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Sacred landscapes in *The River Between*: Ecological significance and conservation

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Abstract

The intersection of sacred natural sites and indigenous environmental stewardship has garnered significant scholarly attention, challenging conventional conservation paradigms and highlighting the intrinsic link between cultural and ecological preservation. While extant literature has explored the role of traditional ecological knowledge in biodiversity conservation, the potential of postcolonial literature as a medium for addressing global environmental crises remains underexplored. This paper investigates how literary representations of sacred landscapes can foster environmental consciousness and redirect human reverence towards nature, using Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. Employing postcolonial ecocriticism as a theoretical framework, the study critically analyses the novel's portrayal of sacred sites as repositories of traditional ecological knowledge and nexus points between human and divine realms. The analysis reveals that the novel's depiction of the Honia River and sacred groves serves as a powerful critique of colonial environmental exploitation while simultaneously advocating for an indigenous environmental ethic rooted in spiritual reverence for nature. However, the novel's exploration of the tensions between traditional and colonial worldviews illuminates the complex challenges facing indigenous conservation practices in postcolonial contexts. This paper argues that the novel's portrayal of sacred landscapes critiques colonial exploitation and models an indigenous environmental ethic thereby demonstrating how postcolonial literature can reframe global conservation paradigms

Key Words: Postcolonial ecocriticism, Sacred natural sites, Indigenous environmental stewardship, Traditional ecological knowledge, Literary environmentalism

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Introduction

The intricate relationship between sacred natural sites and Indigenous environmental stewardship has received growing scholarly attention in recent decades, as the global community confronts intensifying ecological crises. These revered landscapes, imbued with profound spiritual and cultural meaning, act as vital interfaces between human societies and the natural world, encapsulating traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) systems refined over millennia (Sinthumule, 2023; Berkes, 2012; Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000). Increasingly recognised as repositories of biodiversity and anchors for sustainable resource management, sacred natural sites challenge the dominance of reductionist, Western scientific paradigms and advocate for more integrative, culturally attuned conservation strategies (Amin et al., 2024; Verschuuren et al., 2010).

The ontological underpinnings of Indigenous conceptions of sacred landscapes often diverge radically from prevailing Western epistemologies, demanding careful examination of the distinct worldviews that inform them. Many Indigenous cultures regard the natural world as inherently animate and conscious, dissolving the rigid binaries between nature and culture that typify Western thought (Descola, 2013). This animistic ontology fosters deep reciprocity and a relational ethic of care for the environment, with sustainable practices grounded in cultural rituals and spiritual obligations (Latanya & Salinas, 2024; Kimmerer, 2013). Across varied ecological and cultural contexts, sacred sites function as informal conservation zones, protected through taboos and spiritual injunctions rather than formal legal mechanisms (Dudley et al., 2009, p. 568). The demonstrable success of these practices in preserving biodiversity hotspots and maintaining ecosystem functions illustrates the capacity of Indigenous knowledge systems to complement and at times surpass conventional conservation models (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006).

Nevertheless, the integration of TEK into dominant conservation frameworks remains beset by conceptual and political tensions. As Nadasdy (1999) cautions, efforts to "scientise" Indigenous knowledge can strip it of context and coherence, weakening both its functionality and cultural depth. Moreover, interactions between Indigenous communities and state or international conservation agencies are frequently marred by power asymmetries that reproduce colonial legacies of exclusion, appropriation, and dispossession (Brockington et al., 2008). The ongoing erosion of sacred natural sites, and the TEK they sustain, through globalisation, urbanisation, and cultural homogenisation constitutes a

profound threat to both biodiversity and intangible cultural heritage. Capitalist commodification of nature has desacralised many landscapes, severing the spiritual bonds that once underpinned community-based environmental governance (Merchant, 2003). This degradation is exacerbated by the systemic marginalisation of Indigenous perspectives in environmental policy and land management (Dowie, 2009).

Revitalising Indigenous environmental practices and safeguarding sacred natural sites are therefore essential components of global responses to the intertwined crises of biodiversity collapse and climate change. International instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recognise the value of traditional knowledge and customary practices in conservation (Reimerson, 2013). Yet implementation remains patchy and often symbolic, underscoring the need for enforceable mechanisms to secure meaningful Indigenous participation in environmental governance (Lightfoot, 2016).

Education emerges as both a challenge and a key opportunity in the preservation of TEK. While conventional education models have historically undermined Indigenous knowledge systems, there is increasing acknowledgement of the potential for culturally responsive pedagogies to facilitate intergenerational transmission of TEK (Cajete, 2000). Hybrid educational approaches that integrate Indigenous and scientific epistemologies may help cultivate future environmental leaders equipped to address the complex socio-ecological dilemmas of our era (Bang et al., 2014).

The intersection of sacred natural sites, Indigenous ecological knowledge, and contemporary conservation thought represents fertile ground for interdisciplinary scholarship and transformative praxis (Latanya & Salinas, 2024; McGregor, 2004). Researchers across disciplines such as anthropology, ecology, theology, and environmental humanities are deepening our understanding of human–nature relationships and their implications for sustainable futures (Verschuuren et al., 2010).

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how literature, specifically the novel *The River Between* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, can act as a conduit for engaging with ecological crises through the lens of Indigenous environmental ethics. Previous studies have considered the social disruptions affecting TEK transmission (2024), its role in resilience-building (Guto, 2020), and its conservation utility (Sinthumule, 2023). However, this paper offers a distinct contribution by linking

literary ecocriticism with Indigenous praxis, demonstrating how Ngũgĩ's narrative techniques transform spiritual reverence into actionable ecological ethics. Through a close analysis of the novel's treatment of sacred spaces, particularly the Honia River, as loci of TEK and divine-human interaction, the paper highlights literature's capacity to evoke environmental awareness and cultivate reverence for the natural world. *The River Between* was selected due to its explicit engagement with sacred landscapes as contested terrains of colonial disruption and ecological resilience, with particular focus on recurring natural symbols and their resonance with Indigenous cosmologies.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism as a paradigm for analysing literary texts

Postcolonial ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary framework situated at the confluence of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, provides a powerful analytical tool for interrogating the entangled relationships between environmental degradation and the cultural, political, and epistemological legacies of colonialism. This theoretical approach examines how colonial and neo-colonial power structures have historically shaped, and continue to influence human-nature relationships, environmental discourses, and ecological practices in postcolonial settings (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015). By foregrounding the structural links between environmental exploitation and cultural subjugation, postcolonial ecocriticism facilitates nuanced readings of literary representations of landscapes, ecosystems, and socio-ecological entanglements.

Central to the framework is a sustained critique of Eurocentric assumptions that underpin dominant environmental philosophies and conservation models. It problematises the entrenched nature–culture binary that has historically legitimised the colonial expropriation of land and resources, arguing that such dualisms obscure the holistic environmental ethics embedded in many Indigenous and non-Western worldviews (Jonah, 2020; Plumwood, 2002). By destabilising these binaries, postcolonial ecocriticism opens up space for recognising pluralistic conceptions of nature, conceptions that often emphasise relationality, reciprocity, and spiritual interconnectedness between humans and non-human beings.

One of its defining contributions is the insistence that environmental issues are inextricable from questions of social justice, cultural identity, and sovereignty. This perspective resonates strongly with the environmental justice movement, which highlights how marginalised communities, particularly in the Global

South, disproportionately bear the burdens of environmental harm rooted in colonial and racialised histories (Nixon, 2011). In doing so, postcolonial ecocriticism reorients ecological analysis away from abstract notions of 'wilderness' or 'pristine nature' and toward situated, historical accounts of environmental injustice and resistance.

The theory also challenges the romanticised and depopulated concept of 'wilderness' prevalent in Western conservation discourse. Scholars in this field have shown how colonial narratives constructed many landscapes as untouched and uninhabited, thereby justifying dispossession and the erasure of long-standing Indigenous land management practices (Guha, 1989). This critique underlines the importance of developing conservation paradigms that respect and incorporate Indigenous epistemologies and sustainable land-use traditions.

In literary analysis, postcolonial ecocriticism is especially attuned to how writers from formerly colonised regions grapple with the politics of environmental representation. Authors often resist and subvert colonial tropes by reasserting cultural agency through the depiction of local ecologies, thus reclaiming both narrative authority and ecological identity (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011). This is particularly relevant to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, which explores the environmental and cultural upheavals wrought by colonialism through its portrayal of sacred Gikuyu landscapes.

Integral to this approach is Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," which describes the gradual, often invisible forms of environmental destruction that disproportionately affect postcolonial nations and marginalised communities (Nixon, 2011). By bringing temporality into focus, postcolonial ecocriticism enables deeper engagement with the lingering ecological consequences of colonial disruption, resource extraction, and structural disenfranchisement. It allows for a historically grounded analysis of how colonial legacies continue to shape environmental vulnerabilities in the present.

Additionally, the theory interrogates the global environmental movement's complicity in neo-colonial governance. It questions the universalism of Western environmental paradigms and critiques conservation initiatives that are imposed top-down by Global North actors without regard for local knowledge systems or socio-cultural contexts (Shiva, 1988). In this way, postcolonial ecocriticism demands greater reflexivity and inclusivity in global environmental policy and activism.

The concept of "ecological imperialism" further enriches this critique by tracing the ecological disruptions caused by the colonial movement of species, pathogens, and agricultural practices, all of which transformed ecosystems and undermined Indigenous livelihoods (Crosby, 2004). This historical lens enhances understanding of how colonialism has not only altered human societies but also reconfigured entire ecologies in ways that are still unfolding.

Applied to *The River Between*, postcolonial ecocriticism offers multiple interpretive advantages. First, it enables a critical reading of how Ngũgĩ depicts the Gikuyu people's spiritual and ecological relationship with sacred sites in the face of colonial encroachment. The theory's emphasis on the inseparability of cultural and ecological systems aligns with the novel's depiction of how missionary ideologies and colonial policies erode traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and disrupt spiritual ties to the land. Secondly, its critique of the nature–culture divide resonates with Ngũgĩ's portrayal of Gikuyu cosmology, in which sacred landscapes are not abstracted from daily life but are deeply embedded in ritual, memory, and ecological practice. Through this lens, *The River Between* emerges as a counter-narrative to Western environmental epistemologies, advocating instead for a relational, community-based environmental ethic.

Thirdly, the theory's focus on power relations in environmental discourse helps to unpack how different characters in the novel embody divergent ideological relationships with the land, some aligned with colonial modernity, others defending ancestral environmental ontologies. Similarly, its critique of 'wilderness' as a colonial fiction offers a framework for understanding the sacred sites in the novel not as untouched nature but as socio-ecological spaces shaped by long histories of stewardship, ritual, and resistance. Furthermore, postcolonial ecocriticism underscores the critical role literature plays in cultivating ecological awareness. It supports the view that fiction such as *The River Between* can serve not merely as cultural commentary but as a form of ecological praxis, one that challenges dominant paradigms and fosters more inclusive, situated understandings of sustainability. By embedding environmental themes within a framework of historical injustice and cultural resurgence, Ngũgĩ's work aligns with broader efforts to reimagine human-nature relations in the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, postcolonial ecocriticism enables a multi-layered reading of *The River Between*, illuminating the intersections of ecology, spirituality, and cultural identity under colonial pressure. In doing so, it contributes to wider debates about the role of literature in confronting environmental crises and promoting ethical, decolonial futures.

Sacred Landscapes as Ecological and Spiritual Intersections

In *The River Between*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o presents sacred landscapes as vital convergence points between human beings, the natural world, and the divine. This depiction resonates closely with Indigenous environmental worldviews that regard nature as inherently sacred and interwoven with cultural identity and spiritual practice. From the novel's outset, the Honia River is portrayed as both a literal and symbolic life source:

> ***The river was called Honia, which meant cure, or bring-back-to-life. Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes... Honia was the soul of Kameno and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life-stream (p. 17).***

On a surface level, the river's constancy symbolises resilience. However, Ngũgĩ anthropomorphises it with a "will to live," imbuing the river with consciousness in line with animistic cosmologies. Its name, "Honia," meaning "cure," affirms its sacred status and life-giving force. That the river unites not only the two ridges but also all living beings reflects a relational ontology central to Indigenous ecologies, where humans are not separate from, but part of, the natural world. This sharply contrasts with Western environmental paradigms that often elevate human dominion over nature.

Ngũgĩ reiterates this ecological-spiritual nexus when describing the community's dependence on the river:

> ***Cattle, goats and people drew their water from there. Perhaps that was why it was called 'Cure' and the valley, the valley of life; that is what it was, a valley of life (p. 31).***

Here, the river's ecological function is inseparable from its spiritual role. By depicting the river as both a sacred entity and a material resource, Ngũgĩ disrupts the nature-spirit divide typical of Western epistemologies.

A second sacred landscape, the grove south of Kameno, anchored by the Mugumo tree, reinforces this intersection of ecology, culture, and the sacred:

> ***A big Mugumo tree stood near the edge of the hill. It was a huge tree, thick and mysterious. Bush grew and bowed reverently around it... It looked holy and awesome, dominating Waiyaki's soul so that he felt very small and in the presence of a mighty power (p. 26).***

This description conveys the sublime. The Mugumo tree is personified as watching over the land and inspires reverence akin to divine encounter. That the surrounding bush "bowed" reflects a spiritual hierarchy embedded within the ecosystem. Ngũgĩ's language not only sacralises the natural world but also

models a template for human conduct rooted in humility and respect. This grove is further sacralised through its link to Gikuyu origin narratives:

> ***That is a blessed and sacred place. There, where Mumbi's feet stood, grew up that tree. So, you see, it is Kameno that supported the father and mother of the tribe (p. 27).***

Rooting the tree within the Gikuyu cosmology, Ngũgĩ reaffirms the land as a living archive of cultural memory. These sacred sites are not merely spiritual, they are temporal bridges linking ancestral pasts to present and future identity. From a conservation standpoint, Ngũgĩ's sacred landscapes carry significant ecological implications. Their revered status implicitly protects them: the Mugumo grove remains intact due to its sacredness; the Honia River continues to flow unhindered. Such reverence promotes environmental stewardship. The ridges themselves are said to preserve ritual purity:

> ***The ancient hills and ridges were the heart and soul of the land. They kept the tribes' magic and rituals pure and intact (p. 18).***

Here, the landscape is portrayed as a custodian of culture, implying that ecological integrity is bound to cultural continuity. This reciprocity between cultural preservation and ecological conservation echoes patterns observed in Indigenous land practices, where taboos and cosmological beliefs sustain biodiversity.

In contrast, colonial disruption erodes this equilibrium. When describing settler impact, the narrator observes that the land is in parts "becoming poor" (p. 58), implicitly attributing degradation to exploitative colonial land use. Ngũgĩ uses this contrast to critique colonial land ethics and elevate Indigenous reverence for nature as an alternative paradigm of sustainability.

Sacred landscapes also function as sites of personal spiritual transformation. For Waiyaki and Nyambura, the river represents a space of introspection, healing, and unity beyond social divisions. In a pivotal scene:

> ***Waiyaki held her against his breast. Then they slowly descended the Makuyu ridge till they came to their sacred ground (p. 104)***

The designation of this place as "their sacred ground" suggests an intimate, individualised relationship with the landscape, one that transcends inherited boundaries. The river becomes a meeting point for plural identities, Christian and traditional, male and female, emphasising its capacity to foster inclusion and dialogue.

Sacred landscapes as repositories of traditional ecological knowledge

Throughout *The River Between*, sacred sites serve not only as spiritual loci but also as dynamic repositories of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Ngũgĩ illustrates how reverence for sacred landscapes facilitates the intergenerational transmission of environmental wisdom. A poignant example is Chege's instruction to Waiyaki at the sacred grove:

> ***The bark of that tree is good for a fresh wound. The roots of this plant are good...When your stomach bites you, you boil them in water. Drink the liquid. And sometimes it would be a warning against that tree, 'whose fruit is full of poison (p. 26).***

This scene demonstrates how sacred landscapes double as pedagogical spaces. The act of reverent visitation enables the sharing of precise, place-based ecological knowledge. The information is not abstract, it is local, practical, and rooted in centuries of observation.

Importantly, the inclusion of warnings alongside medicinal uses reflects a balanced view of nature that accounts for both healing and harm, reaffirming the holistic character of Indigenous ecological systems. TEK here is experiential, embodied, and integrated into daily life, in contrast to the detached empiricism of much Western science.

Ngũgĩ also gestures toward the risk of eroding this knowledge through cultural disconnection. Waiyaki's Western schooling has estranged him from these traditions:

> ***Waiyaki did not like the dances very much... After all, it was soon after his second birth that he had gone to Siriana... Waiyaki was often surprised at his father, who in some ways seemed to defy age (p. 42)***

This passage marks a generational rift. Waiyaki's awkwardness with traditional practices signifies a broader loss of TEK, while Chege's vitality is portrayed as the reward of deep-rooted cultural continuity. Ngũgĩ thus critiques the epistemic alienation fostered by colonial education systems. The sentience attributed to nature further underscores the embeddedness of TEK in Indigenous worldviews:

> ***The trees listened, moaned with the wind and kept silent. Bird and beast heard and quietly listened. Onlysometimes they would give a rejoinder, joyful applause or an angry roar (p. 18)***

Such personification reflects a belief in a communicative, responsive natural world. This animistic perspective encourages humans to "listen" to nature, fostering ecological literacy grounded in attentiveness and humility. TEK is also encoded in ritual. During circumcision ceremonies, the river's cold water is used for anaesthesia:

> ***During the initiation ceremonies, boys and girls came to wet their bodies here... It had long been discovered that very cold water numbed the skin, making it less painful during the operation (p. 31).***

This practice demonstrates how ritual embeds physiological and ecological knowledge, encouraging repeated engagement with the environment and reinforcing its importance through cultural enactment. The novel links TEK to resistance against colonial encroachment:

> ***The land was important to the tribe. That was why Kinuthia and others like him feared the encroachment of the white man (p. 58).***

This concern reflects more than territorial anxiety; it signals fear over the loss of sustainable lifeways and environmental understanding cultivated over generations. Dispossession thus threatens both cultural identity and ecological wisdom.

From a conservation standpoint, sacred landscapes preserve biodiversity not only physically, but epistemologically. TEK contributes to environmental management practices that are adaptive, locally specific, and often more sustainable than externally imposed models. These landscapes may function as gene banks, cultural heritage sites, and epistemic archives. Ngũgĩ's final metaphor, education as water, captures this potential synthesis:

> ***He [Waiyaki] wanted to feel all would get this water... Education was life (p. 79)***

This passage links the life-giving properties of the Honia River to knowledge, suggesting that true education must sustain both cultural roots and future resilience. Waiyaki's vision is not to reject tradition but to integrate it with new knowledge in ways that honour sacred landscapes and the wisdom they carry.

Challenges to Sacred Landscapes and Indigenous Environmentalism

While much of *The River Between* highlights the ecological and cultural value of sacred landscapes, Ngũgĩ also depicts the various threats they face in a changing world. These challenges mirror real-world obstacles to indigenous environmentalism and traditional conservation practices. The novel portrays

colonialism as a direct threat to both the physical integrity of sacred landscapes and the cultural values that protect them. The establishment of a Government Post near Makuyu represents a literal incursion into traditional Gikuyu territory:

> ***A Government Post was being built on the ridge next to Makuyu. And it was now clear that people would have to pay taxes (p. 54).***

This brief mention encapsulates multiple layers of colonial disruption. The physical presence of the Government Post alters the landscape and symbolises the imposition of foreign authority. The introduction of taxes represents a fundamental shift in the people's relationship to the land, from one based on traditional stewardship to one based on extraction and monetisation. More insidiously, the colonial education system and Christian missionaries work to erode traditional beliefs and practices that maintained ecological balance. This erosion is exemplified in the character of Joshua, who "renounced his tribe's magic, power and ritual" (p. 34) in favour of Christianity. By rejecting traditional spiritual connections to the land, Joshua and his followers weaken long-standing taboos that protected sacred groves and other ecologically important sites.

The River Between also explores the psychological impact of this cultural erosion through Joshua's internal conflict:

> ***Joshua believed circumcision to be so sinful that he devoted a prayer to asking God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised (p. 36).***

This extract illustrates how colonial ideologies can create deep-seated shame and self-loathing regarding traditional practices. By framing indigenous customs as "sinful," colonial powers disrupted the spiritual and cultural frameworks that had long guided sustainable interaction with the environment. Further, the novel's climactic scene, where an angry mob confronts Waiyaki at the initiation grounds by the river, demonstrates how sacred places can be desecrated when people abandon their spiritual significance:

> ***The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising above the dark stillness, reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kameno (p. 113).***

This passage can be interpreted as a cry for the lost harmony between humans and nature. The once-sacred river continues its flow, but the human communities have turned against each other, disrupting the ecological and spiritual balance. The image of the river's beat 'reaching into the heart of the people', suggests that the land itself is trying to remind the people of their forgotten connection to it.

The novel also hints at how Western education, despite its benefits, can erode traditional ecological knowledge if not balanced with cultural education. Waiyaki's struggle to reconcile his Western schooling with traditional Gikuyu values reflects the challenges many indigenous communities face in maintaining their environmental practices in a globalised world:

> ***he [Waiyaki] did not like the dances very much, mainly because he could not do them as well as his fellow candidates, who had been practicing them for years (p. 42).***

This seemingly minor detail about Waiyaki's discomfort with traditional dances speaks to a broader disconnection from cultural practices that often accompanies Western education. Given that many indigenous dances are tied to ecological cycles and serve as means of transmitting environmental knowledge, this loss of cultural practice can have direct impacts on ecological understanding.

The novel also explores how economic changes brought by colonialism can threaten sacred landscapes and traditional environmental practices:

> ***Some people were already working on the alienated lands to get money for paying taxes (p. 56).***

This brief mention highlights how the introduction of a cash economy and taxation system can fundamentally alter people's relationship with the land. When sacred landscapes become sites of wage labour, their spiritual and ecological significance can be diminished in favour of their economic value. This shift from a subsistence-based, spiritually-informed relationship with the land to one based on economic exploitation mirrors the broader environmental challenges posed by capitalist expansion into indigenous territories worldwide.

The novel also touches on the demographic pressures that can threaten sacred landscapes:

> ***Harvests came and went. They had been good; people rejoiced. Such rich harvests had not been seen for years. Old men sighed with inner fear as they witnessed the hubbub of excitement, throbbing through the ridges, making things tremble (p. 41).***

While on the surface the above excerpt describes abundance, the 'inner fear' of the old men suggests an awareness that population growth following good harvests could lead to increased pressure on the land. This portrayal reflects the complex challenges facing indigenous environmental practices, which must balance human needs with ecological sustainability. There is also the exploration of how political conflicts can threaten sacred landscapes.

The growing rift between Joshua's Christian converts and the traditionalists led by Kabonyi turns the once-sacred Honia River valley into a battleground:

> ***The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life (p. 17).***

By the end of the novel, this 'valley of life' becomes a place of conflict and potential violence. This transformation serves as a metaphor for how political and cultural (religious) disputes can overshadow the shared reverence for sacred landscapes that once united communities. These multi-faceted challenges to sacred landscapes and indigenous environmental practices mirror real-world conservation issues. Environmental degradation often goes hand-in-hand with the erosion of traditional cultural values and knowledge systems that encouraged sustainable resource use.

However, the novel also offers hope for the renewal of sacred connections to the land. Waiyaki's vision of uniting traditional Gikuyu values with selective adoption of Western knowledge can be seen as a model for contemporary indigenous environmentalism:

> ***Waiyaki saw a tribe great with many educated sons and daughters, all living together, tilling the land of their ancestors in perpetual serenity, pursuing their rituals and beautiful customs and all of them acknowledging their debt to him (p. 73).***

This vision combines reverence for ancestral lands and customs with the benefits of education, suggesting a path forward that doesn't require abandoning tradition in favour of modernity. Instead, it proposes a synthesis that could strengthen indigenous environmental practices by combining traditional wisdom with new knowledge and technologies. Waiyaki's dream of education that respects both modern and traditional knowledge echoe calls by many indigenous activists for educational systems that support rather than undermine traditional ecological knowledge:

> ***Education for an oppressed people is not all. But I must think. I must be alone (p. 105).***

This reflection by Waiyaki near the end of the novel suggests an evolving understanding of the role of education in indigenous empowerment. While he still values Western education, he recognises its limitations and the need to complement it with indigenous knowledge and political action.

The novel also offers a critique of narrow, dogmatic approaches to both tradition and modernity. Neither Joshua's rigid Christianity nor Kabonyi's reactionary traditionalism is presented as a viable path forward. Instead, the novel seems to

advocate for a more flexible, adaptive approach to preserving sacred landscapes and indigenous environmental practices:

> ***Waiyaki wondered where he was. Was he trying to create order and bring light in the dark? (p. 63).***

This moment of self-doubt reflects the challenges inherent in trying to bridge different worldviews and knowledge systems. It suggests that preserving sacred landscapes and indigenous environmental practices in a changing world requires constant reflection, adaptation, and negotiation between different perspectives.

The novel's ending, with Waiyaki and Nyambura facing an uncertain fate at the hands of the Kiama, can be read as a commentary on the precarious position of indigenous environmental practices in the face of both internal conflicts and external pressures:

> The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising above the dark stillness, reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kameno (p. 113).

This final image of the river continuing to flow despite human conflicts offers a glimmer of hope. It suggests that even when human societies lose their way, the sacred landscapes they once revered continue to exist, offering the possibility of renewed connection and reconciliation.

Conclusion

The River Between offers a timely portrayal of sacred landscapes that highlights their ecological, spiritual, and cultural significance while also exploring the many challenges they face in a rapidly changing world. In depicting these landscapes as living repositories of traditional knowledge and intersection points between the human and divine, the novel demonstrates their crucial role in indigenous environmental philosophies. The novel's exploration of threats to these sacred sites provides insight into the complex challenges facing indigenous conservation efforts globally. From colonial incursions and religious conflicts to the erosion of traditional knowledge through Western education, the novel paints a comprehensive picture of the multifaceted pressures on indigenous environmental practices. At the same time, the novel offers hope through its vision of synthesising traditional and modern knowledge. Waiyaki's struggle to reconcile his Western education with his indigenous heritage reflects ongoing

efforts by many indigenous communities to adapt their environmental practices to contemporary realities without losing their cultural essence. By framing sacred landscapes as pedagogical tools, Ngũgĩ's novel suggests literature can inspire community-led conservation, aligning with UNDRIP's call for indigenous-led governance.

Through its rich, sensory descriptions and careful development of landscape symbolism, *The River Between* serves as a powerful literary intervention in support of indigenous environmentalism. By encouraging readers to view nature with reverence and wonder, it fosters the shift in consciousness many see as crucial for addressing global ecological challenges. The novel's emphasis on the interconnectedness of ecological, spiritual, and cultural aspects of sacred landscapes aligns closely with contemporary holistic approaches to conservation. It suggests that effective environmental protection must go beyond merely preserving physical landscapes to maintaining the cultural practices and spiritual beliefs that give those landscapes meaning and ensure their sustainable use. Thus, *The River Between* makes a case for the value of indigenous environmental perspectives in addressing global ecological crises. By portraying sacred landscapes as dynamic, living entities that are intimately connected to human cultural and spiritual life, the novel offers a model of human-nature relationships that could help foster more sustainable and harmonious interactions with the natural world.

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