

# 1 • *African Buffalo and the Human Societies in Africa: Social Values and Interaction Outcomes*

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## Introduction

The sustainable management of wildlife and other natural resources, including the African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*), depends largely on the social–ecological context being considered (e.g. McGinnis and Ostrom, 2014), Decision VII/2 of the Convention of Biological Diversity<sup>1</sup>). This context is largely defined by a combination of complex interactions between ecological (e.g. biomass, reproduction rate, climatic factors) and social (e.g. cultural values, norms, needs, practices) parameters and dynamics. These two intertwined dimensions can influence the way natural resources are perceived and subsequently managed, used and studied by actors interacting with natural resources, and vice versa. These interactions may lead to the sustainable use of resources by environmental stewards, or the overexploitation, cruelty and eradication of the natural bounty. Understanding these complex social–ecological dynamics consequently helps facilitate the fair and just conservation and sustainable use of wildlife species.

In this chapter, we bring together experiences on the sustainable use and management of the African buffalo from major regions of the African continent where the African buffalo is found in substantial numbers, especially in the wild and in areas adjacent to protected areas. In the first section, we will explore the socioeconomic values of the African buffalo

<sup>1</sup> Principles of Sustainable Use, Convention of Biological Diversity, COP Decision VII/12: [www.cbd.int/decision/cop/?id=7749](http://www.cbd.int/decision/cop/?id=7749)

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in its various contexts in Africa. We also examine the African heritage associated with the African buffalo in the form of folklore and poems depicting the interconnectedness of the species' symbolic importance to people. These cultural forms and traditions have been handed down from one generation to another for centuries. However, these African worldviews have been progressively lost in recent natural resource discourses and paradigms framed by the dominant Western worldview (Mtenje and Soko, 1998). Finally, we describe the reality of the relationship between humans and the African buffalo, including the goods and services and the disservices provided by the African buffalo to humans.

### Global Names for the African Buffalo

Among African mammals, the African buffalo has one of the largest ranges. Although this range has contracted recently (Chapter 4), it has provided an opportunity for buffalo species and humans to interact for millennia. This scenario developed because people (*Homo sapiens*) likewise inhabited the entire continent (e.g. Taylor, 2011). Beyond their obvious contribution to human diets when hunted, buffalo are part of the cosmology of many African societies, traces of which date back to as early as the Middle Stone Age (Faith, 2008; Dusseldorp, 2010; Chapter 2). Rock paintings by the ancient San communities that roamed sub-Saharan Africa provide evidence of this familiarity with the African buffalo. This relationship transcends African borders, and the African buffalo plays a role in human cultures worldwide. As evidence of its long interface with humanity, the African buffalo is known in different languages across the globe. Figure 1.1 presents a random and small sample of names given to the African buffalo across Africa.

This linguistic diversity based on millennia of interactions between human societies and buffalo reflects the richness of figurative labelling of the buffalo in people's representations. The long experience of African people with wildlife is also reflected in their use of animal-related, figurative terms to describe people. Figurative language is usually used to convey a message in a sarcastic manner and they demonstrate how wild animals are socially integrated into African societies. These labels are also derived from the folklore, songs and stories told by elderly Africans to their children as a way of encouraging desired behaviour and character (Ben-Amos, 1975; Knappert, 1977, 1985; Mtenje and Soko, 1998). Animal-centred figurative language and labels are applied in African societies to denote human attributes such as strength, beauty, height and

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Figure 1.1 African names of the buffalo. A few randomly selected names of African buffalo among the 1,000 to 2,000 languages spoken in Africa. The location of the names is approximate due to sometimes wide or multiple location uses and overlap. The Roman alphabet has been intentionally used instead of the international phonetic alphabet. Many more African buffalo names are found in the lexicographic LEXICON database of the African languages by CNRS LLACAN laboratory, which lists 586 names for buffalo with ‘buffle’ as the entry point in the database and 631 names with ‘buffalo’ as the entry point (<https://reflex.cnrs.fr/Africa/index.php?state=src>). For language families, see Z. Frajzyngier, Afroasiatic languages. Oxford Research Encyclopedia – Linguistics (<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.013.15>). See also Segerer and Flavier (2011–2018), Good (2017) and Dimmendaal (2020).

wit, as well as poverty, ugliness, stupidity, etc. The point here is not that Africans perceive human beings as being equivalent to wild animals, but rather that as Africans live with animals, they draw from animal messages

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about behaviour, collaboration, networks, social capital, appearance and fecundity (use value).

Animals, both domestic and wild, are therefore a ‘living encyclopedia’ and source of knowledge. In short, animals serve as ‘hermeneutic texts’ subject to multiple interpretations, including creating relationships within clans, predicting, impressing, condemning, judging and making important conclusions or recommendations. We remind readers that such euphemisms are also applied to groups, clans, tribes and even nations. The diversity of wildlife in Africa makes it possible to easily match many animal attributes with those of humans. Western readers may refer to the Fables of de la Fontaine, a work published in 1668, translated into every European language, and still widely read today (e.g. Lebrun, 2000).

The characteristics of the African buffalo given by elderly people in Harare (Mukamuri, personal communication, 2021) were undomesticated, unpredictable, assertive, dangerous and powerful. The buffalo is widely acclaimed in southern Africa for being so cruel because of its habit of urinating on the wounds of victims to check whether they are actually dead. If alive, it continues attacking until the adversary dies. Figurative language is also used by hunters in their descriptions of the African buffalo. The words include ‘resistant’, ‘dangerous’, ‘vengeful’ and having a ‘piercing look’. In Ghana, however, the buffalo stands for ‘uprightness’, which is a positive connotation (Benson, 2021).

The African buffalo has also filled and still fills the imaginaries of European hunters. The species belongs to one of the Big Five, a classification of the most dangerous African mammals to hunt. In the book, *Horn of the Hunter*, Robert Ruark (1997) described the African Buffalo as follows: ‘He looks at you as if you owe him money. I never saw such malevolence in the eyes of any animal or human being before or since’.<sup>2</sup> From another perspective, Kock (2005, 2014) and Michel and Bengis (2012) described the buffalo as a ‘villain’, when referring to the menace it causes when spreading diseases at the buffalo–livestock interface (Cortey et al., 2019; Chapter 9). This perception has not favoured the buffalo during some moments in history. For example, in the early twentieth century, entire buffalo populations outside protected areas were culled to control foot-and-mouth disease and rinderpest as part of efforts to boost commercial livestock production (see Chapter 12).

<sup>2</sup> [www.johnxsafaris.com/hunting/cape-buffalo-hunts/](http://www.johnxsafaris.com/hunting/cape-buffalo-hunts/)

## African Buffalo in Society: Mythology and Symbolism in Africa

Marks (1979) discusses the historical development of a culture among the Bisa of Zambia, which he termed the 'Buffalo Mystique'. Of significance in this culture was the high value placed on both tangible and intangible uses of buffalo, both central to the overall organization of the society. Similarly, in other parts of southern Africa, the close association between people and buffalo can be seen in the wide uses of the animal as a totemic symbol. It is in this region that many ethnic groups use the Nyati totem to organize clans and marriages.

The Bisa of Zambia recognize in the buffalo characteristics of strength, bravery and danger, but they also attribute a powerful 'spiritual' force to the animal. This notion is found in civilizations far removed from West Africa. For the members of the Malinke hunters' brotherhood, the buffalo is endowed with a particularly strong metaphorical spirit or major real element ('*nyama*'; Cissé, 1964), and it is for this same reason that the Hausa of Niger consider it a 'black' animal in the classification of animals based on the power of their spiritual essence (Levy-Luxereau, 1972).

The buffalo also appears in a series of 'horizontal' masks that have been observed over a wide area of West Africa (Frealde, 2002; Figure 1.2). The form of these masks varies, sometimes a buffalo is explicitly represented, notably in the grasslands of Cameroon, but sometimes other species are represented in a stylized manner (McNaughton, 1991). The reference to 'bush cow' appears in several of these masks, which are sometimes representations of hybrids between animals, humans and spirits. The dances and rituals involving the use of these masks are diverse, and although they are often associated with male initiation rituals, this is not their exclusive use. Generally speaking, these masks, especially those based on the form of stylized cattle, are seen as powerful and dangerous entities, associated with the transition from the wild (bush) world to humanized space (Berns and Fardon, 2011). Members of peasant societies have developed a rich cosmology in which the buffalo has a place. A review of myths on the origin of livestock in pastoral societies indicates that for several societies, buffalo are linked to the wild world while cows are associated with humans (Bonte, 2004; Box 1.1). At the other end of the African continent, a Berber myth (Frobenius and Fox, 1937) describes the first two creatures of the world as a buffalo and a heifer, with the former becoming the founding ancestor of wild animals and the latter



Figure 1.2 Anunuma Bush Buffalo Mask performs at a funeral. Tissé, Burkina Faso, 1984 (McNaughton, 1991). Photo by Christopher Roy (used with permission).

that of cattle. Furthermore, cows appear in the increasingly sophisticated costumes worn by the Swazi overlord during the *Nwala*, the annual rite of royalty that lasts several days (Kuper, 1973). The power and ferocity of the buffalo also are represented in the rich Swazi cosmology.

According to Evans-Pritchard (1940), the Nuer People of South Sudan believe that the buffalo is ‘cattle’ that destroys people, for ‘more people have died for the sake of a cow than for any other cause’. They have a story that tells how, when the beasts broke up their community and each went their own way to live their own lives, Man slew the mother of the Cow and the Buffalo. The Buffalo said she would avenge her mother by attacking men in the bush, but the Cow said that she would remain in the habitations of men and avenge her mother by causing endless disputes about debts, bride-wealth and adultery, which would lead to fighting and deaths among the people. This feud between Cow and Man has gone on from time immemorial, and day by day the Cow avenges the death of her mother by causing the death of men.

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Hence, Nuer say of their cattle, ‘They will be finished together with mankind’, for men will all die on account of cattle and they and cattle will cease together (Evans-Pritchard, 1940).

**Box 1.1** *Buffalo Folklore from the Atuot People, Southern Sudan*

Burton (1981) adds to a large basket of buffalo folklores from Africa by narrating one from the Atuot people. According to this folklore, once upon a time, men lived among themselves in their own camp in the forest. But among the animals they kept tethered were buffalo rather than cows. Men had no contact with women, but instead kept vaginas tied to their arms. At the same time, women lived in a camp by themselves by the river, tending herds of cattle, fishing and growing millet. The text continues: ‘One day a buffalo calf strayed away from the other animals and did not return that evening. The next morning a man followed its trail, which led to the camp of women. Until this time when women desired sex, they went to the riverside and splashed the foam of the waves between their legs, giving birth to females only. When the man asked if his calf had come into the camp a woman answered no, and while he was satisfied with this reply, he soon took interest in another matter, asking the woman what the separation was between her legs. She answered: “This is vagina” and in turn asked what might be the thing dangling between his legs. When he answered, the man then said to the woman: “You bring that here and let me see if it is sweet.” When he later said it was very, very good, all the other women of the camp rushed upon him and they had intercourse with him so much he died. A short while later the women said among themselves: “Now it is time to look after the cows”, but each avoided the responsibility, saying: “It is now time to dry the millet so it can be pounded into flour.” Then men from the other camp arrived in search of their friend. The women insulted them for thinking that their buffalo were like cows and went on pounding their grain. Seeing that the women appeared to take no interest in the cows, the men stole them. Later in the day each woman sought out a man of her liking and remained with him that evening. The next day, when each man wanted to marry a woman, the senior woman of the camp said: “You have given up your buffalo and that is good. But if you want to marry my daughters then you must give cows to replace them.”’

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Taboos that forbid the use of buffalo or even coming into close contact with them are also present in some large sections of African communities spread across the continent. For example, some Pygmy groups in Cameroon avoid buffalo because of a commonly held belief that it is inhabited by powerful evil spirits (Duda et al., 2018; see Chapter 16). Southern Africa harbours large ethnic groups, which include the Shona, Shangaan, Sotho and Venda, people who view the buffalo as sacred and who are not allowed to eat or touch the animal because of totemism. However, such taboos are slowly losing their power among people due to modernity and the infusion of other religions, especially Christianity (see also FAO/CIG, 2002). Marks (1979) squarely lays the blame for the destruction of African culture associated with the African buffalo and other wildlife on the emergence of modern institutions of control and in particular the implementation of so-called ‘participatory’ conservation programmes (Benson, 2021).

The iconic or symbolic nature of the African buffalo is also present in many social spheres such as military units, soccer teams, merchandise such as bicycles and T-shirts, haulage trucks and even buses. Buffalo symbols on such materials are a global feature. An Internet search for such symbols reveals wide and global use of the emblems and symbols. A good example is the ‘Buffalo bicycle’ ([www.buffalobicycle.com](http://www.buffalobicycle.com)), ‘built for big loads on tough roads in Africa’, with production in Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Figure 1.3). This product borrows characteristics attached to the African buffalo such as robustness and power. Documented examples of the use of buffalo symbols/emblems in the military include the globally popular ‘Buffalo soldiers’, who were mainly former black slaves in the United States of America at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This military unit was eventually immortalized and internationalized by the world-famous reggae musician Robert ‘Bob’ Nester Marley, who released a song named ‘Buffalo Soldier’. The American Buffalo soldiers were widely respected for their bravery and power. More recent military buffalo emblems may be found in present-day Zimbabwe with the buffalo insignia used by the national army’s 3rd Infantry Brigade, and in South Africa with that used by the 32nd Battalion of the South African National Defence Force.<sup>4</sup> The same seems also to be the attraction for teams and individuals who wear T-shirts bearing buffalo signs.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo\\_Soldier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo_Soldier)

<sup>4</sup> <https://za.pinterest.com/pin/304204149811482618/>





*Figure 1.3* The ‘Buffalo bicycle’ is a well-appreciated product in the communal lands of Zimbabwe for its robustness, easiness to fix and adaptation to local conditions. Sengwe Communal Land. © A. Caron.

## **Buffalo Services: Subsistence and Trophy Hunting in Africa**

### **African Subsistence Hunting**

Palaeontological and archaeological evidence suggests that human ancestry in southern Africa dates back four million years, and throughout this time, humanity has hunted for survival (Crader, 1984; Walker, 1995; Plug, 2000; Badenhorst, 2003; Phillipson, 2005). Hunting can be done in pursuit of many benefits, for example maturity rituals, symbolism, recreation or trade, and for food, ecological balance and raising funds for conservation (Di Minin et al., 2016; Wanger et al., 2017; Hsiao, 2020). Despite different levels of compliance by all groups of people, hunting all over the world is regulated by laws and policies and its control is at the core of most wildlife conservation programmes.

Due to its size and abundance in large herds, the African buffalo played a significant role as a protein source for pre-colonial African

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societies (Marks, 1976, 2016). In Zambia, for example, although agriculture was an important part of the livelihood system, buffalo meat was a stock component in the identity and destiny of Valley Bisa lineage hunters (Marks, 2016). The meat was (and still is) also consumed for its good taste and flavour. Buffalo meat was a major source of protein in Zimbabwe before Africans were banned from buffalo hunting in 1930 (Mutwira, 1989).

Buffalo hunting, as with the hunting of other large animal species, can be dangerous, yet it has remained an important cultural and historical human activity. Hunting connects people with nature and is widely practiced as a maturity ritual for men in many African societies (Atta et al., 2021). The great difficulty, risk and effort involved in hunting buffalo also mean it provides rigorous exercise and adventure and accords a high status to the hunter.

As more and more natural habitats are transformed for human use, and relatively more buffalo populations are consequently found in protected areas (Chapter 4), traditional and subsistence hunting by Africans has increasingly become illegal and is referred to as ‘subsistence poaching’ or ‘illegal hunting’. This phenomenon has put African cultures in a difficult dilemma by impeding them from engaging in important social and traditional activities linked to buffalo hunting, as well as preventing access to valuable protein. Despite the dismal failure of these measures at the local level, scientific studies continue to call for local community involvement in wildlife management, community education, local institutions and benefit-sharing to minimize poaching and compensate for the loss in protein (Hulme and Murphree, 2001; Lunstrum, 2017; Muboko, 2017; Ntuli et al., 2019). However, even if these measures were effective, they cannot compensate for the social and cultural values that have been lost.

### **Western Trophy Hunting**

Interestingly, the experience of Western hunters indicates that the values, risks and perceptions attached to buffalo hunting are cross-cultural. Considered as a pest preventing the establishment of European livestock systems (due to competition and disease transmission) or as a noble thing to hunt, wildlife was targeted by colonial hunting and entire wildlife communities were decimated (Chapter 12). Trophy hunting in Africa developed in the twentieth century as an extreme sport for the perceived ‘brave gentlemen’, and today is a key management tool for the