# An ecocritical reading of Okot p'Bitek's "Chameleon and Elephant"

**Rose Opondo & Tobias Odongo**

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In this article, we undertake an eco-critical analysis of an Acholi traditional oral folktale rewritten by Okot p'Bitek in his oral literature text *Hare and Hornbill* as an allegorical narrative with the title "Chameleon and Elephant". We do this to examine the Acoli community's perceptions of the natural environment and its sustenance of life. Through close reading and content analysis within the paradigm of ecological considerations, in this article we show how interconnected and symbiotic human, animal, and plant worlds are, and how destroying a segment leads to the destruction of all three. The story we analyse presents the sober topic of nature's wrath at its abuse through the structural and psychological dictates of the creative oral narrative. We place oral literature at the centre of exploring the needed mind shifts in environmental conservation. We conclude by arguing that the narrative's central argument is that conservation demands intelligence and humility rather than force and arrogance, parallel to traditional African approaches to co-existence with the environment and in direct opposition to modern supremacist exploitation and degradation of the same environment. **Keywords:** ecocriticism, environment, conservation, nature, oral literature.

## Introduction

Humans have always expressed their connection to the natural world in diverse, creative ways, orally and orthographically. African rituals and oral traditions often highlight a dialogic connection between humans, animals, and the natural environment, a subject that is now attracting theoretical framing. Njogu Kimani notes that "[o]rality has been an important method of self-understanding, creating relationships and establishing equilibrium between body, soul and the environment" (124). African oral literatures are works of art that draw from mythologies of survival in which humans negotiate living with the cosmos, flora, and fauna. They can be references for belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies of communities with regard to communal and environmental relationships. In this context, African creative oral cultures have therefore expressed and reflected an intricate intertwinement of human life with its natural environment and an ensuing interdependency that shows connections between lives on the planet. Brunvand notes that "[f]olklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted in the traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples" (qtd in Sone 3). Content about the benevolence and wrath of the earth and the natural elements, anthropomorphism of animals, and interdependency of humans and nature abounds in myths, legends, etiological tales, songs, proverbs, and riddles, just to mention a few genres of creative oral traditions. As such, African oral traditions have largely been ecological in nature. According to Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, ecocriticism as a critical stance in the understanding and explanation of ecologically oriented literary works is presented as an emerging literary critical perspective that takes on "an earth-centred approach in literary studies". It focusses the cross-fertilisation

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between literary studies and environmental discourse (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 262). Peter Barry wonders whether the theory should rather be called "green studies", with good reason. He argues that:

> For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized [sic] as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Nature, then, isn't reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out onto the universe). (163)

In this article, we undertake an ecocritical reading of "Chameleon and Elephant", from Okot p'Bitek's collection *Hare and Hornbill* (1978). We argue that the approaches available for the interrogation of ecology in art do not completely present new vistas in African oral literature; rather, they afford a re-thinking of the traditional and necessary symbiotic relationship between humans and nature for a balanced life on planet earth—a relationship in which humans are not accorded higher rights over other forms of life in their environment, but rather a stewardship thereof for their own survival. Nathan Bennett *et al.* (599) define environmental stewardship as "the actions taken by individuals, groups or networks of actors, with various motivations and levels of capacity, to protect, care for or responsibly use the environment in pursuit of environmental and/or social outcomes in diverse social-ecological contexts".

"Chameleon and Elephant" is a rewritten Acholi oral narrative in which Chameleon is an animal spouse, and Elephant his arch-rival. The story narrates how there was once a fierce drought in the land, without mentioning a specific location, a pointer to the universal implication of the text. All rivers dry up, and arbitrary fires frequently break out and scorch the dry earth. Constant gales and whirlwinds blow the acrid dust across the land, choking everyone and causing unrequited thirst. The Old Woman with the most beautiful daughter in the land offers her up for marriage to anyone who would bring water back to the community. Animals varying from Elephant through Lion, Rhino, Hippo, Lizard, Waterbuck, Python, Rat, and Chameleon all try their luck to restore the water from the riverbed, but all fail save for Chameleon. Chameleon marries the beautiful girl and manages to impregnate her before Elephant, fuming with anger, shame, and sheer jealousy, hunts the latter down, tramples him underfoot, and takes over his wife. Unaware that he was too late, and the beautiful girl was already pregnant with Chameleon's child, he raises Chameleon's son as his own. Chameleon's bitter wife waits patiently for her son to grow up and reveals to him the entire truth surrounding the circumstances of his birth. Furious, the son plans vengeance for the father he never knew and manages to kill the entire elephant community by trapping them in a raging bush fire. Upon inspecting his foster father's foot, he discovers his biological father still lodged in, injured but still alive. He restores him to their house, and they once more become a whole family as they had begun. The happy conclusion is the restoration of water and a family.

**African oral literature and climate change discourse**

Oral narratives are principally oral productions and performances but are increasingly accessed through written versions due to various interventions. Firstly, the development and introduction of orthographies for African languages, secondly, the need to record oral material for archival purposes, and, lastly, the changing performance spaces that have delineated performers from immediate audiences, necessitating secondary consumption of oral art. However, oral narratives, even in written form as the one we study in this article, retain a number of oral elements. The written recordings of creative oral materials render them static but, conversely, allow reflective studies in an environment that is increasingly alienating performances from the audience and eroding the real-time performance spaces as they traditionally existed. However, the written forms, as seen in the oral narrative studied in this article, still imbibe aspects of orality that retain the authenticity of oral art forms for this material. Therefore, the eco-critical reading proffered herein is principally that of an oral text.

Ecocriticism deconstructs topics encompassing, for example, the dearth of adequate responses to environmental crises, the neglecting of environmental concerns, and romanticised conceptions of nature. This is in solidarity with the recognition that we are now living in what has been termed the Anthropocene era, which denotes the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment (Callicott; Corlett; Mathevet, Raymond, and Bousquet). This is viewed by many as a largely Eurocentric scientific approach to environmental conservation where the environment is not a lived everyday experience but something that is set apart.

African philosophies expressed in oral cultures, and which include environmental matters, offer wholesome and often deeply integrated approaches to human life within the nurturing earth. Slicing ideas apart for isolated study, which more often than not lead to abstractions about phenomena and generalisations that are not culturally grounded, go against the grain of wisdom contained therein. Ephrahim Gwaravanda and Amasa Ndofirepi note that the particularistic school of thought in African philosophy discourse urges that "the definition of African philosophy must be broad enough to accommodate indigenous cultural worldviews" (4), a thought we adopt in this article. Walter Ong argues that "[o]ral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld" (49). The critique of oral narratives was traditionally ingrained in the audience's appreciation of the received performance and within the totality of the cultural axiom rather than in independent analyses of possible meanings, as is characteristic of Western knowledge systems whenever they engage with Africanist knowledge spaces.

African indigenous epistemologies have often been relegated to the peripheries of the 'Other'. In her article "Constructing the Dark Continent: Metaphor as Geographic Representation of Africa", Lucy Jarosz argues that Western geographical and cultural discourse repeatedly uses metaphors of darkness, primitivism, absence, and lack in order to portray Africa as a space of deficiency, danger, and otherness, rather than to describe an empirical reality. This presents the understanding of Africa and Africans as a construct rather than an inherent and intrinsic reality. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha emphasizes the liminality and fluidity of the post-colonial African, who he sees as existing in the third space of hybridity, thereby presenting the African identity as always in flux. Tanure Ojaide consolidates Jarosz's and Bhabha's arguments as evidence of the problems with the treatment of African epistemologies. He notes that: "In the binaries created by Westerners, [Westerners] had knowledge and Africans were ignorant; the West was superior and Africa was inferior" (169). As Ojaide rightly notes, "While Western peoples flaunt their knowledge in books that are archived in libraries or other spaces, the indigenous knowledge of African people is generally archived in their oral traditions or other aspects of their folklore" (170). The binaries between a purely technologically driven exploitation and subsequent restorative attempts of the Western orientations and the humanistic symbiotic approaches of the African indigenous knowledge in the treatment of the earth today gives us adequate spaces for reflection on all-inclusive approaches over the compartmentalised and highly inanimate Western approaches to climate problems.

In his article "The Forest in African Traditional Thought and Practice: An Ecophilosophical Discourse", Mark Ikeke notes: "The African understanding of the forest cannot be separated from the African cosmological view of reality. Life is seen as one integrated bond and interrelated web. There is no pure and absolute dualism in the African worldview. All life-spirits, humans, animals, plants, trees, oceans, rocks, etc. come from God" (346). In "Chameleon and Elephant", both humans and animals collaborate to cajole the earth to yield water, which will revive all other life forms. The earth and water are life forms in themselves and are capable of discourse. This suggests that the environment is an integral part of culture by virtue of being a participant in the web of life forms, and it informs the way man acts in and on it.

Lawrence Buell notes that environmental justice and ethics also provide platforms for ecocriticism (97). The wisdom in "Chameleon and Elephant" portends that the natural environment sustains life and its conservation demands intelligence and humility rather than force and arrogance. In African mythologies, the belief in the "spiritism of nature" dictates that one cannot simply cut down a tree without performing the appropriate ritual to appease its spirit and acknowledging the life force that demands respect, replacement, and regeneration. Ikeke (346) notes that "the trees, plants, animals, and other organisms which make up the forests were infused with spirits". Failure to observe these redemptive ritual practices is believed to bring misfortune, with the ultimate consequence being death. Annie Patricia Kameri-Mbote and Philippe Cullet argue that colonialism caused a major disruption in communal and traditional integrated resource management systems of land use, replacing them with private/public land tenure systems that eventually bred environmental degradation. Gufu Oba furthers this argument by noting that colonial land use and natural resource extraction policies (mining, forestry) "laid the foundation for persistent ecological degradation in postcolonial Africa" (218).

Environmental protection ideologies in African societies are integrated into the socialisation process through art and entertainment, which then translate to imbibed values. A child, therefore, grows into adulthood with an acute awareness that it is their individual duty to conserve the environment, rather than the duty of some separate, isolated entity like the forest conservation department, as is often the case today (Waliaula and Otieno 83). Given its form and content, "Chameleon and Elephant" is meant for a young audience, making it a potent avenue for


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acculturation and socialisation into ecological value systems. Through language, the oral narrative becomes a tool for inculcating environmental messages to upcoming planet citizens, with the intention of posterity. Valeda Dent Goodman and Geoff Goodman (59) observe that "stories are acts of language, laden with symbolism and meaning, that serve a particular function, especially where children are concerned". Education systems introduced by colonial powers in Africa instilled a mechanistic and exploitative worldview of nature, alienating generations from their indigenous ecological values and contributing to large-scale environmental degradation (Mart 45). Alienation from these values by Western education, which introduced a mechanical engagement with the natural environment, bred a detachment from the natural environment in subsequent generations of African children from the onset of colonialism into the post-colonial era. This has resulted in large-scale environmental degradation in the name of 'civilisation', a term that has been the bane of African philosophies. In this article we adopt both an ecocentric and anthropomorphic approaches of ecocriticism. In the former, nature-centeredness is considered, where nature is given a voice, while in the latter, human altercations with nature are emphasised as consequences and counter-negotiations.

**Environmental conservation lessons from "Chameleon and Elephant"**

Water is life, and in "Chameleon and Elephant", because all rivers and streams have dried up, "many animals were threatened with death". The situation is so dire that the Old Woman offers her only daughter in marriage to any man who can give her a little water to drink because she is "dying of thirst". Although not expressly stated, the drying up of all water sources in this community could be attributed to consumption without preservation. This results in vulnerable fauna accidentally being set on fire by human agencies. The community depicted here has interfered with the natural life force, and the consequences are imminent death. Their only hope is to cajole nature back into life to sustain their own lives.

The force enacted by the mighty ones like Lion, Elephant, and Hippo, and even the prowess of Antelope, only exacerbates the already precarious situation.

> The first person to try to dig water was Elephant. He walked to the centre of the river, lifted his front legs up and hit the ground like a meteorite while singing:
> *Heavy one, heavy one,*
> *Let me see if there is any water here,*
> *Heavy one, strong one,*
> *Let me see if there is any water here.*
> Elephant danced and danced and clouds of dust rose up to the sky, but there was no water. ("Chameleon and Elephant" 2)

What we see here is that Elephant is focused on exhibiting his might over the earth. His heavy dance and conceited self-praise only hurt the earth more, and the result is dust. To prove this, his second attempt to forcefully dislodge Chameleon from victory after the latter achieves muddy water from dust, brings back dust.

> When Elephant was told the story he came running into the arena, seized Chameleon with his trunk and threw him away [...]. Elephant jumped and jumped with his hind feet and sang:
> *Heavy one, heavy one,*
> *Let me see if there is any water here,*
> *Heavy one, heavy one,*
> *Let me see if there is any water here.*
> The muddy water turned into mud and the mud disappeared and soon a huge cloud of dust rose up to the sky as Elephant pounded the dry riverbed like a woman pounding millet in a mortar. ("Chameleon and Elephant" 4)

Violence on Mother Earth only breeds death. Elephant's violent acts are captured not only in his heavy frame, but also in the use of words like "hit", "meteoric", and "pounded". We can compare this to the present situation in which large-scale ravaging of water bodies for human consumption without reciprocal protection and massive industrialisation of the world has resulted in an insatiable need for water as a primary resource. The harvesting of these water bodies has been nothing short of violent in recent centuries, leading to the drying up of certain water bodies. The attendant desiccation of water catchment areas for settlement and other human activities has further violated the water life force. Elephant's self-conceit can be likened to man's boasting of progress by harnessing nature to work for him. The innovation of big turbines to tap energy from water, huge water pumps, as well as big


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dredges to interfere with waterbeds are some of the achievements that put man at the pinnacle of planet earth's control, but this is interpreted by the narrative ideology as a deception. Man is not meant to be a brute controller, but a symbiotic partner in matters of nature and life.

Antelope's attempt could be interpreted as those activities that are not essentially brutish, but which still negatively exploit nature.

> But Antelope said he wanted to try. He jumped lightly into the arena and began to sing:
> *I am Antelope,*
> *I am light, I am frail,*
> *But let me see*
> *Where the water is.*
> *I am Antelope,*
> *I am light, I am not strong,*
> *But let me see*
> *If I can get water.*
> Antelope danced and danced but he gave up, because no water appeared. ("Chameleon and Elephant" 3)

Despite his lightness and frailty, Antelope's focus also seems to offend Mother Earth, and she refuses to yield any water. His focus is on himself and his own attributes. He does not address Earth's concerns. This can be likened to the individual actions against nature, which are exploitative, seemingly on a small scale, but which collectively still ravage water sources. Green activists today sensitise individuals on saving water in domestic spaces through simple activities like avoiding long showers, turning off unnecessary running water, and recycling water for optimum usage. Neglect of these seemingly 'frail' activities builds up collectively to negatively impact water resources, leading Mother Earth to shut her water in.

Nevertheless, nature has a way of reciprocating when taken good care of, and the key is to integrate our cultural practices into environmental conservation. A community that makes it taboo to cut down a tree without planting ten others will never need clarion calls for afforestation. A community that makes it taboo to cut down immature trees will never turn into a desert. In traditional communities across Africa, sacred trees abound, meaning they are mature but well-preserved and protected and have stayed intact for hundreds of years, effectively protecting the environment from degradation. In an article on Bukusu proverbs and the environment, Solomon Waliaula and Tobias Otieno affirm that "some of the herbal medicine is not a preserve of herbalists but common knowledge, such as *kumurembe*, a medicinal tree which effectively treats mumps, and the Sodom apple plant, which treats stomachache" (79). They further point out, for instance, the close association between the Bukusu circumcision ritual and the environment:

> [...] the circumcision ritual [...] portrays the Bukusu integration with their environment [...] The beads and string used to make *Bibiuma* (worn across the neck through the armpits to hang on either side) are made of string and beads, which grow from plants. Some initiates wear *ekutwa* (headgear) made of wild animal skin. On the day of the operation the initiates undergo the *khulonga* (smearing the initiate's body with sticky mud) process, which takes place in specific swamps. *Khulonga* is not complete until *ututu* (a rare type of grass that grows in wetlands) is fitted on the initiate's head. Three days after the operation the newly initiated go to specific swamps *khukhwiyakha lulongo* (smearing the body with sticky mud that turns white when it dries on the initiate's body). The initiates keep themselves busy by hunting for birds in the bushes using catapults. They also entertain themselves by playing music on flutes made from reeds. The basic medicine for their wounds is *Enguu* (a painful medicinal herb). (79)

Evidently, for the continuity of indispensable societal rituals, the community must preserve swamps, forests, wild animals, medicinal plants, and bird species, which confirms traditional African societies' awareness of the interrelated nature of the environment and human survival.

In "Chameleon and Elephant", when Chameleon first appears, he whispers, "I also want to try". He does not shout, perhaps recognising that he is just a cog in a bigger wheel, and that Earth also has a say. Then he makes his way *slowly* into the arena. This is without the pomp and noise of the likes of Elephant. The focus is on getting Earth to cooperate, so he approaches her with humility and caution, an almost seductive slowness. His main focus is not on marrying the beautiful girl, but on cajoling Earth to produce water and saving lives. It appears, theoretically, that Chameleon would proceed with his attempts to find water even if the girl were withdrawn as the ultimate prize. We also note a difference in Chameleon's focus—he is effectively chiding the others for laughing and

undermining each other's efforts rather than cooperating to solve the emergency at hand. His message is that we are all born different, with unique characteristics, but each of us matters and has a role to play in the defence and reconstruction of Mother Earth:

> Chameleon lifted up his front legs and began to dance as vigorously as he could, singing:
> *Laughter, laughter, everybody is laughing at me,*
> *Look at Red-headed Lizard laughing at me,*
> *But this is how I was born.*
> *Laughter, laughter, everyone is laughing at me.* ("Chameleon and Elephant" 5)

Chameleon's tagline "everybody is laughing at me, but this is how I was born", which is a call to respect fellow individuals irrespective of how different they are from us, can extend to respecting diverse ways of relating with nature in a reciprocal manner, many of which had been deemed primitive by Eurocentric anthropological treatment of African ecological cultures. Activities like offering sacrifices to water bodies, praying to the spirits of trees before cutting them down, and bestowing spiritual powers to the elemental forces of nature have been ridiculed by Western scholars and consigned to the realms of spiritism, mysticism, and myth. Chameleon's song is also a warning to stop being patronising and condescending and to take into account the need to create a symbiotic, not a parasitic, relationship with the environment.

Elephant represents the destructive forces of humans on planet earth. The dust clouds he throws up every time he is at work are akin to the harmful gases that destroy the ozone layer, gradually stripping us of our protective atmosphere. These greenhouse emissions result in the kind of climate change phenomena we are currently experiencing across the globe. Water is life, and the lack of it nearly exterminates the community in the narrative, but Chameleon's intelligent balancing, humble nature, and ability to blend with the environment help restore it. Proper use of water sources, management of domestic waste, and fuel resources for our subsistence needs form what Bennett *et al.* (598) refer to as local environmental stewardship, which contributes to global conservation and restoration prospects.

**Collaboration of animals and humans in environmental conservation**

In "Chameleon and Elephant", the woman offers her daughter to "any man", but the narrative indicates that "all the animals" (1) gathered at the mouth of a dried-up river to consider the woman's offer. The respondents to her offer are animals named Lion, Elephant, Rat, Lizard, Squirrel, and the like. Chameleon and Elephant become the main contenders, sharply contrasting each other in terms of size, structure, and temperament. The assignment given seems straightforward: revive life and win the girl in marriage. However, it is intriguing that the institution of marriage is invoked here, and, more so, between human and animal. The girl is being offered to an animal spouse. The use of animal characters to depict humans is an age-old phenomenon. While citing Émile Zola's *The Beast Within*, Constant Kpao Sarè notes that "[g]reat writers have often depicted the animal in humans [...] in the form of an attempt at empathy with the animal spirit, a kind of sympathy with the animal kingdom, and the formation of good relations between humans and animals" (167). In this narrative, as in most African oral literature involving animals, humans and animals are seen as equals. The old woman offers her daughter in marriage to whoever will persuade Earth to bring forth water. Animals respond to the offer on equal terms, and the girl is willing to be betrothed to an animal. Conversely, upon marrying Chameleon, the girl is loving and dutiful because he won her hand fair and square and also has a tender temperament. This is evident from the fact that "Chameleon's new wife took him to his house and nursed him until he was cured" (5). Further, the narrative presents her as helpful to and protective of her Chameleon husband: "One day as Chameleon and his wife went to dig in their garden, and as they were working, Chameleon's wife saw Elephant coming through the grass and hid her husband under the half gourd" 5).

The healthy and equal relationship between humans and animals in this and other African oral narratives afford a seamless, symbiotic interaction between these two life forms. Sarè (169) agrees that in African oral narratives involving such marriages, the animal spouse does not transform into a human upon entering a union in marriage but remains an animal. Chameleon also remains thus and is still vulnerable to Elephant. Marriage is the ultimate symbol of integrated life, and the marriage between humans and animals here is symbolic of the intertwinement of both life forms in nature, ingrained into the cultural psyche. This creates respect for animal life and the envisaged symbiosis in relationships, even where humans need to use the animals as food and for labour.


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The offer made by the woman presents an ecofeminist perspective of the offer of a girl in marriage as an incentive to provide water to save lives. The girl becomes the 'bait' for desired behaviour. However, there are traits like raw brutishness and self-conceit that will not win over the girl as demonstrated by the Earth's refusal to yield water to Elephant's brute force, consequently denying him the girl's hand in marriage. Rather, modesty and tenderness carry the day, as demonstrated by Chameleon's tenderness and lack of pride. According to Gourish Mondal and Palash Majumder (482), ecofeminism "proposes that only by reversing current values, thereby privileging care and cooperation over more aggressive and dominating behaviours, can both society and environment benefit".

Once the animals have gathered, a debate ensues on whether to use teeth, horns, or front legs to dig for water. Democratisation of environmental restoration processes ensures inclusivity that enhances participation and involvement. Nevertheless, although they settle for hind legs by majority consensus, it emerges that some animals, like Python, have no legs, while others have limited use of their legs. The emphasis must be on our different abilities: let us all best utilise what we can to conserve the ecosystem and make the world a much better and safer place to live in. Nations are differently endowed, meaning their capacities and abilities will be diverse, but each must be allowed to get involved in their divergences. Contemporarily, the Global North has tended to set the environmental agendas with the expectation that developing and under-developed nations will follow, without consideration of divergent equipment.

Further, we must go about conservation intelligently. Both Elephant and the heavy animals, and Antelope and the light animals, fail to produce water after their heavy digging and unstylish dancing. Only Chameleon exhibits the skills to produce water, but instead of asking him to share the skills and learn from him, Elephant jealously shoves him aside, injuring him in the process. The rest of the animals not only lose the opportunity to learn environment-saving skills, they also do not attempt to speak against such unnecessary cruelty.

There is also an overarching concern of power politics and its effects on nature conservation. With the desire to win the girl's hand in marriage as an incentive, Elephant's show of prowess is an exhibition of power for selfish interests. Globally, we can compare this to the giant industries that have shown a tendency to use the sheer force of financial and political power to exploit natural resources and pollute them through dumping waste for economic prosperity. These industries support political interests and enjoy protection at the expense of the environment, producing 'dust'—read death—for all. The power politics with regard to environmental conservation between the political binaries of the developed and developing nations and the more recent Global North and Global South is also of concern and can actually be termed the harbinger of critical approaches like ecocriticism, as adopted by us in this study.

The surface simplicity of "Chameleon and Elephant" on how not to treat the earth points to a deduced philosophy drawn from experiential discourses with the natural environment. However, accessing the fundamental practicalities in the narrative requires an educated intelligence, which is conversely not the preserve of Western epistemologies from production to consumption. The story suggests that the environment is resilient and has the ability to regenerate and revert to what it was before human intervention, once taken good care of. Chameleon, though trampled underfoot, stays dormant but does not die and is reawakened by his grown-up son years later. Similarly, we have already destroyed our ecosystem, but we can teach our children, grandchildren, and the generations to come not to continue with our destructive ways and impress upon them the importance of conservation. It is notable that human activity is what initially brings the drought, the felling of trees, the diversion of river water into farms for purposes of irrigation, settlement in water catchment areas, and related nefarious activities. It is our responsibility to fix what we have destroyed.

Yet no one wants to take up that task until the woman offers an irresistible incentive: a beautiful damsel's hand in marriage. Competition to repair the ecosystem begins, not in order to save the environment, but to win the beautiful girl's hand. It is a pointer to the fact that we are not conscious of the importance of repairing the environment as a way of saving our own lives, because it is a gradual process; rather, we need a more immediate, more alluring reason to apply ourselves to such a task. While the narrative only refers to the woman and her daughter as human, the fact that the other 'animals' compete to marry her is an indicator that they all belong to the same species. But the point is already made as glaringly as possible: that the ecosystem is interconnected and what affects Homo Sapiens invariably affects all other species.

Another lesson we learn from Elephant's imprudent actions is that only a conducive environment allows humanity to thrive. Elephant might not be impotent, and the beautiful girl is not sterile, but he has polluted the


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ecosystem so much that his forcefully acquired wife can no longer reproduce, so his family lineage stagnates, a sure recipe for the extinction of the human race. Polluting the environment leads to infections, and diseases kill humans, animals, and plants alike, ultimately leading to environmental degradation. In order to be healthy and reproduce, we need a pollution-free environment, for the survival of our race depends entirely on the sustainability of our atmosphere, which we must safeguard at all costs.

Buell (97) seeks changes in human behaviour for the benefit of both humans and their non-human neighbours within the home upon which they depend. He registers disappointment that ecocriticism has failed to make a methodological impact on literary theory in the manner of new formalism or deconstruction but suggests that if it does as much as feminism and post-colonialism, for example, to alter the terms in which cultural enquiry is conducted, this would be an admirable and achievable long-term contribution. He points out that environmental history and environmental ethics, both twice as old as environmental literary criticism, have altered the frames but not the field-sanctioned models of enquiry in history and philosophy. Conceptual originality in ecocriticism has produced revision, re-reading, and re-examination of the range of texts, whilst its interdisciplinary nature, which is its distinctive strength, prevents the establishment of a monolithic methodology. African oral narratives could offer insights into methodological approaches in ecocriticism to bring about desired transformations with regard to ecological issues through literary studies. These practical steps ingrained in the narratives' philosophy are worth consideration. First, recognise that human life and the natural environment are inextricably intertwined; second, recognise the life force of the natural environment; third, adopt symbiotic interactions with nature into cultural ideologies; and, lastly, inculcate these ideologies into the impressionable minds of children within creative socialisation processes for internalisation and practice.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have showed that "Chameleon and Elephant" succeeds in revisiting Africanist perspectives through oral literature in the context of contemporary ecocriticism. It lays bare the recognition by a traditional African community that the environment is alive, as everything in it is alive. All living entities must therefore treat other entities with utmost respect as another living thing with a soul. This negates the modernist way of treating flora and fauna as part of the 'soul-less' elements of planet earth, which are then open to unconscientious exploitation.

For productive discourse on ecocritical issues, this narrative takes the audience back to old age wisdom that works. It exhibits the existence of an African indigenous knowledge system that can be explored for insights into contemporary man-made problems that stem from exploiting Mother Earth. Further, it decentralises knowledge from Western assumptions of the core and the absolute into an inclusivity of variant world cultural systems of knowledge. A wider reflection on diverse folklore across African traditional communities should unearth relevant systemic indigenous discourses on ecological matters.

## Notes

1. We acknowledge that this is an orthographic version of an otherwise oral tale that would therefore exist in different versions, though with the same thrust in thematic intentions, the focus being restoration of the environment after a degradation that threatens life.

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