

**Africans and nature, an ancestral connexion: an ecocritical reading of
Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between***



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Reçu : 17/10/2025

Accepté : 07 /11/2025

Publié : 30 /12/2025

Financement : L'auteur déclare qu'il n'a reçu aucun financement pour réaliser cette étude.

Conflit d'intérêts : L'auteur ne signale aucun conflit d'intérêts

Abstract: The aim of this article is to show that Africans traditionally maintained a close relation with nature. This interconnection very quickly became interdependence. Africans cannot live without nature, and nature cannot thrive without the efforts of Africans to protect it. In fact, nature has many benefits for mankind, providing the elements necessary for survival. In this privileged relationship, the forest is particularly important because it serves as a setting for initiation rites and ancestral values. On this basis, nature appears to be a place of learning and training for the Africans. This is why Africans feel compelled to preserve it against all forms of destruction. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* illustrates this commitment to preservation. The story revolves around a father who teaches his son about nature's healing virtue during a walk through the forest. In so doing, he introduces him to the benefits that man can derive from the forest. This seemingly simple act inspires the young man's determination to protect the environment. The analysis of the work embraces the ecocritical perspective. It reflects the openness of the literature to societal phenomena and global governance issues.

Keywords : Africans – ecocriticism – environment – nature - interconnection.

**Les Africains et la nature, une connexion ancestrale : une lecture
écocritique de *The River Between* de Ngugi wa Thiong'o**

Résumé: L'objectif de cet article est de montrer que les Africains sont naturellement attachés à la nature pour ses nombreux bienfaits. Les Africains et la nature ont toujours été interconnectés. Cette interconnexion s'est très vite transformée en interdépendance. Les Africains ne peuvent pas vivre sans la nature, et la nature ne peut pas se développer sans les efforts des Africains pour la protéger. En effet, la nature apporte de nombreux bienfaits à l'homme en lui fournissant les éléments nécessaires à sa survie. Dans cette relation privilégiée, la forêt revêt une importance particulière car elle sert de cadre à la perpétuation des rites d'initiation et des valeurs ancestrales. A ce titre, la nature apparaît comme un lieu d'apprentissage et de formation pour l'Africain. C'est pourquoi il se doit de tout mettre en œuvre pour la préserver contre toute forme d'agression. *The River Between* de Ngugi wa Thiong'o offre au lecteur un bel exemple de préservation. L'histoire tourne autour d'un père qui enseigne à son fils les vertus thérapeutiques de la nature lors d'une promenade en forêt. Il l'initie ainsi aux bienfaits que l'homme peut tirer de la forêt. Cet acte apparemment anodin a un impact positif sur le combat du jeune homme pour la protection de la faune et de la flore. L'analyse de l'œuvre s'inscrit dans une perspective écocritique. Elle reflète l'ouverture de la littérature aux phénomènes de société et aux questions de gouvernance mondiale.

INTRODUCTION

Man and nature have long been connected. This is what Y. Pan (2022, p.109) underlines when he says : “man and nature are a community of life. Nature gave birth to human beings, and human beings can actively transform nature. There is a high degree of connection between man and nature. Man affects nature and nature also affects human beings.” In other words, the two entities cannot do without the other. In Kenya, this connection is manifested. Indeed, the Gikuyu legend says that Mogai, the Lord of Nature, is the one who gave “the land with ravines, the rivers, the forests, the game” to the man Gikuyu (J. Kenyatta, 1938, p.3). This information is so important that it allows us to understand how Mogai trusted man Gikuyu to the point that he entrusted him with Nature. This act can also be seen as a responsibility for human beings to take care of nature. Nature and human being have, thus, long been connected. Since the beginning, this connection or interconnection has existed between the two entities. Z. N. Alwan (2019, p.19) is also in favour of this point. He recognises that “Since existence, man has a symbiotic relationship with nature. It becomes, as a matter of course, part and parcel of man's life.” In a word, man cannot live without nature and the same is true for nature. To sum up the relationship between man and nature, Y. Pan (2022, p.110) concludes saying : “Man and nature are interdependent.” The name “Lord of Nature” in Gikuyu’s legend simply means that in their tradition, nature belongs to God. The reason why he entrusted it to man was to permit human being to take care of Nature, to protect it. This reference helps understand the importance of nature for God, the Creator. Africans, particularly Kenyans have understood that. Thus, from generation to generation, elders have done their utmost to impart their knowledge of nature to the new generation. The *River Between* by Ngugi wa Thiong’o is an illustration of this cultural perpetuation. We can see a man, Chege, well respected, going to the forest to teach his son, Waiyaki some knowledge long defended by the tribe. This special trip meant to initiate his son, was the right opportunity to educate him. So, how does this education function? How does the interdependence or interconnection between Africans and nature manifest itself? In other words, what is the relationship between African and nature ? The objective of this paper is to show the strong connection between Africans and nature. We will resort to ecocriticism defined by Arnold¹ (94) in the following words : “The term eco-criticism refers to the literary study that highlights the relationship between literature and nature» as the theoretical tool. This article is

¹ Arnold, David&Guha, Ramachandra. 1995. *Nature, Culture, Imperialism:Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, quoted by Z. N. Alwan (2019, p.19).

divided into three parts : the first one is entitled African, nature and Education, the second one is Nature, an asset for Africans and the last one is *The River Between* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o : from nature conservation to local development.

1- African, Nature and education.

There is a connection between African, nature and education. In fact, nature is a place where African people particularly boys and girls are sent for their initiation rite. The forest appears as the right place where they are taught the ways of becoming men or women. In the novel, *Waiyaki*, a young man, had to be sent to the forest to learn many things. He was escorted by his own father who the narrator describes as a very respected man in the village (p.7). It was an initiation for *Waiyaki* because, with his father he discovered the marvels of the nature. This initiation rite also called "second birth" (p.6) is very important in that without it one cannot get certain privileges in the society. *Koina*, a character in the novel, was explaining this to *Waiyaki*, who, uncircumcised, pretended to be a hero. He told him : "You cannot be Demi" "You are not ready for circumcision. You are not born again" (P.11). The new birth *Koina* is hinting at here is the "rite de passage from childhood to adulthood" (p.134). This *rite of passage* is so important that when missionaries complained about it, they were opposed by the whole community in Kenya (J. Kenya, 1938, p.0132). In fact, this practice is the identity of the Kenyan. In other words, it is the mark or the element that permits a Kenyan to be who he is or to be recognized as such. For J. Kenyatta (1938, p.133), this practice "is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral, and religious implications." In short, the initiated men or girls learn much during their training in domains such as education of the tribe as well as the social, moral and religious life of the community. D. O. Odinga (2016, p.5-6) gives here a definition of the initiation rite and what is expected from the initiated in the following reference:

The process of initiation involves undergoing a set of rites to begin a new phase of life in the community. It marks, in a fundamental way, passing from one phase in life to the next more mature phase. It has a fundamental element of transforming the individual. The individual is not automatically transformed through the rites of passage. The rites of passage are a culmination of an intense period of socialization. The period of education is when the core values and new life roles are imparted on an individual. The individuals are expected to come out of this period aware of who they are, responsible members of the community and conscious of what kind of life is expected of them.

This quotation shows that initiation is a necessary element in the young Kenyan's life. It plays a significant role in his education. Let us remind that the "control mechanisms varied cross culturally, but each society endeavoured to produce a well-adapted young person, with standard

morals and keen to perpetuate it.” (Felix Ngunzo,2011, p.1). Simply put, parents are aware of the dangers that the non-education of their children in the ways of the tribe represents. To solve this problem, they do their utmost to teach them their values. Chege, having understood it, decided to act. The education encompasses several domains including sexual education. It is also useful to remind again that “Historians have provided evidence that adolescence has always been a time associated with mischief, disobedience and conflicts with authority, unruly behaviour, and the risk of sexual and aggressive misdeeds. “(R. F. Baumeister and M. Muraven, 1996, P. 407). To prevent it, “Morality education with regard to family life, clan, history and sexual relationships in the community was inculcated from an early age.” (F. Ngukzo *et. al.*,2012, p.2). This early age is the ripe and right time for their initiation.

Knowing also the ways of the tribes confers respect on a person and that was the case for Chege, Waiyaki’s father. The narrator says that “The other elders feared and respected him. For he knew, more than any other person, the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribes. So, he was the head of every important ceremony.” (p.7). In short, in African culture, knowing one’s ways is very praised. This reason prompted Chege to teach his son the same ways so that when he is gone or dead, this one should benefit from the same respect he, Chege, was given. On this ground, we simply understand that respect, in African tradition, comes from the knowledge of one’s culture, history and traditions. To reach his goal, he sent his child to the forest and once there, he demonstrated that he deserved his title. The narrator says: “Few words passed between them. But when Chege stopped near a certain tree or bush, Waiyaki knew that his father had something to say» (p.14). This passage shows that during this initiation, the trainer does not speak for the sake of speaking; he does not talk too much but goes straight to the point, because he wanted his son to grasp the lesson. Talking too much would help to distract them. We also know that the forest is generally a quiet place, where noises are scarce. Going there with his son is significant because they avoid the distraction of the village and are willing to learn easily. The objective is to instill in his son the tribe’s value so that he never forgets them because : “the children who have been taught under European influence have almost forgotten or disregarded the Gikuyu customary law of behaviour” (J. Kenyatta, p.110) and when we know that “Uganda, like most countries of Central and East Africa (Zaire and Kenya, for example), has experienced a rapid Europeanization of its medium of instruction in education since independence,” (Rotimi Badejo, 1989, p.45) we understand the seriousness of the situation.

Chege, later on, advised his son : “Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites” (p;20). This piece of

advice is very interesting because it shows that Black people or Africans are attached to their culture and tradition. Chege wants his son to learn from white people but not to follow their footsteps or vices. During that initiation, the stress is put on some particular elements. The boys and girls are taught about their origin and the history of their tribe. In fact, remaining faithful to one's tribe is more than important. In the bush, the boys and girls are taught about their history, and most importantly the names of past heroes as well as their good deeds for them to inspire from. J. Kenyatta (1938, P.135) said that : "Any Gikuyu child who is not corrupted by detribalisation is able to record in his mind the whole history and origin of the Gikuyu people through the medium of such names as Agu, Ndemi and Mathathi, etc., who were initiated hundreds of years ago." To put it another way, remaining authentic for a Gikuyu is more than necessary. This authenticity is what they are taught at school of initiation.

They are also taught to respect the forest because they believe in the spirit of nature. For Kenyans, anything happening in nature is "imbued with the spirit of Ngai" (J. Kenyatta (1938, P.241). In the forest, Chege taught his son what to do or not and where to go or not. It is an education to natural elements. (p.14). It is said that during the initiatory trip in the forest, Chege would stop at some trees and enumerate their virtues (p.14). The objective is to impart his knowledge to his son who, according to the narrator "is the last in Chege's line" (p.19). Waiyaki becomes, thus, the heir, the one who should keep the tradition and, in the future, teach it to the next generation. As matter of fact, the trip to the forest is more than compulsory for it can be viewed as a transition between the first and the second or next generation. To sum up, we can say that nature is a place of learning for young Kenyans. If nature is a place for Kenyan education, it is also an asset for Africans.

2- Nature, an asset for Africans

Nature is an asset for Africans. Indeed, it is the place where they find their livelihood and the necessary elements for their survival. Kenyans are, for the big majority, farmers (N. Sobania, 2003, P.2) and J. Kenyatta (1938, p.241) recognized that "men depend on nature." In other words, without forest we cannot live. Indeed, we draw everything from nature : food, clothing, medicines. L. E. Keniger *et al.* (2013, 914) are correct when they say : "Throughout history, humans have had an intimate relationship with nature, most obviously depending on it for subsistence and production." In the novel, the majority of the characters are farmers and shepherds. It means that they all depend on what their fields and plantations yield. What this means is that they cannot make it if they do not work on their different farms. Nature or the soil

has become something on which Kenyans depend entirely. Depriving them of the land or even snatching it from them can but cause trouble and this is what N. Sobania (2003, P.22) says in the following utterance : “Eventually, the colonial system with its seizure of land, insistence on forced or cheap labour, forced production of cash crops, and continued treatment of Africans as inferior beings led to new protests.” Just like Nguni who “knew deeply inside his heart that land was everything. Education was good only because it would lead to the recovery of the lost land” (T. w. Ngugi, 1964, p.39), Kenyans also know the importance of land. It is said that “If a man had plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money.” (T. w. Ngugi, 1964, p.19). Simply put, land is what Kenyan people consider as real wealth and not the physical appearance. In a word, possessing a plot of land is the biggest asset a Kenyan can have on earth. We remember the armed struggle engaged by the Mau Mau fighters in the 1950s (R. Finnegan, 2012, p.277) to take back their lands. These fighters initiated brutal attacks against the colonial forces and their followers (T. w. Ngugi, 2010, p.113-114). If those fighters were ready to kill and cause pain to the colonial administration, it is just because the land holds a particular place in their community.

It is also important to say that Africans and nature are connected because like everyone, nature is the place where Africans bury their dead. In the Continent, the dead are not dead and deserve respect (A. Koné, *Le respect des Morts*, 2002). J. Kenyatta was saying that : “the extinction of a kinship groups means cutting off the ancestral spirits from visiting the earth, because there is no one left to communicate with them.” (p. 13-14). In other words, communicating with the ancestors or being connected to the dead through the earth is much valued in Gikuyu’s tradition particularly. As matter of fact, Kenyans are connected to the land because there is a link or relationship between the land and them. No matter where they go, their roots remain in that place due to the fact that it is where their ancestors are buried. In the novel, the characters like Kinuthia are doing what they can to chase the white man from their country. Indeed, they know that if the white man does not go, they will never be able to get their land to till and reconnect to their ancestors. In his anger, he declares: “I say the white man should go, go back to where he came from and leave us till our land in peace” (p.60). This quotation helps us understand that Kenyan people have been deprived of their land, their only real wealth. In losing their land, they are also losing their dignity, their connection to the ancestors and thus their identity. The fact of burying their dead in a specific place makes this one special for them because it becomes a sacred place. They have a particular link or relation with that place which has been turned into

their worship place. So, even if they are moved to a new place much better, they do feel the connection between them and their ancestors for they are disconnected with the latter.

During the initiatory outing in the forest, it is said that Chege would stop at some trees and enumerate their virtues (p.14). On other occasions, he would simply warn his child not to make the mistake of touching some plants. Chege, in showing his son the advantages and importance of some plants wants to impart to him the knowledge of the nature that he has. He knows that nature is rich in plants that are efficient for curing the community. Instead of dying without entrusting this knowledge of nature, he chose his son Waiyaki as the next guardian of this knowledge. Generally, in villages, people resort to traditional medicines to cure themselves. This way of emphasizing on the good effects of the plants aims at promoting traditional medicine in the novel. Let us say that according to J. R. Gusfield (1969, p. 354) :

the old is not necessarily replaced by the new. The acceptance of a new product, a new religion, a new mode of decision-making does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the older form. New forms may only increase the range of alternatives. Both magic and medicine can exist side by side, used alter- natively by the same people.

This mention of plants good at healing some pains and diseases is a way of drawing people's attention on the role that traditional medicines can play in the health domain. In other words, society should not belittle the richness of traditional medicines. They should promote it just like they do for modern one.

3- *The River Between* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o: from nature conservation to local development.

The protection of nature and its preservation are an obligation for every human being. Indeed, we draw everything from nature : food, medicines, clothes and even water. Consequently, our duty, is to take care of that nature, to protect it because our life depends on it. Nature is all that human beings have. Its development is synonym of our survival. The educational trip initiated by Chege into the forest with his son is a warning to the humanity on the danger we represent for nature. Indeed, we all know that "Human-induced global warming, overgrazing, and deforestation are compounding large-scale droughts, famines, storms, and floods." (Z. Jiali and B. Chenglian, 2021, p.208). Simply put, human's actions have severe consequences on nature. The action undertaken by Chege sending his son to the forest has a significant meaning : he wants to show the beauty of nature to Waiyaki because, as the latter would say later he had "never been to the hills deep south of Kameno" (p.13). So, Chege's first objective was to enable his son to discover the nature and its richness. Once this objective is reached, the second step is to teach him the values of some plants. This teaching aims at instilling in Waiyaki the respect

of nature. Indeed, "influenced by the idea of "man can conquer nature", men have no respect for nature. The continuous development of human society inevitably affects the environment." (Y. Pan, 2022, p.110). As a "Seer" (p.7), Chege certainly knew that a time would come when human being's actions would negatively influence nature. He knew that soon or later, human being would harm nature. To preserve and protect some species before the damage occurs, he sent Waiyaki to give him the necessary elements that would help the community when need be. As a young boy, Waiyaki can be seen as the new generation to whom Chege is entrusting the values of nature. Certainly, his will is to give the opportunity to his son to impart the message to the new generation, a message on the necessity to act and protect nature because our future largely and totally depends on it. Quoting president Xi Jinping, Z. Jiali and B. Chenglian (2021, p.212) said: "What we are doing today to build an ecological civilization will benefit generations to come." This quote by Xi Jinping allows us to understand that the protection of nature is a duty for us if we want to see our children who are the members of the next generation to benefit from the virtues of nature. As human beings, we can do it. Y. Pan (2022, p.109) is optimistic as for the good role we, as human beings, can play in the protection and the transformation of nature when he says: "Human beings can protect and transform nature through their own practices and become protectors of nature with reverence for nature, making nature more beautiful and stable." Let us say that we do not have the choice. If we want our future to be bright and our children to benefit from the advantages highlighted by L. E. Keniger *et. al.* (2013, p.919), we must moderate our exploitation of nature because, "the natural resources are limited, not inexhaustible, so if human beings blindly demand from nature without restraint, when natural resources are depleted, it is bound to cause the stagnation of human development." (Y. Pan, 2022, p.109). It is certain that "Man and nature are interdependent. Nature provides us with a home to live on." but we should rethink our use of natural resources. In addition, the protection of fauna and flora can have a number of advantages. G. Umuziranenge and E. Ntiranyibagira (2020, p.62) recognise that "Despite the spectacular evolution of nature, safari and culture tourism during the 2000s, the continent remains one of the world's least popular tourist destinations." This situation shows that all the efforts to make this activity flourish in Africa seem not to be rewarded. If in some areas, tourism seems not to be successful, in other places it is the total opposite: "While tourism remains weak or quite inexistent in many protected areas in Western and Central French-speaking Africa, it is successful in a few English-speaking Eastern and Southern African states well-known for their protected areas." (G. Umuziranenge and E. Ntiranyibagira (2020, p.62). Many reasons can justify this failure and as the same authors put it, "Beyond the obvious negative influence of

structural, organizational and strategic factors, political crises and instability explain the poor tourism performances of protected areas in some countries, particularly in Central Africa” (P.62). Tourism cannot prosper in a conflictual situation. The impacts or drawbacks of different crises in the continent are so drastic that avoiding it is the right solution. P. A. Sørup *et. al.* (2020, p.20) said that “Conflicts often stem from some social and/or political change and are thus unavoidable. It disperses societies, divides people and creates fear.” This is what conflict creates in a country. It disperses people, divides them and creates fear. When such an atmosphere reigns in a country, the chances for tourists to develop are reduced. In reality, for tourism to develop, a country must be at peace and, more importantly to know, is that “well financed, secured and managed protected areas have a more interesting development of tourism and touristic incomes.” (G. Umuziranenge and E. Ntiranyibagira (2020, p.62). Chege’s message to his son should be taken seriously : taking care of nature will not only benefit us but also the next generation.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it appears that nature and human beings have long been connected. This connection is due to the fact that “There is no human being completely separated from nature, and nature completely separated from man is incomplete”. (Yi Pan, 2022, p.111). This interdependence benefits both of them but particularly mankind. First of all, nature is used as a school where human beings learn appropriate morals and social values through the initiation process. During that period, some values are taught to the newcomers. Secondly, nature is an asset for us because it permits us to have the essential elements required for human existence: food, water, shelter, cover. In simple terms, mankind depends totally and entirely on nature and without it, it will be impossible to live. Thus, for the future generation to benefit, we should rethink our way of interacting with nature. Finally, it is important to say that *The River Between* by Ngugi wa Thiong’o appears as a novel that helps understand the importance of nature and the necessity for its protection. Our opinion is that nature must be preserved and protected because today, human actions have accelerated climate change, which severely affects natural ecosystem. If we do not change our way of behaving, environmental degradation could intensify in the coming years.

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