

INTEGRATING UBUNTU PRINCIPLES IN THE TEACHING OF FOLKTALES IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Folktales generally have a simple plot, involving characters that serve as symbols for different kinds of people. These characters encounter situations and events that have relevance in the lives of audience members, even though they are often unrealistic like talking animals. The paper explores the characters as serving four functions in the development of the theme, in the first-year students' prescribed Setswana Folktale text, "Dipheko tsa Bantsho" in relation to Ubuntu principles being the key figure for the success or failure of good behaviour, for a reward and bad behaviour for punishment. The aim of the paper is to serve as a medium of moral education and a nudge to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behaviour. Students are explored in the light of moral and ethical consideration based on the subsequent meaning-making discussions, where they are guided to perceive relationships between the imagined situations narrated in the folktale and the realities in their own environment. Folktales could be used to support students well-being in building bridges between cultures through the shared tradition of storytelling, to engage students' emotions, to help students to recognize the shared experiences and problems faced by people from different cultural backgrounds, to serve as a therapeutic effect by allowing the safe expression of emotions and allow students to confront fears and solve problems and to help students to make sense of their worlds.

Keywords: characters; folktales, moral education students, ubuntu principles.

INTRODUCTION

Folktales are narrative forms that belong to diverse genres, including adventure, moral, and didactic storytelling, and serve as important cultural texts within educational contexts (Jack Zipes, 2012; Ruth Finnegan, 2012). They stimulate students' imagination by exposing them to alternative worlds and perspectives, while simultaneously helping them to organise, interpret, and express their emotions (Bruno Bettelheim, 2010). Beyond entertainment, folktales transmit both personal and educational values, engaging students through imaginative elements such as animal protagonists and symbolic characters that capture their attention and deepen moral reflection (Zipes, 2012).

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Within the South African context, the analysis of folktales through the lens of Ubuntu enables students to engage with relational ethics grounded in interconnectedness, compassion, and communal responsibility (Michael Onyebuchi Eze, 2020; Mogobe Ramose, 1999). Ubuntu-oriented engagement with folktales illustrates how communities across time and space practise and preserve their traditions, thereby affirming cultural identity and shared humanity. Through comparative analysis of folktales from different origins, students develop appreciation for diverse cultures, languages, ethnicities, and worldviews, fostering intercultural understanding and dialogic learning consistent with transformative and humanising pedagogies (Paulo Freire, 1970).

In the modern world, traditions rooted in oral culture have increasingly shifted toward print and visual modes of representation, reflecting broader transformations in media and literacy practices (Walter J. Ong, 1982). Despite this transition, folktales continue to retain core features of oral storytelling, particularly the use of animal characters within what is often termed “animal fantasy” (Jack Zipes, 2012). The literary technique of attributing human traits, emotions, and personalities to animals, inanimate objects, or other non-human entities is known as anthropomorphism (Gillian Beer, 1983).

From the classical moral narratives of Aesop’s fables to contemporary animated and 3D films, anthropomorphism has functioned as a powerful narrative device used to stimulate students’ imagination and engagement in educational settings (Zipes, 2012). By incorporating diverse non-human characters into short narrative forms, authors are able to present complex moral and social situations in accessible ways. Although these scenarios may appear unrealistic, they often mirror real-life human experiences and ethical dilemmas that resonate with students lived realities (Adeyemi, 2021).

Folktales have been described as a prose narrative genre of oral literature that continues to function meaningfully within classroom contexts (Ruth Finnegan, 2012). In educational settings informed by Ubuntu philosophy, the teaching of folktales enables students to recognise their shared humanity and interconnectedness with others (Mogobe Ramose, 1999; Michael Onyebuchi Eze, 2008). Ubuntu-centered pedagogy emphasizes relationality, mutual respect, and communal responsibility, encouraging students to work cooperatively through dialogue, sharing, and collective engagement in the classroom.

Stories play an essential role in developing students’ imagination by exposing them to new perspectives and alternative ways of understanding the world (Kieran Egan, 1986). Furthermore, engagement with narrative texts supports students in organising, interpreting, and expressing their emotions, contributing to both cognitive and socio-emotional development (Bruno Bettelheim, 1976). Through collaborative analysis of folktales, students

not only deepen literary understanding but also cultivate empathy and ethical awareness consistent with Ubuntu principles.

Oral narration in Setswana traditional society served multiple social and educational functions, including transmitting moral codes by which members of society were expected to abide, teaching cultural history and origins, instilling communal values, nurturing the spirit of Ubuntu, and promoting unity during teaching and learning processes (Mogobe Ramose, 1999). Within oral performance traditions, verbal variability is inherent, as each narrator adapts the tale in their own way while remaining shaped by the expressions and narrative patterns learned from previous storytellers (Ruth Finnegan, 1970: 8). During the delivery of the narrative, the storyteller performs the tale through dramatic dialogue, gestures, facial expressions, and voice modulation, subtly embodying the personalities of different characters without fully enacting them. Even while seated, the narrator can vividly evoke actions and emotions through expressive language and performance techniques (Finnegan, 1970). The storytelling event is therefore interactive rather than passive. Students respond dynamically according to their emotional engagement and unfolding events in the narrative. Such responses may include questions, exclamations, repetition of key phrases, and other spontaneous reactions. In many instances, students also participate collectively by joining in songs embedded within the narration, reinforcing the communal and dialogic nature of oral performance (Finnegan, 1970; Ramose, 1999).

Ubuntu-Centred Approaches to Teaching Folktales

Using the principles of Ubuntu in teaching folktales inculcates moral lessons in students by foregrounding relational ethics, communal responsibility, and shared humanity (Mogobe Ramose, 1999; Michael Onyebuchi Eze, 2008). Although folktales often employ both human and animal characters, they symbolically depict life as it is lived within societies, communities, and families (Ruth Finnegan, 1970). Through narrative representation, folktales transmit socially constructed meanings and reinforce culture as something learned, shared, and practiced collectively within a community (Edward Burnett Tylor, 1871).

A primary function of folktales is to validate and transmit cultural norms, enabling students to understand the attitudes, values, and practices of the communities with which they identify or intend to associate (Finnegan, 1970). When analysed through the lens of Ubuntu, folktales provide insight into culturally embedded codes of address, interpersonal relationships, taboos, and conflict resolution strategies grounded in reconciliation and harmony (Ramose, 1999). Such engagement equips students to respond appropriately to social contexts and encourages them to internalise communal ways of being that promote dignity and mutual respect. As a result, students become more culturally competent and better positioned to interact meaningfully within diverse social environments.

Moreover, the inclusion of folktales from different cultural origins in the classroom encourages students to practice Ubuntu principles beyond their immediate contexts. Folktales reveal how communities across time and place sustain traditions and negotiate moral values, thereby fostering intercultural awareness and empathy (Paulo Freire, 1970). Through comparative analysis, students develop appreciation for diverse cultures, languages, ethnicities, and worldviews, and they learn to relate to difference through dialogue and shared humanity—core tenets of Ubuntu philosophy (Eze, 2008).

Green (1983) elucidates that students in the classroom often have difficulty adapting their knowledge to include historical events. Teaching folktales with historically relevant content could help bridge the unfamiliar discourse in literacy practice, which is the way in which people use language in their lives. Folktales mould students into moral citizens. Following the principles of Ubuntu, teaching students' folktales helped them to understand the ways of life of people in the past and integrate the new knowledge of the past with their present knowledge. Animal tales assist students in identifying themselves with the characters and conveying the idea smoothly and more effectively. This intensifies the effort to expand association with nature and environmental factors with the idea that Ubuntu encompasses the interdependence of humans on another and the acknowledgement of one's responsibility to their fellow humans and the world around them. Studies of narrative and its structures have made a distinction between the narrative and content which include a basic description of the main events making up the plot, characters, time and location, and the varying manner in which the narrative is actually told (referred to as "how" or discourse features which include the actual words and grammatical patterns used by a particular storyteller to present the story in the classroom) (Chatman, 1978).

Ubuntu, Moral Dualism, and the Reward–Punishment Narrative Structure in *Dipheko tsa Bantsho*

The folktale of the leopard and the baboon in the prescribed text "Dipheko tsa Bantsho" for the first-year students' serving four functions in the development of the theme, in relation to Ubuntu principles being the key figure for the success of the reward of good behaviour, or failure for bad behaviour for punishment. The reward or punishment storyline found in the folktale from different cultures is another example (Lwin, 2009). In this type of folktale, one of these characters (the leopard) was good-natured, performed the task or tests on humility, honesty or other moral qualities successfully, and was rewarded. The other character (the baboon) was bad tempered, greedy and selfish, she failed in similar tasks or tests and was punished. The plot structure in the folktale can be recapitulated as follows:

Protagonist A or B -task -success – reward

Protagonist A or B - failure- punishment

What these examples illustrate is that different cultures may use different tasks or tests for the characters, the underlying message of what is morally right, what is morally wrong and the consequences of actions, render such messages prove to be the same (Lwin, 2010).

Well-acquainted themes of honesty, kindness, jealousy, greed or other moral issues and narrative structures such as reward or punishment storyline in the folktales can motivate the students to listen or read with confidence (Taylor, 2000). However, the discussed folktale with the underlying narrative structure and messages allows students to use more cognitive space to pay attention to the principle of Ubuntu. This could facilitate their understanding of how Ubuntu principles being the key figure for the success or failure of good behaviour, for a reward and bad behaviour for punishment can be used to realize the meanings which are familiar to them. To illustrate how this might occur in the classroom, the excerpts from (Dipheko tsa Bantsho) (Thubisi, 2006) illustrates the reward and punishment narrative structure.

Extract 1

The narrative opens with the conventional folktale formula, “*Bogologolo tala*” (“long ago”), situating the story within a timeless, didactic framework. In this context, the baboon and the leopard are depicted as intimate companions who regularly visited one another and shared ideas, food, and aspects of their private lives. Such acts of reciprocity and mutual care exemplify the principles of Ubuntu, particularly those related to communal interdependence, generosity, and relational harmony. Students who are acquainted with folktales structured around reward-based moral patterns may anticipate that behaviours aligned with sharing and solidarity will ultimately be affirmed and rewarded. Thus, the opening establishes a moral foundation grounded in cooperative virtue and social cohesion.

Extract 2

In contrast, the second extract introduces moral decline in the character of the baboon. Her untidiness is accompanied by a pattern of excuses, particularly when the leopard attempts to visit during rainy weather. Furthermore, she exhibits traits of irritability, greed, and selfishness, signaling a departure from the previously established communal ethos. Folktales structured around punitive moral trajectories may predict that such negative behaviours will result in corresponding consequences. Within this framework, the baboon’s conduct exemplifies the failure of moral responsibility and foreshadows inevitable punishment.

Following the events described in Extract 2, folktales often operate within a moral universe governed by fundamental social principles or laws that regulate communal life. These principles function as normative expectations that all members of society are obliged to uphold. When such standards are violated, social harmony deteriorates, creating a narrative need for the restoration of order often through the intervention of a heroic or corrective figure. Importantly, even the hero remains subject to the same moral code and must face consequences should these laws be transgressed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ubuntu is a moral theory. That is, it serves as a cohesive moral value in the face of adversity (Teffo, 1994). It is Metz's contention that Ubuntu, if fundamentally a matter of reverence of human life, valuing human life or thinking of others as worthy of flourishing is part of loving others or promoting harmony. Bessler (2008:43) argues that in South Africa the culture of Ubuntu is the capacity to express compassion, justice, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building, maintaining and strengthening the community. It is a worldview that emphasizes the commonality and interdependence of the members of the community, "a human being is a human being because of other human beings" resonates with Mbiti's (1971) maxim I am, because we are and since we are, therefore I am, which articulates social interdependence or a deep rootedness in the community. For Sindane (1994:8-9), "Ubuntu inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to enrich our own".

Storytelling is a pedagogic practice that supports the acquisition of a range of academic skills. This includes enhancing students' imagination and ability to visualize verbal descriptions, fostering their appreciation of the rhythm of language and increasing their vocabulary, enhancing speaking and listening skills, providing opportunities for critical thinking and creativity, revealing the ways in which literature can reflect and provide insights into a human experience, and helping students to gain a deeper understanding of their own cultural heritage and that of others (Collins and Cooper, 2005; Wiysahnyuy, 2013, p.188). Mmila (2006) reported in Botswana that folktales are meant to educate, impart morals, entertain and sometimes provide therapeutic benefits and the stories need to be taken into the classroom and be used to teach various subjects such as literature, moral education, religious education, history, art and other subjects. It is mentioned that folktales can be incorporated in the modern way of teaching whereby both the student and the teacher are actively involved.

South Africa is composed of diverse cultural and linguistic academic literacies. There are (12) official languages spoken in South Africa and Setswana is one of those languages. Setswana is being taught as home language in some of the schools in South Africa which is basically mother tongue (Department of Basic Education, 2011). In 2009 the Department of Basic

Education included story telling (folktales) as part of the school curriculum. Hence teachers and lecturers need to know the correct methodologies of teaching folktales at schools and higher education institutions.

Mangwegape (2019) states that “the philosophy of Ubuntu is not only concerned with the economic conditions of an individual, but it also relates to the social, and environmental aspect of life. This means that it can be used to adjudicate and reconcile broken relationships in the folktales to avoid one party being punished unnecessarily because it provides a civil platform to negotiate and find a common ground for understanding issues.

Folktales are a continuation of an oral literary form and tradition that has helped to shape and define a human being as well as give him or her direction in a constantly changing environment. (Finnegan 1970: 318). They are part of a people’s collective memory and are an endorsement of what each particular person believes to be essential for its sustenance and wellbeing and an expression and continued celebration of what they deem as being the major pillars of what creates and sustains them as people of high moral value. In fact, being people who belong to the family of humanity is denominated by among other oral forms of the folktale.

Msimang (1986:13) notes that Marivate was “among the first to establish that African tales have a fairly simple plot compared to European ones if motifemic depth is considered i.e. each tale consist of a small number of motifemes”.

Makgamatha (1991:22) also focuses on the folktale and makes an interesting observation relating to Scheub (1996). He notes that he does not concern himself, only with the structure and function of folktales, but mainly with the performer and the performance occasion, regarding the folktale as a dramatic oral art.

METHODOLOGY

The participants of this study comprised first year students, registered at the University of Technology in Setswana. The analysis includes several different sets of data gathered from students; self - reflective statements, and a focus group. Qualitative data was analysed according to the prescribed folktale text: Dipheko tsa Bantsho (African traditional Herbs), reflective practice and conceptual expansion, and looked for the principle of Ubuntu being the key figure in the characters for the success or failure of good behaviour, for a reward and bad behaviour for punishment. Students analyze the data, then together reviewed and agreed on the data coded to the theme.

DISCUSSION

The folktale of “The leopard and the baboon” serves as a poignant illustration of the Ubuntu principles, emphasizing the interconnectedness of community and individual behaviour. Within this narrative, the characters embody the dichotomy of good and bad behaviour, which directly influences their respective outcomes. The leopard, representing strength and authority, underscores the necessity of ethical conduct and communal respect, while the baboon, often portrayed as cunning yet ultimately flawed, highlights the consequences of selfishness and deceit. This tale reinforces the notion that one’s actions are not isolated, rather, they ripple through the fabric of community life, reflecting the Ubuntu philosophy that individual success is inextricably linked to the well-being of others. Thus, the narrative illustrates that adherence to communal values and ethical behaviour may yield rewards, while transgressions result in social repercussions, relational discord and underscoring the moral imperative for individuals to act in harmony with the collective good.

Table 1

Summary and the plot of the folktale in Dipheko tsa Bantsho (African traditional Herbs)

Summary of the folktale	The plot of the folktale
The leopard and the baboon are portrayed as intimate companions who maintained a close and trusting relationship. They regularly visited one another, sharing confidences, exchanging ideas, and providing mutual support through the sharing of food. Within this relationship, the leopard frequently assumed an advisory role, offering guidance and suggestions.	In the folktale, the protagonist, the leopard, is given a task by the community. Through diligence, cooperation, and adherence to communal expectations, the leopard successfully completes the task. As a result, the leopard receives a reward. This sequence task, effort, success, and reward reflect the Ubuntu principle of reciprocity: responsible action benefits not only the individual but also the community at large. Therefore, the folktale illustrates how Ubuntu functions as guiding moral framework, where positive behaviour leads to recognition and strengthened social harmony. The reward is positive.
The leopard assured the baboon that her home was always open to her and that she was welcome to visit at any time. In response, the baboon reacted with irritation, asserting that	In the folktale, Protagonist B, the baboon, is entrusted with a task by the community. However, through negligence, selfishness, or disregard

among baboons it was considered a taboo to pay visits, particularly during rainy weather. Her reply reflects both her temperamental disposition and the influence of culturally embedded prohibitions governing social conduct within his community.	for collective values, the baboon fails to complete the task successfully. This failure represents a violation of Ubuntu principles, as the character prioritizes individual interests over communal wellbeing. The baboon becomes a didactic example to both the characters within the story and the audience. Consequently, the baboon receives punishment.
The baboon reiterated her position, insisting that the leopard ought to respect the established taboo. However, the leopard's curiosity was aroused, and she began to suspect that the baboon might be concealing certain matters from her. Motivated by this suspicion and a desire to verify her concerns, she resolved to visit the baboon during the rainy season, despite the explicit prohibition associated with such conduct. The leopard harboured reservations about the way the baboon conducted her life.	In the folktale, Protagonist A, the leopard, is entrusted with a task by the community. However, due to dishonesty either through deception, misrepresentation, or failure to fulfil obligations truthfully, the leopard does not successfully complete the task. This misconduct constitutes a breach of Ubuntu principles, as it undermines trust and prioritizes personal gain over communal wellbeing. Consequently, the leopard receives punishment.
On the following day, during a period of rainfall, the baboon observed the leopard moving about in the vicinity of her home. Despite the culturally prescribed taboo prohibiting visits under such conditions, the leopard proceeded to visit the baboon. Her actions signify a deliberate disregard for the established norm, thereby foregrounding the tension between individual agency and communal expectations within the narrative.	In the folktale, Protagonist A, the leopard, is entrusted with a task by the community. However, due to arrogance or an inflated sense of self-importance, the leopard fails to approach the task with the necessary cooperation, openness, and respect for communal guidance. This lack of humility leads to the unsuccessful completion of the task. Consequently, the leopard receives punishment.
The leopard approached the baboon's dwelling and knocked at the door, disguising her identity as pretending to be one of the baboons. Upon gaining entry, she observed that the household was untidy and permeated by an unpleasant	In the folktale, Protagonist A, the leopard, is entrusted with a task by the community. However, due to an attitude of disrespect — whether towards elders, peers, or communal

odour. The baboon, taken by surprise, experienced both shame and anger, as she had not anticipated a visit from the leopard under such circumstances. Her reaction reflects her embarrassment at the state of her home and her discomfort at having her private living conditions exposed	expectations, the leopard fails to carry out the task successfully. This behaviour reflects a disregard for the principles of Ubuntu, as it undermines the dignity of others and disrupts cooperative engagement. Consequently, the task is not completed effectively, leading to failure. As a result, the leopard receives punishment.
The leopard subsequently came to understand the reasons underlying the baboon's reluctance to receive visitors. However, instead of responding with empathy or offering constructive guidance, she displayed a lack of compassion. Rather than engaging the baboon in supportive counsel, she abruptly informed her of her intention to depart, indicating that she would be absent for an extended period and would communicate upon her return. This reaction underscores the leopard's emotional detachment and her failure to embody the principles of care and solidarity that had previously characterized their relationship.	In the folktale, Protagonist A, the leopard, is entrusted with a task by the community. However, the leopard approaches the task without compassion, showing indifference to the needs, struggles, or contributions of others. This absence of empathy leads to poor judgment, lack of cooperation, and ultimately the unsuccessful completion of the task. Such conduct represents a violation of Ubuntu values, as it prioritizes self-interest over collective wellbeing. Consequently, the leopard receives punishment.

Students from different cultures tend to have different beliefs, attitudes and experiences about accepted patterns of behaviour in characters and are likely to respond differently to the rivalry and fairness of action taken by characters through the plot in such behaviour. Students could also be given opportunities to compare, analyze, evaluate and justify their responses in writing and bring these skills to their writing development.

Morality is one of the key elements of education. From the findings of this study, students indicate that folktales are one of the tools which could be used to inculcate teaching moral lessons to a higher education institution. Students develop interest in listening and narrating folktales and this encourages them to easily internalise the moral values from folktales. The analysed folktale "Nkwe le Tshwene" (The Leopard and the Baboon) indicate the punishment mostly which comes with negative behaviour. It is important to note that folktales could be integrated into the Higher Education Institutions programme to teach moral education.

RECOMMENDATION

It is therefore imperative to incorporate folktales into higher education curricula, as they serve as valuable pedagogical tools for moral and cultural formation. Through narrative structures that depict the consequences of actions, folktales enable students to understand that virtuous behaviour is often recognised and rewarded, while misconduct may result in corrective consequences. In this way, folktales function not merely as literary texts but as ethical frameworks that illustrate accountability, responsibility, and communal expectations.

Moreover, teaching folktales within higher learning institutions provides students with opportunities to engage critically with the cultural values embedded in communities that are guided by Ubuntu principles. Such engagement promotes an appreciation of relational ethics, reciprocity, compassion, respect, and social harmony. By analyzing and reflecting on these narratives, students are encouraged not only to acquire theoretical knowledge but also to internalise and practice the moral values that sustain communal life.

Thus, the inclusion of folktales in higher education contributes to holistic development, fostering ethical awareness, cultural literacy, and socially responsible citizenship grounded in the philosophy of Ubuntu.

CONCLUSION

The integration of Ubuntu principles in the teaching of folktales in the classroom offers significant pedagogical advantages. It enables students to recognise Ubuntu as a moral framework that guides both the success and failure of behaviour: virtuous conduct is affirmed and rewarded, while misconduct is addressed through corrective consequences. In this way, folktales provide a structured ethical lens through which students can analyze character actions, communal expectations, and moral accountability.

Beyond moral instruction, the use of folktales grounded in Ubuntu principles contributes to language and cognitive development. These narratives offer a meaningful basis for vocabulary expansion, as students encounter culturally embedded expressions, metaphors, and idiomatic language. Furthermore, classroom engagement with folktales enhances speaking and listening skills through dialogue, interpretation, and oral retelling. The interpretive nature of folktales also stimulates critical thinking and creativity, as students evaluate motives, predict outcomes, and reflect on alternative resolutions. Additionally, exposure to culturally situated narratives fosters cross-cultural awareness, encouraging students to appreciate diverse worldviews and ethical systems.

A distinctive feature of folktale texts is their brevity and relatively straightforward plot structures, making them particularly suitable for oral narration in teaching and learning contexts. Their accessibility allows educators to present them dynamically, creating

opportunities for students to engage with both verbal and non-verbal elements of storytelling, such as tone, gesture, facial expression, and audience interaction. This participatory dimension enables students not only to analyze stories but also to take part in the storytelling process itself.

Moreover, the communal tradition of storytelling in classroom discussions promotes emotional engagement and cultural affirmation. As students draw connections between the narratives and their own cultural backgrounds, storytelling can serve as a therapeutic function, assisting them in reflecting on personal and social challenges. Through collective interpretation and dialogue, students are better able to make sense of their experiences and the broader social world. Consequently, the pedagogical use of folktales informed by Ubuntu principles supports holistic development, integrating ethical reflection, linguistic growth, cultural awareness, and emotional insight.

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