectedness between humans and the natural world and the significance of these relationships in shaping individual and collective identities (William, 1996).

In Rio's (1992) article, it is demonstrated that Okri has a deep appreciation for the ecological systems that sustain life and the ways in which African religious beliefs and cultural ideologies are intimately tied to the natural world. Through vivid descriptions of lush landscapes, Okri highlights the intricate balance of ecosystems, emphasising the inherent beauty and fragility of nature. The novel's characters, too, are intricately woven into this ecological tapestry, drawing inspiration from their surroundings and finding solace, wisdom and spiritual enlightenment in the natural world.

Central to Okri's exploration of African religion in the novel is the idea that spiritual beliefs and practices are deeply rooted in the land and its ecological rhythms. African religious traditions often emphasise the interconnectedness of all living beings and recognise the spiritual essence that permeates the natural environment. Okri delves into these beliefs, portraying rituals, ceremonies, and ancestral worship as essential components of the characters' lives. By intertwining these religious practices with the ecological context, Okri underscores the notion that African religions are not separate from the natural world, but rather an intrinsic part of it (Rio, 1992).

This focus on the bond between faith and the environment directly supports the study's two main goals. First, it shows how the African novel is preoccupied with ecological crisis: the characters' rituals are tied to the health of the forest, rivers, and soil, so any damage to the land is felt as a spiritual loss as well as a material one. Second, the novel uses religion as a resource for cultural and ideological identity. By keeping ancestral rites alive, the characters affirm a shared worldview that resists colonial erasure and offers a

collective sense of purpose. In this way, Okri's narrative demonstrates that religion not only frames the ecological concerns of the story but also sustains a distinct African cultural identity.

Moreover, Okri delves into the cultural ideologies prevalent in the African context, emphasising their influence on the relationship between humans, ecology, and spirituality. Cultural ideologies encompass a wide range of beliefs, values, and customs that shape societal structures and individual identities. In this novel, Okri delves into various cultural ideologies, such as the importance of community, the role of storytelling and the reverence of African religion in relation to ecology. These ideologies provide a lens through which characters view and interact with the natural world, offering a unique perspective on the ecological balance and humanity's place within it (Rio, 1992).

Through the exploration of ecology, African religion and cultural ideologies, Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021) presents readers with a profound insight into the interconnectedness of life: A critical problem emerging from Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* is the persistent marginalization of African ecological wisdom and spiritual cosmologies within global environmental policy and mainstream sustainability discourse, which perpetuates a fragmented perception of nature that privileges anthropocentric, technocratic solutions over holistic, relational understandings of life; this exclusion not only silences vital cultural ideologies that recognize the sacred interdependence of people, trees, and animals, but also impedes the development of truly transformative ecological consciousness that can guide societies toward more inclusive, resilient, and spiritually informed stewardship of the planet, people, trees and animals.

The novel challenges conventional boundaries between humans and nature, inviting readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and recognise the spiritual dimensions inherent in our interactions with the natural world. As readers immerse themselves in Okri's captivating narrative, they are compelled to reflect on the transformative power of ecological consciousness, African spirituality and cultural ideologies in shaping our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world's ecosystems.

However, until now, most discussions of ecology have treated nature as a backdrop for human activity, while studies of African spirituality have rarely linked those

beliefs to environmental issues. There has been little work that brings together ecological science, African religious thought, and cultural ideas in a single narrative. *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* bridges that gap by showing how spiritual traditions and cultural values can shape a deeper ecological consciousness, offering a fresh perspective that is missing from both environmental studies and literary criticism. This makes the novel an important contribution to the conversation about how we can live more responsibly with the planet.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Ben Okri is a seasoned writer who has always prioritised ecology in his works. A review of some of his fictional works identified a gap that justified this research. Ogunfoli (2012), in his critique of Okri's novel, *The Famished Road*, questioned the supposed duality between the physical world and the imaginary ones, and the multidimensionality of the forest as a dwelling space for spirits and a space submitted to the ecological catastrophe.

Byron (2011) focused on dialogue in Okri's novels as a tool that brings out different visions of the African environment. He examines matters of ecology in relation to marginalisation and suggests eco-criticism as a way that challenges deforestation. On the other hand, Gillian (2007) in his article, *The Forest and the Road*, analyses not only the persistent effects of colonisation on the environment but also the devastating effects of development on forests and the natural world.

The critique of Okri's short story: *What the Tapstir Saw* by Wanzel (2006), illustrates how seemingly magical stories about natural resources and ecology tell us about the multilayered relationship between man and his environment. The study depicts the superimposition of a petroleum economy over the palm economy in the Niger Delta.

The relationship between man and his environment is also illustrated in Okri's short story, *We Live by the Stories* (1987), which beckons us to the shabby but vibrant streets of the strife-ridden Metropolis. Also, Wu (2012), in his article, *From Culture to Hybridisation to Ecological Degradation*, analyses how Okri portrays a forest as an important element that can connect the crisis of cultural hybridisation to that of ecological degradation in Africa.

Further, Porter (2003), in his article, *The Landscapes Within: A Metaphor for Personal and National Development* demonstrates how Okri successfully uses the literary conventions to address some important questions dealing with national development in Nigeria and the effect it has on the environment. In line with this, Brujin (2007), in her article, *Coming to Terms with New Age Contamination*, analyses how the Western form of religion is an attack on African spirituality. The paper argues that Okri's infusion of spirituality in the novel is a means of infusing an enchanted history. It suggests that notions of cosmopolitanism are a threat to the African mode of spirituality.

The review above of Okri's fictional works presented a gap for this research because none of the studies analyses the relationship between African Ecology, religious and cultural ideologies in Okri's novel, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021).

### METHODOLOGY

The paper employed a qualitative research design, using a textual analysis to explore the relationship between African ecology and religious and cultural ideologies in Ben Okri's novel, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021). The design focused on analysing the themes in the novel to gain insights into how these interconnected aspects are portrayed and their significance in the context of the African environment, religious beliefs, and cultural values. The primary data for this research is Ben Okri's novel, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*. A close reading of the text was done, paying attention to concepts of African ecology, religion and culture and extracting relevant sections for further analysis. Detailed notes and annotations were made during the reading process to capture important findings and observations. Reference was also made to secondary sources, among them, journal articles, and academic essays with relevant information on the study topic. For the analysis of data, a comprehensive examination and interpretation of the extracted passages was done to identify the narrative elements and language choice that contribute to the portrayal and exploration of the African ecology, religious and cultural ideologies in the novel.

Themes and patterns related to these interconnected aspects were identified and categorised. The analysis was guided by Eco's theoretical framework of Eco criticism to trace how Okri's novel treats the natural world not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in the story. By treating forests, rivers, and animals as

characters with agency, the analysis revealed how ecological cycles mirror the cultural and religious rhythms of the African community depicted in the text. Eco critical lenses highlighted how the destruction of trees is linked to spiritual loss, while the regeneration of vegetation corresponds to moments of collective hope and ritual renewal. Consequently, the novel's environmental imagery was read as a commentary on humanity's responsibility toward the earth, showing that ecological health and cultural identity are inseparable in Okri's narrative, through which the relationship between African ecology, religious and cultural ideologies was analysed and interpreted.

The study acknowledges potential limitations, such as the subjectivity of interpretation in qualitative analysis. The findings were based on the understanding and analysis of the text. The scope of the research was limited to Ben Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021) and may not encompass the entirety of African ecology, religious and cultural beliefs. The novel was chosen because it is a well-known work by a celebrated African writer, Ben Okri, and it puts the ideas of nature, spirituality and African culture right at the centre of its story. "Every Leaf a Hallelujah" mixes myth, religion and everyday life in a way that makes the connections between people and the environment easy to see. Its vivid images and clear narrative give a concrete example that can be studied in depth, while still reflecting many of the larger themes that appear across African literature and belief systems. This makes the book a useful starting point for looking at how African ecology, religion and culture are linked, even though it cannot cover every possible perspective.

#### **A Synopsis of *Every Leaf a Hallelujah***

*Every leaf a Hallelujah* is an environment-themed novel that speaks eloquently to the ecological pressing issues of our time. The protagonist, Mangoshi, a seven-year-old girl, lives with her mom and dad. Her mom and the entire village become ill, and the only help is a special flower that grows deep in the forest, which can only be plucked by a young girl, seven years old or younger, in line with the traditional African religious and cultural beliefs. Mangoshi is the only person who can save her mother and the entire village because she's only seven. The little girl, with the instruction of her father, sets out alone to find the flower, but unfortunately fails to get the flower because of the immense deforestation occasioned by human greed and industrialisation.

When she gets back home without the flower, a spirit talks to her at night in the form of a bird, and gives her instructions concerning what is to be done, which she follows to the letter, finds the flower, saves her mother and the whole village from a strange illness and immediately launches a campaign against deforestation. The mention of spirits and forests and the community's strange illness by Okri illustrates the interconnectedness of ecology and religious and cultural beliefs.

#### **An Eco-Criticism of Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah***

Buell (1995) asserts that eco-criticism is an approach that examines Literature from an environmental perspective, focusing on the ways in which the literary text represents and interacts with nature and ecological issues. Okri's novel, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021), outlines a compelling exploration of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Through its vivid portrayal of nature, depiction of environmental degradation and the interconnectedness of characters and their surroundings, the novel invites an eco-critical analysis that delves into the environmental dimensions of the narrative. The analysis aims to uncover the novel's presentation of humanity's relationship with nature, the consequences of environmental degradation and the potential for redemption and reconnection with the natural world. By examining these ecological themes, we gain insight into Okri's perspective on the urgent need for environmental consciousness and the transformative power of our relationship with the environment.

William (1996) argues that Eco criticism also looks at the destructive effects of technological advancements on nature and the environment by considering how writers represent not only nature but also culture and religion in society. As such, he further argues that ecocriticism is a theoretical approach that determines the interrelation between nature, culture and even the supernatural elements in nature. Therefore, Eco criticism has a dual duty: the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations and the struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world.

Additionally, Lawrence (2005) gives an explanation of what eco-criticism is by comparing it with nature study, when he says that it includes the study of nature and geography, and therefore, it is multidisciplinary in its approach. He further asserts that eco-criticism has broadened the scope from nature writing to the study of Literature, society and science, all under one head. Hence, eco-criticism is a more inclusive term than nature

study as the study of natural elements is more of its aspects, which also includes other aspects such as society and culture.

Lastly, Lawrence (2005) further explains that eco-criticism looks very closely at how humans interact with culture and nature in texts and that it often presents the scene of an interplay that stresses the cultural aspects of various concepts of nature. Thus, Eco criticism is a means of moving from a monocultural view of nature to a multi-cultural one from the world of a self-isolating society to a world of unifying culture.

Okri (2021) in *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* portrays the relationship between ecology and society. From the onset of the novel, there's evidence of an ecological crisis.

When I was young, I thought the beauty of the forest would last forever. Now I'm not sure. Certain grown-ups who have forgotten their childhood and who care more about money than nature are destroying the forests (p. 1).

It is worth noting that, in as much as Okri realises that there's an ecological problem, he does not hesitate to tell us that the very forests humans are destroying are very important and need to be taken care of.

I knew that trees were more important than money. Trees made us happy. Can you imagine a world without them? If trees could write, they would tell you about this story. If we look after them, they will look after us. Trees are magic, and they touch our lives (p. 1).

The protagonist of the novel, a seven-year-old girl by the name Mangoshi, provides the novel's eco-centric viewpoint. Okri, in the first chapter of the novel, introduces us to this young girl as a five-year-old visiting the forest before the forest is altered and destroyed.

Mangoshi went to the forest on an errand and got lost. As she tried to make her way back home, she found herself among strange-looking trees, and she was not able to trace her path back home (p. 12).

She gets lost in the thicket of the forest because, apparently, the strange-looking trees are so piled up together that locating her way back home becomes problematic. However, Okri does not present the many trees as a problem. He clearly states that Mangoshi's mother had fallen ill, and the only flower that would heal her grew right in the middle of the forest, and Mangoshi

had to go for it. This is an issue of environmental conservation and preservation. Traditional ecological knowledge and practices, such as the use of medicinal plants and the importance of preserving cultural evidence, are highlighted.

She had been sent on an errand in the forest to pluck a special flower that grows on the oldest trees. The flower was meant to heal her mother's illness. The journey had been simple; she had found the flower. Although on her way back, paths seemed confusing, for every path she took led her deeper into the forest, where she saw trees she had never seen before. They were majestic, tall and vast. They looked a hundred years old (p. 13).

Scenes of serious environmental destruction are presented to the reader for the second time when Mangoshi's mother and the whole village fall sick. She's sent to the forest to find the healing flower because her mother and the people in their village were on the verge of dying. She notes a very big difference. She instantly senses a problem.

Something about the very few trees worried her. They seemed to be whispering. She was not sure where the sounds were coming from. It sounded like a river nearby, like the murmur of insects, but no insects ever sounded like this. It came from high up among the tree tops and low down among the lower branches. Then sometimes, among the roots. She pressed her ears to the ground and thought she heard the trees whispering. All these puzzled her. She had to try to find the flower in what looked like a desert, for it was darkening (p. 13).

Okri foregrounds this perspective of trees behaving strangely to show that although nature is profoundly affected by human beings, it also has a life of its own and that the narrator, in drawing our attention to the plight of the trees, illustrates the fact that utter disrespect for nature is not a welcome idea. There's evidence in the novel that shows that, typically, the natural world is helpless. This is evident when the trees, upon seeing Mangoshi struggle to talk to her, air their grievances.

She stopped and sat down, too tired to go any further. She rested her back on a tree trunk and fell into a light slumber. She hadn't been asleep for long when the murmurs she had been hearing became voices. They were all talking at the same time, and from their tone, they were not happy.

“You are all talking at once, and I can’t hear you.”  
The voice from the tree fell silent; perhaps they had never heard a human voice address them (p. 41).

Upon their silence, Mangoshi, driven by curiosity, begs them to speak. She wants to hear what the trees have to say. On the other hand, the trees are afraid that Mangoshi may not be of help, considering her age.

Then at last, one of them, the jacaranda, very sensitively and curiously said,

“We should ask her”  
“She isn’t ready.” Said a third.  
“It would be asking too much of her.” Said a fourth tree.  
“I agree, said the fifth. Can’t you see that she is quite young? (p. 41)

Through the talking trees, Okri reveals the disturbing reality of the serious destruction of the world by reckless deforestation.

“Why did it take you long to come? We had so much we wanted to tell you.”  
It took Mangoshi a moment to realise the voice was coming from a fallen tree.  
“Is it you talking to me? You that I have been sitting on?”  
“Why did you take so long?”  
“I am sorry.” Said Mangoshi.  
“It’s too late now.” Said the fallen tree.  
“It can’t be too late. You are still talking.”  
“Well, I am at my end.” (p. 4)

The massive destruction of trees is also reinforced by Mangoshi’s father when sending Mangoshi to the forest to find the healing flower when Mangoshi’s mother falls ill. Mangoshi’s father reminds her that it will not be easy to find the medicinal flower because of deforestation.

The flower will be harder to find this time round... You will see yourself. The world has changed; we are all in trouble. Human beings are not good to the earth. The forest is not the same forest you went to before. If you succeed in bringing the flower, you will save the village, and in turn, the village will learn to save trees (p. 32).

The mention of the whole village in danger of a deadly disease that can only be healed by a strange flower from the forest illustrates the fact that the impulsive greed of humans to destroy the environment through immense

deforestation puts both human and non-human health at risk. This risk is evident when the narrator says:

She thought she was walking into the forest, but she was really walking through dry scraggly trees. The land was burnt, trees had fallen, and there were no bushes for long distances all around. At first, she was surprised at what she saw: the dryness, the ash of the vines, the broken earth. Trees had been uprooted, and many had been cut, and their broken trunks lay among their resplendent branches on cracked earth (p. 41).

The quotation above illustrates that cutting down forests has an immense negative effect not only on the people but also on the world. The fact that the land has been affected surprises Mangoshi:

What happened here? Mangoshi thought. It seemed impossible to her that this was the same forest she had wandered around; she was dismayed and unhappy...amid broken trees, their sap pouring into the earth, their branches scattered. She gathered that what had happened to the forest would one day happen to the village (p. 46).

The idea that humans are part of the natural world and that their actions have consequences is also explored. Through Mangoshi’s visit to the imaginary world of trees, Okri highlights the importance of preserving the natural world and the interdependence of all living things. The connection between humans and the natural world is illustrated below:

“My mother is ill. The village is sick. I have been sent to bring back a special flower that will heal my people.” “I know the flower you want. Your people have destroyed the forest so much that I am not sure you can find it anymore. It grows in special places and is very rare. Only when the forest is healthy and happy does it grow. It can never grow when a forest is in trouble (p. 45).

Okri’s novel illustrates the importance of environmental activism. His work serves as a call to action for readers to take responsibility for the planet’s health and well-being and to work towards creating a sustainable future for all.

“What is she doing?” people wanted to know. “She is stopping them cutting down that tree.” “Why?” “She thinks that the forest protects us.” “She’s right!” people said. More people gathered. The more people gathered, the more difficult it was for the tree cutters to do their work. The manager offered the girl money, but she

would not take any. He threatened her. He said he would call the police and have her taken away, but she was not afraid. "You are not going to kill my friend," she said. The people who had come supported her. Children who lived in the area heard about what she was doing and came to join her. Some of their parents came too. "What are you doing?" the children asked. "Those people want to cut down the forest. I think we should stop them!" The children liked the forest and could not understand why people wanted to cut it down. "This tree is my friend," Mangoshi said (p. 78).

### **Intersection Between African Religion, Culture, and Ecology**

#### **Introduction**

Traditionally, African religion plays an integral role in linking people to the natural world, imbuing them with the knowledge and values that make caring for the environment or ecology a priority. As such, religion occupies a unique place in ascertaining ecological friendliness, and at the same time, it is a major instrument that has caused ecological problems. However, African Traditional Religion has been a source of ecological preservation and protection, even though abuses also exist. The indigenous people recognise and understand their place in the ecological system, bearing in mind that nature or the ecological system has a spiritual dimension attached to it. By virtue of the fact that Africans recognise that spirits inhabit nature, there is a tendency to nurture and take good care of it (Grim, 2001).

According to Tucker and Grim (2001), African religion explores the many ways in which religious communities ritually articulate relationships with their local landscapes and bioregions. Religious ecology, therefore, gives insight into how people and cultures are able to create human-earth relationships and the practical means of sustaining these relations.

The definition of African religion for this paper is in line with Manu (1992), who argues that African religion refers to the traditional beliefs, practices and spiritual customs of various ethnic groups across the African continent. It is a diverse collection of religious traditions that vary widely from region to region or from tribe to tribe. Generally, it is characterised by belief in a supreme being, ancestral spirits, or other spiritual forces believed to control the natural world. At this point, there is a clear link between religion and the natural world.

The intersection of African religion, culture, and ecology is a complex and multifaceted topic that varies across religions and ethnic groups. However, several common themes emerge in African traditional religions and cultural practices that reflect a deep connection to the natural environment. One of the most fundamental aspects of African traditional religions is the belief in the interconnectedness of all things; humans, animals, plants and the environment. This worldview is often expressed through the concept of "Ubuntu", which emphasises the importance of community and interconnectedness (Dwivendi, 1996).

In many African cultures, the natural environment is considered sacred and is treated with respect and reverence. This is reflected in the practice of various rituals and ceremonies that are performed to honour and appease the spirits of the land, water and other natural elements.

After these words, her father brightened. He gave her food that her mother had prepared from her sick bed. There was some bread, some fruit and a special cup for drinking water. He also gave her a special handkerchief that had been tied into a knot.

"Inside this handkerchief, he said, there are seven seeds. They are very small. They are smaller than the eyes can see."

"What are they for?"

"You will throw them at the entrance of the forest, to appease the gods, that they may protect you from harm while in the forest." (p. 35)

African traditional religion views the environment as a source of life and fertility, and they have developed complex rituals and ceremonies that honour and respect the natural world. As such, African people's ecological intelligence and wisdom are captured in their structures, particularly in beliefs about omens, taboos, rituals, and the sacred. These beliefs help people to interact with nature virtuously, morally, ethically and justly, that is, in a way that shows ubuntu (Rusinga & Maposa 2010). These belief structures create and enforce a vague caste system aimed at promoting the sustainable use of natural resources. According to Dwivedi (1996), the caste system serves to discipline society by partitioning the use of natural resources according to specific status/caste, age, sex, kingship, etc. This creates an ecological space in which competition for resources is reduced. Maposa (2010) echoes similar sentiments, positing that, through

belief structures, indigenous people use natural resources systematically, following taboos associated with the sacred.

The dichotomisation of animals, trees, caves, rocks, rivers, wells, etc., into sacred (tabooed) and non-sacred (not tabooed) enables human beings to use natural resources selectively, systematically and sustainably. Dietary laws that have given rise to the three categories of food, that is, the permitted foods, and the forbidden foods not eaten at all, also promote the sustainable utilisation of natural resources. The categorisation of foods restricts access and regulates gluttonous competition for these resources because, if unchecked, competition leads to extinction. Food restrictions also follow totemic beliefs and even conditions such as pregnancy and illness. In short, there is eco-wisdom in taboos that govern human treatment of animate objects. This is why in the novel, eco-wisdom in taboos is evident through the dialogue between Mangoshi and her father:

The whole village is counting on you for life. I would have come with you, but the gods say that you must go alone because you are young and pure. If anyone comes with you, the gods will weaken the power of medicine. It is your courage that makes it strong. Do you want to do this?

“Yes, daddy.” She said.

“I would not ask this of you but they say you are the only one who can do this”

Who says this?

“Wise people who know about these things (p. 31).

Traditional African religions also incorporate a strong sense of environmental stewardship, with many cultures practising sustainable agriculture, hunting and fishing methods that prioritise long-term health of the ecosystem. For instance, in some parts of Africa, there are some taboos against hunting certain species of animals during certain times of the year to allow their population to replenish and cutting down some trees because they are considered special (Manu, 1992). In the spiritual realm, Mangoshi is taken through the world of trees. Those who had been taken care of are happy and smiling. They are smiling because their environment was being taken care of. The narrator comments that all the trees in the spiritual realm radiate with love, and Every Leaf is a hallelujah (p. 96). To reinforce this, Okri uses Mangoshi, the main character, as a chief environmental steward. She is given the role of taking care of the forest through a

dream. Dreams in the African Setting represent a spiritual realm (Maposa, 2010).

In Mangoshi’s dream, she was soaring high through space and soaring above the branches, and she saw before her, spreading as far as it was possible to see, a universe of trees. They were all bright and magical (p. 68).

After this dream, she made it a personal responsibility to safeguard the forest, for she believed that the gods, through the dream, had commanded her to do so.

“We have come to cut down the trees,” he said, pointing at the baobab.

“Why do you want to cut it down? What has it done to you?”

“You are a child. You don’t understand these things.”

I understand that you want to cut down this tree for no apparent reason, and I won’t let you do so, said Mangoshi.

The man laughed.

What will you do? How will you stop us? He asked, still laughing.

“You will have to cut me down first before you touch the tree. Said Mangoshi (p. 71).

Gbenda (2010) stated very clearly that forests are also venerated because they house a variety of wildlife animals considered sacred or totems. A totem can be an animal, reptile, plant, vegetable or tree that has a special relationship with the group in which man is believed to have a kinship relationship or mystical relationship with any of the above things of nature. Emile Durkheim explained that a relationship could be established between ethnics with creatures of things other than man. They belong to the sacred as distinguished from the profane. A totem brings solidarity and is an invisible sign of unity and kinship relations.

It is in line with the above argument that the intersection of African religion, culture and ecology highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the natural environment as an integral part of human life and spiritual well-being. By recognising our interconnectedness with the natural world and adopting sustainable practices, we can work towards a more sustainable future (Rio, 1992). Okri illustrates this towards the end of the novel. Mangoshi decides to stay in

the forest in obedience to the gods; by so doing, she saves the trees from being cut down by several interested parties.

After a few days, another man came over. He seemed to have more authority.

“What’s going on here?” he said. I am the manager; we have to do work. You must go home.”

“I’m not going. I will not let you kill the trees.”

“Why not? Asked the manager.”

“This tree is my friend.”

The manager looked at the girl and at the tree.

“How can a tree be a friend? Do you know what we do with trees?” We build houses with them, and with some trees we make furniture and some we make books. We have to do our work now. Go home.

“I will not go till you promise that you won’t cut down these trees.”

The manager looked at the tree and only saw a tree, not a human friend (p. 74).

The manager is surprised. He tries to scare away Mangoshi by suggesting that he call the police, but this does not even scare her. This attracts the attention of people and the media. They stood and watched the girl standing in front of the tree with her arms stretched as if protecting it from danger (p. 77).

We also notice Mangoshi’s determination to save the forests when the media highlights the presence of a young girl in the forest, who claims she had been sent by the gods to take care of the trees. This determination is evident in the conversation below.

People began to gather.

“What is she doing?”

She is stopping them from cutting down the trees.

“Why?”

“She thinks that the forest protects us.”

“She’s right, said the people.

And more people gathered. The more people gathered, the more difficult it was for those cutters to do their work. The cutters offered the girl money, but she would not take it. The people who had come supported her. Children who lived in the area heard about what she was doing and came to join her. Some of their parents came too. Eventually, no tree was cut (p. 78).

Also, in response to the challenges of globalisation, there is growing recognition of the importance of promoting sustainable development and preserving traditional ecological knowledge in Africa. This includes efforts to support local communities in sustainable management of resources because, as seen, African traditional religions and cultures are deeply connected to the natural world, and their practices and beliefs reflect a deep respect for and dependence on ecological systems that sustain life.

This effort is illustrated through the journalists who join Mangoshi, upon learning that the world does not care about who cuts down the trees irresponsibly.

The manager and men began marching into the forest. They brushed Mangoshi aside, and she fell to the ground. But suddenly, the journalist who had been there the day before appeared again. Behind him was a big group of people. They looked important.

“Who are you?” Mangoshi asked, with tears in her eyes.

“We have just come to help you.” Said the journalist.

“The story of your struggle is in the newspaper. People are angry about the forest.”

The manager of the tree cutters saw the crowd and came over. One of the important women, a journalist, spoke to the manager.

“I am the governor of this state. The people are protesting about the forest. Stop all work for now. The manager was very surprised at the turn of events. He and his men were forced to stop work in the forest. When they left, the journalists took pictures of the girl and her friend, the baobab. Now that they were not going to be cut down, the trees were sleeping happily in their own shade (p. 88).

Sacred trees are found all over Africa. Gbenda (2010) asserts that sacred trees were originally rooted in religious and cultural beliefs, but have since made significant contributions to the protection of wildlife and other biological resources. Some of the sacred trees serve as water sheds for catchment areas, protecting sources of drinking water. Many of these indigenous areas, usually protected by customary laws, are considered to be the abode of the gods. In some cases, royalty from a particular community was buried there, and the area threatened the plant and animal species of the ecological zone.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Ben Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* demonstrates that contemporary African novels are increasingly preoccupied with ecological crisis. By applying Morton's concepts of dark ecology, hyper objects and ecological entanglement, the study shows how the novel depicts a "haunted" landscape in which environmental degradation coexists with deep spiritual reverence. The narrative uses the pervasive threats of climate change and resource depletion hyper objects to foreground their impact on individual lives, while the intertwining of flora, fauna and ritual practice illustrates that ecological relations are inseparable from religious symbolism and cultural memory. In addition, the paper establishes that religion functions as an ideological conduit through which cultural conflicts are articulated, shaping and reshaping African cultural identity in the face of ecological change.

These findings have several implications. First, they affirm the value of eco critical approaches for African literary studies, encouraging scholars to treat ecological concerns as central, rather than peripheral, to narrative analysis. Second, the identification of religion as a resource for ideological negotiation suggests that

interdisciplinary research combining literary criticism, theology and environmental studies can yield richer understandings of how communities respond to ecological threats. Third, the recognition of ecological entanglement in the novel points to the need for policymakers and cultural practitioners to consider environmental issues not only as scientific problems but also as matters embedded in cultural and spiritual practices.

In sum, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* serves as a literary conduit that maps the complex relationships among ecology, religion and culture in contemporary Africa. By illuminating how ecological crisis, religious ideology and cultural identity intersect, the study contributes to a more nuanced comprehension of African eco criticism and offers a foundation for future research that seeks to bridge literary analysis with environmental and cultural policy. The novel's portrayal of a world where the natural and the spiritual are tightly woven together underscores the urgency of developing holistic responses to ecological challenges, responses that honour both the material reality of environmental degradation and the cultural meanings that sustain African societies.

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