

An Ecocriticism of One Selected IsiXhosa Folktale as Part of Oral Literature

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Abstract

Whereas amaXhosa literature continues to receive scholarly consideration, there is a deficit regarding scrutinizing amaXhosa folktales, particularly through the ecocriticism theory. As a result of this, there is an asymmetrical understanding of how ecosystems can be integrated into amaXhosa literature to advance the meaning of folktales in addition to the reality that folktales contain didactic and pedagogical components. It stands to reason, therefore, to channel heightened deliberation on amaXhosa folktales as part of oral literature. Given this fact, this article aims to examine how one selected amaXhosa folktale fuses ecological features into its pursuits to promote educational understanding among children and adults. Over and above this, the aim is to demonstrate how important it is to heed the instructional values of those with wisdom as it is pertinent in this particular folktale. The objective is to underline that amaXhosa folktales, as part of oral literature, continue to be applicable and as a result, they ought to be uncovered in the arena of scholarly discourse. The selected folktale, *UNTando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando) is appreciated herein as a primary source of data, while ecocriticism is applied as a theory of interpretation and analysis. The findings and discussions indicate that this particular folktale advances the idea that humans, nature and animals are symbiotic and interactive in the environmental setting. Nevertheless, humans ought to respect the territories of animals and nature in a bid to create a proportioned society. The concluding remarks of this article present possible avenues for future scholarly discourses.

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Introduction

African folktales continually mirror and transmit various social realities and cultural values of the communities from which they

originate. These folktales serve as windows into African societies' customs, belief systems and experiences, offering perspectives into their historical, social and moral facets. AmaXhosa folktales are no exception to this

endeavor given that they recurrently reproduce the social occurrences of the amaXhosa ethnic group. In particular, the importance of amaXhosa folktales lies in the fact that they contain moral lessons and ethical principles that are important to the community of amaXhosa and elsewhere in the global village (Diko, 2023a). These oral stories continually center on issues such as authenticity, bravery, kindness, and justice, reflecting the moral values cherished by different societies. In fact, justice is a fundamental theme in many amaXhosa folktales on account that these oral narratives depict the triumph of justice over injustice and the importance of treating all individuals fairly, regardless of their social status or background (Dipio, 2023, p. 157). By the same token, many global cultures, with particular reference to amaXhosa, underline the significance of respecting elders and authority figures as will be proven during the evaluation of the selected amaXhosa folktale herein. Thus, these narratives may feature characters who learn the consequences of disrespecting their elders or failing to follow the guidance of wise individuals.

In view of this fact, it could be accepted that amaXhosa folktales, as part of oral literature, serve as educational or didactic instruments, teaching life prowess and practical wisdom. Simultaneously, they captivate audiences, especially amaXhosa children, with engaging oral narratives, making learning delightful and accessible (Baloyi & Dlamini, 2023), on account that they are affluent with ethnological value systems, norms, and traditions. Through the experiences and choices of their characters, these oral stories impart essential life lessons and convey the cultural expectations of the community. This denotes that listeners learn not only what is considered virtuous but also why it is important within the context of their culture. In addition to this view, one of the primary educational functions of amaXhosa folktales is imparting moral and ethical standards. This is particularly the case owing to the fact that they frequently feature characters who face moral dilemmas, make choices and experience consequences (Ntshangase, 2022). That is the reason Diko (2023b) contends that audiences of amaXhosa

folktales learn about the consequences of dishonesty, greed, selfishness and other moral defects, as well as the rewards of generosity, honesty, and affinity. On account of this, by engaging with folktales, younger generations are introduced to their ethnological pedigree and the importance of oral literature (Diko, 2023b). Ultimately, this amplifies the bond between generations and ensures the continuity of cultural knowledge and values.

Over and above this, when amaXhosa folktales are not scholarly probed, several important consequences may arise. First and foremost, a valuable ethnological heritage may be at risk of fading into obscurity (Kiss et al., 2022). This is because these folktales encapsulate centuries of wisdom, traditions and exclusive worldviews, and downplaying their evaluation suggests losing a critical part of African identity, with specificity to that of amaXhosa. Additionally, the moral and didactic dimensions of these oral narratives remain untapped. Also, amaXhosa folktales are powerful tools for imparting essential life lessons, advancing critical reasoning, and promoting cultural consciousness. Nevertheless, these instructional opportunities may go unrealized without scholarly examination, potentially depriving future generations of valuable insights and skills. This means that the absence of scrutinizing these folktales denotes missed opportunities for cross-cultural understanding. This is against the backdrop that amaXhosa folktales offer a window into variegated subcultures and belief systems, and failing to examine them prevents the broader world from appreciating the fertility and diversity of amaXhosa societies. Serudu (1984, p. 46) confirms this view in that the significance of examining amaXhosa folktales, which are a subset of African folklore, lies in the opportunity they provide to delve into the intricate subcultures, belief systems and diversity within amaXhosa societies.

While there is a considerable exposition of discourses, as shown just above, concerning amaXhosa folktales, it is perceptive to underline that there is an outstanding gap facing literary critics. For instance, Theron et al. (2017) indicate that these folktales encounter diminishing oral traditions in the

digital age. This denotes that with the intensification of technology and challenging lifestyles, younger generations are more exposed to modern forms of entertainment, adversely impacting the transference of these traditional narratives. Fu et al. (2023) add that the risk of ethnological erosion looms as the younger population gives eminence to digital media over oral storytelling. In addition to this, Diko (2023b) suggests that efforts to conserve and promote amaXhosa folktales face the challenge of adapting to evolving communication methodologies while maintaining the essence of these affluent ethnological narratives ensuring their continued relevance in an ever-changing cultural landscape. In the same vein, globalization adds a layer of external influences that potentially diffuse the authenticity of amaXhosa folktales (Diko, 2023a). This is based on the premise that Western cultural dominance, media, and globalization lead to the distortion or assimilation of traditional narratives, potentially altering their original meaning and cultural significance. Beyond this, the fast-paced urban lifestyle contributes to a disjointure between generations, with urbanized youth having obstructed exposure to the rural settings where these folktales continually find their roots. It is for this reason that bridging this gap and buttressing intergenerational communication becomes central to ensuring the preservation of amaXhosa folktales in the face of globalization and the changing dynamic forces of cultural transmission.

Bearing the above context in mind, this article aims to uncover the prevalent educational facets in one selected amaXhosa folktale titled *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando). The importance of this scholarly discourse rests on the certainty that amaXhosa folktales are repositories of ethnological knowledge, values, and traditions. For that reason, by uncovering their educational elements, literary critics and educators could help preserve and transmit this ethnological knowledge to future generations. In addition to this reality, evaluating amaXhosa folktales ensures that essential dimensions of a culture's identity and history are not distorted and erased over time.

Effectively, amaXhosa folktales are part of oral literature, and unraveling their didactic dimensions helps conserve this literature within the arena of scholarly scrutiny. It ensures that oral storytelling practices are valued and passed down through generations. It must also be underlined herein that the isiXhosa language is an indigenous language that is naturally found in South Africa, while amaXhosa refers to the ethnic group that speaks this language. In any event, the following section focuses on the research methodology that this article utilizes in an attempt to address its aim and the problematized phenomenon.

Methodology

This article uses one selected amaXhosa folktale as a primary source of data. The selected folktale is titled *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando), and the English translations are provided in order to accommodate readers who may not be privy to the isiXhosa language as an indigenous language in South Africa. This particular folktale, as part of isiXhosa oral literature, has been excerpted from an amaXhosa folklore anthology titled *Iintsomi zethu* (Our folktales) produced by Mqhubi Given Mdliva (2016). The use of amaXhosa folktales as a primary source of data is a valuable and multifaceted technique that yields insights across various academic disciplines and research areas such as anthropology, cultural studies, literature, education, and many others (Theron et al., 2017). For example, amaXhosa folktales provide affluent ethnographic data concerning the customs, traditions, and belief systems of the amaXhosa cultural group. This denotes that they offer an opportunity into this community's social structures, rituals, and everyday life, facilitating extensive linguistic and cultural analysis. That is the reason Diko (2023b) continues to promulgate that amaXhosa folktales recurrently embody historical artifacts, including references to past events, figures, and migrations. As a result of this, they ought to be recognized and appreciated as a primary source of data owing to the fact that they serve as oral history sources, shedding light on historical contexts and perspectives not found in other written records (Fu et al., 2023). In fact, they serve as a

voice for many voiceless societies that have rich philosophical experiences.

By the same token, amaXhosa folktales are a form of isiXhosa literature, and literary critics could potentially uncover their narrative structures, themes, and literary devices. The technique of uncovering amaXhosa folktales may potentially amplify human understanding of narratological features and literary traditions in African cultures, with special reference to amaXhosa (Agunbiade, 2023). It stands to reason, therefore, to acknowledge that these folktales could be examined from different perspectives. For instance, they continually encompass universal themes such as love, heroism, betrayal and transformation (Mtuze, 1991). On account of this, by locating the themes and motifs that appear across different folktales, literary critics and folklorists may discern the cultural values and concerns that underpin these narratives. In the process, this sheds light on what matters most to the communities telling these stories. Ultimately, examining the literary features of folktales could demonstrate their continued pertinence in contemporary contexts. This suggests that literary critics and folklorists can explore how these narratives are adapted in modern literature, theater, film, and other forms of artistic expression. In essence, treating amaXhosa folktales as a form of literature and subjecting them to literary critique refines human comprehension of the complex and multifaceted storytelling traditions within the amaXhosa culture. It underscores the artistic and cultural significance of these narratives, allowing humans to appreciate the depth and creativity inherent in oral literature from Africa, with special reference to amaXhosa.

In a nutshell, folktales contain archetypal characters and situations that could provide psychological and sociological insights (Diko, 2023c). They can credibly be utilized as primary sources of data to illuminate human behavior, fears, aspirations, and the way societies conceptualize and transmit knowledge. In contrast to this, they feature characters who embody archetypal qualities and traits (Mtuze, 1991). For example, the hero, the villain, the wise old sage, and the damsel in distress are common archetypes

found in many folktales. Considering this, analyzing how these characters are portrayed and how they evolve in different narratives may shed light on universal human traits and roles within societies. In fact, folktales continually reflect the fears and aspirations of a culture. They unmask what a society fears most, such as supernatural entities, betrayal, and the unknown; and what it values most such as courage, kindness, and wisdom. Understanding these fears and aspirations, thus, illuminates the collective mindset of a community.

In so far as *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando) remain central sources of data herein, it is imperative to appreciate that this article applies ecocriticism in its inquiry. Ecocriticism is a critical literary and cultural theory that emerged in response to the growing cognizance of environmental issues and the necessity to examine the correlation between literature, humans, and the environment (Marland, 2013). At its core, ecocriticism seeks to explore the representation of nature, the environment, and human interactions with the natural world in literature and other cultural texts (Siwi et al., 2022). It operates by scrutinizing how these representations reflect and configure human perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards the environment. In the analysis of amaXhosa folktales, ecocriticism is a valuable lens through which to examine the ecological dimensions of these narratives and how they assist in the advancement of meaning within the folktale—*UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando).

This theoretical perspective focuses on the reproduction of nature and the environment within the narratives, and how such depiction could be used to enhance human comprehension regarding social issues as shown during the course of the evaluation. It centers on how the natural world is depicted, including landscapes, animals, plants, and natural phenomena as in the case of *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando). Given this, this evaluation helps uncover the cultural significance of these attributes and how they relate to amaXhosa society's interactions with their environments, and how nature could be personified to advance a certain argument. In

fact, amaXhosa folktales habitually contain narratives that involve interactions between humans and the natural world, such as stories of animal-human encounters, transformations or conflicts with natural forces (Jenkins, 2002). Accordingly, ecocriticism examines the subtleties of these connections and the messages they convey about humanity's place in the ecosystem. This theoretical lens is vital as it intensifies human understanding of the ecological dimensions in isiXhosa literature and culture. It underscores the interconnectedness of humans and the environment, buttresses environmental consciousness and promotes sustainable practices. In unmasking folktales, ecocriticism unveils cultural attitudes, ethical lessons, and ecological wisdom, contributing to the conservation of traditional knowledge and the global conversation on social issues.

In a nutshell, ecocriticism discloses the meaning of amaXhosa folktales by examining the ecological artifacts of these oral literary narratives. It unmask the ways in which the folktales convey messages and insights related to nature, the environment, and human-nature interactions. Effectively, ecocritics scrutinize themes, symbols, character interactions, and narratives to elucidate the cultural, moral, and ethical significance of these rudiments. By so doing, ecocriticism, as a theory, underscores the ecological wisdom, values, and lessons entrenched in amaXhosa folktales, enriching an understanding of their profound meanings and ethnological significance. With this in mind, ecocriticism is highly relevant in today's world and in this article as it addresses pressing social and environmental concerns. It fosters awareness of ecological issues, encouraging responsible stewardship of the society. That is the reason it was underlined previously that by examining folktales through an ecocritical lens, literary analysts gain cultural perspectives and valuable lessons about sustainable living, making this theoretical lens vital for preserving traditional ecological knowledge. Over and above this, ecocriticism promotes interdisciplinary discussions and actions to address global societal and environmental challenges. This is demonstrated in the findings and discussions below.

Results and Discussion

Integration of Nature and Animals in Amaxhosa Folktales

Integrating natural creation and animals in amaXhosa folktales holds profound significance when viewed through the lens of ecocriticism, as a theory. These narratives serve as cultural repositories that mirror and reproduce the intricate correlation between amaXhosa communities and their natural environments. On account of this, depicting nature and animals in the literature of amaXhosa is important owing to the reality that it advances an extraordinary connection between humans and the natural world, promoting environmental consciousness and affinity for non-human life. It also allows for allegorical and symbolic storytelling, enabling authors to explore multifaceted themes and convey profound messages through the interactions between characters and their natural surroundings. Fundamentally, these folktales (amaXhosa folktales) recurrently feature animals as personified characters that interact with humans. This is observable in the textual evidence below:

Yayisele ikhamisile kakade ilungele ukumginya yabuza: 'Ubekwa yintoni kule ndlela? Undothuse ndizonwabele!'
(Mdliva, 2016, p. 36)

(It [snake] was already gasping and ready to swallow him and asked: 'Why are you on this route? You frightened me while I was enjoying myself!')

It is noteworthy to observe that the character in the aforementioned textual evidence is in fact a snake. In any event, it has been given human characteristics such as speaking. This denotes that this folktale underscores the cultural interrelatedness between people and their natural surroundings in that whereas animals have exclusive features, they still have a considerable relationship with humans. Specifically, the human relationship with snakes varies widely across cultures and contexts. While some cultures regard snakes as symbols of danger or malevolence, others regard them as symbols of fertility, healing, or spiritual significance, highlighting the

multifacetedness of this relationship (Tasoulis & Isbister, 2023). They highlight the amaXhosa society's inveterate cognizance of their ecological contexts. This folktale further underlines the entrenched cultural connection between African people and their natural surroundings. In other words, this folktale serves as a poignant reminder of the profound cultural bond between African communities and their natural environment. Through its narrative, it reverberates the intrinsic interrelation between the people and the land, underlining the symbiotic relationship that has configured their lives, belief systems and traditions over generations. Bearing this in mind, this folktale mirrors the reverence for nature, illustrating how it is not merely a backdrop but an essential component of the ethnological identity. In addition to this, this folk narrative becomes invaluable in preserving ecological consciousness and advancing a sense of responsibility towards the environment, highlighting the enduring interdependence between African people and the rich tapestry of the natural world.

For this reason, by reproducing animals as characters that interact with humans, this selected folktale illustrates how the amaXhosa worldview includes a sense of kinship with the natural world. This connection is continually deeply entrenched in spiritual and cultural belief systems, among other crucial matters. In general, African societies have historically exhibited a keen consciousness of their ecological contexts. As a result of this, it stands to reason to contend that these folktales serve as a medium to convey this consciousness by reproducing the interactions between humans and animals. In the same manner, they highlight the importance of coexisting harmoniously with nature and embracing the environment. Africa is eminently diverse, with numerous ethnic groups, languages, and traditions. The use of animal characters in African folktales, particularly those of amaXhosa, allows for a wide range of narratives that reproduce the ethnological variegation of the continent. Each ethnic group may have its own exclusive folktales involving animals, contributing to the richness of African storytelling traditions.

In *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando), two types of animals are used as personified characters; that is, a snake and chimpanzees. Using animals as characters in folktales is a common and longstanding tradition in storytelling across cultures. Animals serve as symbolic representations, convey moral lessons, and add depth to the narrative, making them quintessential to the affluent tapestry of folk narratives worldwide. In amaXhosa folktales, the choice of characters, such as a snake and a chimpanzee, carries specific significance and meaning, continually rooted in cultural belief systems and symbolism (Hausmann, 2023). Having said that, snakes are prevalent in amaXhosa folklore and are symbolic of various attributes and concepts. They can represent positive and negative qualities depending on the context in which they are perceived. In amaXhosa culture, the snake is often associated with both positive and negative qualities, depending on the context and the specific snake species. One example of a snake that represents positive qualities is the python. The python is revered for its majestic appearance, slow and deliberate movements, and its association with life, fertility and protection (Takemori et al., 2022; Diko, 2023b). In amaXhosa folklore, the python is sometimes regarded as a guardian spirit of water sources and is believed to have the power to bring rain, ensuring the fertility of the land. It is also associated with healing and is sometimes considered a symbol of wisdom and longevity. At the same time, it is important to observe that amaXhosa culture, like many other cultures, has a diverse set of belief systems and interpretations, and not all snakes are viewed positively. Some snakes may be associated with danger, evil or negative forces in different contexts within amaXhosa folklore and spirituality. One example of a snake that resembles danger and is recurrently associated with danger due to its appearance is the Eastern Coral Snake (*Micrurus fulvius*). The Eastern Coral Snake is a venomous snake found in the South-Eastern United States (US). It is known for its striking coloration, which consists of alternating bands of red, yellow and black. This coloration is a classic example of aposematism, a warning coloration that signals to its predators that the snake is dangerous.

In addition to this, snakes are known for their unpredictable behavior and their ability to shed their skin, symbolizing transformation and renewal. In amaXhosa folktales, they may be employed to convey messages about change, adaptability, and the cyclical nature of life. Positive snake characters, which are patent in *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando), challenge stereotypes and encourage audiences to see beyond surface appearances. Just as real snakes can potentially have both venomous and non-venomous species, this folk narrative underlines the complexity and diversity of characters in the world or society, teaching humans not to judge based on outward appearances alone. Unequivocally, this is apparent in the selected folktale given that Ntando (one of the central characters in the folktale) has been forgiven by the dangerous snake even though he entered its territory (Mdliva, 2016, p. 36). This is observable in the excerpt below:

Wathi efuna ukujika yamnqanda inyoka ngelithi: 'Ndithi bheka phambili kungenjalo ndakukutya nqwam, nqwam ube ngumthanyana!'
Esoyika, waphendula wathi: 'Enkosi nyoka enobubele.' (Mdliva, 2016, p. 37).

(When he wanted to turn around, the snake stopped him by saying: 'I say go ahead or I will eat you right up, right away you will be a little boy!'
Fearful, he replied: 'Thank you kind snake.')

In contrast to this, Chimpanzees are amaXhosa's closest living relatives in the animal kingdom, sharing a significant amount of genetic material with humans (Kano et al., 2022). Consequently, they are frequently depicted as having human-like qualities, such as intelligence, inquisitiveness, and emotions, in African folktales. Nevertheless, in folktales such as the selected one hereunder where chimpanzees kill humans, this symbolism represents the consequences of human actions, underscoring the idea that mistreating or encroaching upon nature could lead to retribution. In view of this fact, respecting the animal kingdom among amaXhosa is central on account that it is deeply intertwined with their

cultural and spiritual belief systems. Animals are often regarded as sacred beings, symbolizing the interconnectedness of all living things and serving as messengers between the human and spiritual realms. This respect for animals bolsters the amaXhosa people's harmonious relationship with nature, sustains their traditions, and preserves the delicate balance between humanity and the natural world. This is evident in the passage below:

Kungekudala eyishiyile wadibana neemfene zisabelana ngenyama yomntu. Loo nto yamtsho wathi xhungu koyika. Isizathu soko kukuba wayexhalele ukuba angabi lixhoba leemfene elilandelayo. Zavuya kakhulu zakumbona zathi: 'Nali iqumqumana elinyama ithambileyo masilitye bo! Ukuba sife yindlala kukho umntu oyabulayo oko asinakuvumela. Inene ndikhangele nje ngathi sisentlutheni. Yhu! Engaka yona intlutha zange ndiyibone.' (Mdliva, 2016, p. 37)

(Soon after he left it [the snake], he met chimpanzees sharing human flesh. He was afraid. The reason for that was that he was worried about being the next victim of the chimpanzees. They were very happy when they saw him and said: 'Here is a soft fleshy person, let us eat him! Imagine dying of hunger; and we cannot allow it. I really think we have food security. Huh! I have never seen so much food.)

The aforementioned passage serves as a cautionary instrument, highlighting the necessity for humans to respect the natural world and its inhabitants. It underscores the interconnectedness of all living beings, reminding humans that actions that harm or trouble the environment and its creatures can have dire repercussions. Ecocriticism, as a theory, underscores the significance of respecting animals within the context of ecological ethical codes. It advocates for recognizing the intrinsic value of animals and their right to exist and thrive in their natural habitats, foregrounding that humans should not exploit or harm animals without justifiable cause. Ecocriticism further emboldens a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings in

ecosystems, buttressing affinity and ethical consideration for animals and their roles within the natural world. For this reason, in the selected amaXhosa folktale, chimpanzees act as agents of justice, balancing the scales when humans overstep their boundaries in the delicate ecological tapestry. Over and above this, this folktale underlines the significance of maintaining harmony with nature and the necessity for humans to coexist civilly with the wildlife that shares their environment. Nevertheless, when humans disrupt this balance through activities like deforestation, habitat destruction, or hunting, chimpanzees may symbolically retaliate to restore equilibrium. In *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando) the chimpanzees have retaliated by killing and eating humans for invading their territory.

Beyond this, depicting flowers as healing mechanisms in amaXhosa folktales bears profound cultural and practical significance worthy of being probed herein. It mirrors the intricate relationship between nature, traditional medicine, and the spiritual belief systems of many African societies, including amaXhosa (Yuan et al., 2016). The amaXhosa culture has an enormous connection to the natural world and flowers, in particular, symbolizing the abundance and healing power of nature. One would recall that flowers hold significant healing properties in various cultures and therapeutic practices. First and foremost, their vibrant colors and pleasing aromas have been shown to positively affect mood and reduce stress, contributing to emotional security. Second, many flowers, such as calendula and lavender, have been used for centuries in herbal medicine for their anti-inflammatory, soothing, and pain-relieving properties (Shen et al., 2017). Third, the act of tending to and arranging flowers, known as horticultural therapy, can potentially promote relaxation and cognitive stimulation, aiding in mental and emotional recovery. Last, flowers' symbolic meanings and cultural associations recurrently convey messages of love, sympathy, and support, providing comfort and solace to those in need during difficult times. Some of these issues are observable in the textual evidence below:

Kwaye kukho abantwana ababini abangamawele, uNtando noNontando. Bagulelwa ngumakhulu wabo ngokusuka atyhaphake amehlo. Ubumfama bakhe besiquphe babuxhalabise bonke abanebango nabasondeleyo kuye. Bayalelwa ngabazali babo ukuba baye kukha intyatyambo ethile aya kuthi akuyijonga umakhulu wabo aphinde aphile. (Mdliva, 2016, p. 35).

(There were two twin children, Ntando and Nontando. Their grandmother fell ill with blurred vision. His sudden blindness worried all those close to her. They were instructed by their parents to go and pick a certain flower that their grandmother would look at and be able to see again.)

In this textual evidence, the healing of the grandmother's blurred vision relies on the children's ability to pick a specific flower. This illustrates the significant interconnection between humans and nature in the folktale. The flower, although unnamed, represents a natural remedy or solution to the human problem, underlining the reliance of the characters on the environment for their welfare. Furthermore, the knowledge of which flower to pick for the grandmother's recovery is likely based on traditional ecological wisdom passed down orally through generations. This component of the folktale underscores the importance of Indigenous African Knowledge Systems (IAKS) concerning the healing properties of plants and the value of preserving such wisdom for the community's welfare as well as future generations.

The folktale continues to suggest that nature holds the key to the grandmother's healing, uncovering the role of the environment in providing remedies and solutions to human ailments. It promotes the idea that nature offers not only physical sustenance but also the means to address health issues and restore balance. With this in mind, traditional healing relies on locally available plants and resources, promoting sustainability and reducing the ecological footprint associated with pharmaceuticals and modern medical treatments. This aligns with current environmental and sustainability

concerns. Therefore, recognizing and homogenizing traditional healing practices into mainstream healthcare could enhance cultural competence among healthcare professionals. This, in turn, can improve patient-doctor relationships and healthcare outcomes among diverse populations.

Over and above this, flowers, among other natural plants, are regarded as gifts from the earth, epitomizing the vitality and nurturing components of the environment. For this reason, amaXhosa folktales depict the use of flowers in traditional healing mores. These oral narratives serve as a means of preserving and passing down indigenous knowledge of herbal medicine, which is frequently a central component of healthcare in many indigenous communities in Africa and elsewhere in the global village. On the one hand, flowers hold spiritual significance in amaXhosa indigenous communities (Zhang et al., 2023; Diko, 2023c). They may be associated with specific deities or ancestral spirits, and their use in healing rituals may be perceived as a way to invoke divine assistance and blessings (Mabuka et al., 2023). On account of this, by depicting flowers as healing mechanisms, amaXhosa folktales help conserve cultural practices and knowledge that have been passed down orally through generations. They guarantee that traditional healing methodologies are not deserted; instead, they continue to be valued within the different communities. This is on account that these oral narratives feature characters who demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness in using flowers to heal. As a result of this, they inspire audiences to harness the natural resources available to them, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-sufficiency.

In a nutshell, amaXhosa folktales, including the selected one, are acutely interwoven with nature and animals as intrinsic characters. This suggests that nature and animals play central roles in conveying cultural values, ecological consciousness, moral lessons and the interconnectedness of amaXhosa society with their natural surroundings. These elements are inseparable from the fertile tapestry of African narratology and are essential for the preservation of cultural traditions, passing down indigenous

knowledge and teaching important life lessons. In amaXhosa folklore, nature and animals are not just characters but vital storytellers who help configure the narratives and impart wisdom to generations. They reflect the profound consciousness of the ecological context in which these oral narratives originate and emphasize the enduring bond between amaXhosa people and their environment.

In addition to this view, it is important to understand that amaXhosa folktales not only incorporate nature and animals as characters but also draw upon the ethnological and ecological fortune of the African continent. The diverse landscapes, wildlife and plant life across Africa provide a vast source of inspiration for storytelling. Different regions and ethnic groups within Africa have their own unique narratives featuring indigenous flora and fauna, reflecting the continent's incredible biodiversity and cultural diversity. Additionally, these folktales serve as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of African societies. They underline the resourcefulness of people in utilizing their natural surroundings for survival, medicine and sustenance. That is the reason it stands to reason that African folklore underscores the idea that humans are not disjointed from nature but an integral part of it, emphasizing the importance of harmonious coexistence with the environment. Therefore, nature and animals in African folktales are not only characters but also embodiments of the profound connection between culture, ecology and the enduring legacy of storytelling on the African continent.

Importance of Listening to Elders

In addition to the fact that *UNtando noNontando* (Ntando and Nontando) possess a significant meaning regarding ecocriticism, it is important to make additional observations concerning the narrative as a whole. Bearing this in mind, the folktale underlines the importance of listening and following the words of elders as they possess wisdom for future generational usage. Listening to elders, as depicted in the selected amaXhosa folktale, holds profound importance and conveys several valuable cultural and societal lessons.

This is so given that elders are continually mirrored as repositories of wisdom, knowledge and life experience. This denotes that amaXhosa folktales underscore the significance of respecting and listening to elders as a means of preserving and passing down invaluable cultural and practical perspectives to younger generations. This ensures the continuity of traditional wisdom and skills. In the same vein, different amaXhosa societies have a strong tradition of oral storytelling, where elders play a central role as storytellers and custodians of cultural heritage. Folktales highlight the role of elders in transmitting cultural value systems, norms and history. Through these narratives, younger generations learn about their cultural identity and heritage including listening and respect.

In addition to this, folktales such as the selected one depict the consequences of disrespecting or disobeying elders. For example, Ntando – one of the main characters in the folktale was instructed by her parents to follow particular directions when looking for the flower that would be used by his blind grandmother (Mdliva, 2016). However, he deviated and disrespected these instructions, and chose to go elsewhere. Ultimately, he was confronted with wild creatures (chimpanzees) that ended up killing and eating him. This is enough to underline that dismissing elders' instructions as irrational or irrelevant can lead to missed opportunities for learning, growth and preserving cultural heritage. It reminds one that elders' advice should be considered thoughtfully, as it is often rooted in a deep understanding of life's complexities and the values of the community. Their advice is a repository of education and knowledge that has been accumulated over generations and is essential for maintaining the continuity of ethnological values and traditions. Thus, by heeding their counsel, individuals can benefit from the insights and experiences of those who have navigated life's challenges before them, ultimately contributing to their own growth and overall development.

It is clear, therefore, that amaXhosa folktales impart the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships within families and communities. Particularly, listening to elders

promotes mutual respect, strengthens intergenerational bonds and contributes to social cohesion. Elders in amaXhosa folktales and contexts are frequently associated with moral authority. They offer moral guidance, teaching younger individuals about ethical behavior, honesty, kindness and justice. Listening to elders and heeding their advice helps shape individuals' character and values. The wisdom of elders is regarded as instrumental in promoting the well-being of the entire community. Effectively, folktales portray how the collective welfare of the community relies on the wisdom and leadership of its elders. This means that disregarding their counsel may potentially lead to negative consequences for the community as a whole. While amaXhosa folktales emphasize the importance of listening to elders, they also reflect the idea that wisdom should be complemented by innovation. Some folktales showcase characters who respectfully challenge established norms and traditions, striking a balance between respecting the past and adapting to changing circumstances.

Conclusion

Uncovering the facets of nature, animals and parental figures in amaXhosa folktales holds immense significance in the domain of literature as it provides a window into the fertile tapestry of the culture of amaXhosa, offering unique insights into the correlation between humans, their environment; and their social structures. In this regard, nature is a consequential component of the amaXhosa society, configuring their lifestyles, spirituality and worldviews. Based on the folktale that was used as a primary source of data in this article and considering ecocriticism as a theory, it is clear that amaXhosa folktales feature vivid descriptions of landscapes and the natural world. Unraveling these facets allowed this scholarly discourse to appreciate the profound connection between the amaXhosa ethnic group and their environments. The article buttressed the idea that humans are not partitioned from nature but deeply intertwined with it. This is against the reality that amaXhosa folktales, among others, frequently emphasize ecological themes, such as the importance of sustainable resource

management and the consequences of environmental degradation. Uncovering these pertinent subjects promotes ecological consciousness and encourages responsible stewardship of the environment. Fundamentally, these narratives serve as valuable mechanisms for environmental education, highlighting the need to protect and preserve the natural world.

It was also stressed in this article that animals often play central roles in amaXhosa folktales as symbols, metaphorical expressions and characters. As a result of this, uncovering the symbolism of animals in these folktales reveals their cultural significance. For instance, some animals are revered as totems or represent specific virtues, while others embody societal taboos or warnings. Understanding this symbolism, therefore, deepens human understanding of amaXhosa cultural values and belief systems. By the same token, amaXhosa folktales recurrently depict familial relationships and the role of parents in imparting wisdom and values to their children.

Unmasking these parental facets underscores the importance of family in the context of amaXhosa. It highlights the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and cultural traditions, emphasizing the pivotal role parents and elders play in shaping the moral and ethical development of younger generations. These folktales are often part of the oral tradition, where storytelling is a communal and intergenerational practice. Examining the elements of nature, animals and parental figures in these narratives advances the value of oral literature as a means of preserving ethnological heritage. It reminds one of the importance of passing down stories, wisdom and traditions from one generation to the next. While deeply rooted in African cultures, these themes also resonate universally. The relationships between humans and nature, the importance of family and the ethical lessons conveyed in these folktales are pertinent to people from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, uncovering these facets allows for cross-cultural appreciation and understanding. Over and above this, isiXhosa literature is of paramount importance as it serves as a vital repository of the cultural heritage, linguistic affluence and historical

narratives of the amaXhosa people. Through poetry, novels, and folktales, among many others, isiXhosa literature preserves and propagates the exclusive identity, traditions and worldview of the community. It becomes a medium for intergenerational transmission of knowledge, advancing a sense of continuity and pride. In addition to this, isiXhosa literature contributes to linguistic multiplicity, fortifying the significance of the isiXhosa language. By providing a forum for self-expression, it empowers amaXhosa authors or narrators to articulate contemporary issues, ensuring the ongoing relevance and resilience of their cultural narrative.

For future research on folktales, including African folktales, one can explore a wide range of intriguing and culturally significant dimensions. Some potential avenues of investigation include comparative analyses of folktales from different cultures that can reveal common themes, motifs and narrative structures, shedding light on universal human experiences and cultural exchanges. In addition to this, future scholarly discourses can examine how folktales are adapted and reinterpreted in modern literature, film and other media in order to reveal how these narratives continue to evolve and remain relevant in contemporary contexts. Similarly, an investigation on the cognitive and psychological effects of engaging with folktales, including their impact on cognitive development, empathy and emotional intelligence can bring social impact and cohesion.

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