



Article

Ambivalent ecolinguistic narratives in indigenous music: A critical and positive discourse analysis of the Ekegusii song “Engamia ya Nyasae” (The Camel, Too, Is God’s Creation)

Albert Mogambi-Moinani* and Margaret Nasambu Barasa**

Abstract

This study presents an ecolinguistic analysis of the Ekegusii song “Engamia ya Nyasae” by Henry Sagero through both critical and positive discourse analysis lenses. Drawing on Stibbe’s (2015, 2021) concept of “the stories we live by”, the study categorizes the discourses in the song as positive, negative, or ambivalent. It further explores the intersection of language, culture, and environmental ethics within the Abagusii worldview. The analysis reveals a dual narrative: on one hand, the song advocates for animal rights and respect for the non-human world; on the other, it upholds superstitious beliefs that blame the camel for infertility and madness. Grounded in an ecosophical framework, the study provides insights into the sociocultural values embedded in indigenous music and calls for a critical reconsideration of beliefs that hinder ecological coexistence.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; critical discourse analysis; indigenous music; Abagusii culture; animal rights

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a powerful medium for shaping cultural worldviews, values, and ideologies. In indigenous communities, oral texts such as songs serve as repositories of cultural wisdom, environmental ethics, and social commentary. The Abagusii of Western Kenya, like many African communities, use music to comment on socio-environmental issues. This study explores the song “Engamia ya Nyasae” by Henry Sagero, which addresses the treatment of a camel brought to a local fair.

The song is a compelling blend of empathy for animal suffering and anthropocentric

* Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya. Email: amogambi@cuea.edu

** Alupe University, Kenya. Email: mbarasa@au.ac.ke

superstition. It critiques cruelty towards animals, advocates for their dignity, but also blames the camel for infertility and misfortune, hence showing some ambivalence. This contradiction offers a rich site for applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) and positive discourse analysis (PDA) within an ecolinguistic framework.

This study thus uses CDA to examine the songs of the Abagusii, a community living in Western Kenya, and classify them as positive, negative, or ambivalent. Using the concept of “the stories we live by”, Arran Stibbe (2015, 2021) proposes nine different story types: ideologies, framings, metaphors, evaluations, identities, convictions, erasure, salience, and narratives. The underlying stories either promote environmental conservation (positive) or environmental degradation (negative) and at times they can be both positive and negative at the same time (ambivalent). The ecolinguist then uses their own ecosophy to rate the discourse types as positive and to be promoted, negative to be resisted, or ambivalent to be critically sorted out so that the positive elements are promoted while the negative are discarded.

Although Stibbe talks of stories, we feel that songs, as forms of oral tradition, can also be analyzed in a “stories we live by” framework because songs equally tell a story. In this paper, we focus on an ambivalent reading of a song which talks about the camel. Using the “anthropocentrism” and “ecocentrism” ecosophies, we have endeavoured to highlight positive elements in the song worth promoting and negative ones worth discarding. This is in as far as how the Abagusii view camels according to the singer.

The song “Engamia ya Nyasae” (“The Camel, Too, Is God’s Creation”) has an ambivalent ecosophy since it tends to be anthropocentric in placing human beings in control of the larger-than-human world. However, it also advocates respect for the rights of the larger-than-human creations represented by the camel, and hence contains some ecocentrism and moral extension elements. The study contributes to the understanding of nature from indigenous worldviews which show more respect for nature and demonstrate why it has been easy for the Abagusii community to live in harmony and sustainably with other more-than-human occupants of the ecosphere.

The study focuses solely on one Ekegusii song, which may not be representative of all Abagusii music. The choice of a single song is informed by the fact that this item of oral literature handles both ecological advocacy as well as problematic superstitious beliefs in a unique manner. This single case was chosen on the understanding that single pieces of oral tradition can yield rich insights into traditional worldviews, and more especially on the relations between humans and the larger-than-human environment. However, the depth of analysis provides a valuable model for examining other indigenous texts such as proverbs and oral narratives. The interpretation is based on the researchers’ ecosophy and cultural grounding, which introduces subjectivity.

This study contributes to the growing field of ecolinguistics by demonstrating the relevance of African oral literature in environmental discourse. It offers new perspectives on how indigenous music can be both a force for ecological advocacy and a carrier of problematic beliefs. Analyzing less mainstream texts — such as indigenous songs — is

important because they may contain ecological wisdom not yet mainstreamed in global discourse. The findings can inform environmental education, cultural studies, and language policy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Indigenous knowledge and environmental ethics

Indigenous knowledge systems are often informed by a deep respect for the natural environment, expressed through oral traditions, songs, proverbs, and ritual practices. Abram (1996) highlights that indigenous oral cultures maintain an intimate relationship with the more-than-human world through language, which is used not merely to describe nature but to engage with it spiritually and ethically.

This connection underpins many African indigenous traditions, where animals and natural elements are not only seen as resources but as kin and spiritual beings. For example, Mungai and Letseka (2013) assert that African indigenous knowledge systems encapsulate sustainable ways of interacting with the environment that are often ignored in modern conservation efforts. It is for this reason that Stibbe (2018) advocates positive stories to be encouraged and negative stories to be resisted. Therefore, it is important to highlight such positive stories in African oral traditions so as to foster coexistence between humans and the larger-than-human world. Goatly (2000) emphasizes this by reminding us of the German philosopher Goethe, who said, “Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.”

In the Kenyan context, scholars such as Mberia (2009) have shown that oral poetry and songs among communities like the Kikuyu and Kamba convey ecological awareness, taboos, and restrictions that function to protect natural resources. Similarly, Mutonyi (2011) examines Luhya folktales and demonstrates how they embed environmental ethics, including warnings against cutting sacred trees and hunting certain animals. These insights show the richness of African oral traditions as repositories of environmental knowledge. The highlighting and application of this knowledge will go a long way in enhancing environmental conservation efforts.

Abram (1996, p. 68) describes how indigenous oral cultures pass on local environmental knowledge through the generations, the kind of knowledge which allows people to meet their needs without destroying the ecosystems they are part of. The linguistic patterns of an oral culture remain uniquely responsive, and responsible, to the more-than-human life world, or bio-region, in which that culture is embedded. This is in contrast with the estrangement from nature in industrial societies, which makes us “so oblivious to the presence of other animals and the earth that our current lifestyles and activities contribute daily to the destruction of whole ecosystems” (p. 137). Indigenous oral cultures from around the world are, therefore, a useful potential source of beneficial discourses that PDA can explore.

2.2. Critical and positive discourse analysis in ecolinguistics

Stibbe (2015, 2021) introduces the concept of “the stories we live by” to categorize story types as ideologies, framing, metaphors, identity, evaluation, conviction, erasure, salience, and narrative. CDA seeks to expose harmful ideologies, while PDA aims to promote ecological and ethical alternatives (Martin, 2004).

CDA, as developed by Fairclough (1995), focuses on how discourse constructs, maintains, and legitimates power relations in society. In environmental discourse, CDA has been used to critique how dominant ideologies normalize environmental exploitation. Goatly (2000) and Fill and Penz (2018) demonstrate how language in the media and policy documents often reinforces anthropocentrism by marginalizing the voices of non-human nature.

PDA, on the other hand, is an emerging strand of ecolinguistics introduced by Martin (2004) and later developed by Stibbe (2015, 2018, 2021). PDA seeks to identify and promote discourses that contribute to ecological well-being. Stibbe’s “stories we live by” framework provides a structured way to classify discourse types (framing, metaphors, identity, salience, etc.) as positive, negative, or ambivalent. PDA is particularly useful in analyzing less mainstream texts — such as indigenous songs — that may contain ecological wisdom not yet mainstreamed in global discourse. This study endeavours to highlight the wisdom capsuled in the song “Engamia ya Nyasae” with a view to raising awareness of traditional beliefs among the Abagusii which should be promoted while pointing out those which need to be resisted, thus making the world a good place to live in for both humans and non-human creatures.

Other scholars in different parts of the world have also studied forms of oral literature from an ecolinguistics standpoint. For instance, Huang and Weng (2019) employed PDA to examine Chinese children’s literature and found that stories portraying empathy with animals and plants help build ecological awareness. Similarly, Hussein (2018) explored Somali oral poetry and noted how pastoralist communities expressed ecological insights through metaphor and symbolism. These studies reinforce the value of applying both CDA and PDA to oral and artistic expressions.

Stibbe (2018, 2021) reviews some attempts to improve how we view the environment through linguistic analysis. There have been attempts to change the grammar of English, arguing that the grammatical structure of English hinders us from viewing the world positively. However, since it is not easy to change the structure of English, this attempt has not achieved much other than pointing out a deplorable and dystopian situation. But we aver that there has been some achievement since it has drawn awareness of the need to choose our language structure carefully.

Stibbe (2018) points out that another endeavour has been through attempting to alter the lexical usage and look for alternative words, such as words which focus on *being more* rather than *having more*. Dunayer (2001, pp. 193–198) provides a glossary of terms with preferred alternatives; for example, “free-living non-humans” should be used instead of

“wildlife” to emphasize the individuality of the animals, and the more accurate terms “food industry captive” and “cow enslaver” should be used instead of “farm animal” and “dairy farmer”, respectively. However, these are considered too prescriptive and judgmental towards those who do not subscribe to them.

Stibbe (2018, p. 168) heralds as PDA the “imaginative naturalism” of Rachel Carson (2000) and other similar lyrical science writers because their writings contain

... clusters of linguistic features which come together to portray the world in ways which encourage respect and care for nature. These clusters of features draw from the standard grammar and lexicon, but arrange the words and grammatical features in ways that tell a different story about the world. (Stibbe, 2018, p. 168)

By embracing PDA, we are aware that there have been some criticisms leveled against this approach. Wodak and Chilton (2005) and Flowerdew (2008) are used to CDA and putting those in authority on their feet by pointing out negative discourses and biases. They, therefore, urge us to be cautious while using PDA, which points out the positive agenda, so that we do not end up promoting the unfair status quo or being a source of propaganda for those in power as we try to point out the positive discourses. Thus, we critically analyze the data first (CDA) and then seek out what, if anything, is positive towards ecology.

2.3. Language, culture, and society

Language is deeply intertwined with cultural practices and belief systems (Sapir, 1921). In African societies, music serves as a form of communal expression that reflects societal attitudes toward nature, animals, and spiritual beliefs. It is, therefore, important to study songs so as to provide a more fulfilling understanding of how African societies such as the Abagusii perceive nature. This understanding is crucial in highlighting positive stories about human–nature relations worth promoting and the negative ones to be resisted as bad.

The interconnection between language, culture and society is central to sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. Language not only reflects but also reproduces cultural beliefs and social structures (Sapir, 1921). In traditional African societies, songs often serve both aesthetic and communicative functions — used to teach, criticize, praise, and lament. They shape community attitudes toward people, animals, and the environment.

Nabwire (2017) studied Dholuo songs and noted how they reflect societal values and taboos, including attitudes toward natural phenomena. Similarly, Ogechi and Ruto (2010) argue that naming practices among the Kalenjin encode social relationships and ecological knowledge, as certain names are derived from seasons, animal behaviours, and landscape features. This underscores the idea that African languages are repositories of ecological and cultural memory. This ecological knowledge is more useful in the present time, when global warming and climate change threaten both humans and the more-than-human ecosphere. This calls for detailed studies of songs and other forms of oral tradition so as to enhance

environmental conservation efforts for the common good of both human and non-human entities.

2.4. Theoretical framework

This study is framed within ecolinguistics, drawing on three interrelated theories: Stibbe's ecosophy is used to evaluate discourse types; anthropocentrism vs. ecocentrism, to interpret how humans position themselves to non-human entities; and moral extensionism, as seen in Cross (2018), to assess the ethical dimensions of human–animal relations.

Stibbe's ecosophy: The foundation for evaluating discourse types based on their alignment with ecological values. This theory helps the researcher determine whether discourse elements should be promoted, resisted, or critically examined.

Anthropocentrism vs. ecocentrism: The study explores how humans relate to animals, especially the camel. Anthropocentrism centres humans, often leading to exploitation, while ecocentrism promotes a holistic view of humans as part of a larger ecological community (Naess, 1973).

Moral extensionism: Cross (2018) and Plumwood (2002) argue for extending moral consideration beyond humans to include animals and ecosystems. This framework is critical in assessing whether cultural beliefs and practices uphold or violate the dignity of non-human life.

Together, these perspectives provide a robust lens through which to interpret the ambivalent discourses embedded in the song “Engamia ya Nyasae” and other indigenous texts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study adopts a qualitative case study design, using a single song as the unit of analysis. This item of oral tradition handles both ecological advocacy as well as problematic superstitious beliefs in a unique manner. This single case was chosen on the understanding that single pieces of oral tradition can yield rich insights into traditional worldviews, and more especially on the relations between humans and the larger-than-human environment. However, the depth of analysis provides a valuable model for examining other indigenous texts such as proverbs and oral narratives.

3.2. Data source

The data is drawn from the Ekegusii song “Engamia ya Nyasae” (“The Camel, Too, Is God's Creation”) by Henry Sagero.¹ The song was downloaded from YouTube, transcribed

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-go2e4KimV0>

and translated by one of the researchers, who is a native speaker of Ekegusii — the source language of the song. The researchers did both a literary and idiomatic translation of the song. This ensured that the meaning of the song as intended by the singer remained as nearly equivalent to the original rendition in Ekegusii as possible.

3.3. Analytical procedure

Martin (2004) expresses the need for PDA within ecolinguistics. Overall, a methodology for ecolinguistic PDA consists of analyzing the linguistic features of a text (or a collection of texts if looking for larger patterns) to reveal the ideologies embedded in the text.

These ideologies are then compared to the analyst's ecosophy, and the discourse is judged positive if the stories are consistent with the principles of the ecosophy. Stibbe (2018, p. 176) argues that

... a PDA analysis will be searching for positive discourses outside of the mainstream which are not pervasive yet, but which could offer something valuable if they were promoted to become more pervasive. PDA can therefore focus on more detailed analysis of smaller numbers of texts to reveal positive features, without the need to establish how widespread these features are at present.

In his book, Stibbe (2015) has detailed how an ecolinguistic framework can be used to analyze discourses for ecolinguistic themes. Using the concept of “the stories we live by”, Stibbe proposes eight different story types: ideologies, framing, metaphors, identity, evaluation, conviction, erasure, and salience; and in the 2021 revised edition (Stibbe, 2021), he adds a ninth one: narratives. After these analyses, the researcher uses their ecosophies to rate the stories as positive, thus needing to be encouraged and increased; negative to be resisted; and ambivalent, to be critically sorted out so that the positive is promoted while the negative is discarded. In this paper, we focus on ambivalent stories. An ambivalent story is one that needs to be critically examined so that the positive elements are encouraged while the negative ones are resisted. Ambivalent stories in indigenous communities have not received much attention within ecolinguistics. After analyzing and classifying the various story types, ecolinguists then promote the discourse for action towards conserving and improving the environment (Stibbe, 2018).

Using Stibbe's framework, the song was analyzed for: positive stories worth promoting; negative stories to be resisted; and ambivalent stories requiring critical evaluation. The analysis was guided by the researchers' ecosophy and grounded in CDA and PDA frameworks.

4. Data

The data are from a well-known Ekegusii song entitled “Engamia ya Nyasae” (“The Camel,

Too, Is God's Creation') by Henry Sagero. Henry Sagero is a contemporary musician who hails from the Gusii community of Western Kenya. The singer talks about a particular camel that was brought into Kisii town to entertain the public during the annual Agricultural Society of Kenya show. Camels are foreign to the Abagusii, who usually rear cows, donkeys, goats, and sheep.

The owner of the camel used it to make money for himself by charging show-goers a fee so that they could ride on it or pose next to it for pictures. After the fete, the camel, which was malnourished and wounded on its chest, was forcefully driven out of Kisii town and taken through the many market centres along the Kisii–Kericho Highway. Despite being weak and wounded, the owner continued collecting money from those who enjoyed a ride on the camel or posed for photos next to it.

The camel groaned, moaned, and cried painfully as it was whipped and forced to carry the fun-lovers along the highway. Its handlers whipped it mercilessly and, despite its cries and moans, it was forced to walk on till it could not move any further and it dropped dead.

The singer condemns this gross abuse of the camel's rights. He decries the mistreatment and cruelty: despite being sick and starved, the camel is whipped and forced to carry people for the sake of making money for the owner. The song condemns man's anthropocentric tendencies of exploiting other creatures in the ecosystem for his benefit. The singer condemns this in the strongest terms and urges humans to respect the camel (and other animals) since they are also God's creations, just like humans. Thus advocating for the rights of the larger-than-human world. This is a story worth promoting, hence ecocentrism.

However, the singer changes tune and argues that the camel is a bearer of the curse of impotence and barrenness. He warns those who rode on it or posed for photos next to it that they are under the curse of childlessness. This is due to the belief that camels cause impotence and barrenness among humans. We argue that attributing humans' vulnerabilities and shortcomings to animals and other larger-than-human creations is a negative story worth resisting. Blaming the camel and accusing it of being the cause of childlessness among humans is a negative story to be resisted. Ecolinguists should resist such negative stories for the common good of humans and other larger-than-human creations in the world.

The song, which is available on YouTube and other digital media platforms, was downloaded, transcribed, and translated into English by the researchers. The full song lyrics, together with the English translation, are given in the Appendix, and extracts are referred to in the relevant discussion sections.

5. Discussion

The findings are hereby discussed by the discourse types involved. They are then evaluated ecolinguistically. We endeavour to reveal the positive stories worthy of promoting and the negative ones to be discarded.

5.1. Positive discourses

The song “Engamia ya Nyasae” offers rich positive discourse elements that resonate with ecocentric values and ethical relationships with non-human life. These narratives promote the moral extension of human empathy to animals, affirm their intrinsic worth, and challenge exploitative human practices. This section interprets the major positive themes in light of the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning this study.

Overall, the positive discourses centre on three key themes: advocacy for animal rights, empathy and moral responsibility, and condemnation of cruelty and the commodification of animals.

5.1.1. Recognition of animal rights and shared creation

The major positive element in the song is the singer’s acknowledgement that animals have rights and these rights should be respected by humans. This is mainly because animals in nature have equal natural rights. After all, they were created by God, who also created humans. Therefore, humans should treat animals with dignity because they were created by the same God who created humans. This positive story is encapsulated in the song’s title, “The Camel, Too, Is God’s Creation”. Being God’s creation just as humans are, the camel (as well as other animals) should be accorded the respect and dignity due to them as creations of the same God.

The most compelling positive discourse in the song is the acknowledgement that animals have inherent rights and deserve respect and dignity. This idea is grounded in both theological and ecological reasoning. The singer reminds listeners that animals, like humans, are creations of God (“The Camel, Too, Is God’s Creation”). This theological assertion underpins a powerful ecocentric narrative that rejects the notion of human superiority over animals, aligning with Stibbe’s (2015, 2021) ecosophy, which values non-human life as morally significant.

This belief resonates with Cross’s (2018) ecofeminist and moral extensionist approach, which advocates expanding our ethical framework to include all living beings. By presenting the camel as a fellow creation of God, the singer rejects anthropocentrism and instead affirms a worldview in which humans and animals share a moral space. Such a perspective is often found in indigenous ecological worldviews, which, as Abram (1996) notes, are more responsive and responsible toward the bio-region they inhabit.

5.1.2. Condemnation of animal cruelty and advocacy for empathy

The song openly condemns the cruel treatment of the camel, which was exploited for monetary gain and eventually collapsed from exhaustion and neglect. The singer’s refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice is a powerful moral statement (“I will never keep quiet once I notice an illegality/injustice”). This personal responsibility reflects what Martin

(2004) identifies as a key trait of PDA, highlighting discourses that empower individuals to act ethically.

The singer disapproves of the cruelty meted out to the camel:

Abanto bagachanda engamia ya Nyasae.

Humans mistreated the camel — God's creature

Auoooh, auoooh! Inche omwana o Maiko, timanyeti koombia

I, the son of Maiko, I am never the assuming type

Nigo inkorora rigoso, nasinywa koombia

I will never keep quiet once I notice an illegality/injustice

Imbeke chingero, Nyasae nandoche

God sees it all, and if I don't sing about it

Ekeru narooche rigoso ingakora ki?

God will ask me to explain what action I took after observing an illegality

Inche narooche omonyama o Nyasae

I once witnessed an animal — God's creature

Engamia abaminto

A camel, my brothers

Similarly, the song's condemnation of humans' cruelty to animals (the camel) is a positive element. The singer acknowledges that humans are unjustifiably cruel to animals, and it is for this reason that he castigates such cruelty ('Humans mistreated the camel...'). It is equally positive when the singer attests that he empathized with the animal ('I, Sagero, and Tadius were moved to great pity').

The act of being moved to great pity is a positive element in itself. This is because humans more often than not never pity animals. To find people who stand up for the rights of animals is quite positive. This makes the singer decry the unjust treatment of the camel and take responsibility, calling out against this injustice.

It is also interesting to note that the singer takes personal responsibility by claiming that if he does not speak out against this cruelty to animals (God's creatures), God will hold him accountable for such omission ('God sees it all, and if I don't sing about it... God will ask me to explain what action I took').

The appeal to one's conscience in the face of such cruelty is a positive element in the song. The singer is encouraging individuals to embrace moral sense of doing what is right in as far as relations between humans and the larger-than-human world are concerned. Advocating for the rights of the larger-than-human world is a story worth promoting, hence ecocentrism and moral extensionism.

It is equally important to note that the singer condemns the human tendency to exploit animals such as the camel for monetary gain. The animal is paraded before show-goers,

and they use it to make money and boost their social standing by using the camel's photos to brag to their friends ('Many people posed for photos with it'). The singer condemns this anthropocentrism. Despite being weak and wounded, the owner of the camel continued collecting money from those who enjoyed a ride on it or posed next to it for photos ('I once witnessed an animal — God's creature... and the wound on its chest was dripping pus...').

The camel groaned, moaned, and cried painfully as it was whipped and forced to carry the fun-lovers along the highway. This is a negative story which should be resisted. Failure to take care of the sick animal despite having used it to make money ('And then someone would pay twenty shillings') is equally a negative story worth resisting. Similarly, turning a deaf ear to the camel's cries and moans due to pain and hunger exemplifies negative stories which should be resisted. The same is the case for the many people who eagerly rode on its back despite its moans and painful cries for mercy and food ('It painfully knelt down... It moaned as it bent... It was whipped back to its feet'). Its handlers whipped it mercilessly and, despite its cries and moans, it was forced to walk on till it could not move any further — it dropped dead, thus negative story.

The singer condemns this gross abuse of the camel's rights (positive story). He decries this mistreatment and cruelty: despite being sick and starved, the camel is whipped and forced to carry people for the sake of making money for the owner. This mistreatment and abuse is a negative story worth resisting. The song condemns man's anthropocentric tendencies of exploiting other creatures (nature) in the ecosystem for his benefit. Protecting the rights of the camel (and nature in general) is a positive story worth promoting.

The expression of pity and moral outrage over the camel's suffering, shared by the singer and a few others, is an example of what Stibbe (2018) calls a "positive story to live by". It signals an emotional and ethical awareness that challenges societal apathy toward animal suffering. In many African societies, such empathy is embedded in oral traditions that teach community responsibility for both human and non-human life (Mutonyi, 2011).

5.1.3. Rejection of commodification and anthropocentric exploitation

The song critiques the commodification of the camel as a spectacle for entertainment and profit. The animal's suffering is rendered invisible in the pursuit of financial gain and social status, as people pay to pose with it for photos or ride it. This exploitation is characteristic of what Goatly (2000) describes as "instrumental metaphors" in human discourse — language that reduces animals to objects for use ('...pay twenty shillings...to ride on it') is a negative story worth resisting. On the other hand, condemning and warning those who disregard the camel's suffering in pursuit of money and pleasure ('After the fun, my brother, dire consequences await you') is a positive story worth promoting.

By rejecting this commodification, the singer challenges the dominant anthropocentric ideology that animals exist solely for human benefit. Instead, he calls for a paradigm that respects animals as beings with needs, emotions, and the right to live free from harm. This

aligns with ecocentric principles and supports the call for a shift in the stories we live by, as proposed by Stibbe (2021), to ones that encourage ecological respect and justice.

5.1.4. *Moral conscience and divine accountability*

The singer's appeal to divine accountability — suggesting that God will question him if he remains silent about the camel's abuse — is a strong moral device. It embeds ecological care within a spiritual framework, reinforcing the idea that ethical treatment of animals is not only a social issue but also a spiritual obligation.

This convergence of morality and spirituality in the treatment of animals echoes indigenous ecological ethics found across African traditions. According to Mberia (2009), songs and oral narratives among Kenyan communities often embed environmental messages within spiritual and moral codes. This reflects a holistic worldview where ecological, moral, and spiritual well-being are intertwined.

In conclusion, the song “Engamia ya Nyasae” offers multiple positive discourse elements that advocate for animal dignity, reject cruelty, and call for moral reflection. These narratives are consistent with the principles of PDA, moral extensionism, and ecocentrism. They demonstrate the potential of indigenous music to serve as a site of ecological ethics and environmental education.

5.2. *Negative discourses*

The song “Engamia ya Nyasae” also contains discourse elements that are ecologically and ethically problematic. These are categorized as negative discourses due to their reinforcement of anthropocentric ideologies and culturally embedded superstitions. The negative discourses centre on two themes: the attribution of barrenness and impotence to contact with the camel, and blaming the animal for spiritual misfortune.

5.2.1. *Attribution of barrenness and impotence to contact with the camel*

The major negative element in the story is the singer's argument that the camel is the cause of barrenness and impotence among humans. The singer argues that the camel is a bearer of the curse of impotence/barrenness and madness:

Esitori yengamia nigo ebwate ebirecha.

I am also informed that the camel is a bearer of malevolent spirits

Onye aye gwachiete neririonya riaye.

If you happened to have rubbed yourself on its fur

Ebio nebirecha kwairete aye bwoo.

Be informed that you took malevolent spirits to your family

The belief that animals such as the camel are responsible for man's predicament is a negative story worth discarding. Attributing malevolent/evil spirits to the camel is man's way of evading reality and blaming nature for man's failures. This is being disrespectful to the larger-than-human world, hence a negative story.

The song singles out several curses that are attributable to the camel. The curses will affect boys, girls, women, and men in diverse ways. For girls, they will never bear a child — curse of barrenness ('Any girl who rode the camel will never bear a child'). For the boys, they will never sire — the curse of impotence ('For the boys, they will never sire'). For women, they will suffer endless feverish attacks ('For women, they will suffer an unending fever'). For the men, they will suffer madness/mental confusion ('For men, they will suffer the curse of wandering on the roads').

These examples are illustrative of man's perception of the larger-than-human world as troublesome, as well as a cause of man's tribulations. Blaming animals such as the camel for man's failures is a negative story that should be discarded. The examples are also indicative of negative stories worth resisting. The claim that contact with the camel leads to infertility among humans is negative. The singer warns that individuals who rode or posed with the camel are under a curse of childlessness, barrenness, or impotence. This belief exemplifies what Stibbe (2015, 2021) refers to as stories we must resist — narratives that undermine ecological respect and propagate harmful myths.

From a critical discourse perspective (Fairclough, 1995), this narrative legitimates power through fear and mysticism, positioning the animal as a scapegoat for human suffering. By assigning blame to a non-human creature, the discourse diverts responsibility away from social, medical, or environmental causes of infertility. Such framing reflects a deeply anthropocentric worldview, where nature is expected to serve humans and is blamed when expectations are unmet.

Abram (1996) critiques such narratives as symptomatic of cultures estranged from the natural world — cultures that no longer perceive animals as kin but as sources of danger or tools for utility. Similarly, Cross (2018) argues that moral extensionism should counter these attitudes by extending ethical consideration to all sentient beings, regardless of their perceived impact on human well-being. In this context, blaming the camel violates the principle of moral inclusivity and perpetuates unjust stigmatization.

5.2.2. *Blaming the animal for spiritual misfortune*

The second major negative discourse involves attributing spiritual pollution and misfortune to contact with the camel. The song claims that touching the camel introduces malevolent spirits into human homes, leading to ailments and existential disorder ('I am also informed that the camel is a bearer of malevolent spirits... If you happened to have rubbed yourself on its fur... Be informed that you took malevolent spirits to your family'). This narrative reflects what Goatly (2000) terms "magical causality" in language, where linguistic representation falsely links two unrelated events to create a sense of cosmic or spiritual

justice.

While such beliefs may hold cultural significance and offer explanatory comfort, from an ecolinguistic standpoint they are ideologically hazardous. They distort the human–nature relationship by projecting human vulnerabilities onto innocent creatures. This not only fosters ecological alienation but also reinforces fear-based control mechanisms within society (Mungai & Letseka, 2013).

Furthermore, this belief perpetuates what Stibbe (2021) identifies as “erasure narratives”, wherein the animal’s real suffering — its wounds, starvation, and death — is erased or overshadowed by human-centric fears (“Go to church and confess your sins”). Claiming that the camel is a source of sin or religious contamination is a negative story to be resisted. Humans desire a second chance at life but never accord other creatures in the world second chances; thus, this is a negative story worth resisting. Instead of being mourned or rehabilitated, the animal becomes a symbol of contamination and danger, further legitimizing its mistreatment.

Therefore, such narratives are not neutral cultural artifacts but ideological constructs with real-world implications. They justify abuse, marginalize non-human lives, and hinder the development of a respectful and reciprocal ecological ethic. Recognizing and challenging these negative discourses is vital for fostering more equitable multi-species relationships and ensuring cultural narratives evolve toward ecological sustainability.

5.3. Findings

5.3.1. Ambivalent themes

These findings highlight the broader Abagusii cosmology, which suggests that animals are both respected and feared. This duality calls for a critical reflection on inherited beliefs. The ambivalent themes focus on the coexistence of advocacy and superstition, as well as the cultural tension between empathy for animals and the fear of curses.

The song “Engamia ya Nyasae” presents a complex, ambivalent narrative that merges ecological advocacy with cultural superstition. This duality reflects broader indigenous cosmologies and highlights the need to critically evaluate inherited beliefs through ecolinguistic and sociocultural lenses.

5.3.2. Coexistence of advocacy and superstition

The singer’s explicit condemnation of the camel’s mistreatment aligns with ecocentric ideals and reflects moral extensionism, wherein non-human life is granted intrinsic value and dignity (Cross, 2018). His willingness to speak out against cruelty, even invoking divine accountability, promotes a positive discourse consistent with Stibbe’s (2015) ecosophy. This is echoed in other African oral traditions, as seen in Mutonyi (2011), where animals are respected as part of the moral fabric of community life.

Yet, the song quickly shifts to a narrative rooted in superstition, where the camel becomes a symbol of misfortune, barrenness, and spiritual contamination. This reversal aligns with what Stibbe (2021) classifies as an ambivalent discourse: one that contains both ecologically supportive and damaging elements. Attributing human infertility to contact with an animal reflects anthropocentrism and undermines the ethical gains of the initial message.

This duality is not unique to the Abagusii. Hussein (2018) finds similar tensions in Somali oral poetry, where animals are revered for their ecological role yet are sometimes portrayed as omens of danger. The co-presence of ecological respect and superstition reflects what Abram (1996) describes as the “interanimacy” of indigenous worldviews, where relationships between humans and the non-human world are intimate, but not always rational or consistent by modern ecological standards.

5.3.3. Cultural tension between empathy and fear

The contradictory depiction of the camel — as both a victim deserving empathy and a bearer of curses — embodies a cultural tension at the heart of many indigenous cosmologies. Mungai and Letseka (2013) note that such dual narratives often arise where sacredness and taboo coexist. In “Engamia ya Nyasae”, the camel is anthropomorphized and mourned, but also vilified and feared.

This tension may serve sociocultural purposes. Superstition can function as a social regulator in the absence of institutional justice, as suggested by Goatly (2000). In some contexts, fear narratives are used to discourage undesirable behavior or rationalize suffering. However, from an ecolinguistic perspective, such discourses reinforce anthropocentric dominance and inhibit genuine ecological reconciliation.

Moreover, blaming animals for human afflictions disrupts the moral extensionism that Cross (2018) advocates. It violates the ecocentric principle that all life forms are interconnected and deserving of respect. The fear-driven condemnation of the camel exemplifies what Stibbe (2015, 2021) refers to as stories we must resist — narratives that delegitimize non-human entities or obscure human accountability.

5.4. Implications for the Abagusii cosmology and ecological worldview

The findings suggest that Abagusii cosmology, like many indigenous systems, holds space for both reverence and suspicion toward animals. This ambivalence calls for a careful re-evaluation of traditional beliefs in light of ecological sustainability. As Nabwire (2017) argues in her study of Dholuo songs, deconstructing harmful narratives does not mean discarding tradition but adapting it to contemporary ethical standards.

By engaging indigenous songs with tools like CDA and PDA, scholars can uncover not only what is said, but what is silently assumed, and whether those assumptions advance or hinder environmental harmony. Stibbe (2021) reminds us that our survival may depend

on changing the stories we live by, and indigenous oral texts are key sites for this transformation.

In summary, “Engamia ya Nyasae” is emblematic of an ambivalent ecological narrative that requires critical sorting. It invites us to celebrate the parts of tradition that promote care and interdependence, while questioning those that perpetuate fear, stigma, and domination.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

The song “Engamia ya Nyasae” encapsulates the ambivalence in indigenous ecological discourse. While it promotes respect for animals and criticizes human cruelty, it also embeds superstitions that perpetuate animal demonization. This duality reflects broader societal contradictions in human–nature relations.

The analysis of “Engamia ya Nyasae” provides insights into how the contemporary Abagusii worldview constructs the larger-than-human world. This worldview includes both positive and negative perceptions of that world. In the song, the camel serves as a microcosm of the larger-than-human world, reflecting an ecosophy that is essential for improving human relationships with the non-human realm.

However, our examination of contemporary Abagusii stories through the lens of “Engamia ya Nyasae” reveals misguided beliefs that attribute human suffering, such as illness, to the larger-than-human world. Such beliefs foster negative relationships between people and nature, undermining efforts to promote respect for the natural environment. Despite the harm inflicted on nature, humans often position themselves as controllers of it, reflecting an anthropocentric mindset. This perception must be corrected; humans are part of nature, not its masters.

Importantly, “Engamia ya Nyasae” serves as a powerful narrative that advocates for respect towards the larger-than-human world. The song condemns the inhumanity and cruelty inflicted on animals for profit. The singer’s call for humans to develop a conscience in their interactions with nature is commendable. Therefore, it is vital to embrace the positive messages in the song while rejecting the negative ones to foster harmony with nature for the collective good. We must reconsider “the stories we live by” (Stibbe, 2015, 2021) if they fail to support our coexistence with other beings in the ecosphere.

This study critically analyzed the Ekegusii song “Engamia ya Nyasae” by Henry Sagero using an ecolinguistic framework grounded in CDA and PDA. Drawing on Stibbe’s (2015, 2021) “stories we live by” model, the analysis categorized the song’s discourses into positive, negative, and ambivalent types. The positive discourses — such as the recognition of animal dignity, condemnation of cruelty, and call for moral responsibility — are consistent with ecocentric values and moral extensionism. These narratives emphasize the ethical imperative to treat animals as fellow beings created by God, promoting empathy,

justice, and ecological harmony.

Conversely, the negative discourses identified include superstition-driven beliefs that attribute barrenness, impotence, and spiritual misfortune to contact with the camel. These narratives reflect anthropocentric ideologies that scapegoat animals and justify their mistreatment. The ambivalent nature of the song — where advocacy for animals coexists with harmful superstitions — mirrors broader indigenous cosmologies that respect but also fear non-human creatures.

The findings underscore the importance of critically evaluating traditional narratives, not to dismiss cultural heritage, but to transform it in ways that promote environmental ethics and sustainable coexistence. Indigenous oral literature, including music, remains a powerful site for ecological storytelling and should be harnessed for environmental education and advocacy.

6.2. Recommendations

1. Promote positive ecological narratives: Institutions and educators should highlight and disseminate indigenous texts that support empathy, ecological care, and animal dignity.
2. Challenge harmful beliefs: Community-based dialogue and education should address superstitions that frame animals as sources of human misfortune.
3. Incorporate ecolinguistics in curriculum: Language and literature programs should integrate ecolinguistic frameworks to explore human–nature relationships through discourse.
4. Expand research scope: Further studies should analyze a wider range of songs and oral texts across Kenyan and African communities to map patterns of ecological discourse.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Pantheon Books.
- Carson, R. (2000). *Silent spring*. Penguin.
- Cross, C. L. (2018). Ecofeminism and an ethic of care: Developing an eco-jurisprudence. *Acta Academica*, 50(1), 28–40. <https://doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa50i1.2>
- Dunayer, J. (2001). *Animal equality: Language and liberation*. Ryce Publishing.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fill, A., & Penz, H. (Eds.). (2018). *The Routledge handbook of ecolinguistics*. Routledge.
- Flowerdew, J. (2008). Critical discourse analysis and strategies of resistance. In V. Bhatia, J. Flowerdew, & R. H. Jones (Eds.), *Advances in discourse studies* (pp. 195–210). Routledge.
- Goatly, A. (2000). *Critical reading and writing: An introductory coursebook*. Routledge.

- Huang, Y., & Weng, S. (2019). Environmental awareness in Chinese children's literature: A positive discourse analysis. *Discourse and Communication*, 13(5), 569–587.
- Hussein, M. (2018). Oral poetry and environmental knowledge among Somali pastoralists. *Oral Tradition*, 33(2), 329–352.
- Martin, J. R. (2004). Positive discourse analysis: Solidarity and change. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 49, 179–200.
- Mberia, K. (2009). Oral poetry as a means of environmental education in Kenya: The case of Kikuyu and Kamba communities. *Chemchemi: International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 42–57.
- Mungai, N. W., & Letseka, M. (2013). Learners and teachers' perceptions and experiences of environmental education in South Africa. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(14), 563–569.
- Mutonyi, R. (2011). Environmental conservation through oral literature: A study of Luhya folktales. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 23(2), 145–157.
- Nabwire, L. (2017). The environmental discourse in Dholuo songs. *Kiswabili*, 80(1), 115–134.
- Naess, A. (1973). The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. *Inquiry*, 16(1–4), 95–100.
- Ogechi, N. O., & Ruto, S. J. (2010). Naming practices and ecological knowledge among the Kalenjin of Kenya. *Sociolinguistic Studies*, 4(2), 395–415.
- Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason*. Routledge.
- Sapir, E. (1921). *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Stibbe, A. (2015). *Ecolinguistics: Language, ecology and the stories we live by*. Routledge.
- Stibbe, A. (2018). Positive discourse analysis: Rethinking human ecological relationships. In A. Fill & H. Penz (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of ecolinguistics* (pp. 165–178). Routledge.
- Stibbe, A. (2021). *Ecolinguistics: Language, ecology and the stories we live by* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Wodak, R., & Chilton, P. A. (Eds.). (2005). *A new agenda in (critical) discourse analysis: Theory, methodology, and interdisciplinarity*. John Benjamins.

Appendix: The full song lyrics together with English translation

Engamia ya Nyasae (The Camel, Too, Is God's Creation)

Abanto bagachanda engamia ya Nyasae.

Humans mistreated the camel — God's creature

Auoooh, auoooh! Inche omwana o Maiko, timanyeti koombia

I, the son of Maiko, I am never the assuming type

Nigo inkorora rigoso, nasinywa koombia.

I will never keep quiet once I notice an illegality/injustice

Imbeke chingero, Nyasae nandoche,

God sees it all, and if I don't sing about it

Ekeru narochi rigoso ingakora ki?

God will ask me to explain what action I took after observing an illegality

Inche narooche omonyama o Nyasae,

I once witnessed an animal — God's creature

Engamia abaminto,

A camel, my brothers

Yarenge gochandwa.

It was abused/mistreated

Eyio Yarusetigwe Bosongo eshoo.

It was driven out of Kisii showground

Egatarigwa namagoro ekegotera.

It was forcefully driven on its feet wearily

Gaki korwa Bosongo

Mercilessly from Kisii town

Getare mboete

Past Getare

Kemera gotiira, egasoka Ting'a

Uphill to Kemera and Ting'a

Kegosioka Sironga konyora yarosire.

By the time it approached Sironga, it was too exhausted

Kebirigo, Ekerenyo, goika Ikonge.

It was forced up to Kebirigo, Ekerenyo, till it arrived at Ikonge

Yarenge koaora, gaki enchara yoka.

It yawned pitifully due to hunger

Naende buna yarengende endu amauga oka,

And because it was emaciated and bony

Egekuba kiaye kiare korwa amaira,

And the wound on its chest was dripping pus

Sagero na Tadius tokeng'eretia

I, Sagero, and Tadius were moved to great pity

Intwe tweka twaroche amabera ase abanto bonisi pi.

Of all the people, we are the only ones who empathized with the camel

Bildad ominto, mwanabanto nembe

My brother Bildad, human beings are inhuman

Gose nobofara mwanabanto ebwate.

Perhaps humans are so foolish

Gososa egesicha ayekwere amabebe,

No one could pick a flower and express pity for the camel

Ekeroyare korara, ekweringa.

It painfully knelt down

Omonto omanyakorwa e pound.

And then someone would pay twenty shillings

Oyeisaransera omonyuma

To ride on its back

Kegotenena egoitwa.

It was whipped back to its feet

Gekorara ekoora.

It moaned as it bent

Abanto abange baitetwe chibicha neero.

Many people posed for photos with it

Bachie kong'ainera abagisangio babo,

Which they intended to use to brag to their friends

Ing'a aiga Maasai Mara narengende

That they were in the Maasai Mara game park

Abatari bagatoaka chibicha nero

With tourists who photographed them on the camel

Eraa yare tokagoka sana.

It was lots of fun and we enjoyed ourselves

Baada ya faraja ndugu ni uzuni.

After the fun, my brother, dire consequences await you

Erio okagooka sana, utalia ndugu yangu.

You enjoyed yourself, brother, but you will regret

Uchumbe inche imbuate igoro yengamia

Information I gathered about the camel

Manya nigo yachete egakwa gekoora

Indicates that it died painfully

Shauri ya baria inwe mwayerinete

Due to those who rode on it

Esitori yengamia nigo ebwate ebirecha.

I am also informed that the camel is a bearer of malevolent spirits

Onye aye gwachiete neririonya riaye.

If you happened to have rubbed yourself on its fur

Ebio nebirecha kwairere aye bwoo.

Be informed that you took malevolent spirits to your family

Omosubati oyerinete ere takoibora mwana.

Any girl who rode the camel will never bear a child

Omomura ebirecha takoibora mwana.

For the boys, they will never sire

Abang'ina barabwo ogosusubara gwoka.

For women, they will suffer an unending fever

Abagaka barabwo nogosemba chipara.

For men, they will suffer the curse of wandering on the roads

Kobakonya baria inwe mwarinete engamia.

To help those of you who rode on the camel

Genda chikanisa mosaberwe.

Go to church and confess your sins

Engamia ya Nyasae mogochanda?

Are you aware of the consequences of mistreating God's camel?

*Source: YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-go2e4KimV0>)