



# The Role of Ontology in Environmental Conservation and Preservation: Examples from the Praises of the Nyakyusa

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of ontology in environmental conservation and preservation. Methods such as critical reading, interviews, and qualitative analysis were used to gather primary data. The primary data regarding the ontology of the Nyakyusa were collected from Rungwe District in Mbeya Region. Examples were drawn from *Praise* of the Nyakyusa community. The theories guiding the data analysis Ontological and Ecological theories. These theories emphasises that culture and the physical environment are interdependent. The perspectives focus intently on the relationships between humans and the natural environments. The findings reveal that certain beliefs and taboos within ontology contribute to environmental conservation and preservation. This article suggests that specific beliefs and taboos embedded in the ontology of our communities should be respected and revitalised, as they play a vital role in environmental protection.

**Keywords:** Ontology, Environment, Praise, Conservation, Preservation, and Ecological Theory.

## I. Introduction

This article seeks to elaborate on the role of ontology in environmental conservation and preservation. Examples are drawn from the Praises of the Nyakyusa. *Praises* are poetic compositions that praise people, animals, or objects; the composer may choose to extol anything they deem worthy of such praise. The word *tondozi* "Praise" is derived from the verb *tondoa*, which means to praise at length and speak elaborately (Wamitila 2004: 131). Praises typically describe matters relating to another person, often a leader in society, such as a chief or clan head, or even other subjects, such as gods, animals, and towns. Mulokozi (1996:83) posits that anything can be praised, for instance, a stone, mountain, village, country, cow, goat, wild animal, fish, motor vehicle, bicycle, or aeroplane. The literary context demonstrates that Praises are closely tied to ontology because the traits they depict are metaphorical, employing symbolic language and referring to human beings through environmental

imagery. Mulokozi (1996) explains that Praises reflect the beliefs, knowledge, wisdom, and perspectives of a community regarding their life. The beliefs and perspectives of Africans are manifested through their ontology.

Ontology comprises the knowledge, perspectives, and beliefs held by a community about life and existence, and about the universe at large. Heidegger (1999) explains that ontology is the study of the earth, the heavens, humankind, and the divine, thereby providing humanity with a deeper understanding of their environment. Ontology concerns itself with the essence of being and is used to describe the state of existence (Wamitila, 2003). Ontology answers questions about the origin of human beings and the universe, the fate of life, and examines whether there exists a power beyond the world that governs human life. It also addresses how human beings relate to the universe and its components. The foundation of African beliefs lies primarily in the relationship between humans and nature (the environment). To achieve its aims, ontology and Praises employ objects from the environment. The characters represented in ontology and Praises may be human beings, animals, or any element of nature. At times, these characters are known to the audience, even if they cannot be perceived through the senses; nonetheless, in ontology, their existence is accepted, and society respects them. These characters are actors within ontology and serve as symbols of earthly beings; they represent entities that are believed in, respected, and valued by society.

The concept of the environment has been defined by various scholars as the totality of all elements surrounding human beings, for instance, trees, rivers, lakes, houses, and so forth. Thirmurthy (2004) asserts that the environment comprises all living and non-living things surrounding humans. He further elaborates that the environment includes natural resources found in our habitats, air, land, water, the vitality of plants and animals, as well as the social and economic conditions. These



environmental components are the central themes of praise, and they are used within ontology to execute its functions. This article examines how Praises present themes relating to the environment and ontology. Praises have been selected because this genre employs environmental elements more than others; it is a form of oral literature that vividly portrays African ontology. Through Praises, we can understand a community's beliefs regarding their lives and the surrounding elements.

## II. Research Theory

We employed two theories in this article because we are examining the relationship between praise and ontology in presenting themes concerning the environment, and also the role of ontology in environmental conservation and protection. The theoretical frameworks of Ecology and Ontology guided the discussion and analysis of the data presented. The theory of Ecology emerged in the United States and Europe during the 1960s. Its pioneer is Glotfelty (1995). This theory emphasises that culture and the physical environment are interdependent. Its perspective focuses intently on the relationship between humans and the natural environment. This viewpoint is aligned with advocating for nature and is part of broader environmental activism to prevent the world's destruction caused by reckless human actions that disregard nature.

According to Glotfelty (1995), this occurs when human activities disrupt the Earth's natural capacity to sustain ecological systems. Literature, through its various genres and subgenres, employs diverse stylistic techniques to discuss social issues, including environmental conservation and protection. These perspectives maintain that the environment and culture collaborate in shaping language to represent environmental matters. This theory has proven useful in our investigation of the relationship between the environment and culture (ontology), as ecology does not merely consider how literature portrays the environment but also the specific environmental and cultural elements (ontology) embedded within literature, including the utilisation of objects found in nature. Therefore, the application of this theory is seen as appropriate because of the strong correlation between ontology and the environment.

The theory of African Ontology is a branch of metaphysics that relates to the nature of existence and its relation to being (Mbiti, 1969). African ontology refers to the African worldview regarding

life, human existence, and the universe as a whole. It underlines unity and solidarity, which are fundamental tenets among Africans, principles considered unbreakable and indestructible. Tempels (1959) explains that African philosophy significantly revolves around African Ontology. Africans inherently possess many natural elements that require an ontological framework for their interpretation. The African way of life is rooted in foundational principles that guide them. Africans have their methods of resolving issues they face, including environmental degradation. African thought is built upon various forces, including deities, humans, plants, and others. Ontology plays a significant role in the broader context of environmental conservation because even under ordinary circumstances, ontology utilises environmental components to fulfil its purpose. Praise has been used to represent what the community believes in, values, and respects. In this article, we examined particular aspects of ontology that contribute to environmental conservation and preservation. These aspects were used as representatives of other elements.

## III. Research Methodologies

Primary data were collected in the field through the compilation of Praises and interviews with individuals regarding the ontology of the Nyakyusa. Critical reading and qualitative analysis methods were used in libraries to gather secondary data. These data were explained and analysed per the research objectives and relevant theories. The descriptive framework used to elucidate the role of ontology in environmental conservation and preservation was outlined clearly.

## IV. Data Analysis and Presentation

In its analysis, this article explores the role of ontology in environmental conservation and preservation. Certain aspects of ontology that aid in environmental protection and preservation are used as examples. These aspects include reverence for ancestors, the concept of unity, humanity, land, and the ideology of Force.

### 4.1 The Matter of Reverence for Ancestors and Spirits

In African communities, spirits or ancestors are considered an integral part of life, as it is believed that when a person dies, they retain the ability to communicate with the living regarding various matters. In the ontology of African societies, spirits or the deceased are believed to exist and possess the capacity to intervene in response to the



community's requests, whether for protection, rain, healing, and so on. Elingworth (1969), Pelt (1971), and Koponen (1988) speak of the great power associated with graves and ancestral spirits, stating that it was believed, and still is by some communities, that a deceased person continues to live and can assist those still alive. For example, in line 17 of a praise dedicated to a place, the artist says that the ancestors are silently watching over their people. In ordinary circumstances, a deceased individual cannot protect a living one, but within ontology, it is believed that the departed can indeed do so. Respecting ancestors or spirits is carried out through rituals in which their names are invoked, for example, in line 2 of a praise dedicated to a place, the names mentioned are those of deceased chiefs. These names are recited during rituals to seek assistance when needed.

Furthermore, these names must not be spoken arbitrarily; spirits may become offended and

retaliate against the offenders. Such names are only mentioned in designated sacred spaces during ritual ceremonies. These rituals are performed in specific, well-preserved areas—for instance, in lines 3 and 11, the artist refers to high mountains and long grass, and in line 11, to mysterious forests. Some respondents noted that in the Nyakyusa community, there are areas reserved for traditional practices. These areas are both respected and feared; people are forbidden from entering, passing through, or engaging in activities such as farming, gathering firewood, or herding. Violating this can result in harm. This belief has significantly contributed to the preservation of these environments. This is supported by Barbara and Jugen (2007), who conducted a study on environmental conservation perspectives, particularly regarding forests. They observed that forests serve not only for environmental preservation but also as sacred spaces used in rituals, embodying a socially significant ontological purpose. Refer to the praise below.

#### Praise of the Place

1	<i>Itataijubha, kumyitukulkuti</i>	Oh, father, oh mother, we are from Ikuti.
2	<i>KubhaMwakila, kubhallaalatakubhaMwasoni</i>	From the house of Mwakila, Ilalata, and Mwasoni
3	<i>Kufyambaifitali, kulisuitali</i>	Among tall mountains and long grass
4	<i>Kuno likumela palumu na pakilo</i>	Where crops flourish in both dry and rainy seasons
5	<i>Kunoimbotojhikelilwe</i>	Where fertility abounds
6	<i>Kufijhinjaiifitaliniifipimba</i>	Amongst tall and short banana plants
7	<i>Kuno amasimbi ghakelilwe imbatata sikelilwe</i>	Where yams and sweet potatoes grow in abundance
8	<i>Ifitughufikelilwe</i>	With many potatoes
9	<i>Kunoingajhasikukula</i>	Where households flourish
10	<i>Kunotukubhingaingambiliinyonangi</i>	Where we chase away destructive monkeys
11	<i>Kumatengeleamasisy</i>	Within mysterious forests
12	<i>Kunoabhakisubhatikulwamosiku</i>	Where the people never quarrel
13	<i>Bhatengenengatingukujhalamile</i>	They are calm like a brooding hen
14	<i>Bhatengenengatiukufwakujhako</i>	They are as serene as if death did not exist.
15	<i>Kunobhatatabhalambalele</i>	Where our fathers lie in eternal rest
16	<i>BhaketilekukyambaRungwe</i>	Watching over Mount Rungwe
17	<i>Bhalimyebhikutulindilila</i>	They are silent, yet watching over us

Reverence for ancestors and spirits is one of the ontological aspects of African communities that greatly instills discipline in members with regard to their actions, including the protection of sacred sites used for traditional rituals. Africans believe that offending the spirits may lead to punishment, whereas appeasing them ensures peace and prosperity within the community. This study has revealed that ontology transcends mere belief; it is a

profound system through which literature enables us to appreciate and respect the environment. Ecologists such as Glotfelty and Harold (1996) and Wamitila (2008) state that literature has a role in shaping human attitudes towards the environment. It addresses how ecological concepts are represented in literary works and engages with human agency and language concerning nature. It also examines how humans interact with their environment. Praises



fulfil this function by depicting societal realities through environmental symbols. The artist documents what the community lives by its ontology, because ontology encompasses life, the environment, and human thought.

#### 4.2 The Concept of Unity

Unity holds that a person is a product and part of their environment, and that body and soul are inseparable except by death. Unity asserts that everything in the environment contains Force (life force) and thus should be respected and valued (Mulokozi, 2017). Society has been conditioned to this belief, which is why in African ontology, certain trees or animals are viewed with societal reverence, despite their natural or non-living status. All are essential tools in the work of literature. Mulokozi (2017), quoting Kezilahabi (1985:3), notes: "In African Culture, nature is not simply material to be appropriated and used." In African communities, it is believed that there is an ontological connection among all living things. Magesa (1997) states that all creatures are interlinked in such a way that each one affects the other, positively or negatively. Ecologists support

this when examining relationships and interdependence among organisms in nature. Magesa explains that nothing moves within the world without being influenced by another force of life.

This illustrates the existence of ontological solidarity between human beings and their environment. Such ontological cohesion allows living beings to thrive in safe environments because each is taught to respect the existence of the other. For example, in a *praise* dedicated to a chief, lines 10 and 11 state: "Do not cut down that tree; it protects the others, it brings us rain, and it is a very fruitful tree with over twenty widespread branches like a brooding hen." In ordinary terms, this shows the interdependence between a tree and rainfall, a tree and community protection. Within ontology and ecology, the presence of one thing supports the thriving of another. These statements demonstrate ontological solidarity between the environment and its ontology. It is this very cohesion that enables species to live in secure surroundings and ensures the environment is well cared for. Refer to the praises below.

#### Praise of the Chief

1	<i>Nine, nine eeeh x4</i>	Me, me eeeh x4
2	<i>Bhajhubhamwemupimbileindwanga</i>	You mothers bearing axes
3	<i>Lingamusumwikemonkisu, mbelilembabhule, mwepilikambabhule</i>	If you are going to the forest, allow me to speak, allow me to speak
4	<i>Lingamwingilenkisuueeh x 2 imipikigyosamakateghe, mukamenyeghe</i>	If you enter the forest, eeeh x2, you may cut all the trees, split them if you wish
5	<i>Mbelilembabhule ne mwini, lolimpikiumpandapanda, ughughulipakati pa kisu, unywamukuligyosa, ughugulitindongotiubhatalimumwanya, ghomma, napela, ghomma, ghoma</i>	Let me plead with you, but that Mpandapanda tree, the one standing in the middle of the forest, towering above all others, strong as a mast, no, I beg you, no, no.
6	<i>Pilikabhajubhambabhule, namangaumpikighulaahaa, umpikighulamwee, ghogwenekisu</i>	Listen, mothers, let me tell you, that tree, oh that tree, it is the heart of the village.
7	<i>GhogwenekisukyaMwakatapanya, ghogwenekisukyaMulileghe, ghogwenekisukyaMasomelu, mbabhule, eehee</i>	It is the tree of Mwakatapanya, of Mulileghe, of Masomelu, I tell you, eehee
8	<i>GwandileMungujhubwajhe, kujeghekusokaNkisondele, ghusemilempakaNkatonya, Mwitula, Nkajhuki, gujhekusokelaMwalutete</i>	It began at Mungujhubwajhe, seen from Nkisondele, it extends to Nkatonya, Itula, Nkajhuki, and stretches as far as Mwalutete.
9	<i>Mwebhajubhaamupilikisyetasi, umpikighulamukategheesi samba, ghulipasimaniminine, keta ugwenesambasyandilenkikolo,</i>	You mothers, please listen, do not cut that tree entirely, it is different from the rest, see how its branches begin at



		the trunk.
10	<i>Gutengilengatingukujhalamile, isambainywamusilimalongomabhilisyopesipasikeisamba,</i>	It is spread like a hen sitting on eggs, with over twenty large branches extending further.
11	<i>Mwemupilikisyetasimbabhule, Ubhulongosibwampikighula, ghoughughukulindilaiminine, ghoughughukusosyaifula, ghoughughukusosyaamisi</i>	Let me tell you, mothers, that tree governs the others; it brings rain, it brings cool weather.
12	<i>Mbelile bha jubha mungajha kutumula! Loli mkapatileghe, ugwe mama lwako, ugwe tata lwako.</i>	Please, mothers, do not cut it down! But if you do, let it be at your own risk, you, mother, on your own; you, father, likewise.

The value of the environment relies heavily on the extent to which a community respects and cherishes the natural elements around them. The environment holds profound meaning and importance in fulfilling ontological functions. Ecologists pay close attention to how ontological features are portrayed within the environment and even how specific environmental elements appear within ontology, such as natural agents (the sun, moon, stars, rivers, lakes, animals, insects, plants, rocks, soil, air). What do these elements represent? How are they used within ontology? What is their relationship to community life and well-being? In many African cultural traditions, environmental elements bear core meanings that resonate deeply with societal values; therefore, literature also reflects the significance of nature as seen in *Praises*. Culturally, communities are tied to their collective ontology, which encompasses their entire way of life, including customs, traditions, and beliefs guiding African life (Mbiti, 1969; Makumba, 2005). Human beings must value and preserve the environment, as it is the source of clean air, safe water, and food. When humans recklessly destroy or exploit the environment, they contribute to environmental degradation.

#### 4.3 The Concept of Humanity

Humanity refers to possessing behaviour in alignment with human dignity: humaneness (TUKI, 2004). It is the condition of acting by one's dignity as a human being, demonstrated through good conduct towards society, including the preservation and conservation of the environment. Valuing the environment and its creatures is a sign of humanity. Early environmental activists in the West associated this human-centred view with the environmental crisis, asserting that the natural world holds intrinsic value and was not created solely for human exploitation. When we destroy nature through our activities, we violate moral codes. In ontology, humanity and mutual respect are essential values.

Humanity, the measure of humanity, is heavily influenced by the state of the world. Ontology emphasises humanity because, at its core, it believes that God created human beings to live in love and mutual respect for one another, the environment, and all that is within it.

Africans believe that every creature and all elements of the environment were created by God and have equal rights. Everything that exists was created with a distinct purpose, and the human being, endowed with reason, is tasked with watching over and caring for it. That reason does not place humanity above other beings. One cannot be complete without other creatures and elements of the environment. To thrive, humans depend on rainfall for crops, fertile land for planting, and sunlight, among other things, in the cycle of life. In the praise dedicated to a place, the artist notes, "among tall mountains, long grasses, abundant fertility, thriving homesteads, we drive away destructive monkeys." These places are celebrated for their fertility because people have been raised with an awareness of respecting the environment around them. Although humanity is an innate virtue, it can change or be nurtured. Ecology encourages us to change our mindset about ourselves and our relationship with nature. It encourages us to value the connection between humans and every other thing in the environment, as everything exists for a complementary purpose. This implies that art and the environment are interconnected with the things within them. This interconnection is rooted in the community's beliefs about their world, as people's lives are guided by foundational principles.

#### 4.4 The Ideology of Force

The ideology of Force is a philosophy that concerns both natural and supernatural energies, the power of speech, respect, heroism, taboos, curses, and the like (Mulokozi, 2017). It explains how statements or utterances hold power over anyone



who violates social taboos. African ontology believes in the force behind taboos. Kisanji (2013) explains that taboos are part of traditional knowledge systems used to conserve natural resources and ecological frameworks, and they are given high regard despite modernisation and globalisation. Some taboos include prohibitions against cutting certain trees, killing or eating particular animals, or drawing water from specific river sources. These practices aim to conserve the environment and prevent destruction that could result in harmful consequences. Such taboos impose discipline and serve to protect resources. Disobedience to taboos in society may lead to punishment.

Mbiti (1969) states that breaking a taboo involves punishment through social exclusion, hardship, or even death. The community plays a significant role in punishing those who violate taboos. However, if the community does not take action, then invisible natural forces will carry out the punishment. These forces are ontological; they are unseen and intangible. The foundation of ontological theory maintains that Africans believe in a hierarchy of powers, including deities, plants, and others. These forces are arranged in relational tiers, with God as the supreme being, followed by ancestors or deities, human beings, animals, plants, and other elements. Therefore, breaking a taboo is viewed as an offence against the ancestors and God.

In the praisededicated to a chief, the artist states in lines 5, 9, and 12, "Do not cut that tree, if you do, it is your own doing, you mother, your responsibility; you father, yours. Please, I plead with you, my fellows, that tree, the *Mpandapanda*, the one like a mast, the tallest among all, no, please, no, no. Listen, mothers, let me tell you, because that tree is the heart of the village." In everyday life across many communities, certain trees must not be cut because they hold deep cultural knowledge and significance. Some respondents explained that certain trees, such as the *Mpandapanda* tree among the Nyakyusa, which also symbolises similar trees in other communities, are used in sacrificial and communal rituals. Wherever such a tree grows, it is specially preserved and protected. In this community, the tree symbolises a solution to communal problems.

In many communities, including among the Nyakyusa, there are specific places that not everyone is permitted to enter because of strong beliefs that doing so could bring harm. These taboos

have greatly helped in conserving such areas. This research has found that despite the availability of scientific methods for environmental conservation and protection, indigenous science ontology still plays a vital role in discouraging destructive behaviours. Communities often fear indigenous science more than modern science because the latter rarely carries immediate or spiritual consequences such as death, disease, or curses. Therefore, indigenous science should be revived and integrated into modern conservation efforts.

#### 4.5 Land Use

Land refers to the entire surface above and below the earth upon which all natural things grow, and upon which buildings and other infrastructure are erected (Perrinder, 1967). Land is one of the ontological elements recognised as the origin of human life. Ontology believes land is the foundational basis for production and the root of prosperity. It is the eternal dwelling place after death and serves as a medium for communication between the living and the dead. Refer to the praise of the place, lines 3 through 7, where the artist says that their fertile land produces abundant crops. In line 13, it is mentioned that the land has become the resting place of their ancestors. Therefore, to the African, land holds immense value. On land, humans engage in various activities to obtain their basic needs such as food, fresh air from trees, water, and shelter (Ponera, 2023). In African societies, a person's honour is tied to land ownership. This illustrates that land is the principal basis of wealth creation, meaning food for humans and other living beings, because it is upon land that all human activities are rooted to sustain daily life.

#### V. Conclusion

The overall aim of this article is to show how indigenous beliefs, customs, and traditions, what we call indigenous science, can and should be applied with emphasis on educating on environmental conservation and protection. Furthermore, it demonstrates the interconnected and complementary nature of literature, environment, and ontology, all functioning in harmony. The ultimate goal is to educate and encourage people not to destroy or exploit the environment but to live with a balanced relationship with nature for the benefit of both humanity and the environment. The voice raised in this article is a metaphorical appeal about this relationship, underscoring the importance of the environment in the lives of living beings and the broader ecological balance.



In this study, we have found that in addition to honouring traditional beliefs and customs, ontology significantly contributes to environmental conservation and protection. This is because communities are guided by traditional norms and customs that instil respect and caution against harming the environment. Therefore, communal traditions, customs, and beliefs should be upheld, and those which are vanishing should be revitalised, as they hold considerable power in safeguarding and enhancing the environment. Ontology should serve as a catalyst to regulate pollution and environmental degradation. Communities must be educated on how to preserve, protect, and sustainably develop the environment and natural ecosystems, as these are foundational to solving both physical and spiritual challenges.

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