

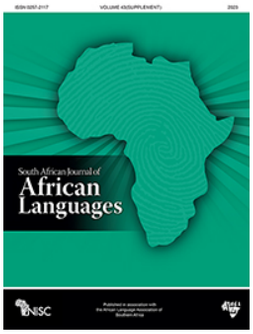
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Understanding character naming in Khaketla's *Mosali a Nkhola*: a literary onomastic analysis

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This article aims to understand Khaketla's intent in naming the characters in *Mosali a Nkhola*. As one of its key features, a novel has characters whose main purpose is to carry readers through the journey the author proposes for them. Characters, like people in real life, bear names that not only help identify them, but also play a vital role in the development of the theme in a literary text. The author makes assumptions about certain things and relies on them when selecting names for the characters. Through character naming, the author blends reality and artistic features to attain credibility. This, therefore, indicates that in literature, as in real-life contexts, names are not just tags, but they carry particular meanings. Using literary onomastics as an analytical tool, the article explores the names of the characters in *Mosali a Nkhola* to find out their meanings and significance in the development of the theme of the novel. The findings reveal Khaketla's creative skill in naming in that the names are symbolic of Basotho history, culture and tradition. They also represent the traditional and modern philosophies, bringing out the concept of cultural dynamism in the text.

Introduction

African literature 'is defined by the experiences of African people not the language of expression' (Ndede, 2016: 10). This implies that African literature also comprises literatures written in English, Portuguese, French and the indigenous African languages. The writing is done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped mentally and spiritually by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. This, therefore, indicates that the language of writing does not in any way devalue this literature and neither does it interfere with the Africanness of the literature (Ndede, 2016). It is written out of the emotional, intellectual and physical experience of African people, fashioned by their cultures. We may add though that, the African's experience is not only fashioned by their cultures, but by other external forces as well, especially the cynical conquests of the continent by Europeans; conquests which were followed by a period of bondage (Chaphole, 1984).

Mosali a Nkhola (1960) is an African novel written in an indigenous African language, Sesotho. Sesotho is one of the two official languages of Lesotho alongside English and also one of the 12 official languages of South Africa. The author, Makalo Khaketla, is an African, a Mosotho of the Bakwena ba Maiyane clan. He was born in 1913 in Makhalong in the district of Qacha's Nek in Lesotho, also known as the Mountain Kingdom (Phafoli, 1996). Based on this background, therefore, the novel *Mosali a Nkhola* can be classified as African literature as it is written by an African author in an African language.

A novel is a narrative text. As a work of art, its artistic features are associated with reality through character naming. The author plays an important role in the naming of characters, as Dvořáková (2018) asserts that the choice and the use of a name are the domain of the author, while the effect domain relates to the reader. The act of naming, as defined by Gibka (2019), happens when the author starts the literary work and gives characters proper names. In naming characters, the author can coin names or pick names from existing names to name characters as an effective way to deliver meaning to the literary text (Allagbè, 2016). Names in the novel, as is the case in real life, carry important information related to various characteristics of the individual such as social status, personal desires and family history. They are instruments of authenticity because they assist the author in the creation of credible characters in a literary text who give the impression of being realistic. Naming a character, therefore, not only helps readers identify the character, but also reveals the part an individual bearing a name plays in the development of the theme in the literary text. The comprehension and enjoyment of the complicated plot of the novel depend largely on the knowledge of the meaning of personal names and the understanding of the naming process. To understand Khaketla's naming act, we provide a short historical background.

The historical dimension of the novel

The historian, Machobane (in personal communication), relates the events of the book to the reforms that took place in Lesotho in 1933. Lesotho was a British Protectorate from 1868 until 1966 when it became independent. During this time, unpalatable colonialist tendencies were widespread in the country. The reforms had far-reaching consequences such as the reduction of the number of chiefs, and 'the[ir] powers...salaries, taxes and land issues' (Phindane, 2012:

210). A directive had been given by the colonial powers of the time that the principal chiefs should choose the chiefs to be gazetted. As would be expected, all the chiefs wanted to be gazetted so that they would not be demoted to lower positions. The chiefs then turned to traditional medicine men, some of whom advised them to resort to ritual murders.

It is necessary to distinguish between witch doctors and traditional medicine men and women. The term 'witch doctor' was used indiscriminately by the early adventurer-cultural anthropologists who imposed themselves as authorities on communities whose cultures they barely understood (see Chaphole, 1986; Smith, 2012; among others). A witch doctor is *moloi* (a witch), someone who practices *boloi* 'witchcraft' and who uses their knowledge of traditional medicine to harm, such as committing ritual murders and other harmful practices. Another definition says that witch doctors are described not as witches but as people who have remedies to protect others against witchcraft (Semenya & Letsosa, 2013), hence the difference between a witch and a witch doctor. Traditional medicine men and women, on the other hand, are the direct opposite of the former definition of witch doctors. They use their knowledge and training in traditional medicine to cure, heal and make whole, both physically and spiritually, those 'patients' who may need their help. Some of the progressive institutions like the Medical Research Council, which conduct research in the field of indigenous knowledge systems in South Africa, have invited traditional medicine men and women as consultants to help shed light on some of the issues that Western medicine is grappling with.

Literature related to the topic

Khaketla's novel *Mosali a Nkhola* has attracted various scholars' interests. In a seminar paper titled ' "Murder, they cried": Revisiting medicine murders in literature', Maake (1996: 13) states that 'Khaketla resorts to subtlety in the symbolism of names. His characters' names are less allegorical'. Maake touches on names only in passing. Understandably, his focus was on ritual murders in literature. This omission has created extant space for the current article. Seema (1995) employs the theory of structuralism to bring out the difference between plot and story in Khaketla's *Mosali a Nkhola*. In his analysis, the researcher invokes the structuralist concepts of exposition, motorial moment, complication, crisis, climax and denouement. In 2012, Seema returns to the same novel, this time to explore the possible reasons for the downfall of the main character, Mosito. Another scholar, Phindane (2012) looks at the depiction of female characters in three of Khaketla's texts: the third is *Mosali a Nkhola*. He argues that Khaketla's naming technique in these female characters bears some clues to revealing their personalities. Phindane's assertion accords with Mokala (2020) that the naming system among the Basotho follows certain processes which reflect their belief systems and cultural heritage. Through names, the Basotho portray various meanings and experiences.

Selepe (1997) is of the view that literary production should be re-established in a manner that would translate pedagogical practice into positive social practices. To this end, his research work approaches the study of the Sesotho novel from the perspective of literary production. The researcher contends that the theory of literary production insists that literature is a form of social production and should be viewed as such. Selepe (2009) argues for the employment of an Afrocentric critical tool to offset current perspectives that promote skewed critical methods. That said, he embarks on a substantive analysis of Khaketla's novel to clear the misperceptions that have consigned African literature to the periphery. He aims to relocate indigenous African works of literature to the centre of academic discourse. Sharing his observations about literary works, Moleleki (1988: 15) comments that 'writers mature in a culture; they learn their skills and their craft in that culture, and so inevitably reflect some aspects of that culture in their writing'. Moleleki highlights the fact that literary works by African writers usually have some traditional flavour. Most African writers, while finding their voices, have had to go back to their roots. How writers use the names of characters in their works reflects the fact that personal names are not cultural universals. However, cultural practices associated with naming vary from one society to the other.

The value of the brief literature review is to show the research that has been carried out on Khaketla's novel. The theory of literary onomastics is yet to be used to analyse the novel under discussion. This makes the case for the relevance of the current article, which follows from the many that were done on Khaketla's literary work, but it adopts a different analytical tool to understand the author's motives in choosing the names of the characters and to explore the significance of such names in the development of the theme of the novel. The research question for this article is: How does Khaketla use names in his novel, *Mosali a Nkhola*?

Literary onomastics

Literary onomastics is a branch of onomastics where scholars are concerned with the levels of significance of names in various types of literary texts such as drama, poetry, fiction and folklore (Alvarez-Altman, 1987; Gibka & Coates, 2018). The core focus of this theory is on names of places, characters, symbols and many others, and their relationship with the theme, structure, or any aspect of a literary text. The theory enables scholars to explore the author's intent with the names bestowed on the characters as well as what the names mean to the reader. The theory is mostly applicable in the study of proper names in a novel because a novel, according to Gibka (2019), is an extended narrative, thus it allows the investigation of names of characters and the motive behind the names as they unfold from the moment of naming. The theory, therefore, is applicable in the current study which is aimed at understanding Khaketla's intent in naming the characters in his novel.

Methodology

The design of the current article is based on the qualitative method because the intention is to describe, understand and interpret how Khaketla uses the names of characters to communicate different meanings to the readers through his novel. Data for this article is both desk and field based.

Field-based data was used because cultural matters are passed from one generation to another by word of mouth. As a result, we identified and interviewed four reliable and resourceful elders as consultants, who helped to decipher the origin, history and cultural meanings of some of the proper names used by Khaketla in his novel. It must be said though that reliable and resourceful elders are hard to come by and sometimes the information they provide differs because they got it from different sources. Two more consultants were interviewed, namely the historian, Machobane, and a researcher, Phafoli, who interviewed the author, Makalo Khaketla, while he was still alive. The names of characters were purposely selected based on their roles in the novel. The sample is representative of both primary and secondary character names. While the novel has many characters, not all of them play significant roles in the development of the plot, hence the selection of the most prominent, namely Lekaota, Mosito, Khati, Sebotsa, Maime, Selone and Mathabo.

Title of the book

Phindane (2012) translates the meaning of the title as 'The woman lands me into trouble'. This could be regarded as the closest rendition of the title. Another version could be: 'A woman lands me in a mess'. The first point that the title reveals is to apportion blame. The speaker in the title chooses to blame someone else (a woman) for the terrible mess he finds himself in. Secondly, he was faced with a situation where he had to choose between taking someone's life in the most gruesome manner and simply letting that person live. Third, the woman in question is his wife whom he chose; but the title does not say *Mosali wa ka...* ('My wife...'). The speaker disowns his wife because, according to him, she made him commit the ritual murder.

Presentation and discussion of character names

Character naming is one of the important attributes of written literature (Allagbè, 2016). The author uses many names as major characters who represent the building blocks of the story. Character naming is an effective way through which the author conveys meaning in his artistic work because it blends reality and fiction. Characters are categorised as primary and secondary, based on their significance and the roles they play in the development of the theme in a literary text. In this text, Mosito is the main character because the plot revolves around him, while Lekaota can be considered a tertiary character. This follows that he appears only at the beginning when he introduces and warns the main character. Five character names, namely Maime, Khati, Sebotsa, Mathabo and Selone are secondary characters. Unlike other secondary characters, they play a significant role in influencing the main character in some way, hence their contribution is the most substantial in the novel.

There is a place in the southern part of Lesotho known as Bokaota, and the people who live in this place call themselves Makaota. In the novel, Lekaota appears as a chief and as Mosito's father. In everyday discussions and during chats, one often hears pronouncements like *Ke lekaota, ke a itshapota* (I am a hustler, I fend for myself). The attribute of independence and self-reliance cannot be missed here. In the novel, Lekaota is a chief and he appears briefly in the three opening chapters where we hear him speak before he dies. First, after his son and successor Mosito returns from Thaba Tseka where he had gone to choose a wife for himself, Lekaota asks:

Jwale, bakeng sa thuto, yena o fihlile kae?
O fihlile ho efe buka?
'Now, as far as education goes, how far did she go?
Which book [standard/grade level] did she finish?'

Mosito replies that the chosen wife-to-be has only passed standard four, which does not compare with the ten 'books' that Mosito had passed. Lekaota chooses not to take issue with this glaring difference in educational standards between his son and daughter-in-law to be. This is his son's choice and he respects it. Perhaps Lekaota's decision not to involve himself is a premonition that his son is yet to make more and more choices in future, including very difficult ones. Secondly, when Lekaota is about to die, he says to his son, Mosito:

O mamele letswalo la hao…
Le ha o ka eletswa ke mang kapa mang…
Letswalo ke lona modisa wa sebele wa motho;
Ke lona motswalle wa sebele wa motho;
Ke lona moeletsi wa sebele wa motho.
'Obey your conscience…
Disregard advice from anybody…
One's conscience is one's true shepherd;
It is one's true friend;
It is one's true advisor.'

These words of wisdom demonstrate and encourage autonomy and confidence. Lekaota warns his son and successor against external influences in decision-making. He ruled his people until his son became a grown-up man who can receive the power of chieftaincy. Lekaota does not live to see his son reign because shortly after warning him, he dies and a new chapter begins. Lekaota could be seen as the embodiment of Mosito's conscience; knowing the moral difference between what is right and what is wrong. Could it be that as he dies, he takes Mosito's conscience with him to the world of the dead?

The main character's name is Mosito. According to the elders we consulted, the name Mosito means 'one who has erred or sinned'. Machobane and Phafoli (both personal communication) inform us that the historical Mosito was an elder of the Bakoena clan. Phafoli further informs us that Mosito is the first and great chief of Bakoena; he is the father of them all. Futhwa (2014) adds that the name Mosito originates from the Bakoena ancestry as the son of Khabo of the Bakoena ba Nkopane, and a father to Mochudi, a ruler of the main branch of the Bakoena. We therefore grasp two things about Mosito from the three sources, namely that he was a Mokoena and he was an elder, a father and an ancestor. Mosito appears at the beginning of the chieftaincy where he recites his praises as:

[Ke] Mosito wa Raseapara lome,
Ha ke a ikapesa,
Ke apesitswe.

The three short lines given here could be paraphrased as: 'I am Mosito who wears a wound (*lome*); I did not choose to

wear this wound; I was destined to wear it'. The reference here is to a bearer-of-arms, a warrior so to speak, and one who never retreats. In the novel, Mosito makes a series of mistakes which lead to his downfall. The first blunder is the choice of an incompatible wife. As the author narrates, two very pretty young women were presented to Mosito to choose from. Their names are Maleshoane and Sebolelo. Mosito chooses Sebolelo, 'someone about whom things are said'. As the title of the book suggests, this is the woman about whom things continued to be said even beyond the final pages of the book.

The second blunder happened when he chose to contest the decision to demote him to the position of junior chief. This may be the beginning of an 'uncontrolled ambition', as Phindane (2012: 210) observes. It would appear that the ambition could still be controlled by the main character. His closest friends, Khosi and Pokane advise him not to contest the decision to demote him. However, there are catalysts involved, who militate against his efforts to control the ambition. A catalyst is understood here as a person or thing that precipitates an event. The first group of catalysts is the trio of Khati, Sebotsa and Maime. Khati means a skipping rope or a game played by girls. The game controls whoever participates in the game, when to jump and how high to jump. It is a game played by binding rules. If Mosito decides to play the game, he will have to play it by its binding rules. Failure of the player to catch up with the speed during the game results in the rope making them fall or wrapping itself around them. From the historical angle, the name Khati is a name for a male individual originating from the Bataung ba Moletsane, the inhabitants of the southern part of Lesotho, where the lineage is as follows:

Moletsane wa Mophethe,
Mophethe wa Thulo,
Thulo wa Thekiso and
Thekiso wa Mmatli.

The second name is Sebotsa. Historically, Sebotsa is from the Bafokeng ba Patsa. There were those of Mangole and Mangojane, and Sebotsa originates from the Mangojane brand. The name is derived from the verb *botsa* 'ask' through the attachment of a class seven prefix /se-/. The noun prefix /*se-*/ when attached to a verb stem means an expert doer. In the novel, Sebotsa is characterised as an expert in asking difficult and probing questions. The writer says he winks several times, closes his eyes and then asks:

Morena, ho na le lekunutu leo o ratang ho re bolella lona,
leo o sa rateng ha le ka bolelwa?
'Is there a secret that you want to tell us, chief,
which should not be revealed?'

The trio comprises also Maime, the name drawn from the Bafokeng clan. Traditionally, Maime is the name of a medicine used by people who want power. It is clear that Mosito wants power, otherwise, he would not have contested the decision to demote him. The writer says:

Lentswe la Maime la tetemisa marulelo a ntlo,
Yaka holane ho tla sefefo se seholo.
'Maime's [deep, sonorous] voice rattled the roof of a house,
As though a hurricane was coming'.

Maime, as his name suggests, would be forceful with people and his word was final as evidenced by this expression, *Ha Maime a buile, eba le dumme!* 'After Maime has spoken, then it has thundered' [it is done, it is finished!].

The second and last catalytic category is a stand-alone, Sebolelo. She now has a new name, Mmathabo ('mother of happiness') because she is married and has given birth to a baby boy, Thabo, who is Mosito's heir. One wonders if Mmathabo is going to bring happiness as her name suggests. After Mosito rejects the advice of the trio, Maime approaches Mmathabo secretly and says:

Mofumahadi, motho o mong feela ya nang le matla
A ho sokolla pelo ya monna-
Ke mosadi wa hae.
'There is only one person who has the power to change a man's heart – it is his wife'.

Convinced by the words, as mentioned earlier that Maime would be forceful with people, Queen Mmathabo agrees to honour Maime's request *ho sokolla pelo ya monna wa hae* 'to change his husband's heart'. Contrary to the assumptions made based on her name, Mmathabo brings sorrow instead of happiness to Lekaota's family. She lives to regret her actions, as her name Sebolelo indicates, because of her scandalous actions.

'Selone is not a Sesotho name, it might be Zulu,' said Machobane. Machobane's observation followed that the Basotho used to believe that the most powerful traditional medicine men came from KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. They would then pay large herds of cattle to the Zulu traditional medicine men to get the best *muthi* 'medicine' money could buy. We could not find the meaning of this name from our informants, except that Selone was a famous witch doctor from KZN. In the novel, Selone is famous for practising witchcraft, treachery, deceit and traditional medicine fraud. He first deceives his easy victim Khati with a dead snake hung on the branches of a tree. From here he catches his prey, Mosito, with yet another dead snake stuffed with a very beautiful, smooth, black stone. Symbolically, Selone is a 'snake' with a smooth tongue. Upon his arrival at Mosito's homestead, Mosito rides a very slippery slope, with a trip of no return, an ambition that has become uncontrollable. Pokane says:

Ropo ya phetha mosebetsi wa yona,
Ba leketlile ka melala ya bona ho fihlela ba e shwa.
'The rope did its job, they hung by their necks until they died'.

Mosito lapses into the behaviour of mutilating the body of an innocent man in search of power. Ironically, he never smells that power. Instead, he dies a shameful, degrading death as the Basotho would say, *O sitile*! 'He has erred'. This contradicts the Basotho proverb, *Morena ha a fose* 'a king does not err'. The contradiction concurs with Allagbè's (2016) argument that the analysis of language can unveil the roles played by characters in the text. The contradiction further brings forth the concept of cultural shift suggested by the fall of an educated leader.

Locating Khaketla's character naming in the Sesotho cultural context, we can argue that the proper names he has used indicate attributes displayed by the individuals who carry those names. This follows the Sesotho proverb *Bitso lebe ke seromo* 'A bad name is an evil omen', which is adhered to by several scholars (see for example, Zulu & Makoae, 2017; Leshota & Sefotho, 2020). This proverb can also be loosely translated as 'give a dog a bad name and hang him'. For

instance, naming a child Lenyesa, one should expect the child to grow up and 'beat the shit' out of innocent people without any provocation because that is what the name Lenyesa means. In agreement, Allegbè (2016: 22) asserts that '[t]he acts or roles the individual performs or the attributes or traits that s/he evinces in the interactions point out the meaning signification(s) of his/her name or naming label'.

In the novel, for instance, chief Lekaota reigned with wisdom and handed over the sovereign supremacy to his educated son, Mosito, whom he warned against external influences. However, Mosito failed dismally and brought the chieftaincy into disrepute. Naming his child Mosito, translated as 'one who errs', chief Lekaota unconsciously laid a curse on his son. Historically, the name bearer was termed the father of all, resulting in the succeeding generations naming their children after him. However educated Mosito is, the name bestowed on him made him a blunderer who finally perished shamefully proving that *bitso lebe ke seromo*. As it has unfolded in the discussion, the secondary characters influence the main character Mosito in different ways. Their names relate to their roles in the development of the plot of the novel. While Selone is not a Sesotho name, his contribution is symbolic of the cultural transition resulting from the incorporation of foreign cultures and beliefs in the Sotho culture.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore and understand Khaketla's creative skill as portrayed in the naming of his characters. The findings of the article are in three parts. First, Khaketla's naming of characters relates to the history of Lesotho. The novel brings the past into the present. It narrates the history for the benefit of subsequent generations. The use of names drawn from the three popular and powerful clans, namely Bakwena, Bafokeng and Bataung, is purposeful. It presents the power distribution in the Basotho chieftaincy. The names Mosito, Khati, Sebotsa and Maime are traced to their clan affiliations, and this adds a significant historical flavour to the contents of the novel, thereby enhancing its credibility. Secondly, from the perspective of literary onomastic theory, each name is symbolic and fits well into the context of its use. This is also captured in the Sesotho proverb *Bitso lebe ke seromo* 'A bad name is an omen'. In Sesotho, names have meanings derived from different occurrences surrounding the birth of an individual. In *Mosali a Nkhola*, the names include medicine (Maime), behaviour (Sebotsa) and games (Khati). Khaketla demonstrates his creativity by adding both tradition and culture in the naming of his characters. Arbitrariness is reduced as there is an absolute link between the attributes and the names of the characters in the novel.

The findings further reveal the two ideologies that underpin the Basotho's lives in general. The characters represent both Western and traditional philosophies. The influence of Western ideology on traditional ideology is indicative of cultural dynamism. The names show the negative effects of static behaviour. Mosito is educated and reigns during times of change in governance, but his vision is blurred by his uneducated wife, so he errs and perishes. Although Lekaota maintained his chieftaincy and accepted change successfully, his son, Mosito, could not detect the effects of mixed ideologies. However, like Adam and Eden, he does not shoulder the blame, rather he shifts it to his wife. In this way, he shows an unwillingness to grow and change for the best. It can be concluded that through the process of character naming, Khaketla employs names in alignment with literary onomastics. As he indicated in his talk with Phafoli (1996), his novel was intended to be credible to arouse the readers' interest, and he achieved this through character naming.

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