

# An Afrocentric Essentialisation Of Orality In Zakes Mda's The Heart Of Redness

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## Abstract

African literary expression owes its origin to story-telling and traditional oral poetry because in the African past, poems and stories were verbally transmitted and passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth (Finnegan, 1992). This makes African literature "people-directed and mass-consumed and therefore, people-centered and mass-based" (Ramogale, 1995:8). Ngugi (1986) calls this oral transmission of cultural heritage to posterity orature. Orality is, therefore, essential to African literature in that it gives it a unique identity. This study strives to essentialise Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) from the African theoretical perspective. Qualitative approach, which is supported by exploratory research design, was employed to guide the study. *The Heart of Redness* was selected from other novels by the same novelist by means of purposive sampling. This was because of its relevance to the study. Textual analysis was used as a data analysis technique in the study. The study proposes that in order for (South) African literary identity to be revived from erosion by colonial influences, orality should be essentialised.

**Keywords:** orality, African literature, transmission, cultural heritage, identity, essentialised

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## Introduction

### Contextualisation

Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni Mda, better known as Zakes Mda, was born in Herschel, South Africa, in 1948 (Birama, 2005). Mda is well-known for his mammoth contribution to the development of dramatic art through his culturally conscious writings, teachings and productions. Above and beyond the large volume of plays that he has crafted, Mda has produced six novels: *Ways of Dying* (1995), *She Plays with the Darkness*, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), *The Whale Caller*, and most recently, *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013). His first novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995), won him the M-Net Book Prize in 1997, while *The Heart of Redness* was awarded the 2001 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the African region. Zakes Mda, playwright, poet, educator, and author is an important member of the post-apartheid generation of writers (Birama, 2005).

*The Heart of Redness* (2000), in which redness indicates traditional South Africa, is a multigenerational saga which reveals Mda's cross-cultural understanding. Set in Qolorha, Mda's novel delineates numerous interwoven familial relationships, so complex that the author includes in the beginning a genealogical chart

of the “Descendants of the Headless Ancestor,” Xikixa. The author’s dedication admits to reinventing certain lives of Qolorha and recognises historian J. B. Peires for his work on “cattle-killing”.

The novel shows how a writer’s imagination recreates the historical record by dramatising facts and occurrences. Mda recounts the divisions that developed among the Xhosa people, unravels the controversies with British colonisers in the nineteenth century around the time of the Great War of Mlanjeni, and brings forward to contemporary times the legacy of these ruptures. Initially, these divisions were caused by the beheading of Xikixa, the “Headless Ancestor,” by the British soldiers including John Dalton, the nineteenth-century character who would become a magistrate.

Working through the opening of the novel and sorting the many characters whose names are symbolic and metaphorical, such as “No Petticoat” and “No England” can be a strenuous task. There are references to known historical figures, such as Nongqawuse, the prophetess, whose visions are captured in the novel, and on which the novel is based.

### **Summary of Mda’s The Heart of Redness**

In Mda’s richly suggestive novel, a Westernised (South) African, Camagu, becomes embroiled in a village dispute that has its roots in the 19th century. The war between the Ama Xhosa and the British in South Africa (known to Westerners as the Zulu Wars) was interrupted by a strange, messianic interlude in which the Ama Xhosa followed the self-destructive commands of the prophetess Nongqawuse and were split between followers of Nongqawuse (Believers) and their opponents (Unbelievers). In the village of Qolorha-by-Sea in the late 20th century, the Believers still flourish. They put the onus for the distressing failure of Nongqawuse’s visions on the Unbelievers’ unbelief.

The chief Believer is Zim; his rival, the chief Unbeliever, is Bhonco. The white store owner, Dalton, whose ancestor killed Zim and Bhonco’s forefather, Xikixa, is on the Believers’ side in the village’s current controversy over whether or not to allow a casino in the village. The Believers oppose the changes they foresee coming to the village’s traditions. The Unbelievers want economic development. Camagu originally comes to Qolorha looking for a woman whose memory haunts him. He ends up being associated with the cold, beautiful Xoliswa Ximiya, Bhonco’s daughter, whose scorn for tradition eventually drives her from the village. Secretly, however, Camagu lusts for Qukezwa, the squat but sexy daughter of Zim. Mda’s sympathies are with the Believers, but his eminent fairness forbids mere didacticism, and his joy in the back and forth of village politics beautifully communicates itself to the reader through poetic language enlivened by humour and irony.

### **Conceptual Grounding**

This study is buttressed on orality as a folkloric concept. As a way of expanding their worldview, understanding life and living, ancient Africans opted for the use of oral forms such as legends, myths, riddles and anecdotes and other forms of lore (Okpe who, 1992). These forms of lore were also used to disseminate information about their identity, their place and philosophies to a younger generation. Orality is an auditory experience that involuntarily unifies the listener in an event as a transitory, evanescent process, conceptualising that event as reality, for orality is immediate in its nature (Okpe who, 1992; Ong, 1982; Finnegan, 1984). Accordingly, orality is pervasively embedded in socially experiential situations (as engaged in stories, ritual, dance, song, regalia, art, architecture, landscape), and contextualised in interpersonal dynamics (terse, minimised use of function words such as prepositions and conjunctions, variation in intonation, personal pronouns are indistinguishable) (Dunes, 1984). Furthermore, orality is viewed as spawning a participatory, non-dualistic engagement in a reality that is understood as continually unfolding, as “becoming”. This study, therefore, strives to qualitatively essentialise African orality in Mda’s The Heart of

Redness by textually analysing the novel. Purposive sampling was used to select this novel from other novels by the same author because of its relevance to the study.

### **Forms of Oral Narratives in Mdas's The Heart of Redness**

There is a corpus of oral narratives, stories and philosophies that belong to or originate from the oral tradition which are found in written African literary forms. Such oral narratives are, inter alia, legend, myth, totems, which are historical narratives that carry a wealth of information and knowledge about the African halcyon past. This study focuses on the following forms of oral narratives that are embedded in Mdas's The Heart of Redness:

#### **Legend**

Kipury (1983) views legends as being about events and people in a historical context within a particular community. An example of a legend as being about people is one about a hero legend, where the hero always has super-human qualities (Kipury, 1983). The Heart of Redness is about the Cattle-killing event and the Xhosa people in a historical context of colonial rule in the Eastern Cape. The novel captures the legend that is composed of the three elements that inform a legend which are: event, people and place. Mda made use of an event that no black South African ever recorded when it took place, but which was passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation (Mtheke, 2003).

Legend is depicted as The Heart of Redness draws its story from the tale of Nongqawse and the cattle-killing event of the mid-nineteen century. The content of the novel is primarily influenced or sourced from the failed legendary prophecy of Nongqaw use and the cattle-killing movement of the Ama Xhosa people which led to a catastrophic situation of starvation and division among the people. Mda skilfully uses the legend factiously to address social maladies that plague South Africa.

Legend is a narrative composed of traditional motifs (Smith, 1989). The Heart of Redness is Mda's original fiction but a shared tradition by the Xhosa people, and other South African people who share in the knowledge of the cattle-killing movement of the teenage prophet. As a result, the story Mda tells, went through a process and passage or stages of evolution, modification, correction, confirmation and collective interpretation of what it means in the historical consciousness of the AmaXhosa and South African people as a whole. It is again, apart from Mda's acknowledgement of the historian who chronicled the history of the cattle-killing movement and Nongqaw use's prophesy, who helped the novel to be what it is, and whose history book Mda is said to have plagiarised; nonetheless, Mda, acknowledges to have conducted research and asked elderly people to relate the story to him or shape and change some of the aspects which render it factual.

#### **Mythology**

Mythologies have over the centuries, since the inception of the literary tradition, influenced some of the great literatures of the world. Western, Oriental, Asian, American and African writers of ancient times have drawn from the oral form of myths to compose poems and novels. The Heart of Redness is a novel that depicts the influence of myth. Mda employs several Xhosa mythologies to round the point of his story in a rich utilisation of oral traditional forms. Spence (1921:11), defines myth as:

...an account of the deeds of a god or supernatural being, usually expressed in terms of primitive thought. It is an attempt to explain the relations of man and the universe, and it has for those who recount it a predominately religious value; or it may have arisen to 'explain' the existence of some social organization, a custom, or the peculiarities of an environment.

As a South African novel, *The Heart of Redness* is influenced by a story which has been mythologised over time. Nongqause's prophecy about the ancestors of the Ama Xhosa rising from the sea to annihilate the white colonialists is nothing short of myth. The cattle-killing movement, regardless of it being a historical fact in the consciousness of the South African people, has something of the myth. An outstanding aspect that makes the story of the cattle-killing movement mythological is the religious overtones it carries. For example, Mda writes:

He was great of power. He lit his pipe on the sun, and when he danced drop of sweat from his body caused the rain to fall. The Man of the River appeared at the door of his hut, and after one word from him people saw the star of the morning coming down from the sky and placing itself on his forehead (Mda, 2000:16).

On the back cover of *The Heart of Redness*, the *New York Times* dubbed the book as "an inspired synthesis of history, myth and satire". From the extract, one notices how Mda imitates the tendency of myth by creating a scenario that provokes belief from anyone who hears the story of the "great man of power", Mlanjeni. There are religious overtones in the extract. Moreover, the fact that through the story the social structure and religious beliefs of the amaXhosa people are explained makes it influenced by myth, since myth explains the existence of certain cultural beliefs, the origin of people or their religion. Mda, therefore, uses the story or myth to interrogate and explain contemporary issues that find their origin in the historical past. Such contemporary issues which trace their origin in the past as captured in *The Heart of Redness* are issues of corruption, exploitation and clash of cultures. He captures the events that have mythological undertones to reveal just how Xhosas view the world, and this he achieves by projecting some of the myths that inform their cosmology. The novel is, therefore, enriched by myth in the sense that it reveals some of the odd beliefs of the people; like the belief that there is a snake water which causes a storm when it leaves its water-abode to visit another river (Mda, 2000).

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010:977) defines myth "as a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or describe the early history of a people; this type of story". Mda's novel is hugely influenced by myth. This is evident in how he explains the events that took place and describes the "early history" of the ama Xhosa. He uses the tragic division that happened between people of the same lineage; this is how myth operates in the novel.

Bhonco is different from the other Unbelievers in his family, for Unbelievers are reputed to be such sombre people that they do not believe even in those things that can bring happiness in their lives. They spend most of their time moaning about the injustices and bleeding for the world that would have been had the folly of belief not seized the nation a century and half ago and spun it around until it was in a woozy stupor that is felt to this day (Mda, 2000:1).

Perhaps the definition of the oral form of myth can validate the claim that *The Heart of Redness* has the myth in it. Given the period which the cattle-killing movement took place, it is not inaccurate to say that the event was transmitted from one village to another, one person to another or one tribe to another through word of mouth. Thus, because one story in the oral tradition is never told the same way, the story attracts something of the myth to itself. Mda draws inspiration for his novel from events which have been modified, through space and time, by the human proclivity to exaggerate verity to the level of myth.

Some aspects of the 1885 cattle-killing movement are of fantastic tradition in *The Heart of Redness* because Mda has recreated them in a way that they respond to the demands of artistic tradition. Mda has fictionalised the characters, which is what makes some aspects of the story partly fantastic. There is an expansion and elaboration of what the story means to the psyche of the people. This explanation reveals the impact of

history on people's psychological being. Furthermore, there is also an interpretation of the history in relation to present day South Africa.

Spence (1921) opines that, "mythology as a term implies (a) the mythic system of any race; (b) the investigation of myth". Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, therefore, charts and recounts the mythic system of the AmaXhosa people of South Africa, and consequently, as a microcosm of the mythic system of the black South African race. There is in the narrative, the recreation of the oral explanation that dates back to the eighteenth-century, the religious belief of the Ama Xhosa people. The study asserts this statement because the black people of South Africa, like every African community of the past, solely used oral narratives to disseminate knowledge about their ways of life or customs, that is before the introduction of writing.

The retelling of Nongqawuse's 1885 (almost 150 years) prophecy that initiated the horrific and tragic situations of tribal or family feuds and starvation is Mda's way of sharing the history of the Xhosa people, which many did not know about because the story was passed around through word of mouth. Mda has used the Xhosa oral tradition, which represents the South African oral tradition, to tell the story of his nation. Qukezwa is also a library of myths. We realise this when she tells Camagu one of the myths as they ride on the "silvery" horse, Gxagxa:

'Have you heard of Gqoloma?'

'No. what is Gqoloma?'

'It is a snake that lives in Nongqawuse's Pool. It lives under the water. When Gqoloma goes out of the pool it causes a great storm. When it pays a visit ... moving from the pool at Gxarha river to another pool at the Qolorha River ... it causes havoc in its wake, like a tornado. It destroys houses. It uproots trees' (Mda, 2000:174-175).

This myth is typical of African oral tradition. Myth concerns traditional self-pride that evokes the source, the beginning of a specific consciousness. The snake that lives in water and when people pass by the river throw money into the water, is a classical character of many mythologies; the Greeks have their own myth of a giant snake that lives under water. Parents told this kind of myths to try and explain the mysterious creature that apparently brews one of the most formidable storm. The myth is also told as a story to scare children off from playing in the river that was suspected to be deep enough for a child to drown. Mda uses this kind of myth to show that black people have their own science of explaining phenomena, and also to hint at their religious belief.

Mda's employment of myth in his novel is a form cultural resistance. The fact that he chose to draw upon historical and South African mythological material to produce the novel points to the aim of the writer to give weight and authority to the beauty and validity of his own culture. Since myth reveals a people's culture, Mda has given the wonder and beauty of his culture voice and a platform to speak of itself like the Western culture has done.

### **Digression**

Digression is a device whereby the oral performer departs for a moment from the main line of the subject of a story or song either to address an object (or person) at the scene of performance or to comment on an issue which may be closely or remotely connected with the main subject (Okpe who, 1992). In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda digresses from the main line of the story. He switches adroitly from the past to the present, and visa versa, to address an issue situated in the past which is related to the present. Mda's novel is a digressive novel in style, shape and form. Many a time, Mda digresses from retelling the history of the ama

Xhosa people by means of pausing the telling of the present situation, to expound and elaborate past events that are connected to the present, perhaps as the reason why the present is the way it is:

At night Qukezwa dreams of Nongqawuse flying with a crow – the Nomyayi bird. She made sure she slept with her legs stretched out. She will, therefore, be able to run away from her dreams if they become nightmares. One should be able to escape from the witches in one's dreams, or even run away from the dream itself.

But tonight there is no need to run away. She flies with Nomyayi in the land of the prophets (Mda, 2000:52). [The present]

Then immediately after telling the readers about the present, Mda switches to the past, thus digressing from going on telling us more about the contemporary Qukezwa's dream; he digresses in this way:

It was the land of the prophets. Then the gospel people came. Mhlakaza first belonged to the gospel people. But later he was in the company of prophets (53).

Mhlakaza is not part of the characters who live in present or contemporary Qholorha, like our young Qukezwa who dreams of Nongqawuse. He, however, belongs to the distant past of Nongqawuse, the one the young, present Qukezwa is dreaming about. This is to address the connection between Qukezwa's dream to Mhlakaza's religion and its influence upon Nongqawuse, Qukezwa visitor in the dream.

### **Memory and Orality**

Camagu tells Xoliswa Ximiya about the memory ritual of the Unbelievers, which captured his interest, for it had "The graceful pain that captivated him" (Mda, 2000: 99). Here, Mda alludes to another form of oral tradition which the ancient South African people relied on for memory. To date, orality is regarded as an important depository of histories, rites and other traditions of the African people (Birama, 2005). A ritual is an activity which is conducted with the aid of extensive remembering of things of the past, a basic social act, a way of narrowing the world into a pure activity without meaning or a goal (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2008: 1233; Staal, 1983). In a way, Mda acknowledges the powerful significance of oral tradition in as far as memory is concerned.

Memory and orality are intricately intertwined. Before the arrival of the European settlers, (South) Africans used oral forms for the creation, transmission and impartation of knowledge through the word of mouth. Historical events, which were of cultural and societal landmark importance, were captured by special personalities in the society who relied on their memories for the storage and retrieval of the information pertaining the events (Kipury, 1983). Therefore, the authentic information about the historical event of the cattle-killing movement of the Xhosa people was stored in the memory of oral historians' minds. As for what the European missionaries documented of the event, is in many ways far removed from authenticity. It is arguable that some of the facts or information that gave *The Heart of Redness* life were related by real people who form a chain of a tradition that conserved in memory and related verbally the story of the cattle-killing movement.

### **Communality**

In 1962, the first president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, formulated a socialist model of community called Ujamaa, a Swahili word which means living together or living as one family. The English equivalent of Ujamaa is communality. Communality is the state or condition of being communal, a feeling or spirit of cooperation and belonging arising from common interests and goals. Oral tradition is a communal art which encourages communality among people as one of its vital principles. Ganyi (2014:61) states that:

Because of the complexity of oral literature and the consequent lack of understanding associated with its concept by Western scholars, oral cultures have always been thought to be inferior to literate cultures which makes it pertinent, at this point, to emphasize that the oral mindset is different from the literate because orality emphasizes communal existence as opposed to the individualism characteristic of Western literate societies.

In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda captures the communal spirit of black South Africans, although presented through the small village of Qolorha-by-Sea, the spirit is resonant. It is considered a “sacrilege to stay away from your fellow man's feast” (Mda, 2000:68). Community is one of the central cultural features that embody the social makeup of black people all over Africa. Interwoven in the philosophy of ubuntu (which will be discussed in the following section) is communality and it is often accompanied by a large corpus of proverbs, idioms and other oral sayings that remain alive in oral tradition. Communality is one of the major motifs of *The Heart of Redness*, and it is seen in how the two groups, the Believers and Unbelievers treat each other when there is a funeral. For example, in Mda (2000:68), although the Believers and the Unbelievers fight:

... they do attend each other's funerals, though, because death is, as the elders say, the daughter-in-law of all homesteads.

Communality goes with compassion, one of the primal values of Ubuntu. Such values were inculcated and spread through word of mouth to the community. Mda therefore, draws from the rich elements of orality. The philosophy of ubuntu is also rich with proverbs, which are often spoken than written. This sense of communality is depicted in the novel:

He had thought only those he had invited would come. He had forgotten that in the village a feast belongs to everyone. But he has only himself to blame, because MamCirha and No Giant, his business partners who brewed the beer for him, did warn him that the malted sorghum he bought was too little to satisfy the thirsty throats of the guests (Mda, 2000:192).

It is a custom therefore, that when one has a feast in a village the whole village goes and feasts with the host. The host can invite his/her close friends of course but in the provisions of the feasts the host will make sure there is enough for anyone who comes for the mere fact that he/she is a member of the village. Camagu, irrespective of his showing great interest and fascination in the traditions of the village and the people, he has “forgotten that a feast” in one household “belongs to everyone” (220). Mogoboya (2011:98) states that communalism is “a feeling of togetherness” towards one another’. Togetherness, oneness are characteristics and values which make African communities, and its people thrive and stand out. Africans are children of the same pot, the same plate and the same calabash. Africans work together and help each other. This can be seen in the extract below from the novel:

‘We would know. We would know,’ says a man. ‘A daughter's hand in marriage is never asked in secret. It becomes a public occasion.’ (Mda, 2000)

Even in affairs or events that one would expect to be private, have everyone attending upon knowing about them. The extract above jells with the African proverb that says, ‘a child is brought up by the whole village’. Hence, when that child marries, the whole village, its mother, should know it. Mogoboya (2011:98) confirms: “In the African past, Africans expressed their identity and oneness through the communal life which they led”. In the novel, an allusion to this is made:

‘But she is a child of this community,’ say Bhonco adamantly. ‘She grew up in front of their eyes’ (Mda, 2000:3).

Bhonco reminds the people that his daughter is their daughter and since “she grew up in front of their eyes”, she deserves to be supported for the post as the principal of the community school. In the African culture, a child has many mothers and fathers, apart from his/her biological ones. This is a proverb that carries in its nuances the social inclinations of the African people, the inclination to consider a neighbour’s child as one’s own, which ultimately leads to rebuking and guiding that child in the right way. This teaching has come from the ancient community of Africa through oral narratives. Furthermore, communality and collectivism are depicted in the novel when a house burns and the men who were at the inkundla proceedings cease their deliberations to help extinguish the fire. Mda asserts:

‘Umuzi uyatsha! A homestead is burning!’ they shout. The inkundla breaks up and the men rush to assist in extinguishing the fire (Mda, 2000:250-251).

African people are by nature promoters of collectivism. Their community is guided by values enshrined in ubuntu, which exudes communalism as one of the primary values that guide the African people. Ubuntu is made up of tapestry of African philosophies.

### **Ubuntu, Proverbs and the Visitor**

Camagu, the visitor to the Qolorha-by-Sea village, is accommodated and integrated into the village. Additionally, he is even regarded as a vital member of the community, he is invited to feasts, events and meetings concerning the state of the village. Camagu is not discriminated against, hence he is afforded the opportunity and privilege to speak as he wishes at meetings.

Africans are hospitable people. The knowledge that Africans are hospitable has been passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth, through the utilisation of proverbs, idioms and general sayings that aim to inculcate and perpetuate the hospitable spirit of the African people. Parents would, in a relevant context that warrants the transmission of the wisdom of ubuntu, impart to their children the knowledge and significance of Ubuntu (Mogoboya, 2011). In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda portrays the aspect of hospitality by creating scenes where there is feasting, and people share in the eating and drinking. There are at least three occasions in which the amaXhosa villagers throw a feast, and every time they do so, the two groups which oppose each other share in the drinking of beer and the dancing, even in the singing.

Mda’s infusion of the oral tradition to express the psychological problems of the members of the society is portrayed as a weapon of social conflict in the novel. The employment of such oral motifs fortifies a sense of communality and common ancestry which Mda uses as a weapon for teaching reconciliation and unity. Ubuntu is one of these motifs. Ubuntu and the proverbs related to it are noted in the novel. For example:

“Don’t be in a hurry for the gravy before the meat is ready”, said Mhlakaza, demanding their patience (Mda, 2000:59).

To be patient with someone or to tolerate them, is one of the principles that undergird the philosophy of ubuntu. The philosophy encourages people to accommodate another irrespective of their origin or ethnicity. Ubuntu teaches patience as both a virtue and value because through patience, people are able to build bridges that overlook and overarch their differences. As a result, unity is forged into their livelihood. Furthermore, another proverb that shows how the spirit of ubuntu helps in uniting and integrating people can be traced in the novel:

He tells them that the horns grew because his grandmother told him folktales during the day. Such stories are supposed to be told only at night (Mda, 62).

The above excerpt suggests the idea of admonishing, perhaps characteristic of the form of oral tradition of proverbs. “Such stories are supposed to be told only at night” comes out as an admonition proverb. Proverbs,



according to Kipury (1983:148), “comment on behaviour, whether in commendation or criticism, in the household, in a public place, or in determining cases in law courts”. Proverbs can even be used to criticise the elderly for telling her grandson stories that are supposed to be told “only at night”, as evinced in the quotation above. Novelists like Zakes Mda deploy proverbs in producing their novels, this appears to be a technique whose aim is to enrich the writings with wisdom, philosophy and insight. Obiechina (1992:200) concedes that proverbs:

function as images, metaphors, and symbols and advance the meanings and formal qualities of the narratives in which they occur. They are extensively used in the works of African novelists—in the novels of female and male African novelists, in those of older and newer writers, in works produced in the different regions of Africa south of the Sahara—and they extend across broad ideological and generic divides.

Some of the African novelists who deploy proverbs in their novels are Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). For example, in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Ngugi writes, “A bean fell to the ground, and it was quickly split among the children”. Other examples of proverbs can be traced in Ben Okri’s *Starbook* (1996), where he says, beginning the first chapter of the book, “There is a saying in my village that my mother use to tell me. They say it is not you that makes the world respect you, but what power it is that stands behind you” (1), and *The Age of Magic* (2002:1) “Some things only become clear much later”. Proverbs are a rich depository and embalmers of African wisdom and philosophy. *The Heart of Redness*, therefore, is one of the African novels in South Africa which makes use of proverbs, thus revealing the beauty and force of African philosophy through the Xhosa worldview as a microcosm.

Moreover, the proverbs in *The Heart of Redness* reflect the African philosophy of ubuntu. The philosophy is revealed in how it encourages hospitality that should be rendered to visitors. As Mogoboya (2011) states that “Africans are noble because they were hospitable, humble, and generous”. Mogoboya refers to Africans as being hospitable and generous with regards to their warm welcoming of the first Europeans who arrived in Africa. Furthermore, he views of African hospitality towards visitors as embedded in their worldview. This worldview is contained in African proverbs which provide the basis on which people of the continent find the humanistic necessity to be generous to their visitors.

### **Orality, Religion and Prophecy**

According to Ong (1982:179), “the orality-literacy interaction enters into ultimate human concerns and aspirations”. All the religious traditions of mankind have their remote origins in the oral past and it appears that they all make great deal of the spoken word. Prophecy is a word from God or ancestors or gods in the African sense, which comes to people through a chosen person, the prophet, the seer, who then tells the people what God or the ancestors or spirits say. We read in Mda’s novel that the young prophetess spoke the prophecy:

Nongqawuse shyly stepped forward to speak the word of the spirit, the prophecy. She was unkempt and looked like a waif. In the manner of all great prophets she seemed confused and disorientated most of the time. ‘Who are the strangers, my child’ asked Twin.

‘I do not know, father,’ replied Nongqawuse. ‘they said they were messengers of Naphakade, He-Who-Is-Foever, the descendant of Sifuba-Sibanzi, the Broad-Chested-One.’ People were confused. They had not heard of He-Who-Is-Forever, nor of the Broad-Chested-One. Obviously these must be the new names of the god of the ama Xhosa people... the one who is known by

everyone as Qamata or Mvelingqangi ... the one who was called Mdalidephu by Prophet Nxele (Mda, 2000:59).

The young prophetess began to divulge the details of her prophecy. Prophecy is not usually written but told to people verbally, thus, it can be said that Mda relies on an oral source to retell the prophecy of Nongqawuse. For example, the Bible never says a person wrote a prophecy, but that they told it or spoke out the prophecy. Mda continues to show that Nongqawuse spoke the prophecy, which reinforces that he relied on the oral source of the prophecy to capture it in writing:

Nongqawuse continued, 'The Strangers said I must tell the nation that cattle now living must be slaughtered. They have been reared by contaminated hands because there are people who deal in witchcraft. The fields must not be cultivated, but great new grain pits must be dug, new houses must be built, and great strong cattle kraals must be erected. Cut out new milk sacks and weave many doors from buka roots. The Strangers say that the whole community of the dead will arise. When the time is ripe they will arise from the dead, and new cattle will fill the kraals. The people must leave their witchcraft, for soon they will be examined by diviners.' (Mda, 2000:60)

The above citation is the prophecy of the young prophetess. This story is of great importance in the Xhosa tradition because it is a story of change and catastrophe, and it reveals just how the amaXhosa people of today came to be. The prophecy captures their odyssey through faith and doubt. Mtheku (2003:4) observes that:

Because the AmaXhosa nation wanted to see their land as it was before the notorious white conquerors had been cast by the waves onto their land, they complied. Their compliance can also be attributed to their strong traditional belief system and the sincerity of belief.

The Heart of Redness captures the historical episode of the famous child-prophetess, Nongqawuse, whose prophecy wreaked havoc among the AmaXhosa nation, dividing them into two warring factions of Believers and Unbelievers. As already mentioned, prophecy is never written down, but spoken out by the prophet to the affected people. Before the Hebrew Bible was canonised as the "Word of God," God did not as a norm speak to his people via written texts, but by means of oral prophets. Even the biblical prophets who pointed out to a future of the coming of the Messiah spoke before a lot of other prophecies were written down. Some of the ancient prophecies, as captured in the Bible, are transcriptions of eyewitnesses or the people who heard them utter the prophetic messages. Prophecy, as an oral form, is employed by Mda in the novel so as to interpret and interrogate it. There is the idea of a religious myth in the novel also:

'That is how things are done,' she says softly. 'You cannot throw money into the sacred pool. You need to throw silver so that your road will shine with good fortune. Your thin girlfriend should have advised you that when you come to Qolorha for the first time you ought to have come here to throw money into the sea, for that is where the ancestors are – the people that Nongqawuse spoke about' (Mda, 2000:119).

Such myths, which had religious inferences in the African past, were spread by word of mouth. People shared these beliefs verbally, children were also given this information in the form of stories around night-fires. There is also the adopting of the idea of The Second Coming. Mda captures the prophecies which were given to the amaXhosa people concerning the Second Coming or resurrection of their departed ancestor. In this regard, Mda appropriates the Christian story and belief of The Second Coming of the Messiah.

## Conclusion

This study has presented an Afrocentric essentialisation of orality in Mda's *The Heart of Redness* by focusing on aspects of orality such as legend; mythology; digression; memory; communality; ubuntu, proverbs and the visitor; and orality, religion and prophecy as depicted in the novel. Several quotations from the novel have been cited to illustrate how orality permeates the novel, thereby validating the assertion that orality is the essence of (South) African literature. In addition, the researchers quoted other scholarly sources such as Okpe who's (1912) which strengthen the view that orality still has essential influence in the (South) African novel. The study, therefore, recommends that in order for (South) African literary identity to be revived from erosion by colonial influences, orality should be essentialised.

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