

Endogenous Environmental Conservation Awareness in Sangu Oral Tales

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Abstract

African culture is a rich reservoir of varying degrees of information. It encompasses unique knowledge originating from within Africa, which is reflected in its people's traditions and customs. This knowledge engrafts and provides solutions to a myriad of problems. Among others, it provides solutions to compelling environmental challenges like land degradation, water and air pollution, global warming and climate change. This paper presents a textual analysis of five (5) Sangu oral tales that represent ecological knowledge and practices of the Sangu people. This is done as a way to unriddle the ongoing environmental enigma in the Usangu Plain, and the world at large. The tales under scrutiny are: *Umutwa na Avatambule Vaakwe* ('The Chief and His Sub-chiefs'); *iNjokha wiita Nguluvi* ('Snake like God'); *Munego* ('A Trap'); *iJungwa Sikhandi Vaanu* ('Elephants Were Once Human Beings'); and *Amagulu ga Nguluvi* ('The Feet of God'). A total of twenty (20) tales were collected qualitatively through one-on-one in-depth interviews with Sangu storytellers; and then through a content analysis method: all of which found the five aforementioned tales fit for the subject matter. The results show that the telling of oral stories is not just an occasion but also a display of skills and knowledge of a particular people, and that solutions to the current global environmental crisis lie in people's traditions as expressed in their environment-related oral narratives.

Keywords: *endogenous environmental conservation; Sangu people, oral literature, Sangu oral tales*

1. Introduction

Environmental conservation as an important aspect of African culture can be defined as a careful handling of the environment in view of protecting it from sources of destruction for the betterment of life (Page & Davis, 2005; Singh, 2006; Iheka, 2015; Kopnina & Eleanor Shoreman-Ouimet, 20018). This is a special awareness developed, spread and sustained from generation to generation by the use of forms of expressive culture, including oral literature; and in this case, oral tales (ARIPO, 1997). Oral tales have functioned as ambassadors of environmental conservation commissioned to carry this special consciousness and spread it as essential information from time immemorial (Aghoghovwia, 2014; Abraham & Abdulmalik, 2015).

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Page and Davis (2005) state that the present reality of existing environmental mysteries experienced in Madagascar and the Indian Ocean islands, the Eastern Arc Mountains and coastal forests of Tanzania and Kenya, West Africa's Guinean forests, Cape Floristic Region, and the Succulent Karoo Biome that extends from western South Africa to Namibia results partly from the lack of attention and due care of the respective people's cultures. Precisely when people's endogenous ways of life are abandoned, it also means the abandonment of the long-lived ecological knowledge, wisdom and perceptions of such people. As a result, people's sound relationship with their immediate physical environment ends, and catastrophic consequences follow thereafter. This is largely because customs and traditions that contain environmental information, observances and skills accumulated over a long period of time disappear with the disappearance of a culture.

This paper aims to present an analysis of Sangu oral tales that are traceable to-date to validate the position that literature, as a part of culture, represents ecological information and practices able to deal with present environmental problems; and that the silencing or disappearance of such literature insinuates the silencing and disappearance of a valuable weapon of environmental conservation. In this way, the article introduces African oral literature, through an analysis of Sangu oral tales, as a viable means of understanding environmental conservation from the viewpoints of the people.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis and presentation of data in this article was guided by the postcolonial ecocriticism theory, which is a blend of two theories: postcolonialism and ecocriticism. On one hand, ecocriticism advocates for the study of literature as a work of art representing the co-existence of humankind and the surrounding physical environment. In other words, ecocriticism advocates the analysis of literature with the view of clarifying the link between man and nature as reflected in literary texts (Glorfelty, 1996).

On the other hand, postcolonialism is principally a resistance against imperialist legacies and manipulations. It opposes the division of the world into two stratagem blocks: the Occidental block, and the Orient or 'Other' block (Ngugi, 1993; Smith, 1999). The Occidental block is formed by the Western powers; and is portrayed to be composed of civilized, developed, intelligent, wise and sane people. The Orient block is depicted as constituting all the people and cultures from the former European colonies (Fanon, 2005). This block is considered by the West as being composed of uncivilized, barbaric, wild, poor, insane and uneducated people.

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This axial division has brought about controversy regarding environmental conservation, whereby the Occidental bloc views its environmental strategies as viable to ecological protection, while endogenous environmental conservation measures of the African people are inferior, and hence accelerate environmental degradation even more. Pollini (2010) explains well the historical confrontation between the two blocs, and assesses the existing binaries between African and European ecological practices as experienced in Madagascar. Briefly, Pollini (ibid.) shows that there are a number of misconceptions being propagated by mainstream Western environmentalism that Africans are not environmentally responsive and sensitive: they lack knowledge to help them take care of their surrounding physical environment and related resources, and hence any efforts to protect the environment in Africa must be done by non-Africans.

For me, the blending of the postcolonial theory with ecocriticism is done to counteract the evils of imperialism that continue to linger in the socio-economic and political lives of the people even after independence. This is done to contest any misconceptions about African people's environmental awareness and responsiveness.

Postcolonial ecocriticism fits well with the objectives of the current study in that it purports the research's allegiance to exhibit the unique treasures of knowledge enclosed in Sangu oral tales. In so doing, it resists the imperialist tenet that African oral literature is mediocre, inferior or awkward. The study, through Afrocentrism, espouses the on-going post-colonial effort to controvert Eurocentric charges levelled against the orality of African literature, and its resourcefulness in the combat of current environmental challenges. The study enlivens the post-colonial spirit that, in African literature, there are enclosed solutions to the problems that face its indigenous people. African oral tales possess specialized knowledge required to solve environmental challenges and many other similar ones. The argument here is that problems facing indigenous peoples must also use their endogenous knowledge to deal with them. The current study, therefore, situates Sangu oral tales at the inception of understanding the root causes of the on-going environmental challenges in the area, and their sensible solutions.

3. Context and Methods

3.1 Study Site

This study was conducted in south-western Tanzania in the present-day Mbarali District in Mbeya. The district was established on 7th July, 2000 by the Local Government Act No. 8 of 1982, as amended by Act No. 6 of 1999. It is found between 7° and 9° south of the equator, and between longitudes 33.8° and 35° east of the Greenwich meridian. The Usangu Plain covers 15,558 km². Of the whole area, only 5,000km² are inhabited by human beings; with the remaining 10,558 km² being a protected area (Sirima, 2010).

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The Sangu people are the original inhabitants of the Usangu Plain and the wetlands found on it (Kalenge, 2012). They speak Eastern Bantu language, known as Kisangu in Swahili, and Ishisangu in Sangu. Ishisangu is closely related to the languages spoken by the people that surround the Usangu Plain. The languages are Hehe (bordering Ishisangu on the east), Bena (on south-east), Vwanji (on its south), Safwa (south-east), Bungu (on the west) and Kimbu (north-west) (Kaajan, 2012).

In spite of the influences from other ethnic groups, and the Christian and Islamic religions, Kaajan (2012: 13) hints that:

A very large part of the Sangu population follows traditional religion in the interior as well as in larger towns. There are quite a few Muslims and some Christians in the area as well, but many of them practice their traditional religion alongside Islam or Christianity.

From the accounts provided above, it is clear that it is unimaginable trying to entirely separate the Sangu from their endogenous ways. They may follow Christianity or Islam—or even modernity—and still swing back to their endogenous ways. This fact became an assurance for the current study of the possibility of finding data (environment-related oral tales of the Sangu people) to fill in the existing gap of information regarding the Sangu people's endogenous environmental conservation awareness.

3.2 Methods

3.2.1 Sampling

The study used two sampling methods: purposive and snowball sampling. It began by consulting available Sangu gatekeepers (that is, individuals who have 'inside' information of their communities) in each of the twenty (20) wards in Mbarali District to help determine the best available Sangu informants (that is, the griots – both males and females). Thereafter, two griots (one female, and one male) were selected in each ward to participate in a scheduled one-on-one interview. One oral tale out of many tales that were collected from each ward was screened for further etic analysis. This made a total of twenty (20) oral tales that were analysed in the initial stage.

3.2.2 Data Collection

The data for this paper were captured through in-depth interviews, which were deemed appropriate because they gave informants time to tell and retell their stories and experiences without interruption, and at a pace that allowed natural flow of the narration. The researcher's role was to record them discreetly.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

A content analysis technique was used in the analysis of the collected tales. The tales were carefully transcribed, translated, examined and contextualised

one-by-one. This was achieved through close reading of the texts. The tales were closely read in view of investigating the portrayal of endogenous environmental conservation practices and awareness of the Sangu people.

4. Discussion

With regard to environmental conservation and basing on the data collected in the current study, Sangu oral tales can be divided into two major groups. The first group comprises of tales that are related to ritual and environmental conservation. These tales, in spite of explicating Sangu ritual activities, they at the same time contain environmental conservation knowledge of the Sangu people. Such tales are called Sangu ritual tales. This article analyses two of such tales, namely: *Umutwa na Avatambule Vaakwe*, and *iNjokha wiita Nguluvi*. The second group of tales includes all the tales that embody environmental conservation motifs other than rituals. These tales are named Sangu non-ritual tales. This paper analyses three (3) such tales: *Umuhinja ni Nyula*, *Munego*, *iJungwa Sikhandi Vaanu*, and *Amagulu ga Nguluvi*.

4.1 Sangu Ritual Tales

As a form of expressive culture, Sangu ritual tales form an enlivened tradition that dates back to the pre-Islamic and Christian eras. During this time period, tales developed endogenously and were disseminated as a means of instructing the Sangu people—especially children and the youth—on a range of issues; including the sacredness of some places, people and events. As insiders' fiction, the tales were not only intended to transmit skills and knowledge of sacred places, people and events, but also to connect the Sangu people with the supernatural. In other words, this type of tales were meant to channel the endogenous religion of the people from generation to generation to sustain the well-being of the Sangu tradition, including that of environmental conservation. One of such tales is *Umutwa na Avatambule Vaakwe* ('The Chief and His Sub-chiefs'). In the tale, the chief sends a messenger to convene a meeting to all the sub-chiefs of his chiefdom. Before the meeting commences, a ritual is performed. The chief leads the sub-chiefs (dressed in black leather made from the hides of goats, and each holding a gourd filled with medicine called *kiihata* for sanctification), together with spiritualists (dressed up with tree leaves called *makhamba*), into a designated place where cows are slaughtered. Here, they pour grains of finger millet.

This is a mimetic representation of the nature of Sangu rituals. It acts as a model description of a complete and complex process of the rituals of the Sangu. In so doing, it equips the Sangu with the knowledge and skills required to do this sacred customary activity. It instils in the audience the sense of respect for places and materials that are designated for rituals. Also, it creates a positive mental attitude towards the components of the environment available in a

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ritual place, and even outside it. The presence and representation of *lipelemehe* and *litamba* trees in the chief's ritual place, for instance, makes these tree species especially respectable wherever they are found.

Another tale with the same didacticism is *iNjokha wiita Nguluwi* ('Snake Like God'). According to the tale, long time ago, the chief's residence was place with the biggest and tallest tree. This tree danced at night and threw lightning all over the place. The lightning was thrown by the tree's hundreds of branches, which are called 'hands'. These 'hands' release blessings onto the people of the land, and declare security in the lives of the people and their belongings like land, cattle, goats, sheep, dogs and chicken. Also, this tree pronounced words of wisdom from ancestors by whispering:

If you find someone's child trapped in the mud, pull him out gently. If you find someone's dog stealing, tell the owner. If you see someone's wife shinning, take yours to the river. You face any trouble, pray!

Furthermore, according to the tale, in the daytime there comes a big snake, known as *Njokha*. Like a continuous flow of water, it moves around the place and swallows the whole chief's residence in case it spots any potential offense in defence against evil spirits and evil men who would want to destroy or confiscate any of the beautiful organisms and objects available in the place. The snake was alert enough to spot the enemy and then swallow the place so that the enemy could not see the compound. When the snake became sure that the place is finally secure, it disgorged it, and life went on like that.

The tale goes on that, one day, the snake did an unusual thing: it did not swallow the compound or the prospective offender: Hepega, Lujinji's daughter. This girl had been sent by her mother to collect firewood. Because firewood was found far away from their village, and she did not want to walk a long distance that day, she decided to go to the chief's compound to collect firewood. As she approached the area, the snake appeared, folded her body, and turned it into an ugly fish called *Ngamulepa*. From thereon, parents and community members stopped their children from going to the compound to collect firewood.

Briefly, the tale portrays the chief's residence having the biggest and tallest tree at the centre. The tree dances at night and throws lightning all over the chief's place. The lightning is thrown by hundreds of the branches of the tree, which in the story are called hands. These tree branches whisper words of wisdom from the forefathers that have slept under the tree. The branches bend to worship and adore the ancestors who gave birth to a beautiful, strong and ever-present tribe of people.

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The tale introduces a character whose movement resembles the continuous flow of water because it is elongated and has no limbs: *Njokha* (snake), which swallows the whole of the chief's compound with all that is present for security reasons. In the tale there are instances in which the snake either completely swallows an individual who approaches the residence without permission; or turns him/her into something ugly. This happens to Lujinji's daughter who turns into an ugly fish after she goes to the chief's compound to collect firewood.

Even though it is difficult to establish the actual circumstances that surrounded the formulation of the *iNjokha wiita Nguluvi* tale, it can be ascertained through associations of events and historical facts that the tale must be belonging to the modern era. Its modernness is associated with the sub-plot in which Lujinji's daughter refuses to walk far away from her village to collect firewood, and decides to go for the same in the chief's sacred compound, the only place nearby that firewood could be found. She goes to the sacred site because of the unavailability of firewood nearby, which implies the unavailability of forests and forest resources nearby people's immediate residences. According to Kangalawe et al., (2007), the Usangu Plain is currently the most depleted area in Tanzania. The Usangu Plain, which formerly harboured a variety of species of organisms, is now destitute. The intrusion into Usangu of other ethnic groups—also known as 'environmental refugees'—is associated directly with this destituteness.

According to Kalenge (2012), the immigrants came into the Usangu Plain along with their traditions and customs, which were also imparted to the Sangu people in various ways. However, the cultures of the immigrants did not cope with Sangu people's ways of life. In this regard, the culture of the Sangu people includes the long-lived knowledge and responsiveness to local ecological conditions of the Usangu Plain. However, Gumo et al. (2012) maintain that across Africa, there are still some places whose environment is intact to-date because they are designated as sacred. A good example is expressed in the tale *Njokha wiita Nguluvi*, where all areas in the setting seem to have been depleted with the exception of the chief's place, which is axiomatically ritualistic.

We can deduce from the above that Sangu ritual sites are also conservation sites. They harbour special species of organisms that, if they had not been ritualistic, the species would have been depleted long time ago. The tale implicates that even with the onslaught of colonialism and globalization, coupled with the growth of population everywhere in Usangu, the natural environment in sacred places is still intact. This is because of two major reasons. The first is the existing attachment of the Sangu to their endogenous religion; a religion that admires, respects, worships and esteems the natural environment as divine. Rim-Rukeh et al. (2013: 427) support the argument by expounding:

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The role of traditional beliefs in the protection of natural resources is reflected in a variety of practices, including sacred groves and sacred landscapes. For example, in India, particular patches of forests are designated as sacred groves under customary law and are protected from any product extraction by the community. Such forests are very rich in biological diversity and harbour many endangered plant species including rare herbs and medicinal plants.

The second reason for the sustained presence of the rich environment in ritual sites of the Sangu is potentially due to the presence of oral tales (the examples of which are given above) that act as endogenous natural resources management models that promote environmental protection of such places of worship. According to Aliyu (2022), because literature transmits knowledge, wisdom, and understanding about the sacredness of ritual places, it develops the concern for ensuring the natural environment found in ritual sites remains undamaged.

4.2 Sangu Non-ritual Tales

As stated above, non-ritual tales are not related to ritual but embed ideas, themes and deeper meanings repeated throughout texts that relate to environmental conservation. Such rendered ideas, themes and meanings produce a literary aspect called motif. Motif is defined by Morgan (2018) as a literary element that revolves around the 'big picture' of a literary work, and helps the audience to comprehend even the underlying messages that an artist intends to communicate. All in all, a motif can be defined as an expression of the recurrence of certain events, images or symbols in a work of art. In literature, it is the repetition or recurrence of certain images, ideas, sounds, words, phrases, clauses and sentences meant to explain the major theme in a literary piece. In others words, it is that element of a literary work that is produced by the repetition of certain words, ideas, images and symbols in a literary work. Such repetition is done with the intention of enriching a certain subject matter or theme central to the work. In the non-ritual tales of the Sangu people presented and analysed below, water, plants, animals and land are the recurring elements; and therefore are analysed and discussed one-by-one as motifs to construe the representation of endogenous environmental conservation knowledge of the Sangu people embedded in such tales. However, at this juncture it is important to note that these practices are related to, and are a representation of, the entire population of the Sangu people.

To begin with, water as a literary motif, recurs in the tale *Munego* ('A Trap'). In this tale, water is iteratively depicted as a physical and biological prerequisite, and an indispensable composition of every form of life requiring endogenous guardianship. This reality is vivid in the *Munego* tale. In this tale, hyenas are portrayed hesitating to go to a river for water when they are thirsty because when they do so, the water mirrors them; and so they fear seeing

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themselves through the water. As a result of this aquaphobia, a multitude of hyenas die. The death of a mass of hyenas prompts a call for a meeting of hyenas to discuss whether the fear of their own shadows displayed in the water should let them go thirsty and die; or the fear of death because of thirst should make them drink the water and survive. After a long discussion and contentious disagreements, the meeting ends with an announcement of the final decision by the leader of the hyenas:

Nda wisakhula kiifwa, lekha king'wa amalenga. Sikhava mwali kuilyo. Omwe na matima ga ndondoloji, leshe king'wa amalenga ga fisima, amakhoga ni khandilo poona pala. Omwe yene numbula sa Nyula ng'wesaji amalenga pene ilijwa likhali, lutaji apa na pala ulupata ulu na lula, ng'wesaji amalenga ga masima, amakhoga...

[If you want to die, stop drinking the water, I will not be responsible for that! You, with a lizard's heart, stop drinking the water from wells, rivers, swamps and anywhere else...You, with a frog's heart, drink the water when it is sunny. Go here and there, this side and that side, drink the water from wells, rivers and swamps...]

From the depiction above, water is associated with life; and its deficiency is associated with death. The hyenas that take courage to drink water live; and those that fear their own images deflected by water die from thirst. On the one hand, the hydrophobia expressed by the hyenas is used symbolically to represent the unfriendly disposition of human beings towards the environment. It represents the abuse of nature and its resources committed by humans whose inclination to protect the environment is poor. It represents the Sangu people who are environmentally irresponsible. It portrays, for instance, the Sangu who clear-cut trees; those who cause forest fires; and those polluting water and the air. These are the ones that destroy nature and cause devastating effects like diseases, floods, drought, famine and hunger due to climate change. On the other hand, the courage shown by the hyenas that drink the water and consequently survive is a symbolism for the Sangu people who utilize the Usangu environment responsibly. It is a stand-in for those who conserve the environment and its resources, and live.

Didactically, the division of hyenas into two groups: the foolish ones (that fear their own images deflected by water and shy away from it); and the courageous ones (that drink water without the fear of the deflection) in the *Munego* tale is a representation of two categories of the Sangu people in relation to environmental awareness. There are those without the cognizance of the environment and the need to conserve, preserve and promote it and its resources (represented by the foolish hyenas); and those people who are fully aware of the importance of the environment and the need to protect it from harm (represented by the courageous hyenas). The tale was composed to specifically raise the awareness of the Sangu people of the importance of water

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and the need to protect it from agents of destruction. It shows implicitly that the conservation of water means the safeguard of life; and the degradation of the same means the destruction of life.

In the tale, the depiction of hyenas as foolish (by fearing the deflection of their own images) is a universal representation of hyenas. From ancient historical periods, these doglike nocturnal mammals—mostly found in Africa and southern Asia, and that feed chiefly on the dead and rotting bodies of other organisms—have been globally described as shy, brutish, foolish, nasty, scheming and charlatans. Brottman (2012) describes these wild animal as among the untouchables of the animal world. They feature in fiction and non-fiction as unusual beasts scavenging on carrions: the remains of animals killed by other predators.

The use of hyenas as stand-ins for human beings is based on the fact that in the years just after independence, the government of Tanzania had taken efforts to conserve wildlife. This was also a part of the implementation of the resolutions reached at the September 1961 Symposium on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources organised by the United Nations in Arusha, and the Eighth General Assembly of the United Nations held in Nairobi, Kenya, from 16-24 September, 1963. In all the meetings the environment was recognized as the integral part of member nations' development.

This declaration marked the beginning of a serious endeavour of ensuring that the country's rich natural resources are safeguarded at all costs. The activities included nation-wide sensitization campaigns like the Tanzanian National Community Forestry Programme launched in 1967; and the villagisation programme that moved 13m people to 7,684 villages by mid-1970s. However, it is widely known that the activism did not bear the expected fruits. Fred Nelson et al. (2007) posits that despite the efforts to conserve the natural environment, illegal utilization of natural resources and human-wildlife conflicts heightened in the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, during that period, wild animals—like black rhinos and elephants—were extensively poached. These and many other problems necessitated a series of legal and policy reforms that began in the late 1980s. The reforms, coupled with strict enforcements, enabled an increase in the number of wild animal species, which also meant their dispersal and availability even outside their usual home ranges. Due to this, and specifically in the Usangu Plain, hyenas were seen roaming around bushes, farmlands, grasslands and even near homes scavenging on carrions and other rotten stuffs; and killing livestock like goats, sheep and dogs. Storytellers in the study area testified of a terrifying event in which hyenas were found unearthing buried dead bodies at Igava. One of the respondents shared the experience:

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Miaka ya 70, fisi waliongezeka sana Usangu. Walikuwa wanaonekana maeneo mengi wakitafuta chakula. Nakumbuka siku moja nikitokea kuchunga ng'ombe nilikuta fisi wanne wanafukua makabuli pale Igava makabulini. Nikashangaa sana! Tangu hapo, nikawa nawaogopa sana fisi.

[In the 1970s, the number of hyenas in Usangu intensified. They were seen in many places scavenging. I remember one day, while coming back from grazing cattle, I found four hyenas excavating graves at the Igava cemetery. I was astonished! Since then, I fear hyenas very much.]

The hyenas' tendency to roam about made the Sangu people learn a lot about the behaviours of these doglike nocturnal mammals. Hyenas are watchful for food. They do not sleep lazily or move about aimlessly: they move watchfully. They also have a natural disposition to fight. They fight in their dens and outside. They fight against each other and against other wild animal species. The Sangu people have also learnt that hyenas are timid. This shyness makes them look foolish and stupid. Their explicit foolishness and stupidity have prompted the creative and imaginative formulation of the *Munego* tale, that in a way demonstrates the presence of two groups of people dwelling in the Usangu Plain as presented above.

This tale was developed not only to share experiences about hyenas' lives and behaviours, but also as a teaching aid to instruct and impart knowledge to the younger generations about the importance of water, and the need to conserve it. As stated earlier, the use—and division—of hyenas into those that fear their own images deflected by water and shy away from it; and those that drink water without fear of the deflection, is didactically meant to influence the Sangu generations to respect the natural environment as a source of life. In the tale, water (representing the natural environment) is portrayed as carrying life and death. Water is needed in the body of organisms. Hence, its use means life; while its denial means death.

Plants and animals form the second motif found in Sangu non-ritual tales. The recurrence of plants and animals as characters in these tales insinuates that the Usangu Plain is filled with a wide range of natural resources. The tales present a stunning description of the available flora and fauna in the study area. For instance, the tale *Ijungwa Sikhanda Vaanu* ('Elephants Were Once Human Beings') represents the biotic composition of the natural environs found in the Usangu Plain. The beautiful elephants and the plants like *lipogolo* and the *litamba* trees used as shades for elephants and dwelling places for the *mwandunga* (i.e., monkeys and baboons); and grasses like *lipelele*, *linyamaji* and *livimbili*: all are meant to characterize the biome as a whole, which have rendered the richness the Usangu Plain as endowed by nature.

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In the *Ijungwa Sikhandi Vaanu* tale, Mr. Sagwasinji travels from his village to look for food. Before he leaves, he instructs his ten children (two boys and eight girls), whose mother had died a few days ago, not to roam around farmlands for *numbu*¹ by telling his children: ‘*One niita kihemela, leelo musikhataga kumagunda kiilya inumbu, mwikho vanangu*’ [‘I am going to look for food, so do not roam around farmlands for *numbu*, it is taboo my children’]. Two days after his departure, the children fail to endure the craving for food, and so they go into farms and eat *numbu*. After eating *numbu*, they all turn into elephants. Then a parade of elephants is shown roaming the farmlands. Human beings on the other hand appear staring at the invasion of their farms and seethe at the view. A troop of monkeys, moreover, flip over and jump from a *lipogolo* tree to a *litamba* tree, and over and over again. The monkeys whistle and mock humans for the invasion done by the elephants.

When Mr. Sagwasinji comes back, he finds elephants in the nearby farmlands. After some minutes of deep thought, he discovers that it is his children who have turned into elephants because of *numbu*. Then he says:

Omwe muvanaangu; omwe mwakhuma kunyangu! Gendaji mumagunda goona, lisaji amasoli na makhamba vanaangu. Lutaji kokona kula. Ino niiluta yune. Niluta kutali. Musilute kutali manyi. Musitine apa. Avaanu ni jungwa vikhuma kulukholo lumo, khalaji apa.

[You are my children; you are from me! Roam around all farmlands, eat grasses and leave my children. Go wherever you like; I am also going my way. I am going my way; you should also go away and come back here. Human beings and elephants are from one clan, live here!]

In the first place, the depiction of farmlands with grasses, trees, monkeys and elephants is a portrayal of the ecosystem in Usangu. This display of a beautiful natural environment and the interaction of creatures in the Usangu ecosystem, as portrayed in the tale, is a demonstration of the gift of nature available in the setting. This is presented artistically to tell the Sangu people and others of the beauty of nature, and that the harmony between humans and non-humans is natural. As long as the natural environment cannot speak for itself, this tale—and others related to it in Sangu oral literature—are used as a base for the audience (the people) to understand the endowments of nature in the study area, and the need to conserve it.

Moreover, the scenario in which the father gives safety instructions to the children before he travels to seek for food, and the children disobeying his instructions and turning into elephants, implies that the harmony between human and nonhuman elements of the environment in the Usangu Plain has

¹A wild underground stem tuber, *oxalis tuberosa*. It is eaten raw or boiled for some minutes.

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been altered. The alteration can be explicated metaphorically in two major accounts. The first account is represented by the father. The father in this account is used as a mouthpiece of the long-lived traditions and customs of the Sangu, as transmitted from generation to generation. These include customary observances like rituals and taboos; literature like songs, storytelling, music and dance; and education on environmental conservation and other endogenous knowledge, skills, experiences, values and wisdom. The statement, *'Nilutila kusakula ishakilya musikhalutaga kumagunda kisakula inumbu mwikho vanaangu'* ['I am going to look for food, so do not roam around farmlands for *numbu*, it is a taboo my children'], is a representation of the conglomeration of all the traditions and customs of the Sangu that the generations of the Sangu must understand and live with.

The second account is related to *numbu*. *Numbu* is used in the tale to refer to any imposition of exogenic ways of life onto the people's endogenous traditions and customs. This symbolic inference is based on the taste of the tuber. *Numbu* has a sharp biting taste. Like lemon, its taste is tangy. This taste causes discomfort to the consumer, especially if s/he is eating it for the first time. The consumer may also experience stomach-ache or nausea. This discomfort is symbolic of the imposition of cultures alien to the Sangu people. The imposition of alien cultures into Usangu has a long history, beginning in pre-colonial period in the form of the immigration of other ethnic groups into the Usangu Plain. In the 1950s there were very few people in Usangu Plain, who were mainly the native Sangu. The area was covered with natural vegetation and filled with water and water bodies like rivers and swamps. The weather condition and the soils were suitable for crop cultivation and livestock keeping. This conducive nature of the environment attracted other people from outside to immigrate into the area. Walsh (2004) and Kaajan (2012) attest that the immigrant groups came along with their traditions and customs that caused some alterations in the culture of the Sangu people. One of these changes was the disregard of the environment, which caused a great deal of land degradation.

Moreover, colonialism—through missionary activities—imposed new ways of life to the Sangu. Gerhardt (2012) expounds that this imposition began between the 1880s and 1990s when Christianity was introduced in Usangu by the Berlin Missionary Society, which established the Brandt Mission Station at Ihahi village in Chimala in 1908.² These German missionaries built training schools, medical centres and churches in the area. In all these institutions, the Sangu people were convinced to join the Lutheran church and abandon their traditions and customs. Although in the beginning the Sangu resisted the imposition, they later gradually adopted new (colonial) ways of life.

² Usangu was called the Land of Glory by the Berlin Missionary Society.

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From the literary point of view, these missionary activities—as agents of colonialism—are represented by *numbu* and its tangy taste. Like the taste of the tuber, the imposition of new faith by the missionaries faced stiff opposition from Chief Merere II and the commoners. However, with time, a few Sangu began to follow this new religion. According to Gerhardt, about 250 pagans (that is, the Sangu people) attended the first church services at the mission in 1910. These 250 followers of Christianity are represented by the children who turned into elephants after they had eaten *numbu*. The tale's title tells it all: '*Ijungwa Sikhandi Vaanu*' ['Elephants were ones human beings.'] Metaphorically, it means that the Sangu who follow alien ways of life were once good people who lived by the Sangu traditions and customs, and were considered 'human'. Now that they follow alien religion and culture, they lack integrity and have lost human qualities.

Furthermore, the end of colonial domination in Tanzania did not end the external influences into the endogenous life of the Sangu people. The *numbu* metaphor manifests itself in the idea of globalisation and its execution. According to Alli et al. (2011), globalisation is the effort to converge all life systems in the world and increase human interactions to give rise to numerous new developments. This convergence, which has been facilitated by information and communication technology, has resulted into the spread and development of western cultures, including languages and literature. The availability of satellite televisions, the Internet, and telecommunications—among others—has facilitated the widespread of ways of life from the West that are alien to the African people. *Numbu* and its tangy taste, therefore, represent globalization. The scenario in which Sagwasinji's children eat *numbu* and turn into elephants in the tale *Ijungwa Sikhandi Vaanu* represents the current situation in which some Sangu people have abandoned their customs and traditions to follow alien ways of life. Kalenge (2012) expounds that, with the current dearth of researches on the Sangu people, the absence of written Sangu dictionaries and storybooks on one hand, and the on-going integration of worldwide cultures on the other hand, means that the Sangu endogenous knowledge and traditions are getting lost day-by-day.

The *Ijungwa Sikhandi Vaanu* exposition above shows that the Usangu Plain was very much endowed with both plant and animal resources, and that the Sangu people used these resources to develop endogenously. However, the immigration of other ethnic groups into Usangu, colonial activities through missionaries, as well as globalization: all these have contributed to degrading the co-existence with nature. The mentality to conserve, preserve and promote the environmental well-being has been disrupted, leading to environmental degradation everywhere in the Usangu Plain.

Endogenous Environmental Conservation Awareness in Sangu Oral Tales

The third motif found in the Sangu non-ritual tales is land. Land as a motif features iteratively in the *Amagulu ga Nguluvi* ('The Feet of God') tale. Like all African societies, the Sangu value land the same way they value the divinities. They consider land to be the essence of the existence of all organisms. They respect land as the homage of God, ancestors and spirits. The sacredness of land and its interrelationship with human life is also explained in Mwaifuge's *Politics and Ideology in Tanzanian Prose Fiction in English*. In the book, Mwaifuge states clearly that land is celebrated in African societies as a gift from God. According to him, Mbise's *Blood on Our Land*, Sokko's *The Gathering Storm*, and Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*: all show how African societies use land as a unifying factor connecting them to divinities. The centrality of land in the texts he analyses comes from Africa's oral tradition. The enlisted literary texts above draw their material from oral literature, which powerfully depicts the traditions of the people regarding land.

The Sangu's inclination to value land as a sacred entity and a communal possession, and their determination to protect it for both spiritual and socio-economic reasons, is portrayed in the tale *Amagulu ga Nguluvi*. In the tale, cows (personified as farmers), dogs (as hunters) and pigs (as gatherers) are told by the snake (which is personified as the chief of all organisms), to avoid the use of fire in their daily activities. The chief explains why the use of fire is prohibited in the land he rules:

Amagulu ga Nguluvi gakheele apa, paanyii. Avagosivaha wope vali apa, paanyi. Apa pana numbula sa vatwa. Muyitilaje inyii yope... Musikhayivalafyaga nu mooto. Musikhayivalafyaga nu uwuwafi mukhati, ulo lwe luneno lwesu. Tifunyage paanyi apa kuno tiitova mawokho na magulu na kiyimba...

[The feet of God are seated here, in the land. All the ancestors are here, in the land. The spirits of chiefs are here. You should respect the whole land... Do not irritate it with fire. Do not irritate it with pain inside it, that is our decision. We should do rituals here, on the land while clapping hands, stamping feet and singing...]

Moreover, human characters in the tale are shown cutting down trees for building houses and preparing farms for crop cultivation. As they continue cutting down trees, they are surprised by the fact that the *litamba* trees in the setting resist falling down. Also, in the process of cutting the *litamba* trees, axes bounce off them. This happens the whole day until when a ritual is performed, and then instructions are received from the ancestors. A voice of an ancestor is heard from the *litamba* trees saying:

Onye, vaanu vangu! Owe, mutwa va wusango! Nina liswi limonga kwa lusawo lwangu. Iliswi ilyi uliganule owe! Umupishi go gona mukhomi, musikha-dumulaga. Mulekhaje mapishi gahano mumagunda genyu... Mapishi gamemile koono, mudumulaje madodo, makhomi gahano mugalekhaje... Amapishi gana numbula ya Nguluvi, tigatiilaje!

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[You, my children! You, the chief of Usangu! I have a word to my generation. You should understand this word! Do not cut down any big tree. You should leave five trees in your farmlands... there are many trees everywhere, cut down the small ones, the five big ones should be left... the trees have the spirit of God, respect them!]

This tale is told over and over again to discourage the Sangu from engaging in the deforestation of the environment. The composer of this tale relates the flora to the supernatural world to make the people respect this entity of the natural environment in the same way they respect supernatural powers. The composer is aware of the firm attachment that exists between the Sangu and the divinities, and uses this awareness to craft the tale in such a way that it connects the flora to the supernatural. This makes the Sangu obviously respect the plants and their resources. The respect based on the instruction given by the *litamba* tree is still valid even to-date. It is not surprising to find a few trees left uncut in every Sangu farmland.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented an analysis of some Sangu oral tales and construed environmental conservation practices and awareness of the Sangu people embedded in the tales. It has maintained that there is a lot to learn and uphold within African societies for a better protection of the environment. The paper has applauded the place of oral literature in telling and showing possible solutions of critical problems facing the world today, like environmental depletion. The analysis of the tales has shown that problems facing humankind in particular settings can be dealt with by using the endogenous ways and knowledge of such people. This postcolonial ecocritical formulation undermines the Eurocentric theorization that the west is the producer, depositor and circulator of (scientific) knowledge everywhere in the world. Instead, it reinforces the fact that Africa has long been capable of producing her own knowledge for use within her own cultural settings.

6. Recommendations

This paper raises the need for more scholarly studies and researches on other forms of oral literature (e.g., riddles, proverbs, songs and dances) to divulge how indigenous people's literary forms speak about endogenous environmental awareness and conservation practices.

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