

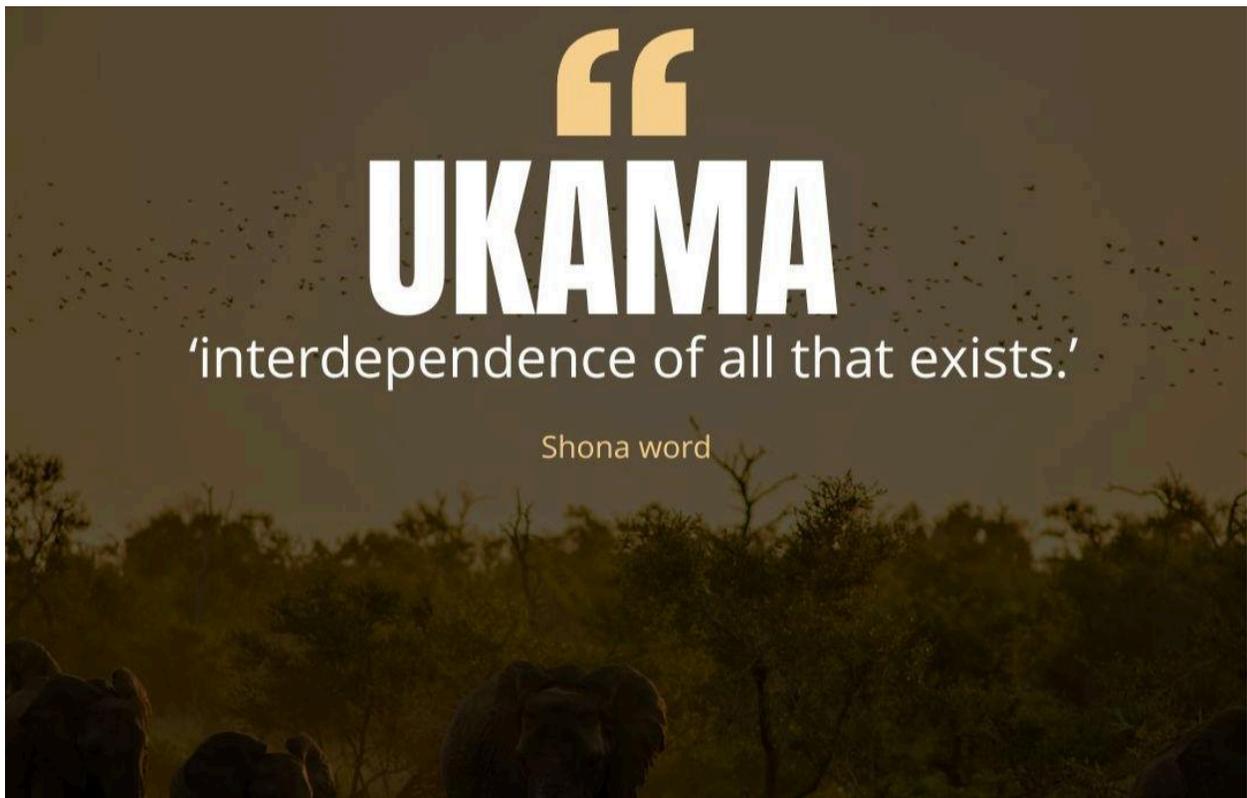
Ukama: the interdependence of all that exists



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Eye in the Sky: Dr. Adam Cruise

Many years ago, while camping in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, I discovered a relatively unknown African philosophical concept that epitomises how we should look at the natural environment. Ukama.



***Ukama*, a Shona word that implies the 'interdependence of all that exists.'**

I had arrived at a remote camp deep in the park to find an old Shona man living there. He was in charge of maintaining the campsite, which was little more than a designated patch under a large Marula tree with a small wooden fence around it, supposedly to protect visitors from wild animals. As I pitched the tent, the man went into the bush to collect some firewood. There were many elephants about at the time – a herd of at least fifty – scattered around the perimeter of the campsite. I was astonished at the bravery of the old man to wander blithely among them, humming softly as he went about his business. The elephants, for their part, seemed to pay him little attention. They grazed on about him with that deep rumbling so typical among a large herd.

“Weren’t you scared of the elephants?” I asked him when he returned.

“They are my friends,” was his reply. “They know me. If they come near, I talk to them and they listen.”

Reconnecting with Nature: Rediscovering the Language of the Wild

It struck me then how much modern humans have become disconnected from the natural world. This old man, instead, belonged to an ancient African way of living that was bodily attuned to the wild world. Here he was, in the midst of, and communicating and engaging with, one of the most dangerous animals on earth, without fear or detachment. He moved effortlessly among them using soothing tones and body language that explained to the elephants that they had nothing to fear from him. The old man was able to speak their language

and, in doing so, integrate effortlessly with his living surroundings by using forms of bodily and voice expression that could be 'read' or interpreted by the elephants.

Detached from wild nature, I, the outsider from a civilized world, had developed a fear for elephants because I had lost the vital principle of my own development and function as a human animal. Basically I had lost the ability both to speak and to hear the language of the wild.

Understanding the Shona Concept of Ukama: Interdependence Beyond Humanity

On chatting further with the old man around the fire later that night, he explained that his connection with those elephants was because of an entrenched part of his traditional culture. He called it ***Ukama***, a **Shona word that implies the 'interdependence of all that exists.'** It is similar to the concept of *Ubuntu*, but goes much further. While *Ubuntu* only focuses on human relationships with other humans, *Ukama* includes the non-human world too.

According to the old Shona tradition, *Ukama* is the reality that *all things* are closely related and depend on one another for existence. Humans exist in a community that depends, not only on other humans, but also on the natural world of animals, plants and other elements in the world like rocks and rivers.

In the strict sense of *Ukama*, there are no inanimate things in the universe. All things, including rocks, rivers, mountains, trees, animals and humans are

carriers of the same life principle in various degrees, and they all speak the language of being.

The Interdependence of Humans and Nature: Embracing the Ukama Philosophy

Ultimately, *Ukama* is concerned about the natural environment and human interrelationship with it. Since humans are wholly dependent on all of nature – the air, soil, water, and animals – for our own survival, it stands to reason we ought to prioritise the protection of our natural environment in its entirety because, in the final instance, *Ukama* understands that the well-being of humans and the well-being of the rest of the natural world cannot be separated out.

Any tampering with the air, the soil, the water and the animals will negatively impact on the natural environment, the wild animals and ultimately also on humans. Being human, therefore, is intricately connected with being-wild.

What's more, *Ukama* is not just a Shona concept, but one that supports a traditional African world view. In fact, some scholars have gone as far as to say that, in fact, all indigenous and ancient cultures across the globe from the Arctic to the Amazon support a concept of interdependence with the wild environment. We 'moderns' could do well to remember that.

We have somehow forgotten we are a part of, and not apart from, the natural world. Afterall, our very survival depends on it.

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