



# Exploring The Role Of Food In Plot Development: A Study Of Makgamatha (1994) Folktales

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The recent noble discovery is that in all Northern Sotho folktales and many other African folktales food has been the driving force to prompt characters to go out in their encounters, thus leading to folktales plot development and finally deliverance of important cultural educational messages. This article reports on the study that focused on the importance of food in African cultures. The importance of food is further used as the reason for the development of folktale plots. The study followed a qualitative research approach where a case study design, was adopted. Data were generated through desktop data collection and document analysis. The study found that: One, African folktales begin with main characters going out to search for food. Two, in the process of their food search they come across different encounters, thus leading to folktale plot development. Three, the character who managed to get the big price in the form of food is praised, worshiped, and sometimes given an important cultural title, and the one who does not get anything mostly because of his ignorance of cultural values is despised and punished. These findings have at least one most important implication, that food is regarded most important in the African culture. People wake up in the morning in search of food, food is the main reason for survival, and without food, there is no life.

**KEYWORDS:** Food, African culture, Northern Sotho folktales, and folktale plots.

## INTRODUCTION

Food is the driving force for the design and development of Northern Sotho folktales. In the African culture, the most adored and respected family or clan is the one with plenty of food, and food in the form of livestock was a sign of wealth and prosperity. The royal family was regarded as one clan that all other families would wish for their children to be married to. The Northern Sotho idiom says:

*Mokwatlala o tsogela mareng.*

He who is hungry goes to the royal family in the morning.

The above idiom signifies that the African royal family is always flocked by many communal people who expect to be given food. In Northern Sotho folktales, the ogre is always chasing young children to catch, cook them, and have them as his delicious food. In the process of searching for food, many things happen thus leading to the development of folktale plots. In the Northern Sotho *dinonwane*, the ogre usually appears as a trickster who tries to imitate the traditional tricksters but lacks the cunning and intelligence necessary to play that role. The ogre is believed to be a human being turned animal, who has given up his intelligence and capacity for social interaction just because he has given in to unrestricted greed (Makgamatha 1991: 305). His actions make him appear to be persistently trying to be readmitted into society. Often called Dimo, Lekgema, or Temankgolo in the Northern Sotho *dinonwane*, he is usually presented as a wicked monster who is ugly and fearful because he has only one eye and one big toe or lone leg which enables him to run very fast, who is huge and has a deep rough voice. He delights in hunting humans, whom he kills and cooks in a big pot. His victims are invariably young, inexperienced, and unprotected children - usually girls.

When the folktale performer wants to show that a community is at peace and that social harmony prevails, she presents her characters working in the fields. Work produces common enterprise, common goals, and social cohesion. Food, the result of such communal effort, thus becomes a commodity to be shared and consumed together. Since the provision of food is so important folklore presents another vital aspect of it: the attainment of magic power. A person does not simply eat to survive, but he eats to become strong especially strong in the sphere that matters, in the control of enemy forces which beset human life at every turn. This means magic

power. This power is drawn from the substance consumed so that a man becomes what he eats (symbiotic magic) (Canonici, 1991).

Due to hunger famine, and lack of food, most characters in Northern Sotho folktales decide to go out to hunt. The characters go separate ways on their hunting and the character who observes and respects the cultural values during his hunting is rewarded with the most recognised cultural wealth, cows. The other character who disregards and disrespects the cultural values is not rewarded instead; he is punished. Every folktale, from its point of view, is a lesson. It may be of a principle of law, civilized manners as they understand them, or religious dogma. They give interpretations in line with everyday life. Folktales are reflections of the minds. They show aspects of the culture of the society to those who show the least awareness of it. As a result, they are part and parcel of people's lives. Their value cannot be taken for granted. By ignoring their value, we are ignoring the complete expression of the feelings, ideas, and ambitions of the people concerned. They are pearls of wisdom handed down from generation to generation and will continue to be traditional pillars on which the community can lean (Mphasha, 2015). During characters going out to search for food, they are tested to see if they respect their cultural values. Respecting cultural values is equal to respecting ancestors, and if ancestors are well respected their character is then rewarded with cultural wealth, many cows.

### PERFORMANCE THEORY

The study was guided by the Performance Theory (PT) as espoused by Barber (1987). Barber's influential book "Popular Arts in Africa" (1987) examines the diverse forms of artistic expression found in African societies, from oral poetry and storytelling to music, dance, and visual arts. She argues that these forms of popular culture are not mere entertainment but important sites of social interaction and cultural negotiation, where meanings are contested, negotiated, and reconfigured in response to changing social and political dynamics.

Karin Barber's approach to performance theory in the context of African folklore is characterized by several key values and principles:

i) Recognition of Orality: Barber emphasizes the significance of orality as a central feature of African cultures. She acknowledges the importance of oral traditions, including storytelling, verbal artistry, and ritual performances, in shaping social identities and cultural practices across the continent. ii) Contextual Understanding: Barber advocates for an approach to performance theory that considers the specific cultural, historical, and social contexts in which performances occur. She emphasizes the need to understand performances within their local frameworks, rather than imposing external interpretations or theoretical frameworks. iii) Dynamic and Fluid Nature of Performance: Barber recognizes that performances are dynamic and fluid, constantly evolving in response to changing social, political, and economic conditions. She explores how performances adapt and transform over time, reflecting shifting cultural values and identities. iv) Agency and Participation: Barber highlights the agency of performers and audiences in shaping the meanings and interpretations of performances. She emphasizes the active role of participants in co-creating cultural meanings through their engagement with oral traditions and performance practices. v) Interdisciplinary Approach: Barber's work is interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, and performance theory. She integrates diverse methodologies and theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of performance in African contexts. vi) Dialogical Engagement: Barber values dialogical engagement with African communities and practitioners. She emphasizes the importance of collaboration and mutual exchange in research projects, recognizing the expertise and knowledge of local performers and cultural practitioners. vii) Promotion of Cultural Heritage: Barber is committed to promoting the appreciation and preservation of African cultural heritage, including oral traditions and performance practices. She advocates for the recognition of the richness and diversity of African cultural expressions on both local and global scales.

Overall, Karin Barber's values of performance theory in African folklore prioritize an inclusive, contextual, and dynamic approach that seeks to illuminate the complexities of cultural expression in African societies while fostering dialogue and collaboration with local communities and practitioners (Barber, 1987). The seven values of Performance Theory (PT) were used to collect and analyse data.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY RESEARCH DESIGN

The study set out to address the concept: of the significance of food in the Northern Sotho folktales. To answer this question, we found a qualitative research approach suitable because it allowed us to peruse all available Northern Sotho folktales with the bid to extract relevant folktales to address the concept on the table, and thereby gain an authentic perspective of the problem under study. Within this approach, we adopted a case-study design, which allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the issues at play. More specifically, like many other qualitative researchers, adopted the notion of a case study as advanced by Stake (2010) because our epistemological stance is that knowledge is constructed and not discovered. Cousin (2005), claims that case study research investigates and interprets a scenario intending to increase the apprehension of that specific scenario. To do that the researcher has to depict the case in a fully comprehensive manner so that the reader gets the feeling of being there. This allowed us to become what he calls qualitative researchers interpreters and gatherers of interpretations.

## DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

The study followed the content or desktop type of data collection using secondary data. The biggest advantage of using secondary data is economics. Someone else has already collected the data, so the researcher does not have to devote money, time, energy, and other resources to this phase of research. Secondary data may include data that has been previously gathered and is under consideration to be reused for new questions, for which the data gathered was not originally intended (Vartanian, 2010). Secondary data such as published printed sources, books, and journals. Secondary data is often readily available. After the expense of electronic media and the internet, the availability of secondary data has become much easier. Published Printed Sources: There are varieties of published printed sources. Their credibility depends on many factors. For example, on the writer, publishing company, and time and date when published. New sources are preferred, and old sources should be avoided as new technology and research bring new facts into light. Books: Books are available today on any topic that you want to research. Books are secondary sources but the most authentic ones in secondary sources. Journals and periodicals are becoming more important as far as data collection is concerned. The reason is that journals provide up-to-date information which at times books cannot and secondly, journals can give information on the very specific topic on which you are researching rather than talking about more general topics (Kabir, 2016). This study selected Northern Sotho folklore books and relevant folktales which will assist in serving as proof that indeed Indigenous African Religion and Culture are embedded in oral literature, particularly folktales. supplementary data about the title was collected from all available international African journals and published printed sources.

The secondary data collection schedule included the seven values of the performance theory: Recognition of Orality, Contextual Understanding, Dynamic and Fluid Nature of Performance, Agency and Participation, Interdisciplinary Approach, Dialogical Engagement, and Promotion of Cultural Heritage. We wanted to establish from different published sources, how food is important in Northern Sotho folktales, what happens if one character has managed to inherit culturally recognised food, and lastly what happens when another character has failed to succumb to cultural values and has not gained any price in the form of food.

## DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document analysis was adopted as the main method of data collection and analysis. We browsed over the secondary data in the form of Northern Sotho folklore books, local and international African articles, journals, and published printed sources for traces and confirmability of Indigenous African Religion in folktales. We wanted to confirm that food in Northern Sotho culture served as the cornerstone for the development of the plots of African oral literature. The magic in most African folktales represented the Indigenous African Religion (IAR), the thick old woman with one long protruding tooth served as the messenger of ancestors. While she was wrestling with Mašilwana, she indicated that if she died, he must open her belly and the two cows would emerge. Is this an indication that ancestors used to take part in providing their living with food indirectly, only if the living respected and appeased them? All these questions could only be answered by the opinions of scholars in their publications rather than the contemporary participants who have abandoned and disposed of their African culture for the Western missionaries' cultures. Local opinions would be compared to international African suggestions and postulations to arrive at convincing conclusions.

## FINDINGS

From the analysis of both data and document analysis, we came up with four main findings which we classified under four themes: i) significance of food in the folktale Nonyana senyamaswi, ii) significance of food in the folktale Masilo le Mašilwane, iii) significance of food in the folktale Moselapše and lastly iv) the significance of food in the activities of the ogre. These are further exposed in the sections that follow.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD IN THE FOLKTALE MAŠILO LE MAŠILWANE

In the folktale, Mašilo le Mašilwane (Makgamatha,1994:107), lack of food and famine prompted the two brothers to go out to hunt for food. Like many African folktales, Makgamatha presented the following introduction:

*Ya re e le Mašilo le Mašilwane. Ke mogolo le moratho. Ba bolawa ke tšhego. ba re "A re ye go tsoma." Ke Mašilo le Mašilwane.*

(Mašilo and Mašilwane, the two brothers because of lack of food decided to go out and hunt for food. It was Mašilo and Mašilwane).

Along the way, they decided to part ways. Mašilwane met the old fat woman with one long tooth who wrestled with him and told him to cut her belly to release the two cows when she died. Mašilwane followed the instructions and was rewarded with two healthy cows. On the other hand, Mašilo could only collect giant snails. Jealous of his brother Mašilo pushed his younger brother in a deep fountain to kill him to gain his big price.

In the above folktale, Makgamatha categorically showed the significance of food in the African culture. The two brothers had to go out to hunt because of the dire need for food. Had it not been because of the need for food we would not have the plot of the folktale progressing further. Masilo the elder brother goes as far as drowning his little brother in a deep fountain because of food. Masilo sees and knows the significance and importance of having food, especially in the form of the culturally recognised wealth, of cows. He goes as far as to kill his brother to inherit his wealth, and food in the form of two cattle. Within traditional community settings, livestock has always signified the wealth of a man who would jealously guard it as the head of the family as well as instruct others on its upkeep and slaughter (except on trade-related transactions). The larger the head of the family's herds were, the more respect he garnered locally and beyond. This was not solely because of his wealth but also because of his breadth of knowledge, skills, and experience, particularly about livestock health, reproduction, and upkeep. Attributing his wealth to knowledge meant that he was broadly consulted for this knowledge (Magubane, 1986). The reason why African people used all parts of the cow for their clan names is clear proof that they value the cow not only for food but as a cultural symbol. Many African clans have the cow as their clan names; *Bopape*, *Letsoalo*, *Lekganyane*, and *Modiba* clans are generally known as *dikgomo*. Many other clans used all parts of the cow as their clan names or surnames; surnames like, *Manaka*, *Mahlo*, *Tsebe*, *Molomo*, *Maledu*, *Kgwahla*, *Meno*, and *Dibete* were taken from parts of the cow. The cow therefore is an African national symbol. Food in African folktales prompts the development and continuation of oral narrative plots; therefore, the conclusion is made that food is an important driving force of all cultural activities.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD IN THE FOLKTALE NONYANA SENYAMASWI

Nonyana senyamaswi is another folktale from (Makgamatha, 1994) collection of folktales containing the significance of food in the African culture. The awful and wicked bird which sang in the fields and the cultivated portion regained back its uncultivated form with weeds and the ugly bush was later caught by the man. The man threatened to pierce the bird with a deadly thorn, but the bird promised to produce milk for the man instead. The man said:

Monna: "Moloi towe! Nka go thoba ka mootlwa wo wa hwa!"

Nonyana: "Se nthobe ka mootlwa ke le nonyana ke enya maswi"

Monna: "Enya! Enya maswi re go bone!"

(Man: You wicked bird! I can pierce you with this deadly thorn to death!"

Bird: Please do not kill me because I can defecate milk!"

Man: "Defecate! Defecate milk let's see").

Satisfied that the bird can defecate not only milk but good quality milk, the man took the bird home and showed it to his wife. He performed the usual threat and the bird produced milk and the problem of lack of food was solved in the family. One day when the man and his wife had gone to work in the fields, the children made the bird to produce milk, allowed the bird to dance for them outside and it flew away. Knowing that losing the bird means losing food for the whole family, they follow the bird to the far end of the bush only to be eaten by the ogres.

### Working in the fields

The man and his wife would go to work in the fields daily. Working in the field not only keeps their crops healthy and well-nourished but guarantees food for sustenance as well. The lazy family that does not work in the fields and eradicate the weeds for the good development of their crops will not produce enough food for the survival of the entire family. This type of farming only to support the family is called subsistence farming. Subsistence farming is defined as a situation whereby South African rural communities make their living on a small piece of land for farming to produce sufficient food to support their families (Cunningham, 2014). Disparately from small and large-scale farming sectors, subsistence farming is dominated labour-intensive because all duties are undertaken by human beings and animals, and to improve the productivity of land, they use hand tools or machines. (Houmy, Clarke, Ashburner, and Kienzle, 2013). If it wasn't for food, the man and his wife would not go out to work in the fields, and as such the plot of the folktale would not progress to the next level.

### The birds offer to evade the deadly threat.

After catching the wicked bird, the man threatened to pierce it with a sharp thorn to death, but the clever bird pleaded and instead offered the man food in the form of milk. If it wasn't for the food in the form of milk the man could have killed the bird, cooked it, and eaten it with his family instead. It is therefore evident that food is important in the lives of African people; if you commit evil but have food as an offer, you will be lucky to live for another day. Production of food in the form of milk saved the bird's life. Food in this folktale is not only important in African culture but also the most important vehicle for the development of the folktale's plot.

### Children are tricked by the bird.

While the man and his wife had gone to work in the fields, the little girls committed the evil of imitating their parents and threatened the bird to produce milk. They ate and the bird offered to dance for them and later asked the children to take it out so it could dance freely. The bird flew away; knowing that the escape the bird

meant no more food in the form of milk, the little girls followed it to the far end where there were ogres who killed and ate them. If it were just a bird without the milk production value, the little girls wouldn't dare to follow it into the bush, but because this is the special bird able to produce food in the form of good quality milk for the whole family, they were obliged to follow it to the danger zone. Food in the form of milk in this folktale was an important food for African families and most importantly the vehicle for the development of the folktale plot.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD IN THE FOLKTALE MOSELAPŠE**

In the folktale, Moselapše the man with two wives (sisters) working in the fields, catches a Guinea fowl and gives it to the elder wife to kill and cook it. In the pot. The woman cooked it very well and went out to collect more firewood, the younger wife ate it and left only bones in the pot. Noticing this the man made a trap in the river and the one who ate the meat will fall into the river. The young wife knowing that she is the culprit, then told her younger sister to her grandmother if she doesn't come back. Along the way, the girl met Moselapše who tricked her and was later killed by the girl's grandmother. Moselapše is a character that seems to represent a certain kind of evil in society, in those trickster tales in which it appears. This is a fabulous animal that is hard to describe. It is not clear whether it is male or female. One cannot say whether this animal is clever or stupid, but it successfully presents itself as an imposter characterized by magic and transformations. It has the typical trickster ability to dupe people into believing it is another human being (Makgamatha 1991:36).

In the nonwane Moselapše recorded in Makgamatha (1990: 48-55), the youngest of a man's wives is punished with death for stealing her husband's guinea fowl. Before she dies, she advises her daughter to flee to her grandmothers with the baby on her back. On her way, she encounters Moselapše who tricks her into parting with all her clothes as well as the baby on her back. Instead of the girl, it is Moselapše who arrives as her imposter at her grandmother's and receives a hearty welcome from the unsuspecting old woman. However, the narrative follows the normal course of events that lead to the 'exposure' of Moselapše, who is mercilessly killed by scalding in boiling water.

### **The significance of food in the folktale**

In the above folktale, food is the theme posed as the problem, and the plot of the entire folktale is propelled by food. Food is an important commodity in the lives and cultures of African people. If it wasn't for the younger woman eating the meat that was cooked for their husband, the plot of the folktale would have not developed to that end. The younger woman finally lost her life because of food. In essence, the meat of a Guinea fowl shouldn't have ended with the younger wife losing her life, but the folktale's main idea was to expose the importance of food in the lives and culture of most African people. One psychologist asked the following question:

Naa! Re jela go phela goba re phelela go ja?  
(Do we eat to live, or do we live to eat?)

The precise and appropriate answer in this instant is that we live to eat. If we ate to live, we would stop eating when we have reached our satisfaction, but instead, people continue to eat even when they are full, which confirms the notion that we live to eat. Food is the most important African cultural product and the mobility of plots in African folktales.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD IN THE ACTIVITIES OF THE OGRE**

If it wasn't for food, ogres in the African folktales would not be chasing young children. The importance of food is further seen as the reason for the development of African folktale plots and related incidences. The ogre as a trickster in the Northern Sotho dinonwane is sometimes witty, though in a stupid way. His ugly description makes him represent some unwelcome evil in society, such as witchcraft. His ugliness, the size of his stomach, as well as his uncontrollable appetite for fat and tender young girls, make him an understandable cultural symbol; he may, for instance, represent rapists with their insatiable lust for young girls. As he represents the evil that lurks in society, one understands why his trickery is always accompanied by stupid concessions that make it fail (Makgamatha, 1993).

In the various versions of the nonwane of Tšelane, for instance, the ogre appears when Tšelane is alone after she has refused to move from the area with her parents. The ogre tries to imitate Tšelane's mother, who gains entrance to the locked hut by singing a song that Tšelane recognizes. The imitation enables the ogre to gain entrance to the locked hut and capture Tšelane, thus creating the impression of successful trickery. However, this action only prepares the way for another attempt at tricking Tšelane later in the narrative, where the trickster becomes the dupe. While the ogres are away hunting for other humans, their mother invites Tšelane to have her head shaven, intending to slit her throat in the process. However, the cunning Tšelane suggests that she should shave the old ogre's head first, and then proceeds to kill and cook her in the same pot she was supposed to be cooked in herself. The returning ogres are also tricked into eating the flesh of their mother believing it to be Tšelane (Ibid, 1993). In the above folktale food is the driving factor that led to the development of the folktale's plot and further indicates the importance of food in the African culture. The ogres catch Tšelane

for food, and along with this activity, the other incidents unfold which led to the development of the folktale's plot. If it wasn't for food, the ogres wouldn't be hunting continuously for young children, especially young girls.

### CONCLUSION

In the folktales of Nonyana Senyamaswi, Moselapše, and the activities of the ogres, the significance of food is deeply woven into the fabric of the narratives, reflecting its vital role in African culture and storytelling. Food serves as more than just sustenance; it acts as a catalyst for the progression of events, shaping characters' actions and the overall development of the tales. In Nonyana Senyamaswi, the promise of milk production from the bird not only saves its life but also becomes the lifeline for the man and his family, highlighting the importance of food in negotiation and survival. The children's temptation and subsequent pursuit of the bird underscore how food can drive human behavior and decisions, leading to both opportunity and peril.

Similarly, in Moselapše, the theft of food sets off a chain of events culminating in tragedy, emphasizing how food can be a source of conflict and consequence within familial relationships. The narrative exposes the lengths individuals will go to secure sustenance and the repercussions of greed and deception. Furthermore, in the activities of the ogres, the pursuit of food drives their actions, portraying them as both predators and victims of their insatiable appetites. Their schemes to capture Tšelane for consumption reveal the darker aspects of human nature and societal dynamics, where food becomes a symbol of power and vulnerability.

Overall, these folktales intricately weave together themes of survival, morality, and cultural values through the lens of food. They remind us of the central role food plays in shaping human experiences and interactions, transcending mere sustenance to become a potent force driving the narratives forward. Thus, the significance of food in these folktales serves as a poignant reflection of its profound impact on African culture and storytelling traditions.

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