From rain-bringer to wealth-giver: Changing forms of the snake in southern African belief systems

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In this article, I explore the spiritual and supernatural aspects of the snake and the ways in which this being has long been associated with various spiritual presences and forces in certain South African belief systems. For instance, Archibald Campbell Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* and some oral narratives from the Eastern Cape province convey positive, benevolent images of the snake as spiritual emissaries, guardians, and guides. Snakes form an integral part of the spiritual order in Eastern Cape cosmology, just as they form part of the ecological balance in the natural world. In the narratives (both written and oral) describing this, the spiritual, the natural world, humans, and other living creatures are interconnected, forming part of a greater whole. More recently, however, as other oral Eastern Cape accounts indicate, snakes have become increasingly connected to sinister aspects of the occult. Oral accounts of the *mamlambo*, a South African wealth-giving spirit, depict the snake as a malign, sinister supernatural presence bringing about divisions, disparities, and disaster, suggestive of the socio-political, economic, and cultural circumstances that brought belief in the *mamlambo* and these attitudes towards the snake into being. I discuss Jordan's novel and oral accounts that convey these contrasting images of the snake and explore the reasons for the changes that perceptions of this being have undergone. In these times of ecological crisis, in this article I highlight the importance of recovering a sense of interconnectedness and integration, and the calamitous consequences of endorsing worldviews characterised by polarisation, imbalances, and inequities. **Keywords:** snakes, oral accounts, Eastern Cape, *mamlambo*, *ukuthwala*, ecocriticism, water.

Introduction

For many years, I have conducted research into mystical and magical snakes, focusing especially on oral accounts from people in Xhosa-speaking communities in the Eastern Cape province in South Africa.[1] Several things have struck me in the course of this research. Firstly, there is the extent to which snakes have been venerated and perceived as mystical beings, intermediaries between the spiritual and physical world. The *amakhosi*, for instance, protective ancestral spirits in Xhosa and Zulu traditions, sometimes manifest themselves as snakes (Wood with Lewis 85). However, snakes have also been increasingly associated with malign supernatural forces and dangerous occult practices. For instance, the *mamlambo*, a deadly wealth-giving spirit in the Eastern Cape, can manifest itself as a snake.

In this article, I examine the deep-seated mystical significance of the snake in South African Xhosa-speaking communities and in many diverse cultures in Africa and elsewhere, from ancient times until today. I also discuss the way this is depicted in Archibald Campbell Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980) and in certain oral accounts from the Eastern Cape. But I also analyse various Eastern Cape oral accounts in which the snake is associated with various malevolent aspects of the South African occult. Most of these oral accounts derive from a series of interviews conducted in the Eastern Cape between 2008 and 2010 by Wendy Muswaka and Abbey Alao and in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Lesotho by Felicity Wood, Sylvia Tloti, and Mike Lewis between 1997 and 2008.

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I also discuss the damaging forces at work in historical and contemporary times that have brought about these changed perceptions of the snake. Now, as in the past, terrible harm continues to be inflicted on snakes, and the ecosystems they inhabit are disrupted or destroyed. This forms a facet of the onslaught on the environment worldwide, with the ongoing exploitation and devastation of the natural world, driven by anthropocentric perspectives and a seemingly insatiable greed for material gain. Philippe Descola describes the way in which human culture and the natural world have been envisaged as two distinct entities, in terms of Western perceptions. A division of this kind has given rise to a separation from the natural world and a polarised, hierarchical vision, in terms of which non-human animals and nature are subordinated to humans and viewed as obstacles to be eradicated or resources to be exploited.

Leslie E. Sponsel depicts the disastrous effects of "rampant predatory capitalism coupled with the associated modern fixation of many people and societies on materialism and consumerism" (xvi). The sinister forces at work in contemporary South African perceptions of the supernatural are connected to an unbridled, self-seeking greed of this kind and the deprivation and disparities it engenders.

Roy Dilley notes that, in certain parts of Africa, marked inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power, as well as exploitative political and economic practices, are sometimes believed to be brought about by malevolent supernatural presences (6; see also Moore and Sanders 3). The wealth-giving *mamlambo* has been associated with and brought into being by socio-economic and political imbalances and disruptions, as have other hazardous African spirits, such as the wealth-giving form of the West African Mami Wata. Thus, damaging socio-political and economic dynamics, both past and present, are interwoven with dangerous supernatural forces.

But now let us turn to other kinds of interconnectedness. In many traditional cosmologies, aspects of which permeate various widely accepted contemporary worldviews in Africa, both the visible and the invisible form dimensions of actuality (for example, Nyamnjoh 29, 47). Aspects of spiritual ecology, in terms of which the ecological and the spiritual are interrelated, also have bearing on this. The spiritual significance of the snake in Xhosa-speaking communities in the Eastern Cape and in diverse belief systems worldwide, both past and present, can be linked to this interconnectedness of the natural and spiritual worlds and the alternative ways of being and seeing that accompany it. For instance, Sponsel highlights the need for a radical "rethinking, refeeling and revisioning of the place of humans in nature" (xiv). Other related ecocritical perspectives are also pertinent here.

Stanley Brooke and Dana Phillips Walter emphasise the value of ecocritical theory that draws attention to the way in which humans, non-human animals, and the land are intertwined (7).[2] The significance of the literature, both oral and written, and the belief systems that emphasise this could also be stressed. Then, in highlighting the fallacious nature of the distinction between nature and human culture, Descola draws attention to the connections between them.

At a fictional level, the interrelationship between people, certain living creatures, and the natural world forms a pivotal part of *The Wrath of the Ancestors*.[3] Furthermore, Fiona Moolla and Caminero-Santangelo describe how living creatures and nature are essential parts of many African cultures, possessing an active, independent agency. This is also borne out in Jordan's novel and some of the oral narratives discussed in this article.

Brooke and Phillips Walter highlight the significance of African ecocritical approaches that are informed by particular "cultural, discursive and material conditions in Africa" (15). Comparably, Moolla and Caminero-Santangelo observe that an African-centred ecocriticism should take cognizance of particular circumstances in Africa. In this article, I focus on Eastern Cape-based oral narratives and changing perceptions of a creature that features prominently in beliefs, perceptions, and orality in this region, relating them to specific historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural factors in this province and to contemporary ecological concerns. In this way, I highlight the intersections between aspects of African ecocriticism and local and regional dynamics and perceptions and narratives, both oral and written.

Anthony Vital also highlights the importance of locally based approaches that focus on specific aspects of their context, maintaining that "ecocriticism, if it is to pose African questions and find African answers, will need to be rooted in local (national, regional) concern[s]" (88; also Iheka and Newell 2).

An approach of this nature has a wide-ranging international significance. Paradoxically, as Brooke and Phillips Walter note, this stems from the "localizing capacity" of African-based ecocriticism (2). For instance, the discussion of the interconnectedness of Eastern Cape socio-economic factors, beliefs, practices, oral narratives, and ecological concerns in this article has a relevance that extends far beyond this province.

The ways in which specific aspects of South African orality can cast light on ecological issues are also explored. This is an area that warrants further exploration in ecocritical studies. South African ecocriticism, for instance, tends to focus especially on written literary texts, rather than oral literatures.

This foregrounding of African orality also runs counter to ecocritical approaches emanating from or shaped by the Western (or Westernised) literary-critical establishment and, accordingly, from centres of relative privilege and power.[4] Although ecological concerns now form a significant part of African literature and critical theory, the above-mentioned tendencies, connected as they are to the Western metropole, still carry weight. In this article, I explore the way in which voices from the margins (in this case, oral accounts and belief systems from a marginalised, disadvantaged region) can speak to contemporary ecological concerns.

However, very different analytical perspectives also inform this article, for oral narratives concerning the *mamlambo* can also cast light on aspects of free-market capitalism. Pacts with this being form part of what Jean and John Comaroff term occult economies: strange, shadowy practices and enterprises believed to generate wealth by magical (or metaphorically magical) means ("Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony" 279, 284). In terms of the way they combine magic and money, occult economies constitute part of that which the Comaroffs describe as the "dark magicalities of modernity" ("Introduction" xxx). In one form or another, occult economies form a feature of many contemporary Western or Westernised societies. Peter Geschiere highlights the sinister aspects of this form of magic, describing it as "the new witchcraft of wealth" (158). The *mamlambo*, a malign and hazardous wealth-giving spirit, forms a feature of this. In various respects, occult economies, including pacts with the *mamlambo*, "evoke, often parody and sometimes contort the mechanisms of the 'free' market" (Comaroff and Comaroff, "Occult Economies" 286).

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the *mamlambo* is not merely a metaphor for capitalism. A problematic aspect of the Comaroffs's theory of occult economies is that it conveys a sense that money-generating otherworldly agencies derive their primary significance from the ways they cast light on aspects of market-driven capitalism. However, as the accounts of the *mamlambo* cited in this paper suggest, this being is a very real supernatural presence for many South Africans. The extent to which the *mamlambo* and the purchase of *ukuthwala*, the Xhosa term for a dangerous, powerful procedure for long-term wealth believed to involve the ownership of a wealth-giving being, feature on social media also testifies to this.

Next, it is worth noting that contemporary free-market capitalist societies are characterised by isolation, disjuncture, and socio-economic divisions. This is mirrored by the separation between humans and the natural world. Thus, aspects of certain cosmologies in which the physical and spiritual form one part of a greater whole, and which foreground images of interrelated ecological and human balance and integration, can play a valuable role in the face of the imbalances, polarities, and disjuncture that characterise many present-day societies. By juxtaposing two sets of narratives, both oral and written, that convey either a sense of interconnectedness and wholeness in their depictions of the natural, the social, and the spiritual or separation, polarisation, and disharmony in their contrasting depictions of one living creature, the snake, I highlight the vital importance of the former situation and the destructive, disastrous consequences of the latter conditions.

In this article, I firstly describe the mystical, spiritual significance of the snake in southern Africa and elsewhere. Thereafter, I consider the ways in which the snake has become associated with malign occult forces, exploring the reasons for this. Next, I discuss the extent to which a change of this kind is indicative of narrow, polarised worldviews, in terms of which the natural is separated from the spiritual. Finally, I emphasise the need for a more balanced, integrated vision that transcends these binaries and divisions.

Snakes as sacred beings

Let me begin by considering the mystical, magical snakes that form a significant feature of Eastern Cape orality and belief systems, and the ways in which they can be related to international ecological concerns in various significant respects. In order to do so, the sacred and supernatural aspects of the snake should first be borne in mind. In many different societies and cultures worldwide, and in ancient and contemporary times, the snake has often been perceived as a being imbued with numinous potency.

In the Americas, for instance, the Aztecs revered Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent. Feathered supernatural snakes occur among many other peoples, such as the Mayans, the Zuñi, and the Hopi, and they also feature in Venezuela. Then, on the other side of the world, there is the Aboriginal Rainbow Serpent, one of the Dreamtime

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spirits that brought the earth into being. It is closely associated with rain and water, an essential element in arid Australian landscapes. Meanwhile, Quetzalcoatl is linked to earth and water.

These latter aspects suggest one reason why the snake has taken on deep spiritual and supernatural significance. Snakes emanate from dark, subterranean cavities: spaces sometimes charged with mysterious spiritual potency, appearing suddenly and unexpectedly on the face of the earth, then vanishing just as swiftly. They inhabit and thus combine opposites and the various elements: sunlight and darkness; earth, air, and water; and their forked, flickering tongues are sometimes associated with fire. Thus, they have been perceived as spiritual messengers, shifting between the seen and the unseen. Then, as fanged beings striking at lightning speed, snakes combine creation, the life forces with which they are associated, with destruction. Moreover, as a symbol of death and rebirth, renewing itself when it sheds its skin, the snake has long had a special significance.

Small wonder, then, that the snake features in many of the ancient animistic nature religions and other belief systems in the Near and Middle East, Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. In Mali, for instance, there are the spiritual messengers and totem snakes in Dogon cosmology, and pythons are revered in Vodun religious traditions in, for instance, Benin. Meanwhile, in Zulu tradition, the python (and sometimes the puffadder) is viewed as a manifestation of the ancestors, and the mamba of the kings (Bernard and Wood). Furthermore, the cobra often occurs in ancient Egyptian beliefs and iconography as a guardian spirit of the underworld, for example, and as the cobra goddess, Wajit. Serpents were also closely associated with the sun god, and the cobra was viewed as emblematic of royalty. There are also sacred serpentine beings in Buddhist and Hindu iconography, the *naga*, which are often depicted as many-headed cobras guarding temples. In such perceptions and iconography, snakes not only form part of specific cosmologies but also the social and political order. Furthermore, many goddesses the world over, including Ishtar, Isis, and Minoan deities, have been depicted with sacred snakes, and Apsara, a figure from Hindu and Buddhist mythology, dances with snakes. There is, too, the ancient, archetypal symbol of the Ouroboros, the sacred snake symbolising eternity, coiled in a circle, tail in mouth.

Across the world, then, from Australia to Asia to the Americas to Africa to Europe, snakes have long been associated with spiritual presences and numinous forces, just as they form an integral part of their natural surroundings. Thus, they are closely connected to other living creatures, humans included, and to social, political, and spiritual aspects of human experience.

Indeed, the snake is one of the most prominent symbols in African belief systems, partly because snakes live near or in water, perceived as a liminal zone within which the spiritual and physical intermingle and as a gateway to the realm of the unseen.[5] The snake, which moves between water and land, is often regarded as a spiritual messenger animal and plays a crucial role in the calling and initiation of *amaqgirha* and *izangoma*, traditional healers and diviners in Xhosa and Zulu traditions. In older works of African fiction, such as Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* and Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, snakes appear as guardians and emissaries. In Pondoland, as Monica Wilson notes, it is believed that the water sometimes heaves in pools where offerings are made and a big black snake appears as a sign from the ancestors (256–8). Moreover, in some of the most arid parts of southern Africa, the snake plays an essential role, featuring prominently in San rock art as a rain-making animal (Woodhouse 11–7; Biggs and Wood). In these beliefs and practices, humans, nature, society, and the spiritual are perceived as part of a greater whole.

Consequently, family ties extend into the natural world, and living creatures are, by extension, perceived as an integral part of a family. James Lunika, a man from the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape, said that after he moved into his new home in a village in the Transkei, he saw three snakes crossing his property one evening. He bowed and clapped his hands as a gesture of respect, believing that his new home was being blessed by the *amakhosi*, his ancestors (Lunika Wood, and Tloti; also Wood with Lewis 134).

Family ties of this kind extend even further, for snakes are the totem beings of various clans in Xhosa tradition (for example, Wilson 260). A pivotal event in *The Wrath of the Ancestors* centres on the totem snake of the Majola clan. Zwelinzima, a Fort Hare student, becomes king of the Mpondomise. An older person asks his wife,

Thembeka, formerly a student at Lovedale College (and known among her husband's people as Nobantu), if she has been honoured by a visit from their totem being.

> "[D]o you know the snake called *inkwakwa*? […] Have you ever seen that snake since you came here? […]
> Nobantu, Child of Khalipha […] Do you mean to tell me you don't know the significance of the snake among your husband's people?"
> "Can it be that you're talking about those idle tales about the Majola snake that the Mpondomise are said to hold in reverence? […]"
> "Oh, Nobantu! How can you speak like that?" cried Nozihlwele, trembling with fear. (167–8)

Thembeka's dismissal of an aspect of Mpondomise beliefs involves a rejection of part of the natural world. The Western worldview she endorses (particularly as a result of her education) foregrounds binaries and, thus, separation. In this extract, she symbolically separates herself from her husband's people. Then, when the brown snake of the Majola clan honours Thembeka and Zwelinzima's child with a visit, Thembeka is horror-struck and kills the snake. In the eyes of her husband's people, she has committed a terrible act, and disaster results.

The snake in the above extract is a spiritual presence and also a living creature. The terror this creature experiences and its desperate attempts to escape are vividly described. Thus, we are made aware of the snake as an independent, sentient being, and not merely as a symbolic image or a device for furthering the plot.

Another type of supernatural snake, widely known throughout southern Africa, is the snake in the sky, known as the *inkanyamba* in Xhosa (and the *khanyapa* in Sesotho). This is the tornado spirit that takes the form of a snake. It lives in deep pools and sweeps through the air at times, wreaking havoc.

Thus, the snake has been associated with constructive spiritual energies and with dangerous, destructive forces. Yet, like the rain-making snakes of rock art and the Majola snake, the *inkanyamba* is viewed as part of the natural order. This interconnectedness of the environment; living creatures, both human and non-human; society; spirituality; and culture is evident in this extract from *The Wrath of the Ancestors*:

> Thunderclouds appeared on the horizon, and there was every sign that a fierce storm would burst before nightfall. The wedding guests had to take precautions against the storm, since legend had it that a Gcaga wedding and rain went together. The "animal" of the Gcaga clan is the *nkanyamba*, the fabulous light-bearing water snake. So, when a young man of this clan marries, there must needs be a thunderstorm, because the "animal" of the house must come and see the bride. (263)

Again, the otherworldly, the natural world, and human society are interconnected in this extract. The snake, in the form of the *inkanyamba*, is an integral part of the social order, playing a key role in the wedding celebration. Here, the *inkanyamba*, fearsome as it is, is a customary wedding guest. But there is another snake-like supernatural being that no one would wish included in their wedding party.

The *mamlambo*

Now I turn to the much-feared supernatural presence, the wealth-giving *mamlambo*, the antithesis of the snakes, both natural and supernatural, mentioned above. Belief in the *mamlambo* arose in Xhosa-speaking communities in the Eastern Cape, and accounts of this being come primarily from this area. The *mamlambo* is a shape-shifter and is often depicted as an alluring woman; a handsome, predatory man; or a mermaid (Wood, "Spirits in the Marketplace: the Market as a Site of the Occult in the South and West African Supernatural and Contemporary Capitalist Cosmologies" 286; "Fatal Seductions, False Promises and Urban Enchantments: the *Mamlambo*, the Blesser and the Consumer in South African Cities" 50). But in particular, the *mamlambo* manifests itself as a snake, as indicated in the following accounts:

> One woman from a village near Komani, in the Eastern Cape, described how her wealthy friend invited her into her house and opened a jar, and she saw a snake coiled up on a pile of R100 notes. Later on, her friend died, and she was told that she had a wealth-giving *mamlambo* which had brought about her death. (Nxaba and Muswaka)

And:

> The Mamase family was the wealthiest family in Lingelihle. Each member of the family drove luxury cars, owned the latest iPhones, and wore high-end designer clothing. No one in the township understood where the family acquired the money from, and no one from the township had a close relationship with any member of the family. When the family went on vacation to the U.S, no one was left in the house but Mrs Mhlobo, the domestic worker, and the gardener. Mrs. Mhlobo decided to perform some spring cleaning while the family was gone. However, there was one chamber downstairs that she was warned she should never open, but she opted to open it out of curiosity on this day. When she opened the door, she discovered a giant snake in the room, as well as numerous banknotes on the floor. (Magagula)[6]

There are many other similar stories. In contrast to the extract from *The Wrath of the Ancestors*, in which the *inkanyamba* is a very public presence, the accounts of the *mamlambo* are characterised by secrecy, separation, and disparities. The *mamlambo* is kept hidden in a jar or concealed in a room which no one, apart from the creature's owner, is permitted to enter. Thus, unlike the Gcaga clan's totem serpent, which is part of the life of the community, the *mamlambo*'s owner does not want to be publicly associated with it. These accounts also depict socio-economic inequalities. There is a great deal of poverty in the community in the first account, yet also one incongruously wealthy individual. In the second account, the affluent Mamase family resides in a township and possesses luxury items, in stark contrast to all those around them.

The description of the *mamlambo* in the first account may be reminiscent of depictions of a Western dragon, a serpentine presence coiled over its hoard. Like the dragon, the *mamlambo* is associated with self-centred material accumulation, a tendency that is foregrounded, even celebrated, in Western capitalism. The owner of a *mamlambo* does not share his or her wealth with others, and, as will become evident, his or her craving for wealth brings about danger and disaster, just as a dragon wreaks destruction in order to guard its treasure.

Wealth-giving snakes are said to occur in other parts of Africa. For example, in Cameroon, a huge snake associated with the rainbow, known as the *nyungu*, is believed to bring about riches, and there are also rumours of mystical boa constrictors that bring about wealth (Geschiere 152–3; Nyamnjoh 33–4). The West African wealth-giving spirit, Mami Wata, often has a snake draped around her.

It is said that if an individual purchases *ukuthwala*, he or she will acquire a *mamlambo*, which lavishes wealth on its owner, but at a terrible price. The *mamlambo* requires sacrifices that come at a great personal and moral cost, for its owners are required to sacrifice those that they love most, such as family members and ultimately their own well-being (see, for instance, Wood with Lewis 64–6, 79–81, 253).

Even if a *mamlambo*'s owner does not physically sacrifice those closest to him or her, it is said that he or she is required to put the *mamlambo* first. Indeed, the craving for money and material possessions can come to govern people's lives at the cost of their personal relationships (Wood, "Fatal Seductions" 58). This was the case with the near-legendary Transkei *inyanga* (medicine man) Khotso Sethuntsa (1898–1972), a renowned seller of *ukuthwala* and purportedly a millionaire, who was rumoured to own a *mamlambo*. He was a separate, isolated figure, distancing himself from the community around him. His money was a priority in his life, and his closest relationships consequently suffered (Wood with Lewis 65–6). Behaviour of this kind is in keeping with the contemporary capitalist ethos, in which individual financial gain, despite the personal and moral costs this may entail, is valorised.

Thus, money obtained from a *mamlambo* involves a separation on various levels, as a *mamlambo*'s owner becomes separate from his or her family and community and even from him or herself. For the being's owner, the *mamlambo* and the wealth it bestows take precedence at the cost of his or her own health and happiness and ultimately his or her life. It is said that the owner of a *mamlambo* experiences sorrow and suffering and dies an untimely death.

For instance, in one account, Thabo, a security guard dissatisfied with his limited income, becomes the owner of a *mamlambo*. He is required to sacrifice his sons in exchange for wealth, and when his wife discovers what he has done, she abandons him. Thabo realises how important his family had been to him and how happy he had been when he was a security guard and dies a lonely death (Phuthing).[7]

The *mamlambo*, then, brings about separation, divisions, and, as the earlier accounts have shown, socio-economic disparities. It also results in other imbalances, including the way in which the *mamlambo*'s owner is reduced to an emotionally and psychologically unbalanced state.

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How did the snake acquire such malign, destructive qualities? Let us turn to historical, cultural, and economic dynamics in the Eastern Cape and the ways they have shaped perceptions of this creature. As I noted at the outset, ecocriticism is multi-faceted, and an analysis of ecological issues should be informed by various contextual factors.

Indoctrination, deprivation, and the magic of modernity

The effect of colonialism and the influence of Western missionaries played a particular role in reshaping perceptions of the snake. In the eyes of the missionaries and the Western colonisers in general, African traditional beliefs (including those involving snakes) were viewed as heathen practices. Further to this, Western religious perspectives have affected attitudes to the snake. Firstly, the human race was granted dominion over non-human animals and nature in the Bible, and aspects of belief systems that accord above-human potency to non-human animals, such as the snake, run counter to this. Moreover, the snake is closely associated with evil in the Bible, particularly temptation (Wood, "Blood Money: an Analysis of the Socio-Economic Implications of Oral Narratives Concerning Wealth-Giving Snakes in the Career of Khotso Sethuntsa" 81–2; Chinyowa 130). Thus, these changed perceptions of the snake involved a separation of a kind, as people in Xhosa-speaking communities in the Eastern Cape and elsewhere distanced themselves from aspects of their beliefs and culture.

Thereafter, economic and political factors brought new, sinister forms of the supernatural, some of which feature snakes, into being. The Eastern Cape, in which belief in the *mamlambo* is most prevalent, is one of the most poverty-stricken provinces in South Africa and has an ever-widening gap between rich and poor and the highest unemployment rate. From the earlier twentieth century onwards, belief in the *mamlambo* developed as a result of interconnected political and economic inequities and exploitation (Wood with Lewis 108–10).

Thus, the *mamlambo* has arisen in part from a sense of disconnection from a traditional, communal way of life; inequalities and imbalances in the socio-political and economic order; and also the hegemony of the capitalist cash economy and the lure of Western materialism (Wood, "The Occult, the Erotic and Entrepreneurship: An Analysis of Oral Accounts of Ukuthwala, Wealth-Giving Magic, Sold by the Medicine Man Khotso Sethuntsa" 344). Moreover, the Western cosmologies, both economic and spiritual, that gave rise to the *mamlambo* were characterised by binaries, including divisions between humans and the natural world, and the rich and the economically deprived.

Jane Parish describes how African spirits have become intricately involved with aspects of capitalism, maintaining that this has become a marked feature of perceptions of the supernatural on this continent (119). Metaphorically, the rapacious, potentially threatening, and seemingly all-powerful aspects of capitalism could, in their scale and destructiveness, be perceived as comparable to malign occult forces.[8] The *mamlambo* and the practice of *ukuthwala* are one example of what Geschiere terms "the new witchcraft of wealth", in which the capitalist cash economy and dangerous magic have become intertwined (146). As such, it has come to represent a dimension of what Peter Pels describes as "the magic of modernity [...] those enchantments that are produced by practices culturally specific to modern states, economies and societies" (5; see also Wood, *Universities and the Occult Rituals of the Corporate World: Higher Education and Metaphorical Parallels with Myth and Magic* 1). Another facet of this is the spellbinding quality of individual financial gain (both actual and imaginary) despite the costs involved. These have not only individual and communal but also global implications.

There are thus certain metaphorical points of comparison between pacts with the *mamlambo* and present-day circumstances. On one hand, the wealth obtained from the *mamlambo* is generated by morally abhorrent actions that have terrible consequences. On the other hand, heedless, destructive practices spawned by what Sponsel depicts as "the apparently unlimited greed for profit of rampant predatory capitalism" (xvi) are having devastating socio-economic, ecological, and climatic effects, resulting in widespread death and destruction. The changes that perceptions of the snake have undergone are symptomatic of this.

In certain respects, ecological, socio-economic, and supernatural calamities of these kinds can be compared to the disastrous, tragic consequences of the killing of the sacred snake in *The Wrath of the Ancestors*. A spiritual, social, and environmental imbalance arises. As disaster descends on Zwelinzima and his family, Thembeka and her child are swept away by floodwaters.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the ancient sacred symbol of the snake and the disturbing new forms it has acquired in the South African supernatural as a result of the damaging forces at work in colonial and contemporary times. In

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contrast to the images of harmony, wholeness, and integration once associated with the snake in belief systems in South Africa and elsewhere, this creature has become associated with a malevolent, hazardous supernatural being, the *mamlambo*, and separation, polarisation, imbalances, and conflict have come to characterise descriptions of the serpentine supernatural forms of this creature. These latter conditions are suggestive of the socio-economic, political, and ecological disparities and divisions that characterise our precarious contemporary times. Circumstances of this kind gave birth to the *mamlambo*, and the greed, exploitation, and inequities that are rife in present-day South Africa continue to foster belief in this being.

In my focus on aspects of African cosmologies that foreground the interconnectedness of humans, non-human animals, and the natural world, I seek to affirm African-related ecocritical perspectives that transcend the binaries of Western worldviews, with their fixed distinctions between the physical and the spiritual and nature and culture. There is, of course, the danger of romanticising the environmental sensitivity of pre-colonial African peoples. Mythologising of this nature can become a form of condescension and appropriation. Nonetheless, it is evident that Western belief systems, both economic and spiritual, have contributed to a separation from and suspicion of those aspects of the natural world that were traditionally regarded as manifestations of spiritual potency. In our contemporary context, in which capitalism has run amok in the face of an impending climactic and ecological apocalypse, the calamitous consequences of this separation from the natural world are all too evident.

As the descriptions of the snake as a significant presence at familial, societal, and spiritual levels in *The Wrath of the Ancestors* and as oral accounts depicting the snake as an integral part of a natural and spiritual order imply, ways of seeing that promote reverence for other living beings have the potential to enhance our awareness of some of the non-human creatures with which we share the planet and reshape our perceptions of them. This has the capacity to expand our worldviews, making us more fully aware that, as one particular species among many others, we only form part of a greater whole, while heightening our reverence for our planet itself.

In the face of the ecocrisis that threatens all living things on this planet, an enhanced vision of this kind is essential.

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Notes

1. An early version of parts of this article was presented at the Ecology Colloquium at the University of Zululand in 2008. However, the earlier paper has been expanded and extensively revised in the light of subsequent research findings. The methodology in this article has also been reworked.
2. Brooke and Phillips Walter make this point about South African ecocritical approaches, but it has a wider relevance.
3. *The Wrath of the Ancestors* was originally published in 1940 as *Ingqumbu Yeminyanya*. The English translation of the novel was published in 1980.
4. In an early work on ecocriticism in Africa, first published in 2001, William Slaymaker commented on this, contending that some African critics and writers tend to perceive ecocriticism as "one more hegemonic discourse from the metropolitan West" (683–4). Vital made a similar point in 2008.
5. According to anthropologist W. David Hammond-Tooke, the snake is the being that appears most frequently in the symbolic structure of Xhosa and Zulu cosmology (27).
6. This was produced during my African Oral Narrative course at the University of Fort Hare and reproduced with this student's permission. The names of the individuals and the place in this account have been changed.
7. This was produced during my African Oral Narrative course at the University of Fort Hare and reproduced with this student's permission. The name of the individual in this account has been changed.
8. This is adapted from a point made in 1996 by Sean Redding. He explores the metaphorical points of comparison between perceptions of the National Party government during the apartheid era and notions of witchcraft (555–79; see also Wood with Lewis 168).

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