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# Conserving Africa's Eden? Green Colonialism, Neoliberal Capitalism, and Sustainable Development in Congo Basin Literature

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**Abstract:** Starting with European colonization, African natural resources in particular and nature in general have been coveted and exploited mainly in the interest of Euro-American industrialized countries, with China as a recent major player from Asia. Interestingly, the incessant quest by some Western NGOs, institutions, and governments to protect and conserve African nature not only are inspired by ecological and climatic concerns but also often tend to propagate a false image of Africa as the last Eden of the earth in order to control Africa's resources. Using literary texts, this article argues that some Euro-American transnational NGOs and some of their governments sometimes conspire with some African governments to spread global capitalism and green colonialism under the pretext of oxymoronic sustainable development as they attempt to conserve a mythical African Eden. Utilizing three novels and one play from the Congo Basin, namely In Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo Inc.: Le Testament de Bismarck* (2014), Assitou Ndinga's *Les Marchands du développement durable* (2006), Étienne Goyémidé's *Le Silence de la forêt* ([1984] 2015), and Ekpe Inyang's *The Last Hope* (2011), I contend that such Euro-American environmental NGOs and their governments sometimes impose and sustain fortress conservation (creation of protected areas) in the Congo Basin as a hidden means of coopting Africa's nature and Africans into neoliberal capitalism. For the most part, instead of protecting the Congo Basin, green colonialists and developmentalists sell sustainable development, undermine alternative ways of achieving human happiness, and perpetuate epistemicide, thus leading to poverty and generating resentment among local and indigenous populations. As these literary texts suggest, nature conservation and sustainable development in the Congo Basin should not be imposed upon from the outside; they should emanate from Africans, tapping into local expertise, and indigenous and other knowledge systems.

**Keywords:** conservation humanities; green imperialism; neoliberal capitalism; sustainable development; Congo Basin; postcolonial ecocriticism



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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Running across six countries in central Africa, the Congo Basin contains the second largest tropical rainforest in the world (after the Amazon Basin) and is fondly referred to as the second lung of the Earth. Due to its unique biodiversity, its huge capacity for carbon sequestration, and its enormous natural resources (e.g., timber, oil, gold, coltan, uranium, etc.), the Congo Basin, like much of Africa, has remained a crucial site for the paradoxical scramble for both natural resources and nature/environmental conservation since the European colonization of Africa and more so in the twenty-first century in which anthropogenic climate change is threatening the Earth. As French environmental historian Guillaume Blanc demonstrates in *L'Invention du colonialisme vert* (2020), European colonialists, inspired by the creation of national parks in the United States and Canada—notably the establishment of the US Yellowstone National Park in 1872—invented the myth of an African Eden to be conserved, that is, protected against irrational and destructive

Africans. Accordingly, Belgian colonialists created the Virunga National Park in the then Belgian Congo (today DRC or Congo-Kinshasa) in 1925 as the first national park in Africa (Andersen 2018). Relatedly, Frits Andersen (2018) convincingly traces the origins of fortress conservation in the Congo to the colonial-racist myth, popularized by Conrad, which considered the area as “the heart of darkness” (pp. 1–3). Andersen further highlights, arguably so, the role played by the celebrated and controversial colonial primatologist and conservationist Dian Fossey in launching violent, fortress conservation in the Congo and beyond (pp. 7–11). With the political independence of many African countries in the 1960s, that myth of an African Eden was sustained by colonialists-turned-experts to the point of being appropriated by post-independence African governments. And that situation has almost not changed to this day. For instance, on #AfricaDay 2021 (25 May), the African Union shared on its social media handles what it called “some interesting facts from our 55 Member States”, including a celebratory message on fortress conservation in Congo-Brazzaville with explicit reference to the Edenic idea: “The Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park in the Republic of the Congo is a protected area also referred to as *the Last Eden on Earth*” (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in 2020, Forbes Africa celebrated Gabon, with its 87% forest coverage and initiatives to diversify its economy—including the sustainable management of forest resources, as “the emerging Eden of Africa”, an idea with colonial origins and largely perpetuated by Western media such as *National Geographic*.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the ongoing double ecological and climate crisis has added more momentum to the quest by some western transnational NGOs, cooperation institutions, and governments to save a mythical Edenic nature in Africa void of any African human presence. This situation is explored in many disciplines, including literature.

In this article, I argue that literary texts can help to expose how some Euro-American transnational NGOs, financial institutions, and governments collude with some African governments to spread global capitalism and green colonialism under the pretext of oxymoronic sustainable development as they attempt to conserve a mythical African Eden. I am neither suggesting that nature protection and sustainable development are unnecessary nor demonizing all foreign environmental and developmental NGOs and institutions working in Africa and the Congo Basin. Instead, I intend to point out how literary texts, placed within the conservation and environmental humanities, can unveil wrong and harmful practices perpetuated by some of these NGOs and institutions in hopes of triggering the reformulation of their goals and strategies in order to balance the needs of nature conservation and social development in the Congo Basin and beyond. In this regard, I examine three novels and one play from the Congo Basin, namely In Koli Jean Bofane’s *Congo Inc.: Le Testament de Bismarck* (2014), Assitou Ndinga’s *Les Marchands du développement durable* (2006), Étienne Goyémidé’s *Le Silence de la forêt* (1984), and Ekpe Inyang’s *The Last Hope* (2011). While all four texts arguably constitute realist eco-literature, *Congo Inc.* and *Les Marchand* are considered, in part, as African climate fiction (cli-fi) and *The Last Hope* is eco-theatre inscribed within the tradition of theatre for development in Africa. The latter three texts were written in the twenty-first century and explicitly engage with current climate change and ecological breakdown which characterize the Anthropocene. Furthermore, Inyang and Ndinga are background-informed literary activists, that is, people with educational and professional backgrounds in conservation-/ecology-related fields who use literature to advance ecological causes (Nsah 2022). Written in the twentieth century, *Le Silence* is not directly concerned with the current climate and environmental crises, but Goyémidé’s fascinating depiction of the indigenous Pygmies as they live sustainably in their ancestral forests (no romanticization intended) lends it to ecocritical readings.

Taking the four realist eco-texts together, I contend that some western environmental NGOs, in collaboration with some western financial and political institutions, sometimes impose and sustain fortress conservation (creation of protected areas) in the Congo Basin and Africa as a covert means of coopting Africa’s nature and Africans into neoliberal capitalism as notably illustrated by Inyang’s play and Ndinga’s novel.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, in lieu of actually protecting nature in the Congo Basin, green colonialists and develop-

mentalists sell sustainable development, undermine alternative ways of inhabiting the Earth and achieving human happiness, and perpetuate epistemicide, thereby leading to poverty and generating resentment among local and indigenous populations. Accordingly, inspired by the literary texts under study, I suggest that nature conservation and sustainable development in the Congo Basin (Africa) should not be imposed from outside; they should emanate from Africans, drawing on local expertise, and indigenous and other knowledge systems.

This article is mainly anchored in the concepts of green imperialism/colonialism and postcolonial ecocriticism and placed within the broader context of the environmental and conservation humanities. [Holmes et al. \(2022\)](#) “consider conservation humanities to be an emergent subsection of environmental humanities that focuses on biodiversity loss and efforts to address it and studies these efforts through humanistic ideas and methods” (pp. 1–2). Meanwhile, green colonialism explains how European imperialism invented the myth of an African Eden to be protected against Africans as part of efforts deployed to control and exploit African biodiversity and natural resources ([Blanc 2020](#); [Murphy 2009](#); [Grove \[1994\] 1996](#)). Despite some evolution in their strategies and methodologies over time, most western industrialized nations (including China), partly in collaboration with some African governments, continue to pursue the same goals as when environmentalism was first created in Africa: control and exploit African nature. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Blanc affirms: “Les scientifiques et les administrateurs coloniaux voulaient des parcs pour protéger une Afrique édénique contre des Africains destructeurs, et depuis soixante ans, les experts internationaux poursuivent leur travail” (Scientists and colonial administrators wanted parks to protect an Edenic Africa from destructive Africans, and for sixty years international experts have continued their work [Note that all translations are mine.]) ([Blanc 2020](#), p. 294). As we face the current ecological and climate crisis, the literary texts under study simultaneously portray and interrogate this stark situation, thereby suggesting that environmental conservation should be thoroughly rethought in Africa (Congo Basin) in order to serve the needs of nature and Africans. Accordingly, Joseph Murphy contends: “Perhaps contemporary environmental problems are an opportunity for the world to confront imperialism again but this time with a more sophisticated understanding of freedom and what it takes to achieve it” ([Murphy 2009](#), p. 25).

Meanwhile, with the notable exception of Marie Chantale Mofin [Noussi \(2012\)](#), most literary scholars have approached the three novels under study from theoretical perspectives other than ecocriticism ([Ndi 2020](#); [Yoon 2020](#); [Oben n.d.](#)). I depart significantly from these scholars by placing these texts within the conservation and environmental humanities and reading the texts through a postcolonial ecocritical lens, including what [Roos and Hunt \(2010\)](#), following Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, call “green postcolonialism”, which foregrounds environmental justice discourse (2010, p. 3). Specifically, postcolonial ecocriticism makes it possible to identify contractions, paradoxes, complexities, and hidden agendas within nature conservation initiatives in the Congo Basin and Africa from the colonial era to the current period of alarming ecological breakdown and climate change while paying attention to cases of injustice to both nature and humans ([Holmes et al. 2022](#); [Okuyade 2016](#); [Noussi 2012](#); [Roos and Hunt 2010](#)). Taken together, green colonialism and postcolonial ecocriticism have the potential to unlock the contradictions, and intentional and unintentional consequences of foreign intervention to save Africa’s mythic Eden while also underscoring alternative ways of carrying out nature conservation in Africa (Congo Basin), as suggested by the texts under study.

## 2. Colonial Origins of Conservation and Green Imperialism

Green imperialism stems from the myth of an African Eden to be protected against Africans, which was invented by colonialists and has remained, to this day, a means for some western transnational NGOs, and political and financial institutions to take hold of African (including Congo Basin) natural resources while mostly employing western “experts”. Apart from environmental history and other sources, some African literary texts

also uncover, either deliberately or accidentally, the (racial) colonial origins of fortress conservation in Africa. A case in point is Inyang's three-act play called *The Last Hope* (2011), which accidentally exposes the colonial introduction of fortress conservation in Cameroon and well beyond. As Inyang explains, *The Last Hope* was "written as part of a three-month consultancy offered by for GTZ [German Technical Cooperation, now GIZ] in 2003 for the evaluation of the Korup Project with the aim of highlighting and sharing some lessons learnt from the creation of the Korup National Park" (2011, p. iii). The play is set in and around the Korup National Park, located in the Anglophone Southwest Region, and in Yaoundé, Cameroon's political capital. It covers a period of seventeen years, from 1986 to 2003, thus following a linear plot occasionally infused with elements of flashback. The play dramatizes many issues, including displacements of locals due to the park, partial resistance to the displacements and park prohibitions, and various situations of conflict (e.g., locals vs. other locals over the sharing of resettlement funds, some locals vs. park guards over access to resources such as bushmeat in the park, the Cameroonian government vs. western conservation donors such as GTZ Donor and EU Donor over the financial responsibility of running the park, and local demonstrators vs. a logging company licensed by the Cameroonian government to operate near the park). Other issues highlighted include the irony of a lawmaker who legislates conservation but accepts gifts of bushmeat, incentives/rewards for accepting the park versus punishment for resisting it, etc. The play partly fits into the category of theatre for development, not in the sense of equipping dominated common people with a critical consciousness but in the sense of a propaganda tool for environmental projects (Nogueira 2002, pp. 104–5).

In Act 1 Scene 2 of the play, Conservator and Education Officer, two government-delegated conservationists, visit Chief Kitok's palace around 1988 to inform him and his people that the Korup Reserve has been upgraded into the Korup National Park where the people are forbidden from carrying out any activity (hunting, farming, fishing, or harvesting). As Era (Secretary General of Korup Development Association) and Koko press on for concrete answers about how they would survive without harvesting food from the forest, Conservator prefers to remind them that the national park was created from a forest reserve, thus indirectly stating that it does not deprive them of their forests. At this juncture, Chief Kitok, in some sort of a theatrical flashback, weighs in to support Conservator and consequently confirms that the reserve was created in the days of British colonization in the then British Southern Cameroons (1916–1961): "... You might still see a sign board with the inscription of Korup Forest Reserve. The reserve was created in the days of D.O Edgerton. In 1937 or thereabouts. When none of you here present was born" (Inyang 2011, p. 17). Chief Kitok's revelation incidentally evokes the colonial origins of fortress conservation and some current green imperialist projects in the Congo Basin, and Africa by extension. What Chief Kitok does not say, however, is that the creation of the Korup Reserve, now Korup National Park, was part of a colonial enterprise across the African continent inspired by the myth of an African pristine and virgin Eden that needs to be protected against Africans while providing European colonialists then and some western neocolonialists now unfettered access to control and exploit African natural resources. Besides the Korup National Park, *The Last Hope* also evokes the Waza National Park in the Far North Region of Francophone Cameroon as an example of successful fortress conservation. Indeed, Kondo and Reka had been sent by the Korup Project to witness the Waza success story (2011, pp. 18–19). However, this evocation interestingly testifies to the proliferation of national parks in Cameroon, and elsewhere in the Congo Basin and Africa—Origo ([2007] 2014) mentions that Gabon has thirteen national parks while Congo-Kinshasa is noted for parks such as Virunga (the oldest in Africa) and Salonga (the largest in Africa). Such parks are often created with financial and other forms of support from western NGOs and governments such as WWF, which initially sponsored the Korup Project, and other initial sponsors such as WCI (Wildlife Conservation International); ODA (Overseas Development Agency) (Inyang 2011, p. 18); and GTZ Donor and EU Donor,

whose threats to withdraw funding nearly terminates the Korup Project at the end of the play.

Aside from the crucial need for preserving biodiversity nowadays, the play reiterates the unjust conservation policy of prioritizing nature alone instead of considering the wellbeing of both humans and nature. In this regard, Education Officer, in Act 1 Scene 1, reminds the local people in Chief Kitok's palace that the Korup forest has many species of animals and plants partly because it is "more than sixty million years old" (2011, p. 15). Education Officer adds, "And you can see that it is the last hope for many endangered and endemic species", before concluding: "[In an elevated tone.] On this note, I call on you all to join the Korup Project and the Government of Cameroon to protect the Korup National Park" (ibid.). Unintentionally, Inyang's support for fortress conservation in the play exposes the paradox of this conservation model and begs questions. How can people who have been cohabiting with animal and plant species for ages suddenly become a threat to the latter if there is no hidden capitalist agenda for conservation? In other words, keeping aside hunting for commercial and trophy purposes in line with the imported capitalist economy, how can people who have cohabited with a forest for over sixty million years suddenly be prohibited from entering it in order to hunt, fish, or farm? If they were so destructive to the forest/nature, why has the forest survived their destruction for over sixty million years? Similar questions could be asked with regard to the fictive Donadieu, the Swiss conservationist–developmentalist, who unsuccessfully attempts to force indigenous Pygmy people out of their forests to embrace "sustainable development" and to enable nature conservation in Ndinga's novel *Les Marchands du développement durable* (2006). Indeed, as I contend, it is paradoxical for a Swiss "expert" to attempt to expel Pygmies out of forests where they have lived for millennia in the name of preserving those forests and their biodiversity. In this regard, Blanc notes: "La figure du paysan 'africain' et 'destructeur' est une invention occidentale, et celle-ci est à l'origine de la violence, indéniablement" (The figure of the 'African' and 'destructive' peasant is a Western invention, and this is undeniably the source of violence) (2020, p. 160). This arguably points to the colonial birth of the myth of an African Eden to be protected from barbaric and destructive Africans, that is, the birth of green imperialism in Africa and the Congo Basin.

As Ndinga's *Les Marchands* reveals, the presence of Donadieu and his accompanying European colleagues in the forests of Cotovillage in the Republic of Coto has more to do with using the myth of an African Eden to secure employment for some unemployed westerners in Africa than actually conserving nature and implementing sustainable development. *Les Marchands* is an ecological novel written by Congolese biologist, conservationist, essayist, and novelist Assitou Ndinga and is narrated from a third-person omniscient point of view. It tells the story of Donadieu, a Swiss conservationist–developmentalist, on a "green mission" to implement a "sustainable development" project in Cotovillage in the heart of the Congo Basin where indigenous Pygmies and local Bantus cohabit, more or less, in harmony with their environment (Noussi 2012, pp. 146–47). Donadieu's project is financially and morally backed by fictive western conservation NGOs such as the World Organization for Forests (Organisation mondiale pour les forêts—OMF) and the World Programme for Development (Programme mondial pour le développement), as well as the government of the Republic of Coto—an imaginary country which plausibly alludes to both Ndinga's native Congo-Brazzaville (Republic of Congo), with a government which is quite committed to protecting its forests (Nguesso 2009, pp. 191–211), and Congo-Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC), which possesses the highest proportion of the Congo Basin forests (Noussi 2012, pp. 152–53). Donadieu's project and mission consist of "educating" the populations of Cotovillage on sustainable development with the intension of preserving their forest and its biodiversity. Ironically, Donadieu is unable to define sustainable development, thus demonstrating the futility of his mission in Cotovillage (Ndinga 2006, pp. 20, 36; Noussi 2012, p. 150). Donadieu has an insatiable appetite for feeding Africa's exoticism to western channels such as the Internet, *National Geographic*, and the *Washington Post* (Ndinga 2006, p. 12). Meanwhile, Donadieu is fiercely opposed by

most Cotovillage people, notably Lenga, a young Cotolese (Cotois), who is fighting for the real development of his area and whose ideas clash with Donadiéu's.

In the novel, there is the presence of resourceful indigenous Pygmy and local Bantu characters such as Matatu, the taciturn, cunning and talented Pygmy (p. 60), Lenga and his mother Mabouéré, two intelligent and critical Bantus (pp. 30, 59), and other project employees such as Marguerite Ngala, the coordinator of alternatives to bushmeat who graduated from the Institute for Rural Development in Cotoville, and Sylvestre Makaya (p. 52). Nevertheless, the sustainable development project is designed abroad and top-managed by western "experts", notably Donadiéu Luigi, the principal technical adviser for the Switzerland-headquartered World Organization for Forests (p. 21), and Rav, the coordinator of the aspect of integrating Pygmies into the market economy (p. 53). While Donadiéu uses the project to access and assess animal species in the Congo Basin (p. 53), Rav takes advantage of it to satisfy his opportunism and fascination for the indigenous Pygmies (Ndinga 2006, pp. 67–68). Interestingly, both of them have been employed as western "experts" to save the Congo Basin Eden through the implementation of sustainable development, which none of them really understands. Unable to define and implement their project in Cotovillage, as the narrator's ironic tone suggests, both Donadiéu and Rav use the technique of camouflage to achieve their secret intentions, thus hiding behind "le manteau vert de la durabilité pour assujettir l'environnement cotois et les Cotois eux-mêmes" (the green mantle of sustainability to subjugate the Cotois environment and the Cotois themselves) (Noussi 2012, p. 151). In this way, Donadiéu and Rav become what James Brown calls "self-proclaimed experts" of sustainable development (2015, p. 1027) who pass for conservationist–developmental godsends in Cotovillage as implied by Donadiéu's name, which seems to be an adulterated form of Dieudonné—godsent. Indeed, Donadiéu's name sarcastically suggests that he is sent by God to sustainably develop the people of Cotovillage and save their Edenic forests, thus tackling an ecological burden in Africa. Relatedly, Blanc affirms: "Après les théories racistes qui légitimaient le fardeau civilisationnel de l'homme blanc, l'heure est au colonialisme vert, né des théories déclinistes qui légitiment le fardeau écologique de l'expert occidental, dans toute l'Afrique" (After the racist theories that legitimised the civilisational burden of the white man, the time has come for green colonialism, born of declinist theories that legitimise the ecological burden of the Western expert, throughout Africa) (2020, p. 112, my emphasis). In reality, however, both Donadiéu and Rav incarnate the NGOization of conservation in Africa (Choudry and Kapoor 2013) and also corroborate the fact that most conservation initiatives in Africa were launched to provide jobs for unemployed colonial "experts" rendered jobless by the political independence of many African countries in the early 1960s and that, since then, conservation has continued to serve as a means for some western NGOs and governments to provide offshore employment to their citizens in Africa (Blanc 2020). Meanwhile, the deployment of many western environmental "experts" in Africa sometimes goes beyond the urge to save Africa's mythic Eden to include the domination and exploitation of African natural resources as well as the spreading of neoliberal capitalism and western cultural values.

### 3. Coopting Africans and Africa into Global Capitalism

The literary texts under study, I argue, reflect and criticize green imperialism for its tendency to coopt Africa and its nature into the neoliberal capitalist economy while also spreading and imposing western consumerist cultural values on Africans. According to Robert Fletcher et al. (2014), "Neoliberalism defined more strictly is commonly identified with the widespread trend toward increasing relaxation of state oversight over political-economic affairs and reliance on the 'invisible hand' of the market to efficiently allocate resources across the social landscape" (p. 6). Meanwhile, many scholars and journalists rightly identify neoliberalism as the fundamental root cause of many of today's global problems, particularly the current climate and ecological crisis (Randall 2018; Elliot 2016; Monbiot 2016; Verhaeghe 2014; Fletcher et al. 2014; Parr 2013). Neoliberal capitalism has

led to the commodification, privatization, and hyper-consumption of much of nature, consequently causing both environmental and climate breakdown across the globe.

The situation is not different in Africa and in the Congo Basin, in particular where the scramble by some western NGOs, financial institutions, and governments to conserve Africa's mythic Eden serves as a pretext for the exportation of "neoliberal conservation" (Fletcher et al. 2014) and western ideals. Following Fletcher, Dressler, and Büscher, I contend that conservation in Africa seems to be more about "selling [African] nature to save it" or "commodification through conservation" (2014, pp. 9, 12) than actually saving it for posterity and the basic needs of its closest human population. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Inyang's *The Last Hope* (2011) is replete with neoliberal terminologies and jargons mostly utilized by the two Cameroonian conservationists in the play. In their attempt to convince resistant residents to accept fortress conservation in Korup, Education Officer and Conservator deploy a neoliberal economic metaphorical language. In Act 1 Scene 2, Education Officer describes the park as a bank:

EDUCATION OFFICER: Whether you believe it or not, the National Park is your bank. And everybody has a free account in that bank. It is a natural bank. You don't need to be told that Nature provides for every one of us. Free-of-charge. I must advise you very sincerely to join the project in protecting your God-given bank. If you allow thieves break into it, well, you know what you will have been losing. Use the interest as it grows but maintain and protect the capital. (Inyang 2011, p. 26)

At this point, Era sarcastically remarks: "This man is beginning to talk like an economist. [*Laughing*]...." (ibid.). Ignorantly, Chief Kitok rebukes Era for interrupting the conservationists' lesson, and obtains some silence, before Conservator proceeds to reinforce his colleague's neoliberal language:

...If you allow the animals and other resources to multiply, you will benefit in the future. Your children and your children's children, too, will benefit. Either hunting some of the animals and harvesting other resources [*Emphatically*], in accordance with the law, or by benefiting through research and tourism. (Inyang 2011, pp. 26–27)

Of course, Conservator and Educational Officer's discourse comes off as the language of future-looking conservationists. In other words, they stand for the preservation and meticulous use of natural resources with both present and future generations in mind, which is the ideal type of conservation that western institutions such as GTZ (which hired Inyang to write the play) and WWF (where Inyang has been working for many years) promote in Africa and the Congo Basin. However, a deeper assessment of their neoliberal language, as Era sarcastically notes, gestures in the direction of the neoliberal model of fortress conservation, which underpins the Korup Project and similar conservation projects in Africa and the Congo Basin. Perhaps, these Cameroonian conservationists are not aware that the western conservationist ideology underlying their project has the ulterior motive of commodifying Africa's Eden for capitalist profits, including the promotion of ecotourism in Korup (Inyang 2011, pp. 27, 89), which is synonymous with what Nigerian postcolonial ecocritic Ogaga Okuyade (2016) describes as "modern capitalist [eco]tourism which is detrimental to the health of the environment" (Okuyade 2016, p. 469; also see Blanc 2020, pp. 287–88).

If the Cameroonian conservationists in Inyang's *The Last Hope* are seemingly unaware of the invisible neoliberal forces driving fortress conservation in Africa, the western conservation–development "experts" in Ndinga's *Les Marchands* (2006) are straightforward in their mission to assimilate indigenous Pygmies (and local Bantus) into the neoliberal market economy while pretending to save the Congo Basin's mythic Eden. As part of Donadieu's sustainable development project in Cotovillage, Rav is very overtly entrusted with the responsibility of coopting indigenous Pygmies into the market economy while at the same time educating them to dislike bushmeat, a task which the narrator satirically

describes as “*fantastiquement difficile*” (fantastically difficult) (2006, p. 61, original emphasis). Using Matatu, the sarcastic Pygmy, as interpreter, Rav would explain to the Pygmies (expelled from the forests to live with the Bantus) that they will soon be prohibited from hunting, gathering, and fishing in their millennial forests—fortress conservation is *en vogue*. As the narrator tells us, a few days later, Rav struggles to “*créer une génération de Pygmées aussi bien mangeuse et productrice de viande de bœuf que des capitalistes*” (create a generation of Pygmies who are as good at eating and producing beef as capitalists) (Ndinga 2006, p. 62). Rav proceeds to lecture the Pygmies that beef is eaten in developed societies and that it is the healthiest meat, without any risk of Ebola or AIDS (and COVID-19, I add). Explaining to them that beef is used to make the best hamburgers and *Big Mag*, Rav removes images of western cuisine excerpted from the best western gastronomic magazines from his bag, displays them on the ground, and continues to lecture them on their recipes and cooking modalities, with a special focus on *Big Mag*, which he tells them is obligatorily accompanied by *Coca occidental* (Western Coca) (Ndinga 2006, pp. 62–63). *Big Mag* and *Coca occidental* symbolize western transnational capitalist companies such as McDonald’s and Coca Cola, which are very destructive to the environment, thereby serving as metaphors for the global spread of western capitalist hyper-consumerist lifestyles. Oswaldo de Rivero (2010), for instance, asserts that “Present-day economic globalization is promoting a primary type of capitalism, more interested in selling pop music, Coca-Cola or McDonald’s...” (p. 97). Paradoxically, the western conservationists–developmentalists Donadiou and Rav want to impose these on indigenous Pygmies whose immemorial lifestyles are more protective of the environment, as illustrated by Ndinga’s *Les Marchands* and Étienne Goyémidés *Le Silence de la forêt*. Following T. V. Reed, Okuyade (2016) explains:

Western colonialism remains a scheme or agenda which privileges dominant cultures above colonised ones, which in turn creates the rationale for the colonial attempt to civilise indigenous societies because the lands of the indigenous people are assumed—from Eurocentric arrogance—to be underdeveloped and empty. (p. 469)

From this perspective, Rav’s ulterior motives of “civilizing” or forcefully assimilating the “primitive” Pygmies, such as Africans who from colonial times are in need of western civilization, then become uncontestedly established. One would normally expect such practices by Rav and Donadiou to be punished since, due to pressure from human-rights NGOs, emergent legislation in some Congo Basin countries prohibits the forceful assimilation or integration of indigenous people.<sup>5</sup> Coincidentally, for example, five years after the publication of Ndinga’s *Les Marchands* (2006), the government of his native Congo-Brazzaville adopted Law N° 5—2011 of 25 February 2011 on the protection of the rights of indigenous populations, which, among other stipulations, prohibits the forceful assimilation or integration of indigenous peoples. One could speculate that, in one way or the other, Ndinga’s novel remotely served as one of the pressure factors that led to the enactment of this law. Despite the westerners’ wrong assumptions about the Pygmies’ and Bantus’ primitivity and lack of knowledge in *Les Marchands*, the people have their own civilizations and are quite knowledgeable, not only about what they need as development, as Lenga and his mother suggest, but also about the contradictions and lies of neoliberalism. In a heated argument between Rav and Matatu, his Pygmy interpreter, the latter defeats the former by proving to him that neoliberal markets are not free from government intervention as he claims (Ndinga 2006, pp. 63–64). Matatu’s intelligence notwithstanding, he and his fellow Pygmies (especially the young ones) and Bantus such as Sylvestre initially learn the fundamental principle of capitalism and its development, as well as the politics of salaries and prices, the creation of capital, and techniques of negotiating in the market. Matatu and Sylvestre for that matter even renounce the eating of bushmeat, something considered as a great achievement for the project, although this capitalist conversion does not last for long. While Cotovillage residents interminably await the other project cows, the Pygmies finish all the fowls and eggs owned by the Bantus. The Bantus accuse the Pygmies of being thieves, thereby pushing the latter to return to the forest (Ndinga 2006, pp. 64–69). Unlike

the partly capitalism-indoctrinated Bantus, in the Pygmy worldview and lifestyle, there is no private ownership of property or food—everything is either owned communally or meant to be shared. Following the near-war situation between Bantus and Pygmies over the eaten fowls and eggs, Donadieu and Rav decide to “restructure” the sustainable development project with the aim of scrapping the aspect of integrating Pygmies into the market economy, thus barring them from the project (p. 69). Sixteen days after suspending Pygmies from the project, all the Pygmies nocturnally escape back into the forest, taking along Maguy, the lone project cow. All attempts by Rav, Donadieu, Toto, and Lenga to trace the Pygmies in the forest are futile (pp. 71–72). At this juncture, one would expect the western “experts” to discontinue the project, but that does not happen. Even when some Bantus, such as Mabouéré and other women who concert with Lenga on developmental needs of their community, display skepticism and opposition to his rather underdevelopment project (Ndinga 2006, pp. 31, 71; Noussi 2012), Donadieu persists with it since their employment depends on it and they need it to achieve other green capitalist-imperialist goals such as spreading capitalism and western values.

While Euro-American culinary practices and neoliberal capitalism are openly and unacceptably imposed on Africans by western “experts” and their sponsors in Ndinga’s *Les Marchands*, it is covert instruments of capitalist globalization such as television (TV) and the Internet which imperceptibly assimilate Isookanga the young Pygmy in Bofane’s novel. Written by Bofane who hails from Congo-Kinshasa, *Congo Inc.: Le Testament de Bismarck* (2014) deploys the omnipresent third-person point of view to narrate the complexities of the endless wars over natural resources in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in a story whose setting spans the DRC, the USA, and China.<sup>6</sup> It is, to borrow from Andersen (2018) and Nixon (2011), a fascinating narrative of the Congo as a resource-cursed country. It should be recalled that Congo-Kinshasa (DRC) is blessed with “vast deposits of diamonds, gold, uranium and, particularly, coltan: a mineral that is used for making mobile phones, and which the volcanos of the mountain ridge have spewed out for aeons and today has become a curse on the area” (Andersen 2018, p. 2). Part climate fiction (cli-fi) and part resource-war fiction or what Ndi (2020) calls “the coltan novel”, *Congo Inc.* is set against the backdrop of a looming climate and ecological catastrophe well known to the third-person narrator and characters such as Isookanga and his uncle Lomama. For instance, the novel opens with a restless Isookanga who cannot catch sufficient caterpillars in the forest for Lomama in a situation which the narrator implicitly blames on “climate change” in the second sentence of the novel (Bofane 2014, p. 11). Isookanga, the protagonist of the novel, is fascinatingly obsessed with capitalist globalization and capitalism, as exemplified by his endless computer game called *Raging Trade* (whereas Congo Bolo confronts western companies such as American Diggers, Skulls and Bones, Uranium et Société, Goldberg & Gils Atomic Project, China Networks, and Hiroshima-Naga over the control of natural resources in the DRC fictionally called Gondavaland) to the extent of self-proclaiming himself as a “mondialiste” (globalist) with the ambition to become a “mondialisateur” (globalizer) (Bofane 2014, p. 26). With a laptop stolen from a young Belgian social anthropologist with whom he later has a sexual relationship considered as revenge colonization, Isookanga quits his native village around the Salonga National Park to go to Kinshasa in search of globalization. There, Isookanga enters into a business partnership with an abandoned Chinese young man called Zhang Xia to sell “Eau Pire Suisse” (Swiss Pure Water), before eventually returning back to the village with a CD-ROM containing a Chinese map of Congolese natural resources after Zhang’s extradition to China to face corruption charges. Accordingly, Gilbert Shang Ndi describes Isookanga as “an archetypal figure of commercial pragmatism that characterizes Congo’s economic war history” (2020, p. 63).

*Congo Inc.* does not only expose the Euro-American capitalists who fan wars in the Congo Basin, especially in the eastern DRC, in order to access natural resources such as gold, coltan, uranium, etc. Through the translation of all chapter titles into Chinese, China Networks; the CD-ROM; the presence of countless Chinese (and Middle Eastern) business

products in Kinshasa shops; and the presence of Chinese capitalists such as Mr. Liu Kai, who abandons Zhang in Kinshasa (Bofane 2014, pp. 47–48, 63–67), the novel also symbolically foregrounds China's conspicuous entry into the capitalist race in Africa. However, Bofane apparently suggests that, despite obvious shortcomings, Congolese and Africans should look more in China's direction for win–win deals such as Isookanga-Zhang's, especially now that western countries are increasingly refusing visas from Africans (Bofane 2014, p. 238; also see Yoon 2020, p. 337).<sup>7</sup> In this complex network of capitalism in the Congo, as Duncan M. Yoon (2020) argues, Bofane "complicates the reductive representation of the PRC as an economic actor and the DRC as a passive recipient by innovating temporality" (2020, p. 317). Aside this complication of the China-Congo dynamics, *Congo Inc.* chronicles the imperceptible ways in which capitalist globalization, not only western conservation–development "experts", coopts Africans into western and other foreign cultural values. In addition to his obsession for the video game *Raging Trade* and integrating the global capitalist economy, Isookanga no longer dresses like a Pygmy. He has a particular fondness for dressing like Euro-American pop cultural stars. Through a flashback, we learn from uncle Lomama that 25-year-old Isookanga finished high school, came home with headsets one day, and became stubborn, eventually obtaining a tee-shirt bearing the effigy of Snoop Dogg, an American pop music star described by Lomama as a marijuana smoker (Bofane 2014, p. 15). In the village, Isookanga usually dresses in a Superdy JPN jean and a Snoop Dog tee-shirt with a necklace bearing the letters NY when playing his video game (Bofane 2014, p. 13). While in the city (Kinshasa), Isookanga is invited by Aude Martin to accompany her to a bar one evening shortly before her departure for Belgium. Through vivid descriptions, we realize that, for this occasion, Isookanga wears his Superdy JPN jean and a Jimmy Choo tee-shirt bearing the English inscription "*This is not a Jimmy Choo & it's not available by H&M*" (Bofane 2014, p. 189, English and italics in the original). With his NY chain shining on his chest, he also wears his Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses. And they go to a bar where music by Wenge Musica and Werrason, the King of the Forest, is played (p. 189). Therefore, *Congo Inc.* suggests that neoliberal capitalism, green imperialism, and western imperialism sometimes move together in Africa and their ultimate objective is to control and exploit the abundant natural resources in the mythic African Eden while also assimilating Africans into foreign cultures for capitalist and other gains. In other words, capitalist industrialized countries in the North need African natural resources for their endless industrialization and economic growth and as markets for their goods. Consequently, they scramble for Africa's nature and resources, deploying varied methods such as warfare (symbolized by Isookanga's videogame *Raging Trade* and the endless wars in eastern DRC where Bizimungu was a warlord), neo-imperial conservation, and luring Africans into foreign cultural and economic lifestyles in order to ensure markets for foreign products in the name of development.

#### 4. (Sustainable) Development and Alternative Ways of Being

Sustainable Development, as advertised or practiced in Africa, largely camouflages the double aim of saving the Eden of Africa while simultaneously making capitalist profits. First popularized through *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (the *Brundtland Report*) published in 1987, the concept of sustainable development advocates the pursuit of development in ways that meets the needs of present generations without depriving future generations of meeting theirs. Nonetheless, many scholars (e.g., Noussi 2012; Garard 2007) acknowledge the complexity and difficulty of defining this concept, including its increasingly official substitute: sustainability. The shift towards sustainability is mainly explained by the fact that sustainable development has come under heavy criticism as an oxymoron trapped in the dilemma of sustaining either nature or development, but both sustainability and sustainable development are criticized for their collusion with neoliberal capitalism to commodify and commercialize finite nature (Blanc 2020; Spaiser et al. 2017; Brown 2015; Noussi 2012; Garard 2007; Bonnevault 2004).

Accordingly, Ndinga's *Les Marchands du développement durable* (2006) satirically characterizes sustainable development as a prefabricated western commodity to be sold to Africans, especially in the Congo Basin. As the novel's title explicitly indicates, Donadieu and Rav, and all the western stakeholders in their project in Cotovillage are merchants (sellers) of a sustainable development agenda, which Donadieu cannot even define appropriately (Ndinga 2006, pp. 20, 36; Noussi 2012, p. 150). Nonetheless, the real goals of these merchants of sustainable development consist of "saving" the Congo Basin's Eden and incorporating its people into neoliberal capitalism and western imperialistic globalization. Consequently, even nature seems to suspect or oppose Donadieu's project in Cotovillage: the novel opens with dog-mouthed monkeys escaping, observing, and seemingly mocking (by chuckling) Donadieu as he walks through the Congo Basin forests (Ndinga 2006, p. 11). Moreover, at the end of the novel (Chapter 20), Lenga meets three fairy-like female figures in the forest discussing the fate of Coto (pp. 148–52). Unfortunately for Donadieu, Rav, and their western sponsors, their ill-conceived, foreign-designed project and masked attentions are quickly understood and variously challenged by many critical minds in Cotovillage, notably Matatu the Pygmy spokesperson, Lenga, his mother Mabouéré, and many other women. As an enlightened Bantu woman, Mabouéré verbally confronts Donadieu immediately after he explains that he has come to implement sustainable development in Cotovillage:

... Nous sommes développés, nous mangeons déjà à notre suffisance, maintenant vous voulez que notre développement soit durable, que nous pensions à la prospérité. [...] Pourquoi voulez-vous que nous élevions des animaux sauvages, pourquoi voulez-vous que nous mangions de la viande fade, que nous labourions nos terres comme vous, que nous semions nos graines comme vous? (*Puis, à voix basse, monologuant, elle ajoute: Ehe, likabo na ye oyo eza na tin ate!*) [...] Voulez-vous que nous soyons tous des Suisses? [...] Vous ne voulez pas que nous soyons tous des Suisses, mais vous nous demandez de faire tout comme vous. Alors, je ne comprends rien à votre présence ici... (... We are developed, we already eat to our satisfaction, now you want our development to be sustainable, you want us to think about prosperity. [...]) Why do you want us to raise wild animals, why do you want us to eat bland meat, why do you want us to plough our land like you, to sow our seeds like you? (*Then, in a low voice, monologuing, she adds: Ehe, likabo na ye oyo eza na tin ate!*) [...] Do you want us all to be Swiss? [...] You don't want us all to be Swiss, but you ask us to do everything like you. So I don't understand anything about your presence here ... ) (Ndinga 2006, p. 31)

As this quote shows, in their mother tongue and in a lower voice, Mabouéré derisively remarks that Donadieu's mission makes no sense. Mabouéré and other Cotovillage locals have a point in rejecting this (un)sustainable development which is conceived abroad and based on the wrong assumption that their Eden needs to be protected against them. Deep in his thoughts, Lenga wonders why they would be forced into a project which purports to address forest exploitation, since Donadieu claims that farming and hunting are threatening their forests. As Lenga recalls, forests are mostly destroyed for road construction and commercial timber exploitation, but nobody in Cotovillage and its environs has the ambition or the means to exploit wood for commercial reasons (Ndinga 2006, pp. 35–36). Thus, there must be concealed intentions in Donadieu's project.

Nevertheless, Mabouéré's rejection of Donadieu's project does not correspond to what Axelle Kabou (1991) described about three decades ago as Africa's refusal of technological development. Instead, Mabouéré and her fellow women stand for a different kind of development which reposes on solidarity among the downtrodden, especially women, a sense of community, and respect for and harmony with nature—a model which is quite similar to that advocated by Francophone Cameroonian novelist Angèle Kingué in *Venus du Khalakanti* (Kingué 2005, p. 163). As Oswaldo de Rivero (2010) convincingly argued after Kabou, the much-flaunted "development" programmes designed for countries in the global South have almost all failed because such a Californian style of development (heavily

dependent on industrialization, hyper consumerism, incessant urbanization, and enormous energy consumption) is both a myth and dangerous for the health of the Earth. De Rivero rightly asserts: “If industrialized societies’ consumption patterns are globalized, the earth’s biosphere will be unable to sustain them” (2010, p. 62). Yet, this is exactly what Donadieu and Rav have come to do in Cotovillage—globalize western consumption patterns in the name of sustainable development. Interestingly, despite initial acceptance of this model by some characters, Mabouéré tells Donadieu that the people of Cotovillage already eat to their satisfaction, thus suggesting that they have no need for these new consumption patterns imposed on them. As Cameroonian literary scholar François Guiyoba (2011) advises: “...l’humanité gagnerait à favoriser le développement raisonné de l’Afrique et non à faire semblant de l’aider à se développer pour mieux l’exploiter, ou à l’engager sur des voies de développement-leurre qui ne tiennent pas compte de ses traditions” (...humanity would benefit from fostering the reasoned development of Africa and not pretending to help it develop in order to better exploit it, or to set it on development paths that do not take into account its traditions) (p. 528). Relatedly, Ndinga’s novel not only rejects such forms of green capitalist-imperialist domination of Africans but also highlights alternatives to what de Rivero (2010, p. 71) describes as “Darwinist” or endlessly progressive development as conceived in the global North. As Ndinga suggests, the people of Cotovillage do not need (un)sustainable development because they care more about their wellbeing and happiness than any development skewed to the whims and caprices of the misleading Gross Domestic Product (GDP), an economic metric which is substantially criticized for encouraging infinite capitalist growth on a planet with finite resources and failing to measure human wellbeing and immaterial needs (Jackson 2017; Sarr 2016; D’Alisa et al. 2015; de Rivero 2010). Accordingly, Tim Jackson (2017) proposes prosperity without growth; Kallis (2019) promotes the idea of an economy of limits, flourishing, and care; and Giacomo D’Alisa et al. (2015) advocate degrowth as replacements for endless capitalist growth premised on GDP which destroys nature.

As alternatives to GDP-driven development and oxymoronic sustainable development, which are wrongly designed abroad and imposed on Africans in the name of saving their Eden, I argue that Ndinga proposes development which hinges upon inclusive participation of men and women, with emphasis on the crucial role of women in formulating and implementing developmental projects (e.g., the consultations between Lenga and women such as Mémona and Rita, pp. 121–29), local consumption patterns and the people’s overall satisfaction and happiness. The narrator reminds us through Lenga’s thoughts: “À Cotovillage, la vie est rythmée entre la femme, les enfants, le champ, la chasse, la pêche, l’alcool, le rire et la danse” (In Cotovillage, life is punctuated between the wife, children, the farm, hunting, fishing, drinking, laughing and dancing) (p. 36). The residents of Cotovillage including the forest Pygmies cherish their lifestyles and have not invited anyone to come and (un)sustainably develop them.

Similarly, in *Le Silence de la forêt* (1984), a novel by Central African Republic author Étienne Goyémidé (1942–1997), when Gonaba, a Bantu Inspector of Primary Schools trained in France, decides to abandon his job and go and learn from Babinga Pygmies in the forest, he discovers that the Pygmies lead complex, dynamic, satisfying, and happy lives. Through a series of events, interspersed with flashbacks, foreshadowing, contrast, dreams, dialogues, etc., the first-person narrator Gonaba exposes a people in a self-sufficient community where laughter is ubiquitous and contagious. And Gonaba cannot help but marry Kaliwossé, a young Pygmy woman, as one of many strategies to integrate into the society. Whether it is Manga the Pygmy on his way to study the Bantu society (pp. 26, 28–29), Toukamignan and Kpoulougnan—Gonaba’s brothers-in-law—or old women (pp. 106, 128, 130), bursting into laughter is the leitmotif of the Pygmy society. In fact, laugh (“rire”) features about thirty times and (was) laughing (“riant/riait”) about six times in *Le Silence de la forêt*, reminding us that the forest is not actually a place of desolation and silence (despite Kaliwossé’s tragic death after bearing two children with Gonaba). Laughter and dance in both novels are of particular relevance nowadays not only because neoliberal capitalism in

industrialized countries of the North has proven that it cannot procure happiness for those who accumulate unnecessary wealth (Mortensen 2020; Jackson 2017; D'Alisa et al. 2015; de Rivero 2010). Laughter is also important here because of growing interest in the Bhutanese concept of Gross National Happiness (despite the debates surrounding it) as one of the alternative instruments for measuring human wellbeing and fulfillment (Mortensen 2020, pp. 8–9). In both novels, life is framed more or less in terms of happiness and wellbeing, which roughly corresponds to how life is perceived and experienced in much of Africa. Senegalese scholar Felwine Sarr observes: “La vie ne se mesure pas à l'échelle, elle est une expérience et non une performance” (Life is not measured on a scale, it is an experience, not a performance) (Sarr 2016, p. 19). Moreover, Sarr reminds us that economic life in precolonial Africa was not organized in order to be measured by metrics such as the GDP, which emerged between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. Instead, precolonial African economies were cyclical in nature and focused on guaranteeing the subsistence of all (Sarr 2016, p. 79).

In view of what precedes, I argue that both Ndinga and Goyémidé use their novels to project alternative cultural lifestyles and forms of “development” for Africa. In the context of the current climate and ecological crisis, I suggest that Africa does not need what I call “aspirational development”, that is, development which is not locally inspired but instead aimed at catching up with the global North. This is no longer the time to conceive development in the Congo Basin or Africa in the form of the “lateness” that Kabou once evoked (1991, p. 44). Contrarily, as Sarr observes, Africa has nobody to catch up with in terms of development:

L'Afrique n'a personne à rattraper. Elle ne doit plus courir sur les sentiers qu'on lui indique, mais marcher prestement sur le chemin qu'elle se sera choisi. Son statut de fille aînée de l'humanité requiert d'elle de s'extraire de la concurrence, de la compétition, de cet âge infantile où les nations se toisent pour savoir qui a le plus accumulé de richesse, de gadgets technologiques, de sensations fortes, de capacité de jouissance des biens et plaisirs de ce monde, et peu importe si cette course effrénée et irresponsable met en danger les conditions sociales et naturelles de la vie humaine. (Africa has no one to catch up with. It must no longer run along the paths indicated to it, but walk swiftly along the path it has chosen for itself. Its status as the eldest daughter of humanity requires it to extricate itself from competition, from that infantile age when nations pounce on each other to see who has accumulated the most wealth, technological gadgets, thrills, and the capacity to enjoy the goods and pleasures of this world, no matter if this unbridled and irresponsible race endangers the social and natural conditions of human life.) (Sarr 2016, p. 152)

As “the eldest daughter of humanity”, Africa needs to draw lessons from her past and cultural realities, as well as borrow what is beneficial from elsewhere and proceed to formulate the kind of “development” model that best fits her without harming nature, especially in a post-COVID-19 world. This is exactly what Ndinga suggests in his novel, notably through the failure of Donadieu's project and the vision which Lenga obtains after his sojourn with the three fairy-like female figures in the forest. Before his sojourn in the forest, Lenga forcefully symbolizes the present-day Africa, which lacks a sense of direction, as he tells the fairy-figures: “Je vais partout et nulle part” (I am going everywhere and nowhere) (Ndinga 2006, p. 151). Invited to stay with them, Lenga stays there for 17 years, 7 months, and 7 days, eating wild yams, dried crayfish, leaves, and nuts; studying and defining the properties of things; calling them by their names; not listening to any fake words; and not embracing any comedy from the “developmentalists” of Africa or that of politicians (Ndinga 2006, p. 151). When written together, 17 years, 7 months, and 7 days becomes 1777, and this figure is quite suggestive. The year 1777 falls within the precolonial phase of African history and could suggest the need to partly tap into the African past, local and indigenous knowledge systems, and foreign inspiration in formulating a new economic model for Africa. As Ndinga's narrator tells us about Lenga in the end,

Loin du diktat des intellectuels du monde dominant, de leur arrogance et de l'hégémonie de leur culture, il découvre et prend conscience du passé de Coto, conçoit des réponses à ses questions existentielles, réponses qu'il ne veut imposer à personne en même temps qu'il tolère la pluralité des façons de vivre. (Far from the diktat of the intellectuals of the dominant world, their arrogance and the hegemony of their culture, he discovers and becomes aware of Coto's past, conceives answers to his existential questions, answers which he does not want to impose on anyone at the same time as he tolerates the plurality of ways of living.) (Ndinga 2006, pp. 151–52)

Certainly, Lenga expects people from other cultures to reciprocate this approach of tolerating different ways of inhabiting the Earth. In other words, western developmentalists–conservationists such as Donadieu and Rav should stop using the pretext of conserving a mythic African Eden to impose their economic and social models on Africans and inhabitants of the Congo Basin. Such a green imperialist approach to conservation and sustainable development comes with many consequences, including cultural and spatial dislocation and the production of poverty.

### 5. Producing Poverty to Preserve Africa's Eden

Nature conservation and sustainable development, both inspired by the masked agenda of preserving the Edenic Congo Basin (Africa), often produce opposite outcomes, especially in terms of ruining people's lives instead of ameliorating them. This should not, however, come as a surprise given that both nature conservation and sustainable development initiatives in Africa, to a larger extent, serve as covert channels for green imperialism or what Rob Nixon calls "resource imperialism". In Nixon's words, "[the] environmentalism of the poor is frequently catalyzed by resource imperialism inflicted on the global South to maintain the unsustainable consumer appetites of rich-country citizens and, increasingly, of the urban middle classes in the global South itself" (Nixon 2011, p. 22). Relatedly, Caminero-Santangelo and Myers (2011) acknowledge that many Africans are adversely affected by global environmental problems, including resource exploitation and consequent poverty, although most Africans are not the primary causes of these problems (p. 9). Similarly, and with regard to the oil-rich Niger Delta region in his native Nigeria, Sule Emmanuel Egya (2016, p. 7) contends that it is often for the interest of a few powerful individuals from the global North and global South that millions of innocent people, such as those of the Niger Delta (and the Congo Basin, I add), are made to suffer. In short, "Poverty in the South is the outcome of the exploitation of its natural and human resources at low cost by the North" (D'Alisa et al. 2015, p. 5).

Whereas the precarious and poor situation of millions of people in the Niger Delta is largely linked to oil exploitation, in the Congo Basin, millions of people are principally impoverished by efforts to conserve the basin's Edenic forests. As Richard A. Schroeder (2000) observes, "environmental policies have for decades done little to alleviate, and have at times contributed directly to the exacerbation of poverty across the continent" of Africa (p. 341). Ndinga's *Les Marchands* interestingly exemplifies this situation. In spite of Donadieu's project to purportedly implement sustainable development in Cotovillage, its inhabitants remain poor.

Without mincing words, Ndinga's narrator tellingly declares:

De la *françafrique* aux réseaux de plus en plus denses de liens internationaux, amicaux et d'intérêts divers pour la conservation biologique à Coto, ce sont moins les triomphes des Landois, des Américains et des Cotois à sauvegarder des ressources forestières en péril que le triomphe du status quo. En d'autres termes, c'est l'asservissement de ces derniers par les deux premiers ainsi que le maintien des Africains, et des Cotois en particulier, en soutiers de l'abondance de l'Occident en ressources naturelles. Du fait des ressources financières qu'ils mettent en jeu, la Lande et les Amériques exigent que l'OMF, de même que le projet—les employés de nationalité cotoise compris—travaillent pour eux, c'est-à-

dire promeuvent leurs politiques. (From *Françafrique* to the increasingly dense networks of international links, friendships and diverse interests in biological conservation in Coto, it is less the triumph of the Landese, the Americans and the Cotois in safeguarding endangered forest resources than the triumph of the status quo. In other words, it is the enslavement of the latter by the former two as well as the maintenance of Africans, and Cotois in particular, as pimps to the West's abundance of natural resources. Because of the financial resources they bring into play, Lande and the Americas demand that the OMF, as well as the project—including its employees of Cotois nationality—work for them, that is, promote their policies.) (Ndinga 2006, p. 94)<sup>8</sup>

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the project is unable to meet the people's needs for a road, a bridge, and a health center (Ndinga 2006, p. 15). Indeed, the project serves the interests of its western sponsors as the narrator reveals above. Consequently, neither the numerous western NGOs nor the foreign states which finance them, while intimidating local NGOs and the civil society (p. 119), are able to ameliorate the lives of Cotovillage residents to the standards of the capitalist economy into which they are coopted. Towards the end of the novel, particularly in Chapter 17, the omnipresent narrator sarcastically remarks: "Le village est riche en ressources naturelles mais les individus meurent chaque jour de paludisme, de sida, de luttes intestines ou de malnutrition" (The village is rich in natural resources but people are dying every day from malaria, AIDS, infighting or malnutrition) (Ndinga 2006, p. 121). Lenga's abusive and punitive dismissal from the project, partly due to unfounded sexual assault accusations from an incompetent western employee called Sophie (Ndinga 2006, pp. 99–102, 121), and the deplorable state of the former project camp and local employees/beneficiaries at the very end of the novel all symbolize the poverty created in that community in the name of conservation and sustainable development. When Lenga returns from the forest, Rita, Madeleine, Judith, and Hélène, four women who depended on the project, have consecrated their lives to raising their grandchildren due to a lack of funding for the project while the project camp is in ruins and the plane landing path is covered with Bokassa grass (*Chromolaena odoratum*) (an invasive plant as explained in a footnote) and "l'œil d'autrui ne voit plus rien. Ainsi, l'OMF donna à Cotovillage un plat à sa façon" (someone's eye sees nothing. So, the OMF served Cotovillage a dish in its own manner) (Ndinga 2006, p. 152). While the invasive Bokassa grass metaphorically represents the intruding nature of some western conservationists–developmentalists in Africa and the Congo Basin, the fact that one sees nothing beyond the ruined camp and abandoned landing track symbolizes the nothingness/emptiness of Donadieu's project, including the poverty it has created in Cotovillage.

Although Ndinga and Inyang both work within the conservation/environmental sector, the former critically and deliberately exposes how some western conservationists–developmentalists contribute to material or economic poverty in Africa (as discussed above) whereas the latter more or less takes the defense of western environmental NGOs and donors on the continent. Indeed, in *The Last Hope*, Inyang struggles to defend the thesis that locals who obediently support fortress conservation efforts in their communities and relocate to designated resettlement sites receive the rewards of development which include moving from thatched houses to modern houses roofed with zinc and furnished with luxurious chairs in the resettlement sites; becoming animal breeders (pig and poultry farmers); and obtaining collective infrastructure in the form of schools, community halls, bridges, and roads (Inyang 2011, pp. 73–77). The play establishes a dichotomy between good residents such as Kondo and Asu who have received developmental blessings from the Korup project and bad residents or activists such as Era, Koko, and Motia whose resistance to the project (e.g., some still want to hunt in the forest and refuse to relocate to the resettlement site) makes them losers. In Act 3 Scene 1, when Era and Koko visit Kondo and they start arguing about why some of them have benefited from the project while others have not, Era promises that they will wipe out everything in the forest, and Kondo (his cousin) reminds him of their last confrontational encounter with the park guards. Stage

directions read: “Era casts Kondo an angry look, and then resumes surveying the house and chairs in hidden admiration. He is apparently boiling with regretful anger” (Inyang 2011, p. 80, original italics). That Era secretly admires Kondo’s house and chairs while boiling with “regretful anger” suggests the authorial intention to highlight Era’s regrets for resisting the project. Unintentionally, however, the play demonstrates the production of poverty among many residents in the name of conserving the Korup Eden. Despite attempts to make forest management more inclusive in the play, the dissenting voices of characters such as Era and Motia should be taken seriously.

Motia concludes as follows: “Whether the project is here or not, it doesn’t really make any difference to me. [He takes a few strides away.]” (Inyang 2011, p. 86). Despite the few successes of the Korup project flaunted in the play, the future of the project is uncertain whenever EU Donor and GTZ Donor will pull out their funding, whereas a lot of the project’s promises have not been fulfilled. If ever these western funders withdraw, it is highly probable that the project will end in ruins like Donadieu’s project in Cotoville. In this regard, Motia’s conclusion should be read as the cry of the numerous Africans whose lives are disrupted and impoverished by conservation–development projects in the Congo Basin (and Africa), which are designed and imposed from the global North in the name of sustainable development and conserving Africa’s Eden. This material poverty engendered in Africa is rightly designated as “paradoxical poverty” (Kabou 1991, p. 151) because under normal circumstances Africans should never be poor since their continent is the richest in terms of natural resources. However, as Schroeder (2000) puts it, “. . . contemporary natural resource management strategies premised on marketing nature as a commodity have, if anything, only exacerbated preexisting conditions of poverty in many areas” of Africa (p. 346).

In addition to producing poverty as argued above, and provoking violent physical and spiritual displacements (addressed elsewhere—Nsah 2022, pp. 202–4; also see Hill 2023; Lee 2022; Betoko and Carvalho 2020; Simlai 2015; Rainforest Foundation UK 2014), another negative consequence of green imperialism in Africa in general and the Congo Basin in particular is epistemicide, as I discuss below.

## 6. Local and Indigenous Knowledge and Epistemicide

Instead of considering local and indigenous people as threats to their environments and forests, conservationists–developmentalists, especially those from the global North, have a lot to learn from them in order to conserve nature. In other words, you cannot claim to preserve a mythic Eden in Africa while at the same time destroying the cultures and epistemologies which have sustained it since time immemorial. Yet, many capitalist conservationist–developmentalist projects actually perpetuate this in Africa and the Congo Basin. Instead of perpetuating such practices, there is much to learn from local and indigenous peoples. Undoubtedly, (neoliberal) capitalism is the principal cause of the climate and ecological crisis threatening the Earth today.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, in *Les Marchands* and *Le Silence*, for instance, indigenous Pygmies have a collectivist economic system focused on the survival and wellbeing of all, that is, an anti-capitalist system which acknowledges their belonging to and interdependence on nature. Following Cameroonian literary scholar Oscar Labang (2015), it should be noted that, for African local and indigenous people, the forest is a resource owned communally by the community, whereby the people depend on the forest for their wellbeing and the forest partly depends on them for preservation. As Kingué’s novel reminds us, we/Africans are all children of the forest (2005, p. 163). We all collectively depend on the forest/nature for food and healing. Accordingly, when accused of having stolen Bantu eggs and fowls, the Pygmies in *Les Marchands* rightly insist that they did not steal but rather ate the village eggs and fowls when they were hungry (pp. 65–66). This is because there is no private ownership of food or resources in their collective worldview or “economic” model.

In *Le Silence*, after Gonaba kidnaps his wife Kaliwossé aka Pygmalion from her parents’ house to his own house, according to the Babinga marriage tradition (Goyémidé 1984,

pp. 114, 120), Gonaba starts wondering what will become of the bushmeat which he and his two brothers-in-law had caught and the yams, ingredients, etc. offered by anonymous Babinga women in preparation for their marriage (Goyémidé 1984, pp. 115–19). Indeed, Gonaba understands that he and his wife alone cannot consume all the food. As Gonaba starts making plans to smoke and preserve the extra meat and fish, unbeknown to him, the community organizes a festive ceremony to officially seal their marriage, a ceremony for which they bring more food and meat and everything is eaten to Gonaba's surprise. Prior to the ceremony, Gonaba visits the old Pygmy Kpignawoulossé (who is a seer, advisor, and healer) to seek his advice on what to do with the excess food and the old man ironically tells him: "Vous n'êtes pas obligés de tout manger. Si ça se gâte, on s'en débarrassera, la viande on en trouve toujours. Essayez de supporter encore cinq jours. Et tout finira par s'arranger" (You don't have to eat everything. If it goes bad, we'll get rid of it, there's always meat. Try to bear it for another five days. And everything will work out in the end.) (Goyémidé 1984, p. 123). Although, superficially, the old man seems to suggest that leftover meat can be thrown away, this is actually an instance of dramatic irony for two reasons: in their customs, they never waste food because it is shared to everyone in need (in fact, no one owns it individually) and they are secretly planning a ceremony in which all of that food will be consumed. Reflecting during that ceremony, Gonaba, the first-person narrator, concludes: "Je suis sans parole devant une telle marque de sympathie, d'amitié. Les Babingas ont fêté à leur manière mon mariage avec leur fille. Les Babingas sont un peuple mûr, souverain, capable à tous égards, et qui n'a de leçon à recevoir de personne" (I am speechless in front of such a mark of sympathy, of friendship. The Babingas celebrated my marriage to their daughter in their own way. The Babingas are a mature, healthy people, capable in all respects, and they have no lessons to learn from anyone.) (Goyémidé 1984, p. 126). As the novel illustrates, these mature, sovereign, dynamic, and capable people lead a lifestyle based on recognizing their place in nature; receiving their food and medicine from nature; and giving to, sharing with, and caring for, one another, including nature. And this is the basis for their wellbeing and happiness (laughter).

In *Congo Inc.*, the Ekonga Pygmies, particularly uncle Lomama, display deep connections to and knowledge of nature and their forests. Lomama is one of those who want to preserve everything (Bofane 2014, p. 158). While Bizimungu is struggling to know how he can destroy the forests and extract minerals, Isookanga informs him that his uncle knows how to cure trees but not how to make them sick. As Isookanga explains, Lomama masters the forest and how to make it prosper; for instance, he can summon rain to fall where it is necessary to make vegetation grow (Bofane 2014, p. 176). In Chapter 9, the narrator follows Lomama in the forest, as the old man struggles to identify the cause of the violent death of his leopard friend Nkoi Mobali (Bofane 2014, pp. 198–206). Lomama finally concludes that Nkoi Mobali was violently assassinated by warthogs whose intrusion into the leopard's territory is blamed on climate change and the telecommunications pylon installed by China Networks, an antenna which has partly led to the disappearance of caterpillars in the area. He understands that the leopard's death symbolizes impending ecological doom if nothing is done (Bofane 2014, pp. 205–6). Yet, his visit to Kinshasa to inform Bizimungu (the detached park manager who never visits it even once) concerning government ministers and UN officials yielded no fruit since none of these people really care about the welfare of the animals and trees in Salonga except the resources they can exploit therefrom (Bofane 2014, pp. 248–52). Loma only succeeds in bringing home his nephew Isookanga who would replace him as chief among the Ekonga, but there is every reason to fear Isookanga's forthcoming reign since he returns home with a CD-ROM containing a Chinese map of Salonga natural resources (Bofane 2014, pp. 252, 256, 279).

Despite the uncertainty of Isookanga's future chieftaincy, *Congo Inc.*, and the other novels under study, I argue and unequivocally advocate for the recognition and promotion of local and indigenous knowledge systems in both conservation and development matters at a time when there is a strong international indigenous rights movement and growing consensus among scientists to recognize and learn from the value of indigenous technical

knowledge systems (Schroeder 2000, p. 345). Instead of humbling themselves and learning from these systems, some western conservationists–developmentalists (displaying colonial arrogance and superiority) in Africa and the Congo Basin prefer to disrespect, undermine, trample upon, and destroy indigenous knowledges, thereby perpetuating epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) and what de Sousa Santos (2014) calls “epistemicide” or “the murder of knowledge” (p. 92). As we see in *Les Marchands* in particular, Donadieu and Rav are bent on murdering the lifestyles and knowledge systems of the Pygmies as they want to force them into the neoliberal capitalist economy in the name of preserving their Eden.

Meanwhile, in *The Last Hope* and *Les Marchands*, conservationists–developmentalists embark on identifying or “discovering” new fauna and flora species in the Congo Basin. In his theatrical lecture to the Korup residents in *The Last Hope*, Education Officer discloses that “ninety medicinal plants have been discovered in the Korup National Park, thirty-eight of which are new to science” (p. 29) and proceeds to announce that one such plant is *Ancistrocladus korupensis*, describing it as “a vine that may provide a cure for AIDS” (p. 30). Certainly, it is beneficial to have such a plant which might potentially save humankind from AIDS and it is laudable to name it after Korup, but one must still wonder which science (epistemology) Education Officer is referring to: western science or the science of the Korup people? Furthermore, there is no guarantee that a potential AIDS cure from that plant would not be hijacked by capitalist pharmaceutical companies for the maximization of profits at the detriment of humanity, including the Korup people. In *Les Marchands*, while Donadieu relies on the assistance of local Bantus such as Lenga and Sylvestre to study, photograph, and document different species in their forests (Ndinga 2006, pp. 5–54, 67), he does not acknowledge them in his *Progress Report* (italics in original) addressed to OMF in which he declares that numerous species of plants, mammals, fish, birds, reptiles, amphibians, scorpions, myriapods, etc. have been identified in the forests and should be protected against the menacing Cotolese (pp. 72–73). Rav in *Les Marchands* and Aude Martin, the young female Belgian social anthropologist, in *Congo Inc.*, in their respective parts, are representative of some scholars from the global North who sometimes pretend to work for conservation–development NGOs in order to quench their exotic thirst and curiosity for local and indigenous people without proper respect and consideration for their cultures and knowledge systems. For such foreigners who perpetuate epistemicide in Africa in the name of saving a mythic Eden, Goyémidé’s protagonist Gonaba has a strong message:

Je ne suis pas ethnologue. Je ne suis pas venu ici avec l’intention arrêtée de faire découvrir au monde civilisé «Les Vies et Mœurs des Babingas de la forêt équatoriale.» Une certaine Margaret Mead le ferait avec plus de «compétence.» Si je me trouve ici dans cette clairière, sous cette hutte faite d’écorces et bâtie des mains de Pygmées, ce n’est pas pour violer leur personnalité, ce n’est pas non plus pour piller leur patrimoine culturel, sociologique, ethnologique et autres, mais c’est simplement pour vivre avec eux, de leur vie de tous les jours, leurs joies, leurs peines, dans leur contexte naturel en les considérant comme il se doit, en peuple mûr et respectable, et non en espèce de cobayes de laboratoire. (I am not an ethnologist. I did not come here with the firm intention of introducing the civilized world to “The Lives and Habits of the Babingas of the Equatorial Forest.” A certain Margaret Mead would do so with more “competence.” If I am here in this clearing, under this hut made of bark and built by the hands of Pygmies, it is not to violate their personality, nor is it to plunder their cultural, sociological, ethnological and other heritage, but it is simply to live with them, their everyday life, their joys, their sorrows, in their natural context, considering them as it should be, as a mature and respectable people, and not as a species of laboratory guinea pigs.) (p. 97)

In this excerpt, the narrator’s reference to famous American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978) suggests Goyémidé’s advocacy for the respect of indigenous people and their lifestyles and against stealing their knowledge and cultural heritage.

Instead of treating them as laboratory guinea pigs, local and indigenous people should be approached as complete, sovereign, and dynamic humans with alternative cultural and knowledge systems. Unless local and indigenous people are approached the way Goyémidé advocates, I argue that conservation and development will continue to be wrongly conceived and imposed on Africa and the Congo Basin without any tangible success in terms of mitigating climate change and preserving nature. Indeed, conservation efforts must cease to be premised on a mythic African Eden to be saved from Africans and instead recognize the unbreakable bonds between these people and the nature to which they have belonged since time immemorial. Instead of displacing them, conservationists–developmentalists should genuinely acknowledge, learn from, and work with them in a spirit of epistemic pluralism (Coliva and Pedersen 2017), following their real needs and desires, and with their explicit consent.

## 7. Conclusions

As I have argued in this article, the myth of an African Eden invented in the colonial era continues to permeate most development and conservation efforts in Africa, including the Congo Basin. I have suggested that some Euro-American transnational NGOs, and political and financial institutions collude with some African governments to spread global capitalism and green colonialism under the guise of oxymoronic sustainable development as they attempt to conserve a mythical African Eden. Such Euro-American environmental NGOs and other institutions impose and sustain fortress conservation in the Congo Basin as a hidden means of coopting Africa’s nature and Africans into neoliberal capitalism. In fact, through fortress conservation, some western NGOs such as WWF, Wildlife Conservation Society, and Ndinga’s fictional OMF; financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF; and (inter)governmental agencies such as the EU, GTZ (GIZ), and USAID knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate green imperialism/colonialism and resource imperialism and promote neoliberal capitalism in Africa and the Congo Basin at the expense of the nature they claim to be protecting. In this regard, while Africans, including indigenous peoples, are being coopted into neoliberal capitalism which destroys nature, alternative forms of development are undermined in the name of sustainable development or sustainability and indigenous people are violently dislocated to save a non-existing Eden at the same time as their knowledge systems are either stolen or destroyed (epistemicide). In the end, most development–conservation projects only succeed in producing visible and invisible violence, as well as material and social poverty, which in turn adversely affect humans and nature instead of actually preserving nature or implementing questionable GDP-driven development.

Although Inyang, in this play and elsewhere (e.g., some of his scholarly publications), intentionally, and sometimes uncritically, defends fortress conservation, I argue that all four literary texts under study expose the various shortcomings of fortress conservation, the contradictions of sustainable development, the nefarious effects of green and resource imperialism, and the resourcefulness of alternative economic models and knowledge systems as practiced by local and indigenous peoples.<sup>10</sup> Fortress conservation often results in both overt and subtle forms of resistance such as those mounted by local and indigenous populations in Inyang’s *The Last Hope* and Ndinga’s *Les Marchands*. In both texts, attempts to perpetuate “accumulation by dispossession aimed to employ free-market policies for private appropriation of the commons” (Fletcher et al. 2014, p. 7) through fortress conservation are glaring. Meanwhile, calls for the abolition of fortress conservation in Africa are multiplying and come from many angles such as academia, civil society, and NGOs (e.g., Betoko and Carvalho 2020; Blanc 2020; Mohanty 2019; Pemunta 2018; Büscher 2015; Fletcher et al. 2014; Brockington 2002). In October 2020, for instance, Irene Wabiba Betoko and Savio Carvalho, two employees of the international environmental NGO Greenpeace, made it clear in an opinion piece that the only way to protect nature in Africa is to tear down the walls of fortress conservation.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, protecting nature in Africa and the Congo Basin is crucial for the posterity of species and as a way of mitigating climate change,

but the current approach and strategies deployed to achieve these goals must be changed if we want to achieve success. Any initiatives in these directions must be both nature- and people-centered, not imposed from the global North, fully considering the people's genuine needs and actively involving them. Moreover, conservationists should approach nature not as a static given but as a dynamic arena of co-construction between human and nonhuman forces (Kelly et al. 2017, p. 1). Otherwise, most forest conservationists–developmentalists in Africa and the Congo Basin will meet resistance and failure and continue to ask the same rhetorical questions as Donadieu in Cotovillage:

Pourquoi est-il venu à Cotovillage? Quel besoin? Quelle urgence? On peut admettre que le développement durable soit nécessaire. Mais Cotovillage est-il réellement demandeur du projet dont il est le Conseiller technique principal? Les procédés d'utilisation de l'énergie, d'exploitation de bois ou de transformation de la matière sont uniformes partout à travers notre planète. Mais doit-on pour autant imposer partout la même façon de manger, la même façon d'aimer, la même façon de faire l'amour, les mêmes saints, les mêmes religions? ... Pourquoi croire que les résistances des Cotois au projet sont forcément liées à un déficit en éducation relative à l'environnement? (Why did he come to Cotovillage? What need? What urgency? One can admit that sustainable development is necessary. But is Cotovillage really interested in the project for which he is the main technical advisor? The processes of energy use, wood exploitation or material transformation are uniform everywhere on our planet. But should the same way of eating, the same way of loving, the same way of making love, the same saints, the same religions be imposed everywhere?) (Ndinga 2006, pp. 51–52)

Such questions remind me of the following story. It is reported that an international NGO (which I prefer to anonymize), without proper consultation, constructed a well (borehole) for some indigenous Baka Pygmies in their camp in the East Region of Francophone Cameroon. But the Baka people ignored the well and continued sending their children to walk for about 2–3 h to fetch water in their distant stream. When the NGO personnel eventually realized this, they conducted an inquiry which revealed that the well was a serious cultural problem for Baka couples because they share their huts with their children and only make love when they send their children faraway to fetch water from the stream. Then, the NGO built small houses with rooms for the Baka.<sup>12</sup> This story alongside the four texts I have examined here all point to the multiple dangers of disregarding people's cultures, value systems, lifestyles, and economic models in the name of preserving a mythic African Eden and spreading neoliberal capitalism and western cultures. In this way, I have demonstrated that conservation humanities go beyond critiquing and generating frustrations to developing new insights about conservation (see Holmes et al. 2022). Holmes et al. (2022) observe, "A conservation humanities approach can also draw attention to perspectives that have been marginalized, silenced, or neglected but have the potential to enrich conservation debates" (p. 3).

As Eveline R. de Smalen (2019) succinctly puts it, "efforts to mitigate human activity's adverse effects on the environment often meet with opposition when they ignore the cultural memories, values and imaginations of implicated communities" (p. 381). Following Bonaventure Mve-Ondo, Felwine Sarr rightly reminds us that the path taken by western reason is just one among many paths (Sarr 2016, p. 114). Similarly, Ndinga uses Lenga at the end of his novel to remind humanity that there are multiple ways of perceiving and inhabiting the world (p. 152). Literature is particularly useful within the conservation humanities given its capacity to critique, to engage with complexity, and to point to new or different possibilities and futures. Consequently, as these literary texts suggest, I submit that nature conservation and sustainable development in the Congo Basin (Africa) should not be imposed from the global North. Instead, these should emanate from Africans and tap from local expertise, cultures, indigenous, and foreign knowledge systems in order to preserve

both nature and humans in a world of multiple epistemological systems and ecosystems. In this way, environmental protection and environmental justice will be pursued together.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article grew out from a chapter in my PhD dissertation, which was defended at Aarhus University, Denmark, on 11 March 2022. I am grateful to my PhD supervisors Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Peter Mortensen for their helpful feedback and guidance.
- <sup>2</sup> See for instance the African Union Commission Facebook Page at <<https://www.facebook.com/AfricanUnionCommission/posts/10165087226585408>> accessed on 26 May 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> Forbes Africa, “Focus on Gabon: The Emerging Eden of Africa”, 28 February 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.forbesafrica.com/brand-voice/2020/02/28/the-emerging-eden-of-africa/>> on 10 March 2020. Despite the fact that all the 13 Gabonese national parks were created by presidential decree in 2002, they all employ the fortress model of conservation with heavy repercussions for local and indigenous people, and this model has roots in the colonial mythic idea of an African Eden perpetuated by Western media such as *National Geographic* and in the French colonial creation of hunting reserves, especially the Lopé National Park (see Laurence Caramel, “Forêt d’Afrique centrale: le pacte vert de Lee White”, *Le Monde*, 6 October 2021, retrieved from <[https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/06/lee-white-un-britannique-au-service-de-la-foret-d-afrique-centrale\\_6097288\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/10/06/lee-white-un-britannique-au-service-de-la-foret-d-afrique-centrale_6097288_3212.html)> on 8 October 2021). It should also be noted that European demand for African animal products such as ivory and the killing of African fauna as hunting trophies by white men played a key role in the decline in biodiversity in Africa in general and the Congo Basin in particular after the Berlin West African Conference. Today, Chinese and other Asian markets are largely responsible for the decimation of African fauna species such as elephants and rhinoceros.
- <sup>4</sup> Fortress conservation refers to the creation of protected areas as a method of biodiversity protection. Specifically, this model, as opposed to community-based conservation, often results in prohibiting local and indigenous people from accessing parts of the protected area on which their livelihoods and cultures formerly depended. It also involves “the full protection of certain classes of large mammals, the use of specific tools forbidden by existing forestry legislation and the ruthless behaviour of ‘eco-guards’” (Pemunta 2018, p. 1035).
- <sup>5</sup> In addition to United Nations and African Union legal texts on the rights of indigenous peoples, some countries in the Congo Basin have begun adopting laws to protect and promote the rights of their indigenous populations. For instance, The Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) adopted Law N° 5—2011 of 25 February 2011 on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Indigenous Populations (Official Gazette of the Republic of Congo, N° 09-2011, 3 March 2011, pp. 315–18). In addition, following a cabinet reshuffle in Congo-Brazzaville in May 2021, the names of two government ministries were modified to embody concerns relating to the Congo Basin and its indigenous people (Pygmies). The two ministries were the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights and Promotion of Indigenous Peoples and the Ministry of Environment, Sustainable Development and the Congo Basin (<<https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/executif-la-composition-du-nouveau-gouvernement-126964>> accessed on 16 May 2021). Furthermore, the Central African Republic (CAR) was the first African country and the 22nd in the world to ratify WTO Convention N° 169 on Indigenous Peoples on 30 August 2010 (United Nations, CCPR/C/CAF/3 of 26 June 2018). Meanwhile, although consultations on a possible bill to promote and protect the rights of indigenous people in the CAR were suspended in 2013 due to political instability, the preamble of the 30 March 2016 CAR Constitution reaffirms the adherence of the CAR to all duly ratified International Conventions, especially those regarding the prohibition of all forms of discrimination against women, the protection of children’s rights, and those regarding indigenous and tribal peoples (ibid.). Finally, in April 2021 the National Assembly and in June 2022 the Senate of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa, DRC) adopted a bill on the protection and promotion of the rights of indigenous Pygmy peoples, a bill initially drafted in 2012 (Ntumba 2021; Mie 2022). In terms of pressure from human-rights and environmental NGOs, it was reported, for instance, in 2020 that the European Union would suspend funding to a WWF project to create the protected Messok Dja area in Cameroon due to pressure from the international NGO Survival International, which had documented evidence of beatings, torture, sexual abuse, wrongful arrests, and killings of the indigenous Baka Pygmies in order to establish the project (“EU suspends funding to WWF’s flagship African project after persistent abuses”, Survival International, 13 May 2020 <<https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/12384>> accessed on 15 January 2021).

- <sup>6</sup> Marjolijn de Jager's English translation of *Congo Inc.* was published by Indiana University Press in 2018, but I have chosen to read the original French text here. Accordingly, any translations here are mine.
- <sup>7</sup> In Koli Jean Bofane has equally confirmed this reading in an interview, asserting: "... La Chine est incontournable aujourd'hui en Afrique. Le titre de chacun des chapitres de *Congo Inc.* est d'ailleurs traduit en mandarin. La Chine n'est pas apparue par hasard. À force de se voir refuser des visas partout, l'Africain a commencé à regarder la carte du monde, non plus du sud vers le nord, mais d'ouest—Brésil—vers l'est—Maghreb, Émirats, Inde, Chine. Quoi qu'on dise de ce pays et de son régime, la question essentielle est: que pourra faire le Chinois à l'Afrique que l'Américain, le Français, le Belge n'ont pas encore fait? Je voulais représenter un Chinois normal, pas un fantasme..." (...China is a major player in Africa today. The title of each chapter of *Congo Inc.* is translated into Mandarin. China did not appear by accident. By dint of being refused visas everywhere, Africans have had to look at the world map, no longer from south to north, but from west—Brazil—to east—Maghreb, the Emirates, India and China. Whatever one says about this country and its regime, the essential question is: what can the Chinese do for Africa that the Americans, the French and the Belgians have not yet done? I wanted to portray a normal Chinese, not a fantasy...) ("Jean Bofane: C'est un Pygmée qui figure la grande Afrique", *Humanité*, 24 June 2014 <<https://www.humanite.fr/jean-bofane-cest-un-pygmee-qui-figure-la-grande-afrique-545006>> accessed on 9 April 2021).
- <sup>8</sup> The term *Françafrique*, coined from a combination of France and Africa and first used by pioneer Ivorian President Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1956 to describe the strong ties between his country and France, has come to designate France's neocolonial influence over and economic exploitation of former French colonies in Africa (see McGowan 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> Although growing populations also partly account for the current climate and ecological crises, capitalism is by far the highest cause of these crises.
- <sup>10</sup> It should be noted that, although Inyang has published scholarly research and plays (e.g., *The Hill Barbers* 2010) on the importance of community-based natural resource management, in *The Last Hope*, he uses "theatre as an instrument for community sensitization and mobilization" to defend fortress conservation in Korup. And he has acknowledged this role of theatre in at least two scholarly publications (see Inyang 1996, 2015, 2016).
- <sup>11</sup> See Irene Wabiba Betoko and Savio Carvalho (12 October 2020). "To protect nature, bring down the walls of fortress conservation." Aljazeera. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/12/to-protect-nature-bring-down-the-walls-of-fortress-conservation/>> accessed on 20 January 2021.
- <sup>12</sup> I owe this story to Professor Divine Che Neba at École Normale Supérieure (ENS) de Yaoundé who recounted it during my guest lecture in his class on Monday 25 February 2019. He told us the story as part of my lecture was about indigenous people and their knowledge systems in Congo Basin literature. An employee of the NGO had told him the story. Professor Neba still confirmed the story to me on phone on 12 May 2021.

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