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Eco-phenomenological Portrayal of Human-Lived Experiences with Animals in Ezra Chadza's *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*

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Abstract:

By drawing from eco-phenomenology, this paper discusses human lived experiences with animals as depicted in Ezra Chadza's novel, *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu.* The theoretical foundation of eco-phenomenology is expounded in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (2003). The last part of the book's title suggests an earth-centred or an ecocentric approach that deep ecologists also advocate. The editors, Brown and Toadvine explicate that "[e]co-phenomenology is based on a double claim: first, that an adequate account of our ecological situation requires the methods and insights of phenomenology; and, second, that phenomenology, led by its own momentum, becomes a philosophical ecology, that is, a study of the interrelationship between organism and world in its metaphysical and axiological dimensions" (xii – xiii). Poised between ecological phenomenology and phenomenological ecology, eco-phenomenology invites us to look "back to the earth itself" and in doing so critique the implications of the human-nature and/or environment relationships rooted in lived experiences. Moran (2000) describes the term "phenomenology" as "best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is, as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer" (4). Experiences based on otherworldliness shape a viable human relationship to nature.

Keywords: animals, eco-phenomenology, phenomenology, nihilistic metaphysics, ecology.

Introduction

The environmental threnody advocated by American ecocriticism and British green studies for ecologically-minded literary criticism entails transcending nihilistic metaphysics that dominates global capitalism and hyperreality. The hero in Chadza's *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* (1986) shakes

off all forms of nihilistic tendencies, pathological symptoms and panic existence in his experiential encounters with animals. Among the definitions of "phenomenology" that Merleau-Ponty expounds in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), is that:

> […] it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science', but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. […].We shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology" (vii – viii).

The inalienability of the world and what the human being encounters in it constitute the crux of *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*. The quest for knowledge is interior to all humans and this underpins finding "in "ourselves […] the unity and true meaning of phenomenology." *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* is set in rural Malawi, in the Village of Khwesi, at a time and space when and where forests, animals and various other natural resources are locally found in abundance. The novel also thrives in larger-than-life human experiences with spatial and temporal syntax. The novel's hero, Kokha, has his father, Pofera Salambula, killed by a lion within twenty-four hours of his birth. The caves, forests, mountains, and the bodies of water like pools, rivers and lakes portrayed in the novel are overwhelmingly awash with life. This paper critiques human experiences in their interactions with these aspects of the environment and how they perceive them.

The hero in Chadza's *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*, Kokha, undertakes his role as an environmental trustee and he does not swerve from it. The title of the novel is proverbial, *Kokha mchepera wa kalulu mtima 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, *mtima unga phiri* (thinking like a mountain) that the human being shares the attributes of the mountains that "refused to undertake" the trust. That humans should not belittle themselves because they are poised for greatness is condensed in *mtima unga phiri*.

Animals constitute an entire range of human experiential knowledge and behaviour including mirroring the people's environmental embeddedness and indigenous ecological consciousness. Since animals are the embodiments of human values through which people traverse the environment, for them environmental restoration and ecological diversity inform their symbiotic being-ness. The idea of the sacredness of 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. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), Merleau-Ponty observes that "[o]ur perception ends in objects, and the object once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it which we have had or could have" (77). The people's perception based on sense-experience of a seamless cosmology in which the physical and divine environments exist in an ineluctable interplay, imply their affiliation not only to their land, but also to their genealogies through which the environment 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 mimetic staged art, the eco-phenomenological portrayal of human-animal struggle for superiority is *a priori* in ndigenous lore a reflection of observational and experiential knowledge. *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* flourishes in this kind of knowledge.

The pangs of childbirth lion kill father

Nangeya, Kokha's mother, suffers not only from childbirth associated with women's amniotic fluidity, but she also suffers from overflowing tears as she mourns the death of her husband. The death of a husband-father devoured by a lion is a painful experience portrayed in Chadza's novel, *Kokha Mchepera wa 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 *chikuta*. 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 was happening. But seeing nothing strange he goes back to sleep. In the middle of the night, however, Pofera, short for Poferasalambula, hears loud shouts from the *chikuta* hut, *Lu! Lu! Lu! Chilombo! Chilombo!* (*Lu! Lu! Lu!* Beast!

Beast!) (Chadza 9). This screaming acts as an *"amblysia"* 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 husband-father. When Pofera comes he finds the lion self-confident to break into the *chikuta*. Poferasalambula, his name means "You need not tidy up your deathbed" gets hold of the lion's tail just outside the ghostly house and we read from the text:

> *Adachigwira mchira chilombocho namachikoka kwinaku akuyankhula ngati akunena munthu. "Lekere mwana yekhayu, idya ine mtima wako utsike." […]. Chitaleka chitsekocho 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 the delight of your heart." […]. Having released the door, it caught Pofera and dragged him into the forest; inside the house people were wailing (Chadza 9).

This passage, which enacts the death of a husband-father in the struggle for survival and superiority with a lion in what could be described as 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 really are" (719). It is in the face of reality that people recognise 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.

The death of Pofera in described in the passage above reflects the people's interconnections with natural forces from which we are alienated in the modern technological culture. Brown and Toadvine (2003) observe that "eco-phenomenology shares the conviction that our cultural detachment from our natural roots rests on the very structure of our current modes of thought, that we are weighted down by the ballast of tradition, by the assumptions and commitments carried forward from Platonism, Christianity, capitalism, Cartesian dualism, patriarchy" (xix). Since some of these commitments are now in the liminality of the post-, such as post-Platonism, post-Christianity and post-Cartesian dualism, for example, eco-phenomenology provides alternatives for humans to reconnect with nature. Brown and Toadvine (2003) further explain that "the insights of eco-

phenomenology hold the promise of bringing about a dramatic shift in our current understanding of ourselves and of our place in the natural world" (xx-xxi). In *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*, Pofera bequeaths to his son, Kokha, temporal awareness, spatial awareness and self-awareness of the human being's place in the natural world.

Human interaction with a lion involves the human dealing with an organic phenomenon having physiological and psychological functions. Lions are skilled hunters and they kill not only humans, but they also kill other big and powerful animals such as buffaloes, for example. This leads us to what Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behaviour* (1967) describes as "a philosophy which treats all conceivable reality as an object of consciousness" (201). Environmental consciousness is embodied in human perceptions of environmental phenomena. Lions carry various attributes that infer how they relate with humans and other non-human animals. Sax (2001) asserts that "lions are social animals that live in prides, 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 next morning, *anthu polondola, adapeza mutu wokha uli gone patsinde pa mtengo wa thundu, m'nkhalango mkangowo utachoka* (when people searched, they found only the head lying under a *thundu* tree in the forest, the lion was not there) (Chadza 10). The remains of Pofera are collected in a reed mat for burial and 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 chilombo Chauta*? (Chadza 10). Nangeya has a fractured sense of the self and develops self-hatred.

Human-animal relationships are tinged with religio-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 an adventurous character. He takes full responsibility as the trustee of the environment and Nature similes at him. As a young boy before his teens, Kokha tells his grandmother, "*Agogo, ine tsiku lina ndidzapha chilombo chija chidapha atate angachi. Chithunzi chake 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). This develops causal thinking in Kokha and he holds a valid reason for hating lions. Merleau-Ponty (1967) is of the view which in a sense links with Kokha's experience, that "[w]hatever the external conditions may be – bodily, psychological, social

– upon which the development of consciousness depends and even if it is only gradually constituted in history, the history itself out of which it comes is only a view which consciousness gives itself with regard to the acquired consciousness of self" (206). Acting within this "consciousness of the self" *chithunzi* (image or picture) of a lion on a piece of paper is enough to incite anger in Kokha and he is determined to kill the real lion when he encounters it in the future. The development of freedom and individualism in Kokha leads him to facing life squarely. Kokha's hatred of lions is not irrational or ecophobic because there is a logical and valid reason: the lion deprived him of a father and deprived his mother of a husband. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty argues "[t]he alleged conditions of existence are indiscernible in the whole with which they collaborate *and reciprocally the essence of the whole cannot be concretely conceptualised without them and without its constitutive history*" (1967:208, italics in the original). Although Kokha has not seen the real, the alive lion, its image historicizes Kokha's future behaviour.

Primordial human-snake relationships

Human experiences with snakes or serpents is primordially mediated. Living close to forests where different species of animals are found, men of Khwesi village are mostly hunters who kill such animals as mammals, birds, and reptiles among others. Although hunting has declined in Malawi (Morris 2000), the killing of animals in *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* reflects not only a masculinised society, but it also mirrors the important roles animals play as sources of food. Seen from this vantage point, it is not ecophobia, that is, illogical fear and hatred of the environment, to work on the land and to hunt animals. 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). Archetypes are atavistic, that is, closely linked to the ancestors. The characteristics of such animals as lions, eagles, snakes, hares and tortoises, for example, are primordial and universally shared.

When Kokha takes up his archetypal responsibility not only as the guardian of nature but also as "the all-conquering hero" (Cuddon 51) he succeeds. His killing of animals is largely due to his trauma resulting from his father's death and this gives him responsibility and a sense of individualism and independence. In his *The Primacy of Perception* (1964), Merleau-Ponty observes that "[w]e never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought –

almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth" (3). In his experiential encounters with animals, Kokha constantly lives in a world of perception. He traps animals not only for food but also to show a sense of his own mortality. The first animal that Kokha kills is a bush pig (*nguluwe*) and the whole Khwesi village is sent into euphoria praising what the young man has done, *Amayi ake nawonso anali wokondwa kwambiri poona kuti Kokha wachita chinthu chachikulu chotere*. (His mother was also happy to see that Kokha had done a great deed) (Chadza 15). Because Kokha's father was killed by a lion, his relationships with animals and his attitude towards animals, demonstrate his traumatised state of mind. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964), "Communication in literature is not the simple appeal on the part of the writer to meanings which would be part of an *a priori* of the mind; rather, communication arouses these meanings in the mind through enticement and a kind of oblique action" (8). In order to manage his trauma and knowledge of his own mortality, Kokha 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 greater than his age although the bush pig did not threaten his life, "*Mwana amene uja angathe kutcha msampha woti 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 wa Kalulu* is informed by personal and collective trauma on the part of Kokha resulting from his father's death as he was killed by a lion and the people of Khwesi 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 *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* takes a healing form that culminates in a sense of human experience with their environment based on the unpredictability of animal behaviours. Merleau-Ponty (1964) observes that:

> […] the intellectual elaboration of our experience of the world is constantly supported by the affective elaboration of our inter-human relations. The use of

> certain linguistic tools is mastered in the play of forces that constitute the subject's relations to his human surroundings. The linguistic usage achieved by the child depends strictly on the "position" (in psychoanalytic terms) that is taken by the child at every moment in the play of forces in his family and his human environment (112-13).

As this passage entails, Kokha's behaviour is shaped by his environment and experiences of interacting with animals. As Wood (2001) suggests, eco-phenomenology "offers us a way of developing a middle ground between phenomenology and naturalism, between intentionality and causality" (78). Kokha's experiences of interacting with animals are understood with recourse to spiritual and/or supernatural explications and thereby providing an alternative to naturalism culminating in naturalistic ethical realism and ecocentrism; earth-centredness. In *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu,* Kokha and other male characters habitually hunt and kill different species of animals such as *nguluwe, mbawala, nungu, ntchenzi, insa, mphoyo, akasenye* (bush pig, bushbuck, porcupine, cane rat, grey duiker, reedbuck, Sharpe's grysbok) (Chadza 16). One of the horrible sceneries about human-animal interaction in the novel is when Kokha and his friends go to the mountains to hunt porcupines (*anungu*) in the caves. In one of these caves Kokha encounters a dangerous snake, *songo/songwe* (black mamba) whose two tiny eyes are shining in the darkness. Kokha thinks to himself, "*Hi, ndafa; 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. Kokha is a character with high sense of imagination, and having calculated his surroundings, he takes off his shirt and hoodwinks the snake's head with it, *ali m'manja mutuwo nswi, waigwira njokayo ndi mphamvu zake zonse, chinunu kutuluka nayo, ali tikawonerana kunja komweko*. (He strongly got hold of the snake's head, and silently dragged it outside, we shall see what happens when we are outside) (Chadza 19). Dealing with a present problem effectively does not necessarily depend on previous experience of dealing with a similar problem.

Meretoja (2020) explains that "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 paralysing 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 recues a child from fire and he also catches

thieves who are terrorising Khwesi community without previous experiences in handling such problems. Kokha only thinks like a mountain, *mtima 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 and according to Price *et.al.* (2019) between "81 000 to 138 000 people die annually as a result of 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 and human experience is replete with this awareness.

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, *kunali chiphokoso kuyamikira nzeru 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 literature's concern with "space, place and mapping" (Tally Jr. and 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 geocriticism. What this entails is to reflect on the "overlapping territories" (Tally Jr. and 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 the non-human worlds are involved in the melodramatic performances of agonizing conditions of survival as in the struggle between Kokha *songo* in *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*. In *Animals and Ancestors* (2000), Morris describes *songo* (black mamba), as a "mythical" and "large poisonous snake, dark in colour, 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 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. Accordingly, "[t]o wait for things to take shape

before deciding is to decide to let them happen in their own manner" (Merleau-Ponty 1964:194), and Kokha does not wait for things to "happen in their own manner", he acts.

Another uncanny episode involving human-animal interaction in *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* is when Kokha struggles with a python and kills it. After what might be described as unsuccessful hunting experience, and having eaten sugary honeycombs, the hunters look for water to quench their thirst. The trees, grasses, bushes, 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. At present, 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.* 2013:6). *Mtengowo udali ndi mphako yaikuku mmene munali zisa za njuchi, zowâwâ ndi zausinda ndiponso zauchi. […]. Atadya uchiwo anthu adamva ludzu kwambiri kuposa kale koma anthu omwe ankasanganiza ndi zisa za ŵana anali bwinoko chifukwa madzi a ana njuchiwo ndiwo ankadzidziritsa 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 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, his hair twitched as if it was moving; when he turned his head he saw a big multi-coloured snake stealthily moving towards him, its eye sparkling) (Chadza 25).

This is a dreadful experience with nature 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, *chinjoka chopanda ululu koma choopsa* (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. Kokha's race with the python in the pool is aided by his skilful swimming abilities:

> *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 small fruit (*dzaye*) he was holding in his hands, leapt into the water and began to swim for he knew how to swim quick-wittedly like one brought up in the lake province) (Chadza 25).

The rivalry in the water/pool between Kokha and the python is breath grasping especially that 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). In this grotesque scenery, the python is finally killed and the human characters celebrate, "*zokolesokole! Yooo! Wafa mdani*!" (Yap! Yap! Hurrah! The enemy is dead!" (Chadza 27). The celebration of the death of the python 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 symbolised by the presence of animals which traumatise him. *Wafa mdani* (the enemy is dead) uttered with reference to the python's death contextualises 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 *thunga*) "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 (*nsato/thunga*), is paradoxical in a community that beliefs in the sacredness of snakes. Perhaps, this is due to his trauma with animals having been told that his father was killed by a lion. 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 2015:791). In the novel, *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*, the killing of the

python provides a moment for learning about the mystic interpretation of a python's death and its burial. One experienced old man explains that:

> *Nsato tikaipha timaiponya m'madzi chifukwa tikapanda kutero chaka chimenecho imakanika, osadza bwino, kapena osadza nkomwe* (When we have killed a python we inter it in a pool/river because if we don't do that, we don't have good rains that year, or it doesn't 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' explanation here, though inadequate, attempts to provide a response to Kokha's question "*Kodi nsato ili ndi mzimu ngati munthu*?" ("Does a python have a soul just as a human being has?" (Chadza 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 (*mizimu*) and they do not experience death. It is also important to note that water symbolises life and water is the essence of protoplasm and sacred snakes' closeness with water emphasises 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 useful for the python's regulation of its body temperature and concealing itself. This illustrates why the python portrayed in *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* is involved in hide-and-seek, so to speak, with Kokha.

Another snake killed in Chadza's novel, *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* is locally known as *mbuvu*; *njoka yaululu woopsa 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 you are in a river, remain there until an herbalist administers herbs to you right there (Chadza 73). Significantly, the killing of this snake provides one of the reasons why snakes are killed when Kokha asks, "*Adani a munthu 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?"

(Chadza 73). Human-snake enmity is primordial. For unexplained reasons, which would be described as ecophobia in this instance, humans kill snakes. *Njoka* (snakes) are "*Adani a munthu*" (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 behaviours, 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 contextual context and (Morris 2000, Chimombo 2001) exploit Malawian myths in identifying meaning attached to snakes. Due to 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 to many, the population of a human enemy like 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 symbolism of animals

When Kokha and his colleagues go the lake, two animals become prominent in their lives besides fish which they have come to buy: the lake eagle and the crocodile. They learn the behaviour of the lake eagle, *nkhwazi, mbalame yodzikonda, yosakumbukira inzake pakudya* (a self-centred bird, it does not share its food with others) and its philosophy is "*Wagwira chambo n'chake*" (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 the rivers and lakes in Malawi and their relationship with people is largely 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 ngwena* (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 behaviour of crocodiles of crawling stealthily when attacking humans is associated with voyeurism in men who hide near where women bathe at the river or lake in order to see their bodies and get sexual gratification. The following song is intended to ridicule men with voyeuristic behaviour like crocodiles:

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

In this song, the crocodile is a shameless animal without proper courtship skills and this symbolises men who display behaviour of similar inference. Generally, therefore, the crocodile is described as a merciless animal, *ng'ona, mpanda nsoni* (Chadza 50). Despite the mercilessness of crocodiles, people kill these animals only if they are confronted with them. This is the case with the killings of *songo, nsato* and *mbuvu* snakes in *Kokha Mchepera wa 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, however, for killing animals for food is rooted in ecological interdependence: *zilengo 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 symbolises hypocrisy and due to its socio-cultural merciless attributes it does not produce tears from its tear glands and if it does the tears would be too outweighed by water to be of any significance as a quality of mercy, *misozi ya 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 through which crocodiles interact with humans after Christocentric views that have distanced people from seeing crocodiles as sacred.

In *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*, when a crocodile attacks the chief's son, Zalengera, and pulls him away from the shore into the lake, everyone who knows the behaviour of the crocodile loses hope of his survival. But Kokha, in one of the longest 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 komwe kamatseka kuti madzi asamalowe kukhosi kwa ng'onayo ndi kuti munthu ataboola mbadiyo ng'ona siingathe kukhala moyo nthawi yaitali chifukwa siingathenso kumira kuopa kuti madzi angalowe kukhosi*. (Kokha 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 after giving him first aid he resuscitates. In appreciating what Kokha has done, people give him fish, goats and sheep. In the African traditional settings, gifts of chickens, goats, sheep and cattle, are symbolic of reverence accorded to the person to whom these gifts are given. They also show the degree of appreciation of the givers.

Ndulu ya ng'ona (crocodile's bile) is known for its venomous effects and people have used it to kill their enemies and those suspected of witchcraft. *Sing'anga* Maulidi, for example, in Gwengwe's book, *Kukula ndi Mwambo* (1965), administers *mwabvi* or *mchape* (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 ndulu ija ya ng'ona ndipo adayenda pang'ono nagwa pansi, nafa nthawi 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 who are affiliated to their land. This illustrates why when Kokha kills the crocodile, people are particular about how to dispose 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 a crocodile was killed its body was tied to heavy stones and lowered into the lake and those who did this were chosen by the chief. They did this to prevent some people from using the crocodile's bile in destroying the lives of others (Chadza 62).

Although animals are rich sources of chemicals that are 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 Mwambo* (1965), *ndulu ya ng'ona* (crocodile bile) is associated with witchcraft. Nyazema (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). What this entails is that the toxicity of crocodile bile (*ndulu ya ng'ona*) is overshadowed by traditional beliefs. Kpera *et.al.* (2007) have observed that "[t]he products and by-products of crocodile are used in traditional medicine like remedies to cure diseases as the asthma, the inguinal hernia, the jaundice, the measles, the 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 blows the bile myth out of proportion in traditional settings.

The characters in *Kokha Mchepera wa 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 well 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, chatha mphamvu kwatsala kungokalipa chili gone 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 rather to celebrate the death of the leopard. It also shows how fortunate that person is who fights with a leopard and wins, *unali mwayi wake munthu ameneyo* (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 colour of the panther enables it to blend into forests, while the spots of the leopard suggest innumerable eyes" (179). In *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu*, Chadza portrays animals attacking and killing humans just as he portrays humans killing animals due to the direct human-animal contact. Animals are killed for vengeance since they kill humans and domestic animals such as sheep and goats.

Unlike Hamlet, Kokha does not prevaricate in requiting his father's death

Human-lion relationship is based on suspicion; one 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 animals, both wild and domestic, 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 pakumwa lero! Uona ndithu! Ndime mzimu wa a Pofera, uja udadyayu! Uone mkondo!"* ("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 since his childhood from the moment he heard that his father was killed by a lion, he has been looking for an opportunity to revenge. 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 for both the throne and the Queen.

After killing the lion, Kokha tells his grandmother, "*Agogo, lero ndalipsira; sadyeka adamdadya ndi mutu*." (Grandmother, I have retaliated today; the one who has never been eaten was eaten together with his head.") In response, his grandmother says, "*Pepa mwana wanga; ndimayesa kuti wamka. Tiye kunyumba. Chilombochi tidzachiona bwino mawa. Chauta wagwira ntchito*." ("I sympathise with you my child; I thought you are dead. Let's go inside. We shall clearly 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 traumatised by his father's death at the hands of a lion, finds his heart's satisfaction by killing it. Wild animals continue to terrorise human communities and kill humans and *ndalipsira* is an apt word considering the human-lion relationships depicted in *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* in which lions kill not only people but they also kill 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-theorising of the place of animals in relation to human societies" (135). This re-theorisation 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. As Merleau-Ponty observes in *Primacy of Perception* (2002), "[m]atter is 'pregnant' with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the 'world.' We experience a perception and its horizon 'in action' [*pratiquement*] rather than by 'posing' them or explicitly 'knowing' them" (12). *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* provides human lived experiences and generates indigenous ecological consciousness in which the centrality of animals is indubitable.

The Ciyawo 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 bad. Humans cannot acknowledge loving animals when they hate other humans even

within their own race. In the zeitgeist culture, "constructing others – both people and animals – as 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 human 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 terrorise Khwesi and the surrounding villages and he finally catches them. When Kokha is offered fifty held 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.

Kokha does not kill animals based on his domination over nature and/or animals, but having been traumatised by the way his father died, taking up his responsibility as an environmental trustee, and being aware of his own mortality, he thinks and acts. As Merleau-Ponty puts it "true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, xx). Having been dominated by science, "relearning to look at the world" is to replace it with phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty advocates a "return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is" (*Phenomenology of Perception* x). What this implies is that experience should not be preconceived by predictable scientific results and human lived experiences with animals in *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* reflect the people's unique perceptions in every encounter.

Conclusion

The foregoing is an eco-phenomenological study of the Malawian novel in Chichewa, Chadza's *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu.* The study demonstrates Kokha's sense of awareness of human mortality in a hostile environment of unprecedented events. The novel proves that there is no prior experience for effective handling of a present challenge facing humanity. Merleau-Ponty's observation that in science "objective thought is unaware of the subject of perception" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 207), means that rather than presenting an already made world, we

experience the world as we live. The hero in *Kokha Mchepera wa Kalulu* 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 to reflect on the wonders of nature is a worthwhile endeavour. Since the animals that Kokha encounters in the novel plan and plot before attacking their prey, he ensures that, as an environmental trustee, he outshines them. Kokha's dealing with nature is rooted in an afro-indigenous-based philosophy with a touch of interdisciplinary eco-phenomenology in which ethically naturalistic and transcendental values are generated from the observation of 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 and this is also the "birth of being for us" (*la genèse de l'être pour nous, Phenomenology of Perception* 154). Through the unprecedented events that the village of Khwesi faces and the animals that Kokha encounters, the novel informs an eco-phenomenology that we have the capacity to provide solutions to our own problems.

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