

REFLECTIONS ON BUKUSU ECOLOGICAL WISDOM AND VIRTUE IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT: *Conservation, protection and care of the natural environment is a major issue of concern in the 21st century. It's in recognition of this fact that environmental issues occupy significant space in various fields of scholarly pursuit. Philosophical reflections on these issues have been rife. This paper is premised on the position that present environmental crisis is largely caused by human actions and inactions, particularly due to increased human capacity to interfere with natural processes. In this paper we have shown that the human-nature encounter raises serious ethical concerns and hence the need for an ethical response. However we are cognizant of the theoretical controversies in environmentalism particularly regarding the appropriate framework to articulate the ethical dimension of human-nature relationship. It is against this backdrop that this study from which this paper has been developed was conceived. This paper is therefore based on the findings of a study carried out in an African cultural context to assess the contribution of culture and tradition to the aforementioned debate in environmental ethics. The study is a reconstruction of the Bukusu (one of the Kenyan ethnic communities) environmental values gathered through intensive oral interviews and subjected to rigorous critical scrutiny and analysis. The study reveals an environmental ethic which recognizes inherent value in nonhuman nature while emphasizing the unique place of humanity in nature. The Bukusu environmental wisdom and virtue support principles and values aimed at achieving ecological balance and harmony. This is perfectly consistent with Bukusu morality which emphasizes harmonizing relationships. Finally and most significantly the findings support eco-sustainability as the ideal human-nature ethical theoretical framework.*

KEYWORDS: Environmental Conservation; Bukusu Environmental Wisdom and Virtue; Shallow Ecology; Deep Ecology; Eco-sustainability; Limanya; Kinship.

INTRODUCTION

One of the troubling questions in environmental philosophy discourse is to argue for the basis of an environmental ethic. Different perspectives have endeavored to anchor moral standingness for nonhuman nature in different criteria. However the debate resolves around two major positions; shallow ecology and deep ecology. This paper contributes to the search for an environmental ethics from the perspective of an Africa worldview. The paper reflects on the findings of a case study of Bukusu indigenous, cultural and moral values of environmental conservation to develop and contribute to an understanding or theory and praxis of environmental ethics.

The Bukusu: The People and their View of Morality

The Bukusu people belong to the larger Luhya speaking group. The Luhya in turn are generally believed to belong to the larger Bantu speaking people of Eastern and Central

Africa. The Bukusu speak Lubukusu, a distinct Luhya dialect, although they relate closely with other Luhya groups in beliefs, practices, in a word, culture. Presently, the Bukusu people are predominantly found in the Bungoma and Trans Nzoia counties, and Uasin Gishu albeit in small numbers.

In the old days before the coming of the Europeans, the Bukusu people lived in fortified communal villages and communities called **chingoba**. This set up provided context within which all their activities, be they social, economic, political or religious were defined and carried out a communally. The indigenous Bukusu were mainly agriculturalists, who practiced both crop farming and keeping of livestock, especially cattle. These activities, which had great economic, social-cultural and religious values, were generally carried out within a communal framework.

In my earlier work, **The Relation between Morality and Religion: A Case study of the Bukusu of Western Kenya (Makokha, 1993)** a detailed exposition of the basis of Bukusu morality was explored. In this discourse, it clearly emerged that Bukusu morality, like most other African conception of morality, is articulated within the context of the community. This is to say that morality is centered on the community rather than the individual. Hence individual welfare is measured in the wider context of societal welfare or well-being. John S.Mbiti in his seminal book *African Religions and Philosophy* has elaborated on this aspect of African identity aptly expressed in his famous dictum, “I am because we are” (Mbiti 1969). Thus, in Bukusu perspective, moral uprightness denotes cultivation of traits of character, which enhance peace, order and harmony in the community. That is to say, morality aims at sustenance and promotion of *kumulembe*; this being the embodiment of the aforementioned moral virtues. Consequently therefore, the goal of Bukusu morality is “to bring about *kumulembe* i.e. a state of calmness, implying order, harmony, peace, solidarity and prosperity. In other words, “an indication that all is well in the community” (Makokha 1993, 69).

Thus, moral rules are pursued because they reflect an essential part of human nature (traits of being) and their practical utility are recognized in the community and confirmed by human welfare. The emphasis on human welfare underscores the centrality of humanity in morality. Thus, we clearly see that Bukusu morality is essentially humanistic in outlook.

The ethics so far described makes no direct reference to human to nonhuman nature relationship. It should be pointed out from the onset that there is no systematized ethics of environment in Bukusu ethics. This does not however mean that the Bukusu have no notion of human to nonhuman nature relationship in ethical terms, far from it. This paper is therefore an attempt to unearth the foundations of Bukusu environmental wisdom and virtue in order to reconstruct and construct Bukusu environmental philosophy.

A Brief Overview of Bukusu Cosmology

The search for the foundations of something cannot be unearthed without a sojourn in into metaphysics. Therefore the search for the foundations of Bukusu environmental wisdom must traced from the Bukusu cosmology. Cosmology is a branch of metaphysics which focus on understanding the principles underlying the universe to explain the genesis, nature and workings of the universe or cosmos. It is also referred to as the metaphysics of the universe or cosmos. In many African communities/just like among the ancient Greeks, there are many myths, which try to account for the origin of the universe. These myths however differ a

great deal in nuance and detail but they serve a general purpose of an attempt to understand the world largely from a supernatural point of view. The Bukusu, like most other African communities attribute the origin of the universe and all its inhabitants to the creative power of an ultimate supernatural being. The Bukusu call this supernatural being, **Wele**. **Wele** is qualified in many respects to emphasize different aspects. For example one of the qualifications of **Wele** which is relevant to this paper is reference to **Wele** as **khabumbi**. The word **Khabumbi** is a verb from **khubumba**, which simply means to mould or create, thus emphasizing the creative power of **Wele**.

Principally, Bukusu cosmology presents a universe that is divided into two broad categories, namely the visible or material (*liloba*) and the invisible or immaterial (*likulu*). The Bukusu, in opening their prayers and entreaties to Wele, always make reference to this duality saying, *Wele owabumba liloba nende likulu* (Wele, you who created the earth and heavens).

The notion of *likulu* as the invisible or immaterial reality requires clarification at this point. Ordinarily, when reference is made to a place designated as *mwikulu*, people tend to look up to the sky, as if to suggest that *likulu* refers to such bodies as the moon, sun or the stars. Were this to be the case, then *likulu* would refer to some physical rather than spiritual reality. However, the correct interpretation of *likulu* is implicit in reference to the abode of the departed persons. When the Bukusu bury the dead, they believe that the abode of the deceased is *mwikulu*. In this it is then clear that *mwikulu* does not refer to some physical place or location. In essence, however, one thing is clear, namely that wherever the remains of the dead person is believed to go to is the dwelling place of *Wele*. Yet in Bukusu metaphysics, **Wele** is portrayed as being present and manifested in all beings in nature. This simply affirms the spiritual nature of *Wele* who can aptly be described as being both transcendent and immanent.

Therefore one can clearly see that the Bukusu notion of *likulu* does not refer to some specific physical entity or existent such as the moon, sun or stars, neither does it refer to some spatial space, it rather refers to some immaterial or invisible reality. Thus, *mwikulu* denotes a spiritual consciousness not physical reality.

In Bukusu cosmology, the two realms of existence, i.e. the visible and the invisible are not divorced or separated from each other. The invisible reality as described above is principally the abode of spiritual entities notably *Wele* and ancestral spirits (*bisambwa*). The material reality on the other hand consists of the earth together with all its physical existents including humans, animals, and plants and so on. These two realms exist in an intricate and delicate balance and harmony (see Placide Tempels (1945) on Bantu ontology).

Then *Wele* is believed to have put in place mechanisms to uphold, sustain and further the harmony and balance. The Bukusu readily point to the succession of seasons as evidence of this eternally coordinated process of harmony in nature. Through this process, consisting of what we with hindsight of science may call the laws of nature, the natural universe is self-regulated, maintaining balance and harmony.

Further to the laws of nature, the Bukusu believe in the permanent or eternal presence of *Wele* in all beings in nature. This eternal presence is significant in that it helps to further maintain the natural order of being. To help **Wele** in this process, the Bukusu believe in the authority of elevated humans in the form of ancestral spirits. These spirits like *Wele* are thought to play a significant role in ensuring balance and harmony in the order of being. The

overall purpose of the prayers and sacrifices the Bukusu direct to the spirit world is to uphold the said balance, order and harmony in the universe.

Further still, the Bukusu believe in the presence of some invisible power in all created beings. This invisible power is generally responsible for the living, creative and rejuvenative ability in the universe. It is this invisible power thought to be present in all beings that partly accounts for each being's unique contribution to the overall balance in the universe. Placide Tempels calls this the vital force present in all beings, both living and nonliving (Tempels, 1945).

In concluding this section, the Bukusu cosmology described above presents us with a universe, which is a well integrated system, essentially because of the common origin of all existents. Each being in nature plays a role, which is integrated in the overall purpose of the universe. Thus, the various existents, living and nonliving, human and nonhuman co-exist in a delicate balance and harmony, to ensure the realization of the overall purpose in nature. This in our view provides the metaphysical grounding of Bukusu environmental wisdom and virtue.

Human and Nonhuman Beings: Fellow Sojourners in Nature

At a first glance, we can infer the place of human beings in the natural order of beings from the Bukusu myth of creation. The myth as pointed out in the preceding section vests the origin of the universe including all its contents in the creative act of *Wele*. According to this account every existent owes its being to *Wele khabumbi* (the creator). In essence, then, from the onset we see a close metaphysical connection between human beings and all other beings in nature, since all begins in nature owe their direct origin to the same common source. A plausible interpretation of this account is that, all beings in nature have inherent worth. We have already made reference to Temple's notion of vital force which attributes inherent worth in all beings in nature.

The Bukusu present the above position more forcefully in the maxim which asserts that, '*Wele kawele mubindu biosi mala kechulamo*,' this is to say, God is fully present and manifest in all beings in nature. Thus, all beings in nature as *Wele*'s creation manifest and embody the very presence of *Wele*. It is plausible therefore to posit that it is this common ancestry (which all beings share and conform to) from which all beings in nature derive their worth. We however take cognizance of the fact that this position is philosophically debatable. In other words to argue that beings in nature, humans included have worth of their own merely on account that they are created by God and share a common ancestry is problematic. The point being made however, is that, whatever their origin, all beings in nature are presented as having inherent worth, independent of each other. Each of these beings is unique and contributes in its peculiar way towards the integrity of the ecological system.

In ethical terms, this perception is significant as it grounds in all nature a locus of worth merely by virtue of being. It is this inherent worth which in turn gives all beings in nature a purpose in which all participate. We can thus argue that nature's good transcends being merely a means to human ends but the integrity of the whole system. This is contrary to Aristotelian-Thomistic conception of the purpose of nature as which the duo predicated on their usefulness to humans. By this inherent worth, we can posit that all beings in nature emerge as having their own independent good or well being. In our view this endowment

imbues in all beings a natural right to exist, which cannot be dispensed with without ethical consequence. This in our view grounds the moral dimension of human –nonhuman nature relationship.

In the light of biocentric and ecocentric ethics, the Bukusu conception described above is significant in that it passes as an expression and recognition of the moral standing of all beings in nature. To express this differently, we infer in Bukusu conception of nature a worth or goodness in all beings in nature obtaining in their very existence or being. This goodness is independent of any utilitarian value that may be attached to various species by human beings. This is what Aristotle called ontological goodness, although paradoxically tied nature's purpose to human ends.

The picture that comes through the Bukusu ontology is one that views humanity as being an integral part of nature. In response to the question about humanity's place in the natural order of things, a Bukusu sage, Francis Makhanu, philosophically observes; *omundu alisindu sititi musibala*. Literally, this means human beings constitute very tiny part of the natural universe. That this is the case is indeed a truism, which cannot be denied without absurdity. Fundamentally, however, this response raises a more pertinent philosophical question concerning human to non-human nature relationship.

In our view, this conception of human beings vis-à-vis other beings in nature construes a part-whole relationship in which human beings together with other beings in nature incrementally add to the totality of nature. By implication, the various parts of nature thereof contribute in different ways towards the realization of the overall status of the totality of nature. This, in our view further attests to the connectedness of the different parts of nature owing to their sharing in this totality. Thus conceived, the vast expanse of the universe emerges as home to all beings in nature, human beings being integral part of this totality. In this light, it becomes clear then, that the Bukusu conceive of the universe as having a larger overall purpose, which transcends humanity. This understanding radically questions the anthropocentric argument that other beings in nature exist solely for the purpose of human ends or good. Thus viewed the Bukusu conception of nature is inclined towards biocentrism, or even ecocentrism.

The Bukusu view of nature can therefore be described as holistic in the sense that humanity and other beings in nature are seen as being internally connected and intimately intertwined. The emphasis then, is not on the systemic properties of nature, but rather on nature as a collectivity. The bondedness that exists between the parts of the whole emphasizes the importance of not only the parts but also the whole itself. This leads us to the irresistible conclusion that the functioning and well-being of the universe ultimately and entirely depend on the harmony among the different parts of this collectivity.

The view that humanity's position or even value in the natural order of being is comparable to that of other beings in nature seems to be in line with the central theme of ecocentrism which envisages ecological as well as axiological egalitarianism in nature. This position, is however highly contentious, as it poses a serious challenge to the thesis which stresses the centrality of humanity in the universe articulated mainly by the anthropocentric perspective and even common sense. Prompted by this challenge, we raised the issue of centrality and superiority of humanity in nature with our Bukusu sages. In response to this issue one sage Francis Makhanu gave a two-fold observation. First, he observed that humans, like other beings in nature are subject to the basic constraints imposed by the laws of nature, which are invariably operative in the universe. Second, he observed and argued that human fallibility is

inconsistent with any claim to their absolute control over the rest of nature. He thus concluded that any claim of human superiority over the rest of nature is mere human arrogance. To reinforce Makhanu's argument, another sage Samson Ulula cites instances in which humans are at the mercy of nature, their ingenuity notwithstanding. For example he observed that *omundu anyala khukhwituya khwibale mala kafwa*, that is to say, a human being can stumble over a stone, falling down to death! This dramatically illustrates not only human infallibility but their inability to be masters of nature.

A critical view of the above explanations and arguments is that in Bukusu worldview, the harmony between the various parts of nature, humans included is measured in terms of how well integrated the different parts are in the overall good of the ecological system. Thus, great premium is placed on the well functioning, welfare and harmony of the universe as a whole. This view is close to the Buddhist theory of changeability which essentially emphasizes the connectedness of different orders of being (McLuhan 1994). In other words, the individual well-being can only be accounted for within the context of the functioning and harmony of the collectivity. The connectedness and bondedness of the various parts in nature discussed above support this interpretation. This, in essence therefore, explains the superfluity of the question as to whether human beings are central or superior beings in the universe.

The preceding analysis notwithstanding however, the Bukusu are not oblivious of the unique characteristics that distinguish humanity as a species among the collectivity of beings in nature. The Bukusu recognize in humanity a unique quality, which is thought to be either absent or only a limited possibility in other beings in nature.

To express this, the Bukusu say "*omundu alinenda limanya*", literally this is to say, human beings are rational. The notion of *limanya*, however as conceived by the Bukusu does not simply refer to the cognitive or intellectual activity of the mind. Over and above, the Bukusu conceptualize rationality or *limanya* in terms of moral consciousness. Thus to the Bukusu, "*omundu we limanya*", literally a rational person, is one who has in addition to being rational, has the capacity to discern the right and the wrong, the good and the bad, and inclined to act in accordance with this. This is pragmatically determined in both the person's speech and action. Thus mere knowledge or cognition of the moral imperatives devoid of the concomitant practice of those imperatives does not qualify one to be a person of '*limanya*'; *limanya* therefore more accurately means prudence. The normative function of rationality is therefore more significant than the mere cognitive, for this can be inter-subjectively demonstrated within the moral fabric of the community.

The moral order engendered in the notion of *limanya* therefore forms the basis of the second nature of humanity in the universe. From this point of view, morality is necessarily a human attribute, which distinguishes humanity from other beings in nature. It is only human beings who possess *limanya* and *ipso facto*, the capacity to discern, appreciate and pursue moral value. This capacity is however, not without a purpose in the overall order of being in the universe as our sage, Pius Namwinguli guides us in his response to the question regarding the usefulness of *limanya*. For example, he observes two aphorisms quite truistically, but philosophically. First that *omundu anyala khubaya esimba* that is, the lion can be tamed by humans (not withstanding all its physical strength) and secondly that *embwa senyala khuruka kumukoye tawe*, i.e., a dog cannot weave a rope. The basic inference that can be drawn from these aphorisms is that humans by endowment of *limanya* can give meaning to events or

phenomena. In other words, human actions are charged with meaning, intentionality and purposiveness.

The Bukusu therefore recognize significant distinction between human beings and other beings in nature, principally as residing in the capacity of *limanya*. The inevitable concern at this juncture however, is whether there is a paradox between this dimension of humanity and the earlier nature of humanity presented above. Put differently, does the capacity of *limanya* necessarily abstract or alienate human beings from nature, setting them in opposition with other beings in nature? The presence of *limanya* as analyzed above being defined in terms of moral order in the universe extends beyond the human to human relationships to include other beings in nature. This explains the expectation that people would be guided by moral virtue in dealing with their immediate natural environment. To the Bukusu a person who senselessly destroys the natural environment is described as lacking in *limanya*.

In the light of this, we are inclined to argue that the underlying moral imperative is that human beings endowed with *limanya* have responsibility not only to fellow humans but also to other beings in nature. This responsibility is implicit in nature's overall purpose to which all beings subscribe by virtue of their origin. Most importantly also, this responsibility directed to nonhuman nature indispensably contributes to the wellbeing of humanity. Resultantly, we have some sort of mutuality of relationship in which both humanity and the natural environment are benefited.

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that the proper role of human beings in Bukusu worldview is that of being custodians or stewards of nature. This emanates from their unique place in nature as beings with *limanya*, which confers upon them with this responsibility. To act otherwise towards nature would amount to the negation of this uniqueness. Thus viewed, *limanya* does not in any way justify human superiority and subordination of the nonhuman nature, neither is it carte blanche to humanity to act in accordance with the Thrasymachean motto of "might is right". Rather it is meant to reinforce humanity's role as stewards or custodians of other beings in nature. The contrary view as the above discourse suggests negates humanity's humanness as beings with *limanya* rather than exalt them as overcoming the handicap imposed by nature. This way, there would be a contradiction for humans to conquer nature because it also necessarily means conquering themselves. Thus posited, it becomes abundantly clear that destruction of nature necessarily implies the destruction of humanity.

Thus far, we discern in the Bukusu view of humanity's place in nature presented above two realms of interaction and meaning. First, we have the human as part of nature thesis, which holds that humanity is essentially an integral part of nature. This is affirmed by the common origin, which all beings in nature, humans included are thought to share and conform to. Second, it can be inferred that the presence of *limanya* as explained above sets human beings apart from nature. This view is simply a recognition of the unique place of humanity in nature as possessing capacities by which they can interpret and reflectively respond to the natural world rather than instinctively submit.

From the above, it can be observed that there is no contradiction arising from the dual position of humanity in nature. Humanity's second nature, apart from distinguishing them from the rest of nature, is perfectly engendered harmoniously in the overall good in nature. Thus, rather than abstracting and alienating humanity, opposing them to nature, *limanya*

ought to guide humanity in their contribution towards enhancing the harmony and balance in nature. This way, human beings are accountable to themselves, nature and transcendence.

In concluding this section it can be posited that the Bukusu do not perceive humanity and the rest of nature as two totally separate realities. This does not however, obliterate any distinction between humanity and other beings in nature like what is envisaged in the extreme radical environmentalism expressed in ecocentrism. Thus humanity cannot be absorbed by nature neither can other beings in nature be defined merely in terms of human purposes and ends. There is an internal unity that coalesces in the balance and harmony in nature. This way, we can argue that the ethical concern for nonhuman nature in Bukusu moral thought is informed by a fusion of the two realms of interaction and meaning discussed above. The following section elucidates this by exploring the intricate relation between man and nature.

The Bukusu and the Earth: The Inextricable Bond

This section proceeds on and articulates the position that there exists an inextricable bond between humanity and the earth that forms a natural basis for the Bukusu environmental philosophy, in particular an environmental ethic. As discussed earlier on, in Bukusu cosmology, land is considered a significant entity of the material existence, and it is to the earth that they return when they pass on. This is why to the Bukusu, the earth is symbolically presented as both the father and mother of all existents. This father/mother principle presents the earth as the cornerstone of survival and continuity of being.

To emphasize the foregoing point, the Bukusu with a sense of finality say, *liloba lilinda omundu mubulam nenda mwifwa*. This is to say that the earth sustains humanity both in life and in death. This can be interpreted to mean that the bond between humanity and nature transcends the mere mundane relationship in which the earth and natural provide material resources from which human beings eke out a living human. Instead the relationship encompasses all other dimensions including spiritual, thereby establishing a strong bond between human beings and other beings in nature. The binding force lies in their rootedness in the earth. To the Bukusu the earth thus forms a meeting point for all beings in nature, both humans and nonhuman beings.

Further still, to the Bukusu the earth defines an individual's identity. This identity is multifaceted, encompassing the social, economic and spiritual dimensions. To express this sense of identity, the Bukusu insist on burying the dead in their homestead. If a person died away from home and the body was never found, a ceremony was performed to bring his spirits 'home'. In such a case, a banana stem, symbolizing the body of the deceased would be buried with all the requisite burial rites. For instance, this was done for the Bukusu people who died and their bodies never recovered in Burma and other places while serving in the British army fighting alongside British soldiers during the Second World War.

The grave is equivalent of a death certificate and its presence at the homestead qualifies the deceased's family inheritance of the place he is buried. This is an affirmation of belonging and identity. But most importantly, burial within the familiar environment is believed to link one to his ancestral spirits. There is no doubt therefore that this sense of belonging and identity enhanced the bond between the Bukusu and their land. This may partly serve to explain why at the dawn of independence, many Bukusu people refused to move to the settlement schemes that were created out of the former white highlands. They considered those places as *mundaa* (bush) even with full knowledge of possibility of enhanced economic

prospects in terms of ownership of bigger farms with greater agricultural potential. The prevailing thinking was that by moving to these schemes (*mundaa*), they would fundamentally alter and disrupt their lives especially socially and spiritually. In a word, they feared being disconnected from their 'home', and hence losing their sense of belonging and identity. This serves to confirm our earlier observation that to the Bukusu the land was not a mere commodity and resource for economic benefit, but rather the very foundation of their existence. It was therefore considered sacrosanct.

To emphasize the bond between human beings and the earth further, the Bukusu believe that, *sobwabwa namwe sotunyila liloba tawe*, that is, one can neither curse nor get angered with the earth. *Khubwabwa*, from which the verb *sobwabwa* is derived, refers to an extreme kind of curse, which is meant to completely sever the relationship with the victim of the curse. It arises out of extreme desire to see the victim perish entirely. Likewise, *khutunya*, from which the verb *sotunyila* is derived, expresses excessive anger, again arising from intense feeling of hate and or annoyance.

Therefore the belief that human beings can neither curse nor get angered with the earth is an expression of humanity's rootedness in the earth and the extent to which they are inextricably bonded. The Bukusu further believe that a child's curse to his parents is of no consequence. Analogously, therefore we can infer that the Bukusu see and treat the earth in the same way as they view and or relate to their parents and hence the futility of any attempt to curse it. The earth as already pointed out above, connects humans to the spiritual world and this relationship is invariably permanent; it cannot be severed whatsoever. Finally, the above belief emphasizes human dependence on the earth, their transient nature notwithstanding, because this extends to the hereafter. John Mbiti has discussed this topic in details in his seminal book, *African Philosophy and Religions* (1969).

Further still as alluded to above, the earth was also believed to provide a meeting point between the living and the departed members of the community. As the living walk on the earth, they walk on the dwelling place of their ancestors and hence the earth metaphysically binds the living to the spiritual world, to their past, present and future. The Bukusu for instance symbolized this unity by burying the placenta and umbilical cord in a fertile banana plantation. This also symbolized fertility and continuity, implicitly attesting to their vitality, the procreative and living power, in a word, the fecundity of the earth, which holds the key to enhance and sustain being.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Bukusu people hold the earth in sacrosanctity, this in our view pointing to its inherent goodness. The earth as portrayed above is valued not only for the benefits that humanity reaped from it, rather as a sacred entity. As a sacred entity, the earth was valued and respected on the basis of its inherent worth. The father/mother principle of the earth already referred to further emphasizes the idea of the earth as not only the very foundation of existence and survival of all beings in nature but to its own inherent worth.

In ethical terms, the above conception enhanced the Bukusu people's direct respect for the earth. This determined the way people related to the earth in particular and to other beings or existents in nature in general. Thus other existents were logically first and foremost, perceived as fellow sojourners in existence since they shared in common their rootedness in the earth. The concomitant respect for the earth and other beings in nature by the Bukusu provides the fundamental basis for their underlying ethic of conservation of the environment. Consistent with humanity's pro-active position in nature, this ethic implies that human beings

in pursuit of their needs should relate to and treat the rest of nature judiciously. The representation of the earth as mother/father further implies that humans are naturally obligated to relate and to treat the earth and its other inhabitants as such, that is, that humans ought to take care of it, respect and love the earth and its existents the same way as they would their parents in keeping with the dictates of Bukusu ethics.

The values articulated in the foregoing paragraphs are the natural and logical contents of Bukusu environmental ethics generally engendered in their cosmology, but specifically expressed in their attachment to the earth. We are therefore at this point inclined to argue with McLuhan (1994:310) that “to be exposed to nature and to live your life in its rhythm develops humility as a human characteristic rather than arrogance.” Indeed, the Bukusu attitude of humility to the earth, to nature is explicitly engendered in their ties to it as explicated above. This attitude is diametrically opposed to the dominant Western worldview that engenders an attitude which tends to be manipulative, exploitative and arrogant, that sees nature at best instrumentally and externally.

Humanity and Nature: A Sacred Balance

The Bukusu cosmology presents an orderly universe, which existed in harmony and balance. This as we have seen in the preceding pages entirely depended on the harmony and balance of the visible and the invisible realms of existence which are so to speak, inseparable. This inextricable connection as pointed out is for example expressed in the succession of seasons, which determine and guide the link between natural phenomena and human activities. This connectedness is not only a pointer to but itself actually enhances the harmony and balance in nature. Let us explain.

To the Bukusu, the knowledge about rhythms of nature was largely available to the majority of the people, who exhibited a great mastery of knowledge about plants, animals and their interactions within their locality. This was in addition to specialized knowledge such as rainmaking available only to their experts. Placide Tempels’ seminal book, *Bantu Philosophy* (1945) has discussed this topic in detail. By way of illustration, among the Bukusu, most people whenever they fell sick, they would readily know what types of herbs they would draw medicine from. Most of this ecological knowledge was learnt from the characteristics that natural phenomena presented. For example, the Bukusu would not depend on the expertise of a meteorologist for knowledge about changing weather patterns. This knowledge was readily available to the majority of people through observation of and behavior of natural phenomena. For example to signal the impending arrival of rainy season, an indigenous tree called *kumukimila* would normally begin to exude some foul smell. From this smell the people would begin to prepare their farms for the imminent planting season. This way, people are able to harmonize their activities within natural rhythms, thus maintaining a delicate balance between the two. This in our view helped to minimize human-nonhuman nature conflicts and unwanted exploitation of the natural environment.

The bondedness of humanity to nature already discussed has real impact on human to nonhuman nature relationship. This is because in the words of Chapeskie (1999, 78), “it opens possibilities for the accumulation and application of ecological knowledge. Such knowledge flows synergistically among the different ‘users’ of different resources”.

The many rituals performed at different times were in essence meant to ensure and enhance the harmony and balance between human activities and nature. By way of exemplification,

the Bukusu would normally congregate to perform an important ritual ceremony to mark the planting season. On such occasion, a goat was slaughtered and the blood together with some traditional beer was sprinkled on seeds mixed with some herbs. This ritual as explained by our sages served a two-fold effect. First, it was a sacrifice to the spiritual world to bless the soils for their fertility and therefore an abundant harvest. Second, the ritual was meant to apologize to the soil and other lives, because in the process of ploughing, a lot of these lives are destroyed.

Western rationality and scientific outlook would make nonsense of this explanation because it cannot rationally account for the relationship between the ritual as described and the abundant harvest. True, there is no causal relationship between the cause and the effect, neither is there logical relationship between the two. However, to explain the Bukusu ecological knowledge purely in terms of cause-effect is in our view to limit the scope and possibilities of indigenous knowledge. This knowledge is holistic in the sense that it does not draw a hard and fast distinction between the knower and the object of knowledge as is the strict rule in Western epistemology, rather the knower is an intimate participant in the whole process of knowing.

Coming back to the two pronged purpose of the ritual described above, two related meanings germane to the ritual can be discerned. In the first instance, the ritual aims at harmonizing the visible and the invisible realities. In the light of the inseparable nature of the two realities, this harmony is crucial in achieving an overall balance in nature. To the Bukusu, a nonfunctioning or non-performing natural phenomena expressed for example in crop failure, drought, and so on is an expression of disharmony between the two worlds. Therefore the presumed intervention or invocation of the invisible world through the ritual by the physical world greatly influenced the Bukusu conception and utilization of the natural resources, which we can conclude had an underlying conservation ethic of sustainability.

The above explanation of the malfunctioning natural phenomena as a signal of a mal-integrated ecological system is not different from what we learn from the science of ecology. Today the science of ecology directly links environmental problems such as erratic rainfall patterns, drought and so on, to a mal-integrated ecological system. Thus Bukusu indigenous ecological knowledge is therefore quite in harmony with science.

Second, the idea of apologizing to the soil and other lives is a re-affirmation of the sacredness of all lives, including human beings. This is significant in terms of human to nonhuman nature relationship. In ethical terms, it points to an ethic that constraints and guides humanity's intervention in the natural world. With this ethic, humans are guided by need rather than mere accumulation. This is consistent with the overall good in nature, which aims at maintaining a sacred balance between humanity and other beings in nature.

When the above balance in nature is achieved, human beings co-exist with nature, thereby minimizing conflicts between the two categories. Accordingly, a situation of conflict between humanity and nature would not necessarily require a restraint on humanity from their environment, rather to harmonize patterns of resource use. This is because humanity's survival patterns are necessarily interwoven in the ecological relationships. In most cases however, the subsistence practices operated in harmony with nature and hence an ecological balance. This also helped to minimize human-wildlife conflict that has escalated in contemporary society. The Bukusu elders look back with nostalgia about the many species of

flora and fauna that were perfectly maintained and conserved (for example on the slopes of Mt Elgon). Many of these species have since disappeared from their environment.

Human Kinship with other Beings in Nature

In an earlier section in this paper, we have discussed the Bukusu belief in a common ancestry or origin for all beings in nature and its implications for the relationship between humans and other beings in nature. This commonality established some lateral relationship between humans and other beings in nature in which humans identified themselves as being part of nature. The theme of humanity as part of nature is re-affirmed by this belief. Informed by this belief in common ancestry, the Bukusu perceive themselves as being kin to nature or at least parts of it. This perception which is widespread is generally expressed in Bukusu tales in which natural beings particularly animals and birds are featured as family members. But most concretely, various Bukusu clans actually identify and associate certain animals, birds, and plants and so on with their origin and treat these beings as their kin.

The rules of kinship that bind humans to fellow human beings extend to humans as they relate to these beings they identify with. For example, a Bukusu clan known as *Bakoyi* associate its origin with *enjofu* (elephant). It was believed that if you wronged or harmed *omukoyi* (a person from this clan), he would turn around the house and transform himself into an elephant. To them therefore the elephant is a symbol of security and protection. As a result of this kinship relationship with the elephant, *Bakoyi* also cared for and protected the elephant from harm. They were neither allowed to kill nor eat the elephant. They drew their strength as a clan from the elephant. As pointed out earlier on, almost every Bukusu clan identified itself with a natural being in this manner. Underlying such beliefs and practice we can infer an ethic of conservation and preservation. This way, many species of nonhuman nature were either conserved or preserved in Bukusu environment. It is perhaps worth noting that some of these beliefs and practices persist in contemporary society.

To illustrate the notion of human to nonhuman kinship further, perhaps the way the Bukusu people as a whole related to and treated a cow would suffice. First we begin with an analogy from human to human relationship. In Bukusu social life, when a morally deviant person had sexual relationship with his mother or niece, this was considered the worst form of incest. As such this kind of transgression was considered beyond any form of cleansing prescribed by the Bukusu moral system. Therefore, the curse that was handed down to such a person summarily amounted to a capital punishment.

Interestingly, our research reveals that in Bukusu community, a man who committed a sexual act with his cow was dealt with exactly in the same way as in the above case. That is to say that sexual intercourse with a cow was viewed and treated in a similar manner with sexual intercourse with one's own mother or niece. In both cases again, it was considered an extreme form of incest, which was beyond cleansing. This is an important similarity which as our informants emphasized, more than anything else, underscored the strong tie and sense of kinship relationship between human beings and the nonhuman counterparts.

In recapitulation, the case explicated above and many other similar ones between the treatment of human beings and nonhuman beings reinforce the human to nonhuman nature kinship theme. This in turn points to a Bukusu environmental ethic underwritten by such values as respect for nature, care and protection of other beings in nature, human stewardship of nature and sustainability of nature. The kinship principle was particularly important in

resolving conflicts between humans and nonhuman nature. The above case of sexual intercourse with a cow and the subsequent punishment of the offending human is one classic example.

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