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Animal Metaphors Representing Human Images: A Case Study on King Shaka, the Founder of the Zulu Nation in South Africa

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ABSTRACT Animal metaphors are widespread in isiZulu because of the Zulu nation's traditional closeness to wildlife. Scholars have demonstrated the dynamic and enduring legacy of animal metaphors where images of small and big animals are used to create new facets of meaning and to reflect the relationship of humans with the animal realm. Although animals are the most popular characters used as metaphors in Zulu folklore, little field-research has been conducted on their social behaviour; on the way in which their characteristics were transferred with precision to depictions of King Shaka's behaviour and activities during the amalgamation of Nguni clans. The examination of animal metaphors has often been based only on library sources. This paper attempts to fill the gap by using first-hand interviews with local informants in KwaZulu-Natal to examine the ways in which the social behaviour of animals is used to represent Shaka's image. The paper concentrates on Shaka's *praise poems* in which the poet describes his physical and dispositional characteristics through bold animal metaphors in the Zulu socio-cultural context. These metaphors reflect the responsibilities and status of the king and also project the crescendo growth of the Zulu nation; from a small clan to a mighty kingdom.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on animal metaphors and the interpretation of images of agile, ferocious and powerful animals portrayed in King Shaka' praise-poems. Wild animals with aggressive temperaments and energy help the reader to develop a prototype of Shaka and his activities, especially at the time of the integration of the Nguni clans into a Zulu kingdom, approximately in 1816. Shaka's conquests, the unification and prosperity of his kingdom are construed and magnified according to the signals given by animals. However, reconstructing Shaka's image through the social behaviour of the 'Big Five', namely, the lion, the leopard, the buffalo, the rhinoceros and the elephant, which are often referred to as Zulu royal favourites, should not be interpreted plainly as another form of 'tendency to lionise Shaka' Wylie (1995: 71) or to describe him as a mere 'monster predator' as displayed by some authors.

This study is based on the basic conceptual metaphor theory advocated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who locate the basis of human thought as understanding and experiencing one kind of thing or experience in terms of another. This implies the interaction of two thoughts – tenor and vehicle – and the exchange of two contexts (Alfonso 2006). For example, the English conceptual metaphor 'love is a journey' is based on conceptualizing love as a journey. The

metaphor is not only talking about love but there is also a deep reasoning about it because lovers are perceived as travellers on a long journey with a variety of impediments. Despite challenges on their journey, the lovers reach their destination eventually through their common life goals; cemented by their love and commitment to each other. Lakoff (1992) claims that the lovers' vehicle is their relationship, as it allow them to pursue their common goals together towards their purpose, love.

The conceptual animal metaphor is the main mechanism through which a prototype of Shaka is crafted to construe the Zulu cultural concepts reflected in the perceived behaviour of selected animals. The selection of animals and their characteristics is vital as the conceptual metaphors under discussion are not are applicable to every context. 'Animals signify different meanings in different texts and eras' (Levy and Mann 2007). Hermanson and du Plessis (1997: 2) also maintain that animal characteristics attributed to the people are not necessarily real characteristics of the particular animals. They are rather perceived characteristics of the animals according to folk models, which speakers borrows from the environment, thus enriching the imagery bank for eloquent communication. Lakoff (1997: 1) claims that conceptual metaphors are also used to engage the listener's mind by making the subject of discussion more vivid and memorable through

emotive images demonstrated within a particular context. Canonici (1995: 13) holds that the use of animal metaphors by human societies is a generalizing and distancing technique widely recognized in literatures from many parts of the world because animal characters are used as stereotypes of behaviour, feelings, attitudes that can be in human behaviour in general, without pointing a finger at anybody in particular. Distancing results from a seemingly objective vision of the animal world may or may not be applicable to the human condition. Thus, while the signifier is animal behaviour, the signified is the human condition.

Motivation of the Study

Shaka's praise poems are like his concise curriculum vitae as they give an account of his lifestyle and open a window on the Zulu nation of yesteryear. There is, however, not a substantial amount of field-research done on depictions of Shaka's figure during the unification of Nguni clans, based on animal behaviour. This gap motivated me to track Shaka's image by interviewing the local informants to underscore the other side of Shaka's image, that of a 'leader of tremendous abilities, the great unifier and the hero in battle' (Hamilton 1995) as these components are often overlooked by researchers and writers.

Literature Review

The literature on the relationship of Africans with the animal kingdom is revealed in folklore, which is the oral expression of culture, life and attitudes. Scholars such as Batoma (2009); Canonici (1995); Pfukwa and Barnes (2008) have investigated the bases of African or Zulu folkloristic trends as resulting from the physical characteristics of various animals, either real or perceived.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Shaka's poems use metaphorical language, which needs collaborative interpretation by both the researcher and local informants. The research problem was identified: How do Shaka's praise poems portray his character and reveal the Zulu nation's attitudes towards his actions through the images of the 'Big Five'? To address the research problem, both literature study and empirical investigation based on qualitative research design were undertaken. This study consists of

three inter-related components: the examination of Shaka's poems, oral testimonies and a comparative analysis of the two first components. During the preliminary study, the researcher explored the roots of Zulu history as preserved by the people who occupy areas traditionally linked to Shaka's exploits and by the descendants of the characters mentioned in his praise poems to get a feeling of the realities around which animal metaphors interpreted in this study originated; and to discuss ethical issues with the leaders of the targeted field-research areas. The research design included the selection of informants including size of the sample and sampling, the research instruments, recorded interviews and the processing of data. The researcher found the qualitative model relevant for this study. Poetic language is made up of key words whose interpretation is often difficult to condense onto a structured format of 'yes or no' responses. Key words which express cultural values are untranslatable, except by lengthy descriptive expressions because there are no equivalent meanings (Vansina 1965).

Population and Sampling: Targeted Research Areas

Informants were interviewed in deep-rural areas, namely, Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve, KwaMthethwa, Empangeni-Melmoth, Nongoma and Nkandla in KwaZulu-Natal. I used the simple random sampling method to target these five areas where the older isiZulu language is still fondly and intelligently utilised in daily conversation. To avoid finding myself in a jungle of irrelevant information, I decided to do individual and group interviews with forty informants from the above areas. My informants included ten praise poets: five at Nongoma and five at KwaMthethwa, five Shaka's descendants at Empangeni-Melmoth, five herbalists at Nkandla and five rangers at Umfolozi Game Reserve where Shaka's hunting tracks are still preserved. In each of the five areas, 3 senior women who live in contact with nature and were able to offer fresh insights into animal lore were interviewed to avoid gender bias. Zulu Praise-Poems by Cope (1968) was used as the standard reference for citations and questions for interviews- using video-recorders, audio tape-recorders and still cameras to collect data. Dates of interview and biographical information of the interviewees were also recorded but here participants are anonymously referred to as informants. Data recorded had to be translated into English as interviews had been conducted in isiZulu. Testimonies were selected according to their priority and relevancy to the study. Following are the results and discussion on the metaphorical relationship between Shaka and selected animals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Lion

According to Guy (1972), there is no animal symbol as important or as evocative in human history as the maned lion. The lion appears on family crests, coats of arms and national flags in many civilizations. Lions are great, formidable and fascinating predators that have dominated the fauna for many centuries and have attracted researchers with their sophisticated social system, which is based on teamwork roles that enable them to survive in the harsh conditions of the wild. Such a developed social system makes lions exceptional, as most big-cat species live a fundamentally solitary existence.

The Zulus are fascinated by the lion as the king of the wild. An informant, who is a praise poet of the present Zulu king, told me that the Zulu names of the lion, which are ibhubesi, ingonyama and imbube, are never uttered overtly during a hunt because they are same as those of the Zulu king. For a safe and successful hunt, the informant explained, that the hunter who sees the lion first has to shout the following exclamation: 'Ubonakele!' (He has been seen!), which implies that the great one of the forest has manifested himself. 'Ubonakele!' is a salute of honour and respect to the king of the wild that shares the same name and 'rank' with the Zulu king. This salute is similar to the 'Bayethe!' (Long live the king), which the Zulu proclaim on the appearance of their king. 'Lions deserve the name king of the jungle. Large, strong, and fast, the lion is an intelligent predator' McVeigh (2012: 2). Zulu hunters are obliged to abide by the rule of respect for the great one of the wild. Tradition has it that when Shaka was still living among the Mthethwa under the mentorship of his foster father, Dingiswayo, he killed a lion. His contemporaries interpreted this deed as an indirect way of telling Dingiswayo that he was mature to assume the Zulu throne because, with a single spear, he was able to kill the most powerful cat. It is assumed that killing the king of the animals was for Shaka a final test of his capability as a prospective king for the Zulu throne. During those days a contender for the Zulu throne had to be physically strong and intelligent since he had to compete with more experienced kings in the neighbourhood. According to tradition, when two rivals fought, the victor would take over the praises and attributes of the victim. When Shaka killed the lion, he therefore empowered himself with the latter's kingly status and power. When Shaka assumed his throne, he began to refer to himself as a lion, roaring in the Zulu kingdom. Accordingly, Shaka's contemporary praise poet recorded his new title: Uyingonyama! (You are a lion!) (Cope1968).

When Shaka came to power, there were other strong kings in the area such as Zwide of the Ndwandwe and Macingwane of the Mchunu clans. Macingwane had a homestead named eNgonyameni (place of a lion) because he also regarded himself as a lion. This meant that there was a lion at eNgonyameni and one in KwaZulu. Both lions often challenged each other to test their respective strength. About wild lions McVeigh (2012) further maintains, 'Male lions challenge one another for leadership of the pride. The victor often kills the weaker lion's children to maintain his leadership role in the pride.' The question was: who was the stronger lion, Shaka or Macingwane, and what advantages did the more powerful lion have? Parker (1995: 112) draws attention to what normally happens in the lion community: 'When the pride leading male becomes old and weak, he is challenged by a younger stronger male who will then take over.' Tradition claims that Shaka was younger than Macingwane. Like a young boisterous lion, Shaka challenged Macingwane who was the more experienced king. Since Shaka referred to himself as a lion in the presence of a 'senior' lion, Macingwane, he had to prove his strength in order to claim this title as his royal honour. In this rivalry, either Shaka or Macingwane had to prove to his subjects that he rightfully deserved the title of lion, which is a symbol of power, courage and nobility. When an individual displays his strength with pride and authority in public, the Zulu describes such an act through the following proverb: utonda esithebeni njengengonyama (he displays his power like a charging lion). The reason for Shaka's challenges to Macingwane can be traced from the praise poems of

the former's father, King Senzangakhona (Cope 1968); where Macingwane is referred to as an owl, which implies that his power was based on evil because an owl is the most notorious familiar of witches. Shaka had to get rid of the threatening old lion for the security of his subjects.

The Leopard

One of the game rangers I interviewed said that when the leopard comes across a human being, it normally looks down and walks away. The rangers interpreted this behaviour as a sign of composure on the part of the leopard, which is lacking in a lion that fights often and sustains many scratches on its skin. Hinde and Taylor (1993: 95) draw attention to other prominent characteristics of a leopard that appear to attract the Zulu kings: 'beauty, grace and power are blended in the leopard as in no other animal.' The Zulu nation seems to aspire to these leopard-like attributes for their own king, whose responsibility it is to promote tranquility, integrity and tolerance among his subjects. During major cultural ceremonies the Zulu king wears over his shoulders and chests the male leopard's skin with soft, dense and beautiful fur as the apparel of

royalty and source of both spiritual and emotional power as Mutwa (1997: 12) explains: the leopard and the cheetah were regarded as sacred animals among the African people. The leopard was believed to be both a physical and a spiritual entity. The wearing of the coat and the claws of the leopard by the Zulu king not only empowers him emotionally but also suggests his responsibility to protect this animal from poachers and hunters who do not value it for its unique beauty and sacredness. The Zulu king has responsibilities for the welfare of the big cats. The king was traditionally the protector and high guardian of all leopards, cheetah and tiger cats in the area. With the permission of the king, only princes and members of the Royal family were permitted to kill the leopard. Von Kapff (1997) reports 'If a leopard is killed, the skin has to be handed over to the king. Only the royal family may wear leopard skin.' The Zulu royal house is said to have responded with rage at the wearing of the leopard's skin by ordinary citizens (Ndiyane 2010). The security of the leopard and its body parts belongs to the royal house. According to Gcumisa and Ntombela (1993), the protection of the 'big cats' started with King Shaka,

and his protection also extended to other wild animals, as animals with young and those that were feeding were never hunted during his reign.

While I was interviewing the praise poet about the social behaviour of the leopard, the issue of provocation was raised when I asked him why he proclaimed the king's praises before entering the main gate of the royal residence even though he was not coming to see the king and did not even know if the king was in the residence. The informant explained that, according to Zulu custom, he as the praise poet had to sing the king's praises as a sign of respect and to inform the royal house that he had come on a peaceful endeavour. He stressed that the royal house could otherwise have been suspicious of his arrival, interpreting it as a declaration of war on the king as its head. The informant clarified his point by comparing the Zulu king to the leopard in the following proverb: isilo asithintwa (a leopard is never touched). 'Touching' in this proverb implies provocation, and is said to have originated from observations of the behaviour of a leopard, which is known as a non-provocative, introverted and elusive creature. The leopard avoids unnecessary fights, unlike the lion, which often roars with a thunder-like voice as if looking for someone to devour. When the leopard fights, death is inevitable – as the Zulu proverb says, ingwe ayilali yodwa (a leopard never dies alone), because if it is attacked and fatally wounded, it ensures that, before it dies, at least one of its attackers dies with it. This makes the leopard a brutal fighter if challenged. In Shaka, the praise poet perceives the same behaviour of a challenged leopard as he applauds him: uyisilo (you are a leopard) for his prowess on the battlefield.

The Buffalo

Buffaloes have earned a bad reputation from hunters and other people who come in close contact with them. They are often accused of deliberate savagery (African Wildlife Foundation 2013). The savagery of buffaloes is told not only in wildlife circles but also by my Zulu informants who claim that a slight mistake when one hunts a buffalo means a death sentence – even climbing a tree is no use, as the buffalo can tear it with its strong horns and smash it with its head until the victim falls to the ground. When the victim is lying helpless there, the animal urinates over the prone body and the urine causes severe burns.

If an attempt is made to run away owing to the burning effect of the urine, the buffalo smashes its victim to death with its sharp hooves. Two proverbs in particular caution a traveller about the dangerous behaviour and attitude of a buffalo. The first is inyathi iyaweya umuthi (a buffalo underestimates a tree). When a buffalo is overcome by its own viciousness, it behaves like an angry elephant by smashing trees with its robust horns. In this proverb, a tree represents something that is massive, powerful and fierce. For a fuming buffalo, nothing is too powerful. The second proverb is ungibambele inyathi ngophondo (she/he is holding a buffalo for me by the horn). The strongest weapons that a buffalo uses in attacking its victims are its ridged horns, which grow straight out from the head or curve downwards and then upwards. Holding a buffalo by its horns implies putting someone into a most dangerous situation. These proverbs might have originated from fear of the buffalo. It appears that the whereabouts of a buffalo was the first thing that every traveller had to remember before leaving home. It is presumed that if the people from whom these proverbs originated were literate and living in modern times, they would have made big billboards to warn travellers about these dangerous animals.

Tradition has it that Shaka went to Mpondoland to hold diplomatic discussions with the Mpondos concerning the white immigrants who were flocking into both Mpondoland and Zululand. The Mpondos did not trust Shaka and, in fear, decided to run away. Shaka's praise poems refer to this incident as well as to the ferocity and unpredictability of the buffalo: *Inyath'ejame* ngomkhonto phezu koMzimvubu, amaMpond' esaba nokuyehlela (Cope 1968). (Buffalo that stood glaring with a spear on the banks of Mzimvubu, and the Mpondos feared to come down to it.) Seemingly, the buffalo that attacked the Mpondos was even more ferocious because it had an additional weapon, the spear. The Mpondos did not know whether Shaka was going to spare or kill them with his famous spear, called iklwa as he could be as vicious and unpredictable as the buffalo of the wild. An image of a buffalo carrying a spear and probably hiding in the reed-bed of the river bank instills more fear than the terribly feared ordinary buffalo. The image of a buffalo in these proverbs and praise poems demonstrates a frightening scenario; wherever there is

a buffalo, people feel insecure. Hinde and Taylor (1993) maintain, hunters fear no animal as much as they do a buffalo bull in a reed-bed. Interestingly, as a ranger has testified, buffaloes in a group are not as dangerous as isolated old ones that have been ousted by the young ones. The expelled old ones become more vicious, obstinate and unpredictable. Following is another Zulu royal house favourite; the rhinoceros with its fascinating horns.

The Rhinoceros

In Zulu culture, there is no black or white rhino because white rhinos are not white and black rhinos are not black. The ubhejana (a socalled black rhino) has a much smaller head and lives in densely wooded areas with plenty of water. The *ubhejana* is the one mostly at risk for its horn from poachers. Umkhombe, known as the white rhino, with its wide mouth, prefers grazing on grasslands. The white rhino's name is taken from the Afrikaans word describing the mouth: weit, meaning wide. Early English settlers in South Africa misinterpreted weit for white. (Stay Informed 2013). It is essential to stress the difference between the two animals because this discussion focuses on the behaviour of ubhejane, the 'true' rhino, which is used in Zulu in relation to the praises of the present Zulu king, Goodwill. Sithole (1982) proclaims: 'UBhejan' odl' abakayise. Phuma Ndab'esiqiwini, kade bekuvalele.' (The Rhino that devours those of his father's house. Ndaba, come out of the game reserve, you have been locked in there for far too long). The 'game reserve' here, refers to Bhekuzulu College in Nongoma where the king was then studying. The praise points to the critical state of affairs that existed before the enthronement of the king. It was said that the king's father died when his son was still too young to reign and had to continue his studies at the College. During the reign of his regent, Prince Mcwayizeni Zulu, things got out of hand in the kingdom to the point that the nation made a demand for the king to leave school before his throne was usurped by the royal house predators, including, probably, his regent. As the voice of the nation, the praise poet spoke out and gave the king his strategy for embarking on his reign. The poet uses no other animal than the rhino to clarify what the then prince had to do to assume the throne despite his inexperience. The prince had

to act like a 'solitary rhino, extremely aggressive, which readily attacks predators including humans' (*The Financial Gazette* 2013). The young prince was thereby exhorted to act like the rhino in line with the example set by his ancestor, King Shaka. According to the poet, such a situation needed a courageous and self-determining king who would vigorously grasp the Zulu throne to secure it from the raging rivals of his royal blood. Like the rhino, the young prince had to meet his challengers head-on. The Zulu nation needed a king who would strive for the welfare of his subjects and continue where Shaka, the founder of their nation, had left off. In the last part of this discussion comes the elephant.

The Elephant

My informants emphasized certain characteristics of elephants that are often overlooked by researchers. The lion, they argued, is not supposed to be called the king of the beasts and they highlighted their view that the lion might incorrectly have received this attribute because it is an aggressive carnivore, which makes all other animals fear it. Instead, the elephant should have been recognized as the king of the wild because it is perceived as sociable, considerate and powerful, and thus protects other animals that are not members of its species. To illustrate the point, animals such as giraffes, impala and zebras are common targets of lions, which may be the reason why these animals often graze together with a group of elephants, as lions are afraid of elephants in a group. During dry seasons, life is difficult for wild animals because vegetation becomes scarce. Edible branches and twigs are out of reach for most herbivorous animals. My informants had seen an elephant pulling down a huge branch to make it accessible to other animals. When the branch came to the ground, the herbivores such as zebras gathered together to enjoy a free meal from the generous elephant. Another testimony refers to Namibian elephants, which grow up in a desert where water sources can literally run out. Animals can be seen going long distances looking for a place with water. One ranger reported being deeply impressed when he saw a group of elephants coming together to dig the ground with the aim of finding drinking water. They scooped the soil with their feet and trunks. What struck him most was that, when water had come out, other animals flocked together round the little pool that the elephants had provided free of charge. When the elephants had finished drinking, they proceeded with their journey, leaving water flowing as a future resource for other creatures. That is appreciated as generosity in the fullest sense. When it rains, water runs away and quickly disappears into the ground. This informant had observed that, on rainy days, elephant's feet leave small pot-holes that block rain water to form little pools, which become breeding-places for frogs. Who would have thought that even frogs could look to elephants for help? Besides being seen as compassionate, protective, generous and considerate, elephants have behavioural traits that often appear to surpass human understanding. McBride (1974: 187) claimed that few animals die with attendants at the deathbed. The elephants express concern and grief to an extent seldom seen among animals. In a gentle salute, the bull had been observed laying his trunk on the body of the dead cow. Good memory and intelligence, as well as revenge, characterize both Shaka and the elephant. My informants maintained that, like an elephant, Shaka never forgot anything that befell him, either good or bad. He avenged himself on those who ill-treated him as a child. There is an incident concerning an elephant's good memory that came from a ranger in the Umfolozi Game Reserve, in whose chronicles it is recorded. In 1984, a group of elephant calves arrived. An old rhino killed one of these young elephants. In 1987 the same group of elephants - now grown up - encountered the very same rhino that had killed one of them. The rhino could not escape. They mercilessly avenged their brother elephant's death by killing it. This incident can be associated with Chadwick (1983), 'An elephant never forgets,' whatever befalls it. The informants interpreted the action of these elephants as a sign of exceptional cleverness. According to the African Wildlife Foundation (2013), the elephant is distinguished by its high level of intelligence. An element of wisdom can be identified in Shaka's praise poems where he is referred to as ilemb' eleq' amanye ngokukhalipha, which means that Shaka surpassed all others in wisdom. To the present day, the praise name ilembe is used as a mark of respect for Shaka's intelligence.

'Wena weNdlovu!' (You of the Elephant!) is often heard when the Zulu salute their king at the beginning of important occasions. The ques-

tion arises: who is this Elephant to whom the Zulu king belongs and why is this animal so highly respected? Chadwick (1983) provides a clue: the degree of respect that many tribes had for the elephant is reflected in the terms of praise for great chiefs and warriors, such as Shaka whose ultimate accolade was that of 'Oh Great Mighty Elephant of the Zulu' while his mother, Nandi was praised as the Mighty She-Elephant! Shaka's praise poet applauds him with uyindlovu! (You are an elephant!). The admiration that an elephant receives from the Zulu royal house probably started with Shaka, as his contemporaries also regarded him as the Mighty Elephant. It is observed that in the Zulu royal house, an elephant is treated as the 'symbol of fortitude', reminding them of Shaka who inherited a small tribe and built an empire. Likewise, he protected it with an elephant's power through his formidable army. It appears that Shaka was not an elephant of the Zulu nation only, but also an elephant for other kingdoms as well. Shaka is regarded as a stronghold to which other kings came as refugees to get shelter (Gcumisa and Ntombela 1993). Shaka also extended his hospitality to the white traders who were destitute (Isaacs 1936). He placed them in the community of KwaKhangelani amaNkengane in Durban, known today as Congella. Shaka commanded Mhlophe, the headman to provide the traders with food and clothing (Bird 1888). Shaka' praise poet remarks on the king's custodianship towards the white immigrants, especially, Fynn-nicknamed umnawabo kaShaka (the younger brother of Shaka) (Cope 1968). Dingane together with his brothers and Mbopha, Shaka's body-guard formed a conspiracy against Shaka, which led to the latter's assassination, which the poet refers to as the drowning of the Elephant in its own blood (Rycroft and Ngcobo 1988). The Elephant that the poet implies is Shaka, because after his death, Dingane built himself a huge homestead, which he named uMgungundlovu (the surrounding of an Elephant) near the Umkhumbane River at Mahlabathini as a living memory of his victory over the Mighty Elephant.

CONCLUSION

The novelty of this study comes from the fact that I was able to go back to Shaka's roots to interview the local people whose understanding of the background culture helped in the analysis of literature for this research as literature mirrors

the society from which it springs. Interestingly, the images of the lion, leopard, rhinoceros, buffalo and the elephant depicted in Shaka's praise poems can be referred to as images of the Zulu transitional era, as they reflect a great change in the Zulu socio-political system under their heroic leader. Shaka is revered for having superimposed a kingship and a military system where the ideals of dominance, forcefulness, fearlessness and national glory, and loyalty to the king took precedence in the incorporation of Nguni clans into a consolidated Zulu nation. Consistent reference to these heroic animals has earned them high symbolic status in the Zulu royal house since the reign of King Shaka. This research rendered an imagery bank expressed in animal metaphors for others to draw upon for effective communication. It is a contribution to Zulu socio-cultural heritage and the conservation of threatened species, especially the rhinoceros to promote an appreciation and reawakening of traditional Zulu friendship for the environment.

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