

Allegorical Animal Grooms and Human Brides in Malawian Folktales

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Abstract

Drawing from anthrozoology, the purpose of this paper is to analyse animal-human relations in selected Malawian folktales that function as a means of reprisal for girls who flout societal norms about courtship. Animals in folktales involving animal grooms and human brides also function to ensure that boys should be shrewd in their courtly behaviours. Since the major source of folktales is the environment, children to whom the folktales are narrated learn not only survival skills in sometimes a hostile environment, but they also learn the skills of coexistence with the non-human world. In folktales, animals play significant roles in shaping human behaviour and building personality. This paper exploits allegorical human-animal marriages as the basis for societal well-being. The folktales prepare children for the augmented realities in life through home-grown lore. The findings of this analysis reveal that animals as stand-ins for humans embody human values. Through their various interactions with animals, the people generate experiential knowledge that demonstrates their environmental embeddedness and consciousness while recognising animals as sentient beings.

Keywords: anthrozoology, sentient, allegory, coexistence, consciousness

Introduction

Folktales instil environmental wisdom among the listeners and/or readers besides contextualising human and non-human relationships and the kind of attitudes humans have towards animals. This paper focuses on folktales that involve allegorical marriages between animal grooms and human brides. These marriages reveal how people perceive biological and physiological similarities between humans and animals and their awareness and knowledge of the environment. This paper seeks to show that these marriages are a means of representing Otherness and the unsuccessful endings also entail that folklore recognises the ontological gulf and separateness between humans and animals. The representations of animals in the selected folktales, however, recognise them in ways that contradict the “Cartesian philosophy” of viewing animals in mechanistic terms as irrational (Descartes 1970). Folktales mostly represent animal grooms such as hare, hyena, lion, duck, tortoise, baboon and monkey with human brides largely in metaphorical terms. The animal groom and human bride relationships are also loaded with gender implications. The girls are depicted as very

beautiful but sexually inaccessible to men and thereby they attract what Zheng (2013) describes as “male erotic gaze” and “sadistic voyeurism and/or fetishistic scopophilia (looking as a source of pleasure)” (7) that results in violence and seduction expressed in the form of animal grooms. This ecofeminist view said, the animal grooms are meant to punish girls for breaking the rules of traditional courtship.

The term “anthrozoology” covers a wide of other related concepts such as “animal studies,” the “study of human-animal relations”, “critical animal studies” and “animal humanities” and “it examines the complex interactions between the worlds of humans and other animals” (Lynn 2010:42). Although the interest in anthrozoology seems to be a recent phenomenon in the modern world, folklore is replete with various depictions of human-animal relations. Lynn (2010) further explains that anthrozoology “emerged in response to three problematic ways of understanding animals. The first is the failure of the natural and behavioural sciences to adequately address the sentience, sapience, and agency of many animals. The second is the recognition of anthropocentrism and speciesism as prejudicial paradigms that distort our moral relationship with other people, animals, and the rest of nature. The third is a burgeoning interest in the cultural, social, and political place of animals in human societies” (42-43). Although oral literature represents animals as capable of expressing emotions, feelings, sensations and passions (sentience), the sapience (wisdom and knowledge) that animals express are

projections of human wisdom and knowledge. De Mello (2012) defines the term “anthrozoology” as the “scientific study of human-animal interaction, and the human-animal bond” (5). Allegorical human-animal marriages represented in folktales constitute this “human-animal bond” and the descendants of such marriages reflect people’s knowledge about hereditary traits. According to Cuddon (2013) the word “allegory” is derived from the Greek *allegoria* meaning “speaking otherwise” and it is “a story or image with several layers of meaning: behind the literal or surface meaning lie one or more secondary meanings, of varying degrees of complexity” (21). For their moral or didactic purposes, folktales or fables are rich in eclectic meanings.

Literature Review

Literature available on Malawian folktales reveals that no studies have used an anthrozoological approach. Key concerns in studies about folktales in Malawi have involved compilation in order to preserve them for future generations in the light of the dying interest in oral discourses. Critics who have analysed Malawian folktales have placed their emphasis elsewhere and not on the environmental consciousness of the people, their environmental embeddedness, or the human-animal relationships. Although Singano and Roscoe compiled and edited *Tales of Old Malawi* (1986) and Kumakanga collected and compiled proverbs in *Nzeru za Kale* (1946) and various other researchers in oral literature have undertaken to preserve it through

compilation, Nazombe (1983) explains that “by 1882 Duff MacDonal had compiled two volumes on the customs and folklore of his Yawo and Nyanja neighbours in Southern Nyasaland” (10-11). What this implies is that there has been tremendous work on compiling and recording of folktales for the purpose of preservation. These compilations and other books in Chichewa or Chinyanja, Nazombe (1983) observes, “have constantly served as [...] storehouses of tradition” (10). These repositories of Malawian oral literatures have not been studied from an environmentalist stand point. Manda (2015) examines the role of folktales not only in cultural identity but also in fostering community development through communicating societal values. In departing from Manda, this paper analyse Malawian folktales from a literary environmental perspective and demonstrate the people’s environmental consciousness using human interconnectedness with animals/nature as the basis of indigenous ecological thought. Folktales play an important role in societal cohesion and the animal tales reflect the complexity in human-animal relationships. Timpunza Mvula (1982) observes that the “Chewa folk narrative is characteristically a *cante-fable*, a tale that is narrated and chorused. [...]. The term *nthano* (folk narrative), is collectively used to describe myths, legends, folktales and fables” (32, italics in the original). The Malawian *nthano* or *vidokoni* (Tumbuka) includes a wide range of oral narratives. Hangertner-Everts (2008) has collected Malawian myths and folktales and organised them based on thematic content. She observes

that “oral literature contributes to maintaining cultural values and commonly and widely practised ways of social behaviour, to exercising social/political control and authority, as well as to forming social institutions” (10). This study departs from the interest in the functions and classifications of oral literature including the various storytelling skills that preoccupy Hangertner-Everts.

In traditional settings, it is a taboo for a girl of marriageable age to choose not to marry and remain single. Through folktales about animal suitors, girls are taught to choose their husbands carefully in addition to preparing the girls for the anxieties of marriage and the beastly behaviours of some men. Therefore, tradition teaches that when a girl has reached marriageable age defined by societal rules, she should marry because society looks at her as an embodiment of moral values. When a girl attains marriageable age defined by society, she has to marry. If she refuses to get married, she is considered to have disobeyed societal behavioural patterns. Her marriage to an animal is retributive for her disobedience.

In terms of methodology, four folktales have been purposefully selected for analysis and these are “The Hare and the Chief’s Daughter”, “The Bride Price”, “Kanguli” from Singano and Roscoe’s *Tales of Old Malawi* (1986) and “Lion and Hyena” from *Tumbuka Folktales: Moral and Didactic Lessons from Malawi* (2010) that involve animal grooms and human brides. By focusing on girls as requiring a lesson from nature, these folktales call

attention to an ecofeminist interpretation that sees “a link between dominations of women and dominations of nature” (Davion 233). However, folktales about animal grooms and brides “may embody women’s desire for autonomy and equality in marriage; they may reflect male fantasies of domesticating and subduing female power; and they may reflect male anxiety about desertion by females” (Haase 41). This means that in folklore, animals play important roles in helping humans decide how to choose spouses as well as providing hopes and fears about marriage life.

Animal-human chromosome pair and dominant animal allelomorphic gene

The idea of a very beautiful girl but sexually inaccessible to men is depicted in “The Hare and the Chief’s Daughter” (Singano and Roscoe 42-43). The chief’s daughter has refused marriage proposals from many men and animals but she falls prey to hare’s cunning. Hare observes that the chief’s daughter goes to the river to bathe and thereafter basks herself on the sunny and sandy beach. Hare digs a tunnel from the nearby bush ending up just beneath where the girl lies on the sand. From this position, he is able to craftily have sex with the girl, without her knowledge. Hare impregnates the girl inexplicably by having sexual contacts with her from the tunnel. She gives birth to a baby who resembles hare. Throughout the period of the girl’s pregnancy, the community and the girl herself do not know the “man” responsible for it. When she gives birth, the child’s resemblance to hare reveals the culprit. Thus, the people become aware of the abilities of hare and the

environment in which the chief’s daughter and hare interact leading to her pregnancy. The river, the sand, the warmth from the sun on the beach and the ecstasy it provides, the nearby forest where hare hides and the tunnel he digs create an aesthetic and romantic setting as well as environmental awareness of these acting in concert to produce such an outcome as contained in the folktale – however improbable certain of its aspects appear to be when read literally.

As a trickster, hare is deceptive “and violates the moral codes of the community. [...] The trickster is a mythic figure, both creator and destroyer, associated with traditional culture throughout the world” (Haase 992). For his trickery, the environment opens up avenues through which hare interacts with the girl whom he loves so much. In agreement with the masculine aspects of wild animals, Bertens (2008) explains that “a major discourse found in nature writing will standardly extol the virtues of the wilderness and of the wild animals that inhabit it – often in terms of a robust masculinity” (201). The hare-chief’s daughter amorous relationship glorifies the hare and stupefies the girl. By representing hare with qualities of cleverness and ingenuity the people admire these qualities which they identify with themselves. Human sharing of the cleverness and ingenuity with hare entails indigenous people’s observation of a point of confluence between themselves and hare. This in turn, reveals indigenous environmental awareness. Furthermore, in this folktale, hare is an animal that is firm in purpose and this symbolises the

determination of a young man for whom hare stands. In his determination to marry

the chief's beautiful daughter, hare observes her movements closely:

He found out that every afternoon she and her maids went to the river to swim and to play on the lovely river bank. After swimming, hare noticed, the girl would go and lie on the sandy banks, sunbathing while her maids played around her, covering her body with sand. This interested the hare who had also noticed that the chief's daughter had one special place where she always lay in the sun (Singano and Roscoe 42).

The environment depicted here is rich in natural resources such as the river and the sand for swimming and sunbathing that provide the chief's daughter with a comfortable place to relax. Indigenous representation of the physical environment in oral literature is genuinely earth-centric and the manoeuvres of hare and the chief's daughter are set in an environment rich in natural resources. The description of hare and his impregnating of the chief's daughter in this folktale carry instrumental value insofar as the folktale has its premise on didacticism. The biting sarcasm in the folktale is meant to make the girl regret her action of refusing men for her hand in marriage.

Mota (2009) expresses this view when he says that "[f]olktales play a role in nation-state building as they refer to the collective value of all social networks" (12). The collective community sarcastically attacks the princess, the chief's daughter in the folktale, for example, by making her be sexually accessible to a trickster, hare, in order to make other girls come to their senses in how they choose marriage partners. As Goldberg (1997) notes, folktales "educate by illustrating or

explaining particular cultural ideas and especially by cautioning against undesirable behaviour" (356). Girls who refuse many marriage proposals and end up marrying monkeys and hyenas, serve to illustrate the theme of disobedient girls who marry animals. If girls think that they are sexually inaccessible, there are clever young men symbolic of trickster hare who can have access to them. Leavy (1995) asserts that "supernatural lovers may also be demons or tricksters or deities whose seduction of human women betokens an amorality only the gods can enjoy" (102). This signifies why hare digs "a tunnel from his hiding place to the spot where the chief's daughter always lay, and every afternoon he came to wait for her. The girl also began to spend more time on the sandy bank than she did in the stream" (Singano and Roscoe 42). The stream or the river in which the chief's daughter does not now frequently bathe is symbolic of how patriarchy sees the woman whom according to de Beauvoir (2007) "has often been compared to water because, among other reasons, she is the mirror in which the male, Narcissus-like, contemplates himself: he bends over her in good or bad faith" (315). The girl's frequenting of the sandy bank is symbolic

of her fecundity which results in her pregnancy by hare.

The tunnel hare digs becomes an allegory of the invisibility of the hare and the girl's sexual maturity. Being sexually mature, intuition teaches the chief's daughter to begin liking her place more than ever before. The various roles animals play in folktales mirror the attributes bestowed on them by humans. Although Goldberg (1997) is of the view that folktales "make use of stock characters, and different animals assume some of the same roles: the fox, the jackal, the monkey, or the coyote is clever, as are the rabbit and the hare; the bear, the wolf, or even the human is stupid" (357), the composition of these folktales mirrors human communities in which stupidity or folly is ridiculed in favour of wisdom.

The cleverness of hare is demonstrated in "The Hare and the Chief's Daughter" when he observes the girl's habits of finding the stream/river cold and the sandy riverbank satisfying not realising her sexual relations with hare, "and now, from his underground tunnel, the hare began to satisfy his amorous desire without the girl's knowledge. The chief's daughter did not know about this daily intimacy she enjoyed with the hare, but only thought the sand had grown more pleasant to lie on" (Singano and Roscoe 42). This implies that the girl has attained sexual maturity and Malawian indigenous culture encourages that any girl of marriageable age as defined by tradition, should marry. The chief's daughter is initiated into sex life by means

of hare that satisfies, as in this folktale, female erotic fantasies. This also implies that nature is irresistible and in the folktale nature is symbolised by what Leavy (1995) calls "the disembodied phallus" (141)) from the tunnel where hare hides. When, finally, the chief's daughter becomes pregnant and her father summons "all the animals and people to ask who was responsible" and everybody says, "It is not I" (Singano and Roscoe 42), it becomes clear that the girl has only herself to blame. Culture provides unprecedented alternatives from the environment for the girl's pregnancy for failure to love her own human species. Thus, the folktale carries the thematic concern of the susceptibility to deceptions of disobedient girls for whom it is asserted that "young women who take animal mates are often believed to have resisted a proper upbringing" (Leavy 139) and an animal deflowers her.

The representation of animals in folktales reveals what Arluke (2010) observes as "our most essential conceptions of the social order – how we think things should ideally be or not be – while unmasking our expectations, hopes, fears, and hatreds of our fellow humans and modern life" (35). The girl who is sexually inaccessible to men is made to be impregnated by a hare, a symbol of a clever young man who fights his way to access her in a patriarchal dominated society of culture/nature dualism. Kaur (2012) asserts that "[d]isrupting the dualism would posit the women in an ambivalent relationship with nature and their immediate environment [...]. Women then are not just

simplistically and neatly aligned with nature [...]. They straddle the grey area between the two binaries” (100). Malawian oral literature is already subaltern literature and the voices of women are marginal because they occupy ambivalent spaces.

Hare depicted in the folktale under discussion is an animal widely known for

[Hare] was finally caught by some of the chief's men, who dragged him off to the palace. The chief now called everybody together again.

“What should I do with the hare?” he asked.

“You must kill him,” said the lion.

“Give him to me and I will trample on him,” said the elephant.

“We should free the hare but kill the baby,” the chief's wife put in.

“Very well,” said the chief at last. “We will kill the baby and the hare as well.”

The chief then asked the hare how he would like to die.

“Well, I'd like to die fast,” the hare replied, “and if someone strong held me and flung me against a bushy shrub, that's what would happen.”

The lion, being a strong animal, held the hare tightly. But as he was throwing the hare against a bushy shrub, the hare slipped from his hands, disappeared quickly in the forest, and was not seen again (Singano and Roscoe 43).

This passage reflects not only the harmony between lion and elephant with the chief whose daughter has been defiled by hare in the folktale but it also reflects the harmony between humans and animals necessary for environmental restoration and ecological diversity. This said, however, for all their body sizes and strengths, lion and elephant are no match for the trickery of hare. Why hare is portrayed as a clever animal that dupes lion, elephant and other

its ingenuity and Sax (2001) observes that “all across Africa, the hare is an important trickster figure, and he often matches his cleverness against the size and strength of a hyena or a lion” (138). The last episode in “The Hare and the Chief's Daughter” illustrates the generally held views about hare when he dupes lion as elephant looks on:

big animals is that society admires nimbleness that hare symbolises rather than sluggishness. The hare, lion and elephant depicted in the folktale entail that these animals are found in their natural habitats such as forests and bushy shrubs around which people are aware of in their environment.

“The Hare and the Chief's Daughter” is analogous to the Yawo folktale, “*Abiti Mwenye, Chikanaalume*”

("The Princess Who Refused Men for Her Hand in Marriage") and she ends up marrying a baboon. The baboon, however, does not want to be naked before his human wife. The wife spies on him in the bathroom and sees that her husband hides a tail in his trousers and when she screams in nervousness, the baboon runs away and that is how the marriage ends. The ugly baboon serves to illustrate the contrast between the animal groom and the very beautiful chief's daughter who is easily deceived by the baboon's handsomeness when dressed in a suit. This also illustrates why in "many cultures, the animal groom is depicted as an exceptionally disgusting or frightening beast" (Haase 41). The animal grooms in Malawian folktales are mixed because the hare and tortoise grooms make comical characters while the hyena and lion grooms are tragically fearful.

Pangs of my daughter's beauty, tortoise pays bride price

While in "The Hare and the Chief's Daughter", it is the girl who turns down marriage proposals from people and animals, in "The Bride Price" (Singano and Roscoe 56), it is the girl's father who sets a difficult condition for his daughter's marriage. Using this folktale, I argue that human-animal relationships are complex and that the people allegorically exploit the seemingly contemptible condition of tortoise as a yardstick for humans to achieve their set goals so long as they are strongly determined. In "The Bride Price" a man has a very beautiful daughter. He sets up difficult conditions for suitors who ask for his daughter's hand in marriage. He hides an object high in a tree. Below the

hidden object is a hole in which a very poisonous snake hides. The snake fatally bites every man who attempts to retrieve the object in order to marry the girl. Tortoise succeeds in retrieving the object because the snake hits his shell. Tortoise marries the man's daughter and the whole village laughs.

"The Bride Price" depicts an example of an arranged marriage and, accordingly, the animal grooms and according to Haase (2008), "may well have been perceived as noxious by their young brides, who full of anxieties about marrying, are taught their culture's lessons about the sacrifice of desire and/or the transforming power of love" (41). The setting of this folktale is allegorical. The people's laughter in the folktale comes for three reasons. First, it is because of contempt for the Tortoise. We are told: "The Tortoise came to the village and heard the story. He said that he would try to get the object. Everyone laughed at the idea, but Tortoise insisted that he would take a chance" (Singano and Roscoe 56). This means that the appearance of Tortoise on the scene of the bride price trials by different men and animals makes the whole enterprise paradoxical. The implication of the laughter is the derision people have about Tortoise as a contemptible animal but paradoxically, he is the winner. The second reason for the laughter is directed towards the girl's father, "for making such an unreasonable condition for his daughter's marriage" (Singano and Roscoe 56) and this serves the moral purpose of warning parents who do not allow their daughters to choose their husbands freely.

Thirdly, the laughter is due to the comical situation strikingly out of the ordinary created by the Tortoise's win in the contest. It is this "comic hyperbole" (Abrams 120) and its "extravagant, outlandish or improbable" (Cuddon 710) situation that makes this folktale disproportionate in how it represents animal-human partnership. Due to its blatantly exaggerated narrative style and the Tortoise's managing to do the impossible,

[Tortoise] went to the tree and began to climb. When he reached the hole, he put his head inside his shell. The snake struck out at him, but only hit the shell, and the Tortoise began to sing

Go, unagogoda chiguni,

Go, unagogoda chiguni,

Nyama ili mkati!

this is an example of a tall tale. The tale says "many a young man had met his death in an attempt to hoodwink the snake one way or another" (Singano and Roscoe 56) in order to retrieve the hidden object from the tree. Yet, Tortoise succeeds. The poisonous snake that hides in the hole has symbolic significance of suffocating the attempts of others to achieve their goals. In the folktale under discussion, we hear that:

*Go, you are hitting
the shell,*

*Go, you are hitting
the shell,*

The meat is inside!

(Singano and
Roscoe 56)

This satirical song that ridicules both the girl's father and the snake suggests that *chigumi* (tortoise's shell) functions to protect its skin (*khungu/nyama*) from attacks and poisonous substances besides being its own 'house.' Both the tortoise and snake are reptiles and cold-blooded animals. The imagery of the snake/serpent in the folktale foreshadows the tragic deaths of many men who attempt to win the girl. The Serpent is the first animal recorded to have been engaged in speech with the human, Eve, in *Genesis*. In this folktale, the snake could also vie for the beautiful girl. The word *unagogoda* (you are hitting) informs the striking force of the snake. The

snake's failure to bite through the tortoise's shell and poison his body (meat) is illustrative of the people's consciousness of animal adaptations and their knowledge about poisonous and non-poisonous animals. The people are also ecologically conscious of zootoxins and phytotoxins through their experiences with "objects" in their environment. The Tortoise in the folktale becomes a symbol of those despised in society as well as a symbol of perseverance.

The "object" to be retrieved from high up in the tree placed close to a hole in which a poisonous snake hides, informs

Tortoise to readapt to the environment by hiding his skinny protrusions in his shell when passing near the snake in order to protect his life. The Tortoise's song *Unagogoda chiguni* (you are hitting the shell) satirises the snake and the girl's father for setting up such an awkward plan. The Tortoise's success in marrying the beautiful girl reflects his persistence in order to achieve his goals. The folktale also uses Tortoise to mock the daughter's father for his thoughtlessness. The suggestion within indigenous lore and which is implied in "The Bride Price" for the Tortoise marrying the girl is better conceptualised by DeMello (2012) who says that "[a]nimals exist as mirrors for human thought; they allow us to think about, talk about, and classify ourselves and others" (14). Indeed, the co-existence of animals and humans is reflected in the many symbolic, metaphoric, religio-cultural, paradoxical and allegorical settings in Malawian folktales.

The use of the Tortoise as the groom who wins the human bride for successfully retrieving the hidden object suggests not only an intricate human-animal relationship but also the symbolisms that, via metaphor and simile, bond humans and animals together. "The Bride Price" is based on competition for a girl and many men sacrifice their lives. This prepares boys and girls for the adult competitive world and survival mechanisms in an environment which is not always friendly. Arguably, according to Leavy (1995), "animal groom stories frequently reveal a storyteller's full awareness of the paradoxes involved in charging the same being responsible for the

fall of man with his redemption. Women are being asked to do what is either impossible or too costly for them to do, and then, because they have difficulties fulfilling their roles they are frequently accused of being the source of human problems" (Leavy 146). This view infers the Serpent-Eve relationship. Thus, primordially, humans have been closely associated with animals.

Tortoise wins the daughter's hand in marriage because of the adaptive potential of culture (Sutton and Anderson 2010) that acts as a moral to the daughter's father. The tortoise's shell is the feature adapted for survival in its environment and the song of the tortoise as he climbs the tree to retrieve the object is appropriate in mocking the payment of "the bride price." The Tortoise with its shell thus, becomes the measure for humans about the bride's accessibility since the snake cannot bite its way through it. It is interesting to note that "[a]nimals do not make humans the measure of things at all" (Rolston III, 15), yet the place of animals among humans is crucial in conceptualizing the cosmos.

Through animal folktales, "members of the young generation must prepare themselves for life within the environment into which they were born [...] by learning to adjust themselves to the social institutions [...] and to master the valid sign system" (Peil 20). Through the tortoise's folktale, children are "expected to be wise, industrious, [and] calculative in all [their] endeavours. [...] to come out of difficulties especially those difficulties, that will cost

[them their] life, by hook or by crook just as tortoise [does]" (Ogbalu 21). It is worth noting that "[i]n Africa, the [tortoise] is a sort of trickster figure, yet unlike other tricksters [...] he is virtually never impetuous. Other tricksters often become victim of their own cleverness and pride, but the [tortoise] is prudent and almost invariably victorious" (Sax 258). In "The Bride Price," the Tortoise mocks the conditions the father sets for his daughter. The folktale teaches moral values of respect and dignity for nature because seemingly despicable people, for whom the Tortoise is but a symbol, are important as well. Tortoise, despicable though he is, outwits human plots and other animals like snake.

Double-sexed hyena and morality

The hyena plays an important role in teaching morality and sex in traditional societies. Like the beautiful chief's daughters who refuse men for their hand in marriage and they end up with animal grooms, in "Kanguli" (Singano and Roscoe 53-55), a beautiful girl who does the same marries a hyena, a beast, after being deceived for his feigned handsomeness. A few months later after the marriage

One day, a very handsome man came to propose to her. When she saw him, she lost her heart at once and accepted his proposal. Arrangements were made according to custom and soon after, the wedding took place. After the ceremonies had been performed, there was feasting, rejoicing, and dancing (Singano and Roscoe 53).

The hasty acceptance of the marriage proposal and the wedding ceremonies are meant to speed up the girl's realisation of her error. When the husband/hyena asks his wife's parents to

ceremony, the girl goes to her husband's home. At night, the husband and his relatives transform themselves into hyenas and sing around her as she sleeps. The wife's brother listens to the ordeal outside through the cracked wall of the chicken hut where he has been put up. Having alerted his sister, he carves *nguli* and energised by a song he and his sister fly back home. The word *ka-* attached to *-nguli* gives a diminutive noun, *kanguli*, a small cone shaped wooden piece which children play as a game, *nguli* (a spinning top). The narrator of the folktale and listeners imagine the *nguli* grows wings as if by providence and flies away in order to rescue humans trapped among hyenas.

In "Kanguli" the treachery of the hyena is observed in how he approaches the human bride. He dresses up handsomely hiding his ugliness and identity as a hyena in order to attract the girl. The point the tale raises by making hyena's marriage proposal full of pomp and material attractions, is to warn girls to see beyond material splendour when identifying a husband. We hear from the tale that:

take her to his home to see his parents he is allowed to do so without any hesitation. The newlywed girl's brother wants to accompany them but she refuses him. He insists and follows his sister and brother-in-

law from a distance. The narrative mode in the tale reflects ecocriticism's concern with the relationship between literature and the physical environment. In "Kanguli," the imagery of a "dirty and untidy" boy who fails to sleep at night because of "chicken droppings and fleas" (Singano and Roscoe 53) being punished for insisting in following his sister to her husband's home, turns out to be a blessing and saviour to his sister against hyenas. The representation of animals in folktales agrees with the attributes humans give to the animals in real life existence.

The relationship between the boy and fleas is that of host/parasites. Fleas and ticks are a nuisance to humans and they are disease vectors to chickens. With chickens, chicken droppings, fleas, and the olfactory imagery, the environment entails excruciating sleeplessness for the boy – this, too, works for the good of both because by being forced to stay awake he manages to see the strange rituals and transformations. The representation of animals in folktales carries the sense of the marvellous/fantasy.

When the boy in "Kanguli" tells his sister about the danger in which her life is, she dismisses "him as a disobedient, dirty-faced nuisance [and] the girl would not

listen" (Singano Roscoe 54). In order to make her prove it for herself, one night the boy "tied a string around his sister's little toe so that he could wake her when the hyenas came. In the middle of the night when the hyenas arrived and started their singing, the boy gave a sharp tug at the string and his sister awoke and saw what was happening" (Singano and Roscoe 54). The "string" that awakens the girl becomes a symbol that disconnects her from the hyenas when she "saw what was happening" as she reconnects with her own people. The girl goes "to her brother and asked him to forgive all she had said and done. She also begged his help in escaping from the animals" (Singano and Roscoe 54). The girl's realisation here and her desire to escape "from the animals" implies a rejection of their non-human identities and recognition of the animal-other. The hyena's failure to maintain his disguise as a handsome human man in order to keep his marriage with the woman means he has failed to invade into the human world and distort its lineage that demonstrates the people's knowledge of the human/animal boundaries. The song the transformed human/hyenas sing demonstrates how the girl turns into *nyama*/meat. Referring to the girl by the hyenas as "meat" is a recognition of otherness that the hyenas can devour, flesh and blood, once fattened:

Tidye nyama, tidye nyama!

Let's eat meat, let's eat meat!

Sinanone, sinanone!

No, she's not fat enough yet!

(Singano and Roscoe 54)

This call and response song by the hyenas makes the beautiful girl, metaphorically, *nyama yomwe sinanone* (meat which is not yet fattened). By fattening the girl in order to consume her flesh (*tidye nyama*), the song posits a difference between animals and humans; that they belong to different species because if they were humans eating the flesh of humans it would have been cannibalism and thus, making humans beasts. Estok (2012) argues that because “ecocriticism is any theory that is committed to affecting change by analysing the function – thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise – of the natural

environment [...], the relevance of something so ancient as cannibalism to a concept so current as species-ism can hardly be overstated” (2-3). Hyenas are carnivorous mammals and their consumption of the human is justified by their eating habits.

The people are aware of their environmental resources and they use the girl's brother to utilise these resources to their advantage. The boy in “Kanguli” is determined to rescue his sister from the impending throes of death. He goes “into the forest and made himself a [wooden piece called] *nguli*” (Singano and Roscoe 54) which flies with the tempo of a song:

<i>Kanguli kanga ndendende, kanguli kanga!</i>	My little <i>nguli</i> , carry me
<i>Ndendende!</i>	Carry me!
<i>Kanguli kanga ndendende, kanguli kanga</i>	My little <i>nguli</i> , carry me
<i>Ndendende!</i>	Carry me!
<i>Ndiperekere ndendende, kanguli kanga</i>	My little <i>nguli</i> , carry me
<i>Ndendende!</i>	Carry me!
<i>Kuli amayi ndendende, kanguli kanga</i>	Guide me to where my mother is
<i>Ndendende!</i>	Carry me!

(Singano and Roscoe 54 – 55)

The boy's carving of a piece of wood that flies like a bird carrying humans hints at the kinship of humans with nature expressed in indigenous art. *Kanguli kanga*

ndendende (My little *nguli* carry me) suggests the close relationship between the boy who has carved it and the *nguli*. The word *ndendende* or *ndengundengu* implies

the force contained in the *nguli* with its potential to fly. Salmon (2000) argues that “[i]ndigenous people view both themselves and nature as part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origins. It is an awareness that life in any environment is viable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin” (1327). The urge for the boy in the song to *Kanguli kanga ndiperekere kuli amayi* (My little *nguli* carry me to my mother) reflects a matrilineal ancestry. The *nguli* in the folktale functions as a ghost or the supernatural element that rescues the boy and his sister from the beasts - hyenas. The moral the tale advances include, first, the girl in question should not have turned “down good marriage proposals from local youths” and secondly, she needs to respect her brother, “even though he was dirty and scruffy” (Singano and Roscoe 55). This

implies that the girl’s behaviours is disapproved by society and the animal groom is meant as a corrective measure.

The marriages between humans and animals such as hare, baboon, tortoise and hyena so far analysed constitute society’s ways of punishing disobedience among girls and non-conformity to societal values. We perceive the behaviour of hyena through what he does. The hyena carries indigenous wisdom that a girl should not delay to marry the moment she is of marriageable age. The idea of a handsome husband is untenable, the best a girl in search for such a husband can get is a hyena, a symbol of greed.

The significance of the folktales in which the human woman marries a non-human man, as Davis and Bryce (2008) note, is:

[T]o (re)stage coming-of-age tales, and so celebrate the mutual love between normal human characters and characters with strong manifestations of Otherness. In these narratives, the inner strengths of powerless human characters [...] are often the key which impels not only individuals but also the people around them to carry out their respective passage towards self-development and maturation, from solipsism to altruism (208).

By bringing hare, tortoise and hyena, for example, “characters with strong manifestations of Otherness” into intimate relations with human female characters, the folktales reinforce self-corrective measures among humans that include “self-development and maturation, from solipsism to altruism.” I take up the cues from Davis and Bryce (2008) to argue that the tales about human-animal marriages help the listeners to transcend the self and

grow into unselfish characters. This illustrates why upon arrival at home and after the boy has narrated “his story to his parents and the rest of the villagers [they] all told the girl that what she had suffered was the result of turning down good marriage proposals from local youths” (Singano and Roscoe 55). This kind of realisation helps the young listeners to come-of-age and fit into the mores of their

community in which nature is a tool for cultural self-definition.

Leavy (1995) argues that if the girl “plays her part as nurturer, or so many animal groom stories make clear, she will win at the end a devoted and passionate lover-husband instead of a beast” (147). Thus, human-animal relationships penetrate not only the public sphere of human existence, but also the private life. The people’s identification with animals is important for a symbiotic interplay between humans and animals. This is also important because the people’s awareness about the roles of animals in instilling cultural values entails their recognition to protect them. Sometimes a hyena as a groom does not need to disguise himself into a handsome young man in order to be accepted by a human female for marriage. “Lion and Hyena” (Shawa and Soko 76-78) portrays how people in agrarian societies are embedded in their environment and how they exploit animals for their instrumental value. In the story, hyena proposes marriage to a young human bride and he asks his friend, lion, to accompany him to the girl’s village. Despite the affectionate welcome with feasting by the girl’s people, at night, hyena goes into the village kraals and kills goats. The villagers become alert by the bleating noise of the goats and they wake up to their own animosity about the behaviour of hyena. The marriage fails. In shame, Lion and Hyena return to their respective homes.

One important literary feature in the folktales is the personification of animals,

the mutual conversations in the various ways Lion and Hyena are portrayed as they interact with humans. We hear from the story that, “[a]s was the custom the parents later brought in the girl and asked her if she was interested to marry Hyena and she accepted. The mood in the house was good-humoured and everyone was dancing” (Shawa and Soko 77). Hyena’s greed explains why the marriage fails. His greed is in spite of the girl’s innocent acceptance of hyena’s marriage proposal and that the “villagers prepared nice food for lion and hyena that they ate and no one would be expected to feel hungry again that night” (Shawa and Soko 77). The people narrating the story of “Lion and Hyena” show that it is hard for an individual to give up old habits as lion warns hyena, “I am happy that we are going to see your prospective wife because what we want is that you should have a wife. But knowing you, if something bad happens you will have yourself to blame” (Shawa and Soko 76). Lion, here, demonstrates understanding of hyena’s behaviour, which in turn, reflects the people’s knowledge of animals and the various ways they behave as sentient ecological entities.

Despite chickens and goats that hyena eats on his way to the prospective wife’s home and feasting on nice food there, hyena wakes up leaving lion sleeping and goes into people’s kraals “and started slaughtering innocent goats and eating the meat” (Shawa and Soko 77). Hyena in this folktale is humanity’s symbolic perception of what we lose if our behaviour is disagreeable like that of a hyena, who loses

a beautiful girl. Despite being provided for with delicious food by his bride's parents, hyena estranges himself from the people by preying on their domestic animals. With the constant imagery of bushes/forests in the folktale and domestic animals such as chickens and goats, the people are embedded in their environment and they exploit hyena as an enemy to their agrarian activities. The human-animal relationships reveal the people's awareness of different behaviours of animals through which they approve and/or disapprove human behaviours. Animals therefore, mirror what humans like and dislike in humans.

The representation of animal-human marriages in Malawian folktales reflects the issues of gender and sexuality where men as hunters hunt animals just as women are romantically or amorously hunted. Understood through ecofeminism, the gender inequalities demonstrated in these folktales about human-animal marriages inform male dominated societies. However, I desist from interpreting these folktales through western feminism and western formulations of gender. Most folktales involving allegorical animal-human marriages show that the grooms are animals, hare, hyena, tortoise, while the brides are humans. Male dominated societies highly prize virginity and when clever young men symbolised by animals have sexual access to these virgins, society promotes female dependence on the male. Beauvoir (2007) opines that a "virgin body has the freshness of secret springs, the morning sheen of an unbroken flower, the orient lustre – man, like a child, is

fascinated by enclosed and shadowy places not yet animated by any consciousness, which wait to be a soul: what he alone to take and to penetrate seems to be in truth created by him" (311). Animal mates depicted in Malawian folktales sexually interacting with very beautiful maidens serve as deflowers of girls in patriarchal societies.

It is worth noting that in "African societies, women are recognised as preservers and disseminators of oral traditions, in spite of patriarchal tyranny that seeks to construct them as the negative image of men. Storytelling also encourages and provokes solidarity among women and firmly situates women as significant socialising agents in the community" (Sheik 46). Most of these folktales are narrated by mothers, women and grandmothers to their children and grandchildren, both boys and girls, equally interested in the maternal politics, motherhood and bride prices. People are likely to protect the animals they represent in their stories. In the folktales analysed, animals are represented as vehicles for punishing girls who have deviated from societal norms or fathers who impose difficult conditions of bride prices for their daughters. Some of the folktales test the habits of the animals such as hyena.

Conclusion

Although the voices of the female human brides are silent in these folktales, their silence can be read in terms of gender disparities in indigenous settings. Listeners or readers can only imagine the reactions of a girl mysteriously impregnated by hare, a girl whose father has put her in an awkward

position forcing her to marry tortoise, a girl who unknowingly marries a hyena or a girl who willingly accepts to marry hyena but due to hyena's greed their marriage cannot be consummated. The silence of the girls in these folktales reflects a culture of submissiveness of women to the dictates of men. Animals are vehicles through which men have sexual access to virgins. However, it is also vital to interpret these folktales in the context of African ecofeminism which does not militate against motherhood.

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