Digital transformations and the construction of utopia imperfect in African science fiction: Eco human syncretism in Mame Bougouma Diene's *Lekki Lekki*

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Abstract

This article, focusing on Mame Bougouma Diene's *Lekki Lekki,* examines how contemporary African science fiction (ASF) harnesses the speculative possibilities of science fiction to critique Africa's socio-political realities and envision a domesticated African future which incorporates traditional ethos and technological advancements. ASF marks a significant epistemological shift by reimagining science and technology, not as imported constructs, but as adaptable, locally grounded practices, that is a hybrid scientific paradigm that merges technological innovation with indigenous epistemologies. This synthesis challenges the entrenched binary between scientific rationalism and traditional knowledge, advancing a syncretic and process-oriented vision of utopia, what this study terms an "imperfect utopia." Rather than presenting utopia as a fixed ideal, ASF portrays it as a dynamic negotiation shaped by Africa's historical, cultural, and ecological specificities. Through this lens, African writers redefine science and technology as tools for both survival and self-determination, reframing them within Africa's epistemic and environmental contexts. Drawing on frameworks from African science fiction and ecocriticism, the study explores how these narratives interrogate the colonial legacy of Western scientific dominance and proposes integrative, sustainable models of existence. Ultimately, ASF disrupts reductive dichotomies between modernity and tradition, science and myth, offering a nuanced blueprint for reimagining Africa's agency within the global speculative imagination.

Keywords: Utopia, African science fiction, science fiction, hybridity, syncretism.

1.   Introduction: Towards a definition of African science fiction (ASF)

African science fiction (hereafter ASF), much like its Western counterpart, resists rigid or hermetic definition. The genre of science fiction itself has long been marked by an inherent indefinability. Delany (1994) observes, "we have watched definitions posed and definitions refuted. All have seemed too broad or too narrow" (p. 176). Similarly, Roberts (2000) agrees that "all of the many definitions offered by critics have been contradicted or modified by other critics, and it is always possible to point to texts consensually called SF that fall outside the usual definitions" (pp. 1–2). And that is because "the qualities that govern texts universally agreed to be science fiction can be found to govern other texts as well…it may even begin to appear that ultimately nearly *all* fiction—perhaps even including realism itself—will be found to be science fiction" (Freedman, 2000, p. 16).

ASF shares this fluidity, further complicated by its entanglement with multiple cultural and geopolitical contexts. Like poetry, ASF resists clear cut boundaries, and efforts to impose definitional frameworks have often been met with resistance by both practitioners and critics like Okorafor and Adeyemi, particularly when such definitions attempt to subsume ASF within the broader rubric of Afrofuturism. Okorafor (2019) for

instance persistently refuses to be called an Afrofuturist writer, rather referring to herself and works as "Africanfuturist" writer. She writes in her blog that: "Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, [it] is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa" (p. 1). These writers argue that their creative and philosophical intentions depart significantly from the assumptions often embedded in Afrofuturism. This rejection underscores the importance of considering African science fiction on its own terms, rather than through frameworks developed in the West.

Despite definitional ambiguities, several scholars have proposed working descriptions of the genre. Adejunmobi characterises ASF as a body of literature through which African authors employ science fiction elements to interrogate the socio-political arrangements shaping the contemporary African condition (Adejunmobi, 2016, p. 265). Crucially, this definition does not restrict ASF to futuristic or speculative temporality; instead, it accommodates realist depictions of African life that are shaped by the technological and socio-political anxieties of the present. Likewise, Omelsky (2014) posits that African science fiction is marked by its appropriation and localisation of canonical science fiction tropes: "they recycle many of the existing tropes and conventions of Euro-American SF and insert them into distinctly African cultural geographies" (p. 38). In this view, ASF writers engage in a form of narrative grafting, infusing familiar speculative conventions with uniquely African cultural, historical, and spatial inflections.

Central to the conceptualisation of ASF is the identity of the author and the authenticity of the setting. As Okorafor (2019) insists, the African provenance of both the writer and the narrative space is foundational to the legitimacy of the genre. African science fiction, then, can be defined as speculative storytelling about Africa by African authors, incorporating indigenous epistemologies and exploring the intersection between African socio-religious systems and technological advancement. Thus, for a text to be considered African science fiction, it must be unambiguously grounded in African temporality and geography, and its thematic concerns must emerge from African experiences or a projection into African future. This positioning stands in deliberate contrast to the rationalist and often decontextualised scientific ideals that underpin much of Western science fiction.

ASF therefore, addresses the post-industrial realities confronting African societies, particularly the socio-environmental and ethical consequences of science and technology. It also reveals the ways in which African communities have domesticated and reinterpreted scientific paradigms through the lens of organic traditions and cultural continuity. In other words, ASF advances a hybrid epistemology, blending modernity and tradition in ways that produce a culturally mutated variant capable of surviving, and thriving in the speculative future. In so doing, ASF domesticates technology to fulfil utilitarian purposes rooted in cultural specificity, rather than simply showcasing technological novelties as ends in themselves. Ultimately, African science fiction offers a unique contribution to global speculative discourse as it provides a historicised, non-Western vision of the future, one that foregrounds African people, their traditions, and their aspirations. Through this genre, African writers assert both cultural autonomy and imaginative agency, challenging dominant narratives and proposing alternative futures shaped by African values, histories, and environments.

This paper articulates the concept of "utopia imperfect" as a framework for reading African science fiction. The essay demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of postcolonial, ecocritical, and utopian theories, weaving them into a coherent argument that redefines the speculative imagination in African contexts. By positioning *Lekki Lekki* (2020) within this theoretical nexus, the paper reveals how African science fiction both critiques and transcends Western technocentric paradigms, envisioning instead a hybrid, eco human model of futurity

grounded in indigenous epistemologies. The strength of the analysis also lies in its close textual reading, which illuminates how the narrative's techno-organic symbols, such as the Soul Machine, embody the reconciliation between modern science and traditional spirituality. Furthermore, this essay is seminal because it bridges an abstract theory with narrative evidence. This intellectual attempt contributes to the on-going conversations about de-colonial futurism, ecological consciousness, and Africa's speculative reimagining of science and technology.

This work also addresses the dearth in African science fiction by theorising the intersection of utopian imagination, ecological consciousness, and indigenous epistemologies, a connection often overlooked in existing critical discourse. While much of ASF criticism has focused on its political, technological, or postcolonial dimensions, this study advances the conversation by introducing the concept of "utopia imperfect" to describe a uniquely African mode of futurist thinking that resists the static, idealised visions of Western utopianism. By analysing Diene's text, the paper demonstrates how African writers reconceptualise science and technology as culturally embedded, adaptive, and ecologically attuned practices, rather than as imported instruments of modernity. This reorientation fills a scholarly gap in understanding how ASF negotiates the relationship between modern techno-science and indigenous ecological wisdom to imagine sustainable futures. The study's contribution to knowledge, therefore, lies in its development of a syncretic critical framework, one that bridges ecocriticism and speculative futurism; to articulate how African narratives generate alternative epistemologies of progress and survival. In doing so, the paper expands the theoretical vocabulary of ASF studies and offers new pathways for interpreting Africa's speculative engagement with science, environment, and de-colonial transformation.

2. Methodology

The choice of Diene's *Lekki Lekki* (2020) as the primary text for this study is guided by both thematic relevance and theoretical significance within the landscape of contemporary African science fiction. Methodologically, this paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis, grounded in postcolonial ecocriticism and utopian theory, to examine how Diene's narrative constructs a decolonial and eco-human model of futurity. Unlike more widely discussed ASF texts, such as Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) or Thompson's *Rosewater* (2016) and the others, *Lekki Lekki* offers a distinctive engagement with environmental degradation, techno-spiritual hybridity within a specifically African context.

Diene's short story captures the complex entanglement of technology, ecology, and spirituality in ways that foreground Africa's ongoing negotiation between modernity and tradition. This made it a particularly suitable text for exploring the paper's central concept of "utopia imperfect," a paradigm that envisions progress as a continuous, adaptive process rather than a fixed ideal. The selection also responds to a methodological gap in ASF scholarship, which tends to privilege Anglophone and novel length works over Francophone and short speculative narratives.

3. Utopia and the foundations of science fiction: A genealogy of idealised space

At the core of science fiction as a literary genre lies the concept of utopia, a speculative space often juxtaposed with dystopia and understood as an ideal realm in which the complexities and contradictions of real-world conflicts are imaginatively resolved. The notion of utopia, while central to science fiction, is rooted in a longer literary and philosophical tradition that begins with More's seminal text *Utopia*, first published in Latin in 1516 and translated into English by Robynson in 1551.

As Rogan (2009) notes, most contemporary definitions of literary utopia trace their origins to More's foundational work, in which the term "utopia" itself is coined from the Greek *ou-topos*, meaning "no place". Importantly, More's *Utopia* is not to be mistaken for *eutopia*, or a "good place;" but rather, a satirical projection, a "non-place" that critiques existing sociopolitical structures through imaginative displacement (p. 309). More's *Utopia*, therefore, does not present an ideal society in the conventional sense but rather operates as a space of cognitive estrangement, where familiar norms are subverted to provoke critical reflection. Rogan argues that More constructs this imagined world not as a blueprint for perfection but as a means of distancing the reader from their own reality:

> *Utopia* is a 'no place,' and does not represent an idea of the ultimately ideal, attainable place, but serves as a blank slate upon which he inscribes a world that is intended to estrange the contemporary reader from their conditions of existence, thus allowing them to see their own world in a new light (p. 309).

In this sense, *Utopia* functions as a political satire employing mechanisms that would later become central to science fiction, particularly the trope of cognitive estrangement. Freedman (2000) further extends this conceptualisation by describing utopia as "the homeland where no one has ever been but where alone we are authentically at home. It is the promised land that can only be attained by means of exodus" (p. 65). This paradoxical formulation underscores the role of utopia not as a destination to be reached, but as an experiential device, a metaphorical and imaginative elsewhere from which to critique the present and envision alternative modes of existence. Thus, utopia in science fiction is not simply an abstract ideal but a narrative strategy that enables radical thought and political critique. More's *Utopia* sets the stage for the development of this tradition, laying the groundwork for subsequent science fiction texts that continue to explore the tensions between what is and what could be, between the real and the possible. Through the dual mechanisms of satire and estrangement, utopia in science fiction becomes both a site of imaginative freedom and a tool for socio political interrogation.

In this interrogation, Suvin (1979) delineates several structural characteristics essential to the utopian form. These include the use of an isolated setting, a comprehensive and panoramic depiction of the alternative society, a systematic and often rigidly formal social order, and dramatic strategies that challenge the reader's normative expectations. Suvin further describes utopia as a "historically alternative wishful construct"—a vision of the ideal that remains aspirational and fundamentally elusive as quoted in Seed (Seed, 2011, p. 73). Sargent (1994) contributes to this enquiry by defining utopia as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived" (p. 9). Utopia, then, functions not only as imaginative critique, but also as a tool of ideological intervention. Freedman (2000) deepens this interpretation by suggesting that utopia cannot be understood as wholly detached from empirical reality. Rather, he argues that "it is the transformation of actuality into utopia that constitutes the practical end of utopian critique and the ultimate object of utopian hope" (p. 69).

Although utopia as a concept may be inherently unattainable, its imaginative potential played a formative role in the development of eighteenth-century travel fiction, as exemplified in the works of Defoe, Swift, Spence, and Paltock. These authors employed utopian motifs not as concrete blueprints for ideal societies, but as literary devices through which to critique contemporary socio-political conditions. Seed (2011) argues that Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* established the narrative pattern for subsequent utopian literature by framing the

utopian society as the subject of a traveler's report. This narrative technique positions the traveler as an intermediary figure, mediating between the reader's familiar reality and the speculative realm being depicted. More's contribution to the genre also highlighted a formal liability: the utopian narrative's tendency toward excessive exposition and an overemphasis on societal order (p. 73).

However, following the catastrophic events of the Second World War, literary utopias gave way to a surge in dystopian narratives. As Seed observes, dystopia can be understood as a "malfunctioning utopia," wherein the promise of scientific advancement and social liberation is subverted, leading instead to disorder and chaos (p. 74). Dystopian fiction underscores the disillusionment with Enlightenment ideals, especially in light of technological developments that failed to deliver emancipation and instead exacerbated human suffering. In examining the implications of science fiction within this context, Leonard (2006) asserts that the genre allows writers to explore both poles of this spectrum.

Science fiction can hypothesise future worlds in which existing social problems have been resolved, or conversely, it can magnify those problems, extending them into bleak, dystopian futures (Leonard, 2006, p. 253). While traditional religious and philosophical discourses often portray utopia as the dwelling place of the morally upright and dystopia as the realm of evildoers, science fiction complicates this binary. Rather than presenting these worlds as fixed moral endpoints, the genre frequently renders them as contested spaces, arenas in which competing values and ideologies struggle for dominance. In this light, the interplay between utopia and dystopia in science fiction becomes not merely a narrative contrast but a dynamic continuum of ethical, political, and existential tensions. These speculative spaces offer the possibility of transformation and renewal, functioning as receptacles where the future is negotiated through both critique and hope.

4. Contaminated utopias and syncretic heterogeneity in African science fiction

The early emergence of utopian themes within African American literary tradition is exemplified in Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859), often cited as the first proto science fiction text authored by a Black writer. This narrative centres on the orchestration of a successful slave revolt and the subsequent establishment of a Black utopian society in the American South, culminating in resettlement in Cuba. Similarly, Harper's *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892) is widely regarded as the first African American utopian novel, premised on a vision of a just and egalitarian society wherein racial and gender equity is realised among formerly enslaved individuals and their white counterparts. While differing in their narrative trajectories, one emphasizing militant resistance, the other peaceful integration, both texts articulate a foundational utopian impulse shaped by the enduring legacy of racial subjugation in the United States. As Fabi (2001) observes, these early African American utopian narratives emphasise the transformative process of individual and collective ideological development over the attainment of a fully realised or perfected utopian state.

This emphasis on ideological transformation rather than static idealism resonates profoundly within contemporary African Science Fiction (ASF), where utopia is reconfigured not as a definitive site of perfection, but rather as a discursive space of contestation, negotiation, and potential rebirth. In ASF, utopia is inherently provisional, subject to decay, appropriation, and the imposition of hegemonic structures that replicate exclusionary dynamics. ASF suggests that a utopia that suppresses dissent or enforces homogeneity undermines its own legitimacy. Instead, these narratives often foreground communal values that coexist with, rather than override, individual agency. The utopian visions in ASF are therefore dynamic and pluralistic,

reflecting the syncretic nature of African epistemologies, which traditionally accommodate diverse spiritual, cultural, and social systems.

Central to this syncretic vision is the tension between indigenous African worldviews and the encroachment of technocentric modernity. ASF engages this tension through speculative frameworks that seek not to reject science and technology outright, but to domesticate and harmonise them with African socio-cultural values. In doing so, these narratives critique the uncritical embrace of technological advancement that often characterizes Western science fiction, portraying it as a force complicit in ecological degradation, social fragmentation, and neo-imperial domination. ASF, in contrast, posits a utopian alternative that is iterative and rooted in cultural hybridity, where science is not an instrument of sterile advancement, but a tool reoriented towards sustainable and inclusive futures.

Ultimately, African science fiction represents a critical intervention into global science fiction discourse. It offers speculative models that not only resist dystopian inevitability, but also challenge the epistemological binaries between tradition and modernity, science and spirituality, the global and the local. In doing so, ASF articulates a form of utopianism grounded in the lived realities of African communities—an aspirational horizon that remains conscious of its limitations while remaining committed to social transformation. In an era of unprecedented technological advancement and ecological precarity, such a vision is both necessary and urgent.

This reimagining of utopia as a process rather than a destination is particularly salient in ASF's ecological consciousness. In many African speculative texts, the recovery of the environment is framed as integral to the construction of a liveable future. ASF writers envision societies where ecological stewardship, communal ethics, and technological innovation converge to resist the destructive logics of capitalist exploitation and environmental neglect. Such narratives underscore the urgency of rethinking the role of science and technology within African contexts, not as ends in themselves, but as means to a broader socio environmental equilibrium. The leadership problem in Africa is responsible for the myriads of difficulties bedevilling the continent. Omelsky (2006) notes that:

> the leaders are not conscious of preserving posterity. At the moment, unbridled capitalism and the quest for financial aids and loans by these rudderless leaders, have them giving up the landscape to multinational corporations and foreign government to use the ecosystem as drilling grounds for fossil fuels and solid minerals and its vast lands as areas used for scientific experiments with future devastating ramifications (p. 34).

African Science Fiction now operates as a corrective discourse situated against the backdrop of dominant technological epistemologies, offering an alternative worldview grounded in ecological consciousness and a recuperative return to pre-colonial cosmologies. Fundamental to ASF's critique is a reinvestment in nature as both a symbolic and material force. Within many African societies, nature has long served as a crucial signifier of spiritual, cultural, and communal life. However, the exploitative trajectories of extractivist capitalism manifested in unregulated mining, deforestation, industrialisation, and spatial expansion, have increasingly endangered the ecological foundations upon which African life depends. ASF thus advocates for a syncretic alternative, wherein scientific rationalism is tempered and enriched by nature-based aesthetics and traditional cosmologies, producing a mode of futurism that ensures continental survivability amidst

anticipated resource scarcity. This yields what may be termed a "utopia imperfect", a vision of futurity that resists dystopia through imperfection, hybridity and adaptability.

This conceptualisation of utopia in ASF significantly diverges from Western paradigms, which have often been shaped by the theological idealism rooted in Thomas More's foundational text, *Utopia* (1516). In More's formulation, utopia functions in a way that is underpinned by Christian dogma and monolithic moral codes that dictate sociopolitical order. In contrast, ASF posits a cosmology of ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity. Rather than conforming to a singular hegemonic ideal, ASF's utopias are embedded in a pantheon of diverse spiritual and philosophical systems, what may be understood as syncretic heterogeneity. This approach refuses essentialism and critiques the limitations of any fixed ideal. As such, the utopia envisioned in ASF is not a static end state but a striving, a continuous negotiation toward equilibrium between humanity and the natural world.

Consequently, the utopia posited by ASF writers, therefore, is an ongoing phenomenon, one that renews, critiques, and regenerates itself through cycles of self-correction. This dynamic conception aligns with Moonsamy's (2006) assertion that utopia, like all human constructs, "is prone to decay, much like everything else, and must continually forge ahead in acts of constant renewal" (p. 343). In this sense, utopia in ASF is less a place than a practice, an evolving form that responds to shifting social, political, and ecological conditions. Its regenerative capacity is not merely philosophical, but urgently practical, given the rapid techno scientific transformations affecting African societies.

In addition to its forward-looking aspirations, ASF is imbued with a nostalgic sensibility. It often mourns the displacement of a once harmonious triadic relationship among divinities, humanity, and nature. While ASF does not advocate a regressive return to the past, it seeks to retrieve and recontextualise indigenous epistemologies as a basis for imagining sustainable futures. This return is not only temporal, but also spatial and epistemological, a process of recombination wherein the past and present inform a hybrid future. The utopia projected in ASF is thus not a manifestation of a centralized socio-political authority or a knowledge monopoly; rather, it is a decentralised, hybridised formation that resists fixed boundaries and monocultural dominance.

This hybridity is not incidental, but central to ASF's narrative logic. The genre deliberately deflects the notion of utopia itself through tropes of mutation and contagion. Such deflection resists the sterility associated with classical utopias, spaces defined by total order, purity, and the erasure of difference. As Moonsamy (2016) notes, ASF "embraces the contaminated utopia," resisting both the genre's Western inheritance and the colonial residues embedded within idealised futurities (p. 343). In these narratives, utopia is always already infected: by history, by contradiction, by the very impossibility of perfection.

That is why Reid (2009) underscores this critical tension in postcolonial science fiction, observing that writers frequently "parody utopian societies as a sign of the inflexibility of essentialist Western values while simultaneously celebrating utopian thought's potential for social transformation" (p. 266). ASF embodies this dual gesture. It critiques the exclusions of conventional utopian models while reclaiming their imaginative utility to envision radically better futures. As Moonsamy (2016) further articulates, "utopia comes to stand for the imaginative conceptualisation of significantly better worlds, not ideal ones," and this reconceptualisation allows for the integration of "both the unknown song and the potential contagion that one can encounter" (p. 343).

Accordingly, the utopias constructed within ASF are imperfect by design. Edward and Mendlesohn (2003) contend that "utopian perfection is a form of control that denies any sense of adventure, risk taking, and discovery" (p. 222). Moonsamy (2016) extends this argument, asserting that a "perfect" utopia is incompatible with an African futurity because it replicates the very colonial logics from which the continent seeks emancipation (p. 337). Through the embrace of an impure, mutable, and hybridised utopia, ASF writers not only resist genre conventions, but also assert a distinct intellectual and political agency within global science fiction. These contaminated utopias embody resistance, complexity, and possibility, hallmarks of a genre committed to both critique and creation.

5. Utopia imperfect: Ecological syncretism and cultural reclamation in Mame Bougouma Diene's *Lekki Lekki*

The organic and spiritual interconnectedness between human beings and the natural world constitutes a foundational aspect of African cosmology. Within the African worldview, nature is not merely an external environment to be utilized or exploited; rather, it occupies a central, metaphysical position that informs cultural, spiritual, and philosophical thought. As Egya (2019) observes, "humans do not only depend on nature for feeding but also for spiritual wellbeing… [they are] products of nature, profoundly inscribed in it, constantly rejuvenated by it" (p. 414). This ontological embeddedness of humans within nature is vividly illustrated in the broader trajectory of African literary philosophy, evident in the works of seminal authors such as Laye, Achebe, and wa Thiong'o, among others. These texts articulate an intimate, almost sacred relationship between people and their environment, a relationship that is both sustaining and identity constituting.

However, the incursion of modernity and the colonial project have disrupted this ecological harmony, introducing exploitative paradigms that regard nature as a resource to be dominated and consumed. For a people whose cultural and existential essence is deeply entwined with the land, the degradation of natural ecosystems precipitates not merely environmental loss, but an existential crisis that threatens the continuity of life and tradition. Consequently, postcolonial African writers increasingly emphasise a renewed ecological consciousness that recognises nature "not only as the other being besides human being, but also as an environmental being, a place, inflected with histories of peoples, that is shaped and in turn shapes the cultural existence of humans" (Egya, 2019, pp. 412–13).

African science fiction, in this regard, has emerged as a critical narrative form through which the recuperation of precolonial environmental symbiosis is envisioned within speculative futures. It frequently articulates the imperative to reclaim the land, not merely as physical territory, but as a site of cultural memory and ecological agency. This reclamation is often pursued through the very instruments of modernity, science and technology, which, while responsible for the ecological damage, are reimagined as tools for restoration and renewal. The dialectic between destruction and redemption through technological intervention is central to Diene's speculative narrative *Lekki Lekki* .

Set in a post-apocalyptic Senegal, *Lekki Lekki* portrays a dystopian landscape ravaged by global environmental shifts. The once fertile land has become arid and lifeless due to drastically reduced rainfall, threatening both human and non-human life. The narrator poignantly describes the condition of the land, noting that it remains a lifeline despite its degradation: "we get our food from the trees, our water from the roots" (p. 78). This statement not only underscores the resilience of the natural world, but also the enduring dependence of the community on ecological systems for sustenance. The story further illustrates how

environmental degradation has eroded communal life. The traditional nocturnal gatherings, once characterised by storytelling, collective memory, and social bonding, have been replaced by isolated domestic retreats necessitated by nightly dust storms. These storms are held at bay by a retractable protective dome that shields the village each evening, suggesting a technologically mediated survival that nevertheless lacks the warmth of communal cohesion. "Villagers hurry home and stay indoors before the protective dome rose against the evening storm" (p. 76), the narrator notes, emphasising the loss of a once shared cultural ritual.

In this technologically altered world, even pastoral life, a long-standing symbol of African communal identity, has been reduced to a rationed and emaciated vestige. Morning routines, once guided by organic rhythms, are now governed by artificial mechanisms: "The sun wouldn't shine through the dusty vortex until the turbines had worked their magic" (p. 76). The extinction of goats and the skeletal condition of cows highlight both ecological collapse and cultural disintegration. Herders, maintaining the remnants of a traditional lifestyle, now do so within an artificial ecosystem, suggesting a fragile attempt to preserve identity in a fundamentally transformed world.

Lekki Lekki, therefore, serves as a potent critique of the ecological consequences of unchecked modernisation and a call for syncretic solutions that bridge scientific innovation with indigenous ecological knowledge. Through speculative fiction, Diene reasserts the centrality of the land to African identity, while envisioning pathways toward environmental restoration that honour the cosmological roots of African communities. The narrative ultimately affirms that in the African context, technological advancement must align with ecological symbiosis to forge a meaningful and sustainable future. The narrator's father said that:

> We herded cattle before the world knew we existed. When other people flew, some of us herded cattle. When the world crumbled, and the towers fell we herded cattle. Two thousand years later we herd cattle. It doesn't matter where we're going. It doesn't matter where we came from, it doesn't matter if we're here or on the moon Djoulde. We herd cattle, it's our tradition… And that's why I take you all in turn with me in the morning. To remind you of that… (p. 78).

In the context of increasing multicultural hybridity and the pervasive allure of techno-scientific advancement, the affirmation of cultural identity and traditional knowledge systems remains an indispensable marker of communal selfhood. The erosion of indigenous identity in favour of ephemeral technological trends carries with it the risk of cultural dislocation. This underscores the critical importance of preserving traditional practices as a cohesive force that affirms cultural continuity and homogeneity among its adherents. In *Lekki Lekki*, this preservationist ethos is exemplified through the community's reverence for cows, which hold symbolic and ritual significance within their sociocultural framework. Despite the dramatic decline in cattle populations due to ecological degradation, the community deliberately refrains from consuming mutton. This conscious abstention signifies an effort to safeguard what remains of a vital aspect of their traditional heritage—underscoring the cow's centrality not merely as livestock, but as a cultural emblem. Moreover, the community's worldview is shaped by a profound belief in the sentience and personhood of nature. This ontological posture is captured in the character Djoulde's assertion that "she knew the tree can hear her and know her love" (p. 75), which motivates her daily ritual of singing to the tree (p. 77). Her inability to hear the tree in return does not negate her belief; instead, it initiates a desire within the community to bridge this communicative gap through technological innovation. The elders, acknowledging the limits of human

perception, collaborate with scientists to create a technological interface that can fuse human consciousness with the sentient essence of nature.

This endeavour culminates in the development of a hybrid technological device known as the "Soul Machine," a fusion of indigenous spirituality and scientific innovation. Embedded within primordial forest trees, the Soul Machine facilitates the electronic transfer of human soul essence into the trees themselves, engendering a metaphysical convergence between the human and the non-human. This union, wherein the material transitions into the immaterial, enables reciprocal communication between humans and nature. Through this integrative process, the community envisions a renewed relational ontology, one in which humans can listen to, nurture, and exist harmoniously with the environment.

African Science Fiction, as exemplified in this narrative, privileges the metaphysical and introspective dimensions of existence over the empirical materialism often characteristic of Western techno scientific paradigms. In contrast to the prevalent trope of interplanetary migration as a solution to ecological collapse, a hallmark of Euro American science fiction, the scientists in the text propose an inward migration into the spiritual core of human and planetary existence. Their goal is not to escape Earth, but to re-inhabit it more ethically and symbiotically: "to live on. One with the earth" (p. 79). This approach exemplifies the distinctive epistemological framework of ASF, which seeks to restore equilibrium between technological innovation and ecological reverence through a syncretic fusion of science and cultural spirituality. This inward migration is necessary, as Djoulde tells her cynical husband:

> We'd be a planet with a conscience. A planet that could guide life instead of suffering from it. When a new people are born to this world, they won't be blind like us humans were. Ravenous like we were. They will learn. From us (p. 79).

Cheikh, the protagonist's husband, expresses a critical and pragmatic stance toward the emergent biotechnological experiment aimed at integrating human consciousness with the natural world. Viewing the scientific endeavour with scepticism, he regards the mechanical grafting of human essence into nature as an exercise in futility. For Cheikh, the speculative nature of the procedure, still in its nascent stage and fraught with uncertainty, renders it an untenable risk. He chooses instead to endure the harsh realities of a dystopian Earth, preferring the tangible discomforts of a deteriorating environment to the ambiguous promises of a technological transcendence that lacks empirical certainty.

His doubts are articulated in his dialogue with his wife, Djoulde, where he questions both the logic and safety of the procedure: "Look, what happens if it doesn't work and you die? You wouldn't even know... Remember the test run?" (p. 79). Here, Cheikh invokes prior failures as a cautionary reminder of the limits of experimental science. His apprehension reflects a rationalist worldview that privileges caution and experiential knowledge over speculative innovation. He remains unconvinced by the project's theoretical underpinnings, perceiving the attempt to synthesise the human soul with nature via technological mediation as not only unreliable but also ultimately unnecessary.

Cheikh's resistance serves as a narrative counterpoint to the optimistic vision of eco-technological harmony espoused by other characters. His reluctance underscores the ethical and existential tensions that arise in response to radical scientific interventions, particularly those that seek to reconfigure the boundaries between humanity and the natural world. In this way, the text does not merely celebrate technological advancement,

but stages a complex dialectic between scepticism and belief, between the familiar certainty of ecological decline and the unfamiliar promise of techno-spiritual integration. But progress was however made at the Soul Engine hub, where the willing will make the transition to intangibleness,

> the trees glowed with a reflective light, trunks and branches laced with slick metal, connected across the soil by slithering black cables to large grey cubes vibrating with a collective hum like the voices of a million bugs calling to be born check (p. 80).

Nonetheless, the implementation of the Soul Engine technology is accompanied by stringent ethical and physiological screening protocols, which mitigate many of the risks that fuel Cheikh's scepticism. Individuals whose neural patterns are deemed incompatible with the machine's interface, such as those exhibiting erratic brain wave activity, as well as pregnant women, are systematically exempted from undergoing the consciousness transfer procedure. This precautionary measure suggests that the scientific community involved in the development of the Soul Engine is both aware of its limitations and committed to minimising harm through selective participation. As Khady, one of the project's principal facilitators and orientation experts, clarifies, the transition process is not universally applicable, but is instead governed by a series of medically and ethically informed criteria (p. 80). These guidelines ensure that only those with optimal cognitive and physiological alignment are allowed to proceed, thereby reinforcing the integrity of the experiment and countering the claim that it operates on speculative or haphazard foundations.

In this context, Cheikh's reservations, while emblematic of a broader cultural and philosophical hesitation toward post-human integration, are shown to be partially misinformed. The narrative thus complicates his position by juxtaposing emotional doubt with the procedural rigour of a carefully managed scientific innovation, underscoring the nuanced interplay between scepticism, informed consent, and technological advancement in African speculative imaginaries. Khady explains further that:

> The Engines are very complicated but quite simple. The world is a network, everything is interconnected. We all evolved from the same original organism. Billions of years ago. Down to our DNA. We are one with the earth. One with the wind. And yes, one with the cows we herd in the morning…And they communicate. Organically. They know who we are and fear us when we wish them harm, and love us when we give them love and they let the others know, through their roots, through their spores and sap. We have mapped these networks and now, we can connect to them more directly through the Soul Engines. These engines parse out our human consciousnesses and pulse them into the network, mimicking the bokki's own bio-chemical signals, those signals are transmitted into the roots of the trees and conducted into the earth where they become one with the planet. Growing with new saplings, spreading through open spores. Our way of life is no longer sustainable, if we want to survive, we have to adjust to the world, adapt and embrace it. For thousands of years humanity has tried to shape the world in its image. We failed and did so much damage to the world in the process. Now, we pay it back (p. 81).

Paying nature back is necessary because the narrative presented in Diene's *Lekki Lekki* reflects a world teetering on the brink of ecological collapse. It depicts a post-apocalyptic environment characterised by severe climate anomalies, diminished rainfall, the near extinction of livestock, the degradation of the ozone layer, and the toxic saturation of the atmosphere. Within this environmental catastrophe emerges a radical technological intervention: the Soul Machine, a symbolic and material conduit for the techno organic reconciliation between humans and nature, to save both humans and nature. In this speculative scenario, the preservation of life and culture is no longer possible through conventional means. The text posits that only through a deliberate syncretism between the organic and the mechanical, a merging of human consciousness with natural elements, can ecological and existential continuity be assured. This form of techno organic fusion collapses the historical binary between the human and the natural, proposing instead a hybridised ontology in which mind, body, and soul coalesce within the natural world.

Djoulde, the central figure in the narrative, initially embraces the opportunity to undergo the transformation facilitated by the Soul Machine. However, her participation is interrupted when the machine detects that she is pregnant—rendering her ineligible for the process due to its ethical protocols. Her exclusion underscores the machine's sensitivity and ethical design, further discrediting Cheikh's earlier scepticism. Cheikh, Djoulde's husband, had refused to participate, dismissing the initiative as unproven and perilous. Upon learning of his wife's willingness to undergo the transformation without his approval, he responds with hostility, masking his insecurity and fear with emotional and physical abuse. His reaction underscores a broader theme in the narrative: the resistance to change from patriarchal and anthropocentric paradigms that prioritise control and materialism over ecological harmony and spiritual transcendence.

Despite Cheikh's doubts, the experiment proves successful. Those who underwent the transformation now inhabit a new ontological space, existing as ancestral spirits embedded within the trees, the air, and the waters. Their presence is both ethereal and active, serving as ecological stewards and spiritual guides for subsequent generations. Four years after the Soul Machine's implementation, the narrative illustrates a community that is thriving in symbiotic connection with nature. The grafted ancestors not only care for the natural world but also maintain communication with the living, particularly the children, who are now born with telepathic abilities. Djoulde's daughter, Arsike, exemplifies this emergent generation, able to communicate freely and consciously with her grandmother, who now resides within the ecosystem.

Djoulde, however, remains confined to partial communion with the ancestral realm, receiving messages only through dreams. This limitation signifies her transitional position between the corrupt, anthropocentric past and the evolving posthuman future. Her marginal access to the spiritual world is a poignant reminder of the ecological complicity borne by earlier generations, whose actions contributed to the environmental crisis. Meanwhile, Cheikh, increasingly alienated and disillusioned, succumbs to despair and violence. His descent into alcoholism and domestic abuse signals the destructive consequences of rigid resistance to transformation. Ultimately, his rejection of the ecological synthesis proves fatal. In a climactic moment, the spirit of Djoulde's mother intervenes by psychically overwhelming Cheikh, driving him into a state of madness that culminates in his accidental death.

The conclusion of the narrative reaffirms the cyclical and regenerative philosophy central to African cosmology. Though the ancestral spirits acknowledge their temporality, "none of them will be there forever" (p. 89), they affirm the community's future through continuity. Arsike is expected to one day enter the Soul Engine herself, symbolising an intergenerational commitment to ecological stewardship and cultural preservation. As Djoulde's grandfather proclaims, "we were always one with nature…it's our tradition" (p. 89).

The ancestral admonition that "just because you can't hear" (p. 89) the earth's cries does not mean it is silent, underscores the spiritual deafness that contributed to environmental degradation. Now, however, humanity has been restored to an ontological alignment with nature, allowing for reciprocal communication and mutual care.

In *Lekki Lekki*, the synthesis of spiritual tradition and scientific innovation does not signal a retreat into romanticized pasts, nor an escapist projection into sterile techno futures. Rather, it embodies a utopia imperfect—an ongoing process of ecological repair and cultural reclamation. Through techno organic hybridity, the narrative envisions a world in which nature, tradition, and technology are not antagonistic forces but interconnected modalities for survival, continuity, and renewal.

6. Conclusion

The prominence of nature-based aesthetics within African Science Fiction is deeply rooted in the cultural epistemologies and ontological frameworks of African societies, wherein nature is not merely a backdrop to human activity but a central, animating force in the structure of communal life and cosmological order. ASF foregrounds this ontological pre-eminence by envisioning scientific and technological innovation not as instruments of domination or escape, as is often the case in Euro American science fiction, but as means to restore and reforge a lost communion between humanity and the natural world. In these narratives, science is reimagined as a reconciliatory tool, one that counteracts the alienation produced by Western modernity and reintegrates the human subject into a relational and ecologically conscious cosmos.

Operating within a postcolonial framework, ASF actively interrogates and dismantles the hegemonic paradigms propagated by traditional Western science fiction, which often posits interplanetary migration or technological transcendence as the default responses to ecological collapse. In contrast, ASF resists such escapist trajectories and instead articulates a form of planetary responsibility. This repositioning constitutes a significant intervention in the speculative tradition, offering a counter narrative that reclaims African agency, cosmology, and ecological knowledge systems from the margins of futurist discourse. Through this intervention, ASF performs a critical revisioning of history, what may be termed a corrective historicity, that challenges the colonial legacy of technological imposition masked as religion, education, and civilisation.

Despite the purported universality and benevolence of these colonial civilizing missions, their application in African contexts has repeatedly failed to yield the promised ideal of societal perfection. ASF exposes these failures and rejects the utopian projections they imply. Rather than striving for a static and unattainable perfection, ASF proposes a dynamic model of *utopia imperfect*: a fluid, contested space characterised by hybridity, multiplicity, and on-going negotiation. Within this imaginative terrain, the interplay between indigenous African epistemologies and contemporary scientific paradigms produces a syncretic vision of futurity, one that neither denies the value of science nor relinquishes the spiritual and ecological imperatives central to African worldviews.

In this way, ASF reorients the speculative gaze inward and downward, toward the earth and its histories, rather than outward and upward into the void of space. It offers not a flight from dystopia, but a transformative engagement with its causes. Through this lens, utopia becomes not a distant destination but a continuous, imperfect striving toward balance, justice, and ecological renewal. The merger of science and African liturgy in ASF thus inaugurates a powerful space of cultural reimagination and resistance, an ever-evolving

landscape where the values of the past and the imperatives of the future converge in the pursuit of sustainable coexistence.

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