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The Representation of Animals as Linguistic and Cultural Signs in Yawo Initiation Songs

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Abstract:

This paper is premised on ecosemiotics as a theoretical standpoint to analyse how animal-oriented *jando* and *nsondo* initiation songs shape the people's cosmos. Ecosemiotics and other overlapping theoretical territories such as zoosemiotics and biosemiotics are rooted in semiotics, the science of signs in language. The environmentally grounded initiation songs selected for analysis in this paper draw from animals focusing on symbol-based sign systems. The paper argues that from time immemorial, humans and animals inhabited the same territory before the anthropogenic change of the equilibrium between culture and nature. Further the environmental commitment reflected in the initiation songs attest that culture can be engaged in achieving ecological restoration and biodiversity. The findings of this paper reveal that meanings are attributed to animals using concepts loaded with semiotic overtones. For their environmental embeddedness, indigenous people produce ecological knowledge that reflect many years of experience and observation of natural phenomena. Such knowledge also reflects the people's environmental thought that is linguistically verbalised.

Keywords: animals, ecosemiotics, zoosemiotics, biosemiotics, semiotics.

Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the representation of animals in *jando* and *nsondo* initiation songs from the perspective of ecosemiotics. Nöth (2001) defines the term "ecosemiotics" as "the study of sign processes which relate organisms to their natural environment" (71). There are various signs – adaptive, survival, courtship, territorial defence – that animals demonstrate in their natural environment, and humans who have learned to listen to and/or watch these signs,

transcend semiotics to untangle human relationships with nature. Ecosemiotics also known as "semiotic ecology" is a branch of "semiotics" and the latter is defined as "the theory of sign systems in language. […]. But, *not just language*. The study of animal behaviour is known as *zoosemiotics*" (Cuddon 2013: 643, italics in the original). Ecosemiotics is concerned with sign processes displayed by biotic entities and their niches in the ecosystem. Ecosemiotics' concern with living organisms informs its development from biosemiotics, that is, biological semiotics, "an approach to the study of living systems that takes the production, exchange, and interpretation of signs to be constitutive for life" (Hoffmeyer 2010:367). Life is semiosis, the basis of which is water with biochemical sign processes. According to Siewers (2010) "[e]cosemiotics looks at the cultural aspects of signs as an environmental phenomenon" (209) and thus, it correlates the sign, environment and meaning. Roland Posner (2011) observes that "[i]n all cultures of the world, the members of the young generation must prepare themselves for life within the environment into which they were born. They do this by learning to adjust themselves to the social institutions, to handle the tools in use, and to master the valid sign systems" (20). *Jando* and *nsondo* initiation songs play significance roles not only introducing the youths to their environment, but they also introduce them to the world of adults through "the valid sign systems" metaphorised in animals.

In *jando* and *nsondo* songs, human-animal sign-mediated relationships occupy significant positions in the lives of the people in generating ecological wisdom that reflect the people's socio-political and religio-cultural values. According to Maran (2010) "[t]he scope of ecosemiotics can be expressed as a study of semiotic relations between an organism and its environment, various interpretations and representations of nature, communicative processes between human culture and living nature and problems in these, or a culture's relations with the local environment" (83). The animals the representation of which is to be analysed in this paper exist in relation to their environments in the context of nature and culture expressed in words/signs. Howarth (1996) explains that "[w]e know nature through images and words, a process that makes the question of truth in science or literature inescapable and whether we find validity through data or metaphor, the two modes of analysis are parallel" (77). The analysis of literature through metaphor – symbol, image, allegory, comparison, representation, and simile – informs the inescapability of truth. Living in an era where "human domination of the biosphere is the overriding problem" (Glen Love 1996:227), the centrality of analysing the relations

between culture and nature and the place of living organisms cannot be overstressed. Maran (2010) asserts that "[e]cosemiotics can differentiate our relationships with nature by asking what kind of meaning processes are involved in nature experience, what meanings they generate, and how these meanings can be categorised. By acknowledging semiotic processes outside human culture, ecosemiotics can also highlight animal aspects of our interpretation processes" (83). *Jando* and *nsondo* traditional songs introduce the young people to the sign systems of their culture and animals are key in this undertaking. Culture consists of shared meanings about how to make sense of the world.

The analysis of how *jando* and *nsondo misyungu* (core teachings) songs involving animals inform cultural values environmentally instituted and arbitrated by signs. Morris (2000) observes that from time immemorial "humans and animals have long shared the same life-world, and the relationship between humans and animals has always been one that is complex, intimate, reciprocal, personal and crucially ambivalent" (19-20). Thus, human-animal relationships are not free from equivocation. Animals constitute a large group of environmental phenomena that have interacted with humans mediated by various cultural signs. The analysis of *jando* and *nsondo* songs using ecosemiotics is significant because it provides an alternative view to these rites of passage focusing on animals as vehicles for reflecting the people's culture and their relations to nature.

Literature Review

Most critics on *jando* and *nsondo* in Malawi have mainly focused on the ills of sexual decadence on boys and girls hinting at increased school dropout rate, early marriages and/or pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Malawi Human Rights Commission 2005; Banda and Kunkeyani 2015; Munthali *et.al.* 2018). This is the central angle from which those who denigrate a people's culture have focused on, especially what is known among the Yawo, as *kututa liwu* (literally, to remove the ash). *Kututa liwu* is a cultural symbol that unless a novice finds a sexual partner, his/her body will appear as if it has been smeared with ash. The metonymic approach where critics have substituted *kututa liwu* for sexual lewdness has marred fertile ground for other research in *jando* and *nsondo*. Mthatiwa (2020) argues that "promoting sexual licentiousness and promiscuity was and is not the motive behind *jando* [and/or *nsondo*]" (80). Indeed, it is not. In ecosemiotics text, context, and contextual thinking (Maran 2007; 2010)

are significant in inferring meaning drawing the interpreter and/or analyst into "the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives and operates" (Pearsall 1998: 617; Maran 2007:271). In fact, *jando* and *nsondo misyungu* focus on encouraging hard work, respect for the elders and moral uprightness. The Yawo *misyungu* are almost the same as the Chewa *miyambo*. Habib (2005) observes that in today's world it is important that "we understand the bewildering multitude of voices in our own culture. In order to make sense of our own present, we need to understand our own past" (1). The time for colonial and neo-colonial psychic numbing of our past is over. There is a lot of "knowledge" out there that needs cleaning up, removing the dust and the cobwebs soiled onto it, and this provides the point of departure for this paper.

The aphorism *Mundu jutajisosele duniya yambone ukoto wakwe ngauona jika* (whosoever wishes the earth well; she/he will not see its goodness alone), reflects the Yawo people's environmental embeddedness. This aphorism implies humans living together in sound rapport but also it means collective responsibility towards environmental conservation and restoration in what Naess (1995) expresses as "*mixed community* to mean those communities where we consciously and deliberately live closely together with certain animals" (226). Among the Yawo, *duniya* (earth) is associated with *ukweti* (forest) as dwelling places for humans and animals: *duniya ukweti, chilambo ŵandu* (forests make the earth, humans make the world). This reflects a culture that values the physical environment in the context of signs. Therefore, the contemplation of the animal presence in *jando* and *nsondo misyungu* is key in rediscovering the people's knowledge about animals. Among the Yawo people songs are occasional performances and they are sung for different purposes during *jando*, *nsondo*, and *litiwo* (the rite of passage for a woman who has the first pregnancy or first child). Other occasions for singing include *likwata* (women's songs to the accompaniment of clapping of hands without drums), *chindimba* (dance songs performed during the installation of a chief in which drums are used) and *inyago* (masks similar to the Chewa *Nyau*). The Yawo *jando* and *nsondo* songs, contextualised to specific occasions, have become part of their identity. Animals express different emotional states loaded with cultural signs. This view facilitates different facets of human-animal interactions that folklore represents in sign-mediated contexts. Bekoff (2000) expresses similar views concerning the emotional states of animals:

> Pythagoreans long ago believed that animals experience the same range of emotions as humans (Coates 1998), and current research provides compelling evidence that at least some animals likely feel a full range of emotions, including fear, joy, happiness, shame, embarrassment, resentment, jealousy, rage, anger, love, pleasure, compassion, respect, relief, disgust, sadness, despair, and grief" (861).

Although Bekoff gives few examples of animals that express some of these emotions such as elephants, chimpanzees, ravens, whales and dogs, he expresses optimism about animal emotions through human language manifested in anthropomorphism, (using human terms to explain animals' emotions or feelings" (867). The use of emotions in representing animals in *jando* and *nsondo* is based on anthropomorphism and this is how indigenous people perceive and conceptualise animals. Bekoff asserts that "to claim that one cannot understand elephants, dolphins, or other animals because we are not one of them leaves us nowhere" (866). Using signs, humans can decrypt meanings from animal behaviour because, as Maran and Kull (2014), observe "[l]iving systems are meaning-making systems. In other words, they are sign-using systems, or communicative systems" (41). In *jando* and *nsondo* songs, the emotions that Bekoff lists in the passage cited above may or may not be there in the animals, but they are represented in human linguistic (cultural) modelling.

Singer (1975 [2002]), laments the quandary about animals in the Western culture. He says that "[w]e have seen how, in violation of the fundamental moral principle of equality of consideration of interests that ought to govern our relations with all beings, humans inflict suffering on non-humans for trivial purposes; and we have seen how generation after generation of Western thinkers has sought to defend the right of human beings to do this" (213). Singer's concern of human infliction of suffering on non-humans is only if it is "for trivial purposes" and he does not provide any normative guidelines in terms of what people ought to do in order to put a halt to the problem of animal suffering. Singer emphasises that animals are sentient entities and he illustrates this with a stone and a mouse, the latter having "an interest in not suffering" (7-8). However, I find Singer's notion of identifying a similar pattern in racism, sexism and speciesism (9) objectionable because the first two terms entail discrimination based on differences in race,

sex and gender in which one group of human beings treats other human beings as if they were not humans. The third term, *speciesism*, which is human discrimination of animals, is not analogous to the first two terms, *racism* and *sexism*. However, Singer's argument that humans should treat animals with respect is valid.

A brief information about *jando* and *nsondo*

Jando which involves the removal of the whole foreskin was a development from *chidototo*. Previously, *chidototo* involved a partial removal of the foreskin or prepuce. The Malawi Human Rights Commission (2005) erroneously places *chidototo* together with *nsondo* as initiations for girls (41). The word *nsondo*, on the other hand, is derived from a drought resistant shrub called *nsondoka* in Ciyawo. The fruits of this shrub are used for making fish buoyant (*kwesula*) when pounded and thrown into a marked body of water in a river. The fruits contain *ntutu* (poison). During the isolation period the young girls were made to drink of water mixed with the roots, leaves and fruits of *nsondoka*. When they seriously vomited, the girls were also made to fast for one whole day. The practice caused serious problems to those girls not given to vomiting and it was stopped. Now, the girls are merely isolated for counselling. Previously, girls were initiated into *nsondo* after *chiputu*, an initiation which provided basic introduction into womanhood with overnight songs locally known as *makunami*. On the day that *chiputu* initiated girls came out of exclusion shelters (*masakasa*) they wore *magajawisa* prepared from barks of tress. They wore them from below their navels to the knees with many beads from across their necks coming to rest on each side of the armpit, their breasts uncovered. At a time when the girls were initiated in their teens, the ceremony attracted many men. *Chiputu* is no longer being practised and only *nsondo* remains.

Jando songs are mostly short and consist of repetitions of one line or two lines. The songs are *misyungu* (didactic teachings) sung to the accompaniment of *ngwasala* (a long bamboo the initiates beat in unison to the tune of the song; each initiate holds two sticks for this purpose). Chanunkha (2005) describes *ngwasala* as "percussion beam" or "percussion instrument made from bamboo" (2-34). After a round of singing, which depends on the number of initiates, because every initiate gets a song, the performer sits down to pass on the moral in each of the songs sung. This is described as *kuwunda* (to translate the meanings of *misyungu* to the initiates). Besides, *ngwasala*, sometimes the songs are also sung to the beat of drums. If an initiate forgets

the song sung (*msyungu*) at his turn, he receives punishment by standing up and dancing alone to the song *Ŵamkwangu ali koswe* (my wife/husband is a rat), repeated several times to the beat of drums and *ngwasala* and therefore, the songs enhance memory among children.

The key stylistic feature of *jando* and *nsondo* songs is call and response with several repetitions and a chorus. In most cases, when *misyungu* take overnight the songs are prolonged so that the singing continues up to sunrise. *Jando* and *nsondo* songs are pithy, concise and use ellipsis. The singers avoid being wordy so that the songs become handy and memorisable to the initiates. The people who sing *jando* and *nsondo* songs engage with eco-cultural representations of the environment and their perception of nature reflects the people's views about eco-diversity and interconnectedness. The "human mind" that goes into formulating the songs engage with critical environmental concerns beyond mere singing. As Finnegan (2012) explains, the "verbal content of [oral] songs tends to be short (though the actual performance may be lengthy)" (235). Finnegan's articulation here provides textual evidence to what I have explained at the beginning of this paragraph about the characteristics of *jando* and *nsondo* songs. These characteristics are generally observed in African oral songs.

Seasonal spermatogenesis in warthogs and sexual maturity in humans

A warthog has warty protuberances on the face and large protruding tusks that carry cultural sexual intimations. Its skull (*chikalakasa*) is prominent and its teeth and snout are adapted to ploughing into the soil fetching for food. Seen through eco-linguistics or ecosemiotics the warthog's body, both external and internal, is loaded with cultural signs that can be decoded. For Maran and Kull (2014) ecosemiotics is "a close ally to cultural geography, environmental history, ecocriticism, environmental anthropology, environmental culture studies, and other fields that focus on the various aspects of the representations of nature in human culture" (43). Using the warthog the Yawo people teach moral values that involve discipline among young men in matters of sexuality. The song to which I now turn for analysis mocks a young man who cajoles his sister-in-law to sleep with him while his brother is away:

Alamu, alamu gonani! (x2)	My sister-in-law, my sister-in-law snooze!
Ikalakasa ya mbango yakulandana,	The skulls of warthogs are similar,
Ni ŵandu alamu,	To those of humans,

Alamu, alamu gonani! My sister-in-law, my sister-in-law snooze!

This song flourishes in sweet-talk and cajolery, *Alamu, alamu gonani* (My sister-in-law, my sister-in-law, snooze). The song takes the form of a serenade that persuades the young man's sister-in-law to doze off into torpor so that he has sexual access to her. The young man entices his sister-in-law to sleep with him because he resembles his brother: *ikalakasa ya mbango niimo* (the skulls of warthogs are the same) to mean men are the same. His analogy is that because the skulls (*ikalakasa*) of warthogs (*mbango*) are the same, likewise the difference between him and his brother is the same, philosophically so speak. Based on the Ciyawo expression, *mbango ni simo* (warthogs are similar), the young man intends to convince his sister-in-law that what is seemingly an immoral act, looks conformable to morality. *Alamu, alamu gonani* (My sister-in-law, my sister-in-law, snooze). The young man seduces his sister-in-law to sleep with him, to commit an illicit act because he sees his brother in himself in terms of resemblances. *Ikalakasa ya mbango yakulandana ni ya ŵandu* (The skulls of warthogs resemble those of humans). The young man in the song identifies himself with a warthog creating the imagery of a warthog as resembling humans in the development of secondary sexual characteristics.

Indigenous people use their knowledge of sexual maturity in boys and they compare with the sexual behaviours of animals. Spermatogenesis in human male adolescents can take a similar pattern in animals. Mason (2015) argues that the "testes mass, epididymis mass and seminiferous tubule diameter […] in adult and sub-adult warthogs indicate seasonal sexual cycle as occurs in many southern African species" (46). The Yawo people's observation of the sexual behaviour of the African wild swine (warthog), in the song being probed underscores their knowledge of the environment as it relates to living organisms. In the song, the young man's sister-in-law does not show any positive behaviour towards her brother-in-law, because she is not ready and her silence implies resistance. Female animals show pre-copulatory behaviour on which males take advantage of. By emphasising on the similarities between humans and animals rather than differences, existential symbiosis is possible.

The *jando* and *nsondo misyungu* to the initiates focus on animals with symbolic meanings culturally based on teaching environmental education. In the Yawo songs, the animals concerned are used to rebuke inappropriate human behaviour. Other animal songs praise the animals and

they act as positive cultural signs for humans to emulate. Maran (2018) explains that "[e]cosemiotics studies semiosic or sign-mediated aspects of ecology (including relations between human culture and the environment)" (630). Human culture is ineluctably interconnected with the environment. Thus, ecosemiotics has its roots in "natural sciences" but pivoted on "a semiotic perspective in ecological studies of organism-environment relations" (Maran 2007:275). The song about the warthog, *Alamu, alamu gonani/Ikalakasa ya mbango yakulandana ni ŵandu*, transfers the dirty habits of the wild swine to the young man who coaxes his sister-in-law to sleep with him, a dirty behaviour.

In *Animals and Ancestors*, Morris describes the relationship between the Malawian indigenous people and mammals as being "cheek-by-jowl" and by which he means "close and intimate" (31). This close proximity between humans and animals slowly drifted apart. In *The Power of Animals*, Morris attributes this drift between humans and animals to "the decline in larger game animals because of increases in the human population, the creation of game sanctuaries and the imposition of game laws by the colonial authorities specifically forbidding the hunting of large mammals" (63). With syndicated illegal wildlife trade in Malawi (Waterland *et.al*. 2015, Trump 2017), compounded by deforestation, seeing wild animals for Malawians remains the privilege of the few who can afford the luxury of visiting protected areas. In the folksongs, however, animals are ideas through which indigenous people conceptualise the natural environment as a source of ethical values.

Reptiles and teachings against turpitude in human society

Reptiles were once "the most important animals in the world" but "nearly all of the reptiles died out, or became extinct" (Sealey 138) and with the current state of environmental degradation they have become a rarity. The songs about reptiles testify to the important roles they play as carriers of moral values and beacons of environmental consciousness among the people. Snakes have influenced human thought from time immemorial for different symbolic meanings; for example, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, "the python, puff adder and file snake all have associations with the spirits" (Morris 2000:145). Snakes periodically shed their skins and this natural phenomenon carries cultural meanings among the Yawo. The snake's shed skin can also be used for medicinal purposes and some traditional medicine people use skins of snakes to inspire reverence from their customers. DeMello (2012) observes, however,

that "[w]hat animals ultimately do […] is allow humans to express ideas about human identity" (296) including "transformation" as in the snake's shed skin. The song entitled *Lijoka Ligwagulilo* (snake and its shed skin) deals with the mystery of the snake shedding its skin to teach eating etiquettes and respect for women who cook *nsima/ugali*:

Lijoka ligwagulilo-o!	The snake and its shed skin!
Lijoka ligwagulilo-ye!	The snake and its shed skin!

This song is an epitome of how the local people interpret a natural phenomenon like the seasonal sloughing of the snake's skin in linguistic or ecological semiotics cultural concepts that an outsider would easily raise objections. However, in the Yawo culture, the song constitutes *msyungu* (a teaching) that children should desist from doing. In this song, *lijoka* means snake and *ligwagulilo* means its shed skin. The song, however, uses the snake and its shed skin metaphorically to refer to the hardened *nsima/ugali* (Malawi's staple food) that has grown a dry layer on top. Through the song, the initiates are taught that they should not peel off the dry layer on top of *nsima* their mothers kept for them. The peeled off dried layer of *nsima* is what is referred to as *ligwagulilo* (shed skin) as a metaphor of the snake's skin. Culturally, there are several roles attached to this *msyungu* in relation to the snake's skin. The snake's behaviour *kuligwagula* (to peel itself off its skin) reflects zoosemiotics with an interface between ecosemiotics and biosemiotics.

In the song, *Lijoka ligwagulilo* (The snake and its shed skin), first, children are instructed to be available at home during meal times and take meals together to instil familial ties among members. Children's presence at meal times will prevent *ugali* from growing the thick that might be peeled off in favour of the soft hard porridge. Second, removing the dry top layer of *nsima* is compared to undressing the woman who cooked it, *kwagwagula mama ŵenu* (to peel off your mother). This interpretation is cultural context basing on how humans and their culture stand in relation with the natural environment. Sherman (2008) observes that "snakes hold a place of importance in folklore and mythology from around the world. A snake's ability to shed its skin has made it a symbol of immortality […]. This also may be the reason that snakes appear as deities or representations of rebirth or the return to youth in stories from many cultures" (424). Steve Chimombo's mythopoeia about Napolo, a subterranean snake, calls to mind a writer's desire to fathom meaning from his culture and natural environment. Thus, snakes are closely

associated with the spirit world. Among the Yawo *kuwujila ku wanache* (return to youth) is symbolic of *usongolo* (childishness) in peeling off the dry skin of *nsima*. Gray (2012) argues that "because [the snake] is in constant contact with the environment, and thus sustains considerable wear and tear, and since it does not accommodate the growth of the underlying cells very well, the stratum corneum [the outermost layer of the epidermis] needs to be periodically replaced" (16-17). The "stratum corneum" is what is known as *ligwagulilo* in Ciyawo language and the people's knowledge about snakes shedding their skins finds its metaphor in peeling off dry *nsima* (Chichewa) or *ugali* (Ciyawo).

The central message in the song, however, is teaching children *ngagwagula ugali* (do not peel off *nsima*) not only to avoid wastage, but also to instil in children the habit of being present when meals are served because tradition encourages the communal dish. The docility of the snake during the period when it sheds its skin implies that it ceases to be dangerous to the people and this includes the peeled off skin itself that does not threaten people. *Lijoka ligwagulilo* (the snake and its shed skin) also alludes to a hospitable person who does not instil fear among children and they are called upon to give due respect and not abuse her/his hospitality and/or its docility. The people's hearts soften with their closeness to nature as the folksongs testify.

In the song, *Lijoka ligwagulilo* (The snake and its shed skin), creates the sign of rebirth and the cycle of events in nature. The knowledge of seasonal peeling off of the snakes' skin entails the cyclical understanding of natural events that regulate the agricultural year. According to Kääpä (2017), "[c]yclicality emphasises the recurring and holistic nature of existence, both in terms of natural resources and the lifecycle of humans" (137), that regulate indigenous people's activities and reflect their embeddedness in the environment, their being-ness in the land by which life is cyclically renewed. DeMello (2012) observes that "[a]s in other cultures, the snake, because of its ability to shed its skin, is used as a symbol of transformation" (292-93). Similarly, by referring to the newly initiated boys and girls as *achinankopoka ititi ya magombo* (the newly initiated are like the piths of banana trees), it informs this transformation and so the environment plays a critical role in the education of the youth among the Yawo because it carries cultural signs in both fauna and flora.

The observation that snakes shed their skins periodically attracts moral responsibility among the Yawo for whom snakes have different symbolic meanings such as life renewal and

evil. The people learn about different species of snakes and whether or not they are poisonous from their shed skins. The shed skins of snakes are cultural signs that require decrypting. Thus, according to Kull (1998), ecosemiotics aims to "research on the semiotic aspects of the place and role of nature for humans, that is, what is and what has been the meaning of nature for us, humans, how and in what extent we communicate with nature" (350). The role of nature for humans cannot be overstressed since nature is the gem of human wisdom and livelihood. Gray (2012) asserts that "shed skins may provide evidence of a species without putting oneself in danger by having to get close to an actual snake" (14). Having encountered the snakes in their favoured habitats before, and having experienced the effects of their bites, this knowledge is then preserved and passed on to the next generations through spotting their shed skins afterwards. Thus, through snakes' shed skins indigenous people generate knowledge about their habitats and their venomous aspects. In order to uphold ecological values, the songs involving animals direct people's minds towards nature. Paterson (2006) observes that:

> Because individual life and environment are inseparable, the state of the environment is a reflection of the minds of the people who inhabit it. Environmental degradation is thus a reflection of people's ignorance of the true nature of life and the cosmos: the interrelatedness of all things (148).

People's interconnectedness to the environment reflects the individual's embeddedness in the environment. Refocusing on the Yawo folksongs through an ecocentric ethic reveals "the degree to which people are aware about environmental issues and are capable of making efforts toward contributing to a solution or, at least, to show a desire to be personally engaged in the environmental matter" (Pires *et.al.* 612). The central message in these songs is rational behaviour coupled with responsibility and this is healthy for the environment. Animals as cultural signs help people to infer meanings that forge coexistence between humans and nature. Besides, the songs strive to groom the initiates into reasonably dependable citizens in their communities. The songs deal with the similar question of what sort of persons the initiates should strive to become as they grow up. By drawing from the natural world, the initiates come to realise their inseparability from the environment and thereby the folksongs instil strong bonds of affiliation with nature.

Besides the snake that informs the previous song, another reptile is the lizard. In areas where people bathe at the river, animals also help instil values of respect to others. Children are playful as they bathe in the river or stream. They make the water dirty. As the water flows downstream, it is dirty. This annoys elders who take their baths separately from the children downstream. The behaviour of children making the water dirty is likened to that of the lizard locally known as *sakata* that darkens water in the river with its tail as depicted in this song:

Asakata kuluwi,	The lizard dirtying water,
Kuntundaye-e-e!	Upstream!
Akulu nasamba,	When grownups are bathing,
Kwiŵandaye-e-e!	Downstream!

The Lizard (*Asakata*) in this song stands for a young man/woman who makes water dirty upstream so that elders bathing downstream are using dirty water. It is therefore unethical for the youth to make the water dirty by playing in it. This implies that the monitor lizard (*sakata*) is deliberately involved in making the water muddy creating the imagery of children who play in muddy water after a heavy rain. When children do this at the river while elderly people are bathing downstream, it is unethical because they receive dirty water. There is a mixing of languages in the song, Chichewa and Ciyawo. The word *kuntunda* translated here as upstream is Chichewa and in Ciyawo it would have been *kulutando*. *Akulu nasamba* or *Akuluakulu akusamba* (When grownups are bathing) is Chichewa; in Ciyawo it would have been *Achakulungwa alinkoga*). The word *kwiŵanda* (downstream) is Ciyawo. This explains inter-cultural interactions among Malawians where *jando* is also practised in Nkhotakota, Salima and Dedza in dominantly Chichewa speaking areas and their songs flow from one region to another. *Jando* is also practised among the Lhomwe in Southern and Eastern regions of Malawi. The imagery of the lizard that makes water dirty upstream and then influencing those downstream entails the connectedness of ecological entities and humans are like water that flows from different directions but it meets often times in unexpected ways.

Animals are also used as signs to despise people in terms of their appearances, shortness or tallness and any other body parts. *Wipi mpela ngong'o* (Shortness like a tortoise); *Ulewu mpela nswala* (Tallness like a giraffe) and *Meno mpela mbango* (Teeth like a warthog, for

someone whose teeth protrude from the lips outward), are examples of insulting expressions children use against each other as they play. Now that the initiation introduces them into the adult word, they are instructed to desist from such kind of insulting language using animals that only exhibit their natural dispositions. Due to the present environmental problems, such animals as *ngong'o* (tortoise), *nswala* (giraffe) and *mbango* (warthog) among others, are on the brink of extinction. Max Oelschlaeger (2001) notes in the context of the current environmental catastrophes that "[e]stimates are that at least fifteen million years would be required for the web of life to heal itself" (221). What this entails is that the gravity of anthropogenic or human-induced environmental obliteration is so huge that it is irreparable. Wilson (1985) suggests a solution for environmental restoration in two propositions: "If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos" (Quoted by Cassar 2013:395). The first proposition creates a misanthropic view of people and this cynicism is unhealthy for the environment as it deprives people of their responsibilities as environmental trustees. The second proposition reflects the significant roles of insects in refurbishing the environment though unfortunately, with climate change, most insects are disappearing. Thus, nature is not a stand-alone entity and according to Kull (1998):

> […] ecosemiotics describes the appearance of nature as dependent on the various contexts or situations. It includes nature's structure as it appears, its classification (syntactics); it describes what it means for people, what there is in nature (semantics); and it finds out the personal or social relation to the components of nature, which can be one's participation in nature (pragmatics). In all this, it includes the role of memory and the relationships between different types of (short term, long-term, etc.) memory in culture (351).

This broad sense of nature puts in a nutshell people as linguistic beings whose use of signs takes different forms. Animals are constitutive of the physical environment and they are integral to nature. In seeking meaning from the environment different species of animals provide symbolic/metaphoric overtones to people's experiences. Animals are loaded with signs by which people interpret the world and songs are expressions of the people's emotions and worldviews. A

tortoise is a herbivorous reptile with a hard shell. Despite the smallness of its body size, it is usually depicted as a trickster in African animal folktales. Tortoise dupes Kalulu, the hare, in Malawian folktales. Both hare and tortoise are symbolic of cleverness which people admire. However, tortoise is ridiculed for being short (*wipi*). The following *inyago* song uses tortoise to emphasise that being short should not be seen as a flaw in nature. In fact, it is a sign that tells people things and sometimes inexplicable:

Akawona wipi wa ngong'o, e!	Don't despise the shortness of tortoise,
Akawona wipi wa ngong'o!	Don't despise the shortness of tortoise,
Mtundu wakwe!	It's its physique!

Animals play important roles in setting behavioural patterns that society approves and/or disapproves. The song suggests it is a waste of time to despise others because the humans despised using animals, cannot change their body build as designed and proportioned by nature. The role of animals in handing down humane values affecting different aspects of human life cannot therefore be overemphasised among indigenous people and the songs about animals are crucial in this regard. Ascione (2005) asserts that "[t]he importance of animals in the lives of children is hardly news to parents, teachers, and others whose lives touch young people" (10). Obviously, the inclusion of thematic songs involving animals in *jando* and *nsondo* comes in the wake of this realisation. It is worth noting that "since the beginning of human history, people have lived in close contact with animals. Naturally, they have developed myths and legends about animals, giving them special meaning or extraordinary qualities. […]. Songs seek to connect with animals through magical, ritual or spiritual means" (Petrovic and Ljubinkovic 106). The many songs associated with different species of animals entail not only the people's close links with animals in the physical environment but they also inform human-animal connections in the spiritual world that constitutes the people's cosmovision.

Hernia, incongruity of elephant's scrotum in man

There are different forms of hernia but locally recognisable among men is the protrusion of the scrotum, the external pouch that carries the testes. The Yawo people's songs pass on

informal lessons to the initiates in ways that reflect deep-seated indigenous ecological knowledge drawing on signs from nature/environment. A man suffering from hernia (locally called *mwela/nsipa*), has his protrusion metaphorically compared to elephant's scrotum. Using this kind the knowledge of elephant's scrotum children learn that when they see a man with hernia, they should not put him to shame or laugh at him as this song indicates:

Andembo kuwupukunya mpwala!	Elephant shaking its scrotum!
Andembo kuwupukunya mpwala!	Elephant shaking its scrotum!
Ukwi! Ukwi! Nambi yeleyi yambone?	Oh! Oh! But, is this good?

A man with scrotal hernia is here referred to as *Andembo* (Elephant) because he is carrying a disproportionate pouch (*mpwala*) to his body size. *Kuwupukunya* means that the pouch of scrotum moves heavily to and from between the man's legs. The song ridicules a man suffering from hernia and through it children are taught to avoid laughing and making fun of such a man. As circumcised members of the community, the young boys are now allowed to bathe together with grown up men at the river. This is where they observe the sizes of the private parts of the elderly men. The advice in the song is that when they have seen that any one elderly man has big scrotum, they should not disclose this saying, "So and so, has scrotum as big as those of an elephant's." The Yawo expression *kuwupukunya mpwala* (shaking scrotums) back and forth creates the imagery of incongruity with the man who carries them for the elephant and the man with hernia are incomparable in terms of body build.

Sax (2001) notes that "[t]he elephant is set apart from other creatures by its immense size, its enormous tusks, and above all, its reprehensible trunk. […] this strange, paradoxical nature has made people identify intensely with the elephant, since the animal seems to share with humans an alienation from the natural world" (104). The elephant's huge trunk with some parts being inconsistent with its enormous body creates an image of oddness which children observe in a man suffering from hernia. The song about elephant and its scrotum burlesques the man with hernia and thereby making him alienated from his own body and the natural world. The

metaphor of the elephant's huge scrotum transfers the man with hernia whose scrotum are disproportional to his body. The song is in a form of call and response:

Soloist: *Andembo kuwupukunya mpwala* (× 2).	Elephant shaking its scrotum!
Response: *Ukwi! Ukwi! Nambi yeleyi yambone?*	Oh! Oh! But, is this good?

The response has biting satire in the interjections and the rhetoric. *Ukwi! Ukwi!* expresses sarcastic surprise about the mismatch. The rhetorical question *Nambi yeleyi yambone*? (But, is this good?), leaves listeners dumbfounded except to agree that it is not good to have scrotums that size. Despite this apparent absurdity, the initiates learn to contain themselves and avoid laughing at such a man. Children are told not to spread the news about the man's hernia for to do so is to behave as if they do not feel ashamed. To accord dignity and respect to a fellow human, implies that "reverence towards and respect for nonhuman nature" (Devall 303) would have its place in human hearts. This is what it means to live a life "premised on a gestalt of person-in-nature.

The person is not above or outside of nature" (Devall 303). Ecocriticism explores a "gestalt" in which "Everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner 1971 [1974], 16). Devall and Sessions (1985) explain this ecological wholeness in terms of the "first law of thermodynamics, which is also the first law of ecology, asserts the conservation of energy in an ecosystem as energy is changed and exchanged in its continual flow the interconnected parts. […].The world is active and dynamic; its natural processes are cyclical, balanced by cybernetic, stabilising, feedback mechanisms" (230). This then entails balance in the relations between organisms and their environment. Each organism's ecological niche is in equilibrium with other ecological niches for the proper functioning of the ecosystem. Folklore recognises this interconnectedness and this illustrates why children are introduced to humane values through songs about animals that reflect that no biotic and abiotic entity is a-stand-alone but forms a niche in the ecosystem. The significance of these Yawo songs is that they draw from nature and the discipline they instil in children has a lifelong attribute. Commoner (1974) says that the "word 'cybernetics' derives from the Greek word for *helmsman* [steersman], it is concerned with

cycles of events that steer, or govern, the behaviour of a system" (16). The songs engage the young generation in the processes of communication involving biological entities.

Eating habits and signs from baboons and monkeys

In taking communal dishes in the African setting of eating, children suffer. First, they are the last to wash their hands before eating. Before they have finished washing their hands, the meal is almost half-way finished by the elders who washed their hands first. Second, the pace at which children eat is slower than adults. Children prefer eating with the people who are considerate. Metaphorically, children prefer monkeys to baboons. Baboons and monkeys are two kinds of animals representing different eating habits. The eating metaphors of baboons and monkeys infer meanings that the former are gluttonous while the latter eat with restraint:

Che Lijaniwo ngatukwakolanga,	Mr Baboon we need not mention him,
Pakuŵa ŵakulungwa!	For he is big!
Tusyoŵelele anganga Che Katumbiliwo,	We're used to our grandfather Mr Monkey,
Kulya kwa njalale!	He eats moderately!

The word *njalale* rendered here as "moderately" in the song means that the eating habits of baboon and monkey are contrasted. *Njalale* in other contexts would mean greedily, but here it means that monkey eats with some degree of self-discipline unlike the gluttonous baboon. The baboon is big (*ŵakulungwa*) in terms of body size and he/she eats more than monkey does. The context of this song is about the communal dish. Children share the same dish with people of different ages and different levels of satisfying their hunger. In most cases, they are victims of hunger because elders do not consider them.

The baboon in the song is the metaphor of a person who is not considerate when eating with children. Given a choice in terms of sharing a dish with a baboon and a monkey, children prefer the monkey, the metaphor of one who does not eat much. *Che Lijaniwo ngatukwakolanga*

(we need not mention the baboon, insofar as eating is concerned), *pakuŵa ŵakulungwa* (because he is experienced), in this case, in "eating." The word *ŵakulungwa* translated here as "experienced" means an old person from whom we get experience or expertise. *Lijani* (baboon) is bigger than *chitumbili* (monkey) and children in the song prefer the latter to the former. In folklore, the baboon is closely associated with immorality and greed. The monkey's *kulya kwa njalale* (eating moderately) is in sharp contrast to the baboon's *kulya mwa kutondwa* (eating hungrily).

Through the symbolic meanings of the baboon and the monkey, the initiates learn to perceive different eating habits among humans. With the baboon/monkey, symbolism arises a "new cosmic/ecological metaphysics which stresses the identity (I/thou) of humans with non-human nature, [and it] is a necessary condition for a viable approach to building an eco-philosophy" (Devall 310). By drawing attention to indigenous oral discourses and begin to rethink the environmental embeddedness of the people, it becomes recognisable that the solutions to the contemporary environmental problems could be locally derivable. Boutros Boutros-Ghali explains that "it is not enough for a man [woman] to love his [her] neighbour; he [she] must also learn to love his [her] world" (cited by Holms Rolston III 2009:224). In learning to love one's world, human interaction with the physical environment has produced ecological wisdom of great repute.

The fainting beetle and the small grasshopper, loathe violence in human society

Epilepsy is a disorder of the central nervous system in which the epileptic person loses consciousness and convulses. In teaching children to control their anger, they are advised to desist from picking quarrels that would lead to fighting. There are people who suffer from epilepsy and may lead to loss of consciousness and convulsions if someone beats them up. Some insects/beetles locally known as *chiwansagaja* feign death. Using knowledge of the behaviour of this insect, the people strongly warn the initiates not to involve themselves in fights. This has attracted a folksong through which the initiates are advised not to beat up children because, like *chiwansagaja*, they may lose consciousness and convulse or die:

Chiwansagaja chaŵechete-e! The little opossum beetle spoke!

Kundutane nikomoka-ye! You push me I faint!

The speech by the opossum beetle in the song provides self-defence and it announces its disability, falling sickness. Although the people realise that the opossum beetle feigns death as a defensive mechanism against danger, they take it that for some humans it constitutes a disease that requires those around to be considerate. Some of these songs are for both *jando* and *nsondo* and through human-human and human-environment relationships depicted therein, ecological knowledge of great import is imparted to children. The expression *chiwansagaja chaŵechete* (the opossum beetle spoke) is an allegory. The speech of the opossum beetle is only expressed by its fainting action when someone pushes it. Pictorially, the opossum beetle creates the imagery of death. Animals, big and small, play crucial roles in passing on the culture and norms of society among the Yawo. The song that discourages children from fighting each other uses the defensive mechanism of the opossum beetle to project epilepsy among humans.

The initiates are generally discouraged from beating up other children younger than themselves and animals are utilised in order to contextualise human-animal relationships. The use of the natural environment in Yawo initiation songs underlines the people's interest in the relationship between culture and nature. The following song about a sable (symbol of a grownup person) beating up a small grasshopper (symbol of a child) informs how children are warned against fighting:

Nan'dambojo-e!	A small grasshopper!
Kupikana jwaŵangwile-e!	You hear it has been beaten up!
Mbalapala!	By the sable!

Nan'dambo is a very small grasshopper associated with wet grassland and in the song it stands for a small child who is beaten up by a grownup person metaphorized as sable. The metaphor of a sable beating up a grasshopper is meant to instil sympathy in the children and therefore desist from fighting each other. The representation of animals in *jando* and *nsondo* songs is loaded with cultural implications that infer the sacredness to animals which humans share. Some animals are symbolic of good deeds while others are symbols of ill omens. The anatomical, physiological and behavioural similarities between humans and animals reveal their interconnectedness that culture exploits. The imagery of a sable (*Mbalapala*) picking a quarrel

with a tiny grasshopper (*Nan'dambo*) is loathsome and in the song the soloist sarcastically ridicules the sable.

Some aspects of the cultural implications of the human-animal relationships represented in *Jando* and *nsondo* songs is that they provide moral values embedded in nature and respect for the environment. This is a rich area for "ecocriticism [which] begins with an interest in 'representations', followed by an examination of how nature is depicted in literature and which subsequently leads to raising public awareness of attitudes toward the natural world" (Culajara 156). The representation of animals in these songs emphasises on drawing responsible human behaviour through which the initiates' personalities are shaped into rational and responsible members of the community.

The chameleon and its wardrobe, the blue lizard, bearded dragon: marvels in nature

Due to the different camouflaging colours that suits its environment, a chameleon symbolises an inconstant person. A chameleon is an insectivorous reptile that is at the centre of myths of origins in Malawi. Its slow movement has been epitomised as a way of survival in a hostile environment where one needs to be cautious. The following song is about a chameleon but it turns out to be a metaphor of a young woman, dressed to entice, looking for a man. The young woman's accountability is called into question:

Kalilombe nyali-nyali!	The chameleon stealthily, stealthily!
Ana chichi nkusosa?	What are you looking for?
Kaponda ngusosa.	I am looking for vegetables.
Nkatiji kaponda nkusosa,	Do not say you are looking for vegetables,
Ŵalume ankolopwele!	A man has beckoned you!
Ŵalume ankolopwele!	A man has beckoned you!

Kalilombe here refers to the big chameleon as opposed to the small one, *nalwiyi*. Its slow movement is reflected in *nyali-nyali* (craftily and stealthily) "along branches [of trees]" as it

"catches insects by shooting out its long tongue" (Sealey 143). The imagery of chameleon's slow movement is transferred in the song to a girl who pretends to be in search of vegetables when in reality she looks for *ŵalume* (a man). The expression *ŵalume ankolopwele* (a man has beckoned you) entails that the man the girl follows has used tactics in order to win her. The word *ankolopwele* translated here as "beckoned" has its roots in the Ciyawo verb *kolopola* with two interpretations.

First, it means to catch or get something using a hook, as when someone wants to get a mango fruit from a tree using a long bamboo with a small stick tied at the end, locally referred to as *ngolopongo*). *Kolopola* also means to take something stealthily by grabbing it off someone's hands. The chameleon is locally known for having an endless colour of clothes and in this song, its habit of self-grooming is transferrable to the girl who grooms herself and goes out of her parents' house in search of a man. The song works on a symbolic level with animal and plant imagery. The song is in dialogic form in which the chameleon (the girl) speaks once in response to the question *Ana chichi nkusosa?* (What are you looking for?). The elderly and experienced women realise that her response is a lie and they conclude *Ŵalume ankolopwele!* (A man has beckoned you!).

By means of the chameleon metaphor to refer to the girl, the song teaches moral responsibility in matters of sexuality. In this perspective "Once we understand nature as an interconnected whole, our perception of its different parts, ourselves included, alters dramatically. […] such a holistic understanding reveals a *commonality of interest* within nature" (Davidson 316, original italics). The craftiness with which the chameleon catches insects is, in the song, related to the quietude of the girl in search of a man and thereby revealing "a *commonality of interest* within nature." In this context, "metaphor represents a class of linguistic expression that says one thing and means another; thus, resembling cases of irony and indirect speech acts" (Jafari 119). By drawing from nature, the central emphasis in *nsondo* songs is not only teaching girls to be responsible, they also learn how to relate well with their husbands and their parents especially to respect their fathers.

The indivisibility that characterises the interconnectedness in nature reflects that the health of humans is dependent on the health of the environment. The representation of animals among the Yawo also reflects how they perceive some of them as totems. Kelbessa (2009) notes

about African societies that, generally, "[m]any African societies have perceived wild animals through totemism and other religious beliefs. […]. Totem animals have special cultural value and associations" (16). The reverence accorded to some animals in indigenous lore serves to illustrate how they are considered as totems. The horned chameleon in Malawian folklore, for example, is considered the progenitor of both humans and animals. Although the Yawo may not be sure about their totemic connections with animals and plants, their cultural practices reveal elements of totemism. The description of totemism and totemic objects in this passage fit into the Yawo *jando* practices.

On the one hand, the blue headed lizard is admired for its blue patched colour around its head/neck but it is ridiculed because the blue patch does not match the rest of its khaki twilled body. The proverb *Nampopo konanga buluwu* (The lizard ill-using blue colour) is applied to refer to an ugly man who marries a very beautiful woman. Thus as Maran and Kull (2014) have claimed in ecosemiotics, "most inter-species and intra-species relations – of which all ecological communities are composed – are based on sign relations" (43). *Nampopo*, a sign in nature involving other species and within the species itself, as a sign of ugliness in men is culturally encrypted. The bearded lizard or dragon (*Lipomombo*), on the other hand, is a sign despicability. *M'mwe Lipomombo* means (You are evil) because this type of lizard has a poisonous bite. Accordingly, as Maran Kull (2014) put it, "semiosic activities of animals can provide regulatory functions that often have an integrative and stabilising effect on ecosystems. Semiosis may also bring forth new relations, inserting a creative and sometimes chaotic force into an ecosystem" (44). The poisonous excretions from the bearded lizard has a communicative effect in the environment just as the blue lizard communicates a different kind of information. The following song involves the blue lizard and the bearded lizard:

Nampopo popola masamba,	Blue lizard bring down the leaves
Atati ŵawile!	My father is dead!
Chitonombe achimwene.	The councillor is my brother
Kutandaga kuwusya kaje,	Ask first before acting,
Alipomombo,	You bearded lizard,

Niwawulele mtembo The corpse got injuries.

This song communicates at the symbolic level. Leaves (*masamba*) or small branches of trees placed on the sides of the road means death in the vicinity. The blue lizard (*Nampopo*) is urged to do this because the singer's father is dead (*Atati ŵawile*). The singer's virtuosity is reflected in combining words with similar sound and concordial agreement: *Nampopo popola masamba*; *Chitonombe achimwene; Alipomombo* (lines 1, 3 and 5), as in children's word games. *Kutandaga kuwusya kaje/Alipomombo/Niwawulele mtembo* (lines 3-6) is informed by the proverb *Tulinganye ŵakowele maliro gachimisyene* (Let me do it nicely peeled off other people's corpse). This is perhaps with very hot water when the dead body is prepared before burial (*kojesya maliro*). In the song *Alipomombo* (the bearded lizard) is warned against doing things without proper guidelines. Thus, animals are signs with which people engage in meaningful conversation with the environment and through which they listen to various voices/signs in the environment. It is worth noting, as Maran and Kull (2014) articulate that:

> Human semiotic involvement in the environment is hybrid by nature. On the one hand, everything that humans do involves (bio-geo)-chemical and energetic aspects, element cycles, and energy flows. In this sense, cultural processes are always situated within the chemical and energetic processes of an ecosystem, culture is physically part of the ecosystem. On the other hand, in terms of semiotic processes, the situation of culture is twofold. First, cultural semiotic processes form a part of the semiotic processes of an ecosystem as a local web of all semiotic processes. Second, cultural models can be the models of this system itself. In this sense, culture as a modelling system builds up a meta-level in relation to the ecosystem (45).

Biochemical processes in living organisms and geochemical processes in the earth's crust involve the transference of energy at various points with centripetal (toward the centre) and centrifugal (away from the centre) forces. In all these, there are signs or indications involving linguistic communication in one way or the other in which chemicals and energy are expended in the cultural context as essential to the ecosystem. Ecosemiotics reduces the communication

challenge between humans and the environment and/or nature because ecosemiotics plays a mediatory role in linguistic terms using signs.

Before the young boys and girls are excluded into *ndagala* (shelter) for circumcision, and *nsondo* the *amichila* make sacrifices of flour at the sacred *nsolo* tree. The presence of many ants (*mbamba/nyerere*) around a mound of sacrificial flour means the ancestors have accepted the sacrifice. On the eve of the circumcision or *kuchika nsondo* (exclusion), the *amichila* lead the parents of the children in prayer to the ancestors in which plants and animals are dominant features:

> *Ambuje, Kwilinga, Abiti Ndogolo, Abiti Uka, Abiti Jana, Che Kalikalanje, Abiti Twabi,*
> *Ŵanachewa kwitinji kwakujaku ajende chenene,*
> *Masimba gajuŵejuŵe.*
> *Majoka gajuŵejuŵe.*
> *Isichi ijuŵejuŵe.*
> *Makoloto gajuŵejuŵe.*
> *Njerenyenye syakaluma*
> *Ŵanachewa.*
> *Achinamame,*
> *Akaguluka.*
> *Masisita gatende ji!*
> (Our ancestors, Kwilinga, Abiti Ndogolo, Abiti Uka, Abiti Jana, Che Kalikalanje, Abiti Twabi,
> We implore you for the safety of these children to the bush they are going,
> Let lions hide.
> Let snakes hide.
> Let tree stumps hide.
> Let scorpions hide.
> Let not centipedes bite these children.
> Let not nightjars fly.

Let owls remain silent!)

Animals play important cultural and spiritual semiotic functions among the Yawo people and their cosmology is linked to animals. The people's cosmovision considers not only the spiritual environment conceptualised and perceived through the spirits of the dead, but it also involves the physical environment of which animals are integral parts as philosophical signs and symbols. Lions, snakes, scorpions, centipedes, barn owls, typical owls, spotted eagle-owls, nightjars or secretary birds mentioned in the above supplication to the ancestors, are culturally encrypted as dangerous animals that need spiritual guidance in order to exist in harmony with them. In this way, the environment is not only a significant semiotic source of moral values that help instil ecological wisdom among the community members, but it is also a source of solace from the unprecedented natural events. The Yawo, therefore, in their cultural practices, revere animals and reading these animals through the prism of ecosemiotics, biosemiotics and zoosemiotics is worthwhile. The traditional religious values are significant in promoting environmental restoration for their inherence in nature. The Yawo traditional prayer reflects the interrelatedness between the human and the nonhuman worlds through totemism and thus human-animal relationships are implicated in the people's traditional religious beliefs. All these have their signs rooted in nature and the role of animals in the ecosemiotics interplay is crucial.

Conclusion

That animals are cultural signs is reflected in the foregoing paragraphs in which ecosemiotics has been expounded as one way of conceptualising and perceiving the environment. The *jando* and *nsondo* songs that are locally known as *misyungu* constitute the core teachings for the novices during the exclusion period. The bulk of the songs involve animals through which the initiates are introduced to their local environment and the adult world of complexities. Since humans think of animals ambivalently as kind, helpful, gentle and generous creatures, interacting with them carries cultural signs and symbols. With their different symbolic meanings, animals like birds are handy in children's songs that involve the teachings of a people. The different *jando* and *nsondo* songs involving animals do not only reflect the people's environmental embeddedness and awareness of ecological interconnectedness and interdependence between humans and animals, but they also show how humans attempt to communicate with them through ecolinguistics terms. The availability of different species in the

past was dependent on forests, tall grasses and springs or brooks of water as signs of life in the ecosystem. The availability of animals is related to habitats to which different species of animals are adapted. The people's knowledge of animals and their different symbolic meanings reflect their cumulative experiences from which they draw viable conclusions about the behaviours of animals within zoosemiotics in relation to human beings. As trustees of the environment, indigenous people have the capacity to protect the environment. The Yawo *jando* and *nsondo* initiation songs about animals show not only the ways through which moral values are symbiotically inculcated to the initiated boys and girls, but they also reflect different semiotic implications animals have including taboos and totems. The various aspects about animals in the initiation songs, their behaviours and actions are given to linguistic interpretations.

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