

Negotiating Afro-Oriental Religious Eco-Political Space
and the Modernist Backlash in

God Was African by Nkemngong Nkengasong and
Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer by Cyrus Mistry

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of the connection between religious beliefs and the natural environment around sacred places in *God Was African* by Nkemngong Nkengasong and *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* by Cyrus Mistry. Comparing the eco-cycle around Zoroastrian Fire Temples, the Towers of Silence in Bombay and the shrines of Fuondem and other gods in Lewoh traditional religion, this article argues that the inter-connectivity between these Parsi-Bangwa religions reveals that gods reside in our immediate environment and only our eco-politics can preserve this supernatural connection. Using ecocriticism, therefore, I contend that the Parsis in India and the Bangwa in Lebialem revere and protect natural abodes of the gods like earth, water, hills, valleys, forests and fire against the devastating environmental crises heralded by the modernist backlash. The modern transformation of these sacred places into sources of generating renewable and artificial energies accounts for the different physical and ideological conflicts that abound in the two novels. As such, by protecting the different forms of life that inhabit these sacred places, this article concludes that Nkengasong's and Mistry's eco-poetical language and style in *God Was African* and *Chronicles of a Corpse*

Bearer reflect Lewoh traditional religion, Zoroastrianism and the environment, participating in the Afro-Oriental artistic crusade for biophilia and environmentally friendly belief systems.

Keywords: Afro-Oriental, Eco-poetics, modernist backlash, biophilia, renewable energy.

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, the relationship between man and his environment has been symbiotic for African and Asian people. The symbiosis, which is socio-cultural and political, carries with it the spiritual vitality of their being because nature serves as the pantheon of their gods and belief systems. This article examines the inter-connectivity between Zoroastrianism and Bangwa traditions in Bombay (India) and Lebialem (Cameroon) to highlight the importance of the environment and natural things like earth, water, hills, valleys, forests and fire in their religions. The article will resort to ecocriticism to point out how the Parsis and Bangwa people construct their gods in the natural environment and how their ways of life, artefacts, rituals and customs reveal their ancestral and religious connections to their environments. According to Richard Foltz and Manya Saadi-Nejad in “Is Zoroastrianism an Ecological Religion?,” Zoroastrian theology preaches Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds. Zoroastrians protect nature and its elements, which is why many consider it as the “world’s first proponent of ecology.” They further explain that the Avesta and other texts insist that water, earth, fire, and air are protected. Zoroastrians believe in *Ahura Mazda* as their Supreme God and other gods such as *Mithra*, *Airyaman*, *Anahita*, *Apam Napat*, *Verethraghna*, and *Vayu* that exist in several forms in their natural environments in the Fire Temples and the Towers of Silence.

Similarly, the Bangwa traditional pantheon consists of *Fuondem*, which the big god, *Nyimbong*, the god of the forest and

hills, and *Ntsembeuh*, the god of water. Every household has a shrine where the heads of the ancestors are worshipped through special transitional rituals using food items, palm wine drinks and herbs for purification rites. These items are scarce today with modernism, urbanisation, and scientific and technological developments. Paradoxically, the Parsis and the Bangwa societies are less exposed to scientific and technological advancements in order to preserve their traditions and make better environmental choices. This is because, according to David W. Orr in *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture and Human Intention*,

Myth and religious beliefs, which we regard as erroneous, have sometimes worked better to preserve environments than have decisions based on scientific information administered by presumably rational bureaucrats. Accordingly, solutions to environmental problems must be designed to resonate at deep emotional levels and be ecologically sound. (24)

This will require that the emotional levels be rooted first in the belief systems of a people and their relationship with their immediate environment. That is why in the Towers of Silence and the different shrines in Zoroastrianism and Bangwa cultures, burials and traditional rituals require the use of items that have a direct link to their environment, like palm wine, palm oil, melon seeds, salt, camwood, sandal wood, cow urine, incense, etc. as will be seen in the section below.

Connecting Gods, Culture and the Environment

In this section, the relationship between Zoroastrianism, Bangwa beliefs, culture and their environments will be analysed to show the extent to which their inter-connectivity helps preserve the ecosystem. Briefly, in *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, Cyrus Mistry narrates the love story of Phiroze who falls in love with Sepideh, the daughter of a corpse bearer and becomes a corpse bearer himself, in the Tower of Silence, in order to stay close to his bride

on the outskirts of Bombay. There, they are attracted by the forests, hills, caves, gardens and other animal species around the temple which they feed and protect as a way of celebrating their romance. The representation of the cycle of life, death and reincarnation through the sacred vultures in the Towers of Silence and the use of ritual elements like fire, water and the earth in the Fire Temples show how Zoroastrianism protects and celebrates the natural elements of the environment. These natural elements and habitats, according to Mistry's characters, are being destroyed by modernism and are in need of protection in order to maintain Zoroastrian cosmic unity.

In *God Was African*, Nkengasong focuses on the conflict between Bangwa tradition and modernism. After completing his Fulbright Programme in America, Kendem, the protagonist, returns to his Lewoh village and examines the way his people interpret the role played by the gods of the river, forests, hills and valleys through the effectiveness of different rituals performed by the chief priests. His description of the Bangwa rituals to the different gods of the environment and how they are incarnated through specific animal species reveal the culture's protection of their environment and their natural habitats. Modernism here is represented through Christianity which condemns Bangwa cultural practices as uncivilised, resulting in conflicts between Bangwa Christians and traditionalists. In the end, Kendem argues that there is an urgent need for hybridity through a blend of Christianity and tradition in the struggle to protect the natural environment before it depletes completely.

It is important to note that the link between the environment and culture is rooted in the language use of these societies. The way the Bangwa people describe the environment and living organisms celebrates ecocriticism because their proverbs draw from both the animal world and the environment as seen in the following proverbs used by the sub-chiefs when they meet in the palace of Atemangwat, the paramount chief of Lewoh country in *God Was African*:

“When you squat in the latrine do you know what the penis tells the faeces down there?” (148)

“What had a hen got to do with matters that concerned teeth?” (149)

“A pig does not know the value of its snout until there is a wound on it.” (151)

“The river current could never have favoured the stones and carried away the tadpoles.” (155)

“The old monkey that sat on a rock to crack kernels will one day crack its own testes.” (215)

“Do you know what transpired between the leopard and the cat?” (255)

“The parrot does not say everything it sees.” (255)

These proverbs used at different times in the novel reveal the importance of the environment in Bangwa language (*Nweh*) and cultural life, especially as understanding these proverbs helps establish Bangwa cultural identity. Moreover, anecdotes in Bangwa culture revere the importance of the ecosystem in the survival of humans and animals. The narrator recalls one such anecdote thus:

You know the story of as our mothers told us: the lizard once told the tortoise: Friend, I am always travelling out into the forest and I have seen the light. But each time I come back I always see you on the same spot. I have brought you a new idea. Let me break the shell on your back and liberate you so that you too can travel into the forest and see the light of the world. (150)

The forest here is a metaphor for the cradle of wisdom which facilitates an understanding of Bangwa culture. Arguably, the richness of *Nweh* lies in its blend of animal images and the environment to describe human activities. Such anecdotes reveal the importance of communication in the animal kingdom which is also important to people, as Christopher Manes posits in “Nature and Silence” that cultures

see the natural world as inspirited, not just people, but also animals, plants, and even “inert” entities such as stones and rivers are

perceived as being articulate and at times intelligible subjects, able to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill. In addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls – a world of autonomous speakers whose intents one ignores at one's peril. (15)

The importance of animals to humans is further seen when Lewoh gods who reside in sacred places like rivers, forests, hills and valleys turn into animals in order to observe the events in the world of humans. Their observations are then communicated to the people of Lewoh through chief priests during rituals and divinations. That is why the big god, *Nyimbong*, lives in the forest and hill, places considered sacred by the villagers who fear to venture there except for spiritual reasons. The narrator of *God Was African* explains how these sacred forests in Lewoh country resist deforestation:

While some of the hills were fast losing their vegetation, a few distant ones towards the southern country bunged with baobabs, iroko, sapele, bebinga and palm trees soared into the sky. My father once told me that the forest on the distant hills was home to renowned wizards of the land and that only those who owned totems of different kinds like pythons, leopards and owls lived there. . . . He also told me about the twin hills he called *Nyi-mbindia* separated by a short distance which was the abode of the spirits. The hills he called *Nyimbong*, the good hill . . . hosted the good spirits which protected the land against the evil forces. It signalled the death of an important notable or a chief in the form of landslides and the trembling of the earth around the hill. Barren women went there to solicit children in prayer and song, but they never went too close. (2-3)

Just like the good hill on one side, *Nyi-tebong* is the evil hill or the abode of evil spirits, and people fear to go there. The binary opposition of Bangwa belief system is deeply interconnected to its environment in such a way that the creatures that inhabit the forests and the hills tell them everything as they are a provider not only of food, but of spiritual guidance, protection and fecundity.

Similarly, in Zoroastrianism, the connection between the forests, the hills and the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, is seen in the location of their Fire Temples and the Towers of Silence. The narrator in *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* describes the beautiful environment around the temples in the following terms:

For years, the forest on the hills had been my refuge. The woods might more precisely describe the tangled profusion of fruit and flowering trees that covered the hill. Thickest near the summit where the crude path that led to the rusty gate of the small white Fire Temple was almost lost in tall grass and bramble; here grew casuarinas, banyans, date palms, mango, pear and so many flowering bushes and trees whose names I do not know. On occasion, I would spot a hare or a snake here, sometimes peahens, once, even a deer. In this strangely enchanted Eden, I felt completely at home. (167)

In the Fire Temple, candles for prayers to the dead after burial in the Tower of Silence are lit. Their location in the middle of dense forests and hilltops where trees and animals of different species exist shows the link between Zoroastrianism and the environment. They are called Fire Temples because Zoroastrians usually pray using fire and water as the principal act of worship and as a medium to gain spiritual insight and wisdom. Arguably, Parsi-Bangwa belief systems cannot exist without this connection with life matter and the environment because the gods usually turn into different animals and play in these sacred places. For this reason, Zoroastrianism was the first religion to signal the eventual depletion of the environment and animal species as Greg Garrard posits in *Ecocriticism*:

For at least 3,000 years, a fluctuating proportion of the world's population has believed that the end of the world is imminent. Scholars dispute its origins, but it seems likely that the distinctive construction of apocalyptic narratives that inflect much environmentalism today began around 1200 BCE, in the thought of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathustra. Notions of the world's gradual decline were widespread in ancient civilisations,

but Zoroaster bequeathed to Jewish, Christian and later secular models of history a sense of urgency about the demise of the world. (86)

That is why Zoroastrianism advocates the protection of vultures which have mystical and ecocritical dimensions because the gods exist through vultures that eat the souls of the dead in the Towers of Silence. Describing the role of religion in preserving the ecosystem, the narrator adds that “when it comes to disposal of the corpse, our religion is so sensible. We don’t pollute the earth by burying, not the air by cremating . . . everything’s so nice in our religion – must be the finest in the world” (125). Consequently, corpses are kept in the Towers of Silence where burial rituals are performed, then placed on the sacred platform of the gods who are incarnated in vultures to eat their souls to the world beyond.

Furthermore, as Zoroastrianism protects vultures, the Bangwa tradition protects the baobab tree. In most traditions in Cameroon, the baobab tree is a symbol of the beginning of a civilisation and these trees can survive for hundreds of years. There is a mystical connection between the baobab trees and the different cultures in Cameroon. In *God Was African*, the narrator captures the history of the Bangwa people through this very tree:

I threw my eyes towards the open ground that stretched towards the entrance into Anya Palace, the seat of the Paramount ruler of Lewoh country. The baobab tree still stood at the centre, huge and tall with bold massive branches spread out as if to cast a spell on the entire universe Certainly, it had seen the beginning of time. And as we were told as we grew up, it was under the tree that *Anyankedong* first settled with his followers when he came into the country, outwitted the original settlers and started a dynasty whose lineage has existed till date. (5)

This baobab tree carries the history of the Bangwa people, and protecting it means preserving their history and cultural heritage. That is why some Bangwa rituals are performed under this tree believed to be the abode of the gods. In most Cameroonian cultures,

you find the baobab trees in the centre of the village markets, in palaces, sacred groves and the forests. According to the Bangwa tradition, purification rites have to be done before a baobab tree is cut down to delocalise the gods in them, and if a baobab tree falls down or dries off, the chief and his notables perform rituals to avert any eventual calamity signified by the tree's death. Bombabili, a semi-literate villager in *God Was African*, tries to explain the ritual to Kendem in broken English mixed with *Nweh* dialect saying:

The chief and his *bekem* was giving offertory so that the Rock god wul not be annoy. Every yeah they offer offertory. Every year they dance and dance and kill goats and swines. Then they will make the *ku'ngang* medicine when the big *ngangafu* . . . the traditional pipu wul meet in the palace to make the *lekat*. The villager bring their farm tools and seed on the day so that the big *ngangafu* wul bless them. While the women plant the seed in their farm and make prayer for the big harvest, some seed is plant on the boundary of Lewoh land to chase away bad pipu which destroy the crop. (sic. 128)

This ritual suggests the spiritual connection between the baobab tree in the centre of the palace and all the crops that are planted yearly in Lewoh country. Therefore, the Bangwa tradition protects and preserves this tree for the ecological and mystical survival of the culture and the people. This spiritual protection is extended to the different family shrines where the heads of the families perform rituals to the ancestors who intercede to the supreme God. The ecological importance of these rituals lies in the items that are used:

My father opened the clay pots and scattered the bits of meat around the ash-coloured objects that were covered with the wooden bowls and clay pots. When I looked closely, I realised that the ashy white objects were already weathered off and some were broken down, held together by the clay pots. There were altogether eight 'heads' covered with the clay pots and wooden bowls and my father spoke to each calling his or her name and highlighting their status in the family, from *Atehmba-Ngong* to *Ajuha-Ngong*. He poured raffia wine around the 'heads' as he spoke. Bubbles formed

quickly and the wine disappeared quickly on the thirsty earth. When he started covering the 'heads' first with the *mbebueh* leaves and then with the clay pots and wooden bowls, my mother started singing *eseib* and the other women joined in. They continued singing, throwing salt, melon seeds and palm oil on the earth as they left the shrine. (Nkengasong 117)

The different food items used for this ritual and offered to the gods of the land are indicative of the importance of preserving the lands and forests that produce them. The 'heads' of the ancestors continue to lie on sacred ground which means that any environmental degradation around the shrines will lead to a loss of this spiritual contact with the world beyond. The importance of the soil in the Bangwa religion is confirmed by Donald Worster in his *Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination*, where he argues:

In its simplest terms, the soil is, of course, a supplier of the minerals needed for plants to grow But as any ecologist knows, there is much more to a soil than this. There is the humus, the organic residue of roots, carrion, faeces, bone, and leaves mixed through the mineral components. On this humus there is an incomprehensibly large number of bacteria working away, decomposing the dead, fixing nitrogen, forming nitrates to feed the living. The soil is fungi, too, and earthworms, moles, burrowing insects – over a thousand different animal species in all, aggregating more biomass below ground than above it. Soil is the water, the gases, the solar energy that all these living things need to keep going as they plough and add their carcasses to the whole. (81)

From Worster's arguments, it is evident that the Bangwa people have thought collectively about the place of nature in their socio-cultural belief system. This accounts for the numerous community and family rituals devoted to the gods of the land and the ancestors of the different families.

In ecocritical terms, while the Bangwa believe that the termites that eat the sacrificial foods in the shrines of their ancestors symbolise an acceptance of their offerings, the Parsis protect the

cobra and other snake species because they are sacred. Traditional Parsis believe in the practice of snake charming, and there is a cult of snake charmers famous for performing rituals to cleanse the society and to heal anyone suffering from snake bite. In *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, when Sepideh is bitten by a cobra in the forest around the Tower of Silence, a snake charmer is brought to treat her of the venom. Phiroze describes the snake charmer in the following words:

The disrepute-looking *faqueer* in fact had a formidable reputation in these matters; that his incantations and dance steps were meant to placate the serpent deity, so that after it ceased to be angry with Seppy for stepping on it, the very cobra would appear again at Seppy's convalescent bed; and with a second bite draw out the venom from her body; following which he or she would spew the poison into the bowl of milk, thus neutralising its effects; Seppy would definitely recover and return to normal health. (110)

Like the Bangwa culture that protects the forest and the creatures living in it, the Parsis believe in the snake deity who lives in the forests around the Fire Temples and the Towers of Silence. In the Zoroastrian pantheon, Zoroaster controls all the snakes and can treat anyone bitten by a snake. This is why the Parsis do not kill snakes and protect their natural habitat. It is meaningful that Edward O. Wilson describes, in *Biophilia*, Parsi-Bangwa religious eco-poetics as the “innate urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (85). In like manner, biophilia is expatiated on by Orr in the following terms:

Biophilia may be evident in our preference for certain landscapes such as savannahs and in the fact that we heal more quickly in the presence of sunlight, trees, and flowers than in biologically sterile, artificially lit, utilitarian settings. Emotionally damaged children, unable to establish close and loving relationships with people, sometimes can be reached by carefully supervised contact with animals. (25)

Orr sees the connection between gods, cultures and the environment as the core element in which we evolve and which nurtures and sustains us. He argues that, if biophilia is destroyed through environmental degradation, it results in biophobia, thereby creating a world in which we do not fit. In conclusion, the connection between religious beliefs and the natural environment around sacred places in *God Was African* and *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* supports biophilia and suggests that we fit better in environments that have more, not less, nature. Therefore, the Parsi-Bangwa contact with animals, trees, flowers, flowing water, birds, and natural processes ensures their survival through the development of spiritual and emotional attachment to particular landscapes.

Human Non-Conformism and the Limits of Nature

Over the years, the increase in human population and the expansion of urbanisation have had adverse effects on the natural environment. Human activities such as mechanisation, pollution, over-forestation, etc. have contributed to the degradation of the landscape, seascape and the airspace. In *God Was African* and *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, Nkengasong and Mistry satirise the effects of the degradation of the ecocycle in both the Parsi and Bangwa communities. This is evident when Kendem laments the decline in the production of palm and raffia wine in his mother's bar in Lewoh:

My mother sat in front of her little palm wine bar at the very populated part of the market square, possibly one of the few surviving palm wine bars in the land. The palm and raffia bushes had been destroyed and in their place coffee and cocoa had been planted. Palm and raffia wine had become as scarce as dog's tears. Many people went for beer. (6)

Palm and raffia wine are important ancestral and traditional drinks to the Bangwa people. They are harvested from the palm and raffia

trees and used in all celebrations and rituals in Lewoh country. Tradition-wise, libations and other rituals to the gods of the land require that the chief priest use them and palm oil harvested from the palm trees. Ironically, with the coming of modernism, these ancestral trees are cut down and replaced by coffee and cocoa trees which are commercial crops. The fact that the Lewoh people drink beer now is the effect of the degradation of palm and raffia production, which affects both the religious and the economic sectors because beer is expensive for the average Bangwa man. That is why it is important to restore this cultural interconnectivity, as William Rueckert suggests in “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”:

The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature. The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities – the human, the natural – can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere. (107)

Rueckert’s observations address an important cultural issue because, to the Bangwa man, beer is not a community drink as it is drunk in isolation, unlike the palm and raffia drinks where several people shared from the same keg and communed with one another. Therefore, modernism estranges the locals from their socio-cultural ties, and this has boomerang effects on their religion and natural environment. Dharam Ghai assesses the impact of these on the life of an African woman, like Kendem’s mother, in “Conservation, Livelihood and Democracy: Social Dynamics of Environmental Changes in Africa” and concludes that:

In many ways women in the rural areas have been the most affected by the environmental crisis. Nearly 80 per cent of the economically active women in sub-Saharan Africa are in agriculture and are responsible for 70 per cent of food production in Africa. In their

capacity as food producers, they have seen the returns to their labour reduced by declining soil fertility and cultivation in marginal areas. (9)

Since most men no longer have farms to cultivate because cash crops take years to produce, women's suffering is compounded by the migration of male members of the household to the cities to get other jobs since commercial crops planted on their lands result in the degradation of the lands, due to the use of chemicals. Eventually, the decline in production affects their resources, acting as a catalyst for mass migration to the metropolis.

In the same manner, Mistry satirises the decline in the population of vultures in Bombay due to modern developments that affect Zoroastrian burial rites in the Towers of Silence. Phiroze, the protagonist and corpse bearer in *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, adds that:

It's a sad irony, I suppose, though pretty amusing as well: vultures have become extinct, even before Parsis could. A core element in our communal identity, a distinguished feature of our ancient creed is lost. Three thousand years or more of a preciously revered tradition is at an end because of a certain drug much used in veterinary compounds, which causes kidney failure in vultures that consume animal carcasses packed with it. (177)

The decline in the number of vultures affects Zoroastrian burial rites because there is an increase in the death rate of humans in the city of Bombay with a little number of vultures to consume these corpses in the Towers of Silence. This has raised arguments in India as to the growing concerns over this ancestral burial practice given the decline in the vulture population. There is internal division among the orthodox and reformist Zoroastrians as to the use of modern solar panels in the Towers of Silence in order to direct solar energy rays to facilitate the decomposition of corpses now that vultures are on the decline. Rajesh Nirgude examines the decline of vultures in India in "Zoroastrian Funeral Rites Arouse Anger in India" and states that:

Over the past 15 years, millions of South Asian vultures have died from eating cattle carcasses tainted by a painkiller given to sick cows. Conservationists estimate that more than 90 percent of India's vultures have died, creating havoc for Parsis' funeral rites. The IUCN – World Conservation Union lists India's three species of vulture – the oriental white-backed, long-billed and slender-billed vultures – as critically endangered, the category of animals closest to extinction. It could not provide exact population figures. And with three to four Parsis dying daily in Mumbai, a city of 16 million people, it is clear that there are nowhere near enough vultures to consume the corpses. While bodies are coated with lime, scattered complaints are now heard about smells wafting through the affluent neighbourhood. Baria and other reformists are demanding that the Parsi Punchayet, or council governing the community's affairs, permit burial or cremation within the funeral grounds. (3)

According to Nirgude, the scandal of the vanishing vultures was revealed when Dhun Baria lost her mother and later learned that her mother's corpse would take at least a year to decompose. She secretly entered the Tower of Silence, took photographs and video footage and published. This raised consternation all over the country and people started asking questions as to the sustainability of this ancient religious ritual in the face of modernism. It was later discovered that there were vested interests behind this propaganda, especially as their target was the vast commercial potential of the real estate around the Towers of Silence. This is the way in which modernism and post-modernism have impacted religious practices, as Glen A. Love explains in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment*:

The great blind spot of postmodernism is its dismissal of nature, and especially human nature. The constructionist nature sceptics have walled themselves off from the life sciences, often the most reliable source of knowledge of human nature and behaviour, which, if acted upon with moral intelligence, offers the best hope of

making their humanitarian political goals – shared by nearly all the scientists and nature endorsers they exclude – more attainable. (26)

Love corroborates Garrard's perspective which sees the relationship between globalisation and ecocriticism as distorted in the light of developments in ecology that expose the rhetoric of balance and harmony. Love thinks that this limited human vision is consequential in life, and the challenge that faces us is to outgrow our notion that human beings are so special that the "earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone, to move beyond a narrow ego-consciousness toward a more inclusive eco-consciousness" (25). Therefore, like Love, Mistry and Nkengasong are concerned about all human intentions that have contributed to the decline of the ecosystem.

From another perspective, the serenity of the Fire Temples and the Towers of Silence is doubtful to some schools of thought in India, which has witnessed several invasions by the military and in the process, vast destruction of the forests and gardens around these sacred places. Although these holy places are apolitical, terrorists, in alliances with some corpse bearers, use these sacred places to hide weapons or manufacture small bombs that are detonated during political rallies or thrown at politicians and government officials. It is the case with the independence struggle in *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, as colonial administrators are potential targets, a fact noticeable when Rohinton solicits the help of Phiroze during supper in the Taj Mahal hotel:

A proposal was made to me . . . that I help build a bomb at a secret location in Bombay. You know the new viceroy's just been appointed? The idea was to find someone to throw it at him during a visit he has planned to the Gateway of India, after his investiture in Delhi. When the question of a secret location in Bombay came up, I immediately thought of you, and the Towers of Silence. . . . When he told me this, I, too, immediately thought of the 'grotto' as an ideal place for building bombs. (153-4)

Rohinton's proposal reveals the reasons for the different attempts to assassinate many dignitaries in different parts of the country. To avert these attacks, the police have raided many shrines and temples all over the country seizing weapons and arresting, killing or sending to prison many terrorists. These raids sometimes violate Indian laws that protect holy places. Phiroze describes one of these raids led by Mr Ignatius Strickham, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, to arrest suspected criminals in the following words:

Now this was rather unusual, I should point out. Strickham was obviously new to India, and his job. Perhaps he was trying to impress and intimidate the locals with the added stature the horse gave him. But under the Places of Worship Act first enacted by the East India Company, for more than a hundred years the diverse religious communities of India had been assured the privilege of maintaining the sanctity of their places of worship. . . . As it became evident, this arrogant and possibly corrupt officer was entirely out of tune with the times. (Mistry 137)

During these raids, military vehicles and horses destroy the environment, trees and flowers, whereas sacred animals living around the forests are killed and sometimes large areas of the forests are burnt down. The activities of these terrorists, therefore, contribute to the destruction of the ecosystem, which, in turn, degrades and vilifies the spirituality of the Fire Temples and the Towers of Silence.

Furthermore, the advent of modernity has had environmental consequences on the lands around the Towers of Silence and the Fire Temples. With rapid urbanisation, real estate developers find these lands on hills suitable sites for the construction of ultra-modern residential areas for commercial purposes. Phiroze laments the destruction of these sacred lands and forests by the Zoroastrian Punchayet and their sale to rich buyers in the following terms:

At the Towers of Silence, commercial exploitation of properties has begun. Four acres of sylvan land was recently sold to a well-known Bombay builder for vast sums of money, and trees have been cut.

Construction of a deluxe block of apartments has commenced; it will be called Ahura Apartments. Apparently, only bona fide Zoroastrians who can afford these exclusive flats, and who have booked them early enough, will move in. I fear for the wild garden of my youth. The teeming city nibbles at its edges. The turn of the wheel may have become irreversible. (169)

The wheel of modernism has reached the sacred places, and Phiroze now witnesses the destruction of the vast forests, gardens and orchards around the Towers of Silence that have always been a romantic place for many. This is where he first met his future wife, Seppy, where they fell in love and later married and spent most of their time in the gardens with their only daughter, Sepideh. The destruction of these forests affects the thousands of vultures which made their nests on the high trees and whose young flew from tree to tree, playfully. Furthermore, the depletion of the forests deprives the Khandhians, Nussesalars and Priests living in the Temples of firewood that served to warm their homes and the temples. From Phiroze's lamentation, it is obvious that humanity is a disease to the environment.

Another religious ecocritical practice which modernism has erased is the Zoroastrian belief in the ability of dogs to ascertain or establish someone's death, as Phiroze says:

Nobody quite remembers how the custom of showing a corpse to a dog began, but it's probably as old as ancient Persia itself. Before modern medicine reserved that right for itself, it was canines that were believed to have an uncanny ability to sniff out the slightest flicker of vitality persisting in a body presumed dead. (16)

To Phiroze, dogs have saved many people who were in a prolonged coma and mistaken for dead and sometimes buried. Such a dog should be a "four-eyed" dog (having a spot above each eye), and the ritual is repeated five times a day in a fire-lit room. Three days later, if the person is confirmed dead, the corpse is taken to the Towers of Silence for the vultures to consume. After four days, prayers are organised in the Fire Temple for the soul of the dead.

The coming of modern medical technology has reduced traditional Zoroastrian connections with their dogs, and these pets that equally helped in hunting for food now have little to do because the forests are undergoing degradation, giving way to congested urban settlements. With these new settlements, social interaction becomes difficult, and traditional Zoroastrian modes of life and values are extinct. In conclusion, modernism has reshaped human actions on the environment in ways that hardly tie in with the teachings of traditional religions like Zoroastrianism and the Bangwa tradition.

Negotiating Religious and Cultural Eco-Politics

The passage of time and the difficult experiences caused by environmental degradation have made mankind to understand that nothing changes human behaviour like pain. Parsi-Bangwa societies are built on the ideology that the environment cannot be separated from their religions, and every member in these societies should appreciate the peace and comfort which nature and live matter bring to the soul. This is evident when Kendem describes his internal peace in Lewoh after returning from America in *God Was African*:

The rays of the early morning sun filtered through the bedroom window and it was not like the street lamps that glowed all night and one never knew what time of the night it was in the cities. It was different here because even that early morning, I heard the song of the partridge and the intermittent crow of cocks around the homestead. And it was clear that the darkness was beginning to brighten and clear off from the surface of the earth. (16)

The soothing environment in Lewoh reminds Kendem of this spiritual touch of nature, which heals the soul as the fresh breeze from *Atungong* carries with it the fragrance of flowers and trees. This freshness livens his soul, especially the flowers around the ancestral shrine behind the house. Such early morning beauty is revealed in *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* as Phiroze describes his

mornings in their residence near the Towers of Silence after a busy day transporting corpses:

Early morning silence punctuated by a tittering of birds soothed my nerves, but the muscles still ached. . . . Outside the wire-meshed window, a sprig of pale orange bougainvillea swayed slightly. As I climbed out of bed, the rays of a fledgling sun touched the treetops lightly with a golden brush. . . . How beautiful and peaceful is this place. (2)

The beauty of these natural environments is further highlighted through Kendem's description of the echoes of his mother's voice calling him in the forest, valley and across the hills. The resonance is described thus:

I moved towards the raffia bush in the valley bordering *Atungong*. A voice called, sounding as if it were in a vacuum. It sounded like that of a fairy in the underworld. . . . It was as if some spirits that inhabited the valleys were mimicking her call. I could hear her voice going deeper and deeper like the voice of a siren down the valley until it faded. The echoes now seemed to have changed, reverberating across the valley loud and clearly: '*Ofeuh leb! Ofeuh leb!*' Then the echo carried the voices in relays across the valleys and hills. I stood there, my mind filled with multiple voices that spoke, some in *Nweh* and others in English: Come well, Prince of the Hills! Come well, child of *Nweh-Mbinzeah*! Come well, sibling of the leopard. (30)

The description of the forest echoes reveals the degree of spirituality of the Bangwa people and their natural environment, given that their gods reside in the forests, valleys, rivers and hills. That is why the Bangwa preserve these natural sites as their gods continue to provide plenty for the sustenance of their community. In the same light, the Parsis take care of the animals that reside in these forests because their gods take animal forms to come in contact with humans. That is why in *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, Sepideh spends most of her time in the forests around the Towers of Silence feeding animals, as Phiroze suggests:

I didn't know then she considered animals her dearest friends. She fed as many as she could every day, often by her own hand: wild squirrels, pheasants, pye-dogs, stray cats, as though they were her personal pets. The first time I approached her she was stooped to the ground placing a small bowl of milk in a cleaning. 'Who's that for?' I asked, as she straightened herself. . . . 'A snake. A big grass snake who comes and drinks it all up, whenever I have any to spare.' (3)

Sepideh, like every Parsi, believes in the natural cohabitation between humans and the different animals in their immediate environment, which is why Zoroastrianism encourages the care of the ecosystem. In this light, Parsis keep pets which they treat with care like members of the family. Phiroze describes his mother's interests in animals in the following terms:

Over the years, she had accumulated a small menagerie of pets, housing them in the temple's small backyard. . . . The latter were always very short-lived. The brief melancholy occasioned by the death of one of these minor pets was a recurrent and heart-sinking motif that sounded like the temple bell through my childhood, and one of the few intense emotions I regularly shared with Mother. (22-23)

The fact that the family's connection to these pets takes a spiritual dimension shows how Parsis venerate animals as they incarnate their gods. The bells that ring in the Fire Temples during mourning ceremonies are a metaphor for those in his parents' home when any of these pets die. This shows the degree of care and emotional attachment that Parsi women have for their animals, and this is why women see the forests and bushes around the temples as protected spaces. In her study "Gender, Environment and Poverty Interlinks in Rural India: Regional Variations and Temporal Shifts, 1971-1991," Bina Agarwal examines how women's interests in protecting the environment differ from men and points out that:

In schemes involving tree planting, women and men are often noted to have different priorities in species selection. Women typically prefer species which fulfil everyday household needs, such as for fuel and fodder, over species which fulfil only sporadic needs, such as for small timber, or which mainly bring occasional cash returns. Involving women in species selection is therefore critical. In particular, trees which provide fuel and fodder (in regions where these have become scarce) can not only decrease poor women's work burden, but the advantage of greater availability can be reaped by all household members. (30)

The Indian woman's struggle to protect the environment has resulted in legal rights related to inheriting parental land among most communities and regions of India. Agarwal contends that, in traditionally matrilineal communities of southwest and northeast India, women do inherit landed property, and, in patrilineal communities in south India, in-village and cross-cousin marriage is permitted in south India. She says that "This allows any land inherited by a woman to remain within the overall purview of the extended family, and makes for less resistance and hostility toward her inheritance claims" (21). In rich families, lands inherited or bought by women are used to open parks where animals are kept, and many people visit them to see different species of animals. This is the case with the rich Kanga family whose private park Phiroze describes:

The park boasted a small private zoo. Among the various animals, the deer and nilgai roamed unhindered, while some others – a porcupine, leopard, orang-utan and an enormous python were confined to spacious individual enclosures. There were also three enormous, though gentle, hounds who were allowed to run free in the grounds. A high compound wall circumscribed the large park, heralded by an imposing wrought iron gate. (38)

The Kanga family live in the heart of the city and have experienced the depletion of the natural environment and the disappearance of important species of animals, due to modernism and urbanisation. To prevent the extinction of some of these animals, their park

serves as a haven for the remaining species as they buy or allow other people to bring their animals to their park whenever they feel they can no longer take care of them, rather than kill them. This move is meant to prevent the alteration of the biodiversity by the fast-growing city of Bombay.

Furthermore, the forests and gardens around the Parsi Fire Temples and the Towers of Silence are romantic sites for the youth who constantly go there with their loved ones to have fun. In *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, the love affair between Phiroze and Sepideh, which ends in marriage, begins in the beautiful forest, as he tells us:

My courtship with this strange creature of the woods was almost wordless. The dense floescence we were surrounded by – this could well have been tropical forest in some remote part of the world – only heightened our sense of naturalness, our knowledge of the intrinsic validity of what we were about. We felt happily inapprehensive of being disturbed by the world of adults. Spontaneously, and quite fearlessly, we discovered together, the tremendous world of sexual love. And we were adult enough not to shrink from it – from the responsibility of it – from understanding, in a complete sense, that from this moment on, there was no going back. (50)

This relationship that starts in the forests makes the forest a place of fond memories in the life of the couple because Sepideh takes him into the heart of the forest to show him a cave with nice boulders that give the place a more romantic touch. The lovers transform this cave into a love den where they have a quiet time away from the bustling and noisy world outside the forest. The fact that after Sepideh's death, Phiroze continues to take their only daughter, Farida, there, to show her the beautiful environment he shared with her mother points to the importance of this cave to his family. Phiroze describes Farida's excitement thus:

The sounds of the twilit forest pressed about us, eerily. The trees towered over us, encircled with thick, winding creepers that looked

in the dark like monstrous serpents skulking for prey. Through the canopies of the trees, occasionally, one could still see glimpses of the cloud-banked evening sky. . . . There were mango trees here and bananas, berries, pepper and wild pineapple. . . . Soon it would be completely dark. I began to smell the prospect of a drizzle. But my little one, like her mother before her, wanted to press on, probing unrelentingly into her own unbearable incomprehensible loss. (107-8)

To Phiroze, Farida connects with the beauty of the forest and does not wish to go back home because everything in this forest makes her happy. Several attempts to make her relinquish her quest to discover her environment fail. Arguably, her love for this forest is genetically and spiritually inherited from her late mother, who spent the best part of her life exploring and feeding the animals in the forest. Furthermore, the fruits in the Parsi forests are tasty, just like those in the Lewoh forest, which Kendem eats with Bombabili as they journey to Beyano village: “we could see scattered homesteads from a distance, interspersed by forests trees, fruit trees. We harvested what we could eat and the invigorating natural nectar of the fruits – oranges bananas, plums, avocados – were yet not tinged by human experiment” (132). To the Parsis and the Bangwas, these fruits are the gifts of the gods to their people, which is why everyone is free to harvest and eat without destroying the trees. Consequently, the protection of these divine forests is paramount in the two religions.

In the same light, Kendem tells us that these forests, hills, valleys and rivers serve as playgrounds for village children on Saturdays after they do laundry and sun-dry their clothes, swimming and sleeping on the big boulders. Then, they explore the forest, playing hide-and-seek and looking for fruits or catching tadpoles, which are a delicacy in Lewoh cuisine. These forests and rivers equally serve as meeting points of spirits on religious days when the wonders of the land are celebrated through rituals that purify Lewoh country. That is why Kendem finds these rivers soothing:

I walked to the banks of the river and washed my face with the fresh water. It was cool and refreshing, as if I had returned to a new fresh world. I washed my face again and again then I threw the water over my head and washed it again and again until it seemed that my brain and my whole being had been transformed and my vision became clearer. (126-7)

The water gives him the spiritual cleansing he can only get from waters that accommodate the gods of the land. Kendem feels his senses brightening up, especially in the cool village breeze that reanimates his soul and reawakens his consciousness from the traumatising experiences in America. That is why he concludes that "I needed some calm and rest. I needed peace within myself" (13). Evidently, with modernism, natural endowments like the hills, valleys, rivers with large boulders, bushes and animals are depleting, which has adverse effects on the tradition of Lewoh country.

From another perspective, Kendem emerges as an eco-conscious crusader when we listen to his response to Dos Santos during their conversation in America. The fact that Dos Santos sees all blacks as monkeys who live on tree tops, shows his ignorance about Africa and the importance of these trees and monkeys to the eco-system. His question to Kendem betrays his eco-ignorance: "Ken, do you have roads in your country? . . . How do you move around? (92-93). Kendem's response to Dos Santos is a lesson on the importance of the environment as he says, "No, I said . . . We skip from tree to tree until we reach our destinations. . . . And your country's ambassador is an excellent tree climber. A good skipper too. In fact, he occupies one of the biggest trees in the capital city" (93). The wisdom in this answer lies in the insinuation that even the foreign ambassador is comfortable living on tree tops, like all the other monkeys, and enjoys his skipping in the country. This answer ties with the observations made by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, who examine the link between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, asserting that:

If the conjunction of postcolonialism and ecocriticism has begun to prove mutually illuminating in terms of, say, colonial genesis and continuing human inequalities and environmental abuses, the two areas have often been in conflict. While there are numerous instances of individual ecocritics questioning the promotion of conservationist ideals over those of human development where, as is often the case, the two are in competition, ecocriticism has tended as a whole to prioritise extra-human concerns over the interests of disadvantaged human groups, while postcolonialism has been routinely, and at times unthinkingly, anthropocentric. (17)

Evidently, Dos Santos's perception of Africa and ecocriticism is Eurocentric, and is intensified by his postcolonial disgust for the black race, which is anthropocentric. Kendem's response to him points to the understanding and fun that exist in the animal kingdom, which is why as humans, Parsi-Bangwa cultures protect these natural habitats. Consequently, the importance of this forest is that it provides the Bangwa people with material to construct their houses. This can be seen when Kendem describes their burnt house, and the rapidity with which the villagers gather forest resources to rebuild it:

Before the rays of the sun reached the plum tree where the old men sat talking ceaselessly, the young men were beginning to arrive with roofing material. Some carried sticks and ropes, others carried enormous bundles of raffia leaves which were to be woven for thatches. Some carried sticks, some so big that they had to be carried by two men. (214)

These materials are easy to get from the nearby bushes and forests in Lewoh country because the people protect these species given that they constantly use them for their housing projects. As such, wanton destruction of these forests is prohibited, and punishment is inflicted on people who disrespect this tradition.

To some extent, it can be argued that many westerners now understand the importance of the forest and the natural environment in their well-being. This is the case when Kendem discovers in

America that some rich whites prefer to build country houses in the middle of forests or on hill tops just to move away from the noisy and polluted cities and towns. This is the case of Professor Don Tomson and the LaFortune family on the outskirts of Deering Town. Kendem is surprised to see Tomson's love for the natural environment, given that he spends most of his time in town teaching at the university. He says:

Don's house was a wooden duplex surrounded by huge, old maple trees with splendid colours and thick raspberry bushes that extended to the pond down in a wide valley opposite the building's front view. The pond was about the size of a football pitch and it didn't seem to have welcomed many human activities since its existence. . . . I went round the house to see the extent of the forest. . . . I went to the cherry farm then down to the pond to see the weasels. Beautifully coloured birds, giant squirrels, rat moles, tortoise and other animals moved about in the woods, some coming very close to the garden as if part of the world had completely warded off civilisation. (91)

Don Tomson, just like the LaFortune family is surprised with Kendem's curiosity and his wandering in the forest to observe the animals and birds. He is the only participant among the sixteen on the Fulbright programme who shows interest in animals and the natural environment. This is because Kendem had lived in big cities for several months and witnessed the effects of modernism on the natural environment and habitats of animal species. That is why he is surprised to discover rich and eco-conscious whites like Tomson and the LaFortunes, who are still interested in protecting the remaining animal species.

In like manner, protecting the environment around holy places in India is, in respect of the Places of Worship Act, enacted by the East India Company. For more than a hundred years, the violation of this act is punishable by the law. It is the case with Mr Ignatius Strickham, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, who invades the Towers of Silence to arrest suspects, and, in the process, destroys the gardens around the sacred Towers. Taken to court by

the religious authorities of the Zoroastrian faith, Phiroze concludes that:

The English magistrate, a man called Peabury, who found the policeman's entry into the Towers of Silence horse riding, and his handcuffing of the accused 'overzealous beyond the farthest limits of civility'. . . Word of mouth even insinuated that Strickham was corrupt, and had probably received a large amount of money from the sheikhs to behave in the way he did. (140)

These sheikhs are Muslim real estate investors who bribe Strickham in a court case over lands around the Parsi Towers of Silence. Their plan with Strickham to arrest and intimidate the Parsis in order to determine them to abandon the land fails because the government of India respects the sacred nature of the environment around temples. This act requires the protection and maintenance of the natural environment and habitats of animal species.

Finally, in the wake of modernism, the Indian government and the Zoroastrian religious authorities have sought solutions to the problem of the vanishing vultures in the Towers of Silence. In an article titled "Vanishing Vultures: A Grave Matter for India's Parsis," Elliot Hannon quotes his interview with Homi Khusrokhan of the Bombay Natural History Society, who examines the measures taken by the Indian government to that effect and says:

The Indian government banned the drug and set up reserves for the birds. The success of the program has led to a new proposal to start a vulture sanctuary in Doongerwaadi. And that could make life easier for the Parsis and their neighbours, says Homi Khusrokhan, president of the Bombay Natural History Society. "For years, Parsis have been trying to manage without vultures," Khusrokhan says. "But obviously, if the vultures could be brought back, [the Parsis] would be delighted. And it's always been an impossible task, so this is the first time it's really become feasible to do." (3)

In these new reserves, vultures are bred in large numbers and are highly protected with the aim of eating the corpses in the Towers of

Silence. Meanwhile, the authorities of the Zoroastrian religion develop modern technological methods to decompose the rising number of corpses while the vultures grow in the reserves. The idea of solar panels placed at the top of the Towers of Silence is equally eco-friendly, as Phiroze puts it:

The rays of the sun, above all, are powerful enough to destroy any residual corruption – vultures or no vultures. The trustees, moreover, had installed three powerful magnifying lenses high atop skyscrapers around the towers to catch the rays of the sun and aim them directly onto the steps of the towers where bodies were exposed to the birds. (176)

With the help of these panels, the corpses decompose quickly, while the vultures chew the flesh. Furthermore, to prevent future intrusion into the restricted areas of the Towers of Silence, security is enforced to guard the towers, the gardens and forests around. In this respect, the Parsis ensure the continuous protection of their environment because many of their gods exist in animal forms.

Conclusion

The natural relationship between man and his environment has spiritual dimensions that vary from one society to the other, and from one religion to the other. The arguments in this article have established that the ecological cycle is the primary ingredient for the sustenance of Zoroastrianism and Bangwa traditional beliefs. As such, *God Was African* by Nkengasong and *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* by Mistry capture the perennial problem of how Parsi-Bangwa religions and cultures rely on their surroundings for food, shelter, energy, and the means of livelihood. Therefore, the Zoroastrian Fire Temples, the Towers of Silence in Bombay and the shrines of *Fuondem* and other gods in Lewoh traditional religion, reveal that gods reside in rivers, hills, valleys, forests and fire. The growing environmental crises caused by modernism in transforming these sacred places into sources of renewable and

artificial energies account for the different physical and ideological conflicts that abound in the two novels. Parsi-Bangwa religious ecocriticism reveals the strategies that modern societies can use to construct cultures and means to meet their needs. This is because human actions and cultures are depleting the ecology, and we need to adopt new eco-friendly strategies that can regenerate the capacity of ecosystems. From this perspective, it can be argued that Nkengasong and Mistry use eco-poetical language and style in *God Was African* and *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer* to advocate for good lives in communities making use of national, ethnic, racial, gender, and other lenses through which we interpret reality and celebrate the Afro-Oriental eco-identity.

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