

Profit, Tradition, and African Wildlife: Examining Animal Commodification Through Eco-Bio-Communitarianism

Carla Turner

University of Fort Hare

CTurner@ufh.ac.za

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Abstract

In Southern Africa, there exists a large-scale commodification of fauna, extending to the utilisation of animals in traditional medicine. In South Africa alone, 1,175 documented cases of rhinoceros poaching transpired in a single annum, and analogously, an estimated 100,000 pangolins are smuggled from there to Asia annually. These and myriad other species, whether intact, in part, or processed into medicaments, are vented either in their country of origin for application in traditional medicine or exported illicitly across the globe for similar purposes. In this paper, I posit that this large-scale commodification conflicts with a relational African environmental ethic. To substantiate this claim, I consider two cardinal concepts in African ecological ethics, which will illuminate how animals should be utilised and considered morally. Firstly, the Shona concept of *Ukama* employs Felix Murove's exegesis. Secondly, I explore eco-bio-communitarianism, precisely the *Nso* worldview of Godfrey Tangwa. Upon applying these concepts to the utilisation of fauna in traditional medicine by traditional healers and to the current large-scale commercial exploitation of animals in conventional medicine, this thesis concludes that only the profit-driven use opposes an African environmental ethic.

Keywords

African Ethics;
Environmental Ethics;
Animal Ethics;
Traditional Medicine;
Relationality;
Ukama;
Eco-Bio Communitarianism

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Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the large-scale, profit-driven trade of animals used in traditional medicine conflicts with an African environmental perspective. I do so by first looking at the current state of affairs in using animals in conventional

traditional medicine, particularly in Southern Africa, where animals or parts of them are legally or illegally exported for use in other countries. In the second section, I briefly explain Murove's view on the Shona concept of *Ukama* (which translates as relatedness) and Tangwa's account of the *Nso* worldview, which can be described as eco-bio-communitarian. I also consider the conceptions of moral status that arise here and how they tie in with the concepts above. In the following section, I highlight two main ways this relationality is expressed. The first is the interdependence between people and nature. The second is the interdependence between the past, present, and future, which involves a responsibility toward posterity. I then consider how these two expressions of relationality speak to the use of animals in traditional medicine, as conventional healers use it on the one hand and the current large-scale commodification of animals for this use on the other. I then conclude that the use of animals by traditional healers is in accord with an African environmental ethic; however, the large-scale commercial use is not.

Use of Animals for Medicine

Wild animals have been facing many threats, from sources that range from habitat loss to climate change and a variety of other factors. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the largest global environmental network that aims to develop sustainable solutions to ecological problems, provides us with a Red list of endangered species. This Red list is considered the world's most comprehensive inventory of the global conservation status of plant and animal species, and animals that fall on this list are at serious risk of extinction. The number of species on the IUCN red list currently totals over forty thousand animals (IUCN, 2022).

Currently, globally, the illegal exploitation of natural resources such as plants and animals is the world's fourth most significant crime sector, and it is growing at a rate 2-3 times faster than that of the global economy. It is estimated to be between 91 and 260 billion US dollars yearly (EIA, 2016, p.3). This has tremendous effects on those species targeted, many of them endangered or critically endangered, and

becoming more so because of the demand for them. The consequences of illegal wildlife trade are far-reaching – fuelling conflict (between individuals, groups, and entire nations), undermining governance and economic stability, and exploiting communities in various ways (EIA, 2016, p.3). As a criminal activity, it involves resources stolen from people and governments, and the corruption that allows such crime to flourish further undermines a stable society and economy. Additionally, it threatens the very existence of a wide range of wildlife species and the ecosystems in which they live.

Recently, there has been an increasing demand for animals, many of them on this IUCN Red list, for use in traditional medicine, both locally and internationally. The link between traditional medicine and the loss of certain species has become increasingly apparent. In Kenya, for example, 42 different animal species are used for nearly 30 other medicinal purposes, from STDs to coughs (Vats & Thomas, 2015, p.1). Typical animals or their parts sold throughout Southern and Western Africa for medicinal purposes include vultures, pythons, hornbills, aardvarks, bats and hippopotami (Alves & Rosa, 2013, p.23). In the past, the use of specific animals in traditional medicine was localised, known and practised only by a limited number of individuals or cultures. However, the globalisation of commerce, combined with the increased popularity of natural approaches to health worldwide, has created a level of demand that threatens the survival of many vulnerable wildlife species (Alves & Rosa, 2013, p.2). This trend bears important implications for the conservation of the many African species of animals on which traditional remedies are based, both locally and for use in foreign countries.

In Africa as a whole, the legal trade in protected species (both plant and animal) numbers 13.6 million, or an estimated 20.6 million kilograms of product between 2011 and 2022 (CITES, 2022, p.12). One of these legal avenues is the trade in African Lion bones to supply the substitute tiger bone market in East–Southeast Asia, where it is used in much of traditional Asian medicine (Williams et al, 2015, p.8). Since then, the sharp increase in the export of lion skeletons from South Africa to Southeast Asia has led to concerns that this can negatively affect

already vulnerable wild lion populations. In less than six months in 2012, about 400 lions' bones were legally shipped to Southeast Asia from South Africa (Williams et al., p.10), where the bones are used in bone-strengthening wine.

Illegal trade, however, is much more challenging to determine. In the sub-region of Southern Africa, we see a large-scale commodification of animals for unlawful export to other countries. Looking at the 2016 Environmental Investigation Agency report, we can see the current situation more clearly. The Environmental Investigation Agency investigate and campaign against environmental crime and abuse, and their reports summarise contemporary ecological crime and the measures to prevent it (EIA 2016).

While illegal rhino poaching is present in all southern African countries, some, in particular, stand out. In South Africa, the EIA report demonstrates that large quantities of rhino horn are still being trafficked out of the country and that the known rhino poaching cases have increased by 9000 per cent since 2007. In 2015 alone, 1175 available rhino poaching cases occurred in South Africa, with most horns being smuggled to Vietnam to be traded as tonics and medicines (EIA 2016, p. 35). In Kenya, in five years, 121.74kg of rhino horn had been seized in transit (EIA 2016, p 25). In the same period, 797.78 kg was seized or linked to Mozambique (EIA 2016, p.31). Estimated prices for rhino horn in 2018 were around 4808 USD per kilo (UNODC 2022:61). Similarly, an estimated 100,000 pangolins, which are the most trafficked animals in the world, are smuggled to Asia from South Africa each year (EIA 2016, p.63). In five years in Kenya, 500kg of scales were seized (UNIDC 2022:25). Their scales are used in much of Asian traditional medicine, but their meat is also considered a delicacy, and their skins are used to create leather products.

Moral Status in Ukama and Eco-Bio Communitarianism

Numerous endangered animals are threatened by the fact that they are used in traditional medicine. This use is widespread and contributes significantly to the illegal trade in animals, or even legally, such as in the case of lion bone. Having

demonstrated the problem of the trafficking of animals for use in traditional medicine as it stands in Southern Africa, I will explain what moral status is and how it is achieved through two concepts in African environmental ethics. The first one, as put forward by Murove, is the Shona concept of *Ukama*. Secondly, I will look at Tangwa's eco-bio-communitarian approach. I will then demonstrate that both thinkers emphasise the idea of relationality, both in physical space and across different timeframes, which I will exemplify more specifically in the next section, and finally apply to the use of animals in traditional medicine, both as employed by traditional healers, as well as in large-scale commercial use.

The study of moral status, broadly construed, looks at which individuals or entities are considered intrinsically morally valuable in some way and, therefore, are entitled to a particular treatment (Metz 2019, p.11). We can further differentiate between intrinsically valuable things (in themselves) rather than extrinsically practical (for some other purpose), hence something that can be morally *wronged* in some way (Metz 2019, p.11). Animals sold for commercial purposes are financially valuable, but what needs to be established is whether they are helpful and worthy of moral consideration. A case needs to be made that animals are worth more than their financial value, and both Murove and Tangwa's views support this.

Firstly, the Shona concept of *Ukama* is expressed by Murove (2004). *Ukama* means relatedness. It provides us with an understanding of reality where the relationships and interdependence between individuals are essential components of existence (Murove 2004, p.196). In his own words, "(b)eing in *Ukama* implies that there are no entities that are self-sufficient and enjoy existence independently of other entities" (Murove 2004, p.202). In other words, being in *Ukama* recognises that individuals do not and cannot exist independently of each other; instead, there is an essential interdependence between us and the rest of the world. In this sense, it is similar to the idea of Ubuntu, where a person is a person through others, and we cannot exist as a person on our own; instead, we depend on others for our personhood. *Ukama* is similar to this and is often, or perhaps more commonly interpreted as, a relationship between people and not only people currently living

in the present but also those that have existed in the past and those that will exist in the future. Thus, it is not bound by time; instead, it “...advances the idea that there is a unifying principle that links the identity of a person or community not only to past generations but also to future generations” (Murove 2004, p.201).

The concept of *Ukama* can also be widened to include not just other people but the world around us, making it particularly relevant for providing perspectives on how animals are treated and used. *Ukama* can consist of the interdependence between people, animals, plants, and the natural world. In this widened sense of *Ukama*, human existence gets its meaning not only from relationships with other humans. Instead, human existence is only seen as appropriately meaningful when it is in a continuum with everything else that exists (Behrens, 2014, p.73), such as animals and the environment in general. This means that moral status is attributed to humans and all other aspects of the natural world, including animals. This moral status can also be extended into the past and future, to generations before or generations yet to come, as will be demonstrated more concretely in the next section. What this would mean concerning the moral status of animals is that insofar as we can have a relationship with them, they are beings that can be righted or wronged and must be treated accordingly.

The second idea we find in African environmental ethics, particularly relevant to our treatment of animals, is the *Nso* worldview, which Tangwa (2004) refers to as eco-bio-communitarian. Within this view, “the distinction between plants, animals, and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, matter and spirit, the communal and the individual, is a slim and flexible one... in short, that (people) are more disposed toward an attitude of live and let live” (Tangwa 2004, p.389). According to Tangwa, the pre-colonial traditional African metaphysical outlook recognises the interconnectedness and interdependence between people, animals, and the rest of the environment. This leads to a more respectful and cautious account of how animals should be treated. This would then also lead us to consider plants, animals, and the environment as things we can consider ethically. Furthermore, in the *Nso* worldview, human beings are not seen as having any

special privilege bestowed upon them that gives them the right to own, dominate or exploit the rest of the animate and inanimate world around them (Tangwa 2004, pp.389-390). Because the distinctions between humans and nature are so slim and flexible, humans do not necessarily have any overriding rights over nature. Here, we also see a commonality with the idea of *Ukama*, that relationality plays a central role in establishing what it means to be a human.

The eco-bio-communitarian view also holds that animals have moral status since humans alone do not have any exceptional standing above them. Tangwa (2004) acknowledges that this broad view is quite open and a rather untidy collection of thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs (Tangwa 2004, p.989). Yet, it nonetheless indicates that animals would have some moral status (though not necessarily the same as humans) and need to be treated with respect both in themselves and because of their interdependence with humans.

Relationality in African Environmental Ethics

In both Murove's work, when looking at the concept of *Ukama* and in Tangwa's description of an African worldview as eco-bio-communitarian, African environmental ethics is relational. These views do not separate humans from the rest of nature; instead, they give us an ethical obligation to live in harmony with the natural world and to respect it. As Bénézet Bujo (2009, p.282) says about an African concept of reality (which in turn guides ethical behaviour): "All beings – organic and inorganic, living and inanimate, personal and impersonal, visible and invisible – act together to manifest the universal solidarity of creation". It is not so much the individual entities that are ethically important (though they can have value in themselves) but rather the relationships between them.

This idea of relationality is beneficial in contrast with more Western views, especially considering animals and the natural environment. When we look at what is required for ethical consideration in classic Western accounts of animal ethics, the focus tends to be on specific characteristics of individual entities. This is exemplified by the most popular approaches to animal ethics: Singer's (1975)

utilitarianism, with its focus on sentience, or the ability of an individual to suffer and experience pain, and Regan's (1983) rights-based view, with an emphasis on practical autonomy, or the ability to reason and have some notion of oneself. Both of them argue that certain qualities are valuable and ethically relevant. If a person or an animal has this quality, we should give them ethical consideration, which is standard in Western approaches. In contrast, Bujo (2009, p.296) summarises the African moral view on animals: "It is not other beings' sensitivity to pain, or their capacity to communicate, that establish an ethical obligation for human beings towards nature. The cosmic community, including all beings, not just animals, is the foundation of African ecological ethics".

As we see from this and Murove and Tangwa's work, their ethic is not concerned with individual entities, be they organic or inorganic, fauna or flora, human or non-human animal, and the qualities they possess. This does not necessarily imply that individual entities have no worth in themselves, apart from the relationships they find themselves in. Still, an African ethic is less orientated or focused on separate entities and their specific qualities and more focused on the relationships between these entities. To summarise:

More attention is paid to the processes and forces that flow between entities than the entities themselves. Emphasis falls on relating rather than existing since the relationship's quality and nature determine whether the whole will sink or swim. The relationship between any two entities affects all of life since (according to this view) all life is bonded (Peterson, 2004, p.172).

A person is not just an individual but an individual with others. Similarly, a lake is not just a lake; with everything else, it is a source of water, a habitat, and many other things for plants, animals, and humans. If we take the example of a lake being polluted, from a Western perspective, the lake does not get hurt or suffer from being polluted; it is not the type of thing that can, from a Western perspective, be ethically wronged since it cannot reason or feel pain. We might argue that this pollution causes harm to people, but still, in this view, only people can be ethically

wronged, not the lake itself. But considered from an African perspective, the relationship between that lake and everything else does get damaged; it influences the plant and animal life around and inside it, animals drink from it and die, and humans who depend on it no longer have it as a source of water; the relational consequences are multiple. Even though a lake cannot feel wrongdoing done to it, it can be harmed in this relational sense because its connection with the rest of the world gets damaged or severed. We can argue that even something inanimate like a lake has moral status and can be ethically wronged. Similarly, just because an animal might not have the ability to reason or any other qualities deemed necessary by more Western approaches does not mean they have no moral status. In this relational view, things have their individuality, but their relations are more critical. Therefore, even something that would not be considered from an ethical viewpoint in Western views can be considered from an African one.

Thus, relationality forms the foundation for an African reality and is essential to having a meaningful human existence. What this implies for an African animal ethic or an African environmental ethic more broadly is that this relationality can (for my work at least) roughly be broken down into relations between people and nature (animals in this particular case, though it includes any aspect of the natural world), and relations between past, present and future generations. I will look at these relations separately, starting with the interdependence of people and nature, or what I will refer to as relations in space. If our understanding of reality involves thinking of all of nature, ourselves included, as interdependent, we cannot view ourselves separately or in any way above the rest of the natural world. To Behrens (2014, p.70), “(It is) a belief that all (humans) are part of, rather than set apart from, nature”.

All of this leads to a solid foundation for ethics, considering animals in particular as things that have moral status and can thus be considered ethically. Humans, animals, plants, and other natural objects get their value from the relationships between them, and each thing depends on the whole for its existence. Any disrespect or ill-treatment of any single part damages these relationships and

thereby damages the whole. This demonstrates the interdependence of humans, animals, and nature, as things exist near each other simultaneously, with relations between them and dependencies on one another as part of what makes a fulfilled human being. Ethical responsibilities are also owed to each part of this system.

The second form these relationships can take is the relationality between past, present and future generations or the responsibility people have to posterity, which I refer to as relationality in time. Many accounts of African ethics provide us with a moral obligation to generations past and generations to come since the belief in ancestors implies “a continuity and interdependence between generations” (Behrens, 2014, p.80); hence, past and future generations have moral status. We can also see this relationality across time in the concept of *Ukama*. According to Murove:

Through *Ukama* between the present and the past, those living now owe their existence to their ancestors because the past has an inescapable bearing on the present. The individual’s identity is the consequent derivative of *Ukama* with the past. The present commitment to ethical living arises from the urge to contribute positively to future generations. It also follows that virtuous acts done with sensitivity to the well-being of future generations will promote the survival of *Ukama* in the future. Actions of the present generation have a causal influence on future generations in the same way that the past has a causal effect on the present (Murove, 2004, p.203).

This interdependence between generations runs from the past to the present and the future. They are all interconnected. This contrasts heavily with much of Western ethics, where there are many debates on how we can justify and argue for moral status or ethical obligations to the next generation, who is not yet there and thus do not possess any of the usual qualities for ethical consideration, such as sentience or reason. But in African thought, this type of question does not even arise (Murove, 2004, p.81). We owe future generations for the same reason we owe nature and the environment, as in this view, the past, present and future are all interrelated, and we are dependent on this interrelatedness. From

this interrelatedness, we get our ethical obligations towards future generations. Therefore, we see that relationality is central to this African ethic, both in time and space and is particularly prevalent in the eco-bio-communitarian Nso worldview and the Shona concept of *Ukama*.

The Use of Animals in Practice by Traditional Healers

To return to the original question, how would the current use of animals in traditional medicine hold up against an African environmental ethic? We can apply it firstly to how traditional medicine is ideally practised by traditional healers in Southern Africa and then to how animals are currently being used commercially for the same purpose in both legal and illegal international trade.

For centuries, traditional healers have been collecting and using local plants and animals for use in traditional medicine without threatening the population dynamics of the species. This is to a degree because of the low level of harvesting previously required, as fewer people needed them, but also mainly due to the traditional healers' beliefs (Alves & Rosa, 2013, p.4). "African traditional healing is based on the belief that the land's natural resources have nurtured humans and all forms of life since the beginning of time" (Ross, 2010, p.47). Humans are a part of nature and stand in relation to nature. In the same way, an individual cannot exist successfully without nature when you have an illness, and it cannot be cured in isolation from nature. This means that herbs, wood, bones, other parts of animals, and even certain rocks are used in the healing process because humans are part of nature, which is involved in curing them.

For traditional healers, "(t)he natural environment and the people who inhabit the environment are believed to possess intrinsic worth. African traditional healers respect the environment as a sacred entity and emphasise the need to preserve it for future generations" (Ross, 2010, p.47). This creates an interaction with nature that recognises the moral status of entities in the natural world and the interrelatedness between humans and nature. In these foundations for traditional medicine in Southern Africa, we see both the respect for the interrelatedness

and interdependence of humans and nature, in the dependence of humans and nature with an understanding that humans are part of nature and cannot be treated separately from it.

We can also see the interdependence of present and future generations being taken into consideration in the acknowledgement that resources need to be used in such a way as to ensure they are available for use by future generations. We see this when Bujo says:

(T)he African traditional healer does not only embrace the community of the living and the dead but also the natural elements such as animal bones, teeth and hair, plants, pieces of wood and minerals to emphasise that effective healing is only possible when reconciliation with the cosmos has taken place (2009, p.284).

We can see then that, ideally, traditional healers keep to an African environmental ethic focused on relationality. Because of the respect for the environment underlying this view, when animals are used, they are used sparingly and respectfully and only for particular purposes. And this respect goes beyond things currently existing but also considers past and future generations.

Criticism of Current Commercial Use

However, when we look at the current commercialisation of animals for use in traditional medicine, relationality in space and time is needed. I first consider the notion of interdependence of humans and nature, or relationality in space, to see how it aligns with using animals in traditional medicine. This is not ethical if we look at the current use of animals in conventional medicine for profit. Let's take the case of the lion bone trade, which is both legal and profitable. It completely disregards individual lions, wild lion populations, and the effects the trade has on the environment and communities. It completely ignores the interdependence and interrelationality between us and nature, and it seems that no or minimal moral status is awarded to individual lions here. Because the whole gains its value through the relation between the parts, when damage is done to an individual or a part, the

damage is done to the whole as well. The total is automatically not respected if respect is not paid to one aspect.

The lack of concern for interdependence between humans and nature becomes increasingly apparent when we look at illegal natural resource exploitation. Illegal trapping, killing, and exporting of animals fuel conflict between individuals and entire nations. It undermines governance and economic stability and exploits communities that rely on animals and the environment to survive. Even if one takes the concept of *Ukama* in its narrowest sense, where only relations between people are deemed necessary, the illegal animal trade damages these relationships. It advances a dangerous criminal component of society, provides ample opportunities for corruption, and endangers the lives of people and animals directly and indirectly.

It seems clear then that the animal trade ignores relationality as the interdependence of humans and nature. Further, it also ignores relationality in time or our responsibility towards future generations. Wiredu (1994, p.46) sums up our commitment to posterity perfectly:

Of all the duties owed the ancestors, none is more imperious than that of husbanding the resources of the land to leave it in good shape for posterity. In this moral scheme, the rights of the unborn play such a cardinal role that the debate in Western philosophy would nonplus any traditional African as to the existence of such rights. In the upshot, there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obligations to both ancestors and descendants, which motivates environmental carefulness, all things being equal.

The current large-scale use of animals in traditional medicine for profit shows almost no concern to the next generation. The everyday use of these animals in conventional medicine on such a large scale does not consider that the extinction of these valuable species will directly harm future generations. Since 2007, there has been a 9000% increase in rhino poaching, and the Western Black

and the Northern White rhino became extinct in the last few years. Since the 1970s, average populations of vertebrates have been more than halved. So already, this responsibility towards future generations has been ignored, and in the case of animals, we have less than half of them remaining to leave to posterity. Again, we see this idea of relationality, the past having a direct causal link to the present and the present a direct causal link to the future. And since the past, present, and future are all interrelated and interdependent, any damage to the part is damage to the whole, or in other words, damage to the future is the same as damage to the present. Damage to future generations is damage to ourselves and our ancestors as well. Far from ensuring that resources will be available to future generations, as traditional healers do, there is a complete disregard for the environment and the animals trafficked for the same use.

Conclusion

To conclude, African environmental ethics strongly focus on relationality, as demonstrated through the Shona concept of *Ukama* and the *Nso* worldview, which can be described as eco-bio-communitarian. This relationality is expressed through the interdependence of humans and nature and as a responsibility towards posterity. This relationality and the responsibility accompanying it is defined in traditional healers' practice, where there is a recognition that healing can only occur when we acknowledge the interdependence between humans, past, present, and future, and the environment. However, the large-scale commercial use of animals for profit is incompatible with an African environmental ethic. It fails to respect the interdependence between humans and nature and to acknowledge our moral obligations towards future generations. Therefore, the illegal trafficking of animals and the legal means of profiting from commercialising animals for use in traditional medicine conflict with an African environmental ethic.

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