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## Folklore and Environmental Conservation among the Swahili and Luhya of Kenya

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### **Abstract:**

*Environmental degradation is a major concern in Kenya and the world at large. Global warming is one of the major consequences of environmental degradation that is affecting human beings and animals in a major way. Presently many lakes and rivers in Kenya are polluted and also drying up and in the process endangering lives of human beings and animals. Several wildlife are emigrating from the national parks causing unwanted human/wildlife conflict. The movement of the animals also kills tourism which is one of Kenya's main foreign exchange earners. The invasion of the Mau Forest by local communities has destroyed the forest causing rain shortage which has in turn attracted drought. As a result of this, many human beings and animals have died. Ethnic clashes in Kenya have been fought over the natural resources of the Mau Forest, which have seen the forest and its environment destroyed.*

*The question we ask is 'Why was environmental degradation not an issue in Kenya in the past? Is it possible that Kenyans have relegated their environmental responsibilities unlike in the past when they considered taking care of the environment their individual and joint responsibilities? This paper explicates how folklore, as a communal counsel, was used to conserve the environment by teaching the community from their youth the importance of the environment. Songs, stories, proverbs and riddles emphasized the importance of conserving the environment, as a way of protecting the people against such problems. This study explores Luhya and Swahili proverbs to establish the role of environmental conservation or destruction portrayed in it so as to chart the way forward in educating people on the way forward.*

**Keywords:** Environmental preservation, Bantu, proverbs

### **1. Introduction**

The Swahili say, *Mke ni nguo, mgomba kupalilia*: A wife is like clothes and a banana plant needs weeding i.e. A well cared for wife is seen from her dressing; she is like a banana plant that must be cared for. All good things need deliberate care. In this paper we argue for the purposeful minding of the environment. First, we will start off by introducing folklore and in particular, the role of proverbs in society. Then we will argue that from a people's proverbs we are able to discern their attitude to the environment and conservation. But first let us introduce the Luyia and Swahili people.

The Swahili people are a Bantu ethnic group and culture found in East Africa, mainly in the coastal regions and the islands of Kenya, Tanzania and north Mozambique. The name *Swahili* is said to originate from the Arabic word *Sawahil*, meaning "coastal dwellers". They are mainly united by culture and Kiswahili, the Swahili language that they speak. The Swahili also include Arab, Persian, and other migrants who reached the coast as early as the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. CE, and intermarried with the local Bantu people there.

The Luhya (Luyia) are a Bantu group found in Western Kenya and Eastern Uganda. It is generally agreed that there are seventeen dialects among the Luhya. This study drew most of its data from the Central dialects of Wanga, Tsostso, Shisa, Kabras and Marama. (For more on the Luyia see Khasandi-Telewa 2006 and Wambunya 2005).

#### *1.1. African Oral Literature in Environmental Preservation*

I decided to use oral literature (or folklore, generally) to discuss this very important aspect of environmental conservation because oral literature expresses 'the very heart of a people's way of life: it is the very soul of their culture' (Bukunya, Kabira and Okombo, 1994:85). Being the reservoir of a people's values, oral literature 'expresses a given society's world view and gives them a springboard from which their day-to-day existence is propelled' (ibid) Okot p'Bitek also affirmed that oral literature embodies the political, social and moral philosophies of the people, their outlook on life and death' (Okot P'Bitek 1973, quoted in Bukunya *et al*, ibid). It is important to study and understand traditional cultures and folk lore in particular as these can be used to help us reshape our values and preserve that which is good while discarding and avoiding that which cannot benefit us now.

Moore (2009: 346) discusses how Indigenous traditional knowledge can be tapped in mitigating human wildlife conflict in Namibia, particularly among the Khwe, a Khoisan community and elephants. She argues that it is likely, however, that the Khwe's knowledge of elephant behaviour will now take on a hybrid form as 'old' traditions and memories merge with the younger generation's observations of their environment and new experiences associated with an independent Namibia. The government's policy of sustainable utilization in addition to the rising international environmental consciousness will be important within this. Even though, she avers, trying to revive more traditional forms of elephant knowledge in the current socio-political environment may be of little use to the Khwe because both the Caprivi and the Khwe have undergone significant transformation since the time in which the Khwe would have been depending on this knowledge to avoid confrontation with elephants. In particular, the rules and regulations associated with access to the environment have changed too much. This is especially the case with elephant conservation: because of its endangered species status, Namibia has a responsibility to safeguard the elephant for the international community.

As such, her paper demonstrates that culture is a process that adapts in response to biophysical and socio-political change. This finding has valuable insight into the dynamic nature of culture and cultural memory in making new sense of the world. It reformulates the notion of 'loss of culture', instead, presenting a perspective of adaptation and hybridization as people's needs and wider circumstances change.

Workineh (2005) discusses Oromo indigenous environmental ethics and suggests that there is a need, for the revival of a multiplicity of indigenous and cultural environmental ethics in contemporary societies. He also asserts that there is a further need on the part of those who have power to produce knowledge, and those scientists and environmental philosophers who can influence the former, to change the negative attitudes towards indigenous environmental knowledge and ethics. This is because:

The worldviews of the indigenous traditions of various countries in the world contain many environmentally friendly and profound insights into the nature of life and our mother Earth... indigenous environmental ethics can be integrated into modern environmental ethics. There are many things that the rural people know and environmental ethicists do not, and vice versa. In some cases, peasant farmers and pastoralists who live on and by the land are far more resourceful and innovative than modern technicians in the area of environmental control and soil conservation. Likewise, modern environmental ethics and related theories can address a vast array of problems that indigenous knowledge cannot. Thus modern environmental scientists and ethicists and the rural people can learn from one another...to foster mutually enhancing relations between humans and the earth. (Workineh 2005:30)

That the environment is in need of preservation and restoration is a well known fact. There are warnings of 'the litany', though questioned in Regis (1997):

The environment is in poor shape on earth. Our resources are running out. The population is ever-growing leaving less and less to eat. The air and the water are becoming ever more polluted. The plant species are becoming extinct in vast numbers...we kill off more than 40,000 each year. The forests are disappearing, fish stocks are collapsing and the coral reefs are dying. (Quoted in Lomborg 2001: vii).

There is talk of catastrophes and how we risk consigning humanity to the dustbin of evolutionary history by self destructing (*New Scientist*, 2001:1). In the article 'Self Destruct' the *New Scientist* Magazine goes further to compare human beings to the asteroid that allegedly wiped out the dinosaurs as we are increasingly damaging the world. Overpopulation, vanishing soils, and killing off of fisheries, drying up of wells, burning of fossil fuels are leading us all to cataclysm. Even though some are sceptical of the factuality of these versus exaggeration and spreading of fear (Lomborg 2001 believes things are better), it is still a fact that industrialization and modernity lifestyles have some impact on the environment, not always for good and that deliberate steps ought to be taken to mitigate against this damage.

Due to degradation it is not uncommon to find human-wild-life conflict that leads to loss of property and even lives in some cases. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere (Khasandi-Telewa (2006), our fore parents lived in harmony with these animals, each one getting their fair share of nature's riches. By exploring the folk lore of our societies we can extract how the philosophy and attitudes of our people enabled them to live in harmony with the animals and plants. Workineh (2009) argues that there are two main approaches in modern environmental ethics: human-based (anthropocentric) and non-anthropocentric with different strands of thought within the two approaches.

Human-based environmental ethics stresses that the natural environment does not have intrinsic (non-instrumental, non-derivative) value beyond human beings.

In contrast to human-based ethics, non-anthropocentric ethics stresses that things other than human beings should be the proper subjects of moral concern as well as human welfare. It challenges the existing value categories and moral analysis. One group of non-anthropocentric environmental ethicists suggests that ethics should be extended to all living things. Others argue that environmental ethics should be concerned with the well-being of whole species than of individual specimens, with the integrity of biotic communities and the health of ecosystems. (Workineh 2009, p19)

Whereas we do not go into the fine details of this dichotomy here nor draw a very fine distinction between what could be two extreme views (for further explication of this argument see Workineh 2009), we infer that environmental conservation among both the Swahili and the Luhya would lean towards the anthropogenic. The environment was basically preserved in order to make human beings' existence more comfortable. When there were signs of environmental damage like droughts and floods divine intervention was sought to protect the human beings. It is a bit strange even today, when the arguments of non-anthropogenic tendencies try to impose their views on Kenyan indigenous peoples. For instance, whereby in the case of human-wildlife conflict they are told to leave the animals alone yet they have caused damage to human interests it is still a challenge to local people and hard to comprehend.

### 1.2. Proverbs and the Environment

We have chosen to focus on proverbs because they are defined as ‘the most widespread and the most respected genre of African Oral literature’ (Bukanya *et.al* 1991: 47). Conversation, whether simple and everyday or serious, political, judicial or religious when conducted with a sprinkling of proverbs acquires an intelligent and wise dimension. Proverbs settle arguments with very few words. Miruka (1987:44) tells us that society is the mother of culture and every culture is divided into the material and the social. Whereas the material culture consists of artefacts, utensils, tools, furniture, musical instruments and attire, the social culture consists of language, history, religion, philosophy, customs and other intangible elements of culture. Proverbs are part of the artistic communication and Miruka (*ibid*) sums up the following as features of proverbs after sieving from several published definitions (Kipury (1983), Akivaga *et al* (1982), Finnegan (1970), Nandwa and Bukanya (1983)):

- a. Shortness, terseness or brevity
- b. Truth, wisdom, meaning or pithiness
- c. Obscurity, indirectness or gnomic nature
- d. Relative invariability of form
- e. Acceptance and usage by a community

There are diverse ways of classifying proverbs but the one most appropriate for our task at hand is that of Miruka (1994) that we adapt in this paper, whereby he shows proverbs as both art and part of socio-culture. This brief analysis also gives us features of proverbs that we shall encounter once we start the analysis.

### 1.3. Social Functions

Proverbs are used for more than just warning, advising, cautioning and generally exhorting others to behave in a certain preferred way. There is a diverse array of social functions that proverbs serve to fulfill. These are briefly illustrated below following Miruka (*ibid*). The proverbs we use in this paper all refer to aspects of the environment whether flora or fauna. A limitation is that we could only select a few proverbs: there are very many proverbs in both cultures that touch on some aspect of the environment but time and space cannot allow us to deal with all of them.

#### 1.3.1. Aesthetic Functions

Proverbs are used to make conversation more enticing and persuasive. Achebe has often been cited alluding to proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten. This aesthetic function is achieved because proverbs are rich in imagery. They create indelible pictures in our minds with their strong and vivid comparisons and allusions. Indeed, every aspect of life is a source of rich imagery that can be aptly used in proverbs. The images conjure up pictures in the mind that reinforce the clarity of the subjects. Imagery is indeed the oral graphics of literature (Miruka, *ibid*, p70) and this is well manifested in proverbs. These images can appeal to our tactile, visual, olfactory or audio senses. Images can refer to stock names from real or imagined happenings and characters under which become associated with certain proverbial circumstances. These effects also contribute to the rhythm of the proverbs and thus to the aesthetics as there is often internal rhyme which creates phonic symmetry. Sample, for instance, the rhythm in the following Swahili proverbs:

*Kazi mwanamandanda, kulala njaa kupenda* (When you work hard, it is certain that you will succeed. On the other hand, if you don't work hard, you are bound to have a miserable life).

*Usilaumu sisimizi sukari haimalizi* (Don't blame an ant; it will never finish the sugar i.e. Don't look for lame excuses).

#### 1.3.2. Reflective Functions

They express a people's reflections on life. Proverbs are a summary of the philosophy of a people that has developed over time and undergone fluctuations and revisions to retain what is relevant to today's life. Miruka (*ibid*:78) points out that from the occurrences and recurrences, empirical conclusions are coined on the nature of life and expressed in proverbs as listed truths traversing the past via the present and into the future. As people reflect on their lives they refine proverbs to reflect what man has done, what he is doing and what he is capable of doing. This reflective function of proverbs is what allows us to take a peek into a society's values, attitudes and thought processes through its proverbs. For instance, we have the Swahili proverb:

*Jogoo la shamba haliwiki mjini*. (The village cock does not crow in town, which is a reflection on changing times). The Luhya say:

*Eshikhumoola shienya okhukhuluma* (that which crawls on you intends to bite you) and:

*Ininga yahale ibotsa niyileshera* (a pigeon from far eats sparingly- being mindful of the setting sun)

#### 1.3.3. Normative Functions

This is whereby proverbs are instructive and edifying. They are used to point out errors in society and rectify that which is going wrong. There are certain standards expected in society and through proverbs one is exhorted to adhere to these. Thus, they serve to educate, warn, caution, advise console, encourage, satirise, encourage and other didactic functions. Proverbs admonish, especially the young to toe the line. Examples of the normative function of proverbs can be seen in:

- *Ziba mwanaya usipite panya* (Swahili): Fill up the crack so the rat can't pass, i.e. Fix small problems when they arise so they don't turn into large ones
- *Wapiganapo tembo wawili ziumiazo nyasi* (Swahili): When two elephants fight it's the grass that gets hurt. When the rich and powerful contend with each other it is the weak and powerless who pay the price.

- *Ndege mjanja hunaswa kwa tundu bovu (Swahili):* A clever bird gets caught by a worthless trap i.e. A clever person can be tripped up by an idiot. It is possible to be “too smart” and forget or overlook what is blatantly obvious to everyone else.
- *Ukimwiga tembo kunya utapasuka mkundu.* If you imitate an elephant defecating, you’ll burst your anus-yours can never be as big! Know your limits to avoid getting hurt.
- *Usione simba kapigwa na mvua.* Do not look down upon a lion because it has been rained on. Don’t ridicule the powerful when their situation takes a turn for the worse.
- *Watetea ndizi mgomba si wao.* They argue over the bananas but the banana plant belongs to someone else. Don’t waste your time arguing over matters that don’t pertain to you.

#### 1.3.4. Summative Functions

Miruka (*ibid*, 82) refers to proverbs as being both ‘short and shortening’. There is a general interpretation to each proverb but context also determines how each proverb is to be interpreted with each usage. Consequently, one does not jump to conclusions on hearing a proverb but must analyze the context of usage to infer the intended meaning. This is because proverbs are also condensations of larger issues, thus veiled and requiring decoding for clarity.

- Tsinjira tsibiri tsiakaniakania ifisi (Luhya- Two ways confused the hyena)
- *Tawi kavu kuanguka si ajabu.* (Luhya-It is not surprising for a dry branch to fall i.e. the downfall of the weak or corrupt is not a surprise).

## **2. A Proverb for Every Aspect of Daily Living**

We shall now start examining how proverbs were used in every aspect of life among the two communities. We shall divide the activities according to time of the day.

### *2.1. Reflections While Performing Early Morning Chores*

#### 2.1.1. Going to the River

Both the Luhya and Swahili lived (and some still live) in an environment that accommodated diverse flora and fauna. From their proverbs we learn of their daily lives whereby they learn varied lessons from animals to teach wisdom to their young and educate each other. Right from when they wake up we find proverbs exhorting early rising and diligence. One is expected to clean up their environment as they rise in the morning:

- *‘Oranjilia weya iyiyo kho waleka yowashio’* (Luhya- First sweep yours [home] before you criticize your neighbour’s’).
- *Mja kisimani mbele hunywa maji maenge* (Swahili- Whoever comes to the well early drinks pure, unspoiled water).

After cleaning up by sweeping the houses and courtyards, they proceed to fetch water from the river. This is a good way to start a fresh day as: *Amatsi kabula omwoyo omubi’* (Luhya-Water has no bad heart i.e. water will only do you good). As they fetch water there are also proverbs emanating from the experience as they observe:

*‘Amatsi kakhayanga omutsi* (Luhya- the person who goes to collect water from the river is most troubled when it is wasted’). Water is precious and the fetching procedure is tiresome, thus wastage is highly discouraged and it is not uncommon to hear a warning of how water ought to be carefully utilized.

As they fetch water they reflect on the behaviour of animals at the watering hole:

*Okhufwimba khwelishere shikhukaya ing’ombe okhunyuwa amatsi* (Luhya-The swelling of the frog does not hinder the cow from drinking water, i.e. the weak have no voice). The presence of frogs shows rivers with life, thus clean and healthy. The Luhya had to keep their rivers clean and not dispose of any rubbish in the water. Urinating in water was considered taboo and it was believed one could get the disease ‘*rienyanja*’, from such an action. Many rivers are now so polluted you would be lucky to hear the croaking of any frog!

The Swahili at the Coast also have reflections on water and its occupants that have guided the community in wisdom:

- *Maji ukiyavuliya nguo huna budi kuyaogelea.* If you take of your clothes off for water you must bathe-accomplish the task you begin.
- *Maji yakimwagika hayazoleki.* If water is spilt; it cannot be gathered up-do not cry over split milk.

On the way to and from the river one will most likely encounter many animals each with a lesson to teach. For instance, one can startle guinea fowl and they fly away one after another, but never instantly together:

- *Amakhanga shikapulushila khulala kakhupana tsimbaha* (Luhya- Guinea fowls do not fly together lest their wings collide-sometimes we have to give one another personal space for peace to prevail).
- *Kanga hazai ugenini.* (Swahili -A guinea- fowl does not lay eggs in strange places-it has a special, well prepared environment for such purposes).
- It is also observed that: *Akhayundi shikhacelera lisoko* (Luhya- the small bird cannot advise the big one).

Should disaster break out and one bumps into a snake then *‘Indabushi yolininayo niyo ya wiriranga inzukha’* (Luhya [henceforth ‘L’] - the stick you have is the one you use to kill the snake) or as the Swahili echo: *Fimbo ya mbali hayiuwi nyoka* -The weapon which is

far away won't kill a snake). Usually one would run away from the snake but it sometimes becomes necessary to kill it especially if a dangerous experience has been had before:

*Mwenye kuumwa na nyoka akiona jani hushtuka.* (Swahili, [henceforth 'S'] - the one who has been bitten by a snake, is afraid of even grass i.e. once bitten twice shy). Indeed, such thoughts must be avoided unless ready for consequences: *Ukitaja nyoka, shika fimbo mkononi.* (S-When you mention a snake, have a stick ready in your hand. Talk of the devil and he appears).

As we have said above, it is not always necessary to kill a snake and instead a good relationship can be established: *Maneno mema hutoa nyoka pangoni.* (S-Pleasant words will draw the snake from its hole-where force fails try sweet-talking and dialogue for results). If you must provoke the fearful animal the Luhya recommend that you be prepared to run or face the penalty:

*Inzofu ifutara khoyanyekwa* (you wait for the elephant to turn its back before insulting it) or as they also say *Otanga yinyekungwa niyili khushisia* ('Otanga', the tough elephant's wrinkles are only mentioned when it has turned its back).

When fetching water, care must be taken not to become a crocodile's meal as sometimes befalls the hapless: *Ikwena ilia eshilianjilile* (L-a crocodile eats what fate has planned).

Being based mostly at the coast, the Swahili also have reflections on water:

- *Asiyekunywa kwenye chemchemi hunywa kwenye mto* (He who doesn't drink from the spring will drink from the river, i.e. If you can't get what you want, you'll take whatever you can get).
- *Atekaye maji mtoni asitukane mamba* (Whosoever draws water from the river should not curse the crocodile, i.e. do not insult those that can help or destroy you).
- *Avumaye baharini papa kumbe wengine wapo* (Though the shark is known for fierceness it is not the only dangerous creature in the sea, therefore others can also cause harm. On the flip side, though there are many that can do something better, do not fear to try your hand too).
- *Bahari haivukwi kwa kuogolea* (You cannot swim across the sea, meaning know your limits).
- *Bahari iliko ndiko mito iendako* (Rivers flow to the sea, that is wealth flows to the already wealthy).

### 2.1.2. From the River: Waterpot on Head

On the way back from the river one can observe various wildlife going about their business and make observations galore: a mongoose runs off with its prey to find a suitable spot for its meal: *Haitilile shali haimanyiranga* (L-A mongoose does not devour its prey where it has caught it).

Shuffling the feet as you balance your waterpot on your head and swing your hips, you might scare a hare out of its hiding place and set it up for the hunter:

*Eshituyu shialira omufumbulusi* (L- If you scare a hare out of its hiding and it is set upon by the hunter then it will hold you responsible). But for those hares that survive the dangers to a ripe old age it is payback time for the children:

*Eshituyu shikofule shinunanga mumwana* (L-The old hare suckles its child; thus children must nurture their aging parents.)

The colourful little bird singing as it 'mouth-feeds' its young has a lesson on greed: *India yera omwana welikholobe* (L-overfeeding killed the little bird's chick).

In the early morning dew one needs to be on the lookout for the fresh mushrooms, a rare delicacy, and remembers to note that '*Aho omwana yeha olwoba shaburanga nalahenga*' (A child frequents the spot where he uprooted a mushroom). One has to watch out though, for the pain of a thorn as it dips into the bare feet is to be avoided. It is noteworthy though how thorns co-exist:

*Amawa kabili sikatsomananga* (L- Two thorn trees do not prick each other).

There are a few big rivers in Luhyaland, many of them tributaries of the Nzoia. But even those that appear to be but streams must be approached with caution: '*Amatsi keranga omwelema*' (L- the expert swimmer can also drown).

The Swahili have also observed that *Mfa maji hukamata maji* (A drowning man clutches at the water –used to show irrational behaviour when one is desperate).

On arrival home from water fetching, one must be careful as she enters the house to offload the pot, since it is an adage that *isiongo yatishiranga amuliango* (the pot breaks at the door- a warning that it is not over till it is over- be careful to the very end).

### 2.1.3. To the Farm, Hoe in Hand

Morning chores accomplished, the Luhya is expected to go to work on the farm clearing bushes and planting crops. '*Eyisakulira yibotsa*' (The hen that scratches find something to eat) and '*Amani okalila*' (Your strength is your source of food). Every individual must do their bit not expecting too much help from others because though *Amatere kabili kera inda* (two fingers are needed to kill a louse); yet also '*Mbeba nyingi sitsiyaba obuko bwatsia*' (Many rats cannot dig a deep hole). Nevertheless, cooperation is encouraged as also among the Swahili: *Chombo hakiendi ikiwa kila mtu anapiga makasia yake* (The vessel doesn't go if everyone rows in their own way; In order to get anything done a group of people must cooperate).

The Swahili also urge hard work in spite of the often scorching sun:

- *Mchuma juani hula kivulini* (One who harvests in the sun eats in the shade; hard work now pays off later).
- *Kivuli cha fimbo hakimfichi mtu jua.* (S- The shadow of a stick cannot protect one from the sun).
- *Mtembezi hula miguu yake* (An idle wanderer consumes his legs; One who wanders aimlessly just tires out his legs without gaining any profit).
- *Obufu shibwayilungwa omusala ta* (L- there is no medication for laziness; it must be cast out).

In order to work well one needs to prepare the tools adequately. *Mti hawendi ila kwa nyenzo* (S-You need to have proper tools to carry out any task).

Besides, be wise in the use of your tools: *'Eshikhaya imbatsi omuholo shikunyala'* (Luhya-whatever defeats an axe cannot be cut by a slasher). No need to blame tools either: *Mchagua jembe si mkulima*: (S: He who is choosy about hoes is not a farmer).

Focus on the task at hand and work skilfully: *Owatsia iyaywa yakhalira khubusuma owarula inyuma yabukula*: (L-Who went to borrow the axe and sat down to a meal was overtaken by the one that came and asked for it directly).

*Oulakamanya yarema namatswa* (L-He who did not know cut down the wrong banana variety [not eaten green but meant for ripening])

Be wise and do not expend your energy on the impossible: *Eshiakhaya imbatsi omuyeka nikwo kulikwisa* (whatever defeated the axe the wind will bring down).

*Mpanda ovyo hula ovyo* (S-He who sows in a disorderly fashion will reap likewise).

*Omwiranyi mweka yamala amaanda-* (L-The apprentice smith wasted charcoal-skill and conservation are called for at work).

*Owalima hata mbu 'akhamuna nikho akhamalira'*: (L-He who planted sparingly blamed the hare for eating up his harvest).

*Kukhula kha kwanyola ikhombe* (L-a tree matures before it gets a cavity).

*Kukhalulukha kuloma ta* (L-It better shed off its leaves than dry up).

As work progresses one must remember to multitask. Do not forget other duties

As work goes on so do observations from the environment: *Mgomba haushindwi na mkunguwe*: (S: A banana tree isn't broken by its stalk of bananas; No one is given a burden that is too big for them to carry).

Work goes on come rain or shine: *Mpemba hakimbii mvua ndogo* (S-A native of Pemba does not run away from a small shower).

Work hard as you also work for others: *Mkulima ni mmoja walaji ni wengi* (S-The farmer is one but he feeds many).

Finish on time and go home or else you might have to shelter at a home by the road side. Woe unto you if you cannot shelter due to your sins: *Owabeya ebunyakhufiala imukhupanga nabira* (L-He who lied to his in-laws will have to brave the rain as he is unable to seek shelter there).

I have argued elsewhere (Khasandi-Telewa 2006) that working times had to be adhered to in order to allow a peaceful existence with animals. One was not allowed to set off to work too early, or leave work too late in the evening. There were stories about ghosts and taboos to keep human beings from encroaching on the space of wild life, which are known to be active very early in the morning and late in evening, including hippos that feed at night.

## 2.2. The Environment Must Be Kept Clean-No Defilement

Even though it is not uncommon to find men urinating on the roadside it is anathema to spoil the environment by defecating on the way. Those that dared do so were considered stiff necked: *'Wumire orie shinga omuni wekhunjira?'* (L-Why are you so shameless like the one who defecates on the way?)

Messing up on the road or by the roadside causes others great discomfort: *Owakanania akebirira; owakasena shiakebirira* (L-Who did the mess forgot it but he who stepped in it will never forget it). *Ounia khunjira shianiakho lulala* (L- He who defecates on the road will not do it once-said of a despicable character).

*Mchama ago hanyeli, huenda akauya papo* (S-. A traveller does not make a mess where he had made a camp as he might one day come back.)

*Imbongo ikhasi ayirula yisakula obukono* (a female deer destroys her lair before departing).

Farting is considered ill-mannered and is referred to as 'spoiling the atmosphere' *Aninyimaye mbazi kanipunguzia mashuzi*. (S- He who denies me beans rids me of farts; one who refuses your request for help prevents you from accumulating debt.)

Paths were preserved for the purpose of free movement and those that tried to utilize such spaces otherwise, were mocked, unlike today in many parts of Kenya where public utilities are 'grabbed' by 'private developers':

*'Akhweboola yalima khunjila* (L-the boastful one cultivated on the road)'. This boastful fellow should instead go further and clear his own bush instead of wasting time in idle talk and boastings. Certainly, there are many such places to exploit: *Kwenye miti hakuna wajenzi* (S- Where there are trees, there are no builders). But one must heed advice on where to build or else you should be like he who built his house on the path of dangerous animals: *Nandahulila yombakha khumuhandanda kwamanani* ('I do-not-listen' built on the ogres' footpath).

And please preserve the bridges: *Daraja ukilibomoa ujue kuogolea* (S- If you destroy the bridge you'd better know how to swim. If you intend to destroy something that is useful to you [e.g. a relationship, quit your job] you'd best be prepared to get along without it.)

Environmental medicinal secrets are jealously guarded: *Omuchesi omwayira* (L-do not expose your source of herbs to another medicineman; give him the prepared sample). Medicines were found among herbs and special skills and much learning was required to master which medicine was for what ailment. Thus, these secrets were not easily disclosed to others. It is a fact that herbal medicines have lately, been found effective and healthy, as they are natural and avoid the side effects of synthetic medicines. This is the kind of knowledge modern scientists can learn from traditional indigenous communities. It is valuable, though and ethics should be observed in the getting thereof. This also calls for preservation of these bushes where they are found. Traditionally, such places were preserved by taboos and no one wanted to go near a traditional healer's lair. That fear helped protect their environment against encroachment.

Sometimes plant husbandry was needed to protect especially the special plants: *Omusala kukhulira khukundi* (L-a tree is grafted on another).

*Omusaala kukololosibangwa nikushili omutoro* (L-a tree that is bending is straightened when it is still young).

Even insects provided lessons: *Nzi kufa juu ya kidonda Si haramu* (S- For a fly to die on an ulcer is not bad [after all, he got what he wanted]). This is similar to: *Okhulia khwera isuna-* (L-eating made the mosquito to die-as he tried to suck blood he was slapped to death)

If hygiene was not well maintained there was risk of pests such as lice, bed bugs, and even mice:

*Kitanda usicho kilalia hujui kunguni wake.* (S-You cannot know the bugs of a bed that you have not lain on).

*Eshibisa omusaatsao olishilia netsimbeba* (L-which which you hide away from your husband you will eat with mice. Do not be selfish and hide food away in secret places- which is even unhygienic).

*Eshibi shifutswa, ingokho yafutsa lisa* (a bad thing is thrown out-even the hen spat out the caterpillar- do not hold onto that which is no good or destructive, even if it took you time and effort to acquire it).

Further lessons from insects include: *Amache kabeyereshila tsiswa* (L-the crawling ants deceived the white ants-that all was well outside). White-ants are eaten by the Luhya but no one is interested in the crawling ants. So the white-ants that follow the crawling ants risk being eaten up. Be cautious and do not follow others blindly.

*Fuata nyuki ule asali* (S-Follow bees and you will get honey).

### 2.3. Proverbs on Food from the Environment

The traditional communities got their food from their environment by hunting, gathering and cultivating. There was, however, careful usage of food and ingenious ways of preserving that which was gathered e.g. by drying in the sun or by the fireside and salting. There was no hunting for sport as is done in some modern societies. There wasn't even culling of animals with the pretext that they had become too many. Hunting was strictly for food or protection against a particular situation whereby some animals were endangering lives. Lessons were learnt from even such undertakings:

*Akhasimba khatseshela omunyu kukhalunga* (L-The mongoose laughs at the soup that will cook it- even when faced with destruction be cheerful).

*Mavi usioyala, wayawingiani kuku?* (S-Why drive away fowls from the dung you do not eat yourself? Do not be a dog in a manger).

*Ungalijua alacho nyuki, usingalionja asali.* (S-Had you known what bees eat, you would not have tasted the honey. Something good comes out of something despicable-do not desire to dig out too much information e.g. about your spouse's past).

Certain animals such as antelopes, buffaloes and hares were hunted for meat: *Nabalekwa yera imbongo* (L-the despised one killed the buffalo- a great achievement from a weak person). Green vegetables were also eaten with *ugali* (maizemeal) but the meal was made more delicious when accompanied by meat or chicken. Greens alone were considered inadequate:

*Nabukwe buleche butesherwa inderema* (L-it is the despised inlaws that are served with greens-i.e. without meat)

*Olakhema omwami tsifwa khane imulumanga* (L-Do not refuse the king greens-he could be hungry. A visitor, especially a ruler was to be served with meat or chicken. However, if a visitor suddenly came but you have no meat at hand, do not be ashamed to just serve them what is available). This is similar to the Swahili proverb *simba akikosa nyama hula nyasi* (when the lion finds no meat he eats grass).

Domestic animals and poultry were also tended for food: *Bata mtaga mayai usimchinje kwa tamaa ya wengi.* (S-Don't be pressurized to slaughter a duck that's hatching eggs if you want more ducks: Don't destroy the good things that you have if you want more).

Food and drink were very important. *Omete lishere: kulia khokwaruma* (L-Omete, the frog has to eat before he can hop around).

*Msitukane wagama na ulevi ungalipo* (S-Do not abuse palm-wine tappers while drunkenness persists-you need them).

#### 2.3.1. Hunting and Trapping

*Amachesi amanji kachila eliaka lia Ogemo liabulaho* (L-too much advice made the ant-bear to escape from Ogemo's trap)

*Oureka lilola lipurukha* (L- if you set the trap while the bird is watching it will fly away).

*Msasi haogopi mwiba* (S-A hunter is not afraid of thorns).

#### 2.3.2. Gathering Fruits from the Wild

With the environment well preserved there was no need to buy fruits from the market. One could always go and pick them from trees at home and in the bushes.

*Kateta yamula imbolo* (L-Kateta, the lazy one takes home the rotting fruit-usually that which is already fallen off from the tree). Similarly, *Oulanina yahebwa amabisi* (L-He who does not climb the tree will be given raw fruit).

*Omusala omurerere kunina owakumanya* (L-the slippery tree is climbed by one who knows it well).

*Mchagua nazi hupata koroma* (S-He who selects coconuts with great care ends up getting a bad coconut- do not be too choosy in life).

*Nazi mbovu harabu ya nzima* (S-A rotten coconut in a heap spoils the wholesome ones).

*Mstahimilivu hula mbivu* (S-the patient will eat ripe fruit) and *Mwenye pupa hadiriki kula tamu* (A hasty person misses the sweet things- because he cannot wait for the fruit to ripen). So does the impatient: *Mvumbika changa hula mbovu* (S-One who stores half grown fruit eats it rotten).

### 2.3.3. Friendship/Relationships

Finally, we shall examine some environmental proverbs that teach lessons about friendships:

- *Chui naye ana mke* (S- Even a leopard has a wife; everyone, even the worst person, has someone who loves and respects them).
- *Chui hakumbatiwi* (S-the leopard is not embraced-know your friends and those to avoid)
- *Usicheze na simba, ukamtia mkono kinywani.* (If you play with a lion, do not put your hand in its mouth-that would be pushing your luck).
- *Tunda jema halikawii mtini* (S-A good fruit doesn't ripen on the tree. A good person will be rewarded early e.g. A girl with a good disposition will soon be married).
- *Hakuna masika yasiyokuwa na mbu* (There is no rainy season without mosquitoes, i.e. every good thing has some disadvantage-every rose has its thorn).
- *Udugu wa nazi hukutania chunguni* (S-The brotherhood of coconuts is found in the cooking pot- said of people who do not cooperate until it is too late).

### 3. Conclusion

From the foregoing exposition of proverbs, it is clear that the Luhya and Swahili communities conserve the environment as part of their day to day activities. It is an integral part of their daily existence to coexist with the flora and fauna they encounter in their lives. In fact, it appears the environment is conserved mainly for its utilitarian purposes. This is similar to what Workineh says about the value the Oromo place on the environment as beneficial for human use:

Trees are a source of capital, investment and insurance against hard times. Trees protect soil from erosion and provide the supply of timber, wood and food. Peasant farmers and pastoralists are conscious that, when their environment deteriorates, their life and future generations of humans will be harmed. The Oromo consider the cycles of nature, the coming of the rainy season, the movement of the stars, solar cycles, the movement and the cries of birds, the nature of entrails, the behaviour of domestic and wild animals and the condition of trees in order to grapple with practical problems of everyday life and future problems. From their practical experience, they know the growing characteristics of each crop and tree, suitable environments, the number of months of rain required, planting and harvesting times, crop care and crop labour requirements (Workineh, 2002: 53).

On the other hand, the Luhya and Swahili world views also, like non-anthropocentric modern environmental ethics, have some awe and religious significance to the environment. They have reserved certain areas '*kayas*' in Swahili forests and also sacred sections of the forest among the Luhya where encroachment is forbidden. They also regulate the freedom of human beings in their dealings with nature, for instance, forbidding building homes too close to rivers and in forests and avoiding carrying out activities too early or too late, to allow animals some uninterrupted free movement. Thus, their worldviews have fostered a responsible attitude towards nature, plants and animals. Like the Oromo, the essence of this view is to live in partnership with the natural environment (Workineh, 2002: 54; 2009:19).

Therefore, environmental conservation has been taken in this paper to refer to a holistic approach to development by focusing on environmental conservation while building the lives of the community. The effort of the Green Belt Movement led by Prof Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan Nobel laureate that organizes women in rural Kenya to plant trees, combat deforestation, restore their main source of fuel for cooking, generate income, and stop soil erosion and promote eco-tourism is such an example. Training women in forestry, food processing, bee-keeping and other trades that help them earn income while preserving their lands and resources to both prevent further environmental destruction and restore that which has been damaged is such an effort of practical environmental conservation. Whereas changes in our lives and environment keep on affecting this indigenous knowledge, we can still tap into it to make a contribution to the overall effort of environmental preservation by inculcating in our children the good values from our cultures.

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