

Traditional Wisdom for Modern Ecology: The Role of Swahili Sayings in Environmental Conservation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contribution of Swahili sayings in preserving and protecting the environment in Tanzania. The primary data for this study were collected in the Mbeya region, specifically in Rungwe district, in Kandete ward (Ipelo and Bujingijira villages) and Luteba ward (Kilasi and Mpunguti villages). Interviews and discussions were conducted to gather first-hand information from participants. In the selected villages, 48 participants were employed with an average of 16 respondents per chosen village. The selection of participants considered both gender and age. Documentary reviews were also undertaken, using library research methods to verify the primary data. The findings are presented descriptively, guided by Ecological theory. Results indicate that in the context of environmental care and preservation, sayings provide moral guidance and behavioural norms related to ecological responsibilities, particularly in promoting sustainable and appropriate use of natural resources. This study underscores that in a world facing climate change and ecological degradation, the meaningful use of sayings can catalyse positive change in environmental conservation efforts.

Keywords: Traditional Wisdom, Modern Ecology, Swahili Sayings, Environmental Conservation and Ecological Theory

INTRODUCTION

Literature plays key roles in the environmental conservation strategies. So, this article has examined the representation of environmental conservation themes in the Swahili sayings in Tanzania. To achieve this aim, this article applies the principles of Ecocriticism. Ecology is the study of the relationship between living organisms and their environment (Kimmerer, 2024). A strong interconnection exists between human beings, plants, animals and the natural environment. This ecological relationship manifests in various forms. For instance, human life depends on plants, which produce oxygen essential for the respiratory system.

In another sense, plants attract rainfall which is a fundamental requirement for agriculture, fishing and animal husbandry. Plants also rely significantly on manure produced by animals, including humans, who emit high amounts of carbon dioxide, a vital raw material in the process of photosynthesis (Filho *et al.*, 2025). The ecological perspective treats the environment as a central concern in its critique. It also examines the earth as its primary subject, analysing its attributes and the relationship it shares with living beings and natural features through literary texts.

The environment encompasses all living and non-living organisms that surround human beings. It is further described as everything within human surroundings, including animals, plants, soil, air, atmosphere, rivers and lakes (Channel, 2020). The environment, therefore, encompasses natural resources found in human habitats, including land and water, as well as the lives of plants and animals and the socio-economic setting. It also involves the interdependence of organisms within nature and the impact of human activity on the environment.

The role of literature in environmental conservation efforts has not been accorded significant weight in academic and professional discussions (Wamitila, 2010). Sayings, in particular, have often been dismissed as a literary form incapable of addressing environmental conservation issues. Although literary works contain messages depicting environmental concerns, the attention given to the creation, teaching and critique of

literature does not match the importance of these messages in conservation. This situation partly arises from a lack of understanding regarding the role of traditional literature in combating pollution and environmental destruction. Scientific evidence of environmental degradation tends to be given more prominence than insights from the social sciences, such as history and anthropology.

Environmental literature is a field that adopts an ecological approach to literary works, particularly by analysing ecological content and how characters relate to the environment. It also aims to bring about social and environmental transformation through literature. This field emerged from the relationship between literature and the environment. As the environment changes, so too does literature, adapting its themes to depict environmental destruction, its effects and methods of conservation to avert disaster (Osborn, 1948).

This argument is explored here through reference to Swahili sayings, which have long served to preserve and transmit values and cultural practices tied to the environment. In this sense, sayings are studied as fundamental human acts, as their integration with community life can be historically and contextually demonstrated (Lomborg, 2001). Environmental issues, interdependence of living beings and the impact of science and technology on the environment are all explicitly represented in this literary form. Sayings provide a wide lens for reflecting upon the world, the planet, the heavens, natural challenges confronting human beings and their possible solutions.

Literature is an effective means of shaping behaviour, regulating conduct and discouraging harmful practices within society. The issue of climate change, arising from pollution and environmental degradation, is a reflection of society's understanding or misunderstanding of ecological conservation. For example, in the past two decades, concern has grown regarding the effects of environmental destruction, especially as global economic growth has intensified (Wilson, 1992). Widespread anxiety has been expressed over global ecological threats, including rising temperatures and the depletion of the ozone layer, which are attributed to industrial development and certain production and economic patterns.

Writers, civil society organisations and non-governmental bodies continue to take active measures to highlight environmental destruction and emphasise the need for conservation. This has become particularly urgent as humanity in the new millennium faces existential threats from environmental collapse (Klein, 2014). Despite the significant contribution of literature to conservation efforts, its role has not been sufficiently illuminated. Consequently, this article highlights how environmental destruction is reflected in the sayings of the Selected community in Tanzania.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article examines the role of Swahili sayings in the conservation and protection of the environment in Tanzania. The primary data for this study were collected in the Mbeya region, specifically in Rungwe district, in Kandete ward (Ipelo and Bujingijira villages) and Luteba ward (Kilasi and Mpunguti villages). These areas were purposefully selected because they offered a sufficient scope for obtaining data that addressed the specific objective of this study. Interviews and group discussions were employed to collect primary data from participants. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the wards, villages and 48 participants. On average, 16 respondents were selected from each village with consideration given to achieving a balance in terms of gender and age. Secondary data were obtained from both electronic and library-based sources to explain and verify the primary findings. Results were presented through a descriptive approach. The principles of Ecocriticism guided the analysis of selected literary texts and sayings in this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As noted earlier, the analysis of the selected literary texts and sayings in this article was guided by Ecocriticism, a theory pioneered by Glotfelty and Harold (1996). The theory originated in the United States, aiming to engage literary scholars in advocating for environmental conservation in response to climate change caused by pollution and global environmental degradation. Its establishment was inspired by the need to examine imaginative writings about the environment, particularly those produced in the western United States.

The theory gained momentum in the 1990s alongside the rise of Green political movements. Ecocriticism emerged as a response to environmental crises brought about by climate change, which were themselves a result of pollution and ecological destruction worldwide. Its advocates sought to improve and restore the devastated natural environment. In Africa, Ecocriticism does not have a long history. Although it gained recognition in the 1990s, works by Catton (1980) and Begon *et. al* (2006) laid the groundwork, showing that the field had begun to take shape in the 1970s.

Ecocriticism is a critical approach that explores the relationship between literature and the environment. It treats the environment as a central subject in literary criticism (Smith & Smith, 2005). It also regards the earth as its primary concern, examining its attributes and the interconnections between human beings, other living organisms and the natural world through literary texts. Analyses conducted under this theoretical framework focus primarily on the interactions between humans and the natural environment as portrayed in literature.

Ecocriticism emphasises that human culture and the physical world are interrelated and mutually influential (Levin, 2012). This means that the approach considers how human beings, culture and the environment affect one another. Since culture concerns the way people live in their everyday lives, this form of critique is an effective means of demonstrating patterns of use and the relationship between communities and their environment. Culture functions as a distinguishing mark of human identity, shaping how groups differentiate themselves socially. Ecocriticism also explores the role of the environment in shaping culture at specific historical moments, together with the customs and traditions associated, or not associated, with environmental conditions and the reasons behind such choices.

The approach examines how ecological systems operate to sustain life and how these systems are disrupted, leading to the death of plants and animals (Martin, 2022). Practices such as deforestation, construction on wetlands, harmful technological advancement and poor ecological governance have weakened ecosystems. As a result, ecology faces the threat of destruction caused by human activity. Since culture encompasses daily human practices, ecocriticism examines the interactions between human culture and the environment (Krebs, 2009).

One of the central principles of Ecocriticism is the examination of the relationship between literature and the environment. It is built upon an outlook that defends nature, positioning itself within broader movements that seek to protect the earth from destruction caused by irresponsible human actions (Molles, 2015). Areas of focus include the ways literature portrays the environment, human impact on nature, tensions between tradition and modern development, natural challenges facing humanity and the solutions offered. Other concerns include the study of literature in relation to the universe, the planet, the skies and their effects on literature and the real world, as well as issues of reproduction, population growth, science, technology and the environment.

Ecocriticism explores environmental elements within literature, such as ecological characters including rocks, the sun, the moon, plants, air and lakes. Such representations expose the anthropocentric view that regards human beings as the centre of the universe, the focus of all activity and the rightful beneficiary of nature. At the same time, it challenges this assumption by emphasising that humans are merely one species among many, without inherent superiority over other creatures. Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, engaging fields such as language, philosophy, history, religion, geography, natural sciences, politics, economics and technology (Glotfelty and Harold, 1996). Its principal aim is to educate and persuade people not to destroy the environment, but instead to live in harmony with nature for the broad and sustainable benefit of all living beings.

The discussion and analysis in this article focus on how environmental destruction is depicted in the sayings of the Selected community through the lens of Ecocriticism. In examining and interpreting the data, the researcher analysed these sayings within their ordinary, lived context, as they are understood and accepted by the community. Sayings were studied directly, without exaggeration, to enable deep analysis and critique. The chosen theoretical framework thus provided a foundation for investigating how environmental elements are mirrored in the sayings of the Selected. Particular emphasis was placed on the study area to highlight the connection between literature and the environment as reflected in the sayings of this community.

The Contribution of Sayings in Conserving the Environmental

Sayings form an important part of Tanzanian culture and play a significant role in conserving and protecting the environment. By drawing on traditional wisdom, sayings guide morals and behaviours related to the environment. They strengthen community awareness of the importance of nature and thus contribute to conservation efforts for the benefit of present and future generations. The following subsections present the role of sayings in conserving and protecting the environment in Tanzania.

Inspires the Government Efforts in Ecological Defence

Environmental protection is a global issue requiring the cooperation of all, yet governments have a critical role in ensuring that resources are safeguarded. They create policies, laws and plans to protect the environment. Government efforts are reflected in sayings that highlight its leadership in conservation. For instance, the saying “*Serikali ni mama wa mazingira*” (The government is the mother of the environment) underscores the state’s responsibility to nurture and protect nature, just as a parent care for children. Governments can enact forest, water and wildlife protection laws (Robbins, 2007) and establish national parks to preserve biodiversity and ensure resources endure for future generations.

The saying “*Maji ni uhai, lakini serikali ni mlinzi wa maji*” (Water is life, but the government is the guardian of water) highlights the central role of the state in ensuring the responsible management of water resources. It underscores the government’s duty to regulate water use by enforcing laws and policies that prevent overexploitation and safeguard public access. This responsibility extends to controlling industrial and agricultural pollution, promoting efficient water use practices and encouraging sustainable technologies (Gilbert, 2024). Likewise, it calls for investment in long-term water conservation projects such as dams, reservoirs and irrigation systems, which are essential for both human survival and economic development.

Similarly, the saying “*Ulinzi wa mazingira ni jukumu la kila mmoja, lakini serikali inaongoza*” (Environmental protection is everyone’s duty, but the government leads) stresses that while all individuals share responsibility for safeguarding the environment, the state holds the primary role in guiding and coordinating collective action. Governments can take the lead by raising awareness through formal education, public campaigns and community outreach programmes that highlight the importance of sustainable practices (Wilson, 1992). Such leadership also involves establishing national environmental days that encourage tree planting, public clean-up exercises and the integration of environmental studies within school curricula. By setting an example and providing direction, the government empowers communities to participate actively, thereby ensuring that environmental protection becomes both a shared value and a practical reality.

The saying “*Mabadiliko ya tabianchi yanahitaji hatua za serikali*” (Climate change requires government action) underscores the pivotal responsibility of governments in responding to the challenges posed by global warming. It draws attention to the need for strong state-led interventions, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions through legislation, regulation and innovation. Governments are also expected to promote the adoption of renewable energy sources such as solar, wind and hydro power, while simultaneously discouraging dependence on fossil fuels (Carson, 1962). In addition, by actively participating in international agreements such as the Paris Accord, states contribute to collective global efforts, demonstrating that effective climate action requires both national leadership and international cooperation.

The governments occupy a vital position in the protection of the environment, as their decisions and policies shape how natural resources are managed and preserved. By leading through legislation, conservation projects and international cooperation, states play a central role in safeguarding water sources, ecosystems and biodiversity for the benefit of sustainable development. However, to secure a better environmental future, deliberate and consistent government action must be complemented by active community participation, ensuring that responsibility is both shared and inclusive.

State the Role of Women in Eco-friendly Upkeep

The issue of defending and conserving the environment is reflected and expressed in various branches of

Swahili literature, including sayings. Sayings are among the genres that emphasise the importance of conservation within communities. For example, there is a saying that states: “*Ustawi wa mazingira huanza jikoni mwa mwanamke*” (The well-being of the environment begins in a woman’s kitchen). This means that women, particularly in their traditional role as managers of household activities such as cooking, hold great influence in shaping or improving the environment. Firstly, the kitchen is the main place where energy for cooking is used. When women choose clean and environmentally friendly sources of energy, such as gas and modern stoves, they help reduce deforestation and air pollution.

Women can also manage kitchen waste by separating it, using leftovers as compost, or reducing plastic consumption, all of which contribute to environmental protection (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). Decisions about purchasing environmentally friendly goods and preserving food also have a major impact on the environment. This saying therefore stresses that the well-being of the environment is not solely the responsibility of governments or organisations, but of every individual, beginning with everyday domestic practices. Women, being at the forefront of these activities, can be central agents of positive change in environmental conservation.

Another saying states: “*Mwanamke na mazingira ni marafiki wa maisha*” (A woman and the environment are lifelong friends). This expresses the deep and enduring connection between women and the environment. It carries a message of wisdom that highlights the respect, responsibility and contribution of women in safeguarding and sustaining nature. As mothers and nurturers, women are naturally entrusted with protecting life, just as the environment enables life through land, water, air and vegetation (Shiva, 2015). In many societies, especially African ones, women interact with the environment daily through activities such as collecting firewood and water, farming, cooking and storing food. These responsibilities give them wide opportunities to promote sustainable use of natural resources, such as planting trees, protecting water sources, maintaining cleanliness and educating their families about the importance of the environment. A woman’s life is directly linked to environmental conditions (Kormos, 2024). For example, drought, deforestation, or pollution directly affect women due to their social and family roles. This saying, therefore, underlines that women are not mere participants but true stakeholders in environmental matters, with a unique role in sustaining the life of the planet. It is the duty of society to recognise and empower women in environmental conservation efforts.

Hearten Fortification of Aquatic Foundations

Water is an essential resource for the survival of human beings and other creatures. Without water, life cannot continue. It is therefore crucial to conserve all water sources, including rivers, lakes and seas. In many societies, sayings emphasise the importance of protecting water sources. In this section, five sayings are discussed to show their relevance in environmental conservation. One well-known saying declares: “*Maji ni uhai*” (Water is life). This highlights that water is the foundation of existence. Without clean water, human health is endangered. Water is needed for domestic use, farming and industry (Bateson, 1979). Thus, it is our responsibility to safeguard water sources to ensure that present and future generations benefit from this vital resource. Conservation involves reducing pollution and maintaining a clean environment to protect water quality.

Another saying, “*Usipokunja shati, huwezi kupiga ngoma*” (If you do not roll up your shirt, you cannot beat the drum), teaches that achieving goals requires effort and commitment. In the context of water conservation, it means that communities must invest time and resources in protecting water sources. This includes activities such as tree planting to prevent soil erosion, sanitation projects and raising awareness of the importance of clean water. Without these deliberate efforts, conservation cannot succeed.

A further saying states: “*Maji yakimwagika, hayarudi*” (Spilt water does not return). This reminds society that it is easy to damage water sources, but difficult to reverse such damage. Hence, preventive measures are crucial. Communities must be cautious with the use of agricultural and industrial chemicals to avoid water pollution (Hawken, 2021) and must embrace cleaner, sustainable technologies. Similarly, the saying “*Maji ni kama dhahabu*” (Water is like gold) underscores the immense value of water. Like gold, water is rare and precious. In the modern world, where climate change causes water scarcity, this message reminds us to use

water wisely and sustainably (Wallace-Wells, 2019). It also calls for reducing wasteful practices and seeking alternative clean water sources.

Finally, the saying “*Kila mtu ana jukumu la kutunza maji*” (Everyone has a responsibility to conserve water) stresses collective responsibility. This implies that the entire community must participate in protecting water resources. Contributions may include reducing water consumption, engaging in sanitation efforts, or educating others about the importance of conservation. Together, such efforts can make a significant difference in sustaining water sources.

In summary, the conservation of water sources is not only valuable but also an essential requirement for sustaining life and development. It demands deliberate and coordinated actions to ensure that these sources are preserved and maintained for the benefit of both present and future generations (Klein, 2014). The responsibility does not rest solely with governments or institutions; rather, every individual has a role to play in protecting and using water wisely. Through shared commitment and collective responsibility, water resources can remain clean, healthy and sustainable for all members of society.

Struggle for Upkeep of Forestry and Wasteland

Forests, parks and wilderness areas are vital parts of the environment. They are habitats for animals, provide clean air and help maintain ecological balance. To ensure that these resources endure for future generations, they must be conserved and protected. Many societies have sayings that stress the importance of this responsibility. One saying affirms: “*Mti mmoja haujengi msitu*” (One tree does not make a forest). This underlines the need for cooperation in conservation. Protecting forests and parks requires joint effort from all individuals, communities, governments and non-governmental organisations. Collaboration is key to successful conservation projects.

Another saying, “*Usikate mti bila kupanda mwingine*” (Do not cut down a tree without planting another), stresses the principle of reforestation and responsible resource use. Cutting trees without replacing them leads to deforestation, disrupts ecosystems, reduces oxygen levels and contributes to climate instability (Griffiths, 2025). Replanting trees, on the other hand, helps to restore ecological balance by maintaining biodiversity, stabilising soils, preventing erosion and conserving vital water sources. In this way, the saying underscores the need for sustainable practices that ensure natural resources are preserved for both present and future generations.

Similarly, the saying “*Maji ni uhai, lakini misitu ni msingi wa maji*” (Water is life, but forests are the foundation of water) highlights the intrinsic relationship between forests and water sources. Forests act as natural regulators, protecting watersheds, filtering rainwater and preventing soil erosion, thereby ensuring a steady and reliable water supply. When forests are destroyed, rivers and springs dry up, rainfall patterns become erratic and water scarcity intensifies, threatening both ecosystems and livelihoods. For this reason, conserving forests is not only crucial for maintaining ecological balance but also indispensable for the survival and well-being of human societies (Gardner, 2011).

The saying “*Mtu ni mlinzi wa mazingira*” (A person is the guardian of the environment) reinforces the idea that environmental protection begins with individual responsibility and everyday choices. Each person can contribute meaningfully by planting trees, raising awareness within their communities, adopting eco-friendly practices and reducing unnecessary consumption of resources. Such actions not only preserve forests, rivers and wilderness areas but also help to maintain ecological balance and ensure that natural resources remain available for generations to come (Core, 2005). Ultimately, conservation is not merely a governmental or institutional duty but a shared obligation that forms the foundation of sustainability and long-term environmental well-being.

CONCLUSION

Sayings are an essential part of many communities’ cultural heritage, embodying wisdom and knowledge accumulated over generations. In the context of environmental care, conservation and advocacy, sayings play a

vital role in raising awareness and inspiring collective responsibility for the protection of nature. They shed light on the values, behaviours and duties that guide individuals in safeguarding natural resources, while also reinforcing the importance of cooperation in conservation. Through shared wisdom, sayings remind us that everyone has a role in protecting the environment and those collective efforts can lead to significant change. They also provide moral guidance for the sustainable and responsible use of resources, encouraging practices that are environmentally friendly and socially accountable. In today's world, where climate change and environmental degradation present urgent challenges, sayings can act as catalysts for positive transformation. They offer both cultural grounding and ethical direction, reminding communities that protecting the environment is not optional but essential for survival. It is therefore crucial to preserve and promote the use of sayings in our conservation efforts, ensuring that this indigenous wisdom continues to inspire and guide present and future generations.

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