

Swazi Oral Literature, Eco-culture and Environmental Apocalypse

Enongene Mirabeau Sone

*Walter Sisulu University, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Department of Arts
(English), Private Bag 1 WSU Mthatha. 5117, Eastern Cape, South Africa
E-mail: enongenes@yahoo.com*

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ABSTRACT The main objective of this paper is to show how oral literature is engaged by Swazis with regards to environmental sustainability. It demonstrates the relationship between nature and culture as reflected in Swazi oral literature and how indigenous knowledge embedded in this literature can be used to expand the concepts of Eco literature and Eco criticism. The paper argues that the indigenous environmental expertise among the Swazi people, encapsulated in their oral literature, can serve as a critical resource base for the process of developing a healthy environment. Furthermore, the paper contends that Eco-criticism which is essentially a Western concept can benefit by drawing inspiration from the indigenous knowledge contained in Swazi culture and expressed in their oral literature. The paper concludes by recommending the need to strengthen traditional and customary knowledge and practices by protecting and recognizing the values of such systems in the conservation of biodiversity for sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Swazis, like other people elsewhere in the world, find expression, fulfillment and meaning of life, in relation to the environment where they live. Consequently, the natural environment forms an integral part of human life. This explains why in a world where accommodation to man-made changes in the environment is posing serious challenges, there is an urgent need to draw the attention of the target population to the devastating effects of the wanton destruction of the environment. The aim, of course, is to help those concerned to change their destructive attitudes towards the environment. Environmental degradation is even more critical in the Swazi ecological zone, once replete with exotic species of flora and fauna, but now facing an unprecedented environmental disaster.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to show how oral literature is engaged by Swazis with regards to environmental sustainability. It demonstrates the relationship between nature and culture as reflected in Swazi oral literature and how indigenous knowledge embedded in this literature can be used to expand the concepts of Eco-literature and Eco-criticism.

Hypothesis

The paper argues that the indigenous environmental expertise among the Swazi people,

encapsulated in their oral literature, can serve as a critical resource base for the process of developing a healthy environment. Furthermore, the paper contends that Eco-criticism which is essentially a Western concept can benefit by drawing inspiration from the indigenous knowledge contained in Swazi culture and expressed in their oral literature.

Eco-criticism, it will be recalled, started as an Anglo-American literary discourse although it has grown exponentially since the 1990s, especially in Europe, America and part of Asia. This global interest in the study of literature and the environment has been motivated by the environmental crisis facing the world today. Worster (2014: 718) opines that the world is facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding human impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists and philosophers, cannot do the reforming. Of course, they can help with the understanding.

From the above observation, it is clear that the basis of environmental conservation lies in the eco-centric behavior of man and that behavior can be generated only through consciousness about the co-existence of humans and the environment.

The Problem

It is true that literary scholars can help with the understanding of the ethical system. But one question that comes to mind here is whether African writers and critics are classified among the scholars referred to by Worster above. If so, where do they fit into this global ecocritical effervescence? Santangelo and Myers (2011:7) provide the following answer:

There has been little ecocritical literary writing from Africa. African writers have primarily addressed pressing political and social issues in colonial and postcolonial Africa concomitantly in terms of environmental representation. These writers are concerned with lived environments, the social implications of environmental change, and the relationships between representations of nature and power. Certainly, this is evident in even a cursory reflection on, say, the way that the environment figures in the works of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nurudin Fara, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ousmane Sembene and many more authors. These writers do not focus on nature and its pure state or even on its preservation.

Slaymaker (2001: 132-133) corroborates the above position by stating that,

Black African writers take nature seriously in their creative and academic writing, but many have resisted or neglected the paradigms that inform much of global ecocriticism. The (siren?) call of the Green Wave through much of the literary world has been answered weakly by Black African writers and critics. This eco-hesitation has been conditioned in part by Black African suspicion of the green discourses emanating from metropolitan Western centers. Also, Black African experiences on nature, it is often argued, are different and other.

Finally he asserts that in spite of the interest shown by some "Black" African writers and critics in writing,

There is no rush by African literary and cultural critics to adopt ecocriticism or the literature of the environment as they are promulgated from many of the world's metropolitan centers. For some Black African critics, eco-lit and eco-crit are another attempt to "white out" Black Africa by coloring it green. To some African critics and writers, who directly participate in the liberation of their nation-states from colonialism, what ecocriticism offers is not an-

other theory of liberation like Marxism. Rather it appears as one more hegemonic discourse from the metropolitan West. (132)

Some of the points made by Western ecocritics about the skepticism of African writers and critics are pertinent and need to be addressed here. To begin with, while Western writers and critics see nature mainly as an object of aesthetic appreciation, African writers and critics tend to adopt a mystical and utilitarian outlook on nature. Furthermore, because of its apparent newness, African literature has been subjected to the vagaries of Western critical canons. It is therefore not surprising that African writers and critics should be skeptical in their reception of yet another Anglo-American critical theory under the name of ecocriticism. In spite of the above points, however, most of the statements made by Western ecocritics cited above are tainted by contradictions and incoherencies. As Olafioye (2002:1) observes, 'the manner in which some critics express their ideas is sometimes polluted with verbiage, esotericism, bias, misinterpretation, ignorance and ideological intolerance'. This debate however is not the immediate concern here. Rather, the preoccupation is whether African writers and critics can reshape the Western concepts of ecoliterature and ecocriticism to reflect African attitudes to nature as portrayed in African literature. This paper therefore examines the relationship between nature and culture from an African perspective with the aim of demonstrating how indigenous knowledge embedded in African oral literature can be used to expand the concepts of ecoliterature and ecocriticism in order to make them more relevant to the world of nature. This is in keeping with the views expressed by Estok (2001: 162),

Ecocriticism will need practice from us preachers, it will need to look seriously at anthropocentrism and speciesism and how these inform the daily choices we make, from the food we eat, to the clothes we wear in the same way that it should be difficult to take seriously a man who calls himself a feminist at the two o'clock seminar but goes to strip clubs on weekends, so too is it difficult to take seriously the big oil companies that spend millions advertising their commitment to the environment, or the critic who theorizes brilliantly on a stomach full of roast beef or rye, oblivious of how environmentally unsound meat production is.

Research Questions

This paper is an attempt to answer the following questions arising from the problem statement.

1. Can ecocriticism in its present state be effectively applied to the critical analysis of oral and written African literature?
2. Can literature serve as an agency of environmental awareness?
3. Can literature be usefully examined as having some bearing on man and his practical relation to the natural world?
4. How can one regulate human activities and their effects on the environment?
5. What role can indigenous knowledge contained in African oral literature play in helping to improve the human-nature relationship?

Definition of Terms

Three key concepts need to be defined here. The concepts are nature, culture and ecocriticism. 'Nature' is defined in the Encarta dictionary, as 'the physical world including all natural phenomena and living things, the forces and processes collectively that control the natural phenomena of the physical world independently of human volition or intervention, sometimes personified as a woman called mother nature.' The Western world and Africa tend to adopt divergent views about nature. While Africans apprehend nature as an integral part of their world order, the Western world appreciates it as an independent phenomenon with an aesthetic reality.

'Culture' is both ubiquitous and multidimensional. That explains the many definitions that have been suggested for it. For the purposes of this paper, however, the definition advanced by Marcella (1985:166) will suffice. According to him, 'culture is shared learned behavior, which is transmitted from one generation to another for purposes of promoting individual and social survival, adaptation, and growth and development'. Seen in this light, culture is one of the ways in which a people adapt to their environment and at the same time give meaning to their lives. It is also a major avenue, which the family uses to teach the young how to behave in an acceptable manner. Thus, regarding responses to the environment, all those who share the same culture are expected to behave predictably. Any-

body who ignores cultural guidelines must be prepared to suffer the consequences. Hence, ecocriticism cannot afford to ignore culture because culture is what connects man to physical nature and also regulates man's interaction with nature.

Various scholars have given many definitions and descriptions of 'eco-criticism'. The researcher will look at only three of them here. Winkler (2009:12) stresses the interdisciplinary nature of eco-criticism when he states that

...Nobody is willing to pin down what ecocriticism is. Very broadly, scholars say it adds place to the categories of race, class and gender used to analyze literature. For some, that means looking at how texts represent the physical world; for others, how literature raises moral questions about human interaction with nature.

In this paper, eco-criticism is seen as a literary approach, which analyzes and promotes oral or written literature, which raises moral questions about how humans interact with nature. Glofelty and Fromm (1996), two of the major proponents of eco-criticism, define it as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'. They go further to add that,

All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman (Glofelty and Fromm 1996: xix).

Glofelty and Fromm's (1996) definition encapsulates virtually all the issues that constitute the nucleus of ecocritical scholarship such as the nature culture dichotomy, the human and nonhuman controversy and of course, the umbilical cord linking land, language and literature. Finally, Augustine Nchoujie (2013: 15) defines eco-criticism as,

...A pluralistic literary approach, which seeks to unearth environmental signposts in any work of literature or art. It privileges and integrates indigenous ecological knowledge, the human-non-human entente in its critique with the frequent aim of creating awareness of

threats to the environment and the need for environmental/ecological protection.

Nchoujie's definition differs from that of Winkler and Glofelty and Fromm in one important aspect. It privileges indigenous ecological knowledge. This is crucial because the researcher intends to argue in this paper that in rural Africa human life is closely integrated with physical nature. The people are for the most part peasant farmers in constant contact with the earth. For them, physical nature is not dead for behind nature is super nature. Hence, the combination of the physical and the supernatural helps regulate the interaction of people with the environment, thereby ensuring the harmony and progress of the traditional world. Thus, contrary to what Western ecocritics hold, nature in traditional African consciousness is not 'other'. Rather, it is apprehended by the people as an integral part of their world order. That explains why nature is regarded by the people as an object of veneration rather than of aesthetic appreciation.

Scope of the Paper

Africa is the imagined context within which this paper proceeds. But, Africa is a vast field, impossible to deal with within the framework of this paper. Hence, the researcher has decided to limit the paper to Swaziland, which is the country on which the researcher has done much research.

OBSERVATIONS

Background Information on Swaziland

With an estimated population of 1.1 million people and covering a surface area of 17,364 square kilometers, the Kingdom of Swaziland is a landlocked country (almost completely surrounded by South Africa) located in the south-eastern part of southern Africa. It is one of the smallest countries in Africa, beautifully ensconced between the picturesque scenery of mountainous escarpments, which are part of the Drakensberg Mountains on the western border, part of the former Transvaal in the southeast and part of KwaZulu-Natal and Mozambique in the east.

Tourism officials describe the Kingdom of Swaziland as "a cultural paradise in Africa" as well as "the pearl of Southern Africa" (Sone

2008:80). This is not only because of its natural resources, but also as a result of the vast cultural potential, the beauty of the scenery and hospitality of the Swazis, which attract thousands of tourists every year. The Swazi people or the emaSwati, speak one language, siSwati, and are a homogenous ethnic group with strong clan and lineage connections. They are part of the southern Bantu, linguistically referred to as the Nguni.

The country is divided into four well-defined ecological zones determined by altitude and vegetation. These range from a rainforest in the northwest to the savannah scrub in the east. Along the eastern border with Mozambique is the Lubombo, a mountain ridge at an altitude of around 600 meters. The mountains are broken by the gorges of three rivers, the Ngwavuma, the Usutu and the Mbuluzi. The western edge of the country is Highveld (high-altitude grassland) consisting mainly of short, sharp mountains. Mbabane, the capital, is located on the Highveld. In the past, this region was known as "nkhangala" ('treeless' in siSwati), but nowadays, there are large plantations of exotic pines and eucalyptus, especially around the Piggs Peak in the north. The mountains dwindle to the Middleveld (middle-altitude area) in the center of the country, where most people live. Manzini, the principal commercial and industrial city is located in the Middleveld. The Lowveld (low-altitude area) is less populated than other areas and is now home to sugar estates.

There are two distinct seasons in Swaziland—summer and winter. The summer season is characterized by hot and wet weather conditions between the months of October and March. The winter season (April to September) is characterized by cool to dry weather conditions.

Swaziland is a paradise of exotic flora and fauna. Richmond (2002: 629) mentions that,

Swaziland, one of the smallest countries in the southern hemisphere is rich in flora and fauna, accounting for fourteen percent of the recorded plant life in southern Africa. Due to the remote nature of parts of the countryside, there are probably species that have not yet been brought to the attention of botanists.

Richmond (2000) explains that nature reserves, particularly those administered by the Swaziland National Trust Commission, have the responsibility of conserving indigenous plants. Swaziland has about 121 species of animals, rep-

representing a third of the mammal species in southern Africa. The animals are restricted to the nature reserves and private wildlife farms dotted around the country. These nature reserves protect a vast variety of animals, birds and flora (such as rhinoceros, elephants, lions, antelopes and reptiles).

Swaziland's topography varies from east to west, the highest point being the peak of the Bulembu Mountain (1200 meters above sea level) and the lowest point the Usuthu River (20 meters below sea level). With the exception of desert and sea, every geographical feature of Africa's terrain is found within Swaziland. Magnificent mountain scenery with rivers, waterfalls and gorges, unique rock formations, which are among the world's most ancient, lush and fertile valleys plus typical African bush make Swaziland a unique country.

At the time of independence in 1968, Swaziland was divided into four regions, namely, Hhohho, Manzini, Lubombo and Shiselweni. These regions are distinct from the four geographical zones. The four administrative regions are further divided into 55 Tinkhundla centers (local administration) and they form the basic units of political administration. The country has a land surface of 17,364 square kilometers, of which eleven percent is arable (Richmond et al. 2000: 628). The population counts to about 1.2 million inhabitants. There are two major divisions in the land use type and ownership, that is, Swazi Nation Land, which is communal, is held in trust by the king, and parts of it are allocated by chiefs to individual Swazi families for their use, and individual Tenure Farms that are owned on freehold or concession. This latter sector includes commercial forests, estates and ranches.

Finally, since most of the inhabitants, generally speaking, are subsistence farmers, both grassland and forest are degrading at an alarming rate as a result of perennial bush fires set by locals. The forests have also come under intense exploitation by lumbermen for timber, firewood and other resource extractive operations. The point being made here is that the unsustainable and wanton exploitation of the rich and diverse natural resources coupled with poor management and conservation as well as industrial waste and pollution (especially at the Matsapha industrial area) are at the root of environmental crisis in Swaziland. It is clear, therefore, that the ecological zone of Swaziland is promising and

compelling as a vital site of environmental concern and analysis.

DISCUSSION

In traditional Swazi society, the people were environmentally conscious. That is why Swazis like other Africans, according to Takem (2005: 104),

...Undertook hunting, fishing, land cultivation, harvesting with judicious sense of commitment to the need for natural resources renewal to ensure the continuity of human life. The traditional doctor depended on the forest for his/her practice. Hunters knew that it was not prudent to hunt during certain seasons. The ethics of the trade prevented hunting young animals. Similarly, fishing was restricted to certain seasons, and in specific rivers and streams. People did not just cultivate the forests, indiscriminately. Most farms were located in secondary forest areas. This implies that even when poor farming methods such as bush fires were used, the heart of the [...] forest was never affected. Thus, the biodiversity of the forest was preserved.

Like all other people, their history, culture and the environment have shaped Swazis. These have in turn produced a rich tradition of oral literature. In most cases, the virtues, which Swazis extolled in their oral literature, are still the virtues, which they admire today. That is why the researcher strongly believes that indigenous knowledge of the land and its resources is critical in resolving environmental problems. Appiah-Opaku also argues in favor of the adoption of traditional nature knowledge. In his monograph, "The Need for Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Impact Assessment: The Case of Ghana (2005)", he supports the contention that local knowledge of the land and its resources can be of greater value to the local people than Western scientific paradigms when natural health is being assessed (Appiah-Opaku cited in Slaymaker 2001:137). This traditional environmental knowledge according to Charles Kleymeyer is found in the oral literature of the people (Kleymeyer, cited in Slaymaker 2001:102):

Indigenous knowledge contains forms of cultural expression, such as stories, songs, proverbs and dances, effectively stores and transmits information. It can be powerful teaching tool, since it preserves local history and lore,

define and interpret dilemmas, and pass on lessons [...] They play a central role in... encouragement of group reflection and awareness about poverty and development.

According to Slaymaker (2001: 135), the Ghanaian ecocritic, Kwaku Asante-Darko is of the opinion that 'localized environmental knowledge contained in literature especially in oral poetry, is a key to understanding the sustainable relationship to nature that Africans had realized prior to colonization and modernization and the subsequent exploitation of landscapes and resources'. Asante-Darko (cited in Slaymaker 2001:135) continues as follows:

Pre-colonial Asante proverb poems recognized dangers of human hubris and warned that animals, trees, the inspirited and inspiring natural living world, required respect if the organic life was not to be irretrievably injured. Restrictions to human intervention and moderation of anthropocentric power were the warnings these poems implied.

That oral literature should be a valuable source of environmental knowledge is not surprising. Oral literature in Swaziland as elsewhere serves as an instrument for the examination of individual experience in relation to the normative order of society. Thus, oral literature was used and is still being used in several parts of Swaziland to comment on how the individual adheres to or deviates from the community's norms of behavior.

In order to survive and to progress under the harsh conditions of the time in which the bulk of oral literature of Swaziland was set, that is, in the proximate or remote past, it was imperative for the individual to respect the social institutions, which predetermined his individuality. The institution encouraged in the individual the positive values of industry, courage, integrity, moderation and harmonious coexistence with nature. While making some allowances for social deviance, the institutions deplored such negative traits as greed, gasping individualism, careless behavior and unhealthy natural resource habits.

In traditional Swazi society then, environment was character. That is, the individual was what his society made him. But the society itself was basically competitive and acquisitive. Therefore, it had to rely very much on its system of social controls to ensure internal order. The taboo system, for example, helped shape atti-

tudes of the people through threat of divine or natural retribution. One of the channels of the instruments of social control was and continues to be oral literature. That is why the researcher shares Asante-Darko's belief that a judicious exploitation of the oral literature of the people will contribute significantly 'to a better understanding of what needs to be done and thought, what environmental actions need to be taken to improve human-nature relationships and reduce the destruction of local landscape by macro-degradation' (cited in Slaymaker 2001:135). This position is supported by Okoh (2004:413) when he asserts that 'a proper appreciation or better understanding of our oral literature will sufficiently equip us to abhor, then jettison such negative and perverted values in search of more honorable ideals, say those of humanness and genuine culture'. Swazi oral literature is able to do all these and more because it is intricately bound to the society. It springs from and reflects social and historical conditions, which are peculiar to the Swazis but which can apply with equal force to virtually all people. Finally, Swazi oral literature is far from being antiquated. If anything, it remains a potent and dynamic pedagogic tool, a vibrant literary force, which continues to exercise enormous influence on several spheres of life in contemporary Swazi society. That is why the researcher is not only calling for the urgent resuscitation of traditional ideas of sustainability of nature as contained in the oral literature of Swaziland but also stating and very strongly too that such local knowledge can be and should be adopted as the primary basis of environmental protection and preservation. One collection of Swazi oral literature worth reading is *Tinganekwane Tesiswati: Siswati Folktales*. The forty tales in this collection by various scholars are about how human life in Swaziland is intimately integrated with physical nature, and that is why the tales are full of symbols and images drawn from the natural world. The tales are set in rural Swaziland. For the most part, the characters are subsistent farmers or hunters. As such, they have a good knowledge of their environment and try as much as possible to maintain good relations with it. For example,

They see birds and animals of all sorts as part of their environment, to be put to human use or in some cases treated with reverence and religious awe. They recognize bird songs and build them into the consciousness as a way of

telling the time or interpreting reality, since the songs of some birds are ominous (Sone 2012: 10).

The 40 tales in the collection cited above have been categorized by Kamera (2001:114) under the following themes: aetiological tales, fables, tales of jealousy, tales of rescue, trickster tales, dilemma and secret tales, hilarity and horror, domestic comedy, tales of the bride and tales about suitors and maidens. These stories are didactic in content and therefore, functional. They are told to emphasize the correct and acceptable moral conduct and intend to have a positive moral influence on the community. Finally, they are used to teach children how best to interact with nature, and the consequences of violating environmental ethics. The researcher is suggesting here that ecocritics can draw inspiration about environmental preservation and conservation from the kind of stories that are contained in "Tinganekwane Tesiswati: Siswati Folktales". The researcher's belief is based on the assumption that 'if new concepts or subject matter do not connect with what people know, feel, understand, or believe is valuable, they will feel ignored or neglected (Clover 2000: 217).

A practical example of Swazi indigenous environmental knowledge is seen in the story titled 'The Origin of Hills and Woodlands¹'. This story puts animals at the center of environmental conservation. It is almost an allegory. The concern the animals show for their personal effort is clear. The materials used to construct the dream houses are accessed at the expense of the environment and finally the animals are forced to choose between conserving the environment and saving their lives, and leaving the environment in its devastated form and dying from hunger and thirst in palatial homes. They choose life and abandon comfort and extravagance that could only be enjoyed temporarily with the threat of death hanging over their heads.

The fact that the Tortoise comes up with the idea that eventually gets adopted suggests that even the low, ugly Tortoise has a role to play in the ecosystem. He tells the animals,

I carry my house wherever I go. Even the one I built recently is useless to me. If God wanted you to have houses, He would have done for you what He has done for me; then, you wouldn't cut down trees that we need so much just to construct houses which cannot keep hunger

and death outside their walls. We should demolish those houses and make the open sky the common house for us all.

Thus, in his wisdom, the Tortoise sees the cause of receding water levels before any other animal can see it. In addition to the elevation of the lowly Tortoise, there is a suggestion that in a healthy ecosystem, the flora and fauna must always remain balanced, and any tilting of the balance is likely to lead to disaster. In the myth, there was no drought while the animals survived in the environment in the manner in which they were meant to use it. However, as soon as the animals (fauna) decided to be greedy, self-serving and complacent, the flora got threatened and the aggressive animals responded positively. Contrary to scientific explanations that mountains were formed as a result of folding and faulting and volcanic activities taking place beneath the earth's surface, Swazi people, according to the story, hold that,

The mountains and hills that we see today were the ruins of the huge, permanent houses of the big animals. The forests and the woodland we see around us were planted by the animals.

From the story 'The Origin of Hills and Woodlands', one gathers that the folktale is an important genre of oral literature among the Swazis and is used by the storyteller as a medium to transmit his/her ideas on how to conserve the environment. It reminds one of some animals whose very existence is now threatened with extinction are proposing measures to be taken to conserve the environment. From the above example, the folktale therefore, highlights the Swazi people's conscious attempt to control their environment, and act as a warning that one can only ignore their role in the maintenance of a balanced, life-supporting environment at the peril of human beings' very existence as a species. By encouraging good behavior, the stories are able to cultivate positive values about the environment.

The story of *Ingcavulele*² (a huge water animal) is another good example in the collection *Tinganekwane Tesiswati: Siswati Folktales*. In this story, the *Ingcavulele* was hunted and killed only for its skin, which the king wanted for making a royal shield and wrist bangles. The story shows how rare species of animals are wiped out just for minor products. These animals have become extinct because people did not take any initiative to preserve them. This can be likened

to the killing of rhinos today. Soon this species will be nowhere to be found. The younger generation will not have the chance to see and appreciate the beauty of nature.

This story also seeks to discourage killing for wild game in Swaziland. The animals are like a treasure. Swazis have adopted the habit of killing wild animals only for their skin. This is detestable and morally wrong. Like humans, the animals have a right to life. They need to be treasured and valued, and they need to be protected and no one can protect them other than the Swazis themselves.

In cutting down the forests, poisoning the streams and desecrating the lakes, shrines and groves, human beings put the physical health and livelihood in danger and impair the ability to experience a deeper reality in the lives. When one kills wildlife as the Swazis do and ravage the landscape as the animals almost did before reason came from the Tortoise, one destroys the beauty and wholeness of nature on which one depend for one's spiritual wellbeing. This concurs with Tobias (1994: 22) who declares, 'One of the greatest tragedies of desecrating the environment is that we cut ourselves off from the depths of our innermost being – from the source of insight and joy that makes life meaningful and worthwhile'. The source of insight and joy, which Tobias mentions is that one must be fully aware of the consequences of awakening a sense of the sacred because it has to do with matters of ultimate concern such as values that can inspire one to preserve the environment as something one loves and cherish or drive us to destroy it as something that one fears and abhors.

During this period of rapid social and cultural change and in a world in which globalization is a growing force with expanding mobility of people, would scholars readily accept combining acceptable international scientific principles and methodologies of conservation with traditional non-scientific environmental knowledge as embodied in oral literature? Or, as Okoh (2004: 418) has argued,

Can oral literature, which generally consists of materials that are not only several generations old, but are also transmitted by word of mouth, have any relevance in a modern age that is everywhere visibly assaulted by enormous scientific and technological forces? Do such forms as myths, tales, legends, proverbs, riddles, and oral songs really fit into such an

age? Do such forms have a message, relevance, or significance for a modern, highly technologized age?

These arguments raise the problematic issue of the functionality and relevance of oral literature today. Now turning to Rusell Kaschula (1998) for inspiration. According to him, 'oral literature is adapting and functioning very well within the modern context'.

It is also true that oral literature exist only insofar as society allows it to exist. It is still the interrelationship between texts and context, which permits it to flourish. It is not a static literature, but remains ever changing and dynamic... It is a form of literature that permeates our lives at every level in the modern context. If we care to see and appreciate it, it remains all around us forming part of the literary tapestry that makes up the corpus of world literature today (Kaschula 1998: xii)

Kaschula here points to the interconnection between the past and the present in oral literature. That is, how one can marry the past with the present to face the future. One of the foremost authorities on African oral literature Ruth Finnegan drawing on her own personal experience and extensive empirical data concludes that 'oral forms in practice abound in contemporary contexts, in towns as much as in the countryside, among young people as well as the old, and with functions and contexts which it could be hard indeed to regard as anything but contemporary' (cited in Kaschula 1998: 280). Consequently, by advocating the use of oral literature to increase and sustain awareness of ecology, humans are far from being just a handful of romantically inclined researchers in pursuit of occasion for nostalgia. Rather they are being pragmatic, forward-looking and proactive. After all, it is common knowledge that oral literature teaches one how much one shares about good and evil, about what is moderate or immodest and the standards of defining the mutual responsibilities of the individual and the group to the environment. These are values, which transcend temporal or spatial dimensions.

CONCLUSION

The researcher has shown in this paper that Swazi society and oral literature, both are traditionally eco-centric. In fact, this literature can play a vital role in engendering a more sensitive

understanding of the ecology. The researcher has gone further to demonstrate how indigenous knowledge embedded in Swazi oral literature can be used to expand the concepts of ecoliterature and ecocriticism in order to make them more relevant to the world of nature. Put differently, the Swazi way of life is in complete synchronization with nature and the whole ecosystem. In this connection, Swazi oral literature can be highly illuminative of the relationship between man and nature. In other words, the accumulated Swazi traditions, in the form of oral literature could throw significant light on the understanding of ecology particularly in the age of technology.

Oral literature will continue to voice concerns on various environmental challenges faced by the world in contemporary times. However, while Western thought bonded various issues such as those of biodiversity, climate change, deforestation, social and cultural environment with literature and developed ecocriticism to voice the gravity of these concerns, African and Swazi traditional thought and values definitely added a lot of depth and vision to these issues and tried to provide some thoughtful suggestions through literature. It is for the above reason this researcher argues that:

The environment and its conservation have always been a way of life in Swaziland and, therefore, Swazi oral literature cannot be detached from the environment. This is because oral literature opens a new vista of environmental humanities where literature as whole bonds with the environment to create a more compassionate, caring, cordial and comfortable human society.

The researchers finds such literature as having a strong foundation in Swazi traditional and cultural values. It has the power to coordinate and correlate the depth of philosophy with the Swazi vision of life. Through this literature, it is believed that the entire human world was born out of nature and is dependent on nature for its survival, hence, let nature be the uniting and binding force of complete humanity. Hence, Swazi oral literature not only guides and directs humans towards the solution of salvation of mankind through current environmental upheaval, but it very aptly insists on deeper global understanding through environment and stresses the ideas and ideals of 'the World as a family'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that there is need to strengthen traditional and customary environmental knowledge and practices by protecting and recognizing the values of such systems in the conservation of the environment. The paper also recommends that environmental experts should come together and undertake a systematic study of indigenous environmental knowledge embedded in a people's folklore on the basis of a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of environmental conservation. Finally, the paper makes a clarion call that local communities should be encouraged and facilitated to preserve and share traditional environmental knowledge, not only for the conservation of the environment, but also for the cross-fertilization of oral literature. It is hoped that this study will foster an awareness indigenous environmental knowledge embedded in oral literature among modern environmental experts and theorists.

The Origin of Hills and Woodlands

Once upon a time, all the animals in the world decided to build huge, permanent houses. Even the smallest of them, the rat, agreed that a huge permanent house was what the family needed.

The animals then agreed to meet after everyone had completed building. They agreed to meet at the new house of the Lion. Since he was their king, his house should be large enough to accommodate them all. After some time, their tasks were complete and Lion called the meeting to order and asked each animal to tell the gathering his/her experience with building the biggest permanent house. Finally, Lion stood up to summarize what he heard from the different speakers. What all the speakers pointed out was the increasing shortage of water. The birds had complained that not only were they experiencing difficulties with drinking water but they were also finding it increasingly difficult to find trees on which to place their huge, heavy, permanent houses. The Crocodile's anger with the constantly receding water levels was pitiful. Lion himself pointed out his worry about the possible extinction of the browsers whose food had all gone into the construction of the huge permanent houses.

"What do you suggest that we do?"

Lion asked before sitting down.
 “Blow down the houses,” replied Hare.
 “And then?” Lion asked.

Hare had no answer. No one had an answer for quite awhile.

Then the Tortoise raised his head and said, “I carry my house wherever I go. Even the one I built recently is useless to me. If God wanted you to have houses, he would have done for you what he did for me. Then, you wouldn’t cut down trees that we need so much just to construct houses, which cannot keep hunger and death outside their walls. We should demolish those houses and make the open sky the common house for us all.”

“Well spoken”, said Hippopotamus as he made a dash for the nearest water body.

Crocodile also agreed with Tortoise and went to the banks of the nearest water body. The rest of the animals agreed to not only demolish their huge, permanent houses, but to plant trees, wood and grass afresh. These mountains and hills (narrator stretches his arms and points to the direction of the hills outside) that we see today were the ruins of huge, permanent houses of big animals. The forests and woodlands we see around us (narrator points to the bush around the compound) were planted by the animals after that important meeting. That is the end of my story.

2. See Sone (2014:203-204) for a similar story in the source language.

The *Ingcavulele* (Huge Water Animal)

Once upon a time, there was a certain king who wanted the skin of *Ingcavulele*. He called his people together, the young and the old. The king then asked if any one among them knew *Ingcavulele*. Many people were hearing that name for the first time. All the people did not know the animal their king was talking about. From among the people a small boy came forth who knew *Ingcavulele*. The people were very happy upon hearing this. The king was even more delighted. He came closer to the boy and said, “I want the skin of *Ingcavulele*. Because you know it, go and bring it back to me so that I can get its skin”. The boy then asked for containers with bed bugs, fleas and ants. He was given what he had asked for, and then went on to look for *Ingcavulele*. Along the way he saw a big river. Something told him that there was something in that river. The boy started singing,

The king wants your skin

The king wants your skin

When he finished singing, the boy saw the river shaking. The *Ingcavulele* appeared and the boy became afraid. “Look I have no teeth, how can I eat you?” The animal disappeared into the river. The boy went to another river. The *Ingcavulele* told him it had no teeth to eat him with. The boy was disappointed and went on searching. In the last river the boy sang the same song he had sung at the first river. The *Ingcavulele* appeared and showed its white teeth to the boy. “Run away while I am still preparing myself” said *Ingcavulele*. The boy started running towards home. The *Ingcavulele* came out of the water and took to the boy’s heels. The earth was shaking as the animal was chasing after the boy. When the boy saw that the *Ingcavulele* was about to reach him, he threw down the container with bed bugs. The *Ingcavulele* licked all the bed bugs and pursued the boy. When it was near, the boy threw down the second container of ants. *Ingcavulele* licked all the ants one by one until nothing was left. Again, it took to the boy’s heels. The animal was coming closer to the boy. The boy was now left with only one container with fleas. He decided to throw the last container down. The *Ingcavulele* chased after the fleas and forgot about the boy. After a long time the fleas were finished. It was then that the animal started chasing after the boy. Unfortunately for the animal, the boy was about to reach home. People heard him shouting, “Put needles! Put needles in the kraal”. The *Ingcavulele* was killed by the needles. Warriors skinned *Ingcavulele*. Out of the skin they made bangles, a spear and a shield for the king. The king was very happy and gave the boy cattle as a reward for being a hero.

NOTES

1. A somewhat similar version of the same story was also collected by the Bakossi of Cameroon (Sone 2011) and by the Luo of Kenya (Mwanzi 2006).
2. See Sone (2014:203-204) for a similar story in the source language.

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