REVUE HYBRIDES (RALSH)

e-ISSN 2959-8079 / ISSN-L 2959-8060

NUMÉRO SPÉCIAL 6, OCTOBRE 2026

L'AFRIQUE CONTEMPORAINE À L'ÉPREUVE DES MUTATIONS CULTURELLES, SOCIALES ET ÉDUCATIVES (I)

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COUVERTURE : © Revue Hybrides (RALSH)
MISE EN PAGE ET MAQUETTAGE : Revue Hybrides (RALSH)
NUMERO SPECIAL 6, OCTOBRE 2026
L'Afrique contemporaine à l'épreuve des mutations culturelles, sociales et éducatives
PUBLIE LE : 31/10/2026
URL site web: https://revuehybrides.org/num-special-06-octobre-2026/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23716434

TRADUCTIONS : Joël ÉCHITCHI TEKA (Université de Maroua, Cameroun) & Christian TIAKO YOUADJEU (MINESEC, Cameroun)

INDEXATION

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e-ISSN 2959-8079 / ISSN-L 2959-8060
https://revuehybrides.org/
infos@revuehybrides.org / revuehybrides@gmail.com
impact factor : 4.002

Version imprimée en France & Cameroun
Printed in France & Cameroon
Impreso en Francia & Camerún

REVUE DES ARTS, LETTRES ET SCIENCES DE L'HOMME (RALSH)
Arts, Letters and Human Sciences Journal
Publication semestrielle (Décembre/Mai) & des Hors-série (numéaux spéciaux)
Éditée par l'Association PEA2 Cameroun (Dépôt légal : N°002/RDA/F.32/SASC)

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REVUE HYBRIDES (RALSH)
e-ISSN 2959-8079 / ISSN-L 2959-8060
NUM. SPÉCIAL 06 (OCTOBRE 2026)

An Ecocritical Study of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925) as a Romantic Novel

Étude écocritique du roman romantique Chaka (1925) de Thomas Mofolo

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Résumé : Cette étude propose une analyse écocritique du roman historique *Chaka* de Thomas Mofolo, une œuvre souvent reconnue pour ses dimensions historiques, mythopoïétiques et politiques, mais rarement examinée sous l'angle de sa pertinence environnementale. Bien que *Chaka* ait été étudié à travers les prismes postcolonial, psychanalytique et culturel, l'imaginaire écologique du roman et la représentation de l'environnement naturel comme une force active façonnant la trajectoire tragique du protagoniste demeurent largement inexplorés. L'étude s'inscrit dans le champ de l'écocritique africaine et s'appuie sur les apports théoriques de Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard ainsi que de théoriciens africains tels que Cajetan Iheka et Byron Caminero-Santangelo; avec pour objectif de démontrer que Mofolo élabore un récit écologique empreint de spiritualité et profondément ancré dans la cosmologie autochtone. L'étude fait recourt à la méthode qualitative et une analyse textuelle pour examiner comment le paysage du roman représente la nature et l'écologie du point de vue symbolique et thématique. Elle démontre l'interaction de l'environnement en tant qu'une entité dynamique et morale avec l'arrivée de Chaka au pouvoir. Elle explore l'aliénation spirituelle de Chaka et son éventuelle démise. Les résultats de l'étude nous éclairent sur les dimensions écologiques du roman. L'étude contribue ainsi à une compréhension plus globale de la littérature africaine qui apparait désormais comme un dépositaire d'une éthique environnementale et d'une philosophie culturelle. Le présent travail de recherche inscrit *Chaka* dans le champ disciplianire des humanités environnementales; ce faisant, elle offre une fenêtre permettant de réinterpréter les thèmes du pouvoir, du mythe et de la destruction au sein de la tradition littéraire africaine.
Mots-clé : Écocritique, Paysage, Pouvoir, Mythe, Littérature africaine

Abstract: This study presents an ecocritical analysis of the seminal historical novel, *Chaka* by Thomas Mofolo, a novel frequently recognized for its historical, mythopoeic and political dimensions but rarely interrogated for its environmental consciousness. Although *Chaka* has been examined through postcolonial, psychoanalytic, and cultural lenses, the novel's ecological imagination and its portrayal of the natural environment as an active force in shaping the protagonist's tragic trajectory remain largely unexplored. This study aims to position itself within the evolving field of African ecocriticism and draws on theoretical insights from Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, and African theorists such as Cajetan Iheka and Byron Caminero-Santangelo. The paper argues that Mofolo crafts a spiritually charged ecological narrative deeply rooted in indigenous cosmology. The study draws its underpinning from qualitative textual analysis to examine how the landscape, nature, and ecology are symbolically and thematically represented in the novel. The paper explores how the novelist uses the environment not as a setting but as a dynamic and moral entity and its interaction with Chaka's rise to power, his spiritual alienation and ultimate decline. Since the study foregrounds the ecological dimensions of the novel, its contribution manifest itself in a more inclusive understanding of African literature which reveals itself as a repository of environmental ethics and cultural philosophy. The paper also positions the novel within the broader discourse of environmental humanities which gives an essential tool with which some themes such as power, myth, and destruction are reinterpreted in African literary tradition.
Keywords: Ecocriticism, Landscape, Power, Myth, African Literature

Reçu le : 26/08/2026 ● **Publié le :** 31/10/2026

Introduction

Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925) stands as a pivotal text in the African literary canon, combining history, myth, morality and political allegory to dramatize the legendary rise and fall of the Zulu conqueror, Chaka. Traditionally interpreted through nationalist, psychological and mythic lenses, the novel has been described by Scheub (1975) as an African epic of tragic dimension, cast in the mode of myth and morality. Similarly, wa Thiong'o (1986) lauded *Chaka* as a literary revolution that established African historical imagination as heroic. Yet, despite the range of scholarship, *Chaka*'s environmental imagination, the way Mofolo constructs nature as an ethical, spiritual, and cosmological agent remains critically underexplored. The current student purports to address this lacuna bydrawing on ecocritic theoretical framework to answer the following questions: in what ways does *Chaka* portray the natural environment as a spiritual and moral force that influences human destiny? How does Mofolo's representation of nature in *Chaka* reflect indigenous African cosmology and ecological ethics? What does an ecocritical reading of *Chaka* reveal about the intersection of ecological thought and historical narrative in African literature? This study responds to that oversight by examining *Chaka* through the emerging lens of African ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism, as Glotfelty (1996, p. xviii) defines it, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," while Buell (1995, pp. 7–8) emphasizes that "a text can be said to be environmental… if the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest human accountability." In the African context, Iheka (2018) argues that ecocriticism must be decolonized to account for African cosmologies, indigenous land ethics and oral traditions; for him, African literature offers a site where ecological consciousness intersects with spiritual and historical dimensions. Caminero-Santangelo (2014) expands this by insisting that African environmentalism is embedded within postcolonial concerns and must be read through the lenses of local socio-ecological realities.

Traditional ecocriticism has drawn heavily from European Romanticism, particularly its emphasis on nature as sublime, spiritual and redemptive. For Bate (1991), there is a link between Romantic poets and early environmental consciousness. He goes on to note that Romantic ecology sees nature not as object but as community. However, one would note that the Romantic understanding of nature which puts emphasis on virgin wilderness and solitary subjectivity often clashes with African views of nature as communal, ancestral and interactive. In this line Abrams (1971) opines that Romanticism elevates nature to "the mirror of the self," (p11) whereas in African cosmology, nature is not only a mirror but also a voice, spirit and judge as demonstrated in the novel under study. In *Chaka*, the landscape is active, it is like a person since it watches, warns, and punishes.

Therefore, this study defines ecocriticism within the prism of culture, a definition which surpasses the Eurocentric binaries between nature and culture. Our working definition of ecocriticism revolves as the critical exploration of how African literature constructs nature which is understood as a cosmological force, shaping ethical, political and historical trajectories. In Mofolo's *Chaka*, this is manifested in the wilderness, the ancestral spaces and the symbolic interplay between humans, animals, and spirit forces. Surprisingly, there is an overwhelming scholarly neglect of *Chaka*'s environmental imagination. Though scholars like Kunene (1979) and Gérard (1980) have explored the novel's moral and mythic structure, they have largely overlooked how the environment operates as a narrative and ethical force. This absence limits our understanding of the novel's philosophical depth, particularly its portrayal of power, transgression, and cosmic justice. This study, thus, offers a comprehensive ecocritical analysis of *Chaka*, situating the novel within African-centred environmental theory. By doing so, the research contributes to African ecocriticism, a field that, according to

Caminero-Santangelo (2014), seeks to "recover African voices in global environmental discourse" (p.5). Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its decolonial re-reading of *Chaka*, not only as a political or mythic narrative, but as an ecological parable. In an era of climate change and ecological degradation, African literature's spiritual and communal vision of nature offers urgently environment-friendly needed ethical paradigms. This research, consequently, reclaims *Chaka* as a work of ecological imagination—one that dramatizes the entanglement of nature, power and destiny in African cosmology.

Recent scholarship on African ecocriticism continues to widen its attention to ecocriticism such as: ecological agency, indigenous knowledge and the relationship between environmental interrogations and the issue of postcolonial experience. Adeniyi and Onanuga (2024, p. 263) foreground the relationship among language, literature and environmental criticism from African perspectives, while Keat and Adugna (2024, p. 2) examine ecological proximity and the nonhuman agency in postcolonial African novels. Egya (2026, p.1) also identifies newer directions in African ecocriticism, including decolonial approaches and attention to oralities and other cultural practices. Read alongside this scholarship, the present study contributes to a text-centred interpretation of Mofolo's *Chaka*, a historical novel that merits further consideration within African environmental literary studies. To critically analyze the novel, the research seeks to achieve the following objectives: to examine how Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* represents the natural environment as an active moral and spiritual force within the narrative, To explore the ecological implications of power, violence and destiny in *Chaka*, within the framework of African ecocriticism and to contribute to African environmental literary studies by offering a culturally grounded ecocritical interpretation of *Chaka*.

In a related development, the emergence of ecocriticism in the 1990s marked a pivotal shift in literary studies toward environmental awareness. Glotfelty (1996), in the foundational volume *The Ecocriticism Reader*, defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xviii). Buell (1995) further refines this by asserting that for a work to be ecocritical, "the nonhuman environment must be present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (p. 7). Early ecocriticism which mainly focused on Western literary traditions, often tends to put in oblivion non-Western environment-oriented literary works. Postcolonial ecocriticism emerges to correct this lacuna. That is why, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) argue that to better understand the environmental degradation in formerly colonized societies, one has to acknowledge what colonialism did to those societies and how colonial heritage continues to shape those landscapes (p. 2). They advocate a form of ecocriticism that interrogates "the politics of environmental exploitation and resistance in postcolonial contexts" (p. 2). Interestingly, African literature with its deep rootedness in land, community and oral tradition, offers fertile ground for ecological inquiry.

Consequently, Caminero-Santangelo (2014) urges scholars to consider African texts not just through a Western ecological lens but through their own environmental and cosmological frameworks, stressing that "ecological degradation and human oppression are deeply interconnected in African narratives" (p. 4). Similarly, Iheka (2018) promotes what he terms "African ecocriticism," which emphasizes indigenous ecological knowledge, spiritual ecology and communal ethics: "African literature presents a rich archive of ecological thought shaped by oral traditions, colonial violence, and environmental justice concerns" (p. 9). Despite these advancements, Mofolo's *Chaka* has seldom been explored through this environmental lens. Critical scholarship has traditionally focused on the novel's mythic structure, moral vision and political implications. Scheub (1975), to begin with, analyses *Chaka* as an epic rooted in oral tradition and morality. In a similar vein, Gérard (1980) decodes the novel as a meticulous contemplation and thoughtful meditation on leadership, fate, and

cultural identity. Additionally, Kunene (1979) views the narrative as reflective of Zulu heroic culture, while wa Thiong'o (1986, p.3) emphasizes its mytho-political resistance to colonial historiography and European cultural imperialism.

However, nature in *Chaka*, as a symbol of cosmic justice, ancestral communication and moral order remains largely underexamined. Most studies consider the environment merely as setting, not as a participant in the ethical drama. This is a significant gap, particularly given the novel's consistent portrayal of natural elements as signs, omens and even punishments tied to Chaka's transgressions. Furthermore, much ecocritical attention in African literature focuses on contemporary environmental crises—such as oil spillage in the Niger Delta (as in Helon Habila's Oil on Water) or ecological degradation in urban narratives leaving classical or historical African texts like *Chaka* underrepresented.

The current study draws its insights from qualitative research approach, specifically using a textual analysis method grounded in ecocritical theory. In addition, the research is interpretive in nature and it aims to reveal the ecological dimensions of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*. The paper further explore how environmental symbolism and indigenous cosmologies inform the narrative and character development. The methodology reflects the understanding that literary texts are not merely artistic creations but also ideological and ecological artifacts (Bressler, 2007). A qualitative and ecocritical methodology is appropriate for this study because *Chaka* is rich in allegorical, mythic and symbolic elements that demand interpretive sensitivity rather than quantification. Moreover, the way the text is grounded with spiritual and ecological foundations reflects local knowledge systems. These systems can be better understood through a critical methodology which is holistic and culturally grounded. As Garrard (2012) asserts, ecocriticism is inherently interdisciplinary and interpretive, making it suitable for engaging texts that intertwine environmental, cultural and ethical themes (p.14).

The rationale behind the choice of this approach relies in the fact *Chaka* cannot be read as merely a historical or political text but a narrative that is deeply embedded in a cultural ecology whereby tensions between humanity and the land are revealed. As noted by Caminero-Santangelo (2014), "African environmental literature often resists Western dichotomies of nature and culture, offering instead an intertwined relationship between the two" (p. 92). Mofolo's novel exemplifies this entanglement, making an ecocritical method particularly apt to the exploration of the text. Furthermore, to probe deeper the exploration of Mofolo's narrative techniques and ideological subtexts, the study uses a qualitative textual analysis which is interpretive and non-numerical in nature. The symbolic function of nature—trees, mountains, rivers, deserts—is better understood through careful literary exegesis rather than quantitative coding. In a similar vein, the study employs a descriptive-analytical design, focusing on close textual reading and ecocritical interpretation. This allows for an in-depth examination of how *Chaka* constructs, represents and critiques the human-environment relationship within an African cultural and spiritual context. The design also supports an exploration of the narrative's environmental ethics, mythopoeic structure and symbolic use of nature.

Then, in terms of data source and data collection, the primary data source is *Chaka*, originally written in Sesotho and translated into English by Daniel Kunene. The text is analysed for symbolic uses of nature, representations of spiritual and sacred landscapes, prophetic ecological imagery and hematic interrelations between environment and human action. In addition to the primary text, secondary sources such as critical essays, journal articles, books and scholarly interpretations of ecocriticism, African spirituality and postcolonial literature provide the contextual and theoretical support for analysis. Thus, the study adopts a textual analysis methodology grounded in ecocritical and postcolonial theoretical paradigms. Key analytical foci include symbolic and prophetic representations of landscape; the moral function of ecological metaphors and omens; intersections between

Chaka's psychological evolution and environmental imagery and indigenous cosmological interpretations of nature and fate Through this framework, the study argues that *Chaka* represents nature as a dynamic, spiritual force that participates in the ethical structure of the novel. By reading the text eco-critically, this study positions *Chaka* not just as a mythic or political narrative but as one of the foundational African ecological texts.

1. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This study is anchored in the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism, with vital contributions from postcolonial ecocriticism and African indigenous ecological thought. Together, these approaches provide a nuanced lens for interpreting Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* as a text in which nature is a symbolic moral and spiritual force entangled with the protagonist's rise and fall.

1.1. Ecocriticism : Western foundation

Ecocriticism, as first defined by Glotfelty, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1996, p. xviii). This theory emerged in the 1990s. While it primarily developed from Western environmental movements, ecocriticism focuses on how literary works mirror and shape people's awareness on ecological issues. Buell (1995) expands the field by proposing that "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (p. 7). He emphasizes the role of literature in interrogating human responsibility for environmental harm and moral imagination. To critically understand how *Chaka* uses nature not merely as a backdrop but as something imbues with ethical and narrative agency, the aforementioned foundational definitions are critical to this study. The natural world in the novel functions as a harbinger of fate and a mirror of moral decay, aligning with Buell's idea of ecocriticism as ethically engaged literature.

1.2. Postcolonial Ecocriticism

While foundational Ecocriticism was largely Western, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) critique its Universalist assumptions and propose postcolonial Ecocriticism, which examines the overlapping legacies of imperialism and ecological degradation (p. 2). They argue that in postcolonial texts, nature is often represented as a contested space shaped by histories of dispossession, exploitation and resistance (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 2). This theoretical strand is particularly relevant to *Chaka*, where landscapes are not neutral but deeply inscribed with spiritual, historical and political meanings. No wonder, *Chaka* resists colonial dichotomies of nature and culture by presenting the African environment as alive with sacred power and ancestral presence. As the narrative unfolds, one can contemplate how the ecological setting of the novel becomes a moral stage on which Chaka's destiny unfolds, reflecting the culturally specific understandings of land as communal and sacred.

1.3. African Ecocriticism and indigenous environmental ethics

Critical to this study is the understanding of African ecocriticism which a number of scholars have attempted to cast its saliency within the African imagination. Iheka (2018) and Caminero-Santangelo (2014), to start with, advocate for an African-centred ecocriticism that foregrounds indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual cosmologies and socio-ecological interconnectedness. Then, Iheka (2018) argues that "African literature presents a rich archive of ecological thought shaped by oral traditions, colonial violence and environmental justice concerns" (p. 9). Furthermore, Caminero-Santangelo (2014) adds that African ecocriticism must address both environmental degradation and social oppression, as these are intertwined in African experiences of land and community (p. 7). The natural world that is depicted in the

novel cannot be viewed as a passive scenery; it reveals the Zulu world view with its moral and metaphysical codes. Elements of nature such as sacred forests, rivers and mountains becomes animated spaces where ancestral voices speak, prophecies are revealed and cosmic justice is rendered. This aligns with what Davies (1994) calls "the spatial epistemologies of African cosmology," where land and spirit are indivisible (p. 113).

1.4. Moral ecology and the tragic hero

The study also engages the idea of moral ecology, where nature mirrors or responds to human morality. Buell (2001) emphasizes literature's capacity for "ecological moral imagination"—the portrayal of nature as an ethical presence (p. 15). *Chaka* evidences this by showing how nature punishes or foreshadows Chaka's moral failings. Interestingly enough, natural happenings such as droughts and dark skies, and prophetic animals coincide with moments of spiritual disruption, suggesting an ecological symmetry between human actions and environmental conditions. This moral ecology is deepened by the tragic structure of *Chaka*. When we draw on theories of the tragic hero from Aristotle and African oral traditions, one can see how Mofolo crafts a protagonist whose inner disintegration is mirrored by his estrangement from the land and its spiritual forces. As Chaka consolidates power through violence and betrayal, nature becomes more ominous and distant with a narrative choice that reflects the ecological dimensions of his tragedy.

2. Discussion

2.1 General overview of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*

Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (first published in 1925) is a seminal work of African literature that blends history, myth and fiction to chronicle the rise and tragic fall of the Zulu warrior-king Chaka Zulu. Written in Sesotho and later translated into English, *Chaka* stands as a pioneering text that reflects the early 20th-century African literary imagination. The narrative follows the protagonist's journey. A journey of uneasy youth whereby Chaka endures rejection and suffering while he ironically rises as a powerful and feared military leader. Central to *Chaka* resides the exploration of the hero's psychological transformation: from a heroic figure seeking justice and recognition to a tyrannical ruler consumed by ambition, supernatural influences and a relentless thirst for power.

The novel draws its essence from oral tradition and African cosmology while it incorporates some prophetic elements littered with ancestral spirits and magical realism. Mofolo's portrayal of Chaka is complex and ambivalent. The protagonist is admired for his strength and leadership. While people admire Chaka's greatness, he is depicted as a tragic figure whose descent into violence and despotism somehow overshadow his grandeur. This duality lends the novel a Shakespearean quality, aligning it with classical tragic narratives. At the stylistic level, the novel displays some lyrics and symbols which work as moralizing elements; and this reflects Christian ethical influences. But, the narrative as a whole remains grounded in indigenous cultural frameworks.

Chaka may not be read as merely a historical account but a deep contemplation of the nature of power, destiny and human fallibility. As a foundational African novel, it has provoked diverse critical interpretations ranging from colonial and postcolonial readings to psychological, mythological and ecocritical analyses. Its enduring significance lies in its rich thematic content and its role in shaping African literature's early engagement with identity, leadership and the consequences of unchecked ambition.

2.2 The Intricate Link between *Chaka* and Ecocriticism

Mofolo's *Chaka* constitutes a literary tapestry where history, myth, cosmology and psychology are woven into a coherent narrative of rise and decline. A meticulous reading of the novel through the lens of ecocriticism reveals how the narrative transcends its socio-

political and historical framework. It show how the narrative appears as a profound meditation on ecological disruption, spiritual alienation and the human quest for power at the expense of environmental and moral harmony. This section explores the alignment between the narrative's thematic progression and the study's core objectives to analyse the representation of nature, spiritual ecology and human transgression and how these culminate in the tragic fall of the titular character.

In many African traditions, the landscape is sacred and often inhabited by ancestral spirits or divine forces. Through African cosmology, the universe is perceived as an interdependent triad of the divine, humanity and nature. According to Mbiti (1991), Africans are deeply religious and that religiosity is embedded in their relationship with the environment (p. 2). He goes on to opine that nature is not inert; it is living, sacred and dialogic (p. 2). Mofolo's early portrayal of Chaka's environment reflects this cosmological reverence for the natural world. The forests, rivers, caves and mountains are imbued with ancestral presence and divine energy, forming what Moore and Nelson (2016) describe as "sacred ecology" that is a spiritual reading of land and life as mutually constitutive (p. 1009). Mofolo echoes this in his descriptions of the wild spaces where Chaka encounters his fate. The text reads: "there was a very deep forest, which was dark even in the daytime. It was said that no birds sang there, and no animals entered it" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 41). This forest is not simply a geographical location but also a threshold to the supernatural. The silence and darkness in the forest point to some sense of worship, this makes the nature appears as a spiritual portal. Therefore, nature is not a passive element of the novel but something charged with mystical energy.

Correspondingly, as the narrative unfolds, the reader contemplates how the novelist emphasizes the sentient qualities of the landscape. Nature becomes personified as it watches, reacts and remembers. This aspect is tackled by ecocriticism theorists where they often present the landscape as a character with ethical and narrative significance. Garrard (2012) asserts that ecocriticism interrogates the assumption that landscapes are passive, revealing their active role in shaping human consciousness and fate (p.14). This assertion reverberates with the following passage: "the ground turned red with blood, and the river carried away the cries of the dying" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 122). From this excerpt we can infer that nature reports human violence that it endures and become an active observer of what is going around. The river becomes both witness and mourner as its flow metaphorically carries the weight of transgression. In doing so, nature reveals that there is no clear cut between what is human and non-human as the two interact. This reinforces the relationship that Chaka ultimately violates.

Accordingly, *Chaka* can be positioned within African precolonial eco-conscious framework. As the protagonist of the novel, *Chaka* is firstly portrayed as in tune with this order, especially during his formative years in the wilderness where he encounters the mystic Isanusi and undergoes transformation. These natural environments act as crucibles for spiritual insight and leadership initiation. However, the novel further portrays nature as a mirror of moral order.

Throughout the novel, nature reflects the moral and spiritual climate of human action. When Chaka begins his reign of terror, the natural world shows signs of imbalance and defilement; and "the rivers flowed with blood, and the vultures fed until they could no more… the earth itself seemed to groan beneath the weight of the slain" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 95). This description embodies the ecocritical idea that ecological collapse can parallel moral decay. Mofolo personifies/anthropomorphizes the landscape when he suggests that like human beings, nature experiences suffering. This understanding concurs with the African cosmological view where land is sentient and responsive to human action.

In a similar vein, the protagonist's disconnection from the spiritual-ecological nexus coincides with his growing tyranny. Chaka's fall cannot be interpreted solely as something linked to his personal flaw but as indicative a larger cosmological disequilibrium. Mofolo

shows that when the sacred ecology is violated, disaster follows. This reflects Leopold's (1949) land ethic: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community" (p. 224-225). Chaka does the exact opposite where he tears it apart; the following excerpt instantiates the anxious breakdown within the natural order in the novel:

> The land was full of fear and the people were sad; the rivers of the land were no longer heard singing, and the birds had forgotten their songs. It was as if the earth itself mourned. (Mofolo, 1925, p.146)

This spiritual and ecological alienation forms the crux of Chaka's tragedy. The protagonist's ambitions challenge inherited norms, culturally shared ethics and environmental sacredness. As a consequence, the land, which was once a source of identity and power, turns into an accuser and destroyer. His downfall is therefore a cautionary tale that is a tragic meditation on the costs of ecological disintegration and spiritual betrayal.

Notwithstanding, the novelist frequently uses nature as an imagery to symbolize death and the consequences of moral corruption. For instance, the figure of the vulture, a recurring motif becomes a symbol of judgment and decay. Indeed, the omniscient narrator relates that "the vultures that hovered over his kingdom were no longer birds of the sky; they were birds of the grave" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 112). These birds as elements of nature symbolize the extension of divine justice; that is, they are not just natural scavengers; they indicate the ecological consequences of spiritual imbalance. Then, the narrative shifts as Chaka's relationship with the environment becomes utilitarian and violent. This shift symbolizes the erosion of spiritual ecology defined by Iheka (2018, p. 6) as the indigenous African framework where human life is lived in communion with nature and ancestral forces. However, Chaka's increasing obsession with domination leads him to violate environmental proscriptions. He goes on to desecrate the environment which saw him grow as a boy into a man. In this direction, Mofolo offers a hauting description:

> "The land cried out with the blood of the people… the wind brought with it the stench of death and desolation." (Mofolo, 1925, p. 119)

This passage reflects a breakdown of ecological and spiritual balance. It illustrates what Buell (2001) calls the "toxic sublime," where the grandeur of power and ambition results in environmental destruction and moral collapse. In this sense, nature embodies animate qualities since it reacts; this echoes the consequences of Chaka's moral transgression. As a consequence, the protagonist's ecological alienation parallels his emotional estrangement. This reinforces the idea that environmental harmony is crucial for societal and individual stability.

Unsurprisingly, the more tyrannical Chaka becomes, the more estranged from the natural world he feels. His separation from nature signals his departure from traditional, community-based leadership into violent despotism. For example, the narrator sadly relates that "even the birds ceased their song when he passed" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 120). This total and strange silence connotes ecological exile. As we know, in African Orature, birdsong often symbolizes harmony and life. Yet, their silence indicates that Chaka has lost the spiritual approval of the land and its creatures. Ultimately, *Chaka* is a novel that embodies what Glotfelty (1996, p. xviii) refers to as literature of environmental consciousness. That is why, Mofolo does not just recount history but also, he critiques the ethical failures that lead to ecological collapse. His narrative warns of the dangers of disconnection from nature, of using the land as a tool for tyranny rather than a source of harmony. Accordingly, when Chaka's story is viewed from an eco-critical angle, it becomes a timeless allegory for human estrangement from the earth. The novel invites a return to indigenous environmental ethics that centers respect, reciprocity and reverence for the sacred in nature. It further showcases wilderness as a space of initiation and identity assertiveness.

Indeed, wilderness is not only a setting for exile but also a space of spiritual formation. In his youth, Chaka is driven into the wilderness, where he learns endurance and vision. The

reader learns that "he [Chaka] wandered in the wilderness, among wild beasts and thorns, and there he learned strength, silence, and endurance" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 28). Nature here has a pedagogical role since it evaluates and helps character to grow. This kind of role can be found in African folktales where nature often serves as a place of moral instruction. Chaka's movement into the wilderness is precipitated by rejection, humiliation, and alienation. Cast out by his father, Senzangakona, and shunned by society, Chaka flees into the unknown, where he finds himself in a terrain both physically perilous and spiritually charged. And, Mofolo writes, "he ran and wandered about alone in the wilderness, weeping and being consumed with grief… no one cared for him" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 31). This moment of solitude marks the beginning of Chaka's symbolic death—the shedding of his previous identity as a powerless and scorned boy.

Interestingly, wilderness becomes for Chaka a space for his initiation. Indeed, Chaka meets the mysterious and powerful sorcerer, Isanusi who becomes his initiator. Then, Chaka's transformation begins with Isanusi's arrival. Mofolo describes Isanusi as a man "who was greatly feared on account of the power of his medicines and magic" (p. 34). It is this character that is Isanusi takes Chaka into the heart of the forest; this trip symbolizes Chaka's walk into the depths of self-discovery and supernatural empowerment. During his journey in the forest, Chaka undergoes some ancestral instructions with mystical rituals under Isanusi's guidance. This works as the protagonist's spiritual initiation which happens in the wilderness. So, the forest becomes a sacred space of rebirth and spiritual empowerment. The text recounts how Chaka is introduced to the idea of greatness through bloodshed, as Isanusi tells him: "You must know that a great man is he who is an eater of men… the greatness of a man is measured by the extent of his cruelty" (p. 38). This ideology, absorbed in the wilderness, redefines Chaka's perception of power, identity and morality.

In addition, the narrative delineates the role of water and rivers as symbolic boundaries**.** In *Chaka*, rivers are frequently depicted as thresholds between worlds, symbolizing transition, danger, and purification. Mofolo draws from African tradition whereby rivers often act as spiritual boundaries. During Chaka's training, water is portrayed as both life-giving and treacherous. This is depicted in the following excerpt: "he crossed the river of death… its waters were black and cold, and it seemed to whisper of things beyond" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 43). The way the river is described reveals it as a liminal location where the protagonist metaphorically and symbolically passes from the world of the living to the world of the dead and vice versa. Thus, from an ecocritical perspective, rivers are not just natural elements but an embodiment of both natural power and metaphysical mystery. As such, the landscape actively participates in Chaka's transformation. As Buell (2001) points out, "rivers in literature often serve to mark narrative and moral transitions" (p. 152). In *Chaka*, this motif is not just metaphorical but culturally rooted in African traditions where rivers are sacred and tied to ancestral spirits and spiritual rites.

Subsequently, Chaka's body metaphorically appears as a site of ecological transformation. Mofolo's portrayal of Chaka's physical and spiritual evolution can be interpreted eco-critically as a metaphor for the landscape itself. As Chaka's body absorbs and reflects the violence of his surroundings, so also the land changes with the wars he wages. The narrator recounts that "his body was like a tree hardened by fire—twisted, dark, and fierce" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 86). This image compares Chaka to scorched earth, a human manifestation of environmental ruin. The metaphor of the burnt tree reveals how Chaka has internalized the destruction he has wrought. As Glotfelty (1996) notes, ecocriticism examines how "human identity is often expressed in terms of landscape" (p. xxiii). This is valid when we consider how Chaka's body, which was once vibrant and youthful, becomes a symbol of defilement and excess. This echoes the degraded and blood-soaked territories he invades. As a consequence, Chaka's body transforms alongside the degradation of the environment surrounding him. All

this deterioration of human body and of nature is happening under the weight of Chaka's uncontrolled ambition and violence.

This points to another thematic concern of the novel namely natural justice and cosmic balance. In the novel, Thomas Mofolo invokes the themes of natural justice and cosmic balance to underscore the moral architecture that governs the universe of the novel. This is delineated by the way the narrative presents Chaka. He is described as a powerful and almost superhuman being. We also understands that whatever he does has some consequences. The reader contemplates how violence, sorcery and tyranny lead to Chaka's rise to power and how this rise is ultimately counterbalanced by his tragic downfall. This illustrates a profound belief in the principles of natural justice and the restoration of cosmic equilibrium. This further typifies one of the ecocritical claims that the novel validates, that is, nature participates in cosmic justice. Chaka's downfall is portrayed not only as political but as spiritual retribution as indicated in the following passage: "the sky darkened, not with clouds, but with the wrath of the heavens" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 121). Thus, the cosmos (as depicted in some Shakespearean plays) becomes a judge, aligning with African cosmologies in which human actions ripple into the cosmic and ecological spheres.

In addition, natural justice in the novel is often portrayed as an unseen force that transcends human institutions. This reflects traditional African beliefs in moral causality and divine retribution. For instance, Chaka's military achievements and political supremacy, which he accomplishes with unethical methods marked by deceit, bloodshed and the violation of human and spiritual laws, gradually alienate him from the very moral foundations that uphold legitimate authority. The narrative makes it clear that such imbalance cannot be sustained indefinitely. As Mofolo writes, "for a long time, he ruled with terror, and the people's hearts were troubled… But a man cannot challenge the gods and live" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 112). This statement captures the inevitability of judgment within the natural and cosmic order.

Furthermore, the novel depicts the interconnectedness of the divine and nature which avails its ecocritical implication. Indeed, Mofolo's narrative suggests that humans, nature and the divine are interconnected. Actions that disturb this balance basically greed, ambition, violence which in essence result in both social and environmental disintegration. This anticipates modern ecocritical themes such as: the need for balance between progress and ecology, the consequences of alienation from nature, and the warning that domination over land leads to destruction, not power. In *Chaka*, the landscape is dynamic and active, it becomes a repository of trauma and it bears the scars of human violence. This is instantiated in how Mofolo emphasizes the alteration of entire regions by war and conquest and how once-prosperous lands are degraded into wastelands. We read that "the fields lay barren, the air smelled of death, and even the birds had fled" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 93). Here, nature itself becomes a witness and victim of historical violence. This aligns with African ecocritical theory, which recognizes the land as a living archive of collective memory. As Mbembe (2001) argues, "the African landscape is inscribed with the legacy of suffering and resistance" (p. 175). This sense of suffering results in the feeling of ecophobia and the fear of the wild**.**

A recurring element in the novel is the fear of the wild — forests, mountains, and vast plains are portrayed with reverence but also terror. This reflects what Estok (2009) terms ecophobia: "the fear or contempt for nature that justifies its domination or destruction" (p. 208). This appears unequivocally stated in the novel and "no one dared enter the Forest of the Spirits, for it was said that those who did were never seen again" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 41). These wild spaces are coded as sacred but dangerous, untamable by human will. In the novel, Chaka's disrespect for these spaces, by entering forests and challenging the gods, can be interpreted as a form of ecophobic defiance. One can further decode his conquest of nature as, paradoxically, a result of both fear and the desire for control. However, the novelist subtly critiques Chaka's attitude by showing the consequences of such defiance: madness, isolation,

and death. In this respect, the novel, *Chaka,* concurs with ecocritical readings that connect environmental degradation to psychological and spiritual deterioration. Thus, environmental destruction causes the collapse of ecological harmony.

In a related development, the reader learns how Mofolo paints a picture of ecological harmony before Chaka's reign of terror; that is, a society in balance with nature. As the novel unfolds, present communities that revere nature, engage in sustainable practices, and respect the rhythms of the land. The narrator recounts that people "lived close to the earth, eating what they planted, drinking from the streams, and hunting only what they needed" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 12). However, Chaka's militaristic state disrupts this harmony since his excessive ambition causes resource extraction, forced migrations, and environmental deterioration. This transition from harmony to chaos illustrates what African ecocritic, Caminero-Santangelo (2014) describes as the "inextricable link between social violence and ecological collapse" (p. 95).

As a consequence, the once-nurturing land becomes a site of fear, barrenness, and death. Mofolo suggests that violence against nature and violence against people is part of the same destructive cycle that is a theme resonant in both African cosmology and modern ecocritical discourse.

Accordingly, ecological violence aligns with the destructive path of conquest in the novel. Mofolo's depiction of Chaka's rise to power is filled with images of environmental destruction, war, and bloodshed. In order words, the novel portrays Chaka's conquests not only as human tragedies but as ecological disasters. One learns how villages are razed, farmlands trampled, and rivers filled with corpses. And, "wherever Chaka passed, he left behind ruin and desolation… the trees were felled, the animals fled, and the people vanished into the wilderness" (Mofolo, 1925, p. 91). This concurs with Buell's (2001) notion that environmental degradation in literature often mirrors moral and political corruption. This state of affairs results from Chaka's imperial ambition which creates a wasteland. This motif which appears common in environmental literature decode the rulers' unethical activities. In this context, Mofolo casts a critical commentary not just on Chaka, but on a broader pattern of any exploitative and ambitious ruler who jeopardize both human well-being and environmental harmony. This ecological interpretation of the novel reveals how imperial processes, even in its African indigenous form, carries environmental consequences on both man and his surroundings.

3. Research findings

The current research as an ecocritical analysis of *Chaka* reveals several key insights into the relationship between literature, environment and indigenous African cosmology. Thomas Mofolo's narrative is not only a political and psychological study of a historical figure, but also a deeply ecological text since it critiques violence, ambition and human estrangement from nature. The following findings emerge from the study:

Firstly**,** the analysis shows that nature functions as a spiritual and moral force within the context of the Zulu culture. Indeed, we can see how the novelist represents nature in the narrative as an active moral presence rather than a passive setting. Natural landscapes such as forests, rivers and mountains are imbued with spiritual significance, and characters' interactions with these environments reflect their moral states. For instance, Chaka's crossing of rivers and entry into sacred forests symbolize his transition into a morally ambiguous realm. This affirms Glotfelty's (1996) assertion that ecocriticism must examine "how nature is represented in literature, and what this representation reveals about the human-nature relationship" (p. xix). Mofolo's spiritualized environment reflects indigenous African cosmologies where the natural world is sacred and interconnected with the divine.

Secondly, the study indicates how the novel portrays human conquest as a cause of ecological devastation. We have found how Mofolo critiques imperial ambition and violent

conquest which are linked to environmental degradation. This is made clear with the link between Chaka's rise to power and the destruction of ecosystems with burned forests, polluted rivers, and degraded and barren fields. This illustrates the ecological consequences of militarism, positioning nature as both a witness and casualty of human excess. This finding aligns with Buell's (2001) idea that environmental degradation in literature often serves as a moral and political allegory, revealing the cost of societal choices and leadership.

Thirdly, the study has found the landscape as a repository of memory and trauma. This is illustrated through Mofolo's descriptions of desolated landscapes after Chaka's wars; and this reveals how nature absorbs and reflects trauma. The study has discovered how villages vanish, wildlife flees, and the air itself seems to carry the scent of death. This suggests that the environment is not only shaped by culture but also records cultural violence. This confirms Caminero-Santangelo's (2014) claim that in African ecocriticism, the land serves as "a text inscribed with social and historical wounds" (p. 91). In *Chaka*, the landscape becomes a mnemonic device, testifying to the destructive cycle of violence and ecological disruption.

Fourthly, fear of the wild reflects ecophobic tendencies**.** The paper has found how the portrayal of forests, rivers, and mountains reveal them as terrifying, mystical spaces; and this highlights a tension between reverence for nature and fear of its power. The finding points at how Chaka's journey into these wild spaces often signifies not harmony but domination. His attempts to control nature are driven by a desire to overcome vulnerability, which ultimately leads to his spiritual disintegration. This echoes Estok's (2009, p. 203) concept of ecophobia, where fear and suspicion of the natural world led to its exploitation and destruction. Mofolo subtly critiques this attitude by showing how Chaka's rejection of ecological and spiritual boundaries culminates in isolation and downfall.

Finally, we have found that the novel depicts some kind of inter-reflection between the body and the land. This can be contemplated through the parallel between Chaka's physical transformation and the destruction of the environment throughout the novel. His once-vibrant body becomes twisted and dark, likened to a scorched tree, reflecting the metaphorical convergence between ecological and human decay. Mofolo uses the body to illustrate the internalization of environmental violence, presenting human identity as entwined with the land. This supports the ecocritical notion that the body can serve as an "ecological metaphor" (Buell, 2001, p. 141), and reflects African literary traditions in which land and body are symbolically fused.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined *Chaka* by Thomas Mofolo through the lens of ecocriticism, unearthing the ecological consciousness embedded within the novel's mythic and historical framework. The ecocritical approach adopted in this research reveals that *Chaka* is not simply a biographical narrative of a legendary Zulu emperor, but a complex allegory that reflects deep anxieties about the disruption of ecological balance, the desecration of sacred spaces, and the ethical consequences of power divorced from cosmological order.

Drawing on the theoretical insights of ecocritics such as Glotfelty (1996), who emphasizes that literature is not only a reflection of human experience but also of the environment in which that experience unfolds, this study demonstrates how Mofolo positions the natural world as a moral and spiritual force. Nature, in *Chaka*, is not silent or passive; it responds to human transgressions, particularly the protagonist's estrangement from the land and the ancestral codes of ecological reverence. As Huggan and Tiffin (2010) assert, postcolonial ecocriticism must interrogate how colonized subjects relate to the environment, especially within contexts where land is imbued with spiritual and communal significance. Mofolo's narrative exemplifies this relationship by presenting nature as a participant in Chaka's fate-one that signals spiritual decline and ecological disintegration.

Furthermore, the study aligns with Huggan's (2009, p. 11) notion of "green postcolonialism," which considers how indigenous worldviews challenge Western binaries of nature versus culture. Mofolo's depiction of the sacred forest, the ancestral spirits, and the mythical figure of Isanusi reflect a cosmology in which nature is both animate and sacred. This indigenous epistemology contrasts sharply with the anthropocentric worldview that Chaka adopts in his quest for domination, a shift that eventually catalyses his downfall. The forest's silence, once symbolic of wisdom and spiritual clarity, becomes ominous and foreboding, signalling Chaka's moral and environmental alienation.

In addition, this study contributes to existing scholarship by filling a notable gap in the interpretation of *Chaka*. Previous readings have focused predominantly on the novel's political, historical, and psychological dimensions (Kunene, 1989; Gikandi, 2004), with limited attention paid to its environmental ethics. By foregrounding ecocritical perspectives, this research elevates the ecological undertones of Mofolo's work and emphasizes the interconnectedness of land, power, and morality in African literary traditions. This study therefore presents *Chaka* as one of the pioneering eco-spiritual texts, whose narrative examines both the tragedy of ambition and the consequences of ecological and spiritual rupture.

Furthermore, *Chaka* offers a timeless meditation on the consequences of violating the natural order and rejecting the ancestral ecological wisdom that once guided communal life. The novel's cautionary tale underscores the need for ecological stewardship grounded in reverence, harmony, and responsibility—a message that resonates profoundly in an era of environmental crises. Mofolo's work, thus, is not only a historical or mythical epic but a profound ecological lament and an urgent plea for spiritual and environmental reawakening.

The study's main contribution lies in the fact that it lays much emphasis on how the novel links landscape, spiritual order, power and collective suffering. It does not claim that *Chaka* is an environmental novel in the contemporary sense; rather, it argues that an ecocritical reading makes visible the environmental meanings within its mythic, historical and moral design. The interpretation is necessarily limited by its reliance on one literary text and on close reading. Future research could compare *Chaka* with other African historical narratives, examine the novel's Sesotho source alongside its English translation, and investigate how specific cultural concepts of land and spirituality shape its ecological imagination.

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