Safeguarding Safwa Indigenous Heritage for Sustainable Environmental and Natural Resource Management in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of indigenous traditions and practices of the Safwa community in Tanzania in environmental management and the sustainable use of natural resources. The study was guided by Cultural Ecology theory, which helps explain the relationship between traditional knowledge, the environment, and the use of natural resources. The research was conducted in Mbeya region, Mbeya Rural district, specifically in the wards of Ulenje and Igoma. Ulenje ward comprised the villages of Inyala and Imezu, whereas Igoma ward comprised the villages of Igoma and Kimondo. The sample size was 84 participants, selected with attention to 10 Community leaders, 3 Environmental authorities, 3 Conservation organizations, 10 village elders, 58 permanent dwellers, that the assortment was based in gender and age distribution, land use changes, modernization, population growth, climate variability, and government policies. Primary data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires. The findings show that Safwa indigenous traditions make a significant contribution to motivating the conservation of forests, water sources, wildlife, and other natural resources by promoting environmental values, taboos, and ecological knowledge. Indigenous traditions were also identified as a key mechanism for transmitting traditional knowledge from one generation to the next. The article concludes that indigenous traditions play an important role in strengthening sustainable environmental governance and should be preserved and developed as part of Tanzania's cultural heritage.

Keywords: Safeguarding, Safwa Indigenous Heritage, Environmental and Natural Resource Management, Cultural Ecology theory.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous traditions form an essential part of the cultural heritage of many African communities and act as a reservoir of knowledge, values, and lived experiences accumulated over many generations. Through indigenous traditions, communities communicate teachings about how to live well and relate properly with the surrounding environment. In Tanzania, different communities continue to use indigenous traditions as a way of teaching the importance of conserving forests, water sources, wildlife, and other natural resources. Indigenous traditions reflect the close relationship between people and the environment, where actions that harm the environment are shown to have negative effects on the whole community (Mgumia & Oba, 2003). Because of this, indigenous traditions are considered an important resource for promoting sustainable environmental and natural resource management in both traditional settings and contemporary environments that face global environmental challenges.

The Safwa community found in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania has a rich oral literary heritage that includes stories, proverbs, songs, and indigenous traditions. Within this heritage, indigenous traditions serve as an important medium for explaining the origins of various things in the local environment and for strengthening social values aimed at conserving natural resources (Mapunda & Mhando, 2020). Through these narratives, community members learn the importance of protecting natural forests, respecting sacred sites, guarding water sources, and avoiding misuse of resources that sustain them economically and socially. This knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another through oral storytelling. Consequently, Safwa indigenous traditions are not only tools for entertainment, but also knowledge systems that contribute to environmental management and the sustainable development of the community.

In recent decades, the world has experienced major environmental challenges driven by increasing human activities such as deforestation, environmental pollution, population growth, and climate change. These challenges have increased the importance of seeking alternative environmental management approaches that incorporate local knowledge alongside modern conservation systems (UNESCO, 2019 & 2021). Studies have shown that traditional knowledge embedded in oral literature can make a strong contribution to promoting the sustainable use of natural resources. Since indigenous traditions carry socially and environmentally accepted teachings, they have greater potential to motivate positive conservation behaviour than some formal rules that may fail to consider the cultural context of the communities concerned.

Despite the contribution of oral literature to the lives of many African communities, many studies have focused more on examining literary form, social themes, and the role of oral literature in preserving culture. Few studies (Finnegan, 2012; Kipury, 2017; Ngugi, 2018; Pretty, 2011) have explored in detail how indigenous traditions contribute to environmental management and the sustainability of natural resources. These studies also do not clearly explain how indigenous traditions convey ecological knowledge used to protect forests, water sources, sacred sites, and other vital resources. In addition, many existing studies have been conducted in other communities within Tanzania and across Africa without giving sufficient attention to the Safwa community, which has a strong tradition of narratives related to the environment. As a result, important ecological knowledge contained in Safwa indigenous traditions has remained insufficiently recognized in academic discussions on environmental conservation. Therefore, there is a need to address this gap by examining the content of Safwa indigenous traditions and clarifying how they promote values, attitudes, and practices that support sustainable environmental management.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article titled “The Role of Indigenous Traditions of the Safwa Community in Tanzania in Environmental Management and the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources” adopted a field research approach to obtain direct information from Safwa community members. The study was conducted in Mbeya Region, Mbeya Rural district, specifically in the wards of Ulenje and Igoma. Ulenje ward was represented by the villages of Inyala and Imezu, while Igoma ward was represented by the villages of Igoma and Kimondo. The sample size consisted of 48 participants, equivalent to an average of 12 people from each village. Participant selection considered gender and age distribution to ensure that the perspectives of different social groups were appropriately represented (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This criterion was applied to meet the requirements of the study. This process enabled the collection of comprehensive data on Safwa indigenous traditions and their contribution to environmental management and natural resource sustainability.

Primary data were collected using interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires. Interviews allowed researchers to obtain detailed information regarding indigenous traditions and their use within the community, while focus group discussions helped identify shared perspectives on the role of indigenous traditions in environmental conservation. Questionnaires were used to collect comparable information from many participants at the same time. The collected data were analyzed guided by Cultural Ecology theory, which explains the relationship between a community’s culture and the environment in which it lives. Using this theory, indigenous traditions were interpreted as cultural resources carrying traditional knowledge that promotes the sustainable use of natural resources, environmental conservation, and the sustainability of the Safwa community’s livelihoods.

RESEARCH THEORY

Cultural Ecology theory was developed by Julian Haynes Steward in the United States in 1955 through his book theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution. Steward expanded this theory to explain how human cultures are shaped by, and influence, the environment in which people live. Early on, the theory was used in anthropology to study how communities created strategies to sustain themselves using resources available in their local environments (Steward, 1955). In literary criticism, the theory examines the relationship between literary works, the community’s environmental context, and the ways the community uses or conserves natural resources. Its main principles include the interdependence between humans and the environment, the contribution of traditional knowledge to environmental management, and the sustainable use of natural

resources (Moran, 2015 & Berkes, 2018). In this article, the theory was used to examine the role of Safwa indigenous traditions in encouraging environmental conservation and natural resource sustainability.

According to Cultural Ecology theory, communities create cultural systems and livelihood strategies that enable them to adapt to their environment. The founders of this theory emphasized that customs, beliefs, and various narratives emerge as ways of responding to environmental challenges and ensuring long-term community wellbeing (Netting, 1993). In literary analysis, this perspective enables the researcher to examine how literary works reflect traditional knowledge about the use of land, water, forests, and biodiversity. In the analysis of Safwa indigenous traditions in Tanzania, it was found that many narratives involve the environment and human life in ways that emphasize integrity in the use of natural resources. Some indigenous traditions were found to depict the consequences of violating traditional rules aimed at protecting the environment. Thus, these traditions become an important medium for transferring conservation knowledge from one generation to another.

Another important foundation of Cultural Ecology theory is that traditional knowledge has a major role in environmental management and sustainability. The theorists and scholars who applied this framework observed that many communities establish taboos, rules, and specific procedures to protect natural resources based on long-term lived experience in their local environment (Sutton & Anderson, 2014). In literary criticism, the researcher examines how such elements appear in literary works and how they guide community behaviors. In this study, Safwa indigenous traditions were analyzed by looking at how they encourage respect for forests, rivers, mountains, and other ecologically important areas. The analysis showed that these indigenous traditions warn against actions such as indiscriminate tree cutting, polluting water sources, and misuse of natural resources. Through this, indigenous traditions help build a culture of responsibility and sustainable environmental use.

In this article, Cultural Ecology theory was used as a framework for understanding how Safwa indigenous traditions carry ecological knowledge that supports natural resource management. Guided by this theory, the researcher examined the relationship between the themes of indigenous traditions and the traditional conservation practices applied by the Safwa community. The results showed that Safwa indigenous traditions teach values of respecting the environment, protecting water sources, conserving forests, and using resources in appropriate ways. Therefore, indigenous traditions function as both entertainment and a key instrument for environmental education and natural resource sustainability in Tanzanian communities.

Safeguarding Safwa Indigenous Heritage for Sustainable Environmental and Natural Resource Management in Tanzania

Indigenous traditions play an important role in environmental management and natural resource sustainability because they preserve and transmit traditional knowledge on the proper use of the environment. Through the values, taboos, and teachings contained within them, indigenous traditions motivate community members to protect forests, water sources, and wildlife by drawing on local ecological foundations. They also strengthen the responsibility of the current generation for the benefit of sustainable environmental management and natural resource sustainability, as discussed in the following sections.

4.1 Conservation of Sacred Forests

Sacred forests have been an important component of cultural heritage in many African societies, including the Safwa community in Tanzania. Through indigenous traditions, these forests are presented as sacred areas connected to the ancestral spirits, traditional rituals, and important historical events of the community. As a result of such beliefs, community members develop deep respect for sacred forests and set restrictions that prevent tree cutting, illegal hunting, and other harmful activities that could damage the environment. Indigenous traditions help transmit this knowledge from one generation to another by emphasizing the importance of sacred forests for community wellbeing (Crate & Nuttall, 2016). This has contributed to the long-term conservation of biodiversity, protection of water sources, and maintenance of ecological systems. Thus, sacred forests continue to serve as a major pillar of environmental conservation through the lessons and values embedded in the indigenous traditions of the community.

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The conservation of sacred forests shows how indigenous traditions can be used as a resource for sustainable natural resource management. Various narratives warn about the consequences faced by people who enter or conduct activities without permission in such sacred areas. Although these warnings are rooted in spiritual and cultural beliefs, they have significantly helped protect forests from human destruction. Consequently, different plant and animal species have been preserved that would otherwise likely disappear due to economic activities and increased land use. Sacred forests support soil erosion control, maintain moisture, and improve environmental conditions (Dove & Carpenter, 2008). Consequently, indigenous traditions that address sacred forests make a major contribution to promoting environmental conservation values and the sustainable use of natural resources among Tanzanian communities. One of the respondents maintained the part of conserving of sacred forests:

> Conservation of sacred forests plays a vital role in protecting biodiversity, preserving indigenous knowledge, sustaining cultural and spiritual values, and maintaining ecological balance. It also safeguards water sources, soil fertility, and wildlife habitats while strengthening community identity, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational transmission of traditional conservation practices (Elder - Respondent 41, Interview at Kimondo village, Igoma ward, 14 April, 2026).

One indigenous tradition identified in this study is *Abaswila* (ancestral spirit settlement). According to Safwa oral narratives, forests are not only property of living community members; they are considered the official homes of ancestral spirits and prominent elders who have passed away. In Safwa beliefs, large trees found within these forests represent the presence of spirits that continue to protect the community from various calamities. From this perspective, sacred forests are highly regarded and have been conserved across many generations. Research participants explained that it is a strong taboo to cut trees, reduce branches, or even collect firewood that has fallen within these sacred forests. It is believed that doing so is like destroying the living space of the ancestors. People who violate this taboo may be affected by severe traditional misfortunes known as Amaya. The community believes that the ancestors can show anger by causing drought, failure of rains, or drying of water sources that depend on these forests. Fear encourages community members to continue protecting these forests against human activities that could lead to their disappearance (Kaschula, 2025 & Mwangosi, 2025). Sacred forests have become a key environmental conservation resource in many Tanzanian communities due to their connection to ancestral beliefs and spirits.

Another indigenous tradition identified is Kinga ya *Jamii na Matibabu* (community protection and traditional healing) linked with sacred forests. According to research participants, sacred forests are believed to be the main source of community protection against witchcraft known as *Abitonga* as well as other forms of dark powers. Within these forests, traditional healers obtain medicinal plants and essential remedies used to treat diseases and protect the community from various misfortunes. The forests are seen as a reservoir of knowledge in natural medicine passed down from one generation to another. Participants stated that for these medicines to remain powerful and effective, the forest environment must remain in its natural state without being destroyed. Community members are not allowed to cut trees indiscriminately, clear undergrowth, or carry out other activities that could damage the forest environment. Violating this taboo is believed to reduce the community's protective power and allow witchcraft and diseases to enter the community. People who violate these taboos are required to undergo traditional cleansing rituals to remove the alleged effects of the curse caused by the act. Because indigenous traditions restrict forest destruction, many medicinal plants have been preserved and remain available for community use. Indigenous knowledge related to traditional healing has contributed significantly to the conservation of forests and medicinal plants across many African societies (FAO, 2022 & Mwangosi, 2025). These forests continue to serve as habitats for many organisms and support environmental stewardship.

4.2 Protection of Water Sources

Indigenous traditions make a significant contribution to protecting water sources by building values and beliefs that encourage communities to value and safeguard them. In many Tanzanian communities and across parts of Africa, rivers, springs, and certain ponds are given special status through traditional narratives that explain the origin, importance, or spiritual power believed to exist at these sites (Mbilinyi, 2023). Because of these beliefs, community members avoid actions that could pollute or damage water sources, such as cutting trees along

riverbanks, throwing rubbish indiscriminately, or practicing farming in sensitive areas. Such traditions teach that water is a vital resource for human beings, animals, and plants, and therefore must be conserved for the benefit of both the current and future generations. Through these teachings, the community develops patterns of responsibility that support the sustainable protection of water sources and the wider environment. Indigenous traditions related to water sources also function as environmental education systems that guide communities on the impacts of harming these resources. Due to the fear and respect created through indigenous traditions, many water sources have been protected for long periods. This helps sustain water flow, protect biodiversity, and ensure access to water for domestic use, agriculture, and other economic activities. Therefore, indigenous traditions are important tools for the sustainable management of water resources.

One indigenous tradition described is *Inzoka eya kijiji* (the village snake) related to water source protection. According to participants, the Safwa believe that each major water source has a spiritual guardian often represented as a large snake or a harmless mysterious being. This guardian is believed to have been placed by God (Ngolobe) to protect water from drying up and to ensure that it remains clean for community use. For this reason, areas surrounding springs are treated with great care and preserved. Participants explained that it is a strong taboo to cut trees around the spring, farm close to the water source, or throw any kind of waste into that area. The tradition explains that harming the area angers the spring guardian. It is believed that if the creature leaves, the spring dries up and water becomes scarce in the community. Fear of such consequences keeps people conserving vegetation around water sources. This helps maintain water flow, reduce soil erosion, and conserve living organisms that depend on those ecosystems. One of the participants sustained the position of safeguarding of water sources:

> Failure to conserve water sources can cause water scarcity, pollution, soil erosion, and declining water quality. It also threatens aquatic ecosystems, reduces agricultural productivity, increases the spread of waterborne diseases, and intensifies conflicts over limited resources. In the long term, degradation of water sources undermines livelihoods, public health, food security, and sustainable community development (Community Leader - Respondent 37, Interview at Imezu village, Ulenje ward, 23 April, 2026).

Another indigenous tradition identified is *Ihenje la Mapacha na Kusafisha Nuksi* (twins and purification of misfortune), linked with the spiritual weight given to specific purification practices. After completing these rituals, the final stage takes place in designated areas with flowing water. Such sites are respected as they are used to remove *nuksi* (misfortunes or harmful influences) that may affect families and the community. Participants explained that those water sites were highly honored and were not allowed to be damaged in any way. The community believes these water sources carry special spiritual power used for purifying people who experienced misfortune or curses. Because of this belief, it was a taboo to cut trees, burn vegetation, or carry out other destructive activities in those areas. Breaking the taboo is believed to lead to curses, illnesses, or misfortunes that had previously been removed from that place. Fear of punishment makes community members protect the environment surrounding these sites carefully. As these areas are seen as sacred, human activities that might cause environmental damage are restricted. As a result, trees, shrubs, and natural vegetation have been maintained, helping protect water quality in the relevant areas.

4.3 Preventing the Cutting of Sacred Indigenous Trees

In many Tanzanian societies, indigenous traditions have been used as important tools for encouraging the conservation of specific indigenous trees with ecological, cultural, and social value. Through various narratives, certain trees are given special status by being linked to ancestral spirits, historical events, or spiritual powers that protect the community. This understanding makes community members respect these trees and avoid cutting them indiscriminately. For example, trees found near worship sites, burial areas, or water sources are protected based on the teachings found in indigenous traditions. This contributes to maintaining biodiversity, preventing soil erosion, and preserving habitats for different organisms (NEMC, 2022). Furthermore, because this knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another, the community continues to recognize the importance of these trees in maintaining ecological balance. In this way, indigenous traditions become a strong resource for strengthening the sustainability of natural environmental systems.

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Indigenous traditions also significantly help prevent the cutting of specific trees by explaining the potential harms faced by people who violate traditional rules about environmental conservation. In many African stories, individuals who cut prohibited trees are believed to suffer misfortunes, illnesses, or other problems described as punishment for violating community values. Although these explanations are rooted in cultural beliefs, they have had positive effects in protecting indigenous trees from destruction. As a result, forests and important trees continue to exist and support the conservation of soil moisture, improve climate conditions, and protect water sources. In addition, these trees provide habitats for wildlife and help maintain ecological systems. Therefore, indigenous traditions can be viewed as an environmental education tool that supports the sustainable use of natural resources and long-term community wellbeing.

Within the Safwa community, one major contribution is the prevention of cutting certain trees respected due to traditional beliefs. Participants explained that there are specific trees that must not be cut because they are associated with ancestral spirits, rituals, or clan protection. Through different indigenous traditions, the community develops fear that anyone who violates the prohibition may be affected by curses, diseases, or disasters that harm the family and the entire community. Therefore, indigenous traditions function as customary laws controlling the use of environmental resources without requiring written laws. The prohibition on cutting these trees helps conserve natural vegetation, protect biodiversity, and maintain water sources that depend on the presence of such trees. Many trees preserved through these beliefs have continued to exist for a long time and have become part of the Safwa community's ecological heritage. These findings indicate that indigenous traditions are a vital resource of indigenous knowledge that can contribute to modern environmental conservation efforts.

One such indigenous tradition is the *Umwuvwi* tree (a sacred ritual and rain tree). According to Safwa traditional narratives, this tree is among the sacred trees found near hills or water sources. The community believes it is the home of ancestral spirits (*Abaswila*) and also houses blessed beings that benefit the community. Because of its sacred status, it is used in various rituals such as praying for rain, removing misfortunes, and bringing wellbeing. Participants explained that cutting this tree, reducing its branches, or even collecting fallen firewood from it is strictly taboo. The taboo is built on the belief that people who do so anger the traditional protectors of the community. It is believed that the consequences may include drying of water springs, drought, or the person suffering unexplained illnesses. Because of this fear, community members have preserved the tree for a long time without destroying the surrounding environment. One of the respondents reserved the part of preventing the cutting of sacred indigenous trees:

> Failure to prevent the cutting of sacred trees can lead to biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, soil erosion, and disruption of local ecosystems. It may weaken cultural and spiritual values associated with sacred forests, reduce community identity, and threaten traditional knowledge. Subsequently, environmental degradation and cultural erosion may undermine sustainable livelihoods and intergenerational conservation practices (Conservational Organization - Respondent 12, Interview, 23 April, 2026).

The analysis of this indigenous tradition shows that the Safwa use oral literature as a tool for environmental conservation. Because *Umwuvwi* trees are often found near water sources, prohibiting their cutting helps protect springs, prevent soil erosion, and conserve biodiversity. Therefore, this tradition demonstrates how traditional beliefs supported environmental governance sustainably before the establishment of formal conservation systems. Traditional beliefs have made significant contributions to protecting forests and water sources in different Tanzanian communities (UNEP, 2024 & Mwangosi, 2025). Traditional beliefs contribute to environmental protection by creating procedures and moral principles that regulate the use of natural resources. Many communities believe that certain forests, rivers, mountains, and trees are sacred and should be respected rather than destroyed. For this reason, people avoid cutting trees carelessly, damaging water sources, or hunting animals in restricted areas. Traditional beliefs encourage community responsibility for protecting the environment for the benefit of both present and future generations, helping maintain ecological balance and support natural resource sustainability.

4.4 Conserving Clan Burial Grounds

Indigenous traditions play an important role in protecting clan burial grounds by placing them within a context of respect, cultural inheritance, and ancestral memory. In many Tanzanian societies, clan burial grounds are treated as sacred areas that connect the present generation with previous generations (World Bank, 2023). Through indigenous traditions, such sites are described as the homes of ancestral spirits that protect the family and the community as a whole. These beliefs lead community members to avoid actions that may damage the environment around burial grounds, such as cutting trees, farming, or building there. As a result, natural vegetation and biodiversity surrounding burial sites are preserved for long periods. Moreover, the values taught through indigenous traditions strengthen social responsibility for protecting these areas as both cultural heritage and environmental assets. Therefore, clan burial grounds remain important sites for the conservation of natural resources.

In essence, social indigenous traditions related to clan burial grounds provide guidance aimed at protecting these sites from human destruction. Many narratives show that people who violate traditional rules connected to burial grounds may face misfortunes or punishment from the ancestors. Although such explanations are rooted in spiritual and cultural beliefs, they have contributed significantly to conserving the environment surrounding burial sites by preventing activities that could harm natural vegetation. As a result, many clans burial grounds continue to function as small refuges for indigenous trees, birds, and other important organisms within the ecosystem. Additionally, these areas help preserve history, identity, and social cohesion. Therefore, indigenous traditions make a major contribution to sustaining clan burial grounds and environmental sustainability in natural systems.

The Safwa community established taboos and indigenous traditions intended to protect these sites from environmental damage. This led to the long-term conservation of trees, shrubs, and the surrounding environment. Among the indigenous traditions identified was the tradition of the Tree of the Burial Ground and Spirits that Walk at Night. According to Safwa narratives, when an adult dies and is buried, the person's spirit remains near the burial ground for some time before being formally integrated into the community of ancestors through traditional ceremonies. It is believed that the trees found within the burial ground serve as part of the spirit's home and resting place. Therefore, it is a strong taboo to cut trees, uproot plants, or carry out farming activities within clan burial grounds. Participants explained that anyone who damages the burial ground environment is believed to cause the deceased's spirit to become unsettled and start disturbing family members through frightening dreams, illnesses, or various misfortunes. Because of this fear, burial grounds have continued to be protected along with their natural vegetation. This indigenous tradition contributed significantly to environmental conservation by preventing cutting of trees and soil destruction in clan burial grounds. The environment continues to serve as habitat for different organisms and as a space supporting biodiversity among the Safwa community. One of the respondents reserved the position of saving clan burial grounds:

> Foiling the destruction of clan burial grounds, based on local beliefs, plays an important role in preserving cultural heritage, respecting ancestral values, and maintaining community identity. Such protection also safeguards sacred spaces, traditional practices, and indigenous knowledge transmitted across generations. It strengthens social cohesion, promotes respect for ancestors, and supports continuity of local cultural traditions (Environmental Authority - Respondent 78, Interview, 23 April, 2026).

Another indigenous tradition is called burial grounds of misfortune deaths (*vifo vya amavwiko*). According to participants, people who die under unusual circumstances such as being struck by lightning, suicide (hanging), or accidents are buried in special areas set aside by the community. These sites are linked to spiritual power and given special status in Safwa culture. The tradition strictly forbids anyone from cleaning or disturbing the area, cutting trees, or destroying plants that have grown there. Globally, communities believe that such places are 'charged' with spiritual power that controls the misfortune associated with the death; disturbing them could reopen the misfortune and cause it to recur in the lineage or the community (UNESCO, 2024). This belief helped keep these sites undisturbed for a long time. This indigenous tradition shows that, alongside its cultural purpose, it also played a major role in environmental conservation because it prevented human activities that could destroy natural vegetation. Safwa indigenous traditions were thus used as instruments of environmental

governance by encouraging respect for specific customary areas and preserving them for the benefit of present and future generations.

4.5 Caring for Livestock Grazing Areas

Indigenous traditions play a significant role in conserving livestock grazing areas by promoting good land use practices and protecting environments that enable sustainable access to grazing. In many pastoral and farming communities in Tanzania, indigenous stories and narratives are used to teach the importance of protecting specific areas set aside for grazing. Through indigenous traditions, community members learn that misuse of land, indiscriminate tree cutting, and burning grass can lead to a shortage of grazing and threaten livestock wellbeing (Agrawal, 1995). Such teachings build collective responsibility for managing grazing areas according to customary rules set by the community. Protecting these areas supports the maintenance of natural vegetation, prevents soil erosion, and conserves diverse living organisms. As a result, indigenous traditions become important resources for strengthening the sustainable management of grazing and other environmental resources.

In addition, indigenous traditions related to livestock grazing areas provide warnings against actions that may damage grazing environments and lead to conflicts over land use. In various narratives, people who violate the boundaries of grazing areas or destroy important grasses for livestock are portrayed as facing consequences or being criticized by the community (Mwita, 2020 & Mwangosi, 2025). These teachings help control unsustainable use of resources and improve cooperation in land management. Guided by customary rules, many grazing areas continue to be protected and remain productive in providing grass and other plants needed for livestock nutrition. Furthermore, conserving grazing areas helps reduce environmental degradation that could be caused by livestock management practices that do not respect the carrying capacity of the land. Therefore, indigenous traditions are important for ensuring sustainable grazing and supporting communities that depend on livestock.

One indigenous tradition identified is the blessings of the chief's farm, linked to grazing areas. According to research participants, the community believed that those areas were blessed through special rituals led by the Chief in order to ensure that grass grows well and that livestock continues to reproduce and produce plenty of products. Because of this belief, it was a taboo for anyone to cultivate, build, or engage in other activities within areas set aside for grazing. The community believed that violating the taboo would remove the blessings and weaken livestock, reduce milk production, and increase livestock diseases. Fear of these effects made grazing areas remain safe and used only for their intended purpose. This indigenous tradition demonstrates how it contributed to sustainable land management by preventing illegal occupation of grazing land and ensuring that livestock has enough grazing space. One of the respondents kept the part of caring for livestock grazing areas:

> Caring for livestock grazing areas plays a vital role in maintaining healthy pastures, protecting soil and vegetation, and ensuring adequate fodder throughout the year. Proper management prevents overgrazing, land degradation, and soil erosion while sustaining livestock productivity and community livelihoods. It also promotes sustainable use of natural resources, strengthens traditional environmental conservation practices, and supports food security and the long-term resilience of pastoral and agro-pastoral communities (Permanent Dweller - Respondent 59, Interview at Inyala village, Ulenje ward, 24 April, 2026).

In this narrative, livestock health is directly linked to the quality of the grazing environment. The community believed that goats used for producing *empeta* dance outfits should be reared in clean and safe environments that are not contaminated by acts considered to bring misfortune or negative spiritual power. Because of this belief, it was taboo to contaminate grazing areas or engage in actions believed to endanger livestock wellbeing. The community believed that polluting the grazing environment would affect livestock health and cause diseases that would damage the quality of hides used in culturally significant activities. This led the community to feel responsible for protecting grazing environments for the wellbeing of livestock and for social activities associated with them. Safwa indigenous traditions were used as a traditional system for managing land and livestock resources. Through the beliefs and taboos embedded in these traditions, the community could regulate land use, protect grazing areas, and prevent conflicts between farmers and herders. This system helped conserve

natural vegetation in grazing areas and ensured sustainable availability of feed for livestock (Schaaf & Lee, 2006). Indigenous traditions carried knowledge and values that help manage community life.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Safwa indigenous traditions have an important role in environmental management and the sustainability of natural resources in Tanzania. Through these traditions, the community continues to preserve and transmit traditional knowledge that emphasizes the importance of protecting forests, water sources, sacred sites, livestock grazing areas, and other resources that support community livelihoods. The study showed that indigenous traditions contain lessons, warnings, and values that encourage community members to use the environment carefully and to take responsibility for conservation. Indigenous traditions also strengthen the close relationship between people and the environment by demonstrating that environmental destruction can affect the wellbeing of the entire community. Therefore, indigenous traditions form part of local knowledge that makes a major contribution to promoting sustainable environmental management and should be recognized as a key resource in efforts to conserve natural resources. The article recommends that the government, researchers, educational institutions, and environmental stakeholders strengthen efforts to conserve, document, and develop Safwa indigenous traditions and those of other Tanzanian communities. Ecological knowledge contained in indigenous traditions should be incorporated into environmental education, conservation policies, and sustainable development programs to enhance community participation in protecting natural resources for the benefit of both present and future generations.

Several aspects require further clarification and development. The sample size of 48 participants may be limited for representing the broader Safwa community, and the participant selection process requires more detailed explanation regarding criteria and community representation. The study primarily focuses on community perceptions and reported practices, but provides limited empirical evidence on the actual environmental outcomes of indigenous conservation methods. The influence of external factors, such as population growth, modernization, government policies, land-use changes, and climate variability, is not sufficiently examined.

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