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Trans-symbolisms in Ntshaveni WaLuruli’s *Elelwani*

Abstract

This article examines symbolism in South African filmmaker Ntshaveni WaLuruli’s ground-breaking film, *Elelwani*. The article discusses the “weave”, “layering” and “density” of symbols in the film. WaLuruli rejects standard uses of symbolism, choosing to use symbols as fragments of “trans-symbolic” acts instead: symbols disappear in order that humans appear.

Keywords: Symbolism; *Elelwani*; WaLuruli; trans-symbolism

Introduction

Elelwani (2012) is a South African film by Ntshaveni WaLuruli that casts well known South African actress Florence Masebe in the lead actress role of Elelwani, an ordinary twenty-something girl who dreams of blissful love and a life abroad at university but ends up in an unlikely place: as queen of the vaVenda in the midst of a bitter and sinister power struggle, revenge, murder, and conspiracy at the royal court. The film turns on the theme of transformation, in the deepest sense of transformation as signalling deeply and qualitatively altered relations and relationships in the social worlds of characters. The core symbolism in the film is directed at throwing clear light on the nature, senses, contexts and content of these transformations. In fact, nothing expresses the nature, senses, contexts and content of these transformation as intensely as the last spoken words of the film where Elelwani, from behind a dark freeze frame, says:

My journey has brought me to myself
I am the butterfly that was once a caterpillar
I am the wild flower that carries her thorns
I now wear the beads of my own choice
I am Elelwani
And I am free
Ah, Let the Horns hit me

An adaptation of Titus Ntsieni Maumela's 1976 novel of the same name, *Elelwani* is in Tshivenda with English subtitles. It is the first such film in South Africa to use Tshivenda in this way. Many media commentators christened it "the first Venda film" in South Africa's history. The film was shot on location in the expansive panoramas of Thohoyandou, Limpopo. It premiered in cinemas in 2013, and was the opening film at the Durban International Film Festival of the same year.

This article examines the use of symbolism in the film. I argue that the film is expressly built on a form of symbolism we can call "trans-symbolism" because it transcends standard uses of symbolism. The article explores WaLuruli's deliberate use of the trans-symbolic, focusing on the symbolism of butterfly, mask, *musi* and *mutuli*, mother hen, crown, and forest. In all, I identified more than fifteen symbols. These six, however, have heightened markedness and salience in the film. These six sets of trans-symbolisms are drawn on in order to demonstrate that WaLuruli's use of symbols in *Elelwani* reflects a unique mode of deliberate Afro-aesthetic innovation. I argue that, in particular, WaLuruli constructs symbols in three ways: firstly, as inseparable elements of the warp and weft of the plot, a form of interweaving; secondly, in the form of "layering"; and, thirdly, by way of a dense concentration of symbols. For instance, these selected symbols are woven and layered together with symbols of rain and mist, sacred lion, mirror, the *Gwede* bird, and *domba* dance, contributing to a specific form of "doubling" of characters where the symbol is not necessarily standing for something else that is not there, but is in fact that thing. The standardly assumed transition from symbol to the thing itself, therefore, becomes largely superfluous. Symbols no longer draw attention to themselves but are best seen as parts or fragments of "trans-symbolic" acts.

Symbolism in *Elelwani*

The standard view of symbols is that they are literal objects that point to other things. They normally carry meanings and attachments that are more than themselves. In looking at symbols, we traditionally assume a transition from the symbol to the thing symbolised. In

other accounts of symbol a transfer of attributes from symbol to symbolised is posited. The symbolic thus refers to something else. It is not literal. Rather, it is always standing for something else other than itself. Symbols, anyhow, are an integral part of the social world of humans. Danesi (2009: viii), for instance, is adamant that symbols “tell us more about the state of the world than do theories and sophisticated academic debates”. In fact, as Susan Langer argues in *Philosophy in a New Key* (1948), our sense-data themselves are primarily symbols.

A corpus of examples can be selectively drawn on to show the trajectories of attempts to explain symbols. Charlotte Gilman, in *The Dress of Women* (2002: 11), identifies the existence of what she calls “the symbolic element”, a core constitutive element in the sociology of humans, one that is attended by the “symbolic motive” (14). Goldwater (1979: 1), remarks that both the phenomenon and the movement of symbolism “can be thought of as part of a philosophical idealism in revolt against a positivist, scientific attitude”, and as expressions of the desire to go beyond naturalism, rationalism and realism (Goldwater 1979; Brodská 2012). Cartesians, on the other hand, distinctly separate the real from the symbolic (spirit v. matter). Danesi (2009: 5) argues that symbolism has two main functions. The first is to act “as a practical form of shorthand that can be used for recording and recalling information”. The second function “is to express something perceived as having value (cultural or spiritual)”.

Danesi (2009: ix) divides symbolism into two main categories: logical and mythic. Logical symbolism “is basically shorthand for concrete ideas and conventions – for example, π stands for a specific constant (3.14 . . .) derived by dividing the circumference of a circle by its diameter”. Mythic symbolism, on the other hand, is “shorthand for things that are much less tangible – things (such as zodiac signs and occult figures) that *evoke* unconscious cultural meanings” (emphasis added). Danesi’s (2009) preoccupation is with mythic symbolism, which he says “links people to their communities and to the past” (5). The notion of “evoking” is crucial to the standard view of a symbol as something visible that by association or convention represents something else that is invisible or absent. The suggestion in standard explanations of symbolism is that symbols are coded, esoteric and hidden, and require decoding. The means of decoding symbols and, by extension, the true meanings of symbols, are assumed to belong to an enlightened select few. The masses of humanity have to make do with degraded symbolisms.

In this article I argue that WaLuruli’s symbolism is not of the coded or esoteric kind. The symbols do not express supernatural or hidden mystery messages that need deciphering. Rather, it is both public and exoteric. In this way, WaLuruli’s symbolism is distinguished from mythic symbolism which claims to reveal the hidden, and from logical symbolism, which is merely technical. It is the *publicness* of symbolism in *Elelwani* that, for me, marks it as innovative. It is a symbolism of the ordinary, one that is accessible, social, and has a range of public uses. Aesthetically, WaLuruli is driven by the desire to make symbolism open, inclusive and meaningful. For WaLuruli symbolism is not when a thing stands for things other than itself but, rather, is – at the very least – a fragment chipped off or “doubled off” from other things.

The symbolism in *Elelwani* is a conscious, deliberate and inseparable element of the plot. Ntshaveni WaLuruli himself avers that this is the case. He has previously stated, “I did not want to make an ethnographic film” (WaLuruli 2014). **WaLuruli’s sense of caution regarding**

the “ethnographic film” is understandable. Both anthropology and ethnography are deeply implicated in the colonising project (Asad 1973). Asad (1973: 11) notes that there indeed was a time when anthropology “could and did define itself unambiguously as the study of primitive societies”. A film such as Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, for instance, though not made by an ethnographer, was gradually appropriated as a classic of visual anthropology and was easily read through a particular Western gaze that exoticised the subjects of the film and fixed them to primitiveness.

Cameron, in *Africa on Film* (1994: 11), argues simply that “Africa is a very old site for European projection, a location of myths and fantasies”. It is these myths and fantasies that WaLuruli appears to be referring to when he says that he sought to make a film that was not “ethnographic”. Gray (2010: xi) identifies a particular “disjuncture in (the) treatment of different cinemas”, in particular “certain inequities in how Western and non-Western films are discussed within different forms of film studies”. Western films, Gray suggests, are often analysed “through film theories” whereas non-Western films tend to be analysed “as products of national industries” (Gray 2010: xi). The danger that films such as *Elelwani* can become sites “for European projection, a location of myths and fantasies” is real enough. This article, in this sense, is an attempt to study WaLuruli’s film through “film theories”, and not as an out-of-Africa curiosity.

WaLuruli argues that, as part of his construction of a counter-ethnographic gaze, he purposely eschewed a voyeuristic camera gaze that would have turned Venda culture into a touristic spectacle. Instead he sought to portray what he knew of life in Venda as he saw it and knew it, through its lived symbols. For WaLuruli, these symbols are laden with the meaning of the Venda and, broadly, African people’s existential experience – their fears, aspirations, anxieties, lives, desires, dreams, and loves. WaLuruli sees this portrayal as being in direct opposition to what he terms colonial era “tribal scripts” that are often unconsciously revived in well intentioned local films about “indigenous culture”. To this end, WaLuruli deliberately excluded any symbolism that would have “exoticised” *Elelwani*. In WaLuruli’s words, there were to be “no animals, no sunsets or sunrises, no burning torches at the gate or elephant tusks”.

In the end, *Elelwani* is less about “Venda culture” as about life in Venda. The notion of life in Venda directly expresses what radical philosopher Frantz Fanon (1963: 148) called “social truths”. The film is part of a transitive *situation* or *situating* of everyday life. Here situation is a verb meaning “to place” or to put into place. *Elelwani* thus has a situating, or placing, function such that the citizens of Venda are not abstract categories at all but are actual persons with fears, desires, wants, ethics, demands, aspirations, anxieties and dreams. These actual persons are the ones who produce the social reality depicted in the film. As such, there is nothing fantastic, chancy or accidental about the plot. Whereas the notion of “Venda culture” sails rather too closely to the often commodifying, domesticating and objectifying lens of tourism, the apposite notion of life-in-Venda is somewhat resistant to both script and prescription.

WaLuruli believes, much like educationist Paulo Freire (1976: 39) did, that narratives that adopt a “proprietary fashion” always “end up without the people”. As this article will demonstrate, WaLuruli deliberately inflects symbols such that their meanings do not end up as gifted artefacts that are given to be passively received, but are rather created by active beings and knowers who are grounded in the life-worlds of Venda. That is, context is important to the text of symbols. In my conversations with him, WaLuruli has suggested that

his use and choice of symbols is not arbitrary, but, rather, is constrained by the experiential and lived reality of, firstly, Venda people and, more broadly, Africans. In fact, he finds symbols and life coextensive and inseparable, such that there is no symbol-free life or life-free symbol. As the article will show, symbols in *Elelwani* are not meant to be decoded as such, but are in fact grounded in, preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of specific contexts and worlds. WaLuruli’s “symbol universe” is indistinct from this context. Rather, it is intimately and inseparably coextensive with it. Symbols are pregnant with the world, and the world is pregnant with symbols. That is, local worlds are better understood through their symbols, and symbols are best interpreted in daily worlds and contexts. It is, for instance, in this context that the complex relationship between so-called “tradition” and so-called “modernity” is given startlingly new interpretations in *Elelwani*.

Pic 1
Elelwani speaks about ordinary worlds and contexts

WaLuruli uses symbols in a mostly nonstandard way. At the very least, he does not use symbols as if they were mere elliptical similes in the sense of comparing qualities between the thing stood for and the thing doing the standing for, but, rather, in a much more metonymically iterative and figural sense. Worth noting here is the symbol’s constitutive elements. There are at least two intertwined dimensions to the symbol as it is used in *Elelwani*. One is the symbol as reality and the other is reality as symbol. In a sense, there is no symbol that is not at the same time reality. To use a symbol is for WaLuruli to participate in transforming reality. The symbols are thus much closer to what Freire (1976) would call “interventions in reality” (109) than to the conventional definition of symbols as to-be-decoded visible objects that by association or convention represent something else that is absent or invisible. For WaLuruli, this conventional definition of symbolism clearly will not do. In his words, his approach to his subject matter is so as to make the audience reflect and, by reflecting, hopefully see itself. But the audience can see itself only if the symbolism is constrained by lived worlds and also if the symbolism is public, familiar, accessible and social. To see a symbol as a mere symbol, without its reality content, is thus to deprive it of one of its most salient constitutive elements.

Thus Elelwani the heroine is not simply *like* a butterfly. Rather, she is a butterfly, and the butterfly is Elelwani. When the camera cross-cuts from Elelwani to a butterfly fluttering its wings on a mossy ledge at the royal court, **WaLuruli** is not in fact comparing Elelwani’s qualities to those of a butterfly. He is not merely saying that the butterfly represents Elelwani. Instead, he is showing Elelwani *twice*, in two iteratively linked figural forms, as if

to say “whenever you see Elelwani, then you see a butterfly; should you see a butterfly, then you have seen Elelwani”. The white lion that appears towards the end of the film is not representing the ancestor-rulers of old. It *is* the ancestor-rulers of old. Elelwani is also the crown that is swallowed and reborn. She does not wear the crown. She *is* the crown. When the camera cuts from Elelwani to her mother who is crushing grain in the *mutuli* with a *musi*, it *is* Elelwani who is being transformed.

The iterative “twice-ness” or doubling technique represents a specific use of visual metaphor that WaLuruli heightens in *Elelwani*. Things do not simply symmetrically and lexically stand for or point to other things but, in fact, expressly and visually *become* those things; the camera appears to deliberately create this “twice-ness” or doubling of things. For example, the visual, linguistic or lexical item “butterfly” is Elelwani in every ontological sense. There is neither similarity nor separation. The butterfly on the ledge is not similar to Elelwani, and is neither a representation of Elelwani, nor an image of her. It is not an analogue of Elelwani, nor an extension of her. It is not even, strictly speaking, a “symbol” of Elelwani. Rather, it is Elelwani, shown doubly twice, in all her full identity and the sum of her interstitial multiplicities. That is, the camera would not have cut to the butterfly at all if it was not for the need to double, “twice” or multiply Elelwani. By “twicing”, doubling and multiplying Elelwani’s identity through symbols, WaLuruli throws the character of Elelwani into special light and **highly prosodic meaningfulness**.

The fact that Elelwani can simultaneously be butterfly, crown, grain in a *mutuli*, ancestral goat, and sacrificial mother hen shows how WaLuruli layers, interweaves and “densifies” symbols in the film. WaLuruli uses the camera to eliminate the assumption that a transition is needed to move from literal to symbolic meaning and vice versa. The thing that would do the standing-for in most conventional and standard accounts of symbolism is, in *Elelwani*, quietly eliminated. All that is left – and this is the point of WaLuruli’s use of symbolism in the film – is the figure of Elelwani. The idea behind showing the butterfly, crown, *musi*, *mutuli*, ancestral goat, and mother hen is not so that we begin to think differently about butterflies, crowns, *musi*, *mutuli*, ancestral goats and mother hens. It is not so that we start to see these animals and objects differently, or so that they are anthropomorphically imbued with human attributes. WaLuruli, rather, expressly rejects this use of symbolism. He views such a use of symbolism as steering dangerously closely to anthropological, touristic and anthropomorphising approaches to African film. Anthropological, touristic and anthropomorphising approaches – when they have an opportunity to represent Africans and African material culture and landscapes – turn animals and objects into Africans, and Africans into animals and objects. This is the explanation behind WaLuruli words that there were to be “no animals, no sunsets or sunrises, no burning torches at the gate or elephant tusks” on the set of the film.

By expressly saying “no animals, no sunsets or sunrises, no burning torches at the gate or elephant tusks” on set, WaLuruli meant to underscore that the film was to be about *humans*, indivisibly so and no more and no less. That is, the idea – all along – is that we see Elelwani and others in the narrative, in a full and undivided way. Moreover, that we see them in particularly new and special light. The attention could not, as often happens in “films about Africa” (Mboti 2010), be divided in between people, on the one hand, and animals and

objects, on the other hand. WaLuruli deliberately re-directed symbols through those who meaningfully produce them: human beings. Used this way, the symbol no longer creates meaning in and of itself – by dint of merely being symbol – but is made into some sort of “trans-symbol”. That is, symbols in *Elelwani* do not start out as symbols, or even end up as symbols. Rather, symbols are treated in the same way that one would treat diapers – as objects to be used and promptly discarded – so as not to disrupt the narrative by unnecessarily drawing attention to themselves as symbols. To these disposable trans-symbolisms we attach, de-attach and re-attach meanings at will. Not only is there nothing intrinsically symbolic about symbols, but symbols are meant to **transitively** disappear in order that humans appear. As already noted, the act of doubling or “twicing” is the one WaLuruli uses to disappear symbols and make humans appear. Characters are seen twice, or more than twice, in multiple guises.

Pic 2 & Pic 3
Elelwani is about the relation of ordinary people to power

Elelwani is an ordinary young woman who uses her ordinariness to show that ordinary people too have dignity of nobility. Her journey to the royal court is one of debunking and demystifying – she unravels secret, highly-guarded and conspiratorial worlds, thus putting everything out in the open for ordinary people to contemplate and own. She sets out, unwillingly at first, to wrest and win power on behalf of what Fanon (1963) would call a “national culture”. A national culture, says Fanon, is the “crystallisation of the innermost hopes of the whole people”. By the end of the film *Elelwani* is the matriarchal mother hen who has managed to save her chicks from a sinister elite that plans to grab the crown, silence opposition, commit murder, and eventually dispossess and sell off Venda land and heritage to highest bidders and corporations. As a matriarch, her job is to unmask the danger that the

power of the sinister elite poses to her people. To achieve this, she has to transform, back and forth, from one identity to the other, and from one sense of being to another. This transformation is anchored by and through symbols. Elelwani rejects the esoteric and occultic in favour of the open and accessible. She effectively debunks the view that the project of building a nation, through sacrifice, can only be achieved by supra-human or saintly heroes. Rather, it is open to ordinary beings too. She sets out to demonstrate this openness of the world, and the contested nature of power that lies behind it all.

Butterfly (*susu*)

Elelwani has a tattoo of a butterfly visible on the right side of her neck, just behind the ear. One inference is that this is nothing more than a girly tattoo, a reference to the faddish, flirty tastes of university students. The Elelwani who arrives with her boyfriend, Vele, at the beginning of the film is one such hormonal flirt. She gossips with her friend about “doing it”, a reference to sex. Although Elelwani denies to her friend that she has had sexual relations with Vele, she goes for a passionate dip with him in the pool by the waterfalls a day after her arrival. They kiss and fondle, and afterwards lie down in the grass by the river bank. As they lie down in the grass, the camera cuts from the two amorous lovers to a shot of two butterflies mating on a blade of grass. This shot is followed by a shot of slow-dripping drops of clear water.

Pic 4
Two *susu* mating

The innuendo is unmistakably one of the sexual act, particularly when one considers these juxtaposed shots with the fact that Elelwani and Vele adoringly refer to each other as *susu*, the Venda term for butterfly. The shot of the two *susu* mating on a blade of grass, following as it does the shot of the other *susu* (Elelwani and Vele) lying down and kissing on the grassy bank after a swim, is part of a bundle of suggestive montage. Immediately afterwards, Elelwani's father, Mabada, sternly warns her against continuing to see Vele, arguing that her consorting with him was not only improper for a girl who was betrothed to someone else (the Venda king), but was also fodder for scandal in the village. Elelwani, however, initially resists pressure to marry the king or to break off with Vele. She diffidently objects to being auctioned off “for breeding purposes” and accuses her parents of selling her “cheaply” for no other purpose than “to breed a male heir”. Above all, she wants to go to further her education in America.

Pic 5
Elelwani sports a tattoo of a butterfly

The kind of *susu* that Elelwani is at this point is not so much a butterfly as a caterpillar. A caterpillar, by definition, is an immature and free-living form of a butterfly which is not only nothing like its parents, but needs to metamorphose in order to move from immaturity and free-living to maturity and getting into symbiotic relationships with others. The *susu* at the start of *Elelwani*, then, is completely different from the *susu* at the end of the film. This change is at the heart of Elelwani's assertion that her journey had brought her to herself, "the butterfly that was once a caterpillar". The symbolism of the butterfly in *Elelwani* is thus closely linked with this growth, development and change in one's politics. The butterfly is the symbol that, more than anything else, actuates the notion of transformation. Whereas at the beginning of the film Elelwani sees herself as a fully developed *susu*, one that has already figured out the world and its truths, the film shows us that there is no end either to journeying or to the sum of metamorphoses one's character can go through. As the Shona saying goes, "*kudzidza hakuperi*" (learning knows no end). Elelwani discovers this and other complex truths as the narrative unfolds. In a sense, Elelwani does not actually change or become someone else, but merely discovers a fuller humanity and a new richness of character and identity.

Elelwani's new life as a butterfly might be fulfilling, but it is also fraught with unknowns and mortal danger. This is shown by the montage of a butterfly and a spider that appears to have caught a butterfly in its web. The spider web may refer either to the fact that Elelwani cannot escape her destiny as the Chosen One or to the conspiracies and perilous state of affairs she will encounter at the royal palace.

Mother hen

As part of her journey to self-awareness, Elelwani encounters and is surrounded by symbols of mothering and motherlessness, in particular the mother hen. When Elelwani has a quarrel with her mother, she moves into the goat-and-chicken pen. Her usual bedrom is being prepared for the emissaries. When she gets to her new bedroom, she gets into another "quarrel" with a mother hen which fights Elelwani off its chicks. Later on, as Elelwani digs in and refuses to marry the king, the mother hen is slaughtered for food to feed the emissaries. In this scene, and in the rest of the film, Elelwani sees herself "doubled" as the mother hen which is slaughtered and leaves her chicks unprotected. After her transformation, she ensures that she becomes the "great mother" who does not leave her children orphaned. Equally

significant is the weaving of the symbol of the mother hen with that of the python and the *domba*, the dance of fertility, to reinforce one another.

Pic 6

Elelwani gets into a “quarrel” with the mother hen protecting its chicks from her broom

Beaulieu (1994: 646) has argued that “African mothers forge deep and lifelong bonds with their children”. The notion of motherhood for African women is partly linked to the image of “Mother Africa”, or Africa as the birthplace of humanity (Beaulieu 2006: 645). Thus, “The image of the mother is deeply rooted in every aspect of African society, folklore, and culture, and the image of the African mother filters through in all aspects of life.” (Beaulieu 1994: 646). Coquery-Vidrovitch (1994: 1), however, observes that the image of African women “is stereotyped: from the fertile and nurturing Earth Mother to the lazy, debauched young beauty”. What seems clear is that motherhood is enduringly complex. It can give women fulfilment by affirming the creative power of the female body, or it can oppress them by limiting their identity to child-bearing. It does not seem, however, that motherhood obliges any mother to love her children.

Pic 7

The mother hen is slaughtered, leaving her chicks motherless

That mothers love their children is deeply significant, if **of course** one considers that mothers do not seem to be under any particular obligation to love their children. Rather, they seem to love through conscious decision, and in a sense continue to exercise agency in deciding to continue loving relationships with their children. The relationship between mothers and their children is itself variously complicated by histories, contexts, everyday life and political economy. For instance, apartheid and colonialism fractured African motherhood by turning some African women into objects of domestic service (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994) thus

becoming, essentially, mothers to white children. The notion of an eternally selfless, life-giving African mother is complicated by these histories of oppression, which turn motherhood into something far more political. The motherless chicks in *Elelwani*, for instance, speak to the reality of historically broken and dispersed motherless families. By the end of the film, *Elelwani* has learnt to consciously “mother” all her children.

Elelwani grows from being a self-centred young woman, one who requires the world to revolve around her, to being a matriarch of the nation. However, the journey to being matriarch is initially reluctantly begun, and WaLuruli uses the figure of the mother hen to underscore that destiny is not so much a predetermined set of events that will inevitably happen as a destination that one reaches *in spite, despite, and because of* the trials they go through and the choices they make. Coquery-Vidrovitch (1994: 232) has argued that “African women for centuries have not even understood the possibility of leisure time”. In her view “African women have lacked the leisure and often even the right to observe themselves” (1) and have no time to do anything else other than work. African women, Coquery-Vidrovitch insists, “are so overburdened with tasks of all kinds that they hardly have time to bemoan their fate or even to wonder about it. Their image of themselves remains cloudy” (1). She notes, for instance, part of women’s identity is that of “producer and reproducer”. While it may, of course, be true that most African women work hard and that their general condition reflects this overburdened state of affairs, it seems patently untrue that the generalisation we call African women finds no pleasure in itself or time to enjoy itself. At least, the representation of mothering and motherhood in *Elelwani* shows both the displeasures and pleasures of motherhood, not just the “producer and reproducer”.

Pic 8, 9, 10, 11
The dances and movement of the women, down to the wall markings of the huts, suggest the domba (python) dance, the dance of fertility

The symbol of the mother hen in *Elelwani* helps sheds special light on the complex tension that often exists between the construction (or myth) of African motherhood and the lived reality of African motherhood. It is common, for instance, for some mothers to abuse their children and not to love them for a variety of complex reasons. At the same time, mothers can show incomparable and inspirational love and sacrifice for their children. Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) equates motherhood with a loss of self. In fact, Sethe murders her

child in an attempt to spare her the traumas of slavery. Twisted as this seems, it is an act of child murder that is inspired by love, and an indictment of slavery. Celie in Alice Walker's *Colour Purple* and Maya in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) find motherhood redemptive. Audre Lorde's poem "Now That I Am Forever with Child" expresses the pleasures of being a mother. What seems clear is that the image of a selfless, always-giving African mother does not reflect all the shades of lived reality.

Elelwani's journey that brings her to herself refers in part to her re-discovery of the meaning of love and selflessness. Andrea O'Reilly (2004) has referred to this, in relation to Toni Morrison's novels about mothering and motherhood, as "reconnecting to the motherline" and "maternal healing" which follows the "disconnection", "disruptions" and "ruptures" of the "motherline". The symbol of the mother hen is not meaningful in the service of a static representation of an idealised womanhood – the image of a consistently loving, giving back motherhood, willing selflessness – but rather, in the sense of *Nneka* (Mother is Supreme) (Traoré 1997) where it is important to acknowledge and respect the mother figure in all its profundity and complexity.

Mask

One of the most startling scenes in *Elelwani* is when the heroine opens the door to the forbidden hut and comes to face to face with a handcuffed man in a mask. It turns out that the man in the mask is the rightful king, Thovele, who has been in the mask since a boy. Thovele has been banished to the hut on the border of the village and forest by his enemies who intend to keep him in this state until he gives up the crown that he has swallowed. Elelwani runs off into the forest in panic at the sight of the man in the mask, only to encounter Madzwara the "madman" who explains the shocking encounter.

Pic 12

A handcuffed man in a mask turns and looks at a startled *Elelwani*.

It appears that what shocked Elelwani the most was the mask itself, which has substituted itself in place of the face. What does the mask mean? What is its function? As we have seen, the mask draws Elelwani's gaze. Its first function, therefore, is to draw attention to itself, as spectacle. But, as we shall see, the meaning and symbolism of the mask in *Elelwani* is variously layered and woven. For instance, the moment Thovele swivels and stares at Elelwani through the mask, we notice that we have previously seen a replica of the mask strung on Madzwara's neck as he danced at the graduation party **at the beginning of the film**. This link not only heightens the significance of the mask in the narrative, but specifically imbues the mask with *unmasking* power. Madzwara's little mask emblem, as if it were a key

or a missing piece of jigsaw, points to and decodes, Thovele’s face mask, and vice versa. Our suspicion that Madzwara is not a mere madman is confirmed. Finally, in another reversal of roles, the mask functions to unmask the royal conspirators, Makhadzi and Ratshihule.

Pic 13
The miniature mask hanging around Madzwara’s neck at the start of the film.

Wilsher (2007: 12) defines a mask as “a covering of part or all of the face or body”. By mask, according to Burckhardt (2009: 102), we mean “above all an artificial face that covers the face of its wearer”. Masks can be “decorative, useful, concealing or revealing. They can threaten, entertain, protect or unify” or “disguise, protect or transform” (Wilsher 2007: 12). To mask, therefore, is to make unrecognisable. Burckhardt (2009: 101) considers the mask to be a form of “sacred art”, asserting that the mask is “one of the most widespread and doubtless one of the most ancient modes of sacred art”, going on to distinguish between ordinary masks and sacred masks. Wilsher (2007), on the other hand, distinguishes between sacred (religious, spiritual) and entertainment (secular, theatrical) functions of masks. Sacred masks are “totemic, shamanic, an object linked to deity, a liminal tool that stands at the threshold of the world they know and the world they don’t (Wilsher 2007: 13).

For scholars of masks, particularly within anthropology, the sacred mask is the object of much of their attention; whereas the “artificial” mask is the preserve of theatre and performance. Burckhardt (2009: 102) argues that the ritual use of the mask “goes far beyond mere figuration”. Rather:

...it is as if the mask, in veiling the face or the outward ego of its wearer, at the same time unveiled a possibility latent within him. Man really becomes the symbol that he has put on, which presupposes both a certain plasticity of soul and a spiritual influence actualized by the form of the mask. In addition, a sacred mask is generally regarded as a real being; it is treated as if it were alive... (Burckhardt 2009: 102).

For Wilsher:

...masks allow us to enter into a mind state where we witness performers creating an otherness, a complete world that is somehow not of this world and yet that is

recognisable and believable. Masks offer us a spiritual experience when we least expect one – not in a religious sense, but certainly a feeling of being taken outside of ourselves, a chance to lose oneself in the world of our imagination... (Wilsher 2007: 8).

The suggestion is that wearing a mask is a performance that takes the wearer outside himself or herself into a new identity. Moreover, the new identity owes itself much more to the mask than the wearer.

Pic 14

Both Madzwara and Thovele are against Elelwani touching the mask.

In the African context, the distinction between sacred and entertainment, or ritual and ordinary, is significantly blurred. Babayemi (1980: 1) explains the role of the masquerade amongst the Yoruba in the following terms:

They represent in fact the collective spirits of the ancestors who occupy a space in heaven. These ancestral spirits are believed to be in constant watch of their survivors on earth. They bless, protect, warn and punish their earthly relatives depending on how their relatives neglect or remember them. The ancestral spirits have collective functions that cut across lineage and family loyalty. They collectively protect the community against evil spirits, epidemics, famine, witchcraft and evil doers, ensuring the well-being, prosperity and productivity of the whole community generally.

Masquerades are therefore fundamental both to the spiritual and social well-being of their community. Sacred ancestral spirits are invited to visit earth physically in masks and to partake in the ordinary social life of the community.

The mask in *Elelwani* can be said to bestraddle both the sacred and ordinary, social worlds. Thovele's imprisonment proves that he is made of flesh, but he also knows that upon his death he will turn into a sacred white lion. However, he cannot die until he has passed on the crown to someone who will see to it that the poor and vulnerable are protected, and that fairness and justice are restored to the land. This state of affairs places him in the liminal space between sacred and ordinary. In fact, as long as he wears the mask, the sacred element is beyond his reach. The mask gags and imposes silence on Thovele, because he cannot use his mouth. As we discover later, the reason the king cannot speak is not because he does not want to, but because the mask has deformed his mouth. He appears to have developed a

ghastly pair of grotesque mouths, both of which have teeth. The mask has therefore already turned him into an otherworldly creature. Such a creature is neither sacred nor human. For this reason, Thovele prefers the impassive emotionless mask to his real face.

The unmasking

The wooden mask tied tightly to the Thovele’s face is the symbol of his punishment and imprisonment in eternal abeyance in the non-place between the worlds of the living and the dead. The mask keeps him from living or dying. As long as he wears the mask, he cannot return to the village and reveal his face as King Thovele, or die and join the ancestors as a sacred lion. The mask is the symbol of the living-dying state of permanent non-identity that Elelwani is destined to unmask and put an end to. The mask disfigures Thovele’s face badly, to a point where it is unrecognisable. As such, he no longer wants anyone to see his new face. For instance, he refuses to have Elelwani remove the mask from his face, or even to touch the mask. Madzwara also counsels Elelwani against touching or removing the mask, telling her to “please respect” Thovele. As long as Thovele lives, the mask becomes his (non)identity, one which he has no choice except to hold on to. In the end, the mask is functionally ambivalent. Although the mask symbolises punishment and nonidentity, Thovele also uses it to fight Makhadzi and Ratshihule, particularly in the sense that the mask prevents his enemies from really figuring him out. The limbo that the mask places him in also preserves him, much like hibernation, long enough for Elelwani to arrive on the scene.

Musi and mutuli

The *musi* and *mutuli* are domestic utensils that are made out of wood for crushing grain (or any substance) into fine substance. Grain is crushed in a *mutuli* so that it can become edible or so that it can be added to other cooking ingredients. The *mutuli* is a wooden instrument, about a metre-high, that is shaped like a dumbbell, or at least like two pyramids or cones joined in the middle, with the bottom cone facing up and the top cone down. The bottom part of the cone is the base, which is placed on flat ground so that the *mutuli* is firmly balanced. The top half of the *mutuli* is the downwards-facing hollow cone into which the grain is poured. The *musi* is the long pestle-like pole used to crush the grain. It is made of solid, strong but light wood which is easier to lift up and down. One cannot have *musi* without *mutuli*, or vice versa. Rather, they always work together, one crushing the grain and the other holding the grain in place so that it is crushed. In essence putting grain into a *mutuli* and crushing it with the *musi* is to transform it from one state to another, particularly from rough to refined, and from unusable to useful. The *musi* and *mutuli* take visibly rough quantity and

turn it into sublimated quality. Always, grain that leaves the *mutuli* is quantitatively less, and qualitatively more, than was put into it.

In *Elelwani* the *musi* and *mutuli* are shown in four different but linked scenes, which are anchored by the use of the mirror to reflect Elelwani's complex transformation. The first is scene 8 (00: 22: 28) where, while standing by the window, Elelwani agonises about whether or not to marry the king. Her heart at this moment is set squarely against doing so. She has just had an argument with her mother, Masindi, about this. The camera cuts to Masindi who is crushing grain in a *mutuli*. The sound of the *musi* hitting the grain in the *mutuli* precedes the visuals of Masindi by a full three seconds. At first, the thudding sound, at half-second intervals, is that of Elelwani's heart beating. But as the camera cuts from the window to the exterior scene of Masindi crushing the grain, we see that the sound we are hearing has morphed from the sound of Elelwani's heart beat to the sound of grain being crushed. We are shown the *musi* go up and down, and also Masindi's upper torso as her arms rise and fall digitally. Her face has a determined, serious look on it.

Pic 16

Masindi using the *musi* to crush grain in a *mutuli*. Elelwani is inside standing by the window.

Pic 17

The camera cuts from Masindi lifting the *musi* and bringing it down to a close up of the *musi* crushing into the grain inside the *mutuli* (Source: Author)

This scene is the first link that the film makes between Elelwani’s qualitative transformation – from rough to fine, and from unusable to useful – and the *musi* and *mutuli*. Interestingly, the *musi* and *mutuli* are part of the same layer, weave and density of symbolism as the *susu* (butterfly). As Elelwani is standing by the window, we can clearly see the butterfly tattoo on the right side of her neck. The camera takes us from the tattoo on her neck to the sound of her heart beat to the sound of the *musi* crushing the grain in the *mutuli* and finally to the visual of Masindi using the *musi* and *mutuli*. At this stage Elelwani’s journey is just beginning, and she is highly skeptical and unsure of her place in the scheme of things. She has her mind firmly set on her bursary, going to America, and marriage to Vele. This is the small absolute universe in which all her dreams, aspirations, fears and anxieties circulate and are limited. Anything else outside this narrow universe is superfluous. Her attitude at this moment can be described as ranging from anything between stubborn and selfish, to unyielding and self-centred.

The second scene which shows the *musi* and *mutuli* is scene 15 (00: 57: 25) at the palace after Elelwani has just arrived. In this morning scene, we see Elelwani standing and contemplating outside her hut. The camera cuts from her eyeline to the yard under some shady trees where we are shown a fire, some monkeys and *musi* and *mutuli*. Worth noting in this scene is the layering and weaving of *musi*, *muti* and *susu* symbolism on the same narrative canvas. Just before we see the fire, the two monkeys and the *musi* and *muti*, we are shown a butterfly walking-gliding on a rock. In fact, the camera cuts from the butterfly to the *musi/mutuli*. For further noting in this scene is the presence of the *luselo*, a flat winnowing basket for separating grain from chaff, that is placed beside the *musi* and *mutuli*. In the picture the *luselo* is the object of the two monkeys’ attention. We also see the *luselo* in scene 17, which is the third scene in the film showing *musi* and *mutuli*. In fact, so dense is the layering and weaving of symbolism that *musi*, *mutuli*, *susu* and *luselo* are part of the warp and weft of symbolism signalling the qualitative transformation of Elelwani’s aspirations and identity.

Pic 18

Musi, mutuli and luselo

In this third scene, showing the hustle and bustle of ordinary life at the palace, the girls are up and about cleaning, adding cow dung polish to floors and crushing grain while preparing for breakfast. Both *musi-mutuli* and *luselo* are used in this scene. After grain has been crushed in the *mutuli*, it is winnowed in the *luselo* to clean it and refine it further. The process is one of increasing quality. In terms of Elelwani’s transformation, however, she is at this stage feeling

as if she is merely being crushed for no particular reason. At least, Elelwani cannot see beyond the crushing.

Pic 19

Transformation before the mirror

The pain of the crushing-for-its-sake is reflected in Elelwani's agony at the seeming lack of choice or agency in her life's current circumstances. After repeating to her mother that she is "not interested in marrying the King", she muses loudly: "So it was an auction". She says to her mother, rather diffidently: "It gave you a chance for giving me away for breeding purposes. You sold me cheaply. My worth as a woman is to breed a male heir" (00: 19: 14). Her mother replies:

That's how it has always been (pause). Hey girl, between you and me, who is the mother? Now listen up. Stand up. Go to the river to fetch water. Thereafter you will sweep the courtyard. Make fire, and boil water to make tea for your in-laws! Stand up now. Stand up! I say stand up!

Elelwani interprets the behaviour of her parents to mean that no one cares about or listens to her. Thereafter, Elelwani moves from her usual bedroom to make way for the emissaries, moving in with the chickens and Makhulu the ancestral goat in the zinc-walled shack.

pic 20

Madzwara walking back into the darkened interior of the forbidden hut with Elelwani (obscured on the left except for the colourful fringe of her dress). The *mutuli* is on the left of the hut.

The fourth scene in which we see the *musi* and *mutuli* is when Madzwara drags Elelwani back into the forbidden hut. Elelwani had been so horrified at the sight of a handcuffed man

in a mask that she had panicked and run off into the forest. She cannot believe what she saw, although she can also not bring herself to imagine that she did not see what she saw. Madzwara appears and reassures her that she is sane, and appeals to her to get back to Thovele in the forbidden hut. The presence of the *musi* and *mutuli* in the forbidden hut marks it out as more than just an accidental symbol. It is not clear what the *musi* and *mutuli* are doing in the hut. Madzwara may have used them to make food and/or medicine for the imprisoned king. The bottles, containers and portions on the shelf that is to the right of the hut suggests that the *musi* and *mutuli* may have partly been for crushing herbs. Credence is lent to this explanation by the fact that Madzwara objects to taking Thovele to hospital arguing that “Your heart is a doctor. The forest is the best healer. Remember that.” Whatever the explanation, it is clear that the *musi/mutuli* is an important signifier in the narrative of change and sublation in *Elelwani*.

Crown

A crown is normally worn on the head, as visible proof of regal authority. As metonym, the crown is a referent for royal power. In *Elelwani*, the physical crown is not a headdress at all, but a black shiny pebble that is swallowed and, as such, remains invisible. The crown is at the centre of the plot. Thovele has swallowed the crown, leading to Makhadzi and Ratshihule imprisoning him in the forbidden hut until such a time he is willing to pass it on to them. Thovele, however, refuses to give up the pebble. The interlopers cannot, however, rip the crown out of Thovele’s belly because power is supposed to be handed over voluntarily. Swallowing the crown is therefore a form of safekeeping.

Pic 21
Thovele receives the crown from his ailing father, with instructions to swallow it

The fact that the crown is a mere pebble that has to be swallowed for safekeeping is significant because it locates power in the body of the human agent. By locating power in the human body, power becomes generalised, anonymised and accessible to ordinary beings. Anyone could have swallowed the pebble. Any stomach could house the pebble, whether Madzwara’s, Mabada’s, Tshisevhe’s, Vele’s or in any one the community members’ bellies. Moreover, the pebble cannot be ripped out of the stomach violently. This puts a check on the power hungry. Even the sovereigns (Agamben, 1998) have to seek the consent of the governed before grabbing power for themselves. Makhadzi and Ratshihule resort to punishing Thovele’s body in order to get at the pebble, but are unable to get at his will, spirit or soul. Their hope is that by punishing and torturing the body, they may break the will. Torture is for them a way of manufacturing consent.

Pic 22

Elelwani gets the crown from King Thovele's limp hand

The crown is, at one level, a symbol of the inalienable and unbreakable human will, spirit or soul, which wicked people and sinister agendas cannot touch, however hard they try. The crown, once swallowed, is inalienable, despite the body's suffering and deprivation. It cannot be sold or bought, even if the tortured party is in so much pain that he or she just wants to give up, let go and surrender the pebble. At another level, the crown symbolises the heritage that Elelwani is bound to protect and preserve. This is the essence of the call and response folk ditty that she sings with Thovele:

O, Elelwani Queen of Mine
 My honourable Wife
 Our land of Venda
 You must never sell it
 This land is our heritage
 And for our children
 I hope you understand me
 The wishes of the dead must never be broken
 This land is our heritage

Pic 23

This shot, which follows the shot of a spider catching a butterfly in its web, suggests that Venda land is already being sold off and turned into private commercial farms and plantations.

Pic 24

After Thovele’s death, Elelwani looks out across the land Venda, and it appears as if parts of the land already been sold off and turned into private commercial farms, tea estates and plantations.

Similar to the inalienable will, heritage is inalienable. It neither can be bought nor sold, given away nor auctioned. This inalienability locates both the human will and heritage (land) in the public realm and the public interest. The crown is to be found in the bodies and bellies of all the people of Venda, at the same time. This is against attempts by Makhadzi and Ratshihule to obtain the crown for their own selfish uses. Already one can see that logging is going on in the sacred forest and part of Venda land has been turned into private commercial, plantation and estate farming. As he stands up to go after being unmasked, Ratshihule’s gaze at the people is one of unveiled contempt.

Forest

The forest in *Elelwani* is represented as a living institution. It has a number of uses. For Elelwani and Madzwara, it protects and offers opportunities for reflection, knowledge and contemplation, as well as also being the place where secrets are revealed and identities are unmasked. It is in the silence and protective camouflage of forest that Elelwani asks Madzwara “Who are you?” and where he is eventually compelled to reveal his identity as “The Shepherd”. The forest is thus a place of unmasking. It is not possible that the old man would have revealed his true identity in the village or at the royal court, where the likelihood of surveillance and death remained. While being led by the hand in the forest, Elelwani is told for the first time about the past, and about the existence and politics of the crown. In a sense, she is being mentored and trained, with the forest being a canvas onto which the lessons are written. The shock on Elelwani’s face as she is being led through the forest shows how new all this knowledge is to her. While Madzwara is telling her about the conspiracy against Thovele, Elelwani keeps turning her head in fear. Not once, however, does Madzwara show any fear in the forest. He speaks in a firm and confident tone, suggesting that he is at home in the forest than outside it. He also seems to know the way without any effort.

Madzwara leading Elelwani through the forest, back to the forbidden heart

The meaning of the forest is heightened by the fact that it is the sacred resting ground for kings, where fabled sacred white lions roam. It is in this sacred world that Elelwani gets her knowledge about the true nature of Venda heritage from Thovele and where she sees the rare bird, the Gwede. The Gwede normally exists only in people's memories and children stories. However, memory is revealed to her as living and non-esoteric, because she is able to literally see and hear the Gwede. The significance of her name – Elelwani, which means memory or to remember – is made clear for the first time in the forest. Even more salient is the fact that the sacred forest is traditionally out of bounds for women. Elelwani makes history by becoming the first woman to walk in it, and to know its secrets and knowledges. For instance, it is here that she encounters the sacred white lion.

Pic 26

Pic 27

The symbolism of the sacred forest is woven and layered with that of the sacred bird and the sacred lion

Elelwani's ability to hear and see the Gwede, and to see and feed the lion, proves at least three things. Firstly, it signals that she has gained acceptance into the world of the ancestors. Secondly, it is proof that she has become the bridge between two worlds: that of the ancestors and of current and coming generations. Thirdly, because she has learnt the knowledges of the sacred forest and become the bridge between the past and the present, she is now the memory of the people. Once more, the significance of Elelwani's name becomes even clearer. Fourthly, Elelwani has broken barriers that were out of bounds for women. The forest, in the final analysis, becomes a space for the enactment of a reconstructed modernity in the sense of being the place where change and transformation origin. That is, the forest is a modern cultural institution. This goes against the standard symbolism of forests as primitive. The

forest in Elelwani is where one goes to if they want to change or be changed by its truths so as to enter the modern world as full human beings.

Pic 28, 29

The weather turns immediately after the graduation party as the emissaries arrive

There is a further aspect to the modernity of the forest. The forest – as the source of healing plants – is characterised as the alternative to the modern hospital. Madzwara animatedly objects to taking Thovele to hospital. He believes that the king would certainly die there. He suggests that “modern” hospitals have “no heart”, whereas Elelwani has a heart. Madzwara parodies the confidence in which “modern” hospitals are held, suggesting that hospitals may physically cure but actually do not heal people in the sense of giving them back their lives. Only hearts can heal. The forest is not only imaged as being a hospital in and of itself, but also as a beating heart, or life. Taking Thovele outside the forest to a hospital would thus merely serve to take the life out of him. In objecting to the hospital, Madzwara once again suggests that it is the modern hospital that is primitive and needs to be transformed by a transfusion of “heart”. Lessons of “heart” lie in the metaphoric heart of the forest.

Pic 30

The forbidden hut. Elelwani discovers the forbidden hut on her way to the village well

The forest’s meaningfulness as giver of life is amplified by the presence of the forbidden hut at the edge of the forest. It is significant that the forbidden hut is placed at the border of the village and the forest, but without belonging to either. The hut belongs neither to the world of the living nor that of the dead. Thovele’s banishment and imprisonment in the forbidden hut is especially significant in this sense that he is not allowed to belong to either world. It is a place of absolute torture. Makhadzi and Ratshihule want him alive in order for him to voluntarily pass over the crown that is in his stomach. However, they also want him dead in order to exclude the possibility of Thovele passing on the crown to someone like Elelwani. In other words, they want him dead *and* alive at the same time. The hut thus cannot be deeper in

the forest where it will become a part of the sacred world, or deeper in the village where it would make public the sinister machinations of Makhadzi and Ratshihule, and lead to unmasking and a possible revolt of the people as happened at the end.

Pic 31

The lock on the door to the forbidden hut

The forbidden hut is thus only a no-place or a non-place, much like Dante's characterisation of limbo in *Divine Comedia*. The forbidden hut is a place of eternal abeyance and stagnation. It has no life, self, memory or identity. By being imprisoned in the forbidden hut, Thovele is simultaneously prevented from being human or ancestor, has no identity except that of the mask he wears, and has no access to the memory either of the village or the sacred forest. It takes Elelwani's presence of "heart" (as opposed to just presence of mind) to bring Thovele back to life. That is, he is finally able to die. By dying and passing on the crown, the king has lived on as the white lion. Elelwani has cleared and unblocked the passage between the two worlds that Makhadzi and Ratshihule had – through the forbidden hut – gated and literally locked with a thick chain and padlock. In a sense, the transformations that happen in the forest and at its edge mirror the transformations happening to and in Elelwani's character, such that it may not be illogical to suggest indeed that Elelwani is, herself, *the forest*.

Conclusion

This article has examined the symbolism of butterfly, mask, *musi* and *mutuli*, mother hen, crown, and forest in order to demonstrate that WaLuruli's use of symbols in *Elelwani* reflects a unique mode of aesthetic innovation based on weaves, layers and densities of symbols that produce "doubling" in the film. These six sets of symbols are woven and layered together with symbols of rain and mist, sacred lion, mirror, *Gwede* bird, and *domba*. The article concludes that relationships of "doubling" are the centrepieces of WaLuruli's aesthetic work in *Elelwani*. WaLuruli expressly rejects the standard use of symbolism, such that symbols no longer create meaning in and of themselves – by dint of merely being symbols – or draw attention to themselves but are made into fragments of "trans-symbolic" acts. Symbols in *Elelwani* do not start out as symbols, or even end up as symbols. Rather, symbols are disposable. To these trans-symbolisms we attach, de-attach and re-attach meanings at will. Not only is there nothing intrinsically symbolic about symbols, but symbols are meant to disappear in order that humans appear.

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