

**Environmental Activism and Digital Advocacy in Nigerian Drama:
Reimagining the Niger Delta Oil Crisis in J.P. Clark's *All for Oil* and
Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel***

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Abstract

This paper investigates the evolution of Nigerian drama as a medium for environmental activism, specifically addressing the ecological disruptions triggered by petroleum extraction in the Niger Delta. Through a comparative textual analysis of J. P. Clark's *All for Oil* and Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel*, the study explores how dramatic structure, characterisation, and symbolism expose the realities of resource exploitation, corporate irresponsibility, and local resistance. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of eco-dramaturgy and digital Intermediality, this research defines and deploys the concepts of "algorithmic truth" - the sanitised, quantitative metrics used by state and corporate entities to mask environmental devastation and "visceral truth", the qualitative, embodied reality of ecological trauma presented on stage. By comparing Clark's historical exposition of colonial trade monopolies with Ukala's postcolonial representation of gas flaring and pipeline disasters, the paper maps the trajectory of the Delta's exploitation. Furthermore, this study offers recommendations for digital advocacy, proposing how these activist plays can be preserved and remediated through digital archiving and intermedial adaptation to secure postcolonial data sovereignty. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how Nigerian drama acts as a critical counter-narrative, bridging physical performance and digital preservation.

Keywords: *Nigerian theatre; environmental activism, digital advocacy, eco-dramaturgy; J. P. Clark; Sam Ukala; Niger Delta.*

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria represents one of the most ecologically fragile and politically volatile oil-producing corridors in the world. Since the first commercial oil discovery at Oloibiri in 1956, the region has served as the primary engine of the Nigerian economy. Petroleum extraction in this corridor generates over 90% of the nation's total export earnings and more than 70% of state budgetary revenues (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2006, p. 11; Central Bank of Nigeria [CBN], 2021). However, this "paradox of plenty" has resulted in severe environmental degradation, marked by systemic oil spills, extensive gas flaring, and the destruction of indigenous agricultural and fishing livelihoods (Darah, 2014).

For decades, Nigerian playwrights have used the stage as a social tribunal to expose the structural injustices of petrochemical capitalism. Drama has functioned as an immediate, democratic medium to vocalise local grievances and challenge dominant institutional narratives. In contemporary discourse, this conflict is fought not only on the physical terrain of the Delta but also within the domain of narrative and information management. State institutions and multinational oil corporations frequently rely on sanitised, quantitative risk assessments, compliance datasets, and gross domestic product (GDP) projections to demonstrate corporate responsibility and minimise the appearance of ecological damage (Frynas, 2005).

This paper offers a critical comparative reading of J. P. Clark's historical drama *All for Oil* (2000) and Sam Ukala's contemporary protest play *Fumes of Fuel* (2000). It examines how these playwrights deconstruct the historical and postcolonial systems of extraction that have marginalised the communities of the Niger Delta. By analysing the dramatic strategies employed in these plays, this study highlights how literary texts can serve as crucial environmental counter-narratives. Additionally, the study explores how these texts can be preserved and amplified within the contemporary digital landscape, positioning postcolonial drama as a vital tool for environmental activism and digital advocacy.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To examine how J.P. Clark's *All for Oil* and Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* represent the historical and contemporary dimensions of resource exploitation in the Niger Delta.
2. To critically define and apply the concepts of "algorithmic truth," "visceral truth," and "data sovereignty" within the context of African eco-critical and digital humanities scholarship.
3. To compare the characterisation, symbolism, environmental representation, and resistance strategies deployed in the two primary plays.
4. To propose actionable recommendations for the digital preservation, intermedial adaptation, and digital advocacy of Nigerian activist drama.

Literature Review

The intersection of theatre, environmental advocacy, and resource politics in the Niger Delta has generated a significant body of scholarship. Literary critics have long observed that Nigerian playwrights do not merely depict the environment as

a passive backdrop but rather position it as an active victim of corporate and state violence. Garri (2011) notes that the drama of the Niger Delta is characterised by a transition from the cultural-aesthetic celebrations of early post-independence theatre to a radical, eco-critical consciousness that demands systemic justice and resource control. This literary response directly reflects what Rob Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence"—an environmental catastrophe that is gradual, dispersed, and often invisible to global media.

Scholars focusing on J.P. Clark's historical plays have argued that his work provides the necessary historical context for the contemporary crisis. Asagba (2012) asserts that Clark's late plays, particularly *All for Oil*, correct historical misconceptions by tracing the lineage of exploitation back to the 19th-century palm oil trade. By dramatising the commercial monopolies of the British colonial administration, Clark demonstrates that the structural mechanics of contemporary crude oil exploitation are directly inherited from the colonial administrative state.

Conversely, scholarship on Sam Ukala's dramatic corpus emphasises his revolutionary, populist aesthetics. Tugbokorwei (2019) explains that Ukala's dramaturgy is anchored in his theory of "Folkism," an aesthetic approach designed to bridge the gap between traditional oral performance and Western literary drama. In *Fumes of Fuel*, Ukala uses Folkism to democratise the stage, utilising the participatory conventions of the folktale to engage the audience in a collective trial of the political elites and multinational corporations responsible for the Jesse pipeline fire of 1998 (Anyanwu, Okome, and Tugbokorwei, 2017).

Recently, the "digital turn" in African humanities has prompted scholars to re-evaluate the preservation and dissemination of activist theatre. Imiti (2022) observes that live theatre attendance in Nigeria has faced significant declines due to economic pressures, insecurity, and the rise of digital entertainment platforms. This media displacement, as explained by the Media Niche Theory, suggests that for traditional performance genres to survive, they must adapt to digital environments (Imiti, 2022). Eni (2012) further argues that while global technological advancements present infrastructure challenges for Nigerian theatre departments, they also offer unique opportunities for intermedial experimentation. However, a gap remains in the literature regarding how specific eco-critical plays from the Niger Delta canon can be systematically integrated into digital advocacy and archiving frameworks. This study addresses this gap by offering a comparative analysis of Clark's and Ukala's plays alongside a clear blueprint for their digital remediation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is positioned at the intersection of two converging theoretical frameworks: Eco-Dramaturgy and Digital Intermediality. Eco-dramaturgy, as conceptualised by Downing Cless (2010) and Sone (2018), examines the theatrical representation of human-ecological relationships. It demands that the environment be treated not as a static setting but as a central agent and a violated body. In the Niger Delta dramatic canon, the pollution of estuaries, the flaring of gas, and the destruction of farmlands are dramatised as bodily violations of the community. Eco-dramaturgy provides the analytical tools to examine how Clark and Ukala translate ecological degradation into dramatic conflict.

Complementing this ecological framework is the theory of Intermediality, defined by Kattenbelt (2006) as the co-presence of different media forms within a single performance space. In postcolonial digital humanities, intermediality is reconfigured as a strategy for political amplification and preservation. To ground the conceptual framework of this study, we define three specific, interconnected concepts:

Algorithmic Truth: Drawing on Lisa Gitelman's (2013) critique that data is always socially constructed and politically managed, we define "algorithmic truth" as the sanitised, quantitative, and technocratic discourse deployed by state and corporate actors. This discourse relies on environmental impact assessments (EIAs), corporate social responsibility reports, and petroleum production indices to project a state of ecological safety and bureaucratic compliance, effectively filtering out the human cost of extraction.

Visceral Truth: In contrast to corporate quantitative data, "visceral truth" is the phenomenological, embodied, and sensory reality of environmental suffering represented on stage. It relies on the aesthetic strategies of the "theatre of cruelty" and folk performance to render visible—through soot, gas fire, and charred bodies—the physical realities of pollution that algorithmic metrics sanitise.

Data Sovereignty: Informed by Roopika Risam's (2018) postcolonial digital humanities framework, "data sovereignty" is defined as the right of marginalised communities to control, archive, and manage the digital records of their own history and ecological struggles. This prevents multinational corporations from monopolising the historical archive through corporate greenwashing.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, eco-critical, and comparative research design. The primary data consists of the published play texts of J.P. Clark's *All for Oil* (2000) and Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* (2000). The textual analysis focuses on the dramatic structure, characterisation, dialogue, and symbolism of both plays to investigate how they depict environmental injustice and political resistance.

The comparative literary method is utilised to place these two plays in scholarly dialogue. Clark's play is selected because it represents the historical, mercantile origins of resource extraction in the Delta, while Ukala's play is selected because it depicts the acute, postcolonial environmental crises of the late 20th century. By analysing the structural and thematic continuities between these works, the study maps the historical trajectory of exploitation.

The analytical procedure is carried out in three distinct phases:

1. A close textual analysis of J.P. Clark's *All for Oil*, focusing on colonial commercial monopolies and the historical antecedents of the comprador class.
2. A close textual analysis of Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel*, focusing on postcolonial ecological degradation, oil bunkering, and the politics of state insensitivity.

3. A systematic comparative analysis of the two plays based on seven distinct categories: characterisation, symbolism, environmental representation, resistance strategies, dramatic structure, language style, and audience impact.

Following this textual analysis, the study uses postcolonial digital humanities scholarship to formulate actionable recommendations for the digital adaptation and preservation of these plays.

Findings and Analysis

J. P. Clark's *All for Oil: The Historical Genealogy of Exploitation*

J. P. Clark's *All for Oil* serves as a historical examination of the mercantile structures that laid the foundation for the contemporary Niger Delta crisis. Rather than focusing on modern petroleum, Clark traces the conflict back to the late 19th-century palm oil trade in the Oil Rivers Protectorate, demonstrating that the structural mechanics of foreign monopoly and local collaboration have remained unchanged for over a century.

The play dramatises the trade rivalries and political manoeuvring between Chief Bekederemo of Kiagbodo, a wealthy, independent indigenous merchant, and Chief Dore Numa of Itsekiri, a political figure appointed by the British colonial administration as a Paramount Chief. Clark utilises the commodity of palm oil as a clear historical antecedent to contemporary crude oil, showing how foreign capital requires local administrative collaborators to enforce trade monopolies.

Chief Dore Numa represents the historical prototype of the modern comprador bourgeoisie. Rather than operating as an autonomous leader, Numa functions as a systematic administrative extension of the British imperial trade bureaucracy. This is evident in his reliance on British military power and treaty structures to suppress local mercantile competition. In Scene 2, Dore Numa actively defends the British commercial treaties that exclude local traders, illustrating how administrative mechanisms are deployed to dispossess indigenous populations. Numa's collaboration with Captain Egerton of the Royal Niger Company mirrors the contemporary alliances between multinational oil corporations and the postcolonial state.

In contrast, Chief Bekederemo resists these colonial monopolies, asserting indigenous economic sovereignty. In his confrontations with Dore Numa and British consular agents, Bekederemo states: "We traded with your fathers on terms of mutual respect; we did not sign away our rivers, our soil, or our souls" (p. 34).

Clark uses the symbol of the river to represent both mercantile circulation and ecological stasis. In the play, the river is the highway for the Royal Niger Company's steamships, yet it becomes a barrier and a site of debt accumulation for local merchants. This colonial debt trap prefigures the contemporary ecological debt owed to the Niger Delta communities. The tragic reality of this systemic trap is voiced at the end of the play. As Bekederemo lies on his sickbed, attended by his wife Mitovwodo, he queries in deep frustration: "What is there to live for in this world?" (p. 62). Mitovwodo responds with a poignant lamentation of their political and economic containment: "In daylight, we are in darkness" (p.

62). The play ends with Bekederemo and Mitovwodo reflecting on the newly declared British colonial entity of Nigeria: "We hope this prophecy would put oil into our lamp in the night market; the white man calls Nigeria" (p. 64).

This metaphor of Nigeria as a "night market" built on the slippery foundation of "oil" highlights Clark's scepticism toward the colonial amalgamation, suggesting that the postcolonial nation-state was structurally designed as a site of resource extraction rather than inclusive citizenship.

Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel*: The Visceral Dramaturgy of the Inferno

While J. P. Clark provides a historical diagnosis, Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* delivers an intense, contemporary representation of the postcolonial ecological crisis. Written in the wake of the 1998 Jesse pipeline disaster, the play explores the immediate consequences of gas flaring, pipeline vandalism, and the collapse of the postcolonial social contract.

The play centres on three unemployed youths—Okoro, Ewari, and Efe—who struggle to survive in a heavily polluted Delta village. Efe has been admitted to a university in Abuja but cannot afford the fees due to systemic poverty. Enticed by Okoro and Okoro's father, Efe agrees to participate in "bunkering" (illegal oil siphoning and local refining) to raise his school fees.

Ukala represents the toxicity of the environment as both physical and psychological. This is illustrated in the dialogue between Efe and his fiancée, Timi, who begs him not to join the dangerous trade:

Timi: The money from that pipeline is dripping with blood... it is an invitation to the grave! (p. 45)

Efe: Where else do I get the money to pay for my university? The government feeds on our oil but leaves us to starve on top of the wells! (p. 46)

Timi's moral plea is overridden by Efe's economic desperation, highlighting how structural neglect drives local populations into hazardous survival strategies.

The political elite is embodied by Ebikenie (popularly known as "Earthquake"), the corrupt Local Government Chairman. Ebikenie exploits the community's resources, embezzles development funds, and sexually harasses Timi. He represents the postcolonial iteration of Dore Numa, using political power to enrich himself while labelling local youth who disrupt oil pipelines as "vandals" and "saboteurs." Ukala deconstructs this official corporate narrative, showing that oil siphoning is a direct consequence of a state system that ignores peaceful petitions but recognises the disruption of oil flows.

The climax of the play features a catastrophic fire at the pipeline siphoning site, mirroring the historical Jesse fire. Okoro and his father are trapped in the sudden explosion. Efe, ignoring Ewari's warnings, runs into the inferno to save his friends and is consumed by the fire. The graphic representation of the fire serves as a visceral rebuttal to the sanitised corporate risk reports that classify environmental disasters under technical headings like "accidental discharge."

Ewari, the sole survivor of the tragedy, becomes a revolutionary voice. In a final confrontation with the corrupt Ebikenie, Ewari delivers a blistering indictment of the postcolonial ruling and intellectual classes:

Ewari: Now that the white man has struck us with fires of affliction, why do our political leaders stab us the more with corruption and insensitivity...? Why do our intellectual leaders feed everyone with deceit because of the crumbs they expect from the politician's table? (p. 108).

He continues, attacking the silence of institutional leaders:

Ewari: Why do they rob us with their pens instead of using their intellect to educate us on our rights and how to decently ask for them? Why is there no Nathan among our religious leaders to tell King David that he has sinned? (pp. 108-109)

Ewari's speech elevates the play from a local tragedy to a systemic critique, demanding a collective reorientation of the postcolonial mind.

Comparative Analysis: Staging the Silence and Resistance

A comparative analysis of *All for Oil* and *Fumes of Fuel* reveals significant structural and thematic continuities, alongside distinct aesthetic departures that reflect the evolution of the Niger Delta crisis from its colonial foundations to its contemporary ecological consequences.

Characterisation

The two plays employ contrasting character paradigms to map different eras of systemic extraction. J.P. Clark's *All for Oil* is populated by historical figures, merchants, and colonial administrators. The characters operate within formal hierarchies; Chief Dore Numa and Chief Bekeremo represent conflicting wings of the local mercantile elite. Their interactions are defined by political negotiation, legal treaties, and alliances with foreign capital. Conversely, Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* shifts focus from the elite class to subaltern figures representing contemporary marginalised youth. The protagonists, Efe and Okoro, are defined by their economic vulnerability and spatial confinement in the polluted periphery. Rather than negotiating treaties, they engage in illicit resource siphoning as a desperate survival mechanism, while the local political comprador is embodied by Ebikenie, a corrupt local government official operating through modern state structures of patronage and bribery.

Symbolism

Symbolically, both playwrights utilise the physical elements of their environments to convey the slippery, toxic nature of resource politics. Clark centres his symbolism on palm oil, the maritime river systems, and the metaphor of Nigeria as a colonial "night market."

These symbols represent the early stages of capital circulation, debt traps, and the commercial containment of indigenous sovereignty. In contrast, Ukala's contemporary landscape shifts toward violent, high-temperature symbols: gas flares, chemical fumes, the oil pipeline, and the devastating inferno. These symbols signify the acute stage of postcolonial extraction, representing

environmental toxicity, immediate physical destruction, and the literal consumption of youth by petrochemical infrastructure.

Environmental Representation

The representation of the environment undergoes a radical shift between the two plays. In *All for Oil*, the environment is depicted as a slow, mercantile corridor. The river system of the Oil Rivers Protectorate is represented as an economic highway for colonial steamships and a site of geopolitical blockade and containment. While the natural landscape is restricted, it is not yet physically destroyed. In *Fumes of Fuel*, the environment is depicted as an active, dying victim of industrial violence. Ukala portrays a landscape heavily polluted by continuous gas flaring, toxic fumes, and oil leaks, culminating in the literal pipeline explosion. The environment is no longer just a backdrop of trade but a source of physical and psychological illness that directly instigates human tragedy.

Resistance Strategies

The modalities of resistance in both plays reflect the shifting political landscape of the Delta over a century. Clark's characters deploy intellectual, legal, and formal diplomatic resistance. Chief Bekederemo challenges British monopolies using commercial petitions, historical trade agreements, and verbal debates within colonial assemblies. The conflict is legalistic and discursive. In Ukala's play, this formal diplomacy has broken down. The youth of *Fumes of Fuel* resort to physical, direct, and ultimately self-destructive tactics. Blockades, oil siphoning, sabotage, and militant mobilisation replace the written treaty, showing how systemic exclusion drives local communities to disrupt extractive flows physically when their rhetorical petitions are ignored.

Dramatic Structure

Structurally, the plays diverge based on their distinct theatrical heritages. Clark utilises an Aristotelian, chronicle-style historical structure. The play develops linearly through highly structured, dialogue-heavy scenes, focusing on debates, parliamentary negotiations, and formal assemblies. It functions as a classical historical drama designed for intellectual analysis. Ukala, however, implements his revolutionary aesthetic of Folkism. *Fumes of Fuel* features a participatory, non-linear, and oral storytelling structure that integrates songs, dances, communal trial mechanics, and direct audience address. This structure democratises the theatrical space, transforming the performance from a passive viewing experience into a collective community tribunal.

Language Style

The linguistic registers of the plays highlight their different audiences and thematic aims. Clark writes in highly formal, elevated poetic English. The characters speak in grand, philosophical registers and complex legal-bureaucratic rhetoric, emphasising the intellectual equality of the indigenous elite with their colonial adversaries. Ukala, conversely, employs a rich linguistic mixture of Standard English, Nigerian Pidgin English, and indigenous proverbs. The use of Pidgin English democratises the characters' voices, capturing the authentic everyday interactions of subaltern youth and exposing the raw, accessible emotions of a community in crisis.

Audience Impact

Ultimately, the two plays seek different forms of cognitive and political engagement from their audiences. Clark's historical drama aims for historiographical reflection and critical contemplation, urging the audience to analyse the structural errors built into the foundation of the Nigerian nation-state. Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* seeks an immediate visceral, sensory, and revolutionary impact. By confronting the audience with the visual and auditory shock of the pipeline explosion, Ukala aims to evoke deep emotional discomfort and moral outrage, mobilising the audience to actively challenge contemporary environmental injustices.

Discussion

The comparative textual analysis of J. P. Clark's *All for Oil* and Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* addresses the first three objectives of this study by illustrating how both playwrights challenge dominant political and economic narratives of extraction.

In *All for Oil*, Clark deconstructs the early historical forms of corporate and colonial data management. The British treaties and colonial ledgers represented the "algorithmic truth" of the 19th century, translating the dispossession of indigenous merchants into official, legal treaties. Clark's dramatic reconstruction exposes the human deception behind these colonial documents, demonstrating that contemporary comprador corruption is a direct continuation of this colonial administrative system.

In *Fumes of Fuel*, Ukala challenges the contemporary postcolonial version of this technocratic narrative. By representing the sensory horror of the pipeline fire, Ukala counters the sanitised corporate data that labels environmental disasters as simple "sabotage" or statistical "risk variables" (Greer and Singh, 2000). Through his folkist dramaturgy, Ukala presents a qualitative "visceral truth" that forces the audience to confront the human and environmental costs of extraction.

This literary analysis demonstrates that Nigerian eco-drama functions as a critical counter-narrative to corporate and state metrics. However, in the contemporary digital landscape, live theatre faces significant challenges in terms of audience reach and physical preservation (Imiti, 2022). To remain effective tools for social advocacy, these plays must find new life within the digital sphere. The final section of this study addresses this challenge by proposing concrete recommendations for digital preservation and intermedial adaptation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that J. P. Clark's *All for Oil* and Sam Ukala's *Fumes of Fuel* are critical eco-critical plays that expose the historical and contemporary structures of resource exploitation in the Niger Delta. By comparing Clark's historical analysis of colonial trade monopolies with Ukala's visceral representation of postcolonial pipeline disasters, the study highlights how drama challenges sanitised institutional narratives.

To ensure that these plays continue to serve as active resources for environmental advocacy and postcolonial data sovereignty, we offer the following future-oriented recommendations for theatre directors, digital humanists, and cultural institutions:

1. **Developing Specialised Digital Performance Archives:** We recommend that academic and cultural institutions collaborate to digitise productions of *All for Oil* and *Fumes of Fuel*. Rather than standard video recordings, these plays should be preserved as interactive, metadata-rich digital objects. Incorporating digital prompt books, scene-by-scene annotations, historical treaty documents, and environmental data would transform these theatrical texts into robust public resources for human rights documentation and postcolonial archiving.
2. **Implementing Intermedial and Virtual Adaptations:** To overcome the limitations of physical theatre spaces and bypass potential state censorship, directors should explore virtual performance models. Adapting scenes from *Fumes of Fuel* into virtual reality (VR) or streaming live, intermedial performances from secure locations to global audiences would expand the reach of environmental theatre, creating transnational spaces of witness.
3. **Exploring Creative Augmented Reality (AR) Interventions:** As an innovative pathway for digital advocacy, mobile augmented reality applications could be developed. If adapted into AR, users could point their mobile devices at public corporate sites (such as commercial fuel stations) to trigger digital overlays of scenes from *Fumes of Fuel* or *All for Oil*. This would superimpose the environmental realities of extraction directly onto the clean spaces of consumption, disrupting public apathy through digital activist theatre.
4. **Hacking the Attention Economy via Short-Form Media:** Selected monologues from *All for Oil* and *Fumes of Fuel* should be adapted into high-impact, short-form video content for platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Disseminating Ewari's revolutionary speeches or Mitovwodo's lamentations as 60-second performances can bypass institutional gatekeepers, engaging younger, digitally active audiences with the long-term struggle of the Niger Delta.

By implementing these recommendations, scholars and theatre practitioners can ensure that the environmental advocacy of Clark and Ukala is preserved, adapted, and amplified within the contemporary digital world.

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