

Indigenous Learning of Animal Metaphors: The 'Big Five' in King Shaka's Praise-Poems

Authors : Ntandoni Gloria Biyela

Abstract : During traditional times, there were no formal institutions of learning as they are today, where children attend classes to acquire or develop knowledge. This does not mean that there was no learning in indigenous African societies. Grandparents used to tell their grandchildren stories or teach them educational games around the fireplace, which this study refers to as a 'traditional classroom'. A story recreated in symbolic or allegorical way, forms a base for a society's beliefs, customs, accepted norms and language learning. Through folklore narratives, a society develops its own self awareness and education. So narrative characters, especially animals may be mythical products of the pre-literate folklore world and thus show the closeness that the Zulu society had with the wildlife. Oral cultures strive to create new facets of meaning by the use of animal metaphors to reflect the relationship of humans with the animal realm and to contribute to the language learning or literature in cross-cultural studies. Although animal metaphors are widespread in Zulu language because of the Zulu nation's traditional closeness to wildlife, little field-research has been conducted on the social behavior of animals on the way in which their characteristics were transferred with precision to depictions of King Shaka's behavior and activities during the amalgamation of Nguni clans into a Zulu kingdom. This study attempts to fill the gap by using first-hand interviews with local informants in areas traditionally linked to the king in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. Departing from the conceptual metaphor theory, the study concentrates on King Shaka's praise-poems in which the praise-poet describes his physical and dispositional characteristics through bold animal metaphors of the 'Big Five'; namely, the lion, the leopard, the buffalo, the rhinoceros and the elephant, which are often referred to as Zulu royal favorites. These metaphors are still learnt by young and old in the 21st century because they reflect the responsibilities, status, and integrity of the king and the respect in which he is held by his people. They also project the crescendo growth of the Zulu nation, which, through the fulfillment of his ambitions, grew from a small clan to a mighty kingdom.

Keywords : animal, indigenous, learning, metaphor

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