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Water as a Source of Life and Death: A Comparative Analysis of Flood Myths among the Luo and Kalenjin Communities in Kenya

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to address the limited scholarly engagement with African flood myths, particularly those of the Kalenjin and Luo communities of Kenya, despite their rich ecological, moral, and cosmological insights. Existing ecocritical studies have largely privileged Western mythologies, leaving Indigenous African narratives under-theorised within discussions of human–environment relations and contemporary ecological crises. The study adopts a qualitative comparative methodology grounded in ecocriticism, analysing selected oral accounts and published versions of Kalenjin and Luo flood myths associated with Lake Bogoria and Simbi Nyaima. Close textual reading is combined with contextual interpretation to examine symbolic representations of water and their ethical implications. The findings reveal that in both traditions, water functions as a moral and ecological agent that simultaneously sustains life and enacts destruction. Floods are represented as responses to human arrogance, inhospitality, and ecological transgression, while survival and renewal are linked to humility, hospitality, and moral balance. The myths operate as mnemonic landscapes and ethical frameworks that encode communal environmental values and regulate human conduct toward nature. The study concludes that Kalenjin and Luo flood myths articulate an Indigenous environmental ethic in which ecological harmony is inseparable from moral responsibility. It recommends the integration of African oral narratives into contemporary ecocritical discourse and environmental education, highlighting their significance in offering culturally grounded perspectives for addressing climate change and promoting sustainable human–environment relationships.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, African oral narratives, flood myths, environmental ethics, climate change.

INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the problem of how flood myths among the Luo and Kalenjin communities of Kenya have been interpreted largely as etiological or folkloric narratives, with insufficient attention to the ecological ethics they encode. While these myths have traditionally been read as explanations for the origins of water bodies such as Simbi Nyaima and Lake Bogoria, their deeper environmental meanings, particularly their representations of moral responsibility, ecological balance, and human–nature relations, remain underexplored. This paper, therefore, examines how Luo and Kalenjin flood myths articulate Indigenous ecological ethics through symbolic constructions of water as both a life-sustaining and life-threatening force.

Flood myths, as forms of oral literature, emerge from communities' lived experiences and sustained interactions with their environments. They function as repositories of ecological memory, encoding cultural responses to environmental change and transmitting lessons about survival, reverence for nature, and the consequences of ecological transgression. As Cha (2007) observes, the environment (comprising air, water, and land) profoundly shapes cultural expression and frequently finds articulation in oral narratives. Similarly, Sone (2018) argues that folklore is rooted in recurring human situations shaped by specific environmental contexts, making it a vital site for examining how communities conceptualise and respond to natural forces.

The urgency of re-examining such narratives is heightened in the context of contemporary climate change, where water-related disasters have become increasingly frequent and destructive. The United Nations (2020) identifies climate change as fundamentally a water crisis, manifested through floods, rising sea levels, droughts, and other hydrological extremes. In Kenya, recurrent flooding has resulted in significant loss of life, displacement, and environmental degradation, underscoring the relevance of Indigenous knowledge systems in framing ecological risk and resilience.

Human settlements have historically clustered around water sources, a reality reflected in the prominence of water in oral art forms such as myths, proverbs, and fables. Drawing on ecocriticism, this study analyses how Luo and Kalenjin flood myths narrate water's transformative and destructive capacities, revealing culturally embedded ethical frameworks that govern human relationships with the natural world.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars largely converge on the view that myths arise from humanity's enduring effort to interpret and negotiate its relationship with the universe, particularly in contexts where natural phenomena resist or precede scientific explanation. Podolecka (2021) situates myth at the foundation of religious and cultural systems, emphasising its role in articulating a community's worldview. This perspective aligns with African oral traditions, where myths are closely tied to the observation of the natural environment, social relations, and historical experiences. However, while Podolecka foregrounds myth's cosmological and symbolic functions, Africanist scholars tend to emphasise its groundedness in lived ecological realities.

Flood myths, in particular, exemplify this intersection of nature, society, and history. They encode environmental events within moral and social frameworks, linking natural disasters to human behaviour. This view resonates with Kimani's (2010) argument that oral art forms mediate a dynamic relationship between individuals and their environment by articulating cosmologies that seek balance between body, soul, and nature. From an ecocritical perspective, such narratives function not merely as explanatory tales but as ethical commentaries on human conduct within ecological systems.

Definitions of myth further reveal both convergence and divergence in scholarly approaches. Spence (2014) defines myth as a narrative about the actions of gods or supernatural entities, intended to illustrate the connection between humans and the cosmos, with a focus on its spiritual and metaphysical

aspects. In contrast, Bascom's (1965) definition foregrounds myth's epistemological authority, describing it as a prose narrative regarded as a truthful account of events in the remote past. Finnegan (2016) bridges these positions by noting that, although distinctions between myths and folktales may be blurred in some cultures, many African societies attribute particular seriousness to myths because of their association with divine agency or with enduring physical landscapes such as lakes and craters.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that African flood myths operate simultaneously as sacred narratives, historical memory, and ecological instruction. This synthesis provides a critical foundation for an ecocritical reading of Luo and Kalenjin flood myths, allowing the present study to examine how these narratives construct water not only as a cosmological force but also as an ethical agent that regulates human–environment relations.

This study is anchored in ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary theoretical framework within the environmental humanities that examines the relationship between literature, culture, and the natural environment. Originating in the 1990s as part of the broader environmental humanities, ecocriticism interrogates how texts represent nature and how such representations shape ethical, cultural, and political responses to ecological concerns. As Glotfelty and Fromm (1996, p. 18) define it, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," while Buell (1995) further emphasises that environmental texts demonstrate an awareness of nature as a presence requiring representation and ethical engagement. These theoretical perspectives foreground the role of narrative in constructing environmental meaning and moral responsibility.

Within this framework, oral flood myths are treated as both literary and historical–cultural artefacts that encode Indigenous ecological knowledge. Ecocriticism thus provides the conceptual lens through which the study examines how Luo and Kalenjin flood myths articulate relationships between humans, water, and the broader environment, particularly in contexts of ecological disruption.

This theoretical grounding enables the analysis to treat the selected myths not as mere folklore but as texts that actively mediate environmental ethics, cultural memory, and human–nature reciprocity, revealing how water functions as a moral and ecological agent in Indigenous Kenyan traditions.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis of selected Luo and Kalenjin flood myths. The data consist of orally transmitted narratives collected from secondary ethnographic sources and published compilations of Kenyan oral literature, specifically myths associated with Simbi Nyaima and Lake Bogoria. Texts were selected on the basis of their explicit engagement with flooding, moral causality, and community survival or destruction. The analysis involved close reading and thematic coding to identify recurrent patterns in representations of water, human behaviour, and ecological consequences. These themes were then interpreted through an ecocritical lens to examine how natural disasters are framed as ethical and cosmological events rather than purely natural phenomena.

This study examines two flood myths: the Lake Simbi Nyaima myth from the Luo community and the Lake Bogoria myth from the Tugen community. The selection of the Luo and Tugen communities is informed by their shared Nilotic heritage and long-standing historical relationships with water-rich landscapes. While the Luo trace their migration southwards along the Nile to the Lake Victoria basin, the Tugen, part of the wider Kalenjin cluster, migrated eastwards through Ethiopia before settling in Kenya's Rift Valley, particularly around Lakes Baringo and Bogoria. These distinct yet comparable ecological settings provide a productive basis for examining how flood myths articulate environmental ethics.

Primary data were collected through oral retellings narrated by purposively selected informants from the

respective communities. Informants were chosen based on three criteria: (1) advanced age or recognised knowledge of community history and oral traditions, (2) demonstrated experience in storytelling or participation in cultural practices, and (3) prolonged residence within the community, particularly in areas historically associated with the water bodies referenced in the myths. This selection strategy was intended to ensure the reliability and cultural authenticity of the narratives.

Data collection took place within community settings, including homesteads and communal gathering spaces, where storytelling customarily occurs. Oral versions of the myths were recorded through audio note-taking and detailed transcription immediately after narration. To enhance validity, multiple versions of each myth were collected and compared to identify recurring narrative elements, motifs, and moral themes. These oral accounts were then cross-referenced with published literary versions, notably Grace Ogot's *Simbi Nyaima: The Village that Sank* (1983, 2018) and William Boruett's *Give the Devil His Due* (1988), to establish continuity and variation across oral and written forms.

By prioritising oral retellings and triangulating them with published sources, the study captures the dynamic nature of oral tradition while ensuring a methodologically robust representation of living ecological narratives. In doing so, it clearly distinguishes between theory and method, demonstrating how ecocriticism guides both the selection and interpretation of data and enabling a systematic analysis of flood myths as narratives that mediate environmental ethics and cultural memory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Myth 1: The Simbi Nyaima Story

There exist multiple versions of the Simbi Nyaima flood myth, but they all revolve around a central figure: a mysterious, supernatural woman whose appearance and behaviour trigger a moral test for the villagers. Despite variations in detail, the core narrative remains consistent with this woman, who is mistreated by a community during a time of abundance, and, as a result, the village is cursed and submerged, leading to the creation of Lake Simbi Nyaima.

Version One

In this version, one cloudy afternoon, a foul-smelling woman entered a village called Kolonde, near the present-day Lake Simbi Nyaima. She found the villagers engaged in celebration: men were drinking traditional beer and feasting on roasted meat while the women ensured the festivities continued uninterrupted.

The woman, described as strange-looking and unpleasant-smelling, asked for food and shelter. The villagers, repulsed by her appearance and scent, ignored her request. Instead, able-bodied men were ordered to forcefully eject her from the venue and escort her out of the village. Though food was plentiful and the feast was at its climax, none was offered to her.

Dejected, the woman moved to a neighbouring village where she was welcomed by a young woman and her children. The stranger was given food and allowed to warm herself by the fire. After eating, she asked her host if she was married. The woman replied that her husband was attending the feast in the village the stranger had just left.

The old woman then asked the young mother to fetch her husband. However, upon learning who had sent for him, the man slapped his wife and sent her away in anger. The woman returned home and recounted what had happened. The mysterious visitor then warned her to leave the village immediately with her children. The young woman obeyed.

No sooner had they left the village than a fierce rainstorm began, accompanied by terrifying lightning. It rained without pause for 24 hours, flooding the entire area. The village that had refused hospitality was completely submerged, its people and animals lost beneath the waters. It is believed that this was the curse of the old woman, and it marks the origin of Lake Simbi Nyaima (Hayombe et al., 2014).

Version Two

In another version, set during a time of famine, a poor, hungry old woman journeyed eastward in search of food. She carried with her rain-making medicine, hoping to offer it in exchange for sustenance. She arrived at a large homestead where a beer party was underway. She first approached a woman who was outside the main gathering, and this woman brought her into the area where the men were drinking.

However, the revellers, already drunk, dismissed her rudely. She pleaded with them to let her stay, promising that she possessed something of great value: medicine that could make someone powerful. The drunken men ignored her and told her to leave with her medicine.

The woman who had first received her tried to help again. The old stranger instructed her to gather her children and anything she valued, warning her that disaster was imminent. The woman heeded the advice.

After walking about a mile away, they turned to look back. A black cloud had enveloped the village. Moments later, the entire area was submerged in water. Everyone at the party perished. Thus, the story of Simbi Nyaima continues to be told to this day.

Ecocritical Analysis of the Simbi Nyaima Myth

The myth of Simbi Nyaima offers a profound narrative where nature, morality, and the supernatural intersect. From an ecocritical standpoint, this myth is not merely an act of divine punishment but a deeply symbolic reflection on the consequences of social decay and the disruption of ecological balance.

Central to the myth is the representation of nature as a moral agent. In both oral and written versions, the supernatural woman, often interpreted as an embodiment of nature or its spiritual custodian, responds to greed, inhospitality, and social excess by unleashing a catastrophic flood. Nature is thus portrayed as active and responsive, enforcing what may be described as ecological justice when human moral systems collapse. This conception of nature as a moral and spiritual agent resonates with Wessing's (2006) analysis of Javanese cosmology, where humans, ancestors, and nature spirits constitute an interdependent moral community, reinforcing the view that environmental disturbances are often culturally interpreted as responses to ethical imbalance.

The flood functions as both punishment and transformation. While it annihilates the village, it simultaneously gives rise to Lake Simbi Nyaima, inscribing moral memory onto the landscape. The lake becomes a permanent ecological marker of past transgression, illustrating how natural features operate as repositories of cultural memory. Water here is ambivalent: a force of destruction that also reorders space and meaning.

A further ecocritical dimension emerges through the theme of hospitality and reciprocity. The villagers' refusal to offer food and shelter signifies more than social discourtesy; it represents a rupture in the reciprocal ethic that governs human–human and human–nature relations in many African cosmologies. The ensuing flood restores balance by correcting this ethical breach.

The myth also foregrounds gendered ecological mediation. The compassionate woman who extends hospitality survives alongside her children, embodying restraint, care, and relational ethics. From an ecofeminist perspective, her survival contrasts sharply with the excess and moral blindness of the male villagers, suggesting that sustainable modes of living are aligned with attentiveness and care rather than consumption.

Finally, the recurrent assertion that the story is "heard to this day" frames the lake itself as a mnemonic landscape. Nature becomes a narrative archive, continuously reminding the community of the consequences of ecological and moral failure. In this way, the myth positions the environment not as a silent backdrop but as a storyteller embedded in place.

Overall, the Simbi Nyaima myth articulates a powerful ecological warning. It frames nature as an ethical force that responds to human conduct and demands reciprocity, humility, and care, which are values that resonate strongly within contemporary ecological debates.

Myth 2: The Origin of Lake Bogoria

Around 20 generations ago, there existed a village where Lake Bogoria presently stands. In the village, there lived two clans, the Saraki and the Sogomo. One day, the Saraki clan decided to hold a competition that entailed filling wells with milk. Women were to milk the goats, while men milked cows.

In another version, the story goes that there was a party in the village, and when an elderly woman turned up at the first homestead that belonged to a member of the Saraki clan, she was given the placenta of a goat, which she could not consume. The elderly woman ended up being welcomed into the home of Sogomo, who offered her food and a comfortable place to sleep.

That night, God appeared to Sogomo in a dream and told him to gather his family members, including his daughters married to the members of the Saraki clan. In the dead of the night, a heavy rain began to fall. Sogomo was directed to lead his family and livestock out of the village on a dry path that led southwards towards the region they presently inhabit around Emining, Baringo County.

The rain fell heavily and submerged the entire village. To date, no one lives on the shores of the lake, and those who have delayed late into the evening say voices can be heard from the lake; voices of women calling out to their children or mooing cows.

In Boruett's version in *Give the devil his due*, the Sogomo were generous, kind and humble. The Saraki clan was arrogant, proud and unkind. The rain that fell that night was so heavy that it shook the ground to the point of causing jets of hot water (geysers) to shoot up from the ground. The geysers are presently the feature that makes Lake Bogoria Game Reserve famous among tourists from all over the world, besides the thousands of flamingoes that inhabit the lake.

In another version, the narration goes that the houses of the Sogomo had not been touched despite the village being inundated. So, when the Sogomo family woke up the next day, they found themselves on an island. Leading out of the island to the mainland was a narrow path that Sogomo was instructed to follow as he led his family out of the island. As the Sogomo family went through the path, the earth behind them formed a depression that was filled with water. By the time they reached the mainland, the narrow path had been filled with water, and that is how the lake was formed.

Ecocritical Analysis of the Lake Bogoria Myth

The myth of Lake Bogoria's origin reveals a deep interconnection between human ethics, ecological disruption, and the moral symbolism embedded in the natural landscape. Viewed through the lens of ecocriticism, this myth acts as a narrative map that encodes environmental memory, communal values, and cosmological justice into a physical geography still visible today.

The myth presents nature as a witness and a punisher. Like the Simbi Nyaima myth, the Lake Bogoria narrative positions nature as both responsive and moralised. The catastrophic flood that drowns the village is triggered not by arbitrary environmental change but by moral failure, specifically, arrogance, pride, and inhospitality, primarily exhibited by the Saraki clan. The heavy rain and sudden geological activity (including the emergence of geysers) are framed as divine retribution, reinforcing an ecocritical idea that the environment participates in and responds to human behaviour. The flood is not merely natural but supernatural, a sentient force that redraws the land according to the ethical choices of its inhabitants.

The transformation of the village into a lake, with geysers and flamingoes now marking the site, ties myth to geography. The natural features of Lake

Bogoria are not just tourist attractions because they are embodied memories of a historical and moral event. In this way, the myth "writes" history onto the land, making the environment itself an archive of moral action. The ongoing reports of voices from the lake, ghostly echoes of drowned villagers, suggest that the land retains a haunting memory, keeping alive the consequences of ecological and social misalignment.

In the myth, there are ethical contrasts and ethical survival. The juxtaposition between the Sogomo and Saraki clans illustrates a classic moral duality: humility and kindness vs arrogance and selfishness. The Sogomo are rewarded not only with survival but also with guidance, showing that ecological salvation is tied to ethical behaviour. Their escape route, described as a dry path or narrow passage, resembles motifs found in other global flood myths (for instance, Noah's Ark or the parting of the Red Sea), where chosen individuals are granted passage through chaos due to moral merit. The "narrow path" functions as a symbolic lifeline between ecological catastrophe and ethical clarity, reinforcing the idea that moral integrity leads to environmental harmony.

The myth also embeds geological features such as geysers and depressions filled with water within its narrative structure, attributing their origin to divine or supernatural action. In doing so, it offers a mytho-ecological explanation for natural phenomena, emphasizing how the land's current form is a product of not only physical forces but also moral and social dynamics. This aligns with ecocriticism's interest in how landscapes acquire narrative and symbolic meaning in cultural memory.

The geysers, which draw visitors today, are framed in the myth as aftershocks of divine anger, a reminder that beauty in the landscape may also have tragic origins.

Finally, the story functions as a vehicle for transmitting ecological and social values across generations. It serves as a warning against pride, a call to kindness, and an illustration of how communal harmony with nature ensures survival. It educates its audience about the dangers of disrupting the balance between human societies and their environment. By linking myth to place, the narrative encourages an ethic of environmental mindfulness, a recognition that what we do to each other and to nature echoes through the land and through time.

The Lake Bogoria myth, rich in moral and environmental symbolism, reflects the community's attempt to understand and narrate its relationship with nature. The lake becomes a moral landscape, shaped by divine justice and human choices. Through the framework of ecocriticism, this myth reveals how oral traditions encode ethical codes into geography, teaching that the survival of a people depends as much on their social virtues as on their environmental stewardship.

Discussion

The ecocritical analysis of the Simbi Nyaima and Lake Bogoria myths reveals layered narratives that situate human morality, ecological disruption, and cultural memory within natural landscapes. These Kenyan flood myths are more than etiological tales explaining the origins of lakes; they are ecological allegories and ethical cartographies, mapping out how communities historically have encoded environmental consciousness and moral norms in oral traditions.

A recurring finding is the portrayal of nature as a moral agent. Both myths centralise water, particularly floods, not as neutral or accidental forces, but as active responses to human ethical failure. In the Simbi Nyaima myth, the flood is released by a supernatural woman whose rejection serves as a catalyst for destruction, which is an act of ecological justice. Similarly, in the Lake Bogoria myth, geological and meteorological changes (geysers, rain, the sinking of a village) are framed as reactions to arrogance, wastefulness, and inhospitality. These narratives suggest that ecological catastrophe results not from chance, but from spiritual and moral imbalance, resonating with ecocriticism's emphasis on the agency of nature in human affairs.

The myths are also examples of mnemonic landscapes, where geographical features (lakes, geysers, depressions) serve as embodied memory sites. They preserve communal lessons, instilling reverence for nature and reinforcing taboos. This function is echoed in other world myths, such as the biblical flood, the Gilgamesh epic, and the Atrahasis tale, where divine judgment and environmental transformation are intimately connected. The common motifs of supernatural warnings, rain-induced floods, survivors chosen for their morality, and the transformation of land into sacred geography underscore a shared mythic grammar that spans cultures.

One particularly rich motif is the old woman as a divine envoy, a figure that traverses both Simbi Nyaima and Lake Bogoria myths. Her presence evokes the archetype of the "hag" or wise woman, a symbol of natural wisdom and moral clarity. Often mistreated or ignored, she functions as a litmus test for a community's moral health. Her dismissal triggers the flood, and her recognition brings salvation. This feminine figure, connected to the sacredness of water and the womb, aligns with ecofeminist readings that associate women and water with creation, care, and sustainability. The amniotic symbolism of water and the idea of "breaking waters" before birth reinforce the dual nature of water in these myths, as both destroyer and source of life.

Additionally, these myths foreground hospitality and ecological reciprocity as central values. The denial of food or shelter to a stranger, particularly during times of plenty, is framed not just as a social failure but as a rupture in the cosmological order. In traditional African cosmologies, moral behaviour is not anthropocentric; it encompasses responsibilities to spiritual forces, ancestors, and the environment. The myths suggest that the health of ecosystems is directly tied to the health of social relations, which is an idea deeply consonant with ecocritical principles.

The saved characters, such as a mother and her children, a clan leader and his livestock, Noah and his ark, are symbolic bearers of continuity and ethical renewal. Their survival often involves forewarning, humility, and a willingness to act in accordance with divine or natural wisdom. The recurring motif of a narrow path, an ark, or a dry escape route affirms the idea that moral clarity can carve a way out of chaos. Notably, livestock and family are preserved as foundational units of post-flood renewal, reflecting not just subsistence but a holistic vision of life's continuity.

While local in form, these myths intersect with universal structures of deluge mythology. As Witzel et al. (2008) note, flood myths across cultures often feature similar motifs, divine warning, punishment through water, survival through obedience, and the emergence of a new moral or ecological order. The Kenyan myths, however, also embed uniquely African values such as the sacredness of milk, the taboo against consuming the placenta, and the symbolic significance of livestock, hence grounding them firmly in indigenous worldviews.

Finally, the myths serve a pedagogical function. As Ayayo and Odeck (1980) argue, African oral narratives are vehicles for transmitting ecological ethics, religious belief, and moral responsibility. They offer cognitive maps for living in harmony with the land and with one another, warning against behaviours that bring about imbalance and affirming those that sustain life.

In sum, the myths of Simbi Nyaima and Lake Bogoria are powerful literary and ecological texts. They show that in African oral traditions, nature is not merely background but actor, not just space but story. Through floods, women, and water, these myths articulate a cosmology where environmental justice, spiritual order, and social morality are inextricably linked. Their relevance today is heightened by the ecological crises facing contemporary societies, making them not relics of the past but urgent calls for a renewed ethics of environmental care and community responsibility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study has examined the flood myths of Simbi Nyaima and Lake Bogoria through an ecocritical lens to demonstrate how water is represented as both life-sustaining and destructive within Luo and Kalenjin oral traditions. The analysis shows that these myths function as ecological texts in which natural disasters are directly linked to ethical failure, particularly inhospitality, arrogance, and the breakdown of communal responsibility. In both traditions, water operates as a moral agent that responds to human conduct, reinforcing the interdependence between social order and environmental balance.

The findings further reveal that flood narratives encode models of survival grounded in humility, obedience, and care. Survivors are not randomly chosen but are those whose actions align with communal and cosmological ethics, underscoring a worldview in which environmental continuity is inseparable from moral behaviour. Additionally, the transformation of villages into lakes embeds cultural memory within physical landscapes, turning natural sites into enduring reminders of human responsibility and ecological accountability.

Comparatively, the Luo and Kalenjin myths exhibit strong thematic convergence, particularly in their portrayal of water's dual capacity to sustain or destroy depending on human actions. These shared patterns highlight a common ecological ethic within Nilotic oral traditions.

Recommendations: The study underscores the relevance of African oral narratives for contemporary environmental ethics and climate discourse. It recommends greater integration of indigenous ecological knowledge into interdisciplinary research, environmental education, and cultural preservation initiatives, particularly in contexts vulnerable to climate-related water crises.

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