

A Man is a Tale that is Told: The Utility of African Folktales in an Afrocentric Curriculum and in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The African consciousness has been subsumed mostly by western ideology and resurfaces only in misrecognition and habitual disavowal. Valorising everything European, a history of haplessly succumbing to the seductions of western rationality and perspectives has led to the denial and erasure of self and culture. In its place, the morbid African has birthed, confronting his othering in self-defeating acquiesce and accepting his servile status as natural and ordained. Indeed, there is no ready panacea for centuries of exploitation, domination, and telling to. This paper suggests that one way to counter these ideological formations is to provide pathways to recognise the self. There can be no better way of doing this than to rekindle the myth, folklore, and aphorisms long extinguished on the altar of western education. Consequently, this study explores African stories as artefacts that may shape our consciousness, remind us of cultural wisdom rendered invisible and barbaric by colonial authority, focus our attention on an African centred morality and value system and school us in the inherent dignity of being human and African. A case in point is the abundance of tales that promote social cohesion, adherence to rituals, and the rule of law as well as survival over seemingly insurmountable odds. The lessons from these tales may be modelled onto the coronavirus pandemic in an African centred advocacy. Recruiting the resources of bibliotherapy and decolonising scholarship, this paper enthuses over African narratives that celebrate our own conundrums, our own angsts and engages with lessons to survive the coronavirus pandemic in an Afrocentric intertext. It also makes a persuasive claim that African folktales are an important decolonial tool in university English curricula. This, I argue

are the first and necessary steps of emancipation from the shackles of western epistemologies and hegemony and in addressing the null curriculum.

Keywords: Decolonisation, African folklore, Covid-19 pandemic, resilience, bibliotherapy, curriculum

1 Introduction

As the epicentre of the pandemic moved from China to Europe and then to the United States, the weakness of Western neoliberal and neo-colonial systems have surfaced. As African countries started cancelling flights from former colonial countries and putting their citizens under quarantine, the myth of Western invincibility fell apart, alongside its corollary that only the Global South is susceptible to infectious epidemics. Indeed, it was Western hubris that initially made many governments in Europe and North America not take the outbreak of COVID-19 seriously (Mwambari 2020). The irony of dismissing Africa as a continent of disease, lacking in resources and intellectual capital is now visited upon western and European states who seem helpless in the face of alarming death tolls and savaged economies. Understandably, Africans too fear the pandemic and suffer greatly from its ravages, but the pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of our neo-colonial overlords by destroying the clichéd tropes of death, disease, and perennial failure as an exclusive and familiar African phenomenon. This human tragedy calls for collective effort and humility and provides fresh impetus for Africans to advance a decolonising mandate with studied introspection. From a sociocultural perspective, it is suggested that this may be done by delving into the well of African wisdom overwritten, distorted, and effaced unconscionably by a complex of Eurocentric prejudices. Consequently, this study draws upon ancestral wisdom of resilience, social cohesion, and survival against seemingly insurmountable odds embedded in folk wisdom long since sacrificed on the altar of western education. To achieve this goal, theoretical precepts eclectically recruited and fit for purpose are drawn from decolonisation scholarship and bibliotherapy to advance an understanding of African folklore. The lessons extrapolated from these tales are then modelled onto community wisdom of resilience, survival, and social cohesion as tactical lessons of endurance against the pandemic in an African centered advocacy.

The African conscious has been subsumed mostly by western ideology, and resurfaces only in misrecognition and habitual disavowal. Valorising everything European, a history of haplessly succumbing to the seductions of western rationality and perspectives has led to the denial and erasure of self and culture. In its place, the morbid African has birthed, confronting his othering in self-defeating acquiesce and accepting his servile status as natural and ordained. In this way, Africans have been afflicted with a false consciousness which disguises their real relationship to the world. This is precisely because the ideology which circulates at any given moment is the idea of the dominant or ruling class (Loomba 2005, 27). Indeed, there is no ready panacea for centuries of exploitation, domination, and telling to. Consequently, this study explores African folklore as artefacts that may shape our consciousness, remind us of cultural wisdom rendered invisible and barbaric by colonial authority, focus our attention on an African centred morality and value system, and school us in the inherent dignity of being human and African. A case in point is the abundance of tales that promote social cohesion, adherence to rituals, and the rule of law, as well as survival over seemingly insurmountable odds. This paper enthuses over African narratives that celebrate our own conundrums, our own angsts, and engages with lessons to survive the coronavirus pandemic in an Afrocentric intertext. This, I argue, are the first and necessary steps of emancipation from the shackles of western epistemologies and hegemony.

2 Methodology

This is a qualitative study that uses secondary sources (selected African folktales) as a basis for motivating their inclusion in undergraduate English curricula at universities. Additionally, the efficacy of these folktales as community resources in mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are also explored. As such, these folktales are framed within a decolonising lens that uses the theoretical precepts of bibliotherapy. The rationale for choosing the folktales in this study is their potential to boost resilience through the provision of moral guidance, by promoting healing and new ways of thinking, and reconciling with acute stressors by providing positive metaphors for psychological wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study begins with a rationale for decolonising education, with a specific focus on the undergraduate curricula at universities. It then

extrapolates the potential for African folktales as pedagogical and decolonising tools using the theoretical assumptions of bibliotherapy. Finally, it demonstrates the efficacy of selected African folktales as therapeutic resources for mitigating the pandemic and motivates its inclusion in university curricula.

3 Decolonising Education

This study advances a thesis that eliminating past and current injustices should not be limited to ‘material inequality, poverty and the more familiar tropes of violence. We should also aim to reduce injustices in the production and circulation of knowledge’ (McKaiser 2016). The need to decolonise our education comes out of recognition that much of what is taught is a legacy from our colonial past, a past which was designed to entrench unequal power relations and privileges for a select minority. Heleta points out astutely that the curriculum in South Africa remains largely Eurocentric and continues to reinforce white and Western dominance and privilege while at the same time being full of stereotypes, prejudices, and patronising views about Africa and its people (2016: 2). Consequently, it becomes imperative to decolonise the curriculum at schools and universities ‘by ending the domination of Western epistemological traditions, histories and figures’ (Molefe 2016, 32). Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, provides an illuminating illustration in recounting his days at Healdtown, the school he attended for his secondary education in the late 1930s:

Healdtown was a mission school of the Methodist Church and provided a Christian and liberal arts education based on an English model. The principal of Healdtown was Dr Arthur Wellington, a stout and stuffy Englishman who boasted of his connection to the Duke of Wellington. At the outset of assemblies, Dr Wellington would walk on stage and say, in his deep bass voice, ‘I am the descendant of the great Duke of Wellington, aristocrat, statesman, and general, who crushed the Frenchman Napoleon at Waterloo and thereby saved civilisation for Europe – and for you, the natives.

At this, we would all enthusiastically applaud, each of us profoundly grateful that a descendant of the great Duke of Wellington would take the trouble to educate natives such as ourselves. The educated

Englishman was our model; what we aspired to be were ‘black Englishmen’, as we were sometimes derisively called. We were taught – and believed – that the best ideas were English ideas, the best government was English government, and the best men were Englishmen (2002: 37).

Mandela’s narrative makes it patently clear that the foundations of African thought cannot rest on Western intellectual traditions that have as one of their enduring features the projection of Africans as the other. It also becomes entirely comprehensible as to why Césaire (although predating Mandela’s comments) would determine that ‘decolonisation is about the conscious rejection of values, norms, customs and worldviews imposed by the [former] colonisers’ (2000: 89). How then do we de-link Africa from its global representation as a debased, subordinated, deviant, and inferior entity? How then do we plan for cultural regeneration in the wake of enduring and insidious oppression? What agency is required of an African to eradicate his stereotypes and rediscover his humanity? What we require is a curriculum that reflects the aspirations of African people and places African epistemology at the centre of teaching and learning, knowing full well that the bedrock of African thought cannot be established on Eurocentric assumptions. Assumptions which Zezela says, ‘seeks to universalize the West and provincialize the rest’ (2009: 133).

4 Decolonisation of the English Education Curriculum at a University

The 2016-2017 *#Fees Must Fall* student movement began as a protest against unaffordable fees and grew into an added call for transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum in South African universities. This protest for decolonisation is evidenced based in Chaka, Lephalala and Ngese’s (2017) desktop study of twenty four English Departments of 17 higher education institutions which found that decolonisation has a presence in only three undergraduate modules and is mentioned in only one honours module among the 48 modules reviewed. My practitioner experience of teaching English Education at a university in South Africa can corroborate these findings and a not dissimilar status quo. Consequently, this study takes a pragmatic view of motivating for the inclusion of African folktales in the English undergraduate curricula of universities. The intention is to assist the decentering of western

intellectual traditions and the recentering of African epistemology in undergraduate English curricula. African folktales constitute a significant element of indigenous knowledge and should form part of the intellectual tradition and values prized by African universities. This study illustrates this by using the values implicit in African folktales and those that are grounded in African geographies and populated by African actors to suggest lessons of survival and resilience in the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing this, I also illustrate the rich pedagogical potential of African folktales in the undergraduate English curricula of universities.

5 African Culture and Orality

We should rid ourselves of the notion that what is traditional is incompatible with what is progressive. This perception is due mainly to the fact that those things that are worth preserving in so-called primitive African societies have been much caricatured, ridiculed, and indeed condemned as savagery and decadent by Europeans who set the norms of acceptance. African communities were predominantly oral in nature, an orality that figures their cultural, linguistic, and gender resources. Indeed, the suppression of the oral in favour of the written seems to be a malaise in schools and universities worldwide and has its antecedents in colonial oppression of indigenous languages and cultural practices. Yet orality provides a library of reference of ways of knowing, cultural memory, and a social ecology that have been subjugated and stereotyped as simplistic and the product of wild tribes on the outer edges of civilization. African life starts with naming traditions and prayers and continues through greetings and songs, libations and lullabies, praise names and insults, and funeral orations and spirit possession. This includes informal gossip and formal oratory, individual speech and epics of empires, in fact the scope of artful speech is endless. One must even consider speech about speech (metafolklore), surrogate languages (drum languages and gestures), and the absence of speech in culturally constructed silences. Electronic media has simply expanded the realm of performed speech and song even further (Peek & Yankah 2003). Another irony manifests itself in the concept of multimodality, where scholars are devoting increasing attention to the notion that meaning exceeds the written word and resides richly in the interplay of various semiotic modes and sign systems. Orality is a critical component of this endeavour. This study consequently draws upon the oral by foregrounding

folk wisdom as a repository of knowledge and a cultural resource that can foster resilience and optimism at a time when our communities are beleaguered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.1 Bibliotherapy

This approach is compatible with the theoretical assumptions of bibliotherapy, an approach that uses literature to support good mental health that may be implemented in the pandemic as a versatile and cost-effective treatment option. Bibliotherapy entails the therapeutic use of carefully chosen stories intended to support children and adults as they adjust to risks that threaten their optimal development. During World Wars I and II, for instance, bibliotherapy was used to help returning soldiers deal with both physical and emotional concerns. Bibliotherapy is not reliant on implementation by mental health professionals and has been successfully used by teachers, caregiving figures, and even children themselves (Heath & Cole 2012). This approach explains resilience as a dynamic, interactive process that supports positive outcomes in the face of acute and/or chronic stressors (Masten 2001; 2014). It uses intrapersonal resources (e.g., a sense of humour, optimism, and tenacity) as well as accessible social ecological resources (e.g., education opportunities and mentor-figures) that are useful within their specific context and point in time (Wright & Masten 2015). Bibliotherapy shares strong affinities with Ubuntu in its focus on an interconnected and an interdependent way of being. It promotes a flexible understanding of kinship that encourages strong social bonds with blood relatives as well as neighbours, peers, and other community members. Additionally, an interdependent way of being also promotes an appreciation for personal strengths and how these can be used to nurture meaningful interpersonal connectedness (Theron & Theron 2010). This is also exemplified in the African proverb, ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. This method is most beneficial when people are able to identify with a character, experience an emotional catharsis as a result of this identification, and then gain insight about their own life experiences. It helps promote self-esteem, and develop resilience and psychological wellbeing in times of crisis. Additionally, the use of African folklore also services a decolonial approach to therapy by referencing cultural resources, identifiable characters and plots, customs, rituals, and tales that emanate from an African oeuvre. These characteristics make it appropriate as a therapeutic tool in combatting the pandemic by promoting psychological

health and positive attribution to debilitating personal and community crises.

6 African Folktales

Folktales are rich with indigenous knowledge systems such as beliefs, values, customs, and rituals of indigenous communities. According to Kelin (2007: 64 - 76), the purpose of storytelling is to impart valuable lessons about life, culture, and interpersonal relationships in engaging and imaginative ways. Additionally, it also reflects the character of the listener by recognising reflections of themselves and their culture. Importantly, it provides didactic models for young people to learn the ways of doing and being in their families, villages, communities, and society, and provides a repertoire for understanding.

According to Bascom (1954: 333 - 349) folklore has four main functions in a culture:

1. Folklore lets people escape from cruelties imposed upon them by society;
2. Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them;
3. Folklore is a pedagogical device that reinforces morals and values and builds humour; and
4. Folklore is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control.

Bascom's ideas of applying social pressure and exercising social control also takes on increasing prominence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. African communities have also contributed to the definition of folklore but this knowledge is seldom acknowledged. A case in point is the Muslim-Arab Rubatab of northern Sudan who identify an array of their discourse genres as maqalat (singular, maqala). The word maqalat is the passive participle of the verb 'yaqul' (to say). Maqalat are described by the Rubatab as anonymous, traditional, and orally transmitted artistic or fictitious discourses. These Rubatab criteria are congruent with contemporary western definitions of

folklore. One can therefore argue that maqalat is a folk gloss on the academic idea of folklore itself (Herzfeld 1983). Rubatab emphasise the anonymity of maqalat. A maqala is handed down and ‘Ma maqtu’a min al-ras’ (literally, ‘cut from the head,’ that is, not created by a known individual), and its anonymity is defined as the futility of trying to ‘tasinda’ (attribute them) to known creators. To underline the traditional aspect of maqalat, the Rubatab insist that maqalat do not qualify without having a chain of transmission. They are described as ‘kalam ba’id aw tarikh aw qadim’ (past, historical, or ancient discourses) and can be broken down to its root, ‘qal’ (said), and when repeated, as in ‘qal, qal, qal’ it emphasises the chain of its transmission that qualifies a tale as a Maqalat (Peek & Yankah 2003: 477).

7 African Folktales and the Covid-19 Pandemic

This section discusses a selection of African folktales as they may relate to lessons of resilience and community wisdom when applied to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated gender-based violence in South Africa as lockdown restrictions on mobility meant women are often trapped in the same home with their abusers. South Africa bears the shameful statistic of having one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world. A woman is murdered in South Africa every three hours. More than 87,000 cases of gender based violence complaints were received by police in 2019. During the first week of the coronavirus lockdown in March, police recorded 2,300 complaints of gender-based violence (Egwu 2020). A Zulu folktale that serves as a stern rebuke against gender-based violence is *Intsomi ka Nyengebule*. The story chronicles the cruelty of Nyengebule against his junior wife and it resolves in justice meted out to the perpetrator by the community.

Nyengebule had two wives. One day they went to fetch firewood when the younger wife discovered some honey. They ate their fill and the senior wife took some honey home and gave it to her husband to eat. When he had finished eating, he rushed to the hut of his younger wife, Nqandamate, thinking that she would have brought honey as well. He remained waiting a long time, but Nqandamate did not bring forth any honey. At length, he asked, ‘Where is the honey?’ She replied, ‘I have not brought any’. He beat her with a stick. The isala (bunch of feathers worn on the back of the head of a person who is in the preliminary stages of becoming a diviner) fell off her head and she died from

the severe beating. The isala which fell from her head, turned into a bird and flew to him and said:

I am the little isala of the diligent
wood bearer,
The wife of Nyengebule.
It was I who was wilfully killed by the
head of the house
When he was asking me about the
honeycomb (Callaway 1868: 79).

Nyengebule proceeded to kill the bird, but each time it came alive and repeated the refrain. In the end he tied the dead bird up in his bag and went to his wife's village to reclaim his lobola (bride price). When he arrived, they were dancing. His wife's relation asked him for tobacco. Busy dancing, Nyengebule told him to take it from his bag. The bird flew out and repeated the refrain to the villagers present. On hearing the message, they killed him (Scheub 2006: 217).

The story is a didactic lesson against spousal abuse and femicide. It also signifies that the spirit of a woman is indefatigable and cannot be destroyed. (The isala experiences a succession of rebirths no matter how many times Nyengebule kills it). It also draws attention to community sanctions against domestic violence and femicide and highlights its injustice. It points to retribution executed by the supernatural for the abuse and death of a woman, that women enjoy the protection of a benevolent spirit that insists on justice and makes them invincible. This tale also draws attention to the injustice of domestic violence and femicide and offers a potent lesson in spousal relations in that patriarchal chauvinism and criminality will be avenged. In the COVID-19 pandemic, where domestic violence has exacerbated alarmingly, this story also comforts the many silent and silenced victims of abuse, that indeed the ancestral spirits are omniscient guardians over their wellbeing.

Onuchukwu, in his study, *Wooden Gongs and Drumbeats: African Folktales, Proverbs and Idioms* (2003) recounts a tale entitled, 'Tortoise tries to dodge his responsibilities'. Once upon a time, the tortoise observed with increasing apprehension the failing health of his old mother. It became quite obvious to him with each passing day that she was not likely to recover from her sickness. The sly tortoise examined his finances and felt there was no way he could afford the burial rites of his mother. It was custom that one's departed

parents deserved a befitting funeral otherwise the bereaved would become the laughingstock of the entire village, such were the community sanctions in this clan. So, the sneaky tortoise decided to do what he was best at - dodging his responsibilities. The following morning therefore he announced to all the animals in his village that he was embarking on a very long journey to a distant land. He asked them not to bother to come looking for him unless something unnatural happened in the village. Not long after the tortoise left, his poor, old and sick mother died.

The villagers were upset with such a shameless display of irresponsibility by one of their own. They began therefore to plan how to get the sly tortoise to come home and face his responsibilities. The old, wise elephant hatched a brilliant idea, and soon cheetah, monkey, antelope, and hare were sent to find him. It was the hare that eventually caught up with him. In exaggerated shock, hare exclaimed that the entire village had gone upside down. The dogs have grown horns, male animals were getting pregnant and even trees were bearing the wrong fruit. In great consternation, tortoise rushed back to the village where he was promptly grabbed by the other animals and taken to where the corpse of his old mother was lying in state. 'A man cannot run away from his shadow,' they told him. 'This is your responsibility, you have to face it,' the gathered villagers said in unison, pointing to tortoise's dead mother.

In African custom, the events surrounding death are key cultural events of a community and regarded as particularly important. Status concerns, succession issue, and family bonds are at stake, but most of all, appeasing the ancestors and spirits by a dignified burial is paramount (Jindra & Noret 2011). The use of animals allows the audience to project their feelings, situations, and wishes onto the animals and not themselves. In folktales, for instance, a snake is associated with evil, a bird with luck, and an ox with wealth (Kehinde 2010). Displacing stressful emotions and impulses is a way of coping with difficulty and anxiety and preserving one's ego and self-worth in the process. This tale foregrounds a duty to elders and others in the nuclear family which are considered compulsory. This tale is apt in the context of a pandemic that has claimed the lives of about 9000 (confirmed deaths) in South Africa and close to a million people worldwide at the time of writing. South Africa is the fifth most affected country in the world at this time. Important obligations to family members and fulfilling the rituals associated with burial are moral lessons that become apparent in this tale. It also emphasises the value of saving for a rainy day and not abandoning one's duty and leaving it to others. These qualities

magnify in importance in the pandemic as households lapse into acute financial stress, unemployment increases due to restrictions on social mobility, and South Africans are faced with an unprecedented death rate.

An African folktale that invites positive attribution to grief, illness, and death is ‘The Mother Hen’s Story’. The king had an only son who was his pride and joy. One day the young prince fell ill. The king immediately sent for the palace physician. After examining the sick prince, the doctor unfortunately could not say exactly what was wrong with him. Without wasting time, another great doctor was sent for. The doctor came with speed, but alas, he too could not diagnose the young prince’s malady. Famous physicians came, to no avail. The king grew increasingly worried. The sickness beat the knowledge of the best physicians. The health of the prince meanwhile continued to deteriorate. In despair, the king consulted the oracle, who informed him that ‘The gods want your son, oh king’. That night the prince died. The king was devastated. He wept like a baby, tore his robe and poured red sand over his head, beard, and body. His sorrow was deep. Why did the gods decide to deal him such a terrible blow? What did he do to deserve all these? No one could answer the distraught king’s heart-rending questions. In his sorrow the king went into his inner chamber and locked himself in, forsaking his wise councillors and would not eat nor sleep. Neighbouring kings and royalties who came to pay their condolences went back home without seeing the grieving king. His subjects got very worried. Seven days passed without the king eating any food. The whole village, including animals, gathered in the village square to consider what to do. The hen was in the crowd, uninterested in the gathering. When, at a point one animal queried the hen on why she did not seem to be concerned about the king’s grief, the hen replied curtly: ‘If the man wants to die, why not allow him to die. After all, he is not the first to lose a child; neither will he be the last.’ This comment attracted the attention of all gathered, including the king. Many people and animals reacted very angrily to the hen’s insensitive remark. Some fanatical supporters of the king tried to lynch her but the wise old owl stopped them. He then asked the hen to explain why she had made such an insensitive comment about the grieving king when every other person and animal in the land was showing their concern and sympathy with the king. The hen then addressed the gathering, including the king:

Oh king, come out and eat
Come out and eat oh king

If you think, you have a problem
Then listen to the story of my life.
My misery starts from my first day on earth.
As an egg, every table that wants to have a
good meal must have an egg.
And that includes you oh king.
... I am a woman
with a sad story of life.
I have suffered loss of loved ones.
I see my children being murdered every day.
My brothers and sisters are chased and
slaughtered in my presence
... My husband, despite man's and animal's cruelty
to his family, heralds the morning with loud crows.
Happy for every day he survives.
Come out and eat oh king, for your loss is not the most.
The ill fate of life is worst visited on the fowl.

When the mother hen has finished rendering her very moving story, there was silence. Then slowly the door of the king's inner chamber cracked open, and the king emerged. He then asked for food and change of cloth. The king from then on bore his loss with fortitude, inspired by the wise words of the mother hen (Onuchukwu 2003: 106).

The king has realised that he should be grateful for all he has in life and that the vast majority of people are far worse off than him. In social comparison theory this is termed a downward comparison in which one generates a sense of optimism and gratitude and moves away from degenerative self-pity. The benefits of this is apparent when the king decides that he has much to live for when evaluating himself in relation to the anxiety ridden life of the hen. The sum of this is that the king feels better about himself, develops a more positive self-image and is on the path to acceptance of his loss and re-engagement with his occupational and social world. He is able to realise that continued isolation from others and refusal to eat, whilst a manifestation of grief is inappropriate when prolonged, to the detriment of his well-being and that of his subjects. This story has tremendous therapeutic potential for mediating grief that arises from losing a loved one in the pandemic. Gandhi's adaptive maxim is similarly configured,

‘I cried because I had no shoes, until I met a man with no feet’.

The pandemic has upended the way our society functions, including how we care for the sick, dying, and bereaved. Social distancing rules and prohibitions on hospital visits to the bedside have been replaced with remote conversations, isolation, and the very real possibility that patients will die alone, separated from their loved ones. A common trope in African societies as to the origins of death centre around tales involving Unkulunkulu and the miscommunication from his two animal emissaries. Amongst the Zulus, these emissaries take the form of a chameleon and a lizard; amongst the Akambe of Kenya, it is a chameleon and a thrush, amongst the tribes of Togo it is a dog and a frog and amongst the Ashanti in Ghana, it is a goat and a sheep. A similar perversion of the message appears amongst the Hottentots and concerns the waxing and waning of the moon.

In this myth, the moon charged the hare to go to men and say: ‘As I die and rise to life again so shall you die and rise to life again.’ So, the hare went to men but either out of forgetfulness or malice he reversed the message and said: ‘As I die and do not rise to life again so you shall also die and not rise to life again.’ Then he went back to the moon and she asked him what he had said. He told her and when she heard how he had given the wrong message she was so angry that she threw a stick at him and split his lip which is the why the hare’s lip is still split. So, the hare ran away and is still running to this day. Some people however say that before he fled, he clawed the Moon’s face which still bears the marks of the scratching as anybody may see for himself on a clear moonlight night. So, the Hottentots are still angry with the hare for bringing death into the world and they will not let initiated men partake of its flesh (Frazer 1913).

8 Therapeutic Value of African Folktales in the Context of the Pandemic

The therapeutic value of these tales lies in the externalisation of fears associated with death. Attributing an ailment which is poorly understood (as in the COVID-19 virus) to an actual existing object does reduce fear, as the attention is now focused on the substituted object. Responses to death may be disbelief, refusal of acceptance, emotional numbness, and an obsessive preoccupation with the deceased. The narrative scripts of folktales enable children to establish a rationale for the loss of a loved one and to nurture

adaptive behaviour in stages of adjustment to a changed reality. In the tale discussed, blame is attributed to the mistake of the hare. Negative, disabling feelings and trauma associated with death, are now projected onto the hare instead of being introjected into the self. Personifying death in folktales (in the West African tale, ‘Searching for Death’) also assists in creating some space between the person and the problem, and this enables the person to begin to revise their relationship with the problem. Externalizing grief means children may no longer see themselves as a ‘griever’ but instead view grief as its own complete entity, as something with a name, face, personality, and own idiosyncratic behaviour patterns. These stories assist victims of grief in the restoration of their lives and re-engagement with their social world. (Schriener 2015).

9 Conclusion

Le Grange points out that curriculum scholars have also distinguished between three broad perspectives on curriculum that has not received much attention in relation to universities: the explicit, hidden, and null curriculum. The explicit curriculum is what students are provided with such as module frameworks, prescribed readings, assessments guidelines, etc. The hidden curriculum is what students learn about the dominant culture of a university and what values it reproduces. The null curriculum is what universities leave out – what is not taught and learned in a university (2016: 7). Introducing African folktales as a pedagogical tool and cultural artefact worthy of study addresses both the hidden and the null curriculum at universities and constitutes a significant step towards decolonising English curricula.

Folklore provides an inexpensive, accessible, and protective resource for building resilience in the COVID-19 pandemic by referencing the richness of the cultural legacy of our African ancestors. It’s ability to evoke images of good and sustaining figures provide appropriate role models for overcoming the trauma and despair evoked by the pandemic. In addition to increasing the threshold to traumatising, it also affords solace as in the Zulu aphorism, ‘This thing is like the dew which showers down’, and in a while, it shall be gone. Observing social distancing, wearing a mask, and obeying pandemic rules for public safety may be extemporised in the proverb, ‘If you follow the elephant, you never get entangled in the forest’. Avoiding unnecessary travel may also be tied to the witticism, ‘What you seek in Sokoto could be in your shokoto’-

that which you travel far and wide to search for could just be around the corner. Those that disregard the laws of public safety in the pandemic may be caricatured as ‘Mr. Didn’t-know’ who ‘took shelter from the rain in the pond’ (Finnegan 2012, 380-387). This study has endeavoured to illustrate a tiny seed of African wisdom and by so doing, debunk the Eurocentric libel of Africa as a dark continent, steeped in ignorance and barbarism. The goals of the folklore discussed here in relation to the pandemic are captured appropriately in the concluding lines from this Massai paeon:

That He may give you faces of joy
That He may enable you to become victorious over all troubles
(Dathorne 1974:53).

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The Utility of African Folktales in an Afrocentric Curriculum

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