

Contribution of indigenous econaming practices in ecosystems conservation: A case of Ekegusii language

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the role African indigenous languages play in the global campaign against environmental damage. The objective is to examine how linguistic practices impact ecosystems. Econames among the Abagusii community played a key role in preventing ecological destruction. Indigenous linguistic systems were treasured and promoted a variety of plants and animals by naming newborns after them. In this way, the ecosystem earned a special place and was consequently held in high regard. The study compares the meanings and representations associated with the Econaming systems in Ekegusii naming system. Data for this study was drawn from documented Ekegusii econames related to the environment, supplemented by the researcher's native intuition. The data collection methods included document analysis of existing Ekegusii lexicons, semi-structured interviews with native speakers, and observations of linguistic practices in community settings. The researcher also used his native intuition to collect data. Econames of plant and animal species relating to the environment were inferred for purposes of analysis. This study is based on Evaluation Theory by Stibbe. The indigenous Ekegusii names were correlated with the associated ecosystems among Ekegusii native speakers. Eco-critical analysis of the names under investigation involved semantic and pragmatic analysis of each name collected as well as analysis and discussion of the semantic association of individual names to the related ecosystem. The results showed that the meanings embedded in the Ekegusii econaming system reflect a strategic approach to environmental stewardship, highlighting indigenous practices that could be valuable for sustainable environmental preservation. The data collected showed that indigenous econaming practices are significant and can play a huge role in ecological preservation among rural communities. Consequently, the study recommends that the government and other critical environmental policymakers should focus more on Econaming practices in order to recognise the role played by indigenous communities in environmental conservation.

Keywords: *Ekegusii, Econaming, wildlife species, flora, fauna*

Introduction

Different societies have different naming systems which help in revealing people's identity. The aim of this study is to try and establish which names are related to the environment in Ekegusii language. Ekegusii is a Bantu language that has about two million native speakers who are called Abagusii. They inhabit two counties in Kenya, namely Nyamira and Kisii. In his zonal classification of Bantu languages, Guthrie classified Ekegusii under Central Bantu languages, zone E10 (Guthrie, 1971). This study focuses on Ekegusii language practices which are manifested in the naming system related to the ecosystem. The motivating factor for undertaking

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this study is the fact that indigenous naming practices can be vital tools in contributing to environmental conservation efforts. This study's data was drawn from Ekegusii language. The study sought to investigate how Abagusii community employs indigenous Econaming practises to co-exist with the ecosystem.

The Abagusii community has a rich traditional naming system. Names that are given to newborns are derived from a well-structured kinship relation system. The names have a reflection on seasons of the year, a variety of plant species, totems, and even nature. Because of modernity and advancements in communication technology, the meaning of some of these names has slowly faded and become vague and some have even become extinct. This view is reiterated by Lindo and Bundsgaard (2000: 10-11) who state that environmental changes bring about changes in language and especially the lexicon. According to Widayati (2019), this change comes about as a result of ideological, social and biological factors. It is, therefore, imperative to examine the importance of traditional linguistic practices that have a direct impact on the flora and fauna around us. This would help in finding how indigenous linguistic practices can be employed in global ecological conservation efforts. This study examines the structure and meaning of selected Ekegusii Ecological names in order to document the importance of such practice in controlling environmental degradation. The importance of indigenous linguistic practices that reflect the culture of a community can be cheaper with less probability of failure. In addition, revitalising these linguistic customs is important in reviving local languages which contribute greatly to the global environmental protection agenda. Because of the failure to recognise and involve local communities in environmental conservation efforts, many rare species of plants and animals are facing extinction from the planet. Among the things contributing to this extinction are environmentally destructive human activities, pollution, human settlement, and the introduction of exotic species.

Therefore, this study sought to establish the relationship that exists between the linguistic practices among the Ekegusii community and changes in the flora and fauna. Widiyati (2019) states that there is a close relationship between languages within certain geographical areas and the ecosystem and the speakers of these languages. The present author asserts that people and the ecosystem have a great influence on each other. Nevertheless, minimal study has been conducted before this relationship and find out the role of indigenous languages in environmental conservation measures. Most developing countries like Kenya rely on donations from wealthy nations and the UN to carry out their conservation programmes. However, these donations are unreliable. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that traditional language practices, which are economically affordable and sustainable, are sought as reliable strategies.

The Role of Econaming in Ecological Conservation

Almost all traditional societies have their own traditional naming systems. In the Abagusii community, the naming system is an important marker of one's belonging to a family and society at large. According to Harder (2008), there are two different kinds of human names: personal names and family names. The focus of this study is on family names connecting people with their ecosystems. The Kisii community attaches significant importance to traditional naming systems. This study focuses on Econaming practices to find out the relationship between the linguistic systems and the ecosystems of the speakers. The study aimed to establish whether these naming practices can be used to support and encourage environmental conservation efforts. Murphree (1993) argued that support for local language naming practices can be an alternative, effective and affordable option in ecological conservation.

When efforts are directed at reviving the Econaming practices of local languages, the local communities feel they are part and parcel of environmental conservation. The initiatives are not only cheap, but they also receive wide acceptance from the local community. According to Stibbe (2015), ecological stakeholders and people should act responsibly about their

relationship with the environment and make meaningful changes to improve the environment. This may involve revitalising local practices that can conserve biodiversity.

Ecocriticism is based on the interrelatedness between the physical world and the human culture through the language associated with the environment (Bennett, 2010). It can be reflected in the relationship between the people and the environment they live in as represented in language. Ecocritics examine the ways nature is reflected in language choices and attempts to analyse their applicability to environmental problems. In this view, the study of nature is geared towards understanding the imbalance of ecosystems. This is informed by the fact that most of the global environmental problems are caused by persistent exploitation of nature as a result of human activities.

Language is a composition of sounds with meanings and rules for combining them. These rules are shared and understood by a speech community (Crystal, 2008). In view of this, language has the potential to influence its users' perceptions of the world. Such perceptions may influence what users of a particular language consider significant and employ practices that are relevant to the environment. This study sought to evaluate the significance of local language systems in ecosystem conservation. It is the local people who regularly and actively interact with their environment and therefore they can play a huge role in environmental conservation. According to Sinar and Haidir (2019), when ecosystems are destroyed, there is bound to be loss of some vocabulary in a language, and this has a huge negative impact on existing flora and fauna.

The investigation of the Gusii naming system attempts to document how language practices play an important role in conserving the environment. According to Agrawal and Gibson (1999), when the local people are sidelined in the management of their surrounding ecosystems, they may engage in the destruction of these ecosystems. It was, therefore, important to focus on how Econaming practices can play a key role in conserving the environment. According to Bang and Døør (1996), one cannot separate language from the environment because language gets its meaning from the environment. Consequently, the vocabulary of any language mirrors the environment where the language is used. Similarly, Alexander and Stibbe (2014) share the same view with Bang and Door that ecological discourse plays a significant role in determining how people relate to animals.

This study is based on the Evaluation Theory proposed by Stibbe (2015). Evaluation is concerned with narratives in people's minds concerning their lives. Evaluation Theory can be linked to linguistic systems used by communities in relation to the environment where they live. Furthermore, language evaluation can be used to infer the relationship between peoples' culture and the ecosystem. According to Hunston and Thompson (2005), evaluation relates to the speaker or writer's views or attitudes on certain concepts. Evaluation Theory is therefore relevant in analysing the relationship between Econames and ecological conservation among the Gusii community.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the relationship between the Ekegusii naming system and the environment. Data was collected through a combination of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. The researcher reviewed existing literature and resources related to Ekegusii names and their meanings, focusing specifically on eco-related names. This analysis provided a foundational understanding of the linguistic practices within the community. To gain deeper insights into the community's perspectives, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with fluent speakers of the Ekegusii language. These interviews aimed to uncover the cultural significance of the names, as well as the ecological knowledge embedded in them. Participants were selected based on their knowledge of local naming practices and their connection to the environment. The

researcher also engaged in participant observation within the Abagusii community to witness firsthand the use of econames in various social contexts. This method allowed for a richer understanding of how these names are integrated into everyday life and their significance in cultural practices.

Findings and Discussion

Eco-critical analysis of the names under investigation involved semantic and pragmatic analysis of each name collected as well as analysis and discussion of the semantic association of individual names to the related ecosystem. In order to carry out the analysis as well as the discussion appropriately, a framework of analysis is provided. The framework features three categories generating Ekegusii Econames and these are Econames related to plants, Econames related to wild animals, and Econames related to nature. These are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections.

Econames Linked with Plants

Ekegusii speakers attach great importance to certain plants species. Therefore, these species have a significant role in the Ekegusii naming system. In view of this, many households name their male and female kin after these plants as shown in Table 1 below. With respect to Econames associated with plants, the analysis consisted of semantic scrutiny of the collected names under this category as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Econames associated with plants

Econames	Gender	English Gloss
Matoke	Male	Banana
Nyabando	Male	Maize
Gesare	Female	Kale
Nyachae	Male	Tea
Kenyambi	Female	Weed
Kenyanya	Female	Tomato
Masosa	Male	Pumpkin

The data presented in Table 1 demonstrates that both male and female children in the Ekegusii community are named after plant species that are held in high esteem. This naming practice reflects a deep cultural connection to the flora in their environment, supporting the notion that names carry significant meanings and associations within a community (Harris, 2009). The use of plant names as econames signifies that Ekegusii speakers possess an intrinsic appreciation for the natural world. Research indicates that naming practices are often a reflection of cultural values and beliefs, which can influence community members' attitudes toward environmental stewardship (Davis, 2014). This pattern of naming suggests that the community is more likely to engage in the effective management and conservation of these plant species, as they are embedded in the cultural identity of the people (Mazzarella, 2017).

To further enhance conservation efforts, the community needs to support and supplement existing initiatives. Emerton (2001) emphasises the importance of involving local communities in ecosystem management, noting that traditional ecological knowledge can provide valuable insights for contemporary conservation practices. Therefore, promoting econaming alongside other traditional ecological practices should be encouraged to foster a sense of ownership and stewardship toward the environment.

Ecocritical principles are applied in Ekegusii naming systems. For example, both the physical appearance of a plant and the beliefs associated with it are used metonymically to stand for

personal names. For instance, a baby girl is beautiful. She is named *Kenyanya* (tomato). This shows that tomatoes were revered and well taken care of. Also, the naming of children by Ekegusii speakers as *matoke* (bananas) is a reflection of how the community adored the plant. Banana is a staple food among the Abagusii community, so they adore the plant species and consequently, they will do whatever it takes to plant, cultivate and care for the crop.

Econames Associated with Wild Animals

Another source of names for male and female children in the Gusii Community is wild animals. After analysing the data collected, it was discovered that among the Gusii community, people are named after wild animals. These names connote different attributes and characters to the new-borns as indicated in Table 2 below:

Table 2
Econames associated with wild animals

Econame	Gender	English Gloss
Ong'era	Male	Buffalo
Nyangau	Male	Hyena
Simba	Male	Lion
Nyanchogu	Male	Elephant
Ngoge	Male	Warthog
Nyanchera	Female	Guinea Fowl
Kerubo	Female	Dove
Nyaboke	Female	Cow

From the data in Table 2, it is evident that the Abagusii community has developed a nuanced relationship with wildlife, as reflected in their naming practices. Children, both males and females, are assigned econames based on the belief that they will embody the traits of the animals after which they are named. This practice aligns with the concept that names can influence personal identity and behaviour (Hirsch, 2007). For instance, names like *Simba* (lion), *Nyang'au* (hyena), and *Ong'era* (buffalo) are commonly given to Gusii male children, signifying strength, bravery, or cunning, traits associated with these animals.

Moreover, some animal names serve a dual purpose, as they are also intended to discourage the bearers from adopting negative characteristics associated with those animals (Baxter, 2013). This naming convention reflects a broader cultural narrative that elevates the status of wildlife within the Ekegusii speech community, promoting respect and admiration for these creatures. Such practices are crucial for fostering positive human-animal relationships and can contribute to conservation efforts by reducing human-wildlife conflict and encouraging protective behaviours toward wildlife (Knight, 2011).

The correlation between these animal names and the community's values suggests that the Abagusii regard wild animals highly, leading to a cultural ethos that promotes the protection of these species. The practice of econaming serves not only as a mechanism for identity formation but also as a potential strategy for conservation. By instilling respect for wildlife in the younger generation, this naming tradition can help ensure that these animals are not subjected to negative human activities and are instead protected (Tengö et al., 2014).

Econames regarding Nature

The study found that econames are associated with nature and reflect significant cultural beliefs in the Gusii community regarding life and death. As evident in Table 3 below, names such as *Matiangi* (a type of evil spirit) or *Makori* (path) are often used in times of crisis, particularly when families face repeated tragedies, such as the loss of children. In such cases, community members advise families to shift their naming practices from naming children after prominent

figures to names derived from elements of nature. This practice is believed to ward off evil spirits that may be causing the misfortunes.

Table 3

Econames associated with nature

Econame	Gender	English Gloss
<i>Bitutu</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Bush</i>
<i>Nyanchera</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Way</i>
<i>Makori</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Path</i>
<i>Matiangi</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Evil Spirit</i>
<i>Mongina</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Stream</i>
<i>Kemunto</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Tree</i>
<i>Mogaka</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Plant</i>

The data presented in Table 3 suggest that the Gusii community holds a deep respect for nature, viewing it as sacred and powerful. It is commonly believed that nature can protect against death and misfortune. For example, rivers, hills, and caves are thought to possess divine qualities; thus, harming these elements is seen as inviting disaster (Ochieng, 2013). This belief system is embedded in the community's naming traditions, reinforcing the idea that names can have protective qualities.

Overall, the traditional naming practices in the Gusii community illustrate a profound connection to the environment, emphasizing the importance of nature in their cultural identity and belief systems. Literature on indigenous belief systems highlights how traditional ecological knowledge often influences naming conventions and reflects broader values related to life, death, and the environment (Berkes, 2012).

Conclusion

This study found that ecological destruction has significantly contributed to the extinction of various flora and fauna species, particularly in regions rich in wildlife. The findings indicate that traditional Econaming systems among the Ekegusii community have been instrumental in promoting environmental stewardship and conservation awareness, as reflected in the positive correlations between naming practices and biodiversity preservation (Berkes, 2012; Ochieng, 2013). This underscores the importance of addressing the exploitation of ecosystems through community-driven initiatives.

Given the documented conservation gains achieved through indigenous Econaming practices, it is imperative that these systems be recognised and integrated into official conservation policies by relevant stakeholders. Research has shown that incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into policy frameworks can enhance biodiversity conservation efforts (Berkes, 2012). Therefore, promoting and supporting Econaming practices can serve as an effective ecological conservation measure, ensuring sustainable management of natural resources for future generations.

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