

## A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the employment of fear eliciting images characteristic of environmental apocalypse as a means of influencing the attitude of audiences in regard to manifestations of climate change in selected poems from East Africa. The analysis draws on Stephen O'Leary and Greg Garrard's understanding of comedy and tragedy as modes of thought applicable to apocalyptic stories. Following this thought, I analyse renditions of scenes of destruction in the poems to understand how harnessing emotions of fear and pity may be valuable in environmental discourse. I argue that far from enhancing the notion of an inescapable calamity towards which humans are fast careering, the emotions of fear and pity in the poems potentially enhance meaningful engagement with the ecological crisis, and promote culpability among audiences. I assert that reading apocalyptic representations as attempts to achieve rhetorical effects might be more beneficial in the context of environmental literary criticism than consideration of the truth value of apocalyptic projections. The article points out some of the ways in which the song mode of poetry may be supportive to this way of reading.

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### Introduction:

The written poetry of East Africa is significantly influenced by oral recitations, incantations and songs alongside which the genre thrives. Among other qualities 'deterritorialized from traditional orature,' to use Evan Mwangi's term,<sup>1</sup> this poetry is context sensitive. Much of it is composed in response to certain socio-political conditions prevailing in the respective primary settings. In conformity, the anthology *Echoes Across the Valley*<sup>2</sup>, from which I select the poems for this paper, brings together over 200 poems clustered under themes such as: domestic and armed violence, political betrayal and corruption, poverty and deprivation as well as environmental issues. To date this is probably the only poetry collection from the region that dedicates a full section to environmental issues. The poetry engages with these issues in ways that indicate the purpose to influence the attitude of audiences concerning specific matters, in resonance with Tanure Ojaide's remark that the African poet sees him/herself as 'obliged to enlighten the people'.<sup>3</sup> Such socio-political responsiveness renders the poetry valuable for environmental discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Evan Mwangi, 'Hybridity in Emergent East African Poetry: A Reading of Susan N. Kiguli and Her Contemporaries,' *Africa Today* 53. 3 (2007) 42.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur I. Luvai, and Kwamchetsi Makokha, *Echoes Across the Valley* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Tanure, Ojaide, 'Poetic Imagination in Black Africa,' *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)* 4.10 (1983) 6.

In a general commentary on *Echoes Across the Valley*, Jack Mapanje notes that the poems follow the East African ‘song tradition’ initiated, in part, by Okot p’Bitek in his four Songs.<sup>4</sup> Okot’s song style which Mapanje refers to is in turn anchored in Acholi oral songs and, according to Charles Okumu, exhibits characteristics of specific subgenres such as the satirical song and the funeral dirge.<sup>5</sup> By locating the poems in the song tradition, Mapanje gestures towards certain stylistic specifications. For instance, poetry in the song style does not follow strict conventions in terms of structure. This is not at all to say that it lacks aesthetic rigour, or that it defies order. Rather, the East African song tradition is largely an experimental medium of poetic expression mostly in free verse, and drawing heavily on the natural landscape for the formulation of similes and other figures of speech. It is such qualities that appropriately position the poetry selected here for apocalyptic modes of expression.

How does the rhetoric of eco-apocalypse become relevant in the East African context? Issues related to climate change are of significant interest to the East African population particularly because the region (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania) is 80% rural, with 75% of the population engaged in agriculture, mainly in smallholder mixed farming.<sup>6</sup> In such a setting, adverse weather conditions like droughts and floods present major challenges both economically and socially. Yet lately the meteorological conditions in the region have deteriorated as evidenced by frequent protracted droughts and rain storms. Until about three decades ago, much of East Africa enjoyed equatorial climate with two rainy seasons (March to June and September to December) and an average temperature of 27°C all year round (Waithaka et al 2013; Baguma 2009). However, since the late 1990s the seasons have been unpredictable. Many parts of Kenya and Tanzania have experienced terrible droughts which leave big numbers of livestock dead.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, every year there are media reports of loss of lives as people are struck by lightning and thunder, and of property damage and displacements due to floods (Yier 2002). In the mountainous areas in the East of Uganda, in particular, heavy rains have been causing serious landslides in the last decade.<sup>8</sup>

It is no wonder then that pioneer ecocritical studies of East African literature have been revolving around human relations with the land and related challenges, as scholars including Laura Wright<sup>9</sup> and Renee Binder and G.W. Burnett confirm<sup>10</sup>. It appears that in recent times

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Mapanje, ‘Echoes Across the Valley,’ Rev. of *Echoes Across the Valley*. Centre for African Studies (LUCAS), Accessed 31 July 2017. <http://lucas.leeds.ac.uk/review/echoes-across-the-valley/>.

<sup>5</sup> Charles, Okumu, ‘The Form of Okot p’Bitek’s Poetry: Literary Borrowing from Acholi Oral Traditions,’ *Research in African Literatures*. 23. 3 (1992) 63f.

<sup>6</sup> Adeleke Salami, Abdul B. Kamara, and Zuzana Brixiova, ‘Smallholder Agriculture in East Africa: Trends, Constraints and Opportunities,’ African Development Bank Tunis, 2010, 22 October 2017. <<https://commdev.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Smallholder-Agriculture-East-Africa-Trends-Constraints-Opportunities.pdf>>.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Emerald Osima, ‘Drought conditions and management strategies in Tanzania.’ *IDMP-Integrated Drought Management Programme*. IDMP, n.d. Web. 14 May 2017. < [http://www.droughtmanagement.info/literature/UNW-DPC\\_NDMP\\_Country\\_Report\\_Tanzania\\_2014.pdf](http://www.droughtmanagement.info/literature/UNW-DPC_NDMP_Country_Report_Tanzania_2014.pdf)>.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Landslides in Bududa District: Their Causes and Consequences,’ NEMA National Environment Management Authority, 2010. 21 July 2017. <[http://www.nemaug.org/reports/Current\\_reports/Bududa\\_report.pdf](http://www.nemaug.org/reports/Current_reports/Bududa_report.pdf)>.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Wright, ‘Inventing Tradition and Colonising the Plants: Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*,’ *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa* ed. Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Renee Binder, and G. W. Burnett, ‘Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and the Search for a Populist Landscape Aesthetic,’ *Environmental Value* 3. 1(1994).

issues related to climate change have attracted attention. A number of literary works from this region including Bukenya<sup>11</sup>, Mbugua<sup>12</sup> and Omtatah<sup>13</sup> are engaged with droughts as the most immediately perceived effects of climate change. In seeming resonance, some poets have written on the effects of winds, rain and thunder storms, floods, and droughts on livelihoods. Against such a backdrop, I regard the selected poems, especially in view of their relationship to the song tradition, as committed responses to prevailing conditions. I maintain that although apocalyptic tendencies in literature are often detected in dramas and novels, these poems invite such reading through their thematic focus and stylistic innovations.

The paper focuses on three poems: 'July' by Jotham Tusingiirwe, 'A Sudden Storm' by Michael Vincent Mugabi and 'Nativity' by Eric Sikujua Ng'maryo, all from the section entitled Nature's Play in *Echoes Across the Valley*. Two of these poems, 'A Sudden Storm' and 'Nativity' represent the violence with which rain storms descend on human settlements, while 'July' recreates two scenes of a drought stricken land and the subsequent effect on animals and vegetation. I read the poems not only as commentaries on the corresponding aspects of climate change, but also as rhetorical interventions in the mode of apocalypse. This is mainly because the poems seem to focus on eliciting emotions of fear and pity concerning the future, through imagery and other stylistic devices. I consider the effectiveness of the imagery in representing past and possible disaster and in enhancing emotional engagement with the issues raised. I anchor this approach to eco-poetry in Stephen O'Leary's notion of tragic and comic apocalypse as employed by Greg Garrard in the context of environmental discourse. The paper proposes that reading apocalyptic representations this way might be more beneficial in the context of literary criticism than consideration of the truth value of apocalyptic projections in some earlier studies.

### **Shades of (eco)apocalypse**

The increasing outcry concerning carbon emissions and the resultant global warming expected to cause major climatic changes on the planet has bolstered apocalypse as one of the modes of arousing attention to human responsibility concerning the fate of the planet. The term 'apocalypse', derived from Greek, originally means revelation or unveiling, but has come to mean the notion of cosmic degeneration towards a catastrophic end of history, or 'that discourse that reveals or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny'.<sup>14</sup> In the Christian tradition, this thinking is mostly based on the book of Revelations in The Holy Bible, which spells out an unfortunate end of the world as a penal disaster. Stephen O'Leary in his seminal work, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (1994) proposes what he refers to as the theory of apocalyptic discourse. Drawing on the work of Adela Yarbro Collins who compares the effect of apocalyptic texts on the audience to catharsis in Greek drama, O'Leary rereads the book of Revelations as tragi-comedy. He notes that in the book the perpetrators of evil face an irreversible verdict of destruction while there is a blissful end for the faithful,<sup>15</sup> contrary to the tragic mode. O'Leary suggests that apocalypse can be understood as a mode of thought, and thus not necessarily bound by generic classifications.<sup>16</sup> I will return later to this point. But most

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<sup>11</sup> Austin Bukenya, *A Hole in the Sky* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Ng'ang'a Mbugua, *Terrorists of the Aberdare: A Novella* (Nairobi: Big Books, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Okoiti Omtatah, *Voice of the People: A Play*. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (Oxford; New York et al.: Oxford University Press, 1994) 5.

<sup>15</sup> O'Leary 67.

<sup>16</sup> O'Leary 69.

importantly for this discussion, both O’Leary and Collins acknowledge the relationship between apocalypse and tragic drama as consisting in the significance of the emotions of fear and pity as a resource for effectiveness.

O’Leary addresses apocalypse in relation to religious eschatology, but when it takes on an environmental inflection, apocalypse becomes a discourse which ‘recounts humanity’s fall from ecological grace’.<sup>17</sup> Eco-apocalypse has continued to thrive because, as O’Leary notes, it functions as ‘useful rhetoric’<sup>18</sup> which potentially addresses questions of morality in society.<sup>19</sup> Indeed Lawrence Buell acknowledges that apocalypse is ‘the single most powerful master metaphor’ in the service of environmentalism (*The Environmental Imagination* 285). As handed down from Christian eschatological stories, apocalypse is framed in a tripartite model where good contends with evil until a climatic point when each receives its ultimate corollary as a reward or punishment. Under such a framework punishment is the overriding feature of eco-apocalyptic literary works, constructed through images and other linguistic strategies which potentially maximise emotions of fear and pity. The idea is to promote meaningful reflections towards change of attitude and perhaps behaviour.

Fear, the most significant tool of apocalyptic rhetoric, is defined by Aristotle as ‘a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future’ and he adds that what we fear calls for pity when we see it happening to others.<sup>20</sup> Eco-apocalyptic stories focus on accentuating the notion of ultimate catastrophe as a consequence of human abuse of ecological order, so as to arouse enough fear in the audience and in turn enhance meaningful engagement with the ecological crisis. This means that whereas fear and pity in the classical tradition were regarded as negative feelings from which people had to be freed by means of tragic plots, fear in eco-apocalypse plays a positive role. As such, in the eco-apocalyptic dispensation the emotions of fear are not purged away but are harnessed as a motivation for future action.

Greg Garrard in his *Ecocriticism* draws on O’Leary’s insight to identify two modes of eco-apocalyptic literature, the tragic and the comic. The tragic, to begin with, is where events are featured in such a way that time seems to be ‘careering towards some final catastrophic conclusion’<sup>21</sup>. Garrard further offers a useful list of defining characteristics of this approach which include: ‘The warning is presented in terms of absolute authority; the material threat is ‘evil’, and so, by association, are the authors of it; the consequences of failure to heed the warning are catastrophic; and the danger is not only imminent, but already underway’ (103). As Garrard has noted, this mode of representation may not be helpful to the environmental cause because it occludes intervention. It imagines humans as hurtling towards a catastrophic end and as involved in some form of irreversible self-destruction. The emotions of fear elicited in this case then spring from a sort of terminal gloom. The comic approach, on the other hand, regards human eco-abusive behaviour as errors that can be corrected and the danger averted or minimised. In Garrard’s terms, comic apocalypse tends to promote ‘ethical subtlety’ in which the idea is for people to ‘live in light of the possibility’ (96) of catastrophe, while continuing

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<sup>17</sup> Robin Globus Veldman, ‘Narrating the Environmental Apocalypse: How Imagining the End Facilitates Moral Reasoning Among Environmental Activists,’ *Ethics and the Environment* 17.1 (2012) 4.

<sup>18</sup> O’Leary 3.

<sup>19</sup> O’Leary 6.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, Trans. W. Rhys Roberts, Editor W.D. Ross. *Rhetoric*. (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010) 69.

<sup>21</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2012) 95.

with their ordinary duties. This approach thus allows for hope. It is in this understanding that I appreciate representations of fearful scenes in the selected poetry.

My interpretation of apocalypse is also motivated by Garrard's comments on the mode. Citing Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, Garrard maintains that apocalyptic writing is often misleading in its alignment of facts to support theories of doom (108), leave alone its over simplification of complex issues in an attempt to locate blame among other shortcomings (115). Garrard's observations, I note, are based on his appraisal of environmental nonfiction and I would like to think that literary eco-apocalyptic works might need other parameters of assessment. This is so especially because literary works rarely ever make authoritative time-bound predictions which would be rated as false prophecies should they never come true. It is true that some creative works, including poetry seek close associations with actual contexts, but even then, they can only claim general 'symbolic referentiality' 'as part of the overall work of the text' (L. Buell *The Future* 33). In that light, I would suggest that the effectiveness of literary apocalyptic works, can be assessed on its persuasive potential. This persuasion is strongly tied to style, and in particular to the way the text manages emotions of fear and pity so as to enhance change in attitudes.

The poetry in focus has a special relationship with apocalyptic discourse. While what has come to be known as literary eco-apocalypse are stories projecting a calamitous end as a result of ecologically related disaster, this poetry does not proceed that way. Rather, it features scenes and experiences that attest to the severity of deterioration in ecological balance in general, and climatic conditions in particular, emphasising the possibility of worse disaster(s) without ruling out possibilities of improvement for the better. Actually, I find the poetry aligned with Frederick Buell's idea of the new apocalyptic literature that features 'fictional worlds that do not conveniently end with apocalypse'.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, it invites audiences to 'realise just how deeply in the soup they themselves are and how difficult and uncertain solutions are'.<sup>23</sup> In the next section I explain how such ideas play out in the representation of droughts and storms.

### **A devastating drought in 'July'**

The poem 'July'<sup>24</sup> is written by Jotham Tusingiirwe. This upcoming Ugandan poet seems to be concerned with the impact of meteorological conditions on a subsistence farming community, for his other poem in the same anthology entitled 'Old Woman's Prayer'<sup>25</sup> recounts the words of a farmer thanking God that the rains have finally come and that her crops and livestock can do well. In 'July', Tusingiirwe describes a scene of drought, and the related impact on various forms of life. The poem features a landscape characterised by banana plantations, nut gardens, patches of grassland dotted with trees and riverbeds lined with papyrus, which is familiar especially in central and southern Uganda. However, the picture of a land completely devastated by drought and ravaged by violent winds and wide spreading fires, that the poem recreates, is not a common sight in the country. It is thus possible to say that the poem is a projection of a future state of the landscape should the present conditions of protracted droughts, increased temperatures and reduced precipitation continue. Moreover, the poem is entitled 'July', the driest

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<sup>22</sup> Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2003) 322.

<sup>23</sup> F. Buell 322.

<sup>24</sup> Luvai and Makhoka 27-28.

<sup>25</sup> Luvai and Makhoka 21.

month of the year in the areas around Lake Victoria. Yet the conditions described – the dry swamps and riverbeds, the withered vegetation, and unbearable heat accompanied by ferocious winds, and raging fires – indicate a reality far worse than the expected dry spell in July. Thus, the term ‘July’, as used in the poem, does not refer to the regular season, but as a reference point for the audience to imagine the temperatures described.

The poem presents the vegetation and other life forms, including humans and animals, in a desperate state, which in a way attests to the fact that the conditions prevailing are unexpected, and adaptation is slow. While it is not right to associate all droughts with climate change, there is indication in the poem to that effect. The first stanza opens with the line: ‘The thirsty earth gapes wearily at the heavens’ in which the personified earth is represented not only as a sufferer, but also as taking an accusing stance. The verb ‘gapes’ signifies a blank look of surprise and the figure also implies that there is a deviation from the expected weather conditions. In other words, the ‘weary’ earth is disappointed by the refusal of the heavens to give rain. This figurative expression thus enables the poet to express an idea related to the expansive nature of climate change in terms of time, in a single phrase.

The thirsty earth gapes wearily at the heavens  
The limp dry grass droops to the earth,  
Dry banana leaves rustle and crackle in the heat  
Chaff, dust and paper swirl in the white wind  
Iron sheets clatter and clang, grass thatches scatter  
Skirts rise and flutter in the air  
Trees creak and screech and shriek (1-7)

The humanising metaphor in reference to the earth, ‘thirsty’ (1), implies the extreme heat and dryness of the soil, and the fact that it can no longer support life. In addition, the line is followed by an account of how the different elements indicate their thirst; the grass is withered and just ‘droops’ to the ground in resignation (2), and so are the banana leaves which ‘rustle and crackle’ (3). Line 4 calls attention to the violent wind as an aggravating factor. The auditory imagery created through such words as ‘rustle’, ‘crackle’, ‘swirl’, ‘clatter’, ‘clang’, ‘flutter’, ‘screech’ and ‘shriek’ emphasize the intensity of the heat and the wind. These irritating sounds are accompanied by an image of the air and atmosphere filled with flying dust, pieces of paper and thatch. Together, these piled auditory and visual images not only construct a terrifying understanding of the worsening ecological condition but also of the real threat to human survival. That way, the representation invites the audience to ponder over the crisis and possibilities of redemptive action.

In the final lines of the stanza, the construction of the apocalyptic metaphor reaches a climax through the piling of visual and kinaesthetic images. Here the emotional effect of the description is heightened by the created impression of the progression of disaster and the gravity of the catastrophe.

Fleeing monkeys chattering in lament  
The swamp papyrus their home on fire in ruins  
Papyrus-head embers fly in the smoky air  
Perching on and setting nuts and bushes aflame  
Hillsides black with fire, vast destruction

### Cows and sheep roving in vain for grass (8-13)

In these lines the audience suddenly becomes aware of even greater trouble: Implicitly, the heat has caused wild fires and reduced the already meagre chances of survival for both humans and animals. The fire, flying on the wings of the wind, consumes the surviving vegetation as well as food crops (nuts). In his discussion on the emotions, Aristotle notes that people fear something if it is imminent, for we are not usually bothered about the distant future<sup>26</sup>. The continuous action of ‘fleeing’, ‘chattering’, ‘roving’ and other verbs in present tense in these lines have a way of drawing the disaster to the present thereby enhancing fear.

In addition, the visual image of a landscape black with smoke and embers, of animals wandering and making all sorts of noises in search of water and grass, is the apex of apocalyptic imagery in this poem. One cannot help to wonder about the survival of humans in such a situation. If the burning ‘nuts’ are read as representative of food crops, then the poem indicates a worrying diminution in life supporting resources including oxygen, food and water. Surprisingly, the poet does not mention anything directly related to the state of humans in this scene. Is the silence intended to leave room for hope for human survival? Yet as I hinted earlier, such wild fires are not a major problem in Uganda, the implied setting of the poem. Thus, the improbability of the scene described in the poem tends to depict the poet’s message as projective, thereby ameliorating the terminal gloom. Notable also is the symbolic significance of fire as an agent of destruction. In the first place, there is an implied relationship between a fast advancing conflagration engulfing the whole landscape, and the unstoppable effects of climatic change. In addition, the poem benefits from the assumption of allusion to the Christian conception of apocalypse. I relate this notion of fire bringing an end to human history to fear triggering ideas of hell in the Christian faith, although Tusingiirwe’s poem does not directly acknowledge the connection. This comparison in turn allows the cross mapping of emotional response potentially beneficial in the environmental campaign.

In comparison with the crisis above, stanza two describes a relatively calm situation. It takes the audience to another scene that does not match the calamitous rigour of the first stanza, but which also recreates ominous images of disaster.

Solitary eagles sailing high in the sky  
Streams and wells deserted and lifeless  
Mudfish and crabs dead and stinking  
Ladies on verandahs sipping banana brew  
Heaven blue with a few scattered white clouds  
The glaring sun scorching and burning  
Farmers clearing and ploughing the land  
In preparation for the September rains. (1-8)

Apparently, the drought has lasted a long time and the rest of the birds, except meat eating eagles are either dead or have migrated. The audience is invited to imagine such a place where the excruciating heat has dried the rivers and streams and the air is filled with the smell of dead water creatures. The ‘blue’ and ‘white’ sky (line 5) bears no signs of rain and the sun which deploys unrelenting fury (6) portends even more trouble for humans. The last two lines

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<sup>26</sup> Aristotle 69.

referring to the hopeful farmers then stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the poem, and attract varied interpretations, as I will clarify below. For now, I will emphasize the idea that since the situation recreated in the poem is not a common occurrence in Uganda, the poem is likely to stir emotions of fear for the uncertain future heralded by frequent droughts.

Alongside images that promote fear for the unknown fate of humans in the face of various manifestations of climate change, emerges an accusing tone. This begins in a subtle way through cultivation of sympathy for the different entities scorched by the sun and buffeted by the wind. In the first stanza, the association of the earth (soil) but also in a broader sense the land with a humanly painful feeling of thirst (1), appeals to our sense of pity. This humanising metaphor is also extended to the trees which are imagined in a struggle against the furry of the wind. In the sound 'shriek' the poet suggests the pain and suffering these elements are undergoing (7). In addition, the visual image of monkeys 'fleeing' and lamenting as their habitat is being consumed by fire (8) and of cows and sheep 'roving in vain for grass' and choking with smoke filled air also engenders sympathy (13, 11). It is noteworthy that the speaker refers to the papyrus as a 'home' (9) for the monkeys, contrary to their known habitat – the forest. This implies that forests have disappeared from this imagined landscape leaving wild animals, as victims to human tyranny, to find alternative habitation. In turn, these images create room to reflect on the effects of deforestation and also its perpetrators.

Humans are not the main subject of this poem and it is possible for one not to notice the role associated with them in the imaginary course of events. The first mention of humans comes through a synecdochical metaphor. Amid the noise and movements caused by the wind 'skirts rise and flatter' (6). The reference to women as skirts, in a way dehumanises them, especially in comparison the humanisation of the trees and the earth already mentioned here. What I make of this is an unsympathetic attitude on part of the speaker towards women. This notion becomes more pronounced in the second stanza when the poet strategically positions the line: 'Ladies on verandahs sipping banana brew' just after three lines bemoaning the sad fate of the birds, and water creatures under the scorching sun (1-4), and follows them with two lines emphasizing the complete absence of life giving precipitation (5,6). In this light, the poet calls attention to the incongruity between the action of the ladies and the prevailing conditions both structurally and semantically. Moreover, the behaviour of the women in an atmosphere engulfed by the smell of death and the sweltering heat depicts complacency and by extension, culpability for making no efforts to address the glaringly life-threatening conditions. Similarly, farmers are said to be ploughing the land despite the unrelentingly aggressive heat and remarkably clear sky as indicated in the preceding line. However, the incongruity can also be read as a confirmation of the optimistic idea that since the adverse effects of climate change are mere projections and not predictions, one may continue with agricultural activity in the expectation of better conditions.

It is important to note, however, that the poet does acknowledge the dilemma involved in attempts to apportion blame for the prevailing conditions attending climate change. For instance, reading the metaphor in 'The thirsty earth gapes wearily at the heavens' (stanza 1 line 1) in tandem with the line 'The glaring sun scorching and burning' (stanza 2 line 6) enables the hypothetical tension between the two elements to emerge. In other words, while the earth (and the composite of elements therein) accuses the sun of causing harm because of its excessive heat, the sun also has reasons to accuse the earth for interrupting its natural operations. This symbolises the confusion surrounding the location of blame amongst humans. When Garrard



condemns the search for culprits as one of the effects of eco-apocalyptic rhetoric,<sup>27</sup> he is not opposed to locating blame per se, but to its improper placement which may involve oversimplification of complex systems and processes in order to zero down on a single cause. Notable though, the way the speaker in this poem tacitly draws attention to the culpability of humans minimises the risks Garrard identifies. This is achieved by providing a holistic picture of the complexities surrounding the raised temperatures and reduced precipitation. The earth-heavens relationship above, for instance, indicates that the events that lead to the drought belong to a chain of causes and effects whose origins are neither easy nor beneficial to trace. The sun burns mercilessly and deprives humans and animals of food, and may be the cause of wild fires and the associated damage. Yet human activities like the deforestation alluded to (18-19) could have contributed to the increased temperatures. More importantly, the way the various entities are represented, including elements like the sun, the soils, the vegetation, animals and humans, suggests that both are agents and victims at the same time.

The poem July makes no claims to universally applicable projections. It presents a calamity that faces or may befall a certain community in an unnamed landscape characterised by small hills, patches of farmland river beds and a few trees. Although in the last part of stanza one the poem represents a hopeless situation in which a whole landscape is destroyed by fire, the poet does not present it as an inescapable, irreversible verdict of destruction. Rather, the poem generates enough fear to reinforce culpability and facilitate change of attitudes. It is apparent that the poem utilises the emotive devices of apocalypse without its problematic claims to authoritative pronouncements. It provides for rays of hope in its representations of the fate of the animals. The monkeys, cows and sheep are moving about in search of food and smoke free air have chances of survival should they stumble out of the reach of the conflagration. This mode of representation is what resonates with Garrard's idea of comic apocalypse.

Finally, the contradictions within the poem can be read as a confirmation of the comic mode of apocalypse. In the first stanza, the representation of the dying vegetation and the extreme heat that culminates into a wide spread fire falls just short of creating an impression of an inescapable irreversible calamity. But stanza two, with its rendition of extremely dry conditions minus the mood of crisis, gives an impression of continuity. It is possible to receive stanza two as a description of the same landscape as in stanza one several months after the conflagration. In that light the stanza becomes a symbolic representation of life after disaster. In fact, the incongruity between human action in stanza two, the ladies who revel as if all is well and the farmers who continue to plough under the scorching, mocking sun, calls to mind Frederick Buell's understanding of the society beyond the millennial 'hysterical warnings that didn't come true,'<sup>28</sup> in which people live with the crisis as part of life. He adds that this situation is reflected in literary works which depict the 'deepening environmental crisis as a context in which people dwell.'<sup>29</sup> But whether these incongruities are read as representing coping mechanisms or as complacency being chastised by the poet, they have the effect of neutralising the fear to make room for an optimistic outlook on the circumstances.

### **Apocalyptic representations of rain storms: 'A Sudden Storm'**

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<sup>27</sup> Garrard 115.

<sup>28</sup> F. Buell xvii.

<sup>29</sup> F. Buell 3211-22.

While rainfall is the major direct source of water for both agriculture and domestic use in East Africa, seasons have become more unpredictable, with fluctuating volumes of rainfall. In Uganda for instance, heavy rains have been causing serious landslides in the last decade, in the Eastern part of the country.<sup>30</sup> This dilemma is captured in the two poems I discuss in this section. Dispatching emotively descriptive imagery and metaphors, ‘A Sudden Storm’ by Michael Vincent Mugabi and ‘Nativity’ by Eric Sikujua Ng’maryo represent the destructive vitality of rain storms as well as human vulnerability to the forces of nature. In both poems, the malignancy of the storms which manifests in violent winds, thunder and lightning, and floods of water is amplified, thereby eliciting feelings of fear and foreboding which are characteristic effects of apocalyptic discourse. Just like in the last section where renditions of the disaster are interspersed with hopeful moments, the poems in this section too provide for optimistic views, even as they bemoan the destruction caused by the storms.

The poem ‘A Sudden Storm’<sup>31</sup>, to begin with, is written by the Ugandan poet Michael Vincent Mugabi. It recreates a scene of a destructive storm in an urban densely populated location, as indicated by the large number of people who scuttle about at the approach of rain. While the stampede also attests to the unexpectedness of the rain, and the clouds of dust the wind carries indicate that the rain follows a long dry spell. What is remarkable about this poem is that right from the start it plunges the reader into a deeply frightening scene and sustains the tension through a linear thought structure. The way the poet draws the audience into the poem resonates with Angus Fletcher’s idea of the environmental poem. Fletcher rightly argues that through description linguistic features may acquire ‘the symbolic power to surround,’<sup>32</sup> similar to the way nature surrounds the human observer. The piled images in this poem gives an increasing sense of being present at the scene and being surrounded by the various sounds, sights and activities. Fletcher’s observation then becomes true. He notes that through description ‘a poem does not merely suggest or indicate an environment as part of its thematic meaning, but actually gets the reader to enter into the poem as if it were the reader’s environment of living.’<sup>33</sup> By drawing the audience into the scene this way the poet maximises emotive effectiveness. Renditions of the destructive power of winds, thunder and the raindrops all build a rich experience that leaves the audience with fear and foreboding concerning future storms.

The poem opens with a description of the sky followed by the violence of the wind on the surroundings, the representation of the actual downpour and finally a conclusive comment on the irony in the whole situation. Emotions of fear are enhanced through several strategies, beginning with the creation of a chilling atmosphere through innovative piling of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic images. The first five lines invite the audience to imagine the sinister appearance of the sky.

Sable clouds  
Like factory chimney smoke  
Menacingly float  
Riding upon chariots of howling wind

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<sup>30</sup> NEMA 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Luvai and Makokha 25-26.

<sup>32</sup> Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 43.

<sup>33</sup> Fletcher 122.

Blinding flashes of lightning  
Incessantly light the skies (1-6)

The imagination of a darkened sky with dark clouds (1-2) speedily moving across the sky already creates a frightening sight. Some of the clouds are moving low and seem to be aiming at the observer as implied by reference to their movement as ‘menacing’. This sight is aggravated by the loud noise of the wind termed as ‘howling’ (line 4) accompanied by harsh peels of lightening. The next set of lines relays more chaos as birds, children and adults all dart about in attempts to take cover from the fast approaching storm. The image given by these fast, chaotic movements in turn creates a mounting sense of an unstoppable, advancing catastrophe. This mood of fear is sustained throughout the poem through the fast pace in which the poem develops. The tension reaches a climax just before the end of the poem where the rain is portrayed as: ‘Laying waste crops, houses and granaries/ inviting immense suffering to humanity’ (26, 27).

The scary atmosphere is further enhanced by amplified representations of the destructive vitality of various aspects of the storm. Thunder and lightning and the attendant clouds are constructed as great forces of destruction. Before it rains, the clouds are compared to an airborne animate for they are, ‘menacingly float[ing]’, as if in conscious action, and are also moving vigorously as if ‘riding upon chariots of ... wind’ (4). The ‘menacing’ character of the clouds frightens both humans and birds (25) with their ‘blinding flashes of lightning’ (25). Yet in the progress of the storm the sound of thunder intensifies, and it is compared to that of gunshots in: ‘Thunder like guns of war explode /as the storm builds on’ (24, 25). This image, reminiscent of a war situation, especially in the context of the turbulent political history of East Africa<sup>34</sup> is loaded with meaning. In the least, it amplifies the gravity of danger humans are exposed to in the event of storms. It is undoubtable that the fear with which memories of war are invested for a section of the audience, if transferred to this situation, produces significant effects.

The wind as a primary agent of destruction is presented with even more power. It is imagined as a giant animate with ‘robust limbs’ (9) with which it picks clothes off lines (10) and picks leaves and dust and throws them around (11, 12). The force it exerts on the trees is expressed through the personified reaction of the trees in: ‘Trees painfully sway, coaxed/ To dance to the rhythm of the wind’s/ Bitter song’ (13-15). This strategy not only solicits sympathy for the trees but it also identifies these elements as fellow victims with humans to the fury of the wind. As the wind lays ‘waste crops, houses and granaries’ (26), thereby causing famine amongst the humans, so does it molest the trees. With emphasis on the nature of damage, the poet draws attention to the economic significance of the storm.

The rain itself is the other agent of destruction the poem represents. In the following lines, there is comparison between the sound of rain drops on the roof tops and ‘a myriad hands/ pounding a sole drum’ (22-23). This auditory image confirms the large volume of rain drops and the corresponding volume of water that instead of watering crops, just destroys them. The poet represents the rain as such:

A drizzle – ta!  
Another – ta!

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, the twenty-year guerrilla war in Uganda (1990-2010), Terrorist attacks in Kenya eg. The recent Mpeketoni attacks (2014) and Westgate Mall shooting (2013).

Till the ta-ta-ta-ta- tap  
Upon the rooftops builds on  
Like the work of a myriad palms  
Pounding a sole drum (18-23)

This onomatopoeic rendering apart from making the frightening sounds alive to emotions, communicates a sense of the progression of the storm. Note how the external structure of the lines resonates with the idea of the building up of the storm, as each line is longer than the one before it. I have mentioned before that the poet initially builds an atmosphere to enhance feelings of fear into the audience, which he/she enhances with amplifying the malignancy of each of the agents of destruction. As I noted then, apocalyptic fear is not purged away, but settles as an emotion that informs positive action. The concluding note of this poet enables this process. In the last two lines: 'When rain should have showered/ blessings' (28-29), the poet draws attention to the irony underlying the destructive nature of the storm. This underscoring of the absurdity of life in a way transforms the feelings of fear into a more solid despair that leaves the audience to ponder over the role of humans in the worsening of climatic conditions.

It is notable however, that alongside the sad, angry and sometimes panicky tone of the poem is a hint of grim humour. In the first instance, humour is conveyed as a break between the tense rendition to the gloomy sky in the first six lines of the poem quoted above and the representation of the beginning of the down pour. The confused activity in the lines below does invoke a comic image:

Kids scamper into houses for safety  
As the robust limbs of the wind  
Pick clothes off lines, ...  
Trees painfully sway, coaxed  
To dance to the rhythm of the wind's  
Bitter song. Adults grumblingly  
Collect utensils and clothes  
Before they are through,  
A drizzle- ta! (8-18)

The tussle of clothes, dust, dry leaves, kids, and adults in the wind does produce some humour. Moreover, the poet refers to the movement of trees as dancing. This metaphor in the context of the buffeting power of the wind is inclined towards the comic. In addition, onomatopoeic representation of raindrops on the roof tops may be read as playful too. As I noted earlier, there are cases when apocalyptic thought manifests as a blend of tragic and comic modes. Unlike in the case of July, the poet here makes no effort to explain the possible genesis of such a situation. But this openness may be even more effective in enhancing meaningful reflection on the matter of meteorological volatility in particular and climate change in general. The next poem presents yet another approach to mediating the apocalyptic tone.

### **Death and Birth in 'Nativity'**

‘Nativity’<sup>35</sup> by Ng’maryo comments on the character of a violent storm, just like the previous poem. But apart from the cold wind, the darkened sky, loud thunder and lightning, the storm in this poem is characterised by hailstones. This makes it more violent than the one in the previous poem. In seeming incongruity with this subject, the title of the poem alludes to ‘the nativity’ an expression used in reference to the birth of Christ. Indeed, the poem develops in three parts, with the first nine lines focused on a violent storm, four lines on the ferocity of dogs, and the last seven lines about a child birth. Thus, from the start the audience is made aware of the polarity of experiences the poem brings across. These seemingly different subjects are brought into unity of meaning through figurative use of language as well as innovations with structure.

One of the remarkable aspects of this poem is the way the speaker achieves emotive effectiveness through a detached tone. The frightening character of the storm emerges in this case, not from a rendition of the chaos it causes, but from figurative language and diction.

The sky’s frowned brow  
 Thunders and growls and roars and rumbles  
 Lightning flashes  
 Violent lashes,  
 Heavens lour  
 Rains pour  
 Hail stones bounce on dry, red ground  
 Cold winds blow  
 Merciless, angry.  
 Mad dogs on night prowl  
 Bloodthirsty, hungry  
 And our land is bathed in a  
 Flood of blood. (1-13)

The sky is endowed with a ‘frowned brow’ (1), which suggests the face of an angry person. And this comparison can generate a wealth of meanings and pointers. For instance, why would the sky be angry? Is anyone to blame for the status quo? And if so, what is the attitude of the speaker? Is he or she remorseful? Is the cause of storms reversible? and so on. The overriding metaphor is not any less loaded. The sound of thunder is rendered as a verb and compared to the sound made by a dog and a lion in a row, in ‘growls and roars and rumbles’ (2). I note also that the joiner ‘and’ functions to render the sense of continuity in the stream of these angry sounds. In addition, the animating verb and noun in: ‘Lightning flashes/ Violent lashes’ (3,4) and the personification of the wind in ‘Cold winds blow/ Mercilessly, angry (8, 9)’ all emphasise the motivated violence of these elements. All these metaphors insinuate that there is an object of anger on which the blame rests and in turn call for self-examination on part of the audience.

The violence with which the storm rages emerges even more strongly through some form of extended parallelism that I will refer to as “structural metaphor”. It involves the positioning of two distinct elements next to each other as a way of invoking comparison. In this stanza, the first nine lines comment on the sky, the thunder, lightning, and wind, and without a break, line 10-13 introduce the subject of mad dogs and their fierce behaviour. I interpret this as a case of comparison. Moreover, the idea of dogs seems to be implied in an earlier metaphor in the first

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<sup>35</sup> Luvai and Makhoka 29.

two lines of the poem where thunder is referred to as 'growl[ing]'. In this light, the storm can be imagined, for instance, as destroying everything in its way just as a mad dog would tear at anything it comes across. The last two lines of the stanza push the metaphor further by comparing blood, involved in the ferocious activities of the dog, to rain water (12,13). This complex metaphor in turn suggests that the storm causes a large number of deaths. Such a representation of the storm is bound to generate emotions strong enough to engender meaningful reflection on the matter.

Yet the same comparison between a mad dog and the agents of destruction in the storm is supportive to a comic mode of thought. This is more so when the juxtaposition is regarded as a strategy of internal structural diversion comparable to the fracturing of plots in the Brechtian theatre of alienation. Here I am talking about the interruption of conceptual flow by suddenly introducing new ideas into the stanza. Under such a conception, the introduction of a different subject in the stanza becomes a strategy to prevent deep emotional engagement with regard to the subject at hand, a sort of relief from the gloomy subject of the lines before. This idea gains ground in the second and third stanza where the poet brings up the subject of childbirth contrary to the logical flow of the poem.

The hour has come,  
The frightened child  
Pushes out alone into the dark  
And cold and rain. (1-4)

'We have a child!'  
Cries the midwife  
Unto us a child is born. (1-3)

These two stanzas seem out of place with the illustrations of the storm in the first stanza. Readers might conclude that the destruction caused by the storm is so intense that the speaker seeks to escape from the horrifying details of the scene by changing the subject. Indeed, the midwife's declaration in the third stanza, allusive to the biblical birth of Jesus, becomes a symbolic indication of hope and a new beginning. But the situational irony embodied in the juxtaposition of the two scenarios, death and birth, can also be understood as symbolic of the polarity of weather events. A rain storm, with all the destruction it causes, is always followed by the birth of new crops, and vegetation.

### **Conclusion**

The song mode of poetry seems well positioned for the environmental cause because of its sensitivity to context and reliance on local environments for figures of speech. But most importantly, the form enjoys the liberty of making social and political commentaries without violating the wall between the audience and the speaking voice. It features particularised observations but maintains a subtle relationship with context that permits universal applicability. In the case of apocalyptic stories, this subtlety protects the poetry from accusations related to making false prophecies or engendering misguided policies, which would result from authoritative predictions. Yet the personal involvement characteristic of this poetry enhances transfer of opinions from the imaginary speaker to the audience through emotional involvement, thus increasing the potential to influence positively.

Apocalypse as a mode of thought which realigns punishment and reward with human action may find this form of poetry useful. In this age of the anthropocene, apocalyptic eco-literature has moved away from predictions of a catastrophic end of history to blazing representations of the crises, challenges and dilemmas with which humans have to live. The idea is to sustain serious engagement with alarming ecological realities while remaining open to positive change and interventions. As Garrard has stressed, ‘only if we imagine that the planet has a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it.’<sup>36</sup> Against that backdrop, fear as the major tool of apocalyptic narratives may be used differently. It should not to be harnessed as an end in itself so as to heighten despair and mourning for the irreversible fall of man from ecological grace. Rather, it should be seen as a tool for facilitating change in attitudes, and eventually in behaviour. This new apocalyptic dispensation of fear is well aligned with Garrard’s claim that comic apocalypse is more beneficial in the environmental campaign. Moreover, in the recent past environmentally committed literature has identified more and more with the rhetorical purpose. It is in this light then that the poetry such as the one discussed in this paper demands to be assessed on its effectiveness in employing fear and pity as persuasive resources.

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<sup>36</sup> Garrard 116.

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