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Human-Animal Relationships in Ciyawo Proverbs and the Correlation of Human and Animal Attributes

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Abstract
From time immemorial, indigenous people have generated ecophilosophy of great repute from the environment despite modern scientific knowledge relegating it into oblivion. This paper employs indigenous ecophilosophy and environmental discourse inscribed in Ciyawo proverbs with the purpose of analysing human-animal relationships and what such relationships entail about the people's affiliations to nature. Proverbs as one of the genres of oral literature are loaded with the people's values concerning animals in general, and the environment, in particular. The analysis of the Ciyawo proverbs reveals that nature has both intrinsic value and instrumental value and thus, nothing in nature should be belittled because each has a specific niche that it plays in its ecosystem. Recognising the interconnectedness of biotic and abiotic components of the environment informs the people's standpoints in life based on ecological wholeness. In conceptualising human attributes or traits through the prism of animals by which human behaviour is measured, it demonstrates how the people's view of nature is rooted in monism rather than dualism. From the findings of the study, this paper argues that animals are symbols of what humans like to construct topics on and then make comments as befitting correlatives not only of human behaviour, but also of environmental and economic challenges Africa is experiencing in the zeitgeist culture of exploitation.

Keywords: animals, proverbs, ecophilosophy, interconnectedness, environment

Introduction

Oral literature derives from the repertoire of the indigenous people's collective consciousness and it is the repository of societal wisdom. The words mwambi (singular) and miyambi (plural) in Chichewa refer to "proverb" and "proverbs" respectively and they carry stories that contextualise how the proverb(s) originated. Similarly, Finnegan (2012) affirms that the "Nyanja mwambi […] refers to story, riddle, or proverb" (380). Chakanza (2000) explains that the "mwambi are words of wisdom for counselling, admonishing, warning and giving direction by teaching moral lessons" (10). Mwambo or miyambo (wisdom) generated

from mwambi or miyambi with animal metaphors reflect how people analogously compare animal attributes to humans. Finnegan (2012) observes that “proverbs about animals are […] used to suggest some related ideas about people” (386). Using metaphors and imagery, various similitudes and dissimilitudes are drawn between humans and animals. Thus, as “products of intellectual reflection” (Okpewho 227), proverbs are generated from the natural environment. Ogunjimi and Na’Allah (2005) observe that “proverbs adopt materials from people’s cosmological and social environment” (85). People’s adoption of the environment as the chief source of proverbial lore implies their close links not only with animals but also with nature as a whole.

Studies conducted on proverbs have not largely focused on human-animal interactions. Banda and Banda (2016) focus on the use of proverbs drawing on indigenous knowledge for academic writing. Rodgers has compiled and translated proverbs in what he titles Miyambi ya Patsokwe (2016). Mphande (2001) is concerned with proverbs used for preaching and teaching. Proverbs are used in conflict management but they are also used in teaching economics (Girardi 2012), in the practical experiences of everyday life (Akinmande 2009), in narrative thought (Lauhakangas 2007) and in expressing people’s philosophical values (Ahmed 2005). The study by Kamwendo and Kaya (2016) on African proverbs focuses on gender and the discrimination of women in male dominated societies. Matiki’s (1996) study on proverbs dwelt on the semiotic interpretation of proverbs. None of these studies have paid attention to the interpretation of proverbs through indigenous ecophilosophy.

In terms of methodology, this study analyses purposefully selected proverbs involving animals from the book, Lunda lwa Ŵandu ŵa Ciyawo (Wisdom of the Yawo People) (2006) by Dicks for the various moral values they depict. Proverbs are gems of indigenous wisdom and their succinctness informs the people’s desire in precision of thought with multiple layers of meanings. The closeness of humans to animals from time immemorial explains why there are numerous proverbs about animals expressed in metaphoric and symbolic language. The Yawo refer to proverbs as itagu. Itagu are proverbial expressions that reflect the people’s love for few words but rich in different layers of meanings. Itagu with animal imagery intend to play with words involving animals while recognising their significant roles among humans.

Bronner (2007) gives an important dimension of a proverb as “a traditional propositional statement consisting of at least one descriptive element, a descriptive element consisting of a topic and a comment” (127). In Mundu mbwa (a human being is a dog); mbwa (dog) is a comment on the topic mundu (human being) to refer to what kind of person she/he is. This means that the transference of animal qualities to the human is dependent on what humans do or how they behave. The human-animal “relationship can be understood and described in three parts: first, the activities and identity of self on its own; second, the activities and identity of self-vis-à-vis another; and third, the joint activities and identity of self-and-other” (Lejano 2019:4). The view of animals in the cultural context is that they serve the well-being of humans and this overrides the interests of animals. However, animals occupy an important place in Yawo traditional ontological thought as reflected in their

proverbs. The need for an indigenous ecophilosophical analysis of the Yawo proverbs is underpinned by "a desire to understand past and present connections between [oral] literature and human attitudes regarding [animals]" (Douglass 1998:138). Using the animal-related proverbs, I argue that animals are used in Yawo proverbs as vehicles for promoting human achievements and rebuking human behaviours that society abhors.

Analysis of the selected Ciyawo Proverbs and the Animal-Human Ontology

Society promotes human achievements through the wonders in nature. A small bird, for example, lays relatively big eggs in comparison to its body size while the eggs of a crocodile are disproportionally small. Society has no reason to praise crocodile but rather admires the bird. The proverb, Akasam'wona ndindi unandi, mandanda gakwe aga (Do not see the warbler bird's smallness, these are its eggs) (Dicks 2006:33) is illustrative of my argument. The interest in this bird is that it is small but it lays big eggs. For the people the bird's smallness is extolled by the big eggs it lays. The moral in this proverb is that we should not underrate others based on the way they look/appear. Akasam'wona ndindi unandi (Do not see the warbler bird's smallness), is a call for humans to see beyond the bird's smallness and consider the bird's successes. Having observed the apparent anomaly of the warbler bird, the people then call for respect to this bird since it is an achiever. The warbler bird's big eggs are a metaphor for achievement beyond expectation.

Similarly, just as humans demean animals for their appearances, they also demean fellow humans based on their appearances. The warbler bird (ndindi) then shifts to refer to a person whom society seemingly considers contemptible but has hidden talents symbolised by the conspicuousness of the eggs (mandanda). The smallness of the warbler bird is deceptive but the bird's abilities are astounding. There are small birds that lay relatively big eggs like ndindi, and there are big reptiles like crocodiles that lay relatively small eggs, and this is how nature functions. Akasam'wona ndindi unandi, mandanda gakwe aga didactically emphasises that we should not belittle any person because of their smallness of stature epitomised by the warbler bird. The equivalent of the Ciyawo proverb in Chichewa is Timba sachepa ndi mazira ake (The timba bird is not too small for its eggs) (Chakanza 2000:295) that emphasises respecting people and their possessions despite the smallness of their body builds. Using the small bird, the proverb confers respect not only to humans but also to animals emphasising the idea that we should not undermine their abilities. Sometimes, however, people's views of the same animal are ambiguous. What I mean by this is that people make preferences about which parts of the animal they like and which parts they detest. The proverb Kuwusosa nsinji mang'omba (You only want the open billed stork's feathers) illustrates this ambiguity. The open billed stork (nsinji) is a bird that is "brownish black all over, except for browner upper wing; feathers on mantle, neck and chest glossed greenish; ventral feathers each end in long (up to 40 mm)" (Pullanikkatil and Chilambo 2010:70). The Yawo use the brownish black feathers of this bird in making mawunga (headgears woven from the feathers of open billed stork). The angaliba (circumcisers) during jando initiation ceremonies wear headgears made of open billed stork's feathers.

Paradoxically, the Yawo do not eat the meat of nsinji (open billed stork). The killing of many open billed storks only for their feathers demonstrates lack of empathy. The bird

nsinji (open billed stork) in the proverb is a metaphor for a rich person or someone with special skills symbolised by feathers. Kuwusosa nsinji mang'omba (You only want the open billed stork's feathers) implies that many people who befriend themselves to this person (bird) do so not out of love, but they are only interested in their wealth or skills/talents (feathers). The open billed stork bird also refers to an unpopular leader in society, but other people just want to pluck out his feathers (wealth) through flattery. The moral in this proverb is that we should be aware of superficial love as in the human-open billed stork relationship. The proverb Kuwusosa nsinji mang'omba calls for the respect of both the bird and what the bird has (its feathers); respect to its "person" as a living entity and its beautiful brownish black plumage as a whole.

In a similar vein, humans respect a fellow human for what she/he has, "feathers," as a metaphor of wealth and not the human being her/himself. Sound human-human relationship therefore leads to an equally sound human-animal relationship. Kuwusosa nsinji mang'omba contrasts with the Chewa Chiipanthenga (Its feathers/fur are bad) but the animal's meat is good. These proverbs negate the selective liking of birds/animals for either their feathers or their meat that shift our attention to fellow humans. Superficiality makes us love people for what they have and not for who they are. Using the avian subject proverbs here, each proverb is a set of reasoning that reflects the people's environmental embeddedness and experiences rooted in a worldview that advocates unity and wholeness appropriate for an ecocritical analysis.

These proverbs help not only in reflecting the environmental consciousness of the people, but also in raising the consciousness of readers/listeners about the rich array of ecological wisdom within easy reach, in their immediate environment. For this reason, "[a]n ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is its most important task" (Glotfelty 1996: xxiv). Unlike the prescriptive deep ecology which restricts itself to the search for "ecological consciousness" rather than "environmental ethics" (Sessions 1995:225), indigenous ecological wisdom is normative and it transcends consciousness raising into formulating ethical values for the coexistence of all living and non-living entities. People make use of the light produced by the firefly in darkness to construct parallels with human existence. Fireflies are luminous winged-insects. As they fly in the darkness of the night, they glow with light to illuminate their 'path'. A person who fends for himself and does not need help from others is referred to as kanyetanyeta or chinyetanyeta (firefly). The proverb Kanyetanyeta kakulimulichila kasyene (The firefly gives itself light) (Dicks 2006:60), uses the metaphor of light from a firefly to provide a niche within which a human being functions as a springboard for personal development. Kanyetanyeta (a little firefly) is a self-contained and balanced organism that produces energy that drives it and provides light in its way. The diminutive words ka– in the proverb Kanyetanyeta (a small firefly) kakulimulichila (gives its own light, reflexive liwunichila) to kasyene (itself), shows that society is pleased with the firefly's initiatives to improve its life. Society is contented with young people's success. To give oneself light means struggling from meagre resources to

achieve success and proverbial lore gives respect to the firefly as a metaphor of a person who has attained success through her/his own personal achievements.

As the firefly gives light to itself at night so that it can provide light in its way through the dark, likewise, human beings should fend for themselves. The proverb uses the firefly to encourage the spirit of hard work and discourages acts of begging and dependency. The idea of someone wanting to be the "firefly" (kanyetanyeta) of another like the metaphor of Europe as the light of Africa ("dark continent"), for example, has only ended up in the wretchedness of Africa. Folklore therefore is an important stepping-stone for development. Rodney (1973) argues that "the true explanation [of underdevelopment in Africa] lies in seeking out the relationship between Africa and certain developed countries and in recognising that it is a relationship of exploitation (45). In desiring to be "light" for Africa, Europe has blown off the lantern that illuminated Africa and plunged it in darkness. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are key in ensuring that Africa remains penurious. Kanyetanyeta kakulimulichila kasyene (The firefly gives itself light) "light" implies knowledge as well as the physical and spiritual light. It is important that we should recognise the "light" in us that gives the energy that propels our lives. Cannella (2013) argues that to "truly look upon the landscape and environment of Africa through a critical lens, one must first consider the colonial and postcolonial forces that have shaped the continent" (1). The suffering of the African environment from the exploitative relationship with the West is inseparably connected to the social, political and economic aspects of environmental problems facing Africa today.

Overall, this sublime proverb, Kanyetanyeta kakulimulichila kasyene (The firefly gives itself light), encourages us to use our own "light" for personal growth and development because unguardedly allowing others to use it leads to exploitation. The moment we are fireflies (inyetanyeta), other things become visible. In different cultures, fireflies have different symbolic interpretations and meanings. Morris (2004) explains that "fireflies are in fact beetles, and they are very common during the rainy season, flying at night, especially after dusk. They are small, winged, and brown, with large eyes, with 'light' at end of the abdomen. All local names (mawaliwali, ng'ambang'ambi, nyetanyeta), allude to their ability to produce light" (250). This self-produced and regulated light from the firefly is a source of wisdom for the necessity of humans to fend for themselves Kanyetanyeta kakulimulichila kasyene (The firefly gives itself light) may also be understood to mean "we humans carry the lamp that lights up value, although we require the fuel that nature provides" (Rolston III 1994:15). There are different shades of the firefly's light from which the human derives meaningful existence.

Sentience is not the only reason animals have value because even the non-sentient fireflies (invertebrates) that illuminate their way have value in themselves in addition to their instrumental value. Because humans hold the firefly in admiration for its light, they relate positively with it. From the various animal related proverbs in which humans are animals and comparable to animals, it becomes clear, as Garrard (2004) notes that "humans can both be, and be compared to, animals. There is, therefore, an extensive 'rhetoric of animality,' as Steve Baker calls it, that is functional in descriptions of human social and political relations

as it is in describing actual animals" (140). In paraphrasing Baker (1993), Mthatiwa (2012) describes the "rhetoric of animality" referred to by Garrard in the passage cited here as "the tendency of giving people, institutions, or societies that one does not like or despises derogatory animal names such as beast or brute, or referring to them using names of particular animals as a crude tactic of name-calling" (98). Conversely, the "rhetoric of humanity" projects onto animals the qualities that people desire in themselves, like the firefly.

Among the Yawo the animal related proverbs in which people are given animal names, such names have no fixed identity but are dependent on what attribute the situation in the problem refers to. Mundu lisimba (A human being is a lion), for example, means he/she is a dangerous person. This said, Mthatiwa notes that "every society or culture has its own folk understanding (cultural classification or attitude) of various animals. In a particular culture, some animals may have a reputation for being traitorous, brave, cowardly or stupid. Some animals may have positive and negative (or both) reputations, and in metaphorical usage, these traits may be superimposed on the humans the animals represent" (97). The proverb being probed here is illustrative of how the comparability of humans to animals consists of the attributes of the animals like fireflies. It is worth noting, however, that although indigenous people generate knowledge from the environment, "knowledge is relative to cultural contexts so that to claim to know the world 'as it is' is simply a chimera" (Eagleton 201). Proverbial wisdom which is largely used for practical living, and is based on human experience, is neither illusory nor delusory and every knowledge is relative to the people's conceptions.

The praying mantis (chikasachiwiga or chiswambiya), and dragonfly (tombolombo) are fascinating insects for their slender bodies and they do not sting. They are popular insects among children in indigenous communities. The proverb, Kupasyoŵelela Che Tombolombo ŵapile mchila (To be familiar to a place, Mr Dragonfly burned his tail) (Dicks 69), suggests that when someone is in the habit of doing something it becomes so familiar that it puts in danger one's own life. The dragonfly is an insect that does not sting but it displays flying abilities in different kinds of manoeuvres while preying on other insects. The personification Che Tombolombo (Mr Dragonfly) implies this dragonfly is male and the word Kupasyoŵelela (to be familiar or habituated to), signifies place especially where Mr Dragonfly lives at his wife's village in matrilineal chikamwini society. The metaphor for burning of Mr Dragonfly's tail suggests that he flies around an open fireplace. The proverb warns against being too familiar with something because one loses to pay attention to details and thereby leading into jeopardising one's life. Despite its expertise and experiences in flying, the dragonfly can land on fire and the proverb thus emphasises cautiousness in anything one undertakes to do.

This is a significant view held by indigenous people. Howarth (1996) observes that "[t]he dogma that culture will always master nature has long directed Western progress, inspiring the wars, invasions, and other forms of conquest that have crowded the earth and strained its carrying capacity" (77). Che Tombolombo (Mr Dragonfly) becomes used to a place with plenty of insects thinking he will consume them all. The chikamwini ideology

applied to the dragonfly entails there is a limit to which he can consume insects and remain betrothed to the environment before being autolytic (ŵapile mchila) because his habits cannot sustain him ad infinitum.

Kupasyoŵelela Che Tombolombo ŵapile mchila (To be familiar to a place, Mr Dragonfly burned his tail) and other proverbs support the argument that Iovino (2017) advances that "[t]he very idea of reintegrating the cultures of antiquity into the contemporary environmental humanities debate appears, indeed, perfectly in line with a cultural-ecological effort to reveal elements and voices that have long been 'hidden' or 'marginalised' in ecocritical analysis" (311). Proverbs provide a wide range of ecological insights. Indigenous people's environmental embeddedness implies their awareness of environmental problems relevant to the current debates surrounding environmental literary criticism.

Clark (2015) asks, "Can anyone describe the Earth as a whole and not use terms, concepts and images derived from the specific categories of life on its surface? […]. The Earth is not 'one' in the sense of an entity we can see, understand or read as a whole. […]. The Earth is both an object in the picture, but also the frame and the ground of picturability" (33-34). What this means then is that our conceptualisation of the Earth is relative to our knowledge, the extent to which we are able to capture its envisioned image. Folklore (folktales, proverbs, songs, riddles, myths), encapsulated in animals, embodies the people's visualisation of the Earth and their responsibilities to it. Chang (2017) posits that "oral traditions have a long epistemology that shows that the Earth is a multiverse, shared by fauna and flora and other living and non-living forms at multiple scales" (176). Relatedly, therefore, the animal metaphors in the proverbs are epistemological vehicles through which we reconnect to the physical environment emphasising on "holistic ecological thought in our biotic relations" (Oppermann 2011:231). This illustrates why the proverb, Kupasyoŵelela, Che Tombolombo ŵapile mchila (To be familiar to a place, Mr Dragonfly burned his tail) focuses on responsibility that in whatever a person does, she/he should not show any form of laxity because other elements in the environment such as fire, water and air, for example, threaten our existence. The human-dragonfly relationship in the proverb focuses on responsible behaviour and actions that can sustain our survival in the environment, otherwise we have our tails burned. Indigenous ecological wisdom calls for responsible environmental citizenship.

The different kinds of human-animal relationships represented in proverbs are relative to the behaviour of the animal. The proverb, Kuŵecheta mwakuona Che Litunu ŵangali ajawo (Truly speaking, Mr Hyena has no friend) (Dicks 73), suggests that our relations with others depend on our behaviour. Che Litunu (Mr Hyena) is an allusion not to the animal per se, but to the human being with the attributes of a hyena. Greed, stupidity, lack of foresight, scavenging and love of darkness are among the attributes for which hyena is not a likeable animal in Malawian folklore. A human being with these hyena-oriented traits will have no friends. The human-hyena relationship in this proverb is undesirable: ŵangali ajawo (has no friend). The proverb emphasises Kuŵecheta mwakuona (Truly speaking) to show the negative human-hyena relationship and the human to whom the metaphor for the hyena refers.

The deplorable behaviour of the hyena is transferable to humans through metaphoric constructs. The central image closely associated with hyena is greed but further tainted with acts of "darkness" for which he is the victim of dupery and alienation from society (Chimombo 1988, 2006; Morris 2000b; Mthatiwa 2011). Because hyena is also associated with sexual virility and its body parts used as virility drug and other medicinal mixtures (Morris 2000a, 2000b), human relations with hyena are ambivalent.

Kuŵecheta mwakuona Che Litunu ŵangali ajawo (Truly speaking, Mr Hyena has no friend) is an ambivalent proverb because among the Yao, litunu (hyena), is a man in an arranged sexual cleansing ritual with a woman whose husband is dead (Morris 2000a). A similar arrangement for litunu is also made if a husband fails to impregnate his wife. The phrase ŵangali ajawo (has no friend) also implies that hyena occupies a deplorable place and its attributes are not found among other animals. The numerous negative attributes of hyena explain why every ethnic tribe in Malawi has different kinds of rituals associated with fisi (Malawi Human Rights Commission, 2005). The hyena has no friend also infers that he has no equal in many aspects of his physiology.

The various connotations hyena has in folklore and the ambivalent relationships between humans and hyena derive from human observation of hyena's body parts. Hyenas having the characteristic attributes of cats (felines) and those of the family Canidae (canines) raises apprehension among humans. The hyena's gender indeterminacy helps illustrate why the animal is variously a symbol of sexual taboos and cleansing. Human relations with the hyena are dependent on the disguise "the hyena wears" (Chimombo 2005) on specific occasions. In all these, the hyena has always filled people with anxiety because its character invites both fear and lure. As gender indeterminate animals with "the females [having] a bulge of skin that resembles a male sex organ" and their changing of their "sex every year" (Kalof 46), it is not surprising that folklore associates hyenas with different aspects of sexuality that inform human cultures.

The primary context against which whether Che Litunu (Mr Hyena) or Abiti Litunu (Miss Hyena) ŵangali ajawo (has no friend) is not only in the peculiarities in their bodies and their metaphoric link with bestiality, but also in the hyenas' associations with moral decadence. Kalof (2007) presents the image of the hyena in the Western cultures in terms similar to those expressed in the proverb Kuŵecheta mwakuona Che Litunu ŵangali ajawo (Truly speaking, Mr Hyena has no friend). Kalof (2007) asserts that "the female and male [hyenas] are not sexually dimorphic [distinguishable]" (46), and, anatomically, therefore, Hyena has no friend. Through observation and experience, Ciyawo indigenous animal thought reflects what Coetzee in The Lives of Animals (1997) says that "concern for animals is, historically speaking, an offshoot of broader philanthropic concerns" (157). Human relations with animals in proverbs depend on teaching good heartedness based on animal behaviour.

DeMello (2012) posits that "history is replete with stories of animals performing heroic acts, either for other animals or for humans. These stories have been repeated throughout the years in order to either humanise animals, or sometimes to teach children moral lessons" (349). In this case, proverbial lore identifies the significance of animal

behaviour and correlates it with human behaviour in order to raise an environmentally disciplined community. The human-hyena relationship in Kuŵecheta mwakuona Che Litunu ŵangali ajawo (Truly speaking, Mr Hyena has no friend) is tinged with complexities and since animals embody human values, some of these values entail depicting animals in ways that are negative. Human-animal relationships therefore, involve an intricate web of interconnections.

Conclusion

The foregoing is a result of the study of animal-oriented proverbs and how animal-human relationships are reflected in these proverbs. The discussion in this study reveals that Ciyawo proverbs correlate animal and human behaviours to reflect the people's values about co-existence. As the philosophies of what constitutes "the human" and "the animal" heighten, abstraction around the human-animal divide increases. Humans are not necessarily animals in the strict moral sense of proverbial lore but animals mirror both positive and negative attributes among humans. Animal metaphors are vehicles for the conceptualisation of ideas and moral values for guiding human conduct and actions. Animal metaphors used in this sense therefore carry pedagogical values. Their purpose is to draw from the physical environment and derive from there lessons that help listeners develop their cognitive abilities because proverbs do not provide straightforward grasp on issues raised. What the community hopes for and fears are compressed in animal metaphors with economy of words, and among the Yawo, itagu involving animals carry key connotations that regulate community values.

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