

Popular Predictor Birds in Zulu Culture

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Abstract

Birds, which live close and parallel lives to the human community, have long enjoyed a pre-eminent reputation by lending themselves to human observation. Their perky habits, melodious songs and the magic of flight render them as objects of fascination to humans. Some are of historical or national significance, for example the Indwa, (Blue Crane), which is now the South African national bird and in the past was chosen by King Shaka who used its plumage for his head-feather. The subject of this paper concerns the social behaviour of popular predictor birds. Some predictor birds are drawn from folklore and religion, in which they often constitute the moral or easily remembered core. The selected predictor birds constitute the ideal ground for the formulation of figurative language to highlight human reality as language is both an expression and a symbolic representation of meaning. This paper focuses on the uses and meanings of birds in Zulu culture and language. Proverbial bird metaphors are used as a paradigm to regulate the conduct of persons in their facilitation of the protection of the avian community.

Keywords: Zulu culture, proverbs, social behaviour, predictor birds

Introduction

Language is both an expression and a symbolic representation of meaning. Oral cultures strive to create new facets of such meaning by the use of metaphors and symbols based on natural phenomena, the great book

available to any intelligent observer. The avian community, often existing in close proximity to the human one, constitutes the ideal ground for the formulation of metaphors, which make use of bird symbols in order to highlight human realities. Birds provide human beings everywhere with a rich set of possibilities for constructing meaning, and for commenting on the nature of human social life. Birds such as *Igwalagwala* (loerie or *Turacus corythaix*) and *indwa* (Blue Crane) are associated with historical events and their names convey historical allusions. In the Zulu royal house, these two birds still hold a prestigious status because of their bright and glossy feathers, which form part of the Zulu king's regalia. Tradition has it that all the Zulu kings prior to King Shaka, wore a head-feather from *Igwalagwala*. King Shaka chose his from the *Indwa*. It was probably its beautiful, superb and imposing posture, adorned with silvery bluish grey plumage, together with its long, dark tertial wing-feathers, which dangle nearly to the ground, that attracted Shaka.

The present Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini, has followed in the footsteps of King Shaka by wearing a head-feather from the Blue Crane. According to Mlindeli Gcumisa (1993:89), the present Zulu King has also preserved the Blue Crane as a Zulu royal heritage on his farm at Thokazi in Nongoma. This historical bird still enjoys a very high status in the new democratic South Africa, since it is the national bird and its image is engraved on the five-cent coin.

This paper is not so much concerned with birds as historical or national symbols as with the behaviour of and beliefs about specific predictor birds in Zulu culture. Birds are very popular characters in Zulu proverbial expressions and folktales. Zulu proverbs make abundant use of bird metaphors, drawn both from empirical knowledge and symbolic stock and selected by their suitability for specific situations and socio-cultural contexts. For example, when a person is not intelligent, the Zulu will say to that individual: *zakhala kanye kwasa*, which literally means that the 'fowls' crowed only once and it was dawn. In the folktales, 'uDumudumu', the king, called uDumudumu, marries a queen who turns out to be barren. As a result, the queen, uNyumbakatali, is relegated and she is then ostracised by other wives. Other wives are better because they can at least bear crow-children that in turn laugh at her: *Namagwababa angene, adle nokudla akubekile; achithe umlotha yonke indlu* (Canonnici 1993:85) (even crows would enter and eat the food she had reserved; they would scatter ashes all over her hut).

In this folktale, crows receive a higher status than some humans in the royal house because the king prefers to stay with them than with his barren queen, uNyumbakatali.

The objective referent, namely, birds and their social behaviour, is there for all to see, but the use one makes of it, or the sense one derives from it, depends to a great extent on the cultural background of the group to which one belongs, which acts as a filter for the interpretation of nature. The selection of popular predictor birds made for this study also arises from observation of birds' social behaviour, which is in turn interpreted according to the socio-cultural traditions of the Zulu people.

It is appropriate to mention here that the wealth of information gathered for this article regarding the socio-cultural interpretation of birds and their habits is the contribution of a number of informants interviewed in deep-rural areas such as Nkandla, Mahlabathini and KwaMthethwa in eMpangeni. A still camera, an audio tape-recorder and video-recorders were extensively used in the interviews. Outstanding amongst the informants, for their wide knowledge of birds and hunting skills, were senior shepherds, park rangers, herbalists and oral historians. Their names were recorded during interviews, but in this article, they will be referred to anonymously and generically as 'informants'. With the exception of a few of them who were over 90 and some merely in their twenties, the majority of my informants ranged in age from 40 to 85.

In the following discussion, I will show that birds are not only admired in Zulu culture, but are also cared for and protected from unnecessary harassment. I will also look at how the family as a base of society trains its youth to overcome their basic urges and become responsible and environmentally friendly citizens as far as their relationship with birds is concerned. Without the care and protection of birds by our predecessors, the research for this article would not been possible.

1 Family Ethics as the Foundation of Birds' Protection in the Wild

The family is the place where children are initiated into the systems of relations and brought up in accordance with society's ethical demands. Adults have the responsibility of assisting the youth in sifting good from bad.

Achieving these results requires hard work and restraint from parents, using discipline to instil a code of good behaviour into their children to avoid irresponsible behaviour, which can become a cause of social hostility. The culture of caring for the environment, sharing food and showing gratitude does not come automatically; these values need to be implemented and promoted amongst members of society, especially among those of a young age, so that children grow up with these ethics for the maintenance of healthy social relationships. Such values have to be internalised in the child's mind by adult members of the family as early as possible. According to Edwin J. and Alice B. Delattre (1993:2), if proper attitudes and behaviour are not learned early, problems can mushroom with possibly dire consequences when children are older. Many parents also want to share with children their most deeply held religious, cultural and moral convictions as a foundation for ethical behaviour.

During traditional times, there were no formal institutions of education as we have them today, where children could attend classes to develop knowledge they have already acquired from home about different aspects of life. In the past, boys used to spend much of the day in the veld where they were taught advanced life skills such as herding, hunting and protecting livestock as well as the art of playing games and familiarity with customs and traditions. According to the informants, bird hunting was the most popular activity that boys enjoyed in the wild as both an educational and recreational adventure. Lindy Stiebel (2007:12) highlights the potential values in hunting when she affirms:

The great positive virtue then of the wilderness is the potential it offers for adventure. In its recreational form, adventure for the hero involves hunting wild animals in which the wilderness abounds.

Killing a bird made a young boy a hero; he would have something to take home on that day, as the proverb maintains that *inyoni ishayelwa abakhulu* (a bird is killed for the superiors). Informants testify that it was not pleasing for the boy to take home a small bird like *ungcede* (fantail warbler). Larger birds such as *isagwaca* (quail) were taken home with pride to impress the adults. Killing a big bird was a sign that a boy was growing up towards manhood.

In almost every African family, grandparents enjoy staying with their grandchildren, sharing food with them and telling them stories. As a result, children often communicate more openly with their grandparents than their own parents. I still remember that when my brothers and my cousins came with their birds, they would first show them to my grandfather, even though their mothers were in the house. Each of the boys who came with a bird would receive the head of his bird and my grandfather would take the rest and divide it amongst other small children who were not yet capable of hunting. Jeffrey Masson (1994:157) observes the essence of sharing amongst animals:

Another form of altruistic behaviour is to feed another animal or allow it to share one's food. Lion-watchers have pointed out that old lionesses that no longer bear young and have worn or missing teeth can survive for years because the younger lions share their kills with them.

'Sharing food forms community harmony' (Carol Pottow 1990:137). This statement alludes to the fact that in a truly altruistic relationship there should always be someone who is caring, sensitive and willing to provide for those who are less fortunate. Although hunting birds was a popular adventure in traditional Zulu society, hunting brooding birds was forbidden. In a Zulu family, a boy would be taught that if he found a brooding bird, he had to treat it as his own 'property' and protect it from any kind of harassment. Boys were told that they had to be very careful in dealing with brooding birds because a mother-bird, in particular, is very sensitive to human scent. If it suspects that people are interfering with its surroundings, it flees. Since bird hunting involved a lot of competition, a boy had to keep the whereabouts of his bird in his own heart, lest other boys stole it. Having a brooding bird to look after was a sign of achievement, showing that a boy was growing in understanding the vulnerability of the brooding bird.

This reminds me of what I used to hear from my brothers when they were going to check on their brooding birds. They would say that they were going to *ukondla*, to feed; however, they never said exactly where their birds were. They also did not specify whether they actually fed their birds with wild fruits or suchlike, or whether they only checked on their safety. They

were very secretive about their brooding birds even when our grandmother, sitting around the fireplace, asked us in the evening to tell her about our experiences of the day.

At present, something comes to my mind. We were told, as children, that a brooding bird flees when someone talks about it around the fireplace. The following proverb gives us the background of its origin as well as an allusion to the reason behind this confidentiality amongst the boys: *Inyon'ayikhulunyelw'eziko*, which literally means 'it is not right to talk about a bird around the fireplace'. According to this supposition, a fireplace represents danger to the birds, which means that birds are scared of it, as humans fear the gallows. However, the underlying message decoded from the proverb teaches people to keep a secret, at all costs.

Why did the Zulu society come up with this theory, and was there an underlying problem that the adults faced with regard to boys and their relationship with birds? Probably, the theory of a bird fleeing from its nest when one talks about it around the fireplace came up with adults who had problems with boys. Boys start hunting birds when they are still inexperienced regarding the life of birds. As a result, they may not be aware that their interference with birds in nests is a severe harassment, which can cause the bird to flee or to die. The departure of a mother-bird leaving its young behind puts young chicks in jeopardy. The adults might have come up with this theory, which has developed into a proverb for two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to curb the boys' harassment of the birds during their brooding season through curiosity.

Secondly, it was a psychological strategy, adopted to train both young bird hunters and young herdsman to keep a secret from one another and from others. The challenging situation that the bird faces after leaving its warm nest and friendly environment is meant to illustrate to us the degree of destruction caused by the reckless handling of delicate and sensitive information and matters of importance in our social relationships. The revealing of secret information prematurely, and without the consent of the person involved is a crime, which leads to the breaking of the bond of trust in most social relationships. When the bond of trust is broken, love is automatically threatened, since true love is based on trust. It is presumed that the use of the metaphor of a fleeing bird was a means to teach youngsters, prior to their going to the veld, the importance of handling delicate matters

with absolute care and to train the youth to act responsibly when dealing with issues that might degrade other peoples' reputations.

In the following section, it is brought to light that besides brooding mother-birds of many species, there were specific types of noble birds, which growing hunters were strongly advised, before going to the wild, to take care of, for their own safety as well as that of the birds. Mapopa Mtonga (1994:335) says that when boys go hunting birds, they are warned not to kill the Diderick Cuckoo or rain bird (*Cyrusococcyx Caprius*), to save society from severe misfortune, probably caused by natural disasters like severe drought.

The next section focuses on the proverbs, which warn hunters about the *inhlava ebizelayo*, commonly known as *ingede* (honey-guide).

2 Birds of Fortune in Zulu Proverbs

2.1 The Honey Indicator

Proverbs in a sense permit, prohibit, or require the performance of acts according to the ethics of conduct. Some of the proverbs selected for this section reflect habits and practices of society that seem to be tradition-based. For example, the following proverbs give some guidelines to those who encounter the famous honey foreteller bird, called *inhlava* or *ingede* (honey-guide):

Ungayishayi inhlava ngoju. (Never throw honey in the face of the honey-guide).

Ungayishayi ingede ngoju. (Never throw honey in the face of the honey-guide)

Inhlava ayishaywa. (The honey-guide is never beaten).

Inhlava iyabekelwa. (One must keep something for the honey-guide).

Some experienced herdsman and hunters shared their knowledge about the above stipulations concerning the honey-guide. Most informants tell us that when the honey-guide wants honey, it looks for a place near humans. In most cases, it finds either hunters or herdboys, as they are often

found in the veld. To draw their attention, it sings in a loud voice until someone pays attention to its sweet-sounding song. A person has to follow it until it stops at a certain place, only known to it. When it reaches its destination, it starts signalling with its wings and bowing its head upon the exact location of the beehive:

We followed the dipping flight of the honey-guide, which summoned us in sharp impatient tones; we called back to him when he paused, so that we would not lose him, until he finally led us to a wild bees' nest (Adulphe Delegorgue 1990:248).

The reader should not have an impression that the Zulu do not have specialist honey seekers. The informants mentioned that the people usually follow the calls of the honey guide because it usually leads them to honeycombs of guaranteed and exquisite taste and its signals are reliable and are followed by fortune, namely, honeycombs. Bryant (1949:349) explains the relationship between the honey seekers and the honey-guide as he maintains that the Zulu people loved their honey and that their herdboys were quite diligent in their search for it and always rewarded it with fragments of the comb. Probably, it is due to its strong sense and vision that it earns the title of a beehive predictor or a foreteller. Cyril Walker (1974:19) highlights the importance and contribution made by the birds' senses for signalling or warning purposes:

The species depend on keen, all-round vision to warn of approaching danger. Lacking any sophisticated verbal language, birds communicate largely by signal, and keen vision is necessary to catch, and correctly interpret, a fleeting danger signal.

It appears that the sharing of this gift of nature between Zulu society and the honey-guide community has been a long-standing tradition, which sustained a healthy relationship between the two communities as Hes (1991:21) observed:

The honey-guide's favourite food is the larvae of the honeybee. But he cannot get all the larvae because they are safely hidden inside the bee-hive, which is usually in a hollow of a tree. African people who

find the hive in this way take the honey for themselves and then always make sure that they leave the larvae outside the hive for the honey-guide to eat. Both the honey-guide and the people benefit from the relationship.

The informants emphasise that this kind of relationship has to be maintained to avoid what Mtonga (1998:336) alludes to when he writes:

The popular names that both Tumbuka and Chewa give to the honey-guides are Solo and Nsolo respectively. But because of the unpredictability of this bird's call whether to fortune (a bees' nest) or to misfortune (a snake), it is both a friend and an enemy to humans in this regard.

Clearly, if human beings live by the values of honesty, sharing and gratitude, the honey-guide does not make ambiguous calls. However, when provoked, it might make unpredictable calls with an intention to promote justice as Noverino Canonici (1995:110) asserts:

Justice is a leveling factor: those who have must share, since mother-nature provides for all. The greedy who try to take advantage of the 'small fry' are digging their own grave.

In this context, a snake symbolises the hand of justice, and the unjust forfeit fortune. The above proverbs and the oral testimonies, forewarning us about the honey-guide, have one element in common, which is showing appreciation to the honey-guide by giving it pieces of honeycomb in return for its prediction for the place of honey.

The next section discusses the types of wild bird chosen by humans to be their symbols of love or companionship.

2.2 Loneliness versus Companionship

As children, there were things that we used to sing or say when certain birds passed by. For example, when a pair of doves crossed in front of us, the one who saw it first had to shout: 'Two for joy! Good luck for me!' The rest of the group would envy the one who saw these two birds first because it meant

that some luck was on its way to him or her. We had been told that a pair of doves was a sign of good fortune. Accordingly, a pair of doves left us with a bright representation of hope and happiness. However, when a single dove crossed in front of us nobody would own up to having seen it first because the whole group would confront her or him shouting: 'One for sorrow!' This meant that something bad was going to befall that particular individual. As a result, a single dove left us with a gloomy image because it was like an orphan or a destitute.

Let us consider the image of a pair of doves from a courtship point of view. This image is often used by young men when proposing love to girls. A young man would say to his beloved: *asibe njengamajuba* (let us be like doves). In other words, he attempts to form a pair that will make people rejoice as they do when they see a pair of doves. It is assumed that he wants to belong to a pair that represents joy and peace like the Namaqua Dove that Mtonga (1998:323) claims to be always portrayed as quiet, meek and well-behaved, as opposed to other creatures that are noisy and quarrelsome.

When people see a dove flying without its partner, they always think that there is no peace and safety where it comes from which could be the cause of the loss of its partner. For the onlookers, a single dove represents sorrow. It appears that without a partner of the opposite sex, a young man feels uncomfortable and incomplete because he has no one with whom to share his romantic feelings.

There is another pair of birds called *ubucwibi*, which is of interest amongst courting males in Zulu society. *Ubucwib' obuhle buhamba ngabubili* (the good small grass-seed-eating birds are those that go in pairs) is one of the proverbs used by young Zulu men when they propose love to girls. *Ubucwibi* are species of small grass-seed-eating birds, which are usually found in crop-fields. This proverb tells us that these little birds are mostly admired for their going around together. According to the informants, the pair of *ubucwibi* which consists of a male and a female represents an ideal intimate couple because most of the time the two birds are found together in finding food and shelter, and grooming each other with absolute care. It is also said that during the brooding season, the male protects and defends the territory from invading enemies that might interfere with the mother-bird on the nest. These are highly admired characteristics of *ubucwibi*, as birds like

eagles and owls act differently because they are only seen together in a pair during the mating season.

In the next section, the discussion is on the cock, the traditional night 'watchman', perceived as the predictor of dawn. The subsection focuses on rain/weather or thunderbirds.

3 Time and Season Indicators

The cock and its night alarm crowing has invoked man's interest in almost all cultures. According to the estimation of Zulu society, the night is divided into four parts, namely, *ukuhlwa*, (dusk) *phakathi kwamabili* (mid-night), *ukukhala kwezinkukhu* (cockcrowing) or *emva kwamabili* (after mid-night) and *intathakusa* (dawn). Referring to the night cockcrows, people speak of the *izinkukhu zokuqala*, *zesibili nezesithathu*, literally meaning first, second and third fowls. Probably, people use the plural noun, *izinkukhu* (fowls) because almost all adult roosters in the rural villages crow in turns at one-hour intervals during cockcrowing. Using the clock approximation, it is estimated that the first crow is heard around about 2 o'clock, the second at 3 o'clock and the third at 4 o'clock.

These three calls are regarded as the most important signals of the new day, and travellers mark them for starting their journeys. However, the signals made by the cock do not mean that the time for the Zulu people was solely fixed by the instincts of a rooster. This domestic bird was used as a common chronometer or as a public alarm clock, probably, like Big Ben of the Westminster tower in London. Besides the three cockcrows, it has also been observed that in both rural and urban areas domestic and wild birds often start making noise and movements and coming down from trees or housetops around 4:15 to 5 o'clock, before the break of dawn, depending upon the season. However, it does not mean that if the cock does not crow, dawn does not come. In this context, the cock is used as a sign interpreted by humans to represent the coming of dawn.

In modern times, the crowing of a cock is not only used to mark the coming of dawn, it also reminds Christians about the historical incident narrated in the Gospel of St. Mark 14:30, where Jesus Christ predicted that Peter, his disciple, would have denied him three times before the second cockcrow. The prediction came true and Peter cried bitterly for it. Blose

Ndelu, quoted in Nyembezi (1963:142), reflects in his poem about this incident and confronts the cock for its historical crow: *Ukuqopha kwakho kuyangishumayeza nxashan'uPetro ekhala yedwa ngasese* (Your mark preaches to me as Peter cries alone in privacy). One needs to pity the cock for being on guard every night. It is an all-season alarm, unlike the following birds whose predictions are merely seasonal.

In the province of Kwazulu-Natal, the bird paradise, there is no spring without the resounding call of the *uPhezukomkhono* (Red-chested Cuckoo), which is interpreted by humans as encouraging people to start ploughing and as mocking those who ate up their seeds prior to the sowing season. About *uPhezukomkhono*, Sibusiso Nyembezi (1966:86) gives us an illuminating explanation, saying:

UPhezukomkhono-umnyama. Uvela ngokuthwasa kwehlobo. Kuthiwa le nyoni ibikezela ukwethwasa kwehlobo, ikhumbuza abantu ithi: 'Phezu komkhono, wadl'imbewu'. (The Red-chested Cuckoo is black. It appears in spring. It is said that this bird predicts the coming of spring; it reminds the people saying: 'On your arm, you ate the seeds').

Adrian Koopman (2002:247) claims that the call of this bird in spring marks the beginning of the ploughing season. However, this does mean that if these calls are not heard, there will be no summer. It is the people's observation and interpretation that associate this bird's calls with summer and people have believed that its calls carry messages to remind them of the change of time and to encourage them to appreciate the beauty of the new season. Jo Oliver (2003:35) elaborates about *uPhezukomkhono*:

Le nyoni enamahloni ivela ezindaweni ezishisayo maphakathi ne-Afrika. Zifika ngoSeptemba zihambe futhi ngoMashi. Izwakala ithi 'Phezu komkhono' ilanga lonke ehlobo. (This shy bird comes from hot areas in Central Africa. They arrive in September and leave in March. It is heard saying: 'On your arm', the whole day in summer).

After *uPhezukomkhono*, comes another predictor, namely, *iJubantondo* or *iJubantonto*, (African Green Pigeon), the harbinger of full summer, with its melodious call of *Amdokwe! Amdokwe amabele! Avuthiwe*. (They look like

millet porridge! They look like millet porridge—the millet! They are ripe!) The people interpret this call as a powerful invitation by this dove to other birds to come to the millet buffet, which according to its understanding is provided by nature gratis for the avian community to devour. From the human point of view, this call is understood as saying, ‘Be on your guard, your millet is at stake’.

Other popular summer signs are the rain birds known as *amahlolamvula* (rock swifts) and *izinkonjane* (swallows). Informants mentioned that the Zulu name *amahlolamvula* is associated with rain because it literally means to examine or check rain and it is also derived from the swifts’ collective and swift movements, which they display above the landscape prior to the coming of rain. Charles & Julia Botha (2003:70) explain that *isivakashi esijwayele ukufika ehlobo, sivela eYurophu sibizwa ngokuthi yihlolamvula* (A visitor that often arrives in summer coming from Europe is a rock swift). Many of the rock swifts that come to stay in mid-KwaZulu-Natal use Itshelikantunjambili Rock in Kranskop area as their ‘lodge’ during their summer stay. This place is not far from the home of the present president, the honourable Mr Jacob G. Zuma. When the people see rock swifts flocking to this rock, they know that summer rains are inevitable. *Izinkonjane* (swallows) are local rain predictor birds that are often seen flying low near the homesteads when it is about to rain. This behaviour of the swallow family was a key sign for my grandmother that rain was coming, as she would advise us to quickly bring in firewood before it got wet.

The following discussion is about two categories of birds that are often considered to be omens of peril or death as well as weather/rain predictors or thunderbirds.

4 Birds Carrying the Stigma of Misfortune

In the first category, the most feared weather or thunder forecaster is *ingududu* or *insingizi* (Southern ground hornbill). Due to its size and beauty, this hornbill might be supposed to be a common target for bird hunters. On the contrary, hornbills are often seen in pairs or groups roaming freely near homesteads without anyone daring to harm them. In addition to the freedom that these birds enjoy, there is also a maxim that says: *insingizi/ingududu ayibulawa* (the hornbill is never killed). Some informants mentioned that this

bird should not be harassed or killed because it is regarded as *inyoni yezulu* (thunder bird), which means that if one kills this bird, the thunder strikes in the area where it was killed. The moaning of the surviving birds is believed to sympathetically awaken the weather. Z. W. Gule (1993:66) alludes to such moaning when he writes: *Kwakhal'insingizi madoda, izulu seliyaduduma* (Men, the hornbill is crying, it is now thundering). This statement gives us a notion that the tears of these birds can open the storm gates of heaven to wreak vengeance on the killer and his or her surroundings. Mlindeli Gcumisa (1993:101) has an unforgettable experience of this bird:

Yinyoni yezulu lena. Ayilokothi ingene ekhaya. Uma ike yangena ibika umhlola ozokwehla kulowo muzi. Yinyoni eyiswili lena uma igconawe. Nensizwa eyisiqhanga ihlome iphelele idlela ogageni. USikweleti umfo wakwaNgcobo iqhawe elalidumile endaweni yakwaGcumisa (KwaSwayimana) wadlela ogageni ngelinye ilanga etholene phezu nale nyoni. (This is a thunder bird. It never enters a home. If it enters the home, it is there to bring bad news that is going to befall that home. This is a ferocious fighter when teased. A young man by the name of Sikweleti Ngcobo, a famous fighter of Gcumisa area at Swayimana almost died; well-armed when he dared to fight with it.)

Informants interviewed concerning the killing of the hornbill said that when a person kills a hornbill, other hornbills in the area come to the home of the killer to grieve for their dead comrade. They also said that the howling and the fighting that take place at the home concerned are unbearable because the hornbill is a fatal fighter. After a destructive drama, it is said that they gather together to moan bitterly.

It should be mentioned that wailing is also common amongst other animals such as cattle and elephants if there is death amongst the members of a herd. I have observed the elephants of Namibia on National Geographical Channel on television, assembling around the dry bone of a long dead elephant. After a bitter wailing, one of the elephants picked up the bone and went away.

Cattle often assemble around *umswane* (chyme) of the dead beast and growl in a very touching manner. They also show an element of violence when starting to assemble for the groaning; however, their growling cannot

be compared to that of the hornbills, which is said to be followed by heavy storms.

In the maxim that restricts the killing of the hornbill, one sees the Zulu society's perception of natural life. This maxim seems to be customarily used in a single special situation, and elevated to the dignity of a principle, which arose from the symbolic or metaphoric use of an incident. It is easily used in passing judgment and can, therefore, appear in social contexts to protect people from natural disasters caused by the irresponsible behaviour of humans. Irresponsible behaviour, which can cause hostility as well as such disasters, is severely reprimanded by deeply-thought maxims like this one. The maxim appears to be an observation regarding experience from which one may learn how to live and behave. Though some people who are outside the culture might see these folk testimonies as superstition, maintaining that hornbills have been killed without thunder effect, the Zulu will say: once bitten twice shy. However, some of these beliefs or myths seem to be culture- or context-bound, as Ruth Finnegan (1977:116) states:

Some knowledge of the locally accepted symbolic associations of words and objects is essential. There may be some symbols which have universal reference, but for the most part, local symbolism, whether it is to do with colours, numbers, places, phenomena of the natural world or social forms, is culturally defined.

Jan Vansina (1965:66) further explains the essence of a context for decoding a culture-based meaning:

The meaning of a word only becomes intelligible when the total context in which it has been uttered is taken into account. One has to be thoroughly acquainted with the society in question. Key words which express cultural values are untranslatable.

Birds such as *isikhova* (owl) and *uthekwane* (hamerkop) fall into the second category of harbingers of misfortune and are labelled as familiars sent by witches, especially at night, to suck blood and kill their victims.

For example, the Zulu see no wisdom in the owl because it has a bad

habit of sleeping by day, so that by night it dispenses omens and death. Christian T. Msimang (1982:73) maintains that in Zulu culture, *isikhova* (the owl) represents that which causes misfortune. In most African countries, an owl carries this stigma.

UThekwane, commonly known as the water bird, is also not trusted, and its presence near homesteads is always met with suspicion as Jo Oliver (2003:43) states:

UThekwane (Hamerkop) unomlozi ongajwayelekile awenza lapho kukhona okumphazamisile. . . Umsindo wayo othusayo wenza abaNsundu bayibuke ngezinkolelo ezihambisana nokuthakatha, baze bathuthe imizi yabo uma uThekwane edlule phezu kwayo ehamba ekhala. (The Hamerkop has an unusual whistle, which it makes when disturbed ... This frightening noise makes Black people associate it with witchcraft; people end up leaving their homes when the Hamerkop passes over their homes crying.)

Nzimande (1963:139), in his poem, 'Thekwane Nyoni Yamashwa' (Hamerkop, the Bird of Misfortunes), strongly interrogates this bird:

Kungabe kuliqiniso yini
Lokhu okukhulunywa ngabantu?
Ukuthi uyinyoni yamashwa... ?
Um'udabul'umuzi womuntu
Kulandela izulu namashwa.

(Hamerkop, the bird of misfortunes,
Is it true?
What I hear people say about you ... ?
That you are a bird of misfortune?
You cross-over a person's home, and thunder and misfortunes follow.)

When we apply a word to an object or event in nature we are not always designating what the thing is; the word is often used only as a symbol. Sometimes we react to words as if they were the thing itself because

words are powerful symbols that can produce striking images and pleasant or unpleasant associations in a particular context. This is probably the reason why people label certain birds with the stigma of misfortune, which in turn scares them because these labels become powerful beyond their expectation.

Conclusion

Gule (1993:74) asserts that *inyoni iwusizo, ingaletha izindaba ezinhle noma ezimbi* (a bird is useful; it can bring either good or bad news). This paper, therefore, pursued a cultural thread, searching for the predictor birds labelled as heralds either of doom or of good tidings. These selected predictor birds constitute the ideal ground for the formulation of figurative language to highlight the human reality, as language is both an expression and a symbolic representation of meaning. The symbol is expressed by the word, which conveys an image. Special attention was paid to bird images as metaphors of human interpretation; focusing on the 'sign', the 'thing' and the 'meaning' and metaphors as part of language.

The paper analysed a number of proverbial metaphors, symbols and maxims with themes reflecting socio-cultural values, philosophical ideas, and attitudes of Zulu society towards the welfare of the avian community. The Zulu use proverbs dealing with birds as paradigms to regulate the conduct of young herdsmen and bird hunters as these proverbs take the form of decrees, tenets and statutes or principles.

By researching the meanings attached by our elders to birds' social behaviour, one should be able to decipher some aspects of the maxims that constitute the heritage of the Zulu language, which in turn shapes cultural attitudes.

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