

Nature in Times of Pandemic in Recent Nigerian and Cameroonian Poems

Clement Eloghosa Odia & Ugonma Uba Kalu-Bazuaye

Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts,
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.
clement.odia@uniben.edu

Abstract

The advent of the coronavirus has ushered new perspectives from which several issues have been addressed. The human predicament, with its attendant humanitarian concerns, poverty, the quest for survival, and human resilience to feminist interests has inspired poetic expressions. One aspect which appears to have been neglected is the portrayal of nature in times of pandemic. This gap in pandemic studies has necessitated this essay. The aim is to explore, from an eco-semiotic angle, how pandemic poets have expressed the state of nature as the coronavirus wreaks its deadly blows on humanity. Nature, as conceived in this essay, presupposes the entire range of ecological species comprising animals, plants and aquatic worlds. This essay explores how Nigerian and Cameroonian pandemic poets fictionalise the positive and negative impacts of the pandemic on nature. This essay focuses on four Nigerian poets, namely, Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika, Kayode Iwayemi, Balogun Kehinde and Alfred Fatuase and one Cameroonian poet, Marinus Samoh Yong. These five (5) poets are drawn from **World on the Brinks: An Anthology of the Covid-19 Pandemic** (henceforth abbreviated WTB). The textual analytical method is used to interrogate these poets' eco-semiotic vision of nature in times of pandemic to interpret the relationship between nature and humanity as well as the impact of the pandemic on both the universe and the people. The following findings reveal that the pandemic redefines the way humanity should treat nature; it demonstrates the bond between the two and it establishes the fact that nature is critical in providing the cure to the Covid-19 pandemic. The essay concludes that, during the pandemic, nature regains its lost essence; exposes the interdependence between it and humanity as well as posits that herbs from nature can cure the coronavirus disease.

Keywords: Eco-semiotics, Nature, Pandemic, Restoration and Ecology

Introduction

Pandemic poetry is an evolving movement in Nigerian and African literature especially those written to capture the experiences of people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The usual thematic areas covered in these poems include survivalism, mortality and death, disease and distress especially those relating to hunger and starvation, and economic uncertainty as job losses soar and recession becomes a new experience. These aspects are the core focus of pandemic poems and they have never been in doubt. What appears not to have been considered is the ecology of pandemic poems. By this, we mean the poems which examine the condition of nature in times of pandemic. Apart from reflecting human predicament in times of pandemic, few poems have been written to present the state of nature in this era. This situation results in a limited study of pandemic poems. Additionally, emphasis has not been drawn to the ecocritical imagination of the poems as they examine the nexus between nature and

humanity. These critical gaps have inspired this essay with the view to providing answers and exploring the ecopoetic vision of Nigerian and Cameroonian pandemic poets through the eco-semiotic praxis.

This essay is anchored in eco-semiotics as it helps to open the text to the application of sign systems in reading the ecological dynamics underpinning the poems. Eco-semiotics is also known as semiotic ecology. Timo Moran explains that “Eco-semiotics studies semiotic or sign-mediated aspects of ecology including relations between human culture and the environment” (630). Put differently, eco-semiotics is the ecology of signs in that, the study aids the reader in understanding how signs convey specific meanings as they relate to the existence of living organisms in natural habitat. In another essay, Moran posits that “Eco-semiotics discusses the relation between meaning and context seen as a possibility for an ecological view immanent in semiotics” (269). The study of nature entails interest in how meaning is contrived from the context from which the reader comes to terms with its signification. Meaning in literature and language does not exist in a vacuum. The context conveys special information about the phenomenon which is being studied in the environment. Hence, Moran explains further that eco-semiotics “emphasises the need to take into account the semioticity of nature itself as well as allow analyzing the depiction of nature in the written texts” (270).

The analysis of texts, therefore, should incorporate how nature is depicted using the resources of semiotics to underscore the points being made. Extending the meaning further, Mae Kilker avers that eco-semiotics attempts to bridge the field of biosemiotics, which is the study of non-human sign systems, and the field of traditional or cultural semiotics, “the study of communication between humans” (196). This involves reconciling how animals and plants are configured in a text as well as their relationship with the human component of nature. The biosemiotic field explores zoosemiotics or the semiotics of animal sign systems as well as the phytosemiotic study which is interested in how plant sign systems convey meaning. Timo Moran and Kalevi Kull define eco-semiotics as “a branch of semiotics that studies sign processes as responsible for ecological phenomena” (41). Eco-semiotic tools such as signs are necessary for the study of how ecological phenomena communicate in literary texts. This position is later clarified in Moran’s essay which states that eco-semiotics involves “the semiotic processes that relate the broader context of living biological processes” (5). Thus, eco-semiotics is the semiotic study of biological processes detailing how context mediates meaning. Farina et al describe eco-semiotics as “the interpretation of signs that human and other evolutionary drivers leaves in the environment” (167).

The primary objective of eco-semioticians is to ascribe meaning to such signs which apparently may have been ignored in the environment by cultural and biological semioticians. An eco-semiotic approach thus provides a broad-based perspective to study and understand the environment. The history of eco-semiotics will not be complete without the contribution of Winfried Noth. This eco-semiotician is reputed to have coined the word, eco-semiotics. This great scholar introduced the cultural theoretic approach to eco-semiotics which inspired Ferdinand de Saussure who integrated semiology and structuralism. This effort influenced others like Claude Levi-Strauss, Juri Lotman, Umberto Eco and Algirdas Julien Greimas. All these researchers interpreted nature from a cultural perspective. Apart from the cultural approach, there is the biological angle. Paramount to this group are the contributions of Charles S. Peirce, Charles Morris and Thomas A. Sebeok. Their works later introduced two main branches of eco-semiotics, namely, Zoosemiotics and Biosemiotics. These two concentrate on non-human elements of the environment. Although biological eco-semiotics leans towards natural sciences or specifically, biosemiotics, its interest is in the study of sign relations between living organisms and their environment, while cultural eco-semiotics is interested in cultural semiotics, dealing with how language conveys the cultural system of human beings.

This essay specifically relies on Timo Moran's model of methodological analysis, known as the Nature-text theoretical framework. According to Moran, nature-text analysis comprises a four-way approach for interpreting nature, and they are: "(1) textual natural environment; (2) written text; (3) author of the text; (4) reader" (281).

In conducting an eco-semiotic analysis, Moran argues that each of the four elements is pivotal to the meaning. Therefore, it is imperative to subject each of them to a thorough analytical investigation for any deep-seated meaning to be unveiled. In Moran's view, there exists a world of difference between "the written text and natural environment" (280). Also, there is a difference between "a text and its context" such that the "interaction" between the two helps in shaping "the possible interpretations of the text" (280). Thus, the written text does not contain everything about the environment. In the same vein, the natural environment offers a different level of meaning and interpretation which may not be discerned in the written text. Hence, Moran suggests the integration of the two to arrive at a deeper level of meaning. This is the cornerstone of the nature-text model. Additionally, the author of the text and the reader are equally relevant to the nature-text theory. In Moran's view, "the text does not need to convey all meanings" (280) because "they are present in the environment and familiar to the reader" (280). Consequently, the eco-semiotic researcher must rely on their knowledge of the environment to appreciate the depicted natural environment in the text. Therefore, the author and the reader share knowledge about the natural environment.

This essay shows the various ways Nigerian and Cameroonian poets have responded to how nature is portrayed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The poems of study are selected from *World on the Brinks: An Anthology of Covid-19 Pandemic* edited by Ikechukwu Otuu Egbuta and Nnenna Vivien Chukwu. The essay focuses on the poems of Nigerian poets such as Kayode Iwayemi, Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika, Balogun Kehinde and Alfred Fatuase and the Cameroonian Poet, Marinus Samoh Yong. Iwayemi is a lecturer at Adekunle Ajasin University in Ondo State and a prolific writer whose literary works have touched on the three genres of literature. Asika is also a lecturer at Anambra State University, now Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, and his research areas include African and Comparative Literature, Folklore and Poetry. Kehinde is a young Nigerian poet and a dramatist, who lectures at Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo State. He is currently the Chairman, of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Ondo State Chapter. Fatuase is a lecturer who specialises in translation stylistics, rhetoric and composition. He lectures at Yaba College of Technology, Lagos. Yong is an associate professor of Translation and Literary Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN).

Review of Related Scholarly Works

The poems studied in this essay are written by contemporary Nigerian and Cameroonian poets who have received scant scholarly attention. However, there are few comments on their poems. Ezechi Onyerionwu gives a general view of the anthology where the poems are published thus: one concern that the book of poems conceived and executed in the middle of the pandemic itself, is that of the aesthetic implication of immediacy; that of the writer as a historical witness. (vii) The poems offer the reader the rare opportunity to learn about the pandemic because in the poems, graphic details are provided and several themes are also explored. Therefore, the poems become for the reader a source of historical facts and information. The "aesthetic" quality of immediacy shows in the clever presentation of details about Covid-19 as they happen. Onyerionwu is not concerned about the thematic direction of the poems in the anthology but their quality and artistic texture. Thus, the scholar's views are not concerned with eco-semiotic evaluation of nature in times of pandemic.

Similarly, Ikechukwu Otuu Eghutu and Nnenna Vivien Chukwu classify the poets in the anthology into two groups, namely, “notable writers who have distinguished themselves and excelled in the literary profession” (xi) and the other group includes “some other budding poets.” The difference between them is that the latter poets “are only beginning to attract scholarly attention in the literary world” (xii). This does not diminish their effectiveness as poets. It only means that their poetic output has not attracted wide acclaim and that they present fresh ideas and offer new artistic voices. The above are new Nigerian and Cameroonian pandemic ecopoets whose poems provide avenues through which the condition of nature in times of pandemic can be ascertained. This essay therefore evaluates their poems using Moran’s nature-text eco-semiotic model of analysis and demonstrates that during the pandemic, nature regains its vitality, its dependence on human beings is inextricable and that the cure for Covid-19 resides in the use of traditional African medicine specifically roots and herbs.

Nature’s Restoration

An eco-semiotic evaluation of pandemic poems written by Nigerian and Cameroonian poets reveals that nature undergoes restoration during the lockdown. This fact resonates in several poems by Iwayemi, Asika and Yong. In Iwayemi’s poem in WTB, entitled “Shall I Then Express You Unblamed?” the poet presents nature through some eco-semiotic signs and symbols that convey the idea that nature is in active restoration or healing. According to the poet-persona:

The Angel pauses and watches
As the world lies in destruction
And nature in restoration
Perhaps we should look into its causes
Still we won’t be expressed unblamed? (156)

Following Moran’s nature-text eco-semiotic model of analysis, the “Angel” within the textual nature and the written text components conveys very specific connotative meanings. In the former, the Angel represents some divine essence or power that is indeed imbued with the ability to stop the virus from afflicting the world. That this divine personality “pauses” and “watches”, without the slightest inclination to intervene, smacks of divine culpability. As for the latter, it suggests, among other things, that the virus is divinely sent to accomplish a divine task. As Farina et al. have posited, “eco-semiotics underscores the possibility of interpreting certain semiotic codes which other ecological scholars may ignore in nature.” (167) Viewed from this angle, therefore, the poet presents two entities or relationships represented in the written text as “the world” and “nature” respectively. The world is a verbal code for humanity (or human beings) while “nature” is the sign for animals and plants. The human world is said to lie in destruction as the coronavirus kills millions of people. As this carnage is ongoing, nature is said to be in “restoration”. This word connotes, among other things, the sense of being returned to its original condition. When the earth was created, both the world and nature were in a state of bliss which means untainted and in good order. By the poet-persona’s reasoning, the ruin of nature is the direct result of human activity. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic has helped nature to experience some form of healing. According to the speaker, when one looks into the cause of this pandemic, there is no way that humanity will be “expressed unblamed”. The poet is indirectly calling on humanity to help revamp nature even when the pandemic comes to an end. The restoration of nature should be seen as the primary concern of the human race. Nature cannot destroy itself, but it can only heal itself when humans find themselves in a lockdown situation. In another poem, Yong addresses the theme of restoration in “Our Loss, Nature’s Gain”. According to the speaker, the lockdown opens the door for animals to retake their space:

The smoke and soot have gone away
And the animals have come back
To retake their conquered park
As the covetous colonisers hide at bay (172).

Two key semiotic signs, “smoke” and “soot” employed above are suggestive of industrial waste which contributes to environmental degradation. With the pandemic and the end of industrial activities, nature gradually bounces back as indicated by the animals returning to retake their “conquered park”. Human beings are conveyed in this stanza as the enemy of nature. The pandemic offers the animals the opportunity to return to the parks which humanity once colonised. Thus, the smoke and soot images represent devastating human activities and express the danger posed by such activities to nature which animals embody. With the lockdown and the empty streets, the poet utilising auditory sign systems and anchored in avian sounds conveys the state of nature:

The birds’ chirps are louder now
As the pompous powers bow
In humiliation to a fiend they can’t see.
Even belligerent antagonists now agree (172).

The picture of a calm and peaceful environment is amplified by the loud chirping birds which have retaken their pride of place. The semiotic sign of a bird is meant to convey the theme of nature in restoration. This is the original vision: that birds can fly and chirp without difficulty. The boisterous human activities have drowned the sound of chirping birds. The pandemic therefore enables humanity to hear the chirping of birds again. This situation is important because it shows that nature is regaining itself and experiencing some form of restoration. The pandemic has enabled even the most dangerous of animals to leave the forest and retake the cities:

Lions now relax on the highway
And stroll with elegant sashay
As the avid invaders hide in their closets
Peeping blindly to see the invisible midgets (172).

The opening line reveals the sense of freedom for the animal kingdom. Firstly, the lion, which epitomises other kinds of animals, is said to “relax”, which conveys the idea of calmness and ease. This is complemented by the fact that these animals would not have been seen in the open if not that there was a lockdown. Thus, the pandemic makes it possible for the animals to move freely. The second point is that the animals “stroll” with elegant swagger. They are without a doubt trying to regain the freedom they once had to move before the advent of urbanization and the Industrial Revolution. The pandemic, from the perspective of nature, is the time for restoration and regaining their lost territories. The above image is complemented by that of the sea animals:

The sea animals now rejoice
And swim with assured gaits
Listening to each other’s happy voice
As their oppressors hide behind locked gates (172).

The pandemic offers sea animals the space to enjoy their freedom as no human being is seen to disturb their aquatic world. Thus, these animals “rejoice” as they regain their conquered territory. They

“swim” with assurance that there will be no threat to their lives. These sea animals, according to the speaker using auditory verbal art, compel the reader to listen to them as the animals listen to “each other’s happy voice”. The recurring motif in the above stanza is one of ecstasy as evident in the following words: “rejoice”, “gaits” and “happy”. These animals would not have been able to do this without the pandemic. Hence, the Covid-19 pandemic is a blessing to the animals. As humanity groans under the lockdown, nature, here represented by animals, celebrates their restoration. The above point is validated by the following lines:

Nature is savouring its sudden gain
While we bemoan our deep loss.
As we struggle to live again
We should know that nature is boss (172).

Nature in times of pandemic savours “its sudden gain” just as humanity bemoans its “deep loss”. The lesson here is that nature lives and will outlive humanity. It also means that humanity poses a serious threat to the existence of nature. To sustain the universe, humanity must reform the way it treats nature. The poet ends the stanza with the view that “nature is boss” and that no matter what, the pandemic has come to reaffirm this point. Asika reiterates the peace and calmness that nature experiences during and after the pandemic in the poem “The Earth is at Peace Again”. The poem begins:

The overbearing ocean is calm again
Like it never swallowed the ark!

The villainous volcano smiles now again
Like it never erupted! (137)

The poet configures nature’s restoration in the calmness of the ocean and the smiles of the volcano. These eco-semiotic signs bring to our senses the power of nature as it regains its essence. The ocean’s power to swallow “the ark” is underscored when it is calm again. Nature’s calmness is thus attributed to the pandemic which brings all activities that trouble the ocean to an end. Similarly, the frequent volcanic eruptions suddenly cease because human pressure on nature has also ceased to exist. Hence, nature is said to smile again, signifying its calmness and end to natural disaster. Asika also pays attention to harmony in nature as a result of the pandemic when the speaker remarks thus:

The spotless sheep plays hide and seek with the hyena again
Like the lane lamb was not devoured only yesterday!

The reckless rat dines with the creepy cat again
Like the mouse is not safe in the enemy’s belly! (138)

The poet appears to insinuate that humanity is responsible for the feud between lower and higher animals. For example, the speaker explains that the pandemic has occasioned the harmonious relationship between “the sheep” and the “hyena”. That these mutually opposite animals could play hide and seek amplifies the recuperation that the lockdown has brought to the animals. As we have seen in the second line, the pre-pandemic era presents the lamb in the throes of death by a ravenous hyena. This hostility comes to an end in the pandemic era. Additionally, the archetypal cat and rat hostility is envisioned to be at an end during the pandemic as they are at the dining table. Nature thus

brings about the age-long restoration that the Bible prefigures will happen in the last days. This apocalyptic revelation of harmonious living is meant to establish the theme of nature's recovery. The poet ends the poem with a deep sense of restoration through carefully presented avian eco-semiotic signs:

The flamingoes are back to the waterfalls
The swans are in the lake
The bird is building a fresh nest
The owl settles in the avocado tree
The mother hen chuckles after her chicks (138).

The birds are seen returning to their natural habitat. The flamingoes regain their freshness as they return to the waterfalls. Similarly, the "bird" is said to be building "a fresh nest." The pandemic avails the birds the opportunity to restart their lives on a new page. This is also seen as the "owl" returns to the avocado tree. This image is complemented by the "chuckles" of the mother hen after her chicks. There is celebration and rejoicing in the avian kingdom. All these images confirm nature's resuscitation and imprint the fact that humanity has always been the source of threat to them. This section has examined the theme of nature's restoration as seen through an eco-semiotic evaluation. The poets agree that human beings threaten nature and that the lockdown gives the animals freedom to return to their natural habitats of which humanity has deprived them. Thus, this offers nature in its zoosemiotic and phytosemiotic range of signification the opportunity for restoration.

Nature's Dependence on Humanity

The preceding section has presented nature's restoration during the pandemic. The present section shall examine nature's dependence on humanity. The point is explored in Kehinde's poem, "The world is not silent". This title is significant in two ways. Firstly, it interrogates the sudden disappearance of human beings from the environment. Secondly, it harps on the dependence of nature on humanity as various animals revolt and mourn the empty streets during the lockdown. This is seen in the first two stanzas:

Big owls on baobab trees
Scheming and screaming at black nights
For the offspring of mother Africa.

Sonorous skylarks on Westminster's bridge
Singing dirge in the silent mornings
For the dead of snowy tons of sand (58).

The loss of lives in Africa to the coronavirus sees nature, represented by the owls, expressing their sense of dependence on humanity, as they kick against the deaths. In Europe, nature symbolised by skylarks mourns the large number of humanity who lost their lives during the pandemic. The beauty of the above stanzas is in the predominance of auditory eco-semiotic signs which evoke the sounds made by the two birds. The owls are said to be "screaming" against the death in the land. The sound should be understood against the backdrop of the oddity associated with the experience in the bird kingdom. These birds are thus shocked at what has befallen humanity. Hence, they refuse to be silent, thereby calling attention to the brazen loss of lives. Similarly, the skylarks reel out some melodious dirges to amplify the painful loss of those who died in the pandemic. By expressing their grief, nature

appears to demonstrate the bond between it and humanity. Kehinde also explores the lament expressed by plants and some pandas at the countless deaths, brought upon humanity by the pandemic, in the following stanzas:

Tears of smelly flower sticks
Flowing like flood on the empty streets
For the children of Amerigo.

Countless pandas in mount
Chanting the creed in silent shouts
For the reddish chicks of Budha (58).

The poet proceeds with a pathetic fallacy when “flower sticks” are presumed to be in tears, mourning the great number of those who died in the pandemic. The speaker heightens their grief through hyperbole when the tears are compared indirectly to “flood”. This suggests that a large number of non-human creatures are not happy that the human race is being depleted, as the “empty streets” indicate. This stanza is specific in its reference to the American experience of the pandemic. In the next stanza, the poet shifts attention to India emblemized by the iconic picture of Budha. Death in this part of the world receives condemnation by nature, this time by pandas. These animals are seen “chanting” the Buddhist creed “in silent shouts”. The above oxymoronic expression stands out against the background of the poet’s observation of the pandemic. The animals are reciting their creed in silence but the pain will not allow the silence as they are also heard shouting. The recitation is described as “chanting”. This exercise suggests the attachment which exists between nature and humanity. Nature sees human beings as essential partners in progress. The poet appears to be encouraging both parties to live together for mutual progress. The eco-poetic vision of the poet is diverse and rich in the evocation of both animal and plant worlds to make a serious statement on the relationship between nature and humanity. Relying on figurative devices and imagery especially auditory, the poet presents a world of death mourning and loss which the pandemic presents. In the concluding stanzas, the poet presents the enduring interdependence between nature and human beings, which the pandemic appears to destroy:

Vast pacific ocean of charming look
Cries deeply with furious heart
For no ship to pet her wavy blue hairs.

Lactating Austrian dogs
Now barkingly chase masters-like ghosts
For no more milk for puppies (58).

One remarkable feature of Kehinde’s pandemic poems is the recourse to water eco-semiotic signs to amplify the pain of the phenomenon. The ocean image underscores the “cries” that nature expresses to mourn the death of human beings. The said ocean is in pain when “no ship” is seen on the water body conveying people. The poet personifies the ocean as a lady with “hairs” that the human “ship” often pets. Nature, in this context, has to cry for the absence of human contact. This goes to show that both of them are locked in a mutual relationship. In the last stanza, the poet returns to the animal image, this time to dogs. The lactating Austrian dogs are seen barking and chasing after invisible masters because there are no human beings to provide milk for their puppies. This is an important stanza, in that, it contextualises how nature depends on humanity. No matter how independent nature

is, it also relies on human beings for some essential services. Here food is key. Another is care and protection which can only come from human beings. This section has presented the interdependence between nature and humanity. The poet seems to agree that during the pandemic, the world of animals, land, water and plants could not tolerate the absence of the human component of the earth. To this extent, they revolted by mourning and crying for the human lives lost.

Nature as Cure

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed humanity to alternative sources of cure. The overriding notion is that the disease has no known cure. Some poets especially Yong, the Cameroonian poet who resides in Nigeria, posit that the cure to this deadly virus is in nature specifically in African roots and herbs. This point is canvassed in the poem, “Ancestral Herbs”. This poem opens with unusual confidence as the speaker reiterates the facts:

The cure is in our dense forests
Hanging on leaves and potent barks
Deep in the depths with mangrove roots
And the green grasses of our lush savannah (173).

Yong’s poem emphasises the significance of African rich forests and savannahs in the search for the elusive cure for Covid-19. The speaker points the reader to four areas where the cure can be found. Firstly, the poet-persona identifies “our dense forests” as places where Covid-19 cure can be located. In the speaker’s opinion, the forests boast of rich valuable plants which when searched thoroughly, we could arrive at the cure. Secondly, the speaker believes that the “barks” of trees are “potent” in combating Covid-19. Leaves are also credible sources of cure for the pandemic. There is the “mangrove roots” which the speaker believes could be searched to find the cure. The mangrove area remains endemic for valuable medicinal herbs. Lastly, the poet-persona calls attention to “the green grasses” which dominate the savannah. According to the poet, the savannah grasses are rich in medicines which will be useful to researchers and traditional healers. They are by this poem enjoined to beam their searchlight on these four areas. Hence, the hope of a cure resides in our natural environment. The poet however laments the efforts by Western countries to deride African traditional medicine explaining that:

The Western cacophony of windy brouhaha
Marching on our airwaves with imperialist boots
And tearing our tympanum with hollow barks,
Defy the potency of our ancestral herbs (173)

The conflicting voices arise from the disagreement over African herbs as widely expressed by Madagascar, a tiny African country, claiming to find the cure in herbs. The poet describes the aforementioned revolt against the claim as a “cacophony”. Not only that, the media was awash with derogatory remarks and apprehension about the veracity of such a discovery. The relentless effort to dispute the African cure is described further as “imperialist boots” that march over African historic contribution to the pandemic. Thus, these negative reactions amount to a refusal and an attempt to defy “the potency of our ancestral herbs”. In a world badly devastated by coronavirus, it is unacceptable to watch millions of people die from a pandemic whose cure can easily be found in African forests, mangroves and savannahs. The speaker further explains how the effectiveness of the herbs can be attained:

Roots and backs and grass
In a boiling pot of clay
With embers and flames that give the heat
Stay in mix with quinine fluids (173).

The speaker believes that the best way to prepare the herbs is by putting the “roots”, “backs” and “grass” inside a pot of clay which must be allowed to boil as “embers and flames” combine to give the heat. This helps to increase the temperature. The boiling herbs help to increase the “quinine” to come out of the herbs. For this reason, the herbs cook and mix well to produce the needed medicine. With the above process, the speaker explains that:

Smoke and steam in perfect mix
Ensure the blend is a perfect fix
To chase away the invading crown
That struts around with an angry frown (173).

The beauty of this poem is enhanced by the scintillating blend of sense and sound as exemplified by the poet’s use of rhyming couplets. The stanza above shows that “mix” and “fix” rhyme just as “crown” and “frown” also rhyme to imprint the sense of perfect mix. The speaker explains that “smoke” and “steam” form a perfect mix which when viewed reveals the potent nature of herbs. The patient needs to inhale the steam to clear any nasal blockade and free the air tracts. The intention is to “chase away” the invading virus from the body. The poet describes the pride exhibited by the coronavirus as strutting around the human body bearing a “crown”, a sign of kingship and oppressing the human race with an angry “frown”. Thus, the appearance of the virus resembles a crown. This iconic representation juxtaposes it with the ugliness of the virus. Thus, the poet paints a picture of revulsion to which an urgent cure is needed to set the human race free. The patient is called upon to observe the following steps:

Heat and sweat under a heavy blanket.
Shivers and tears in a single bracket
Give my body its immunity stamp
Against the vice of the invading cramp (173).

There is an unmistakable picture which the speaker intends the reader to see. There is a heavy dose of thermal imagery as conveyed by the words: “Heat” and “Sweat”. The patient, when put under a heavy blanket, “shivers” as well as sheds “tears”. With these experiences, the body increases its immunity against the virus. As we have already noted, the coronavirus abhors heat. The boiling herbs often give off steam which produces heat in the body. This is further concretised by using a heavy blanket to cover to “bracket” the steam. As the patient sweats, the body gradually recovers from the effects of the virus. With the above steps closely followed, the speaker expects a better result:

Coughs and cohorts all go away
And leave me anew as a morning ray.
The crown and spikes now stand at bay
And I hug again in a huddled way (173).

The herbs used as prescribed will clear “coughs” and all other symptoms. This leaves the body revitalised. The invading virus is checked while the body recovers and the patient is ready to hug and

be hugged again. The recovered body is compared to the morning ray. This simile is evidence of the potency and curative ability of African herbs. It envisions also a sense of total healing. The morning ray image is meant to give a picture of the wholesomeness and vitality associated with the roots and herbs found in Africa. The point being made is that if the pandemic is to be defeated, nature should not be relegated. It holds the key to eradicating the pandemic. Another poet, Fatuase conveys the disdain with which the World Health Organisation (WHO) holds the African traditional medicine enshrined in herbal medicine which Madagascar offered the world. The poet, in the first three stanzas, paints a picture of despondency and uncertainty into which the world has been flung. The purpose of the presentation is to explain the grounds for accepting the Madagascar herbal medicine. The poet in the last stanza explains that the cure will not be accepted by WHO:

Yet no vaccine, yet no syrup,
As they gang up,
We sit up
Or break up
WHO will never accept Madagascar?
“WHO” will ever dare! (14)

The world is in a predicament as no “vaccine” and “syrup” have been found. The poet-persona is in shock that the WHO will not jump at the herbal medicine produced in Madagascar. According to the speaker, there appears to be some “gang up” by Western countries not to embrace the traditional medicine from Madagascar. The speaker in a rather convincing tone asserts that WHO will never accept nor approve the drug from Madagascar. Following the assertion is the tone of cynicism emphasised by the graphological deviation in which the poet plays on words: WHO and “Who”. The first refers to the World Health Organisation, a United Nations-approved organisation saddled with the responsibility of regulating world health. The second one is a relative clause “who” which refers to persons. The imperative voice deployed is meant to intensify the poet’s belief that the drug will never be accepted since the World Health Organisation does not approve of it. The two poets appear to explain that nature holds the cure for coronavirus but that the WHO will not be disposed towards accepting it. It is important to note that this virus has defied all known scientific cures. Hence, there is a need to look elsewhere for a solution. It is in this respect that the poets’ suggestion of herbal medicine is praiseworthy.

Conclusion

This essay has conducted an eco-semiotic evaluation of nature in times of pandemic as contained in recent Nigerian and Cameroonian poems. The new poems have been read with the hope of establishing the relationship between nature and humanity. This essay has asserted that nature regains its lost vitality during the pandemic as humanity is locked down. This comes in the form of animal freedom to move to places they would not have been found. Also, the pandemic exposes the interdependence between nature and human beings as plants, animals and water bodies appear to protest the sudden empty roads and parks. Finally, the poems show that if there is going to be a cure for the virus, it will be found in the natural world of trees, grasslands and mangroves. Hence, this essay represents a call to action and responsibility on the part of governments to improve the way humanity treats animals, plants and aquatic life in Africa where violations and abuse of the ecological world are common. Finally, researchers should intensify efforts at seeking solutions to human illnesses through research and studies in herbal medicine.

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