

Reading Animals in the Malawian Novel in Chichewa: Ezra Chadza's *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*

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Abstract

This paper explores the dramatization of animals and human-animal relationships in Ezra Chadza's novel Chichewa, *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*. This novel tells a horror story that dramatizes how humans and animals interact in their struggle for survival and superiority. The book also deals with problem-solving mechanisms that require shrewdness in an adverse environment. Chad's novel, *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*, informs an environmental ethic of human trusteeship rather than advocating ecophobia. The findings of this paper reveal that despite the smallness of means, as epitomized by the novel's protagonist, human greatness is measured by astounding results. Those animals significantly impact human lives, and drawing parallels with animals inspires courage and shrewdness among humans. Although the human attitude towards animals is tinged with complexities depending on particularised animal attributes, zotherapy benefits humans. Animals and their various body parts are used for therapeutic purposes for human ailments and diseases. Some of the chemicals from animals are believed to be toxic, crocodile's bile, for example. The ubiquity of animals in *Kokha Mchepera Kalulu* informs the imagery of

forests, trees, fertile land, grass, wild fruits, mushrooms, mountains, rivers, pools, and lakes that suggest the relevance of an ecocritical perspective.

Keywords: ecophobia, environmental trustee, zotherapy, trauma, mortality

Introduction

Chad's *Koka Mchepera was Kalulu* (1986) dramatizes the struggle for existence between humans and animals. Set in the village of Kwesi with thick forests and animals in rural Malawi, the novel is embellished by the supernatural pivoted on human-animal relationships. The protagonist of the story, Kokha, is seen only once by his father, Pofera Salambula because a lion kills the latter to prevent it from entering the hut where his son, newly born, is being nursed by the woman. The caves, forests, mountains, and the bodies of water like pools, rivers, and lakes portrayed in the novel are overwhelmingly awash with terrorizations of human life. Cyclones, hurricanes, endemic diseases, floods, earthquakes, global warming, ozone

depletion, pollution, freezing snow, and acid rains are among the significant threats in contemporary culture. Estok (2013) asserts that “terror and ecophobia often define twenty-first-century representations of nature” (87). The term “ecophobia” is a portmanteau of *ecology* and *phobia* and refers to the fear originating from and relating to ecological problems. Estok (2009) defines the term “ecophobia” as “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature” (6). Ecophobia, however, in my view, is far from being “irrational and groundless” because, more often than not, there are valid reasons why people express fear about environmental phenomena. *For example*, *Nyanja Zakiya* (the lake is angry) is an expression of fear because of the storms in the lake that fishermen will not dare into. Desirous of taking a broad view of ecophobia, Estok likens it to homophobia, sexism, racism, misogyny, and speciesism (2009:6), concepts that are not analogous. In an earlier article, Estok (2005) explains that “[e]cophobia is all about fear of a loss of agency and control to Nature. It is ecophobia that sets the Old Testament God declaring that “man” is to have dominion over everything” (17). Instead of blaming Judaism for anthropocentrism and ecophobia, the declaration that “man is to have dominion over everything” gives the human being vicegerency and trusteeship over nature. Qur’an (33:72) captures this aptly when it says, “We did indeed offer

the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: But man undertook it: – he was indeed unjust and foolish.” The implications of this undertaking are numerous, one of which is that it gives man personal responsibility with rewards and punishments. Blaming God for anthropogenic environmental catastrophes is the epitome of man's unjustness and foolishness, for which he has betrayed his trust.

The protagonist in Chadza's *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*, Kokha, who undertakes his role as an environmental trustee and does not swerve from it. The novel's title is proverbial; *Kokha mchepera was calculus time Unga Phiri* (the smallness of the lonely hare but thinking like a mountain). Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) carries an essay entitled “Thinking like a Mountain,” and according to Timothy Clark (2011), this phrase “means to take a holistic view of an environment and its often hidden networks of interdependence” (78). The phrase entails not only thinking that transcends human limits, but it also reflects an all-inclusive environmental philosophy, *media unga Phiri* (thinking like a mountain), that the human sharing the attributes of the mountains that “refused to undertake” the trust. That humans should not be little themselves because they are poised for greatness is condensed in *time unga Phiri*.

Animals constitute an entire range of human knowledge and behavior, mirroring people's environmental embeddedness and indigenous ecological consciousness. Since animals embody human values through which people traverse the environment, environmental restoration and ecological diversity inform their symbiotic being-ness. The idea of the sacredness of nature, nature summed up in people's belief systems, and the unitary view of the cosmos that inform indigenous people's worldview infer an atomistic perception of the environment in which humans and animals are integral to their being-ness. The people's perception of a seamless cosmology in which the physical and divine environments exist in an ineluctable interplay implies their affiliation not only to their land but also to their genealogies through which the domain is but a bequeathal to be sustainably used for the nourishment of the human and non-human worlds. Inherited belief systems in which humans imagine conversing with mammals, birds, insects, amphibians, and reptiles, among others, place indigenous people close to nature/animals as reflected in their afro-ecophilosophy and cosmovision. Since drama is a staged mimetic art, the dramatization of the human-animal struggle for superiority is *a priori* in indigenous lore, a reflection of observational and experiential knowledge. *Koka Mchepera was Kalulu* flourishes in this kind of knowledge.

Birth of the son, the lion kills the father.

No sooner is a baby boy born than his father is killed by a lion in the drama of survival and superiority between humans and animals portrayed in Chadza's novel, *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*. Poferasalambula, the child's father, is killed by a lion in the middle of the night in his attempt to prevent the lion from entering the house in which his child is born and is nursed by women in what is locally known as *chikuwa*. At night, Poferasalambula hears dogs barking, and thinking that there could be hyenas in the darkness of the night wanting to kill goats and sheep, he goes outside carrying his sword to see what is happening. However, seeing nothing strange, he goes back to sleep. In the middle of the night, however, Pofera, short for Poferasalambula, hears loud shouts from the *chikuwa* hut, *Lu! Lu! Lu! Chilombo! Chilombo! (Lu! Lu! Lu! Beast! Beast!)* (Chad 9). This screaming acts as an "amblyopia," which Cuddon (2013) describes as a "device related to euphemism where language is reduced or modified by way of preparation for the announcement of something tragic or alarming (29). The beast about which the people are shouting is a lion that marks the tragic end of a father. When Pofera comes, he finds the lion poised to break into the *chikuwa*. Poferasalambula, whose name means "You need not tidy up your deathbed," gets hold of the lion's tail just outside the haunted house, and we read from the text:

*Adachigwira mchira
 chilombocho namachikoka
 kwinkaku akuyankhula ngati
 akunena munthu. "Lekere
 mwana yekhayu, idya ine
 mtima wako utsike." [...].
 Chitaleka chitsekochoko
 chidagwira Pofera ndi
 kuthawira naye kuthengo,
 m'menemo anthu akulira
 m'nyumbamo. (He held the
 beast's tail and pulled it
 while talking as if to a
 human being. "Leave for
 me, my only child; devour
 me to your heart's delight."
 [...]. Having released the
 door, it caught Pofera and
 dragged him into the forest;
 inside the house, people
 were wailing (Chadza 9).*

This passage, which dramatizes the death of a father in the struggle for survival and superiority with a lion in what could be described as a theatre of cruelty punctuated by the screams, wailings, and shouts from inside the maternal hut, is darkly picturesque and uncanny. Cuddon (2013) describes the term "theatre of cruelty" as "the theatre [that] must disturb the spectator profoundly, pierce him [her] heart and soul in such a way as to free unconscious repressions and oblige men [women] to view themselves as they are" (719). It is in the face of reality that people recognize who they certainly are. In the darkness of the night, besides the moon

or the stars, celestial bodies and the lion's eyes provide lighting to the scenery.

A lion symbolizes brute power and mercilessness. Lions are skilled hunters and kill not only humans but also other big and powerful animals, such as rhinos, for example. Sax (2001) asserts that "lions are social animals that live in pride, in which the females do most of the hunting" (173). The lion that terrorizes Khwesi village that night and kills Pofera is probably female. It is horrifying that early the following day, *and polondola, adapeza mutu work uli gone patience pa mango was thunder, m'nkhalango mkangowo utachoka* (when people searched, they found only the head lying under a *thunder* tree in the forest, the lion was not there) (Chadza 10). The remains of Pofera are collected in a reed mat for burial. When Nangeya, his widow, composes a dirge or an elegy entitled "Chauta Wada Ine" ("God Hates Me") for her deceased husband, she questions Chauta's (God's) wisdom for creating the lion/beast, *Mdachilengeranji quilombo Chauth?* (Chad 10). Human-animal relationships are tinged with religious-cultural, political, and philosophical implications. Lions, tigers, leopards, panthers, and jaguars have killed people at various points in human history, and the sceneries have been associated with the macabre. Pofera's son, Kokha, grows into a clever, brave, independent, and adventurous character. He takes full responsibility as the trustee of the environment, and nature smiles at him. As a young boy before his teens,

Kokha tells his grandmother, “*Agogo, in tsiku Lina ndidzapha quilombo chaja chidapha state anarchic. Chithunzi shakes ndachiona Kwa Tengani.*” (“Grandmother, one day I will kill the beast that killed my father. I have seen its image at Tengani’s” (Chadza 13). The development of freedom and individualism in Kokha leads him to face life squarely. Kokha’s hatred of lions cannot be referred to as “irrational and groundless,” as Estok defines ecophobia, because there is a logical and valid reason.

Hunting animals for food, archetypal snakes fall prey.

Living close to forests where different species of animals are found, the men of Kwesi village are mostly hunters who kill such animals as mammals, birds, and reptiles, among others. Although hunting has declined in Malawi (Morris, 2000), killing animals in *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu* reflects a masculinized society and mirrors the important roles animals play as food sources. From this vantage point, it is not ecophobia to work on the land and hunt animals. Estok (2005), however, posits that “[i]t is ecophobia that allows ‘man’ unquestioned use of land and animals” (18). Taking ‘man’ as a trustee who must responsibly use the “land and animals” and recognizing them to be bequeathals from one generation to another, ecophobia will not apply and nothing like “unquestioned use of land and animals” because trusteeship regulates itself in the use of these bequeathable items. The

proposition that “[c]ontrol of the natural environment, understood as a God-given right in Western culture, seems to imply ecophobia” (Estok, 2005, pp. 17-8) is informed by a non-anthropocentric and ecocentric ethic hinged on misanthropic views about humans so that the non-human world flourishes at the expense of the human. Seen from a philanthropic perspective, man is a trustee over nature, and in *Kokha Mchepera Kalulu*, the protagonist takes up this role. It is worth noting that the conflict between humans and snakes is archetypal. Cuddon (2013) defines an “archetype” as a “basic model from which copies are made; therefore, a prototype. [...] the abstract idea of a class of things which represents the most typical and essential characteristics shared by the class; thus a paradigm or exemplar” (51). For example, the characteristics of such animals as lions, eagles, snakes, hares, and tortoises are primordial and universally shared.

When Kokha takes up his archetypal responsibility not only as the guardian of nature's nature but also as “the all-conquering hero” (Cuddon 51), he succeeds. His killing of animals is mainly due to his trauma resulting from his father's death, which gives him responsibility and a sense of individualism and independence. He traps animals not only for food but also to show a sense of superiority. The first animal that Kokha kills is a bush pig (Veluwe). The whole Kwesi village is sent into euphoria, praising what the young man has done; *Amaya takes*

nawonso anali okondwa kwambiri Poona Kuti Kokha Wichita chinthu chachikulu chore. (His mother was also happy to see that Kokha had done something of this greatness.) (Chad 15). Because a lion killed Kokha's father, his relationships with animals and his attitude toward animals demonstrate his traumatized state of mind. In order to manage this trauma and knowledge of his mortality, he is particular about how he deals with animals. The deliberate setting up of a trap that kills a bush pig is praised because what Kokha has done is more significant than his age. However, the bush pig does not threaten his life, "*Mwana amene puja Agathe kutcha mama wrote nkugwira nguluwe?*" ("Can that boy set up a trap that can catch a bush pig? (Chadza 15). Community's praise of how a small boy kills a bush pig reveals the conclusion drawn by Berat Ahi *et al.* (2014) that "human beings are living things destroying the nature most and trying to force it to adapt to their living conditions rather than adapting to its conditions" (10). Arguably, human destruction of the environment implies betrayal of thrust resulting from capitalist greed, monopoly, and exploitation.

It should be noted, however, that the narrative of human-animal interaction in *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu* is informed by personal and collective trauma on the part of Koka resulting from his father's death as a lion killed him, and the people of Kwesi collectively struggle with animals. Meretoja (2020) observes that "trauma is always culturally

mediated, and the cultural dimension of narrating and giving meaning also affects how the traumatizing event or process is experienced in the first place" (28). The killing of animals in the novel being probed takes a therapeutic form.

In *Koka Mchepera was, Kalulu*, Kokha, and other male characters hunt and kill different species of animals such as *glue, mbawala, Lungu, ntchenzi, insa, photo, akasenye* (bush pig, bushbuck, porcupine, cane rat, grey duiker, reedbuck, Sharpe's grysbok) (Chadza 16). One of the novel's horrible sceneries of human-animal interaction is when Kokha and his friends go to the mountains to hunt porcupines (*Enugu*) in the caves. Koka encounters a dangerous snake in one of these caves, *songo/song we* (black mamba), whose two tiny eyes are shining in the darkness. Koka thinks to himself, "*Hi, data; ndipulimuka bwanji pamenepa?*" ("Hi, I am dead; how am I going to survive this?" (Chadza 18). A young man with *songo* in the cave is inconceivable. Koka is a character with a high sense of imagination. Having calculated his surroundings, he takes off his shirt. He hoodwinks the snake's head with it, *ali m'manja mutual NSW, waigwira njokayo ndi mphamvu take zone, chinunu kutuluka nayo, all tikawonerana kunja komweko.* (He firmly got hold of the snake's head and silently dragged it outside, we shall see what happens when we are outside) (Chad 19). Dealing with a present problem effectively is independent of previous experience dealing with a similar

problem. Meretoja (2020) explains that the "experience of a traumatic event and the process of dealing with it [...] is often self-altering in a more radical sense because it can involve confronting a wounding or even paralyzing experience that fundamentally challenges one's previous understandings and orientation to the world" (30). Throughout the novel, Kokha solves problems facing his community as they come: he mysteriously rescues a child from fire, and he also catches thieves who terrorize the Kwesi community without previous experience handling such problems. Koka only thinks like a mountain, *time unga Phiri*. It is worth noting as Laustsen *et al.* (2015) observe that "[t]he black mamba, *Dendroaspis polylepis*, is one of the most feared snakes in the world, owing to the potency of its venom, the severity and rapid onset of clinical manifestations of envenomings, and its ability to strike fast and repeatedly" (3). Thus, *songo* or black mamba (spitting cobra) is not an ordinary snake that Kokha hoodwinks as if by miracle out from the cave into the open. Human-snake conflict is a global problem. According to Price *et al.* (2019), "81 000 to 138 000 people die annually due to snake bites, and around three times as many amputations and other permanent disabilities are caused by snakebites annually. In Africa, 435,000 – 580,000 bites occur per annum, which require treatment" (2). Human-snake interaction involves life and death (Maurice *et al.*, 2018).

Despite the snake's efforts to squeeze itself round and round Kokha's body, he manages to bring it outside to the horror of onlookers, *kunai chiphokoso kuyamikira zero za m'nyamatayo* (there was noise to praise the intelligence of the boy) (Chadza 19). Considering Kokha's encounter with the snake in the cave and how he manages to suffocate it entails the literature's concern with "space, place and mapping" (Tally Jr. & Battista, 2016). Tally Jr. and Battista (2016) observe that "an increasing number of critics associated with the spatial turn in literary and cultural studies have placed greater emphasis on space, place, and mapping" (4) in what is termed criticism. This entails reflecting on the "overlapping territories" (Tally Jr. & Battista, 2016) between literature, ecology, and geography. Tally Jr. and Battista (2016) further observe that "most of the time, it seems, 'nature' stands in the background, a more-or-less picturesque backdrop to the main drama of human activity" (5). The human and non-human worlds are involved in the dramatic performances of severe survival conditions, as in the struggle between Kokha *Songo* in *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*. In *Animals and Ancestors* (2000), Morris describes *songo* (black mamba), as a "mythical" and "large poisonous snake, dark in color, with a red crest, like that of cocks' comb. It is said to crow like a cock, and to be extremely fierce, and it is reputed to lie in wait for the unsuspecting victim" (199). It is extraordinarily gothic for Kokha to hoodwink this snake's head with one's

shirt and drag it out of a cave onto an open space. The struggle between Kokha and *songo* (black mamba), in which the former carries the day, is ennobling and sublime.

Another uncanny episode involving human-animal interaction in *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu* when Kokha struggles with a python and kills it. After what might be described as an unsuccessful hunting experience and having eaten sugary honeycombs, the hunters look for water to quench their thirst. The trees, grasses, bushes, and animals of different species available then contrast with their scarcity now. The honey that Kokha and his hunting contemporaries consume in the forest is not cheaply available today. Currently, bee products such as honey, propolis, and wax are highly commercialized, and "bees deliver about 1.2 million tonnes of commercial honey per year" (van Huis *et al.*, 2013, p. 6). *Mtengowo ugali ndi mphako yaikuku mmene munali zisa za Eguchi, zowawa ndi zausinda ndiponso Cauchi. [...]. Antalya Ichiro anthu adamva kudzu kwambiri cupola kale Koma and we ankasanganiza ndi za wana anali bwinoko chifukwa made ana njuchiwo ndiwo ankadzidziritisa kukhosi* (There was a big hollow in the tree in which there were honeycombs, bitter, with larvae and with honey. [...]. After eating the honey, people felt thirstier than before, but people who were mixing with larvae honeycombs felt better because the water from the larvae quenched their throats (Chadza 24). Through this kind of

experience, people have a symbiotic understanding of their environment, and this understanding Kokha demonstrates to have. Standing by the pool in the forest in order to drink water, Kokha has premonitions:

*Kanthawi kena Kokha
adamva kumyuka mtima,
myu, nkhongo gwa, tisitsi
nyawunyawu, ngati
likyenda; poti acheuke
wangoona chinjoka
chamaangamaanga,
chachikulu chikudza
momuwenda,
pang'onopang'ono, diso lili
ndyo, ndyo, ndyo.* (At one moment, Kokha felt forewarnings; he felt his heart pump blood, the back of his head was stiff, and his hair twitched as if it was moving; when he turned his head, he saw a giant multi-colored snake stealthily moving towards him, its eye sparkling) (Chadza 25).

This is a dreadful episode, and there is a sense of mystery in which Kokha has intuitions about the dangers in his environment. The snake Kokha encounters this time is a python, *Shinjuku chop*, and *lulu Koma* chooses (a non-poisonous snake but dangerous) (Chadza 25). Equipped with supernatural gadgetry, the physical tools that help him succeed, Kokha contains the situation. In the cave, as an inscrutable destiny for Kokha, his shirt is used to hoodwink the

black mamba's head and bring it outside, where it is killed. His skillful swimming abilities aid Kokha's race with the python in the pool:

*Hi, nchilombo, theme
(dzaye) lomwe linali
m'manja mwake kuja chi,
iye m'madzi phava,
wayamba kusambira poti
ankadziwa dera (nsambi)
kwambiri ngati M'nyanja.*
(Hi, a beast, he threw away the tiny fruit (*date*) he was holding in his hands, leaped into the water, and began to swim, for he knew how to swim quick-wittedly like one brought up in the lake province) (Chad 25).

The rivalry in the water/pool between Kokha and the python is breath grasping, especially when the python catches and twists the arrow that Kokha aims at it, *idangowakha ndi kukamwa nkuupindapinda mkondowo* (it caught the arrow with its mouth and twisted it) (Chadza 27). The python is finally killed in this grotesque scenery, and the human characters celebrate, "*zokolesokole! Yooo! Wafa man!*" (Yap! Yap! Hurrah! The enemy is dead!" (Chad 27). The celebration of the python's death, despite its harmlessness as an embodiment of the divine spirits of the dead (Morris, 2000), is paradoxical. One of the reasons for the killing of animals is that it gives us a sense of power and superiority over nature that protects us from the

threatening awareness of mortality. Having a father killed by a lion, Kokha has a sense of mortality symbolized by the presence of animals which traumatizes him. *Wafa man* (the enemy is dead), uttered concerning the python's death, contextualizes the primordial enemy between humans and the deceptive serpent, and thus, snakes are good to make myth with.

According to Morris (2000), the python (*nsato* or *thing*) "is closely identified mythologically (as well as empirically) with water, with rivers and deep pools, and thus, with rainfall; it is, therefore, a key symbolic mediation between the supreme being and humans, for Chiuta is a being also closely associated with rainfall" (*Animals and Ancestors*, 199). Morris also observes that "[m]any snakes are ritually important, and the python, puff adder, and the file snake all have associations with the spirits" (*The Power of Animals*, 145). Thus, Kokha's killing of *songo* (black mamba) and python (*nato/thing*) is paradoxical in a community that believes in the sacredness of snakes. Perhaps, this is due to his trauma with animals, having been told that a lion killed his father. Accordingly, "trauma does not always have a negative meaning; [...]. It is a movement which illustrates an episode of changing which begins from trauma, suffering, and pain to knowledge and understanding" (Heidarizadeh, 2015, p. 791). In the novel *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*, the killing of the python provides a moment to learn about the mystic

interpretation of a python's death and burial. One experienced older man explains:

*Nato tikaipha
timaiponya m'madzi
chifukwa tikapanda
Quintero Chaka chime
echo imakanika,
Mazda bwino, kapena
sadza know (When we
have killed a python
we inter it in a
pool/river because if
we do not do that, we
do not have good rains
that year, or it does not
rain at all (Chadza 28).*

People's attitudes toward animals are shaped by their beliefs. Although some of the beliefs are inexplicable, they are understood in terms of the wonders of nature and archetypal seasonal changes. Morris (2000) explains that "the people of Malawi are not animists and do not conceive of mountains, plants, or animals being 'animate' in the spiritual sense, for neither mammals nor snakes are believed to possess 'spirit' or 'souls'" (199). Morris's explanation here, though inadequate, attempts to respond to Kokha's question, "*Kodi nato il ndi Azimut Ngati months?*" ("Does a python have a soul just as a human being has?" (Chad 28). The definition of animism notwithstanding, the death of the python implies that it has been deprived of its life, and, therefore, its soul (*mzimu, nafs*) and its physical body is then thrown into the river as the people's mores dictate.

Stones do not have souls (*minimum*) and do not experience death. It is also important to note that water symbolizes life and is the essence of protoplasm, and sacred snakes' closeness with water emphasizes its life-sustaining myth. Murphy (2020) explains that "all of the large pythons are known to use bodies of water for concealment to ambush prey and thermo-regulate" (589). Water is helpful for the python's regulation of its body temperature and concealing itself. This illustrates why the python portrayed in *Kokha Mchepera, Kalulu*, is involved in hide-and-seek, so to speak, with Koka.

Another snake killed in Chadza's novel, *Kokha Mchepera*, was Kalulu, locally known as *mbuvu; Njoku you lulu whoops kwabasi (mbuvu, a very poisonous snake)* (Chadza 73). We read from the text: *ukalumidwa ndi njoka imeneyi m'madzi, uzikhala m'madzi momwemo mpaka sing'anga atabwera kudzakutambulira m'madzi momwemo.* (When you have been bitten by this snake while in a river, remain there until an herbalist administers herbs to you right there (Chadza 73). Significantly, the killing of this snake is one reason why snakes are killed when Kokha asks, "*Adani a month achulukiranji m'dziko lapansi? Tiziopa ndi nyongolotsi zomwezi?*" (Many are the enemies of the human being in this world. Shall we be threatened even by these worms?" (Chad 73). Human-snake enmity is primordial. For unexplained reasons, which would be described as ecophobia, humans kill snakes. *Njoka* (snakes) are "*Adani a*

month” (humankind’s enemies). Perez (2021) observes that “[t]he polysemic nature and the seemingly universal feeling of awe that the snake provokes stem from its particular physical characteristics and behaviors, such as its peculiar locomotion and slithering, the shedding of the skin, the unblinking lidless eyes, or its venom, in the case of poisonous snakes” (2). The meanings attached to snakes depend on the context, and (Morris, 2000; Chimombo, 2001) exploits Malawian myths in identifying the meaning of snakes. Due to the many dangers that snakes cause to cause, conserving snakes in most societies is inconceivable. Maurice *et al.* (2018) note that “when it comes to snakes, many people have refused its conservation despite its much needed ecological role. And too many, the population of a human enemy like a snake should not be managed” (77). Kokha’s rejoinder *Adani a munthu achulukiranji m’dziko lapansi?* (Many are the enemies of the human being in this world) echo commonly shared sentiments about snakes.

The eagle's greed and the crocodile's symbolism of hypocrisy and mercilessness

When Koka and his colleagues go to the lake, two animals become prominent in their lives besides the fish which they have come to buy: the lake eagle and the crocodile. They learn the behavior of the lake eagle, *Nkwazi, blame yodzikonda, yosakumbukira inzake pakudya* (a self-centered bird it does not share its food with others), and its

philosophy is "*Wagwira combo cake*” (Whosoever catches chambo fish, it is for him/herself alone) (Chadza 44). It is not surprising, therefore, that newspaper, radio, and television reports indicate that the Malawi Police, whose symbol is the blue eagle, is the most corrupt government institution. In James Ng’ombe’s novel, *Madala’s Children* (1996), the eagle – along with the Special Branch, the instrument of terror and brutality– is a persistent image of oppression, extortion, and torture in Dr. Kamuzu Banda's regime of the Malawi Congress Party dictatorship. The eagle-human relationship is, therefore, richly tinged with complexities. Physical environments, humans, and animals cannot be divorced from historical perspectives because they have always coexisted.

Jack Mapanje's title to his memoir *And Crocodiles Are Hungry at Night* (2011) alludes to Malawi's political history during Dr. Kamuzu Banda's despotism when political opponents were said to be fed to crocodiles. Crocodiles are reptiles, and they are dangerous aquatic animals that threaten the lives of people. There are many crocodiles in Malawi's rivers and lakes, and their relationship with people is mainly deleterious. Crocodiles in the rivers and lakes in Malawi, just as African crocodiles, are dangerous human-eating crocodiles, and the Ciyawo proverb *Pigali mesi pana went* (Where there is water, there are crocodiles) makes people suspicious of all bodies of water.

Crocodiles are associated with the myth of sunrise and sunset; that one crocodile vomits the sun in the morning, and another crocodile swallows it when it sets. Crocodiles are also associated with witchcraft – they are said to appear in a cup of drinking water, for example. When bewitched, an individual urgently goes to the river to fish, only to be devoured by a crocodile. The behavior of crocodiles crawling stealthily when attacking humans is associated with voyeurism in men who hide near where women bathe at the river or lake to see their bodies and get sexual gratification. The following song is intended to ridicule men with voyeuristic behavior, like crocodiles:

Angwena kuliwutanga nale- ee!
 The crocodile is dragging himself!
Wanchipale-ee!
 Ashore!
Kuliwutanga nale-ee!
 Dragging him!
Wanchipale-ee!
 Ashore!

In this song, the crocodile is a shameless animal without proper courtship skills, and this symbolizes men who display behavior of similar inference. Generally, the crocodile is described as a merciless animal, *ng'ona*, *Mpanda noni* (Chadza 50). Despite the mercilessness of crocodiles, people kill these animals only if confronted with them. This is the case with the killings of *songo*, *nato*, and *mbuvu* snakes in *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*. The impetus for killing these animals is that they are enemies to humans. Humans defend their

mortality by killing enemies that would deprive them of their lives. Another reason for killing animals for food is ecological interdependence: *Zilingo zidyana kuchepetsa chiwerengero* (creatures eat each other to reduce their population) (Chadza 46). Sax (2001) explains that crocodiles are “the only large, partially terrestrial animals that do not hesitate to attack human beings. Since our traditions tend to make the food chain into a metaphysical hierarchy, this makes them appear to challenge human supremacy. What makes crocodiles even more frightening is the suddenness with which they strike” (68). Human-crocodile relations are complex. The crocodile symbolizes hypocrisy, and due to its socio-cultural merciless attributes, it does not produce tears from its tear glands; if it does, the tears would be too outweighed by water to be of any significance as a quality of mercy, *misogi you ng'ona*. Pooley (2016) studied crocodiles examining human-crocodile relationships from a conservationist perspective. Tsuji's (2021) study on crocodiles is rooted in folklore, and the various ways crocodiles interact with humans after Christocentric views that have distanced people from seeing crocodiles as sacred.

In *Koka*, *Mchepera* is Kalulu; when a crocodile attacks the chief's son, Zalengera, and pulls him away from the shore into the lake, everyone who knows the behavior of the crocodile loses hope for his survival. However, *Koka*, in one of the most extended narratives in the novel intended to provide suspension,

transcendentally rescues Zalengera. In his kaleidoscopic knowledge, the omniscient narrator says that Kokha *Adaamva Kuti kukhosi Kwa ng'ona m'katikati mumakhala kambadi home karateka Kuti made asamalowe kukhosi Kwa ng'onayo ndi Kuti months ataboola mbadiyo going to sing the Kukla Moyo thaw Chaitali chifukwa siingathenso kumara kuopa Kuti made angalowe kukhosi*. (Koka heard that a crocodile has an epiglottis in its pharynx that closes to prevent water from entering the windpipe; if a person punctures the epiglottis, the crocodile cannot live long because it remains buoyant lest water goes down its throat) (Chadza 55). Based on this knowledge, Kokha punctures the crocodile's epiglottis, and in great pain, the crocodile releases Zalengera from its mouth. The rescued Zalengera is then rushed to the shore, where he resuscitates after giving first aid. People appreciate what Kokha has done by giving him fish, goats, and sheep. In traditional African settings, gifts of chickens, goats, sheep, and cattle symbolize reverence accorded to the person to whom these gifts are given. They also show the degree of appreciation of the givers.

Ndulu you are going to (crocodile's bile) is known for its nasty effects, and people have used it to kill their enemies and those suspected of witchcraft. *Singhania* Maulidi, in Gwengwe's book, *Kukula ndi Mambo* (1965), administers *mwabvi* or *chape* (a ritual purgative to witches and wizards). Having already known the names of those who are not suspected of being witches

and those suspected, Maulidi gives the former to drink liquid oil produced from castor beans (*nsatsi*); they nauseate and vomit. The latter are given crocodile's bile: *Atafika pa Chiipirawachaje adawamwetsa adult ninja you ng'ona ndipo adayenda pang'ono nagware pansi, nafa thaw yomweyo* (When it came to Chiipirawachaje's turn, he gave her to drink the crocodile's bile, she staggered and fell to the ground; she died on the spot (Gwengwe 111). Knowledge of the toxicity of plant and animal substances is ingrained in the people affiliated with their land. This illustrates why when Kokha kills the crocodile, people are particular about how to dispose of its body:

Komanso kudabwera akuluakulu a mudzi kuti awone chochita ndi ng'ona ija chifukwa monga mwa malamulo awo ng'ona ikaphedwa ankaitaya m'nyanja ataimangirira miyala ndipo amene ankapita nayo anali anthu akuluakulu osankhidwa ndi mfumu. Kuteroko nkuwopa kuti anthu ena angatenge ndulu ya ng'onayo nkumawonongera nayo anmzawo. (The village elders came to see what to do with the crocodile because, according to their regulations, when it was killed, its body was tied to heavy stones and lowered into the lake, and the chief chose those who did this. They did this to prevent some

people from using the crocodile's bile to destroy the lives of others (Chadza 62).

Although animals are rich sources of chemicals used in curing various human ailments and diseases in what is termed "zootherapy" (Costa-Neto, 2005), crocodile bile is mythically dreaded for its lethality. As it is clear from Gwengwe's book, *Kukula ndi Mambo* (1965), the adult you are going to (crocodile bile) is associated with witchcraft. Nzema (1984), however, provides scientific evidence that "Phospholipids are one of the constituents of bile and the crocodile bile is no different from the bile from other animals. The experiment proved beyond any doubt that the bile was not toxic" (103). This entails that traditional beliefs overshadow the toxicity of crocodile bile (*adult you are going to*). Kara et al. (2007) have observed that "[t]he products and by-products of crocodile are used in traditional medicine like remedies to cure diseases such as asthma, the inguinal hernia, jaundice, the measles, rheumatism, the otitis, the whitlow, the pain. [...]. So, the crocodile is regarded as a providential animal for the rural populations [...] because all its parts are used to cure diseases and to obtain supernatural capacities" (22). The crocodile's connections with mystic powers blow the bile myth out of proportion in traditional settings.

The characters in *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu* are involved in the drama of existence with animals. They

hunt and kill animals for food. They also kill animals to protect themselves from being killed by the animals. Some of the killings of animals reflect the people's bravery. When a leopard that threatens women who draw water from good attacks a man early one morning, he fights with it and kills it with his bare hands:

*Kambuku nagwera uko,
chatsonga, mofulatira
munthuyo. Asanatembenuke
adambwereza china
chibakera chomveka Ngati
hamala tsono chidagwa,
chacha mphamvu kwatsala
kungokalipa chili went basi.*
(The leopard fell on its hind legs, facing the man, its strength exhausted, only groaning (Chadza 78-79).

In this human-animal struggle for existence, the success of the human being in the fight is meant to show human courage instead of celebrating the leopard's *death*. It also shows how fortunate that person is who fights with a leopard and wins, *until mwayi wake months amene* (Chadza 79). Sax (2001) observes that "[i]n the legends of Africans, who had direct experience with both lions and leopards, the lion may often have been the ruler of animals, but the leopard generally inspired greater awe. The black color of the panther enables it to blend into forests, while the spots of the leopard suggest innumerable eyes" (179). In *Koka Mchepera was Kalulu*, Chadza portrays animals

attacking and killing humans just as he portrays humans killing animals due to direct human-animal contact. Animals are killed for vengeance since they kill humans and domestic animals such as sheep and goats.

In revenge tragedy, Kokha kills a lion to placate his father's spirit.

The human-lion relationship is based on suspicion; one is suspicious of the other's shrewdness, and beyond the lion's preying on humans, the latter finds the former beneficial in different ways. Eveleigh (2021) observes that "[i]n many parts of Africa, lion bone is believed to make a man invincible, the skin to transform him into a tireless lover" (29). The medicinal values of wild and domestic animals constitute a significant domain in human-animal interactions in Africa. When Kokha traps a lion in his cattle kraal, he speaks to it as if speaking to a human being, "*Sapezeka, lero wapezeka! Wasamba Takuma lero! Una neither! Ndime mzimu was a Pofera, a udadyayu! Uone mondo!*" ("The one who was at large, has been found today! You have bathed in the drinking well today! You will surely see! I am the spirit of Pofera, the one you devoured! Let this arrow speak for me!") (Chadza 81). Kokha's words here demonstrate that he has been looking for an opportunity for revenge since childhood when he heard that a lion killed his father. Unlike Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* who prevaricates despite his father's ghost telling him, "A serpent stung me – so the whole ear of Denmark/[...]/The serpent

that did sting thy father's life/Now wears his crown" (1.v.36-40), Kokha is inflamed to revenge after seeing an image or a picture of a lion. The serpent/snake imagery in these lines signifies evil, and the serpent here refers to Claudius, who, like Cain, kills his brother.

After killing the lion, Kokha tells his grandmother, "*Agogo, lero ndalipsira; sadyeka Adam Anya ndi mutu.*" (Grandmother, I have retaliated today; the one who has never been eaten was eaten together with his head.") His grandmother responds, "*Pepa mwana wanga; ndimayesa Kuti waka. Tiye kunyumba. Chilombochi tidzachiona bwino mawa. Chauta wagwira ntchito.*" ("I sympathize with you, my child; I thought you were dead. Let us go inside. We shall see this beast tomorrow. God has done a tremendous job.") (Chadza 81). The word *ndalipsira*, meaning paying a debt of retribution or carrying out vengeance/revenge, informs Kokha's role as a responsible trustee who, having been traumatized by his father's death at the hands of a lion, finds his heart's satisfaction by killing it. Wild animals continue to terrorize human communities and kill humans. *Ndalipsira* is an apt word considering the human-lion relationships depicted in *Kokha Mchepera was Kalulu*, in which lions kill not only people but also their sheep, goats, and cattle. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) note that "[p]ostcolonialism's major theoretical concerns: otherness, racism, and miscegenation, language, translation, the trope of cannibalism,

voice and the problems of speaking of and for others – to name just a few – offer immediate entry points for a re-theorizing of the place of animals about human societies” (135). This re-theorization should consider that generally speaking, no person loves another person even within the same race or tribe and thus “otherness” transcends the list that Huggan and Tiffin have provided here.

The Ciao adage *Mundu kukunonyela pana chakulyeta* (whosoever expresses love for you, he/she has a concealed reason). It is not easy for one person to be good in a community where everybody is terrible. Humans cannot acknowledge loving animals when they hate other humans, even within their race. In the zeitgeist culture, “constructing others – both people and animals – as an animal, both philosophically and representationally” (Huggan and Tiffin 135) is not limited to “racism and miscegenation, language, translation, the trope of cannibalism.” In the global capitalist economy, for example, where everybody is prostituted, the trope of cannibalism transcends humans eating human flesh, and every human being is a cannibal. Human-human and human-animal relationships are based on the attitude of *N'kuzolowere n'kudyere mwana* (I befriend you, I devour your child). Human-human and human-animal friendships are only a skin deep, that is, superficial. This is the attitude that Kokha has when he joins the dangerous thieves that terrorize Kwesi and the surrounding villages, and he finally catches them.

When Koka is offered fifty heads of cattle and many hectares of very fertile land (Chadza 125), it becomes clear that affluence in traditional settings is measured in terms of the number of domestic animals and how much land one possesses. Koka does not kill animals based on his domination over nature and animals. However, having been traumatized by how his father died, taking up his responsibility as an environmental trustee, and being aware of his mortality, he thinks and acts.

Conclusion

Human-animal relationships and other gothic episodes are intricately represented in Ezra Chadza's Chichewa novel *Kokha Mchepera where Kalulu* demonstrates the protagonist's sense of awareness of human mortality in a hostile environment of unprecedented events. The novel proves there is no prior experience in effectively handling a present challenge facing humanity. The protagonist in the novel faces every challenge as squarely as it comes. Every animal is unique, and because of the protagonist's determination, he finds a way out of the challenge. Life means action based on careful thought, and reflecting on the wonders of nature is worthwhile. Since the animals that Kokha encounters in the novel plan and plot before attacking their prey, he ensures that he outshines the animals as an environmental trustee. Kokha's dealing with nature is not rooted in ecophobia. However, it is rooted in an afro-indigenous ecophilosophy in which moral

values are generated from observing natural phenomena and drawing inferences from human experience. The death of Kokha's father while he is still in the cradle gives him individualism and self-reliance. Through the unprecedented events that the village of Kwesi faces and the animals that Kokha encounters, the novel informs a philosophy that our communities cannot succeed in begging and donor aid.

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