Rainbows in Eastern African folktales: Oral narrative as ecocritical model

Inge Brinkman, Teshome Mossissa, Peter Wasamba & James Wachira

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The rainbow makes for strong imagery: throughout world history, the rainbow has functioned in many ways as a tool to think with. This is no different in African contexts. Our aim in this paper is to explore the changing meanings given to relations between rainbows and snakes in narratives from the Gikuyu language in Central Kenya. We thereby remain open to the wider East African context, indicating the multiple meaning-making of rainbows in ecological terms. This diachronic approach to narratives allows us to show how rainbow imagery formed a model that interpreted human/nonhuman relations long before the current global ecological crisis was recognised in developmental circles. In our narrative analysis, we argue that connections were drawn between rainbows and snakes, and in turn between humans and entities like rainbows and snakes. The moral evaluation of rainbow-snakes was ambivalent: they could be dangerous, and they could be good; they could be destructive, and they could be enabling. Analysing the narratives left us with a new perspective on the evaluation of human characters and the rainbow-snake: it could treat humans badly, but humans could also treat the rainbow-snake badly. We furthermore show that in the course of the colonial era, this symbolism changed, and the rainbow-snake as an ecocritical model disappeared in the process: the connection between snake and rainbow disappeared, and the ambivalence of the imagery got lost. Good and bad became clearly distinguishable and inherent: it no longer depended on the way of interacting with the entity. Our diachronic interpretation does not form a call to do away with current images and go back to an assumed romantic, pristine African past. Yet it may be wise to reflect on what imaginative history can teach us, and to learn from narratives in history as a way to overcome the exclusive focus on logical-scientific thinking, arriving at a less anthropocentric interpretative model through narrative thinking. Our analysis points out that these East African oral narratives may be instructive in the context of the current global ecological crisis. **Keywords:** Rainbows, folktales, Gikuyu, East Africa, ecocriticism.

Introduction

Ecology takes up a prominent place in the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs make reference to climate action, clean energy, protection of ecosystems, and other ecological concerns. The way in which these are addressed—with statistics and a stated number of targets, events, publications, and actions—indicates that a logical-scientific paradigm is used to underpin both the problems and the success rates to address these. As such, this is not problematic, but already in 1996 Jerome Bruner (39–42; see also Latour)

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pointed to the separation between logical-scientific and narrative thinking and the need for a fuller approach to knowledge production that also includes narrative modes. Bruner distinguishes between the computational and the culturalist perspective. The computational perspective is based on information and on clear, unambiguous rules, resulting in logical-scientific thinking. This is different from the culturalist perspective that is based on creative hermeneutic processes of meaning-making, resulting in narrative thinking. According to Bruner, education is more than formal schooling; it is about finding one's place in society and learning about "the requirements of communal living" (ix). Narrative thinking—combined with logical-scientific thinking—is crucial in this. Firstly, narratives "frame and nourish an identity". Secondly, narratives as fiction foster imagination. And, "[f]inding a place in the world, for all that it implicates the immediacy of home, mate, job, and friends, is ultimately an act of imagination" (41), whereby Bruner (94) holds that narrative "involves an Agent who Acts to achieve a Goal in a recognizable Setting by the use of certain Means".

Bruner is hence not at all saying that we should do away with the computational view and with logical-scientific thinking. Yet, he points to the fact that many processes in life require creative meaning-making rather than solely logical-scientific thinking. The culturalist view and narrative thinking are, in that sense, crucial in many spheres of life. The problem is, according to Bruner, that in formal education such creative, narrative, meaning-making aspects are often viewed as mere decoration. Bruner argues that narrative thinking deserves a fuller place in education and in knowledge production.

In other words, what the UN does with its facts and statistics is perfectly right, but it leaves out important aspects of the processes involved. To address the ecological crisis, we also need to creatively rethink our vocabulary and the relationships and interactions between humans and non-humans. For example, are words in the English language such as "landscape", "environment", and "nature" not based on an anthropocentric framework, and hence inadequate to address the crisis? Do we need different narratives about the way in which we consider ecology (see Morton; Brinkman, "Who is at the Centre? Gikuyu Ogres, Oral Narrative and Posthuman Thinking.")?

Bruner's invitation to consider narrative thinking as an important way of knowledge organisation leads to reconsidering oral genres. Instead of viewing these oral genres merely as objects of study or source materials, we should move beyond this and explore the analytical capacity of the various genres, studying how they function as theoretical models (see also Nfah-Abbenyi). Often, ecoliterature (literary works thematising ecological concerns) is distinguished from ecocriticism (an analytical tool for analysing literary and cultural forms in their relation to ecology). Yet, Bruner's proposal has the far-reaching consequence that we can potentially study (oral) narratives as epistemological models dealing with ecological concerns. The oral narratives we propose to analyse may at once form an aspect of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and constitute a reflective practice. So with this move, we call into question the divide between ecolit and ecocrit: eco-narratives may very well in themselves form a (eco)critical, theoretical model.

Bruner's analysis of educational systems has aided us in analysing the limits in the UN's approach to ecology and in assessing the need for studying narratives in terms of a theoretical model instead of 'mere' source material. In this paper, we will use these insights to study Gikuyu narratives on rainbows from a diachronic perspective, focusing on the way in which rainbow imagery changed over time, mainly under the influence of Christianity.[1] We will first introduce the wider realm of rainbow imagery and analysis, after which we will discuss source materials on Gikuyu oral narratives on rainbows, framed in the broader East African context. This will be followed by an analysis of Gikuyu narratives told around 1900, which will show how these narratives formed an ecocritical model that may be instructive as an alternative/supplement to mainstream developmental approaches to ecology. After this, we will trace the changes in rainbow imagery throughout the colonial and postcolonial era, showing how new meanings and images ended the narrative imagery of rainbows as an ecocritical model.

The rainbow as worldwide image

We will focus on stories in which rainbows play an important role. The rainbow—as all objects of nature not "cut off from our response to it"—"is far more than one wonder among many" (Fisher 11–2). So far, rainbow metaphors have especially been discussed from an anthropological perspective, focusing on religious cults, rituals of political power, and community formation (Brumbaugh; Tiso; Hazel; Lee and Fraser, Radcliffe-Brown; Löwenstein). A valid approach as such, we can perhaps also focus on literary aspects of rainbow narratives from an ecocritical stance. We could combine notions of fertility and peace in the land and between people with representations of sun and sky; droughts and rain; rivers, lakes, and serpents; and plots of travel and transformation. In this short

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contribution, it will be impossible to explore all the possibilities: this essay is meant as an invitation for further research.

The rainbow makes for strong imagery. Throughout world history, rainbows have informed reflections on human society, on bonds and covenants with the gods, and on monstrosity and landscape. Hence, rainbows have been interpreted as bridges between the gods and mankind, as the path that the dead use to reach the afterlife, and as manifestations of gods. The rainbow appears in Greek mythology, the Gilgamesh, the Bible, Egyptian hieroglyphs, etc. (Lee and Fraser; see also Löwenstein). In Buddhist practice, the Rainbow Body is a state of Great Transference (Tiso). More recently, there is the Rainbow Bridge for pets, where they wait in a joyful place to be rejoined with their owners when they die (Magliocco). So the rainbow is in the sky, but it is also a widespread tool for reflection.

Just as anywhere in the world, the rainbow has a longstanding history of symbolic meanings in all major regions of Africa south of the Sahara. The narratives we analyse in this article derive from East African contexts, and we focus especially on Gikuyu narratives as references to rainbows are very rich. We should point out from the start that the histories of rainbow meaning-making are highly diverse, even in the East African region. We can mention the example of the Ethiopian flag. The rainbow takes up a prominent place in the orthodox church in Ethiopia. As a sign of the covenant between God and humanity, it is regarded as Mary's belt. Its importance is reflected in the colours of the Ethiopian flag. There is also a disease in Ethiopia in Oromo-speaking communities that is caused by urinating or laughing in the direction of a rainbow (Mitiku, Edae, and Wako 95). An Oromo folktale recounts how a girl flies towards the sky and when she laughs, her white teeth become lightening, the noise of the hide on which she flies becomes the roar of thunder, and her staff turns into the rainbow (Kidane and Baxter 106).

The rainbow may be attributed the ability to indicate weather patterns. This has been interpreted both positively and negatively by Luo speakers of the Lake Victoria basin of Kenya. During great social gatherings like religious festivals, large funerals, sports events, or weddings, the appearance of the rainbow in the sky may indicate that nature has honoured the event. It is alleged that some revered medicine men have the charms to make this happen. Conversely, the rainbow is treated as a curse when its appearance runs contrary to society's interests. In farming and fishing communities, long, dry seasons lead to food shortages and poor fish production. Therefore, when rain is due and a rainbow appears, it is regarded as a force that disperses heavy clouds and prevents rain. Everyone is then disappointed, and the rainbow symbolises negative forces against the community's survival (personal experience of third author Peter Wasamba, shared with the other authors in July 2023).

In many African contexts, the rainbow is often connected to an enormous snake. Many myths and folktales stress the association between rainbow and snake, a connection also made in India and Amazonia (see Löwenstein) that forms the study theme for anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown on Australia (see also Brumbaugh). In this paper, we will explore various narratives that allude to this relationship between rainbows and snakes. In practice, we focus on rainbow-snake narratives from the Gikuyu language in Central Kenya, as many sources refer to this connection. In the next section, we will specify the sources.

Sources to Gikuyu oral narratives and present-day rainbow imagery in East Africa

Gikuyu oral narratives have been recorded since the early twentieth century, albeit often rendered only in summarised form, in English translation, and evaluated from a racist and paternalistic stance. To underscore this point, mentioning the title of the book by W. S. and K. Routledge, *With a prehistoric people* (1910), suffices. Despite these serious drawbacks, the collections can serve to reconstruct a preliminary Gikuyu imagery of rainbows in oral narratives just prior to and of the early colonial period, thereby contributing to the sociocultural history of the imaginary in a more general sense.

The sources consist of small reports made by British military, such as Captain W. E. H. Barrett; colonial administrators like Charles W. Hobley; early missionaries like Church Mission Society Reverend Leonard J. Beecher; Consolata Fathers Costanzo Cagnolo, Valentino Ghilardi, and Vittorio Merlo-Pick; as well as the book by anthropologist couple Routledge, who set up a camp near Fort Hall (now Murang'a). We also read later sources such as Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya: the Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* and Godfrey Muriuki's historical study *A History of the Kikuyu 1500-1900*, and we refer to fieldwork carried out by the first author of this paper in 1992 (Brinkman, *Kikuyu Gender Norms and Narratives*) in different parts of Central Kenya. These authors all refer to the rainbow-snake, often including one or more narratives about it. As we will focus on the history of the rainbow as

a symbol, metaphor, a thing to think with in Gikuyu narrative, taking a diachronic approach, we will pay special attention to the early sources, not in order to look for some 'untainted authentic original', but precisely to see how these early narratives relate to present-day imagery.

Imaginations of symbolic connections have a history. Instead of viewing the meaning of symbols as fixed and static, we propose to view them as changing and contextual. Presently, in many African contexts—also in Eastern Africa—snakes evoke negative evaluations while the rainbow often has positive connotations. This holds not only for images in children's literature, it also extends to politics. South Africa has been staged as the "rainbow nation", in Kenya, the National Rainbow Coalition is an influential political party. In the Ugandan context, however, this may be changing towards a more negative approach to the rainbow. Recently, a moral panic developed around rainbows, which are seen as the symbol of LGBTQ+ recruitment. In the words of Uganda's National Parents Association, rainbow colours are "satanic", signalling an "invasion of homosexuality through manipulation of children's minds", and a freshly painted rainbow in a children's park—which was at the centre of this media storm—was eventually removed (Titeca).

Rainbow-snakes around 1900

In the early ethnographic study by the Routledges, they pay some attention to Gikuyu ideas in connection with the rainbow. It is noted that the rainbow was believed to end in a deep pool at the foot of a waterfall where dwells the river monster called *ndamaathia*. The rainbow was called *mũkũnga mbura*, meaning "the one that stops, prevents rain". It hence stops the rain, absorbs it, and subsequently fills all lakes and rivers with this water. In other words, *mũkũnga mbura* possessed full control over the rains: it could prevent them from falling but also had the power to make it rain. Through rituals and offerings to its double, *ndamaathia* the river monster, people could appease this force, and rain might come forth (Routledge and Routledge 237–8, 307–8).

Mũkũnga mbura and *ndamaathia* were seen as manifestations of the same rainbow snake. Although the two are distinguished, the rainbow is regarded as a reflection of the snake: "The rainbow in the water and the sky is not the animal itself but its picture" (Routledge and Routledge 308). People in the region told the Routledges of its dangers to economic resources and its life-threatening character: "When the rain comes, the rainbow puts its head out of the water and lies on its back and turns red and is reflected in the sky; at other times it is green. It eats goats and cattle" (Routledge and Routledge 308). The rainbow would take the shadow (*kũruru*) of anyone standing near the rainbow or on whom the rainbow fell and then devour the victim. This points to a negative evaluation of the rainbow-snake ensemble, and indeed people from the area that the Routledge couple visited spoke of "a bad beast which lived in the pool at the foot [of the falls]". When drawing nearer, they saw a rainbow (Routledge and Routledge 307).

The rainbow-snake as force

When analysing the stories in the publications of the Routledges, Barrett, Beecher, Ghilardi, Merlo-Pick, Cagnolo, and other early sources, we can see the monstrous character of the rainbow-snake. Thus, in terms of dwelling, food, and appearance, *ndamaathia* (and its rainbow reflection *mũkũnga mbura*), is not "normal". To make a home, it is essential to clear the forest and to live where other people live. Ritually, the bush and the home must be kept separate. Yet, the rainbow-snake dwells in the sky, rivers, or lakes, not where people live, and it is sometimes associated with death and otherworldliness.

Thus, one of the Gikuyu poetic verses cited in Hobley (442) states: "A rainbow came and seized our names and scattered them". Somewhat later in the verse, a porcupine digs up the names again. In other words, the rainbow, as a reflection of the snake *ndamaathia*, causes the names to end up in the netherworld, from where they are returned by a porcupine (indeed an animal often associated with otherworldliness).

This connection with death is reinforced by the idea that there are some human skulls that can give forth light through the hole in their base and project it onto the sky, causing rainbows to appear (Cagnolo 197). In this image, we also see a relation being drawn between the world of the dead and rainbows.

Apart from its abnormal choice of dwelling, *ndamaathia* eats the "wrong" food. The rainbow-snake may gobble up an entire village in one go. Such anti-social and greedy behaviour may be related to witchcraft and transgresses the normative order; "normal" people are expected not to be greedy and, of course, only eat food suitable for humans. Furthermore, as a monster, *mũkũnga mbura* has a gigantic body: it has a tail with feathers or hairs and lives

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in the water. It does not fit any category. This deformity once again reinforces its abnormal nature. Yet, it can also appear in different forms, thereby deceiving people.

So we can think of the rainbow-snake as being in opposition to humans: "difference made flesh", as Cohen ("Monster Culture (Seven Theses) 41"; see also Cohen, "Postscript: The Promise of Monsters") puts it in his seven theses on monster culture. Yet, at the same time, and therein lies their ambivalence and a threat for humans, monsters are betwixt and between. As indicated, monsters flout all categorisation. They escape us as soon as we start describing them. Their point is precisely to not fit, "monsters are the harbingers of category crisis" (40).

The rainbow-snake, this monster that can be so dangerous, can also become an active positive force in humans' lives, thereby bridging various worlds and bringing wealth and development to people. Furthermore, the river monster—being both rainbow and snake—had strong religious and social implications in the past. It is connected with a highly complex Gikuyu phenomenon: *ituĩka*, an event, process, ritual, or idea, which marked the succession of men's generation sets. This young men's transformation or revolution succeeded through the actions of a girl who lured *ndamaathia* within reach of the elders in order to steal its tail hairs. As John Lonsdale (345–6; see also Brinkman, "Councils and Chiefs, Monsters and Trees: Gikuyu Political Authority and Colonialism") summarised it: "The message of *ituĩka* for Kikuyu was that revivifying power was costly, dangerous, and made demands on daughters". Society could not do without *ituĩka*, as it was necessary for fertility in both land and people, and for peace and political renewal. *Ituĩka*, through the input of *ndamaathia*'s body, signalled harmony, within human society as well as between humans and other species and entities.

In neighbouring Embu, every elderly man boasted to his grandsons that he used to have the rainbow as a bow to fight with. He explained to his grandsons that the cord broke due to heavy rains, and he had become too old to repair it, the reason why he no longer uses it as a bow. Yet, he would say the decoration with such beautiful colours was his doing: "When you are older, I will give it to you" (Bernardi 182–4). Also here, the relation is not negative but enabling in both directions.

Ndamaathia, the rainbow-snake, is hence not a monster in the sense in which the word monster is used in daily speech; it cannot be solely viewed as a frightening, cruel creature. It is presented far more neutral: as a power not to be annoyed and potentially very dangerous, but beneficial if treated well and respected.

Fluid boundaries between humans and non-humans

In many Gikuyu narratives, the rainbow appears as a character: not as a generic natural phenomenon, but personified and named, an acting character in stories. This also occurs in other regions in Africa. There is, for example, reference to Mbumba the rainbow in Yombe (De Heusch 42–3 or Musoke the Rainbow in Luganda (Schoenbrun 68), depending on the language.

The reverse is also true: not only can the rainbow-snake be anthropomorphised and personified, but people can also be "rainbowised". In one story existing in both Tharaka and Gikuyu that was published in 1914 (Lindblom 48–50), girls are told to only fetch water from a pond where no frogs croak. When they find such a pond and draw water, the storyteller states: "Then a young man rose from the pond, he looked like a rainbow". It is apparently possible for people and rainbows to resemble each other. This young man invites himself to the upcoming beer party. Subsequently, he turns into a beast at the entrance of the village and devours the entire village.

Another story tells of a girl who was sacrificed to bring rain, as there was a drought. The elders stood her in the middle of the one remaining pool in the land and, each time she cried for mercy, the thunder roared and the clouds poured forth the long-withheld rain. The water rose higher and higher in the pool until, at last, the girl drowned. Her spirit haunted the place, and, by making a sacrifice, her father was able to reclaim her from the pool and take her back to her old home. "The rainbow appeared above the pool and took her place. That is why one often sees the rainbow in the heavens at the time of rain" (Beecher 82). This indicates a fluidity of human and non-human forces. Although human and non-human forces are clearly distinguished, they can reflect each other. The rainbow can take people's shadow, they take each other's place, and they can appear in resemblance to each other. So people's bodies and natural forces like the rainbow are not sharply bordered, but they can float into each other.

Humans seen from a monster's perspective

While humans may see the rainbow-snake as a threat, from the perspective of the monster, humans may be bad. We indicated that the rainbow-snake may deceive people through shape-shifting. Yet far more often in the narratives, it is humans who deceive monsters. As stated, *ndamaathia* is lured out of the water by a young girl with

a gourd, or by goats, or by singing, and the beast is stupefied by medicine or beer (Hobley 419; Kenyatta 186–96; Barrett 183–5).

Through ituĩka, the rainbow-snake can bring fertility and peace. In the oral narratives, we see further examples of the enabling nature of the rainbow-snake. They may actually assist people in building up their wealth and status. Thus, Barrett edited a Gikuyu story of two young men who are both first spared by a water spirit and a python and are subsequently assisted to get back to their home community, where they both become heroes (Barrett 73–4).

The rainbow-snake, on the other hand, hardly ever gains anything from its contact with humans. Sometimes it manages to marry a girl, capture a victim, or eat a village, but more often than not, it later has to give up this bounty again. In most narratives, it ends up being killed. It is often afraid of humans. In one story, *mũkũnga mbura* is so scared that it releases all the people it had gobbled up and establishes a pact with the young man who threatens it. While the rainbow-snake holds true, the young man later betrays this pact and still kills the monster. We hear *mũkũnga mbura* pleading with the young man: "Why are you here to slay me? Have I not given you back your people?" (Routledge and Routledge 309–11).

We can conclude that monsters and humans, when it comes to deception, pity, bad intentions, negotiation, lenience, betrayal, assistance, reasoning, marrying, eating, killing, etc., have a far more complex relation than is usually assumed.

A brief summary of the preceding will stress that we drew connections between rainbows and snakes and in turn between humans and entities like rainbows and snakes. The moral evaluation of the rainbow-snake was ambivalent: they could be dangerous, and they could be good; they could be destructive, and they could be enabling. Finally, analysing the narratives left us with a new perspective on the evaluation of human characters and the rainbow-snake: the rainbow-snake could treat humans badly, but humans could also treat the rainbow-snake badly. Taken together, the narratives form an ecocritical model in which the rainbow-snake as a force invited respect for "nature" and stressed a sustainable and mutually engaging relationship between humans and non-humans.

Changing images in the colonial era

What happened to this imagery in the course of colonialism? In their book, the Routledge couple already called this "a somewhat incomprehensible story" (308), implying that they were hardly prepared to understand the full implications of the narratives they heard. In their description, they have no eye for any ambivalence but instead tried to pin down what they heard to one meaning and one moral evaluation only. They radically classified the stories they heard about the rainbow-snake as fiction, even though the narrators of these stories stressed that this was "not a rogano [*rũgano:* Gikuyu term used for fictional narratives] but said to have actually taken place, though he himself could not vouch for its truth" (308).

In the process of Christianisation and colonisation that followed in the course of the twentieth century, missionaries sought to spread Christianity, and any belief from these the colonised peoples could not but be demonic: only the Christian God could be good. This meant that *mũkũnga mbura/ndamaathia*, as a connected and ambivalent force, was unacceptable in the eyes of the missionaries. The imagery had to be demonised or ridiculed or infantilised: other evaluations were seen as a threat to the spread of the Christian faith. Slowly, the imagery was disconnected, and the rainbow-snake as a narrative ecocritical model disappeared.

Serpents have a negative connotation in Christianity (in Genesis already). Hence, a shift also occurred in European history: older stories tell of girls marrying snakes, but later in history the snakes are replaced by swans and, as with the spread of Christianity in Europe, the serpent acquired an ever more negative connotation (according to Sax, the symbol for a pharmacy, for example, refers to the older history of snake meanings in European history). In the Gikuyu Bible, the snake figure *ndamaathia* became the feared dragon in Revelations. In his anthropological and autobiographical study, Kenyatta (326) proposed to view it as "a national totem", in an attempt to arrive at a "modern" interpretation of the positive aspects of *ndamaathia*. Yet, by now, many Gikuyu speakers use ndamaathia synonymously with the devil (personal knowledge of former PhD candidate Hellen Kagotho, shared with the authors in April 2022; personal knowledge of last author James Wachira, shared with the other authors in March 2022 and July 2023). The report of a study carried out by Professor Wanjikũ Mũkabi Kabĩra (108–09) with students from the University of Nairobi, which contained over 50 Gikuyu oral narratives, only had one narrative on the rainbow: a disobedient young man nearly meets his death as he starts a forbidden

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conversation with a rainbow girl. Also, during fieldwork on Gikuyu oral narratives carried out by Inge Brinkman in 1992, out of over 250 stories, only three stories on *ndamaathia* were told, and these were exclusively negative.

The rainbow, *mũkũnga mbura*, by and large lost its symbolic meaning during the colonial era, and its role as a double of the snake disappeared. Some elderly people may still remember the connection (e.g. one 60-year-old woman during fieldwork in 1992), but most Gikuyu speakers have no notion of this connection. The rainbow became an innocent image in children's literature, was associated with the covenant between the Christian god and Noah, or was employed as a positive political symbol. At times, we find echoes of the older narratives in children's books where the Rainbow, imagined as a beautiful girl, becomes the protector of herder boys against lightning. A novel by Goro wa Kamau overtly wants to restore the rainbow-snake to its former status. In general, however, we now see a separation of the manifestations of snake and rainbow, whereby the snake is generally evaluated negatively and the rainbow, in contrast, positively (for similar developments in European history, see Zipes 8–9).

Conclusion

The current debates on the nonhuman, the posthuman, and ecocritical analysis are often regarded as new and related to various crises in ecology, climate, and the pandemic. Yet, the early stories discussed here indicate how these are historical problems. The Gikuyu were already debating the crisis of humanity in relation to the "environment" around 1900. Taken together, the narratives form an ecocritical model that refers to the necessity of a respectful relationship with the non-human.

We analysed how the stories from the early colonial period reveal a sharp awareness of the dangers of tampering with forces that humans cannot manage. The narratives tell of humans fearing and fighting "nature" and the forces therein. As we saw, this does not exclude the possibility of gaining from such forces by killing and destroying them. Humans can benefit from the rainbow-snake. At the same time, Gikuyu rainbow-snakes tell us about the limits of humans' control over their environment, and these oral narratives instil awe and respect for "the environment".

The narratives indeed question the very notion of environment: who is environed, who is surrounded, and who is at the centre of the circle if other forces are so powerful (see also Brinkman, "Who is at the Centre?")? The stories do not oppose "culture" and "nature". Although these are distinguished, our analysis revealed how the boundaries between the various categories are seen as porous, and entities may resemble each other, take each other's place, reflect each other, etc. (see also Morton). In the section on the monster's perspective, we furthermore argued that, in these narratives, the moral evaluation is not the issue. As said, such forces can be good or they can be bad, depending on the way in which humans interact with them.

As we showed, this imagery changed during the colonial era: the connection between snake and rainbow disappeared, and the ambivalence of the imagery got lost. Good and bad became clearly distinguishable and inherent: it no longer depended on the way of interacting with the entity. These changes led to the end of rainbow-snake narratives as an ecocritical model.

This interpretation is no call to do away with current images and go back to an assumed romantic, pristine African past. Yet it may be wise to reflect on what history can teach us. These narratives are by no means restricted to Gikuyu oral folktales. Thus, in the Oromia province of Ethiopia, a massive serpent lives in the clouds, its tail reaching the lake of the Fincha hydroelectric dam. By the time it gradually disappears, it is thought to have entered the lake. The snake is also believed to eat livestock and entire villages (personal knowledge of second author Teshome Mossissa, shared with the other authors in October 2023). Learning from narratives in history may be a way to overcome the exclusive focus on logical-scientific thinking and to arrive at a less anthropocentric model through narrative thinking. These East African oral narratives may be instructive given the current ecological crisis and may form the basis for the UN's SDG approach to become more inclusive and complete.

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Notes

1. We will use "Gikuyu" for spelling of the word *Gĩkũyũ* in English, even though in English the word is pronounced as "Kikuyu". While earlier sources mostly use "Kikuyu", currently the spelling "Gikuyu" is widely accepted.

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