

A Semiotic Exploration of isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa Literary Book Covers and Their Cultural and Religious Impact

Theete, Igneciah Pocia^{1*}, Gobodwana, Anele²

^{1,2} College of Human Sciences, Department of African Languages, University of South Africa, Pretler Street, Muckleneuk, Pretoria, 0801, South Africa, theteip@unisa.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0262-8059>, goboda@unisa.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6579-7044>

*Corresponding Author: theteip@unisa.ac.za

Citation: Pocia, T. I. & Anele, G. (2025). A Semiotic Exploration of isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa Literary Book Covers and Their Cultural and Religious Impact, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(4), 4583-4595. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.3829>

Published: December 30, 2025

ABSTRACT

Readers buy books based on their cover designs, as the covers have a way of capturing the reader's attention, and other readers choose them by choice, recommendations, or academic prescriptions. Scholars have analyzed book covers for intersemiotic interpretations; however, scholarly attention has been limited in exploring how books decode meaning and reflect cultural and religious significance. Book covers are used by authors as external objects of art or expressions of the artist's artistic ideas to the readers. This paper has argued that book covers are not merely aesthetic elements but serve as rich sites of semiotic meaning-making. The aim was to analyze visual elements of isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa's literary book covers, exploring how graphics, colours, and typography convey deeper meanings to the readers. Additionally, it also sought to demonstrate how these elements reflect cultural and religious narratives that resonate with the target audience, and how these representations affect the reader's perception and interpretation of texts. The qualitative method was adopted as the way and approach to data gathering, explored through textual analysis. The inspiration was drawn from Ferdinand de Saussure and Umberto Eco's interpretations of the semiotic perspective. The findings of this paper have demonstrated that book covers serve as a medium for cultural and religious narratives and identity formation within the community. This paper's findings indicated the influence and role played by visual elements on book covers. Lastly, this paper contributes to the scholarship of the significance of cover illustrations for book authors and publishers, emphasizing their embedded religious and cultural meanings.

Keywords: Book covers; culture; religion; meaning making; semiotics

INTRODUCTION

The often-said expression "don't judge a book by its cover" functions as a moral lesson, yet it inherently misunderstands the book cover's primary objective. That is missing out on a rich and rewarding reading experience and the chance to truly engage with the book and all it has to offer. Judging a book solely on its cover is denying oneself an opportunity to engage with the book and discover more information about its content. However, undeniably, readers often judge books by their covers, even though covers do not really reveal the full depth of the narrative. Loots (2018) suggests that book covers with visually appealing elements tend to capture readers' attention, often distracting them from considering the next book. Hence, Ismail (2009) argues that a book cover must entice the reader, provoking their interest to want to delve into the reading process, as through them important decisions about the book are made, whether the book can be purchased or read.

Readers can simply be turned off due to uninteresting and dull cover pages; therefore, it is important for book covers to be creatively designed in a manner that captivates readers and acknowledges their cultural and religious values and beliefs. Book covers are external objects of artists' artistic expressions, thoughts, or ideas to the readers. They are used to convey artistic ideas to the readers and help them understand the potential content of the book. When readers misunderstand a book cover, they can easily become confused and lose their way in the reading process. When book covers are used effectively, they can capture readers' interests, lure them, and increase their reading lifespan. For instance, graphics, symbols, texts, and colours may be used to communicate important messages about the book. This suggests that book covers are also important as the book's content, because they serve as readers' predictive inferences.

A book cover is more than a mere page that serves as a book's protective shield; It is a crafted artifact, a silent messenger of the text it holds, and a powerful repository of imagination and memory (Bartolini, 2020). This scholar suggests that a book cover contains visual images that assist readers in visualizing, memorizing, and remembering what the text is all about. On the other hand, she acknowledges that a book cover retells and narrates the book's content or story. Sonzogni (2009) adds that a book cover partially represents a text and is examined as an inter-semiotic translation. The translation is done through interpreting verbal signs using non-verbal signs on a book cover. Book covers are made up of drawings that serve as visual language to readers, and through them, authors find creative, everlasting ways of informing readers about the potential content. In the context of literary education, book covers hold greater significance as they serve as the first point of contact for learners or students with a culture, language, and a canon of literature. This paper embarks on a semiotic exploration of isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa literary book covers in seeking to deconstruct their visual language to reveal the religious and cultural influence they exert on readers, particularly young readers.

IsiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa are two of South Africa's prominent indigenous official languages, deeply intertwined with the millions of rich identities and histories of their speakers. The visual rhetoric of their literary covers cannot be understood outside of South Africa's specific post-colonial and post-apartheid context, characterized by a dynamic and often tense negotiation between indigenous African worldviews, Christianity (itself a powerful legacy of colonial and missionary activity), and modern, globalized influences, and modern, globalized influences. South African society, particularly in the 21st century, is a site of what Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) have theorized as a "long conversation" between different systems of value and belief. This is evident in the realm of religion and culture, where many individuals navigate a dual consciousness by participating in Christian congregations, whether they are mainstream Protestant, Catholic, or African Independent Churches, while still maintaining respect for ancestral customs and beliefs (Mbiti, 1969). This blended reality implies that visual symbols (a cross, an image of an elder, a specific colour scheme) can hold layered and at times conflicting meanings. A cross might signify devout Christianity to one reader, while to another it might evoke the historical imposition of colonial power. An image of ancestors might represent spiritual guidance and cultural continuity for some, while for others, it might be seen as conflicting with Christian doctrine.

Therefore, this article's objective is:

- To analyze the intentional use of color, typography, graphics, and composition from a semiotic perspective to reveal cultural narratives embedded in the portrayal of ancestral figures and spiritual motifs.
- Argues that a literary book covers a function as a tool, transmitting implicit lessons about what is valued, what is sacred, and what is authentic with each respective culture.
- Later, to respond to the question linked to the article, which is:
- How are religious iconography and cultural motifs used to shape literary works, and what are the potential consequences of these choices?

This paper also seeks to demonstrate how the visual design of literary book covers can have a lasting and sometimes limiting impact on readers' understanding of their heritage and their place in a diverse society. Authors need to use their graphics, fonts, texts, or captions, and colours skillfully to ensure that their covers function as powerful magnets that captivate readers and ensure that they embark on the reading process. Covers may also be intriguing through their physicality, complex designs, eclectic style, and graphics, and their interpretations may not come easily (Bartolini, 2017). This can be experienced when authors use graphics that display different unrelated signs and captions created in more than one form, and readers are likely to be confused about what the content represents.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literary semiotic exploration of book covers is less explored and construed as a construction through various forms of ambiguity that introduce uncertainty on whether there is a relation between the book cover and possible content, or rather highlights authors' background, and serves as a marketing tool for sales generation and

readership (Thete, 2023; Ali, 2017; Zao, Zhang and Feng, 2023). This approach has not received much scholarly attention in African Languages research and has been given traceable attention in Chinese literature, English Literary Translation, and education. This kind of literary analysis approach is an underdeveloped section in literature compared to other fields, as the previous assertion suggests. However, to adequately frame this paper's analysis of book covers as sites of religious and cultural meaning, it is crucial to draw upon established scholarship in visual culture studies and African religious aesthetics. In the broader field of visual culture and religion, scholars have long argued that popular visual media are central to the construction and experience of the sacred in contemporary life (Morgan, 2005). Morgan (1998), for instance, demonstrates how popular religious images function not merely as illustrations but as active agents in shaping devotional practice and belief. This paper's analysis of book covers aligns with this view, treating them as consequential visual objects that participate in the circulation of religious ideas. Furthermore, the work of scholars such as Promey (2014) encourages individuals to look beyond formal religious art to the ways religious meaning is made and contested in commercial and everyday visual culture, precisely in the domain of mass-market book covers.

In the African context, a rich body of literature explores the intersection of aesthetics, religion, and power. Picton (2020) is among others who have documented how visual arts in Africa are often inseparable from spiritual and social practice. In Southern Africa, the concept of ubuntu (humanness and interconnectedness) is not merely a philosophical idea; it is also an aesthetic one, often expressed through communal and relational imagery (Gade, 2012). Similarly, the central role of ancestors (*badimo* in Sesotho sa Leboa, *izinyanya* in isiXhosa) in the spiritual life of many communities has been extensively documented in religious and anthropological studies. Their visual representation on a book cover is thus a potent act, invoking a deeply rooted spiritual cosmology. This current paper bridges a gap by bringing the semiotic analysis of isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa book covers into conversation with the selected literary texts on religion and visual culture. It moves beyond the question of whether a cover reflects content (Thete, 2023) or serves as a marketing tool (O'Connell, 2010) to ask how it functions as a node in a larger network of religious and cultural signification within the specific, complex context of contemporary South Africa.

Lwana *et al.* (2016) support this view, noting that such covers can lead to misleading predictions due to their limited visual features. They emphasize that the relationship between books and their covers can be challenging to understand. However, Thete's (*Op cit.*) utterance suggests that although some literary book covers have stylistic and semiotic significance to convey details about the possible content to readers, some book covers have no importance. Such an utterance may be invalid to a certain extent, as readers' perspectives differ, or perhaps those covers are ambiguously designed; therefore, they are challenging to interpret. In their paper, Zao, Zhang, and Feng (2023) adopt a multimodal analysis to study visual meanings and inter-semiotic relations in the book covers of the Panda Book Series. Their findings revealed that the front covers emphasize a gender-equal, peaceful, historical, and rural representation of China. In contrast, the back covers showcase a contemporary and approachable image of Chinese writers.

Jiang (2021) analyzes the book covers of the Chinese Nobel laureate Mo Yan and their English translations. The study examines recurring images of Chinese women, peasants, and chubby baby boys in the selected texts, exploring whether the cover designs serve as an inter-semiotic translation between image, text, and culture. The researcher has found that most covers in Chinese literature fail to convey significant information about the texts themselves. However, they are derived from the cultural interpretations of Chinese society. Ali (2017) explores whether the novels' front covers accurately reflect the works' values. The study focuses on the cover pages of two Indonesian texts, *Negeri van Oranje* by Pustaka (2014) and *Aya* by Hirata (2015), assessing their inclusion in literary art. This study indicates that these covers consist of two main presentation aspects: the content values or themes of the novels and the marketing aspect.

Similar studies have been conducted in education, specifically in history, by Ismail (2020). He analyzes history textbook covers from a historical elements' perspective, including male hegemony, politics, race, and historical complexity. Ismail's (2020) study explores how a history textbook's cover can influence perception; however, it emphasizes that covers only provide a limited glimpse of the book's overall content. Some scholars have focused their studies exclusively on the titles found on book covers. Mahole (2002) analyzes the Sesotho sa Leboa novel as a detective text. He focuses on various elements of novels, such as setting, theme, and title. Mahole (*Op cit.*) found that titles on book covers often provide clues to the themes, engage readers, and offer insights into the mode and tone of the literary work.

Van Der Merwe (1992) examines the didascalies as a sign system in three dramas by M.S. Serudu. This scholar employs semiotic literary criticism as her theoretical approach and focuses on didascalies related to the fictional world of drama. Additionally, she analyzes the titles on the covers of the selected dramas. Similarly, Zebediela (2001) analyzes L.Z. Sikwane's play *Matsbediso* from a didascalies perspective, focusing on how dramatists use didascalies to convey their messages. The study emphasizes the themes and settings highlighted in the book's title. Zebediela (*Op cit.*) notes that titles can inform readers about the play's themes. Bopape and Mphahlele (1984)

analyze theme and milieu in the novel *Lenong la Gauta* (1981). They specify how the title of the novel leaves readers in suspense. They concluded their study by showing how well the author narrates a good tale and indicating that a title can reveal a controversial book theme.

While a prior study has established the relation between the book cover and content (Thete, 2023), the role that readers' religious and cultural beliefs play in book selection remains unchallenged. Ali (2017) argues that book covers function as a form of literary art, conveying content values and themes while also serving as marketing tools. However, the author overlooks the impact that a cover, perceived as a piece of literary art, may have on readers' beliefs. Therefore, this present study bridges this gap by analyzing isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa's literary book covers through the semiotic approach, offering a more significant understanding of this phenomenon. It contributes to and advances the conversation beyond the book's covers and content, addresses its influence on readership, and calls for research in other contexts.

Semiotics Theory

This paper is motivated by the theory of *Semiotics*. According to De Saussure (1974: 2), semiotics is defined as a general science of signs. Peirce (1931: 58) defines semiotics as the formal doctrine of signs closely related to logic. In addition, Eco (1976: 7) proclaims that semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. It is concerned with studying the role of signs as part of social life because it analyzes the sign system of communication, which means that people use signs to communicate in their daily lives. Hence, De Saussure (1974) suggests that semiotics is the model of linguistic communication.

It advocates that there is a message through signs. Peirce (*Op cit.*) persuasively argues that every thought is a sign, a sign is a mental concept, and it is also something that stands for something according to somebody's opinions, and that people think only in signs. However, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign. It means anything could be a sign if one interprets it as signifying something. This theory declares that there is a sign in every message. Hence, Saussure (*Op cit.*) articulates that semiotics takes any form of signs, unlimited to or whatever their substance, such as images, sounds, objects, texts, or gestures. Nevertheless, such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when people invest them with meaning (Peirce, *Op cit.*).

The term social semiotics was propounded by Halliday (1978) and adopted by Malande (2018, 2020a), where he recommends that language (naming) cannot be estranged from society. The word 'social' in semiotics (a study of the interpretation of signs (including names) in capturers) captures the societal components that were blatantly missing from the semiotics theory model (Malande, 2006 and 2011). Halliday (1978) views language as 'social semiotics' because how people cooperate must be deemed in a social context. Language and society are a united concept and need to be examined.

He pointed out that an individual human being becomes part of a crowd through language. Halliday (1978) appends that a society does not consist of participants but of relations, and these relations delineate social roles, including assigning meanings to names. According to him, social roles are combinable, and the individual, as a member of a society, occupies not just one role but many roles at a time, always through the medium of language. Language is again an essential factor for this final constituent in the process of the development of the individual, from human being to person, to what we may call.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article has used the Preferred Reporting Items for a Systematic Review (PRISMA) to respond to the semiotic analysis in exploring the role played by book covers of isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa selected book covers. First and foremost, Gobodwana (2024: 5) discusses that the preferred reporting items for a systematic review and meta-analysis (PRISMA) are included in the methodology for this article (Liberati *et al.*, 2009). This will consist of the library search strategies searching for books, with no year restrictions. The PRISMA meta-analysis will be used to analyze the data of the novel covers, of what they reveal inside that is not said inside.

Search Strategies

In this study, we used a PRISMA guideline to collect data. The procedure included a systematic data search, abstract, and full-text screening. We used the University of South Africa library to access these books and selected online platforms where necessary. Some of these books we have in our offices as language teachers. The systematic search included all the available accessible isiXhosa and Sesotho Leboa books published a long time ago and recent publications. These book covers reveal what the book might contain inside, and what the cover reveals, and times and progress and audiences.

Selection Criteria

The selection procedure adopted in the present review follows PRISMA, as reported by (Moher *et al.*, 2009). This was followed by mapping the extent of interesting book covers, literature written in the past, and book covers written in contemporary times. These book covers emerge between the isiXhosa and the Sesotho sa Leboa.

The search was streamlined depending on the availability of these books, either novels or dramas, if they cover vernacular content. The inclusion criteria for review are as follows:

- Book covers that are colorful and bright
- Book covers that are dull and dark
- Book covers that have names and detailing on them.

Table 1: PRISMA analysis

| Aspect | Details |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Data collection framework | Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines are followed for this article. |
| Databases search | University of South Africa libraries, both physical and online catalogues. Book availability in our offices |
| Search item used | There is no search item used as the vernacular; we access them online and physically in our teaching spaces, and they are available in the University of South Africa. |
| Time frames for inclusion | Book cover published between 2005 and 2025 |
| Search strategies | There is no search strategy, as we just typed in this: isiXhosa book covers and Sesotho sa Leboa book covers. Moreover, besides the search strategy and book cover collection, we have looked at the books from our offices, as we are linguists. |
| Screening process | Other books have been revamped over the years. For instance, you find a book that was first published in the 1900s. The book cover was/is relevant to the readers of that time. We have eliminated such books that look dull and have a book cover that is blurry. |
| Inclusion criteria | Book covers that were published and used in schools. The relevance of the book cover will enable readers to speculate what is expected inside. |
| Exclusion criteria | Books published in the 1900s were not considered for this article or exercise. Only recent book covers that were considered for exclusion and inclusion. |
| Number of book covers included | From each language, we are thinking of 3 books each that are included for discussion. |
| Coding techniques employed | The following would be the highlight: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Book novel colours. - Book novel words. - Book cover graphics, etc. |
| Data Synthesis method | The synthesis method for this article was based on the book covers that were relevant to the audience in terms of color, struggling to predict what was inside the book. Out of 5 books covers from Sesotho sa Leboa and isiXhosa: Sesotho sa Leboa: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ke tla nyala mang? (Motete, 2002) - Badimo Ba boletše (Mpepele, 2014) - Monyanya wa baTau (Moshidi, 2022) - Ba re Tlogeletše Tšona (Thoka, 2023) - Tlaišego ya Masetlapelo (2005) isiXhosa <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ingqumbo Yeminyanya (Jordan, 1940) - Ityala lamawele (Mqhayi, 1941) - Inkawu idliw'ilila (Kula, 2008) - Uyindoda kwedini (Phakama, 2013) - Andingombala ndingumntu (Khoza, 2013) Consequently, following a systematic selection process for these book covers, we ultimately selected three covers. Only the prominent highlights have been included in this article. This involves recognizing their cover designs and making predictions regarding the subject matter, as well as addressing any contradictions associated with it. |

Context of Publishers of Selected Texts

The literary books selected for analysis in this paper are published by South African educational and commercial presses that significantly influence the national literary landscape, especially regarding indigenous languages. Gaining insight into their mission and market positioning is essential for interpreting the cultural significance of these covers. The publishers of the selected texts include:

- **Shuter & Shooter:** For decades, Shuter & Shooter has been a cornerstone of South African educational publishing. Established in 1925, it has become a household name closely linked with the national school curriculum. As a result, their publications carry an essential pedagogical authority and play a significant role in the formation of the literary canon. A book cover from Shuter & Shooter serves not merely as a marketing tool; it often represents a student's initial formal and endorsed engagement with a literary text and its associated cultural themes. Their design choices are made with a didactic intention, striving to be both accessible and reflective of the text's fundamental themes for a scholarly audience.
- **Via Afrika:** Via Afrika, a prominent educational publisher, plays a significant role in creating learning materials for all official South African languages. Their dedication to the educational sector is reflected in their thoughtfully designed cover art, which aims to resonate with teachers, parents, and students alike. They skillfully balance cultural authenticity with clear, curriculum-aligned messaging.
- **Juta & Company:** One of the oldest and most esteemed publishing houses in South Africa, Juta boasts a strong selection of academic and professional titles, alongside a notable presence in school literature. Their reputation for quality and substance imparts a sense of solemnness to their cover designs, and their selections often demonstrate a strong commitment to South African content and authorship.
- **Oxford University Press Southern Africa (OUPSA):** As the Southern African branch of the esteemed Oxford University Press, OUPSA is renowned for its commitment to academic excellence and quality. In the South African landscape, this publisher plays a particularly influential role in the educational sector. Their publication of indigenous language literature reflects a dedication to local content, all while adhering to international standards of production and pedagogical value. A book cover from OUPSA carries a distinct sense of prestige and authority; its design choices are typically polished and professional, catering to a diverse educational market that places trust in the Oxford brand.

As per the outline of the publishers, they are central institutions in the literary production of South Africa. Their dominance in the realm of education simply means that the visual narratives they produce and disseminate through book covers reach a massive audience of young, impressionable readers. Covers analyzed in this paper are seen as significant agents of cultural transmission, affecting how generations of South Africans understand their heritage, languages, and the associated religious and cultural symbols. The decision by a publisher like Shuter & Shooter to feature a horn-blowing elder calling an assembly (*Badimo ba Boletse*) or a man grappling with a choice before a cross (*Ke tla Nyala Mang?*) or a publisher like OUPSA uses a metaphorical scene of two lovebirds for a title (*Inkannu idlim'ilila*). This choice represents a significant intervention in public discourse regarding the value and meaning of tradition, faith, and modern literary expression.

Textual Analysis

The textual analysis method is about the interpretation of the visual language used by the writers (Frey *et al.*, 1999: 1). In addition, it is a way of analyzing the graphics of a text or video to understand the message that a writer/artist is trying to point out to the viewers or readers (McKee, 2001, pp. 138-149). It is concerned with placing the text into a new context and making it the reader's own through interpretations. This method is often used to analyze videos, films, and television productions, to understand their messages and to help viewers understand the theme more deeply.

This approach is also about classifying the text into a new context as well as making it the reader's own with the interpretations he or she can bring to the text. Since its purpose is to help the reader or viewer discover possible interpretations about the product, there is no such thing as one right interpretation (McKee, 2001). This approach emphasizes the importance of the interpretive methods that must be used to understand the text or product masterfully. Researchers can utilize textual analysis to understand how others interpret the world (McKee, 2003). When quoted, McKee (*Op cit.*: 1) states that "when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text." Therefore, this suggests that researchers or individuals tend to understand their world or culture better through seeing the limitations and advantages of their sense-making practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents data analysis that is based on decoding the linguistic signs and symbols as a form of visual elements present on the selected Sesotho sa Leboa and isiXhosa literary texts' book covers. The selected texts' written captions as linguistic signs, and graphics as visual signs within these texts, are rich with connotative

and denotative meanings that allow for a deeper exploration of their potential religious and cultural impact on their readers.

FIGURE 1: SESOTHO SA LEOBA SELECTED BOOK COVERS

Ke tla Nyala Mang? (Whom Shall I Marry?)

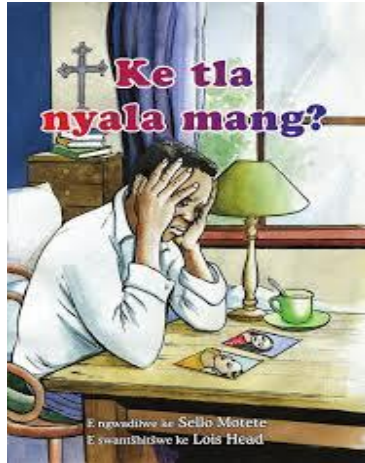


Figure.1.1.: *Ke tla Nyala Mang?* by S Matete (<https://share.google/images/iWVM7WDdckZnPcgJX>)

The first book to be discussed under Sesotho sa Leboa literary texts is the former text of Sello Motete, *Ke tla Nyala Mang?* the picture book. *Ke tla Nyala Mang?* was published in 2002, originally written in Setswana and later translated to Sesotho sa Leboa in 2019. In its cover design, there are two visible elements: written text and visual illustration. The title is placed at the top of the main visual icon of the cover. The main visual icon is the man sitting on a chair next to the table, holding his head with his two hands while looking down at the table. There are two pictures of women in front of him, a teacup, and a lamp. On the cover, visual icons are also placed right under the text, including books on a shelf and a religious cross attached to the wall.

The title is not in title case, or rather, capital letters, and is positioned on the visual icons. Normally, book titles are positioned on their own above the visuals, where they will clearly be visible to readers or consumers. The title or text element for some readers may serve as a marketing function, while to others it may signify a religious motif. This is because it is religiously prohibited for a man of God to marry more than one wife. In addition, Christianity suggests that a marriage is between one man and one woman; thus, Jesus's teaching of "...they shall become one flesh..." The question "*Ke tla nyala mang?*" translates as (Whom shall I marry?) and is a sign that signifies a direct question about future action of entering a lifetime companionship or marriage institution. Some readers may perceive this title to be holding a religious connotation, due to the question posed as a form of a title. It indicates someone who firmly believes in Christ and follows His teachings, as African culture recognizes polygamy.

This is where a deep religious meaning resides, as the question is not merely about a romantic partner but implies a journey of seeking guidance from the inner self and the Maker. It may also signify seeking counsel and advice from family, elders, and most importantly, from God. It could resemble the dilemma the thinker or speaker is in. He seeks to choose between two choices. The speaker is at the crossroads, not knowing which route to take, and requires wise decision-making. Therefore, it can be argued that this title taps into the immense religious weight and social importance of the marriage institution.

Hall (1997) mentions that "meaning depends on the connection between signs and concepts that are formed by codes." The signs created by codes are seen on book covers and are brought about by the visual elements of the covers. Ali (2017: 509) argues that understanding cover meanings requires a discussion of their visual elements. The visual sign illustrates a man looking at the two pictures of women, and he looks confused and distraught. This man seems to be at the critical stage of his life, where he navigates life through faith. The main question from the linguistic sign is not found in worldly desire but through spiritual judgment. Consequently, readers may assume that this book positions God's will as the primary guide for the marriage decision that is presumed to be a motif in Christian teaching. This book cover may be perceived as a moral and religious instruction to a Christian reader. It serves as a moral compass and promotes religious values such as prayer, purity, patience, faith, and seeking God's purpose over personal desire. Readers are provided with faith for navigating a major life decision, reducing anxiety, and offering spiritual support. Lastly, this book cover highlights religious identity by showing that faith is intertwined with daily life and plays an important role in the most crucial decision-making.

Tlaišego ya Masetlapelo (The Suffering of the Tragedy)

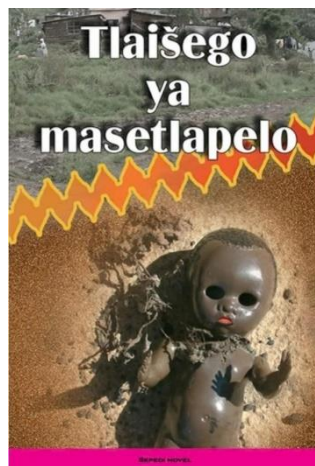


Figure 1.2: *Tlaišego ya Masetlapelo* by M.P. Mathete (<https://www.shutters.co.za/images/PublisherProductImages/9781919778341.jpg>)

Tlaišego ya Masetlapelo, authored by M.P. Mathete, was published in 2005. In its cover, there are two elements: linguistic element consists of written words “*tlaišego ya masetlapelo*”, and visual elements; a village area with shacks in between houses, grassy ground, trees, a human being wearing white, and a black doll. The initial sign on this book cover is its title, ‘*Tlaišego ya Masetlapelo*.’ This title, ‘*tlaišego ya masetlapelo*,’ translates as (the suffering of the tragedy); it signifies the act of suffering, discomfort, and distress. Some readers may view this title as implying a deep, destructive form of discomfort. Destruction that could not be temporary, but a deep sense of disturbance and distress, carrying a strong emotional and spiritual rollercoaster that suggests the discomfort does not stem from a meaningful source. On the other hand, the entire wording in a title may be viewed as resembling the state of being broken, shattered, or crushed. Although it may assume a state of being crushed, it can also signify sadness, deep grief, loss, despair, and emotional devastation. It communicates a universal human experience. However, for some readers, this title may carry cultural connotations that capture emotions in the Basotho ba Leboa people. Stemming from their experience in cultural and emotional worldview, they validate their specific way of understanding and expressing pain, grief, and suffering. Then, it can be presumed that in the Basotho ba Leboa culture, hardship and grief are mainly navigated within a community framework.

This book cover also carries an important hidden religious significance, alongside its cultural connotations. The title may immediately position readers to a core religious and spiritual motif. It can be viewed as directly engaging with a core human condition of suffering and heartbreak that is a central concern of religion and offers a faith and patience-based solution to addressing the pain. Therefore, this title may be viewed as carrying a deep biblical resonance, for example, the biblical scriptures such as Psalm 34:18, “the Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed,” Matthew 5:3 4, “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God bless those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Readers who believe in Christ may be likely to pick up the book to embark on the reading process and expect the book to explore and apply these spiritual truths.

The title of this book is likely to position God as a source of comfort when in distress, pain, and suffering. It implies that when one is in pain, they should seek God’s guidance towards finding support and comfort through prayer and faith as a source of overcoming despair. Additionally, it can serve as a ministerial tool as a form of counsel, offering hope and reaffirming the core religious message of healing and redemption. On the other hand, for some readers, the visual element of this book cover may suggest a state of brokenness, suffering, and pain that a human being is experiencing in their life. It speaks to a collective understanding of pain while at the same time offering a model of processing it that combines with communal support. The element of communal support is depicted using the shacks and houses that are visibly placed as background visuals on this cover. This book cover, therefore, could assist in destigmatizing deep emotional pain by acknowledging that such suffering is a genuine aspect of the human experience that deserves attention. It shifts the focus from private shame to a shared condition that can be healed. This book cover may also serve as a tool for providing healing that is accessible and relevant to some readers. Meanwhile, others may view it as not offering the Western concept of therapy but rather frames healing through a paradigm that integrates faith, which is a significant part of modern African cultural identity.

Arguably, this book cover can be considered a masterful and emotionally intelligent piece of art with significant cultural connotation stemming from its cultural specificity. Its observed dual impact on religious and cultural aspects taps into a core promise of divine comfort for individual suffering and offering healing for broken hearts, while validating the depth of emotional experience within the cultural context. Its title and graphics serve as both a promise and a beacon of hope.

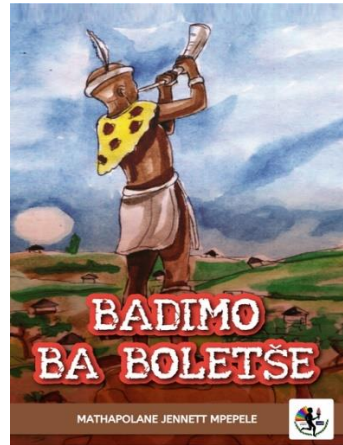
Badimo ba Boletše (Ancestors have Spoken)

Figure.1.3.: *Badimo ba Boletše* by M.J Mpepele (<https://share.google/images/7YVUCnTOJoeVniXKE>)

This book, *Badimo ba Boletše*, is written by Mathapolane Jennett Mpepele and was published in 2014. This book's cover design consists of linguistic signs as a form of written words and a visual sign as a form of a graphic. The phrase, "badimo ba boletše," translates as (Ancestors have spoken) and may be acknowledged as deeply rooted in the traditional religious and cultural worldview of the South African people, including Basotho. For some viewers or readers, the presence of the image may complement the linguistic sign to be more focused and powerful. On the other hand, for some, this title may be considered to be carrying an immense weight and signifies ancestral spirits, those living in the dead, or the spirits of departed family and clan members of the same lineage. However, the word 'badimo' in the title connotes African Traditional Religion, which means that they are not merely dead members of the family; they also represent mediators between the living and the supreme deity. Other individuals take them as their guardians and protectors and believe that they should all the time be appeased, and if displeased by the actions of the living, they can bring misfortune.

The phrase "...ba boletše" (they have spoken) simply connects to what has already been mentioned previously in attempting to explain "badimo." It indicates a completed action with continuous relevance to African cultural people. This phrase signifies ancestors' authoritative and consequential communication. Basotho ba Leboa normally say that culturally, "*lentšu la mobu ga le tshelwe*," when those who have passed on leave behind a word, that word must be honored and followed. Which means there shall be consequences if the word can be dishonored. Therefore, the phrase is not a causal remark but a declaration, a decree that requires attention and action. It indicates that the message has been delivered from the spiritual realm to the physical one.

The full title, *Badimo ba Boletše*, creates a powerful narrative that affirms the active role of ancestral spirits in the world of the living. It immediately positions the book as a medium for conveying ancestral messages and presents it as a revealed word of the ancestors. The title also serves as a powerful affirmation of the traditional belief system. It confirms the core concept that ancestors are active, communicative, and provide important guidance.

In this case, the title in combination with the image of a man wearing cultural attire standing on a rock, blowing a horn towards the village area, has a significant cultural motif and taps into identity and tradition. It reinforces Basotho ba Leboa's powerful heritage and cultural identity. It directly communicates a core cultural concept that preexists missionization. It assumes that Basotho ba Leboa's traditional beliefs are important enough to be the subject matter of books. Normally, in Basotho ba Leboa's villages, when a horn is blown, it signifies an important message or matter that requires the entire village's attention, such as the death of a resident or a communal meeting at the kingdom. This book cover design serves as a generational dialogue that forces conversation about culture and traditions, educating youth about heritage and culture.

The image and title suggest that ancestors are speaking because they are not pleased or are angry about one's actions or negligence. However, the cover challenges Christianity, as many Christians may consider communication with ancestors to be taboo and associate it with witchcraft or demonic activity. From this point of view, the title may be controversial and creates tension, as it highly claims the spiritual ancestral authority with the use of the word "*badimo*" (ancestors). Readers who uphold religious values may perceive this book as dangerously challenging their faith and beliefs. Meanwhile, it may be a very powerful and strong assertion to those who uphold cultural values and may consider the book as a guide to understand social problems and how to address them traditionally. Moreover, this book cover highlights the attention from ancient times to the present, considering the publication date of this book.

FIGURE 2: ISIXHOSA SELECTED BOOK COVERS

Andingombala Ndingumntu (I Am Not a Colour, I am Human)

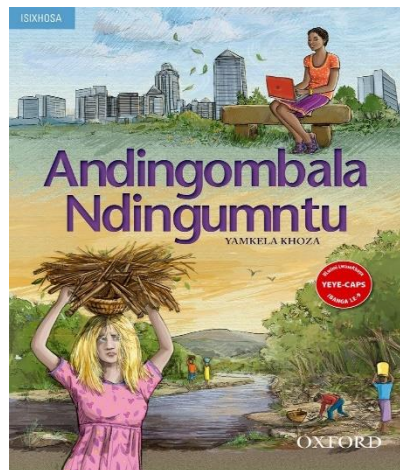


Figure.1.1.: *Andingombala Ndingumntu* by Y Khoza (<https://share.google/images/AdhvHjWbrFID9KmLn>)

Khoza's book cover is quite intriguing, proclaiming, "I am not a colour, I am human." This visual representation engages in ambiguity and contentious subjects for the audience. Consequently, the Department of Basic Education has designated this book as a literature text in several South African schools. The imagery on the cover, for some readers, as it is widely read in isiXhosa classrooms in South African schools, may be indeed perplexing, as it encompasses a variety of themes and textual elements presented within. The upper section of the image portrays urban life and the individuals residing in metropolitan areas, their activities, and potential lifestyles. Conversely, the lower section reflects rural themes and the responsibilities undertaken in those regions.

This leads to the inquiry: *Andingombala Ndingumntu* (I am not a colour, I am a human). What is its significance in relation to the book cover and the book's content? A religious interpretation of this book's cover would explore themes of hope and faith. Individuals living in rural areas often hold the belief that they will eventually move to urban settings to access better services and enjoy the advantages of technology. Nevertheless, this book cover effectively encapsulates the essence and focus of the book, emphasizing the importance of human values and imparting a sense of contentment. The themes of heritage, culture, language, and identity are subtly concealed by the author, encouraging readers to engage and interpret based on both the cover and the content within. The adage (do not judge a book by its cover) is particularly relevant to Khoza's work. Readers may form various expectations yet discover that the book contains unexpected elements. As indicated by the cover, it presents an alternative experience for the audience.

Inkawu idliw'ilila (eating a crying monkey)

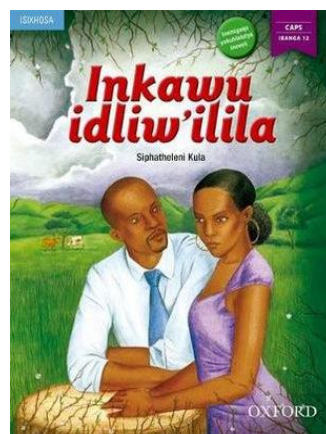


Figure.1.2.: *Inkawuidliw'ilila* S Kula (<https://share.google/images/JbGvSX0MWM948UjsD>)

In this book cover, Kula has thoroughly perplexed the reader, particularly in the work *Inkawu idliw'ilila* (Eating a crying monkey). The textual analysis of the cover for some readers may be seen as failing to depict the crying monkey or individuals consuming it. Khoza employs a figurative expression that complicates the ability to infer the book's content based solely on the cover. This metaphorical usage pertains to a deeper level, as the cover does

not align with the narrative it suggests. Instead, the cover features two lovebirds. The green hue signifies the season; it is summer, a time when love flourishes for these two professionals. The overall wording of the cover also provides the reader with an indication that this book is contemporary, released within a modern context. Furthermore, regarding spirituality, this book cover conveys a sense of tranquility, sobriety, contentment, and acceptance of all circumstances.

Uyindoda kwedini (you are a man boy)

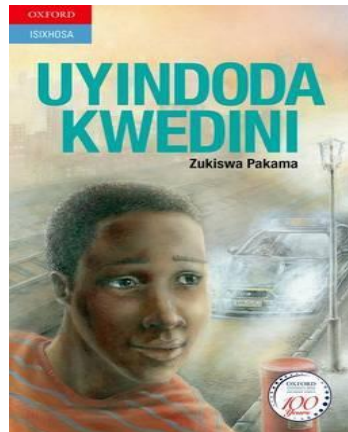


Figure.1.3.: Uyindoda Kwedini by Z Phakama (<https://share.google/images/xLSEIh1rnrWdUiZj0>)

Phakama prompts the audience to question the book cover of *Uyindoda kwedini* (You are the man, boy). An analyst of this cover might contend, “Where is the boy who embodies the man here?” None of the clues are evident; Phakama’s approach has perplexed and encouraged readers to engage more intellectually in uncovering concealed insights, necessitating a higher level of skill. The car may symbolize a man’s perseverance and resilience, while the light signifies that the future of manhood is exceptionally promising.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper analyzed Sesotho sa Leboa and isiXhosa literary book covers from a semiotic perspective. The textual analysis employed in this article elucidates the information that has contributed to its relevance in offering a profound perspective on book cover analysis. Students, scholars, and various readers often find it challenging to derive meaningful insights from a book cover while encountering content that seems entirely unrelated within the book itself. The chosen book covers, utilizing the PRISMA methodology (Gobodwana, 2024), have shed light on the selection criteria and processes undertaken in the development of this article. This paper’s analysis revealed that literary book covers carry a distinct sense of prestige and authority through which their publication institutions are illustrated by the design choices that are typically polished and professional, catering to a diverse educational market that places trust in their brands. Additionally, their use of figurative imagery on the covers, as observed on the above analyzed covers, is especially noteworthy. These covers convey confidence in the literary merit of the work and in the reader’s ability to engage with metaphorical complexity, positioning the text as both modern and intellectually stimulating within the canon of isiXhosa literature.

These findings suggest that the literary book covers of isiXhosa and Sesotho sa Leboa are not neutral packaging; they are meaningful artifacts that actively shape cultural and religious perceptions. Hence, upon engaging in this article, we reference the well-known adage (Do not judge a book by its cover). Indeed, after a meticulous examination, we can concur with this sentiment. However, the book covers analyzed in this study are not simply images; they are visual texts infused with signs and symbols that both reflect and actively shape ongoing societal discussions about tradition, modernity, spirituality, and identity. They operate within what Chidester (1996) refers to as the “field of religion” in South Africa, that is, a contested space where various religious and cultural resources are utilized in the quest for meaning and power. Therefore, this paper’s semiotic analysis is conducted with an awareness of this complex and multi-faceted cultural landscape, in which the meaning of a visual element is not static but is instead activated by its reception among readers situated within this specific historical and cultural context. Given this significant role, this paper raises a critical awareness regarding the illustration process, particularly within the context of historically white-owned publishing institutions that dominate the South African educational and literary market. There exists a potential disconnect between the cultural and spiritual interiority of an Indigenous language text and its external visual representation when the illustration process is siloed with the marketing departments, who may lack cultural fluency. This is to eliminate a cliché for such images that are meant to be sacred, which may be literalized in a manner that misleads or diminishes the text’s power. Therefore, we recommend a structured collaborative model between authors, religious and cultural experts, and illustrators during

the cover design phase. With this being mentioned, the book cover's results will not just sell the book but truly speak its language, honour its culture, and resonate with religious and cultural significance, the analysis revealed they hold.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This was a collaborative work between colleagues, and the roles and duties were shared between the two of us. Ms. Thete focused on the abstract, introduction, and review of this article. And Dr Gobodwana has worked on methodologies and design sections.

Funding Information

This research received no specific funding from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors. Besides, the University of South Africa has assisted with the page fees.

Declaration of Conflicts

There is no conflict to be declared.

REFERENCES

- Ali, A.J.K.N. 2017. Novel Cover as Literary Art, *KnE Social Sciences*, 505-513. Available on: <https://knepublishing.com/index.php/Kne-Social/article/view/848/2224>.
- Bartolini, M.G. 2017. "Judging a book by its cover": Meditation, Memory, and Invention in Seventeenth-century Ukrainian Title Pages. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59(1): 21-55.
- Bartolini, M.G. 2020. "Engrave this Memory in your Heart as if on a Tablet...": Memory, Meditation, and Visual Imagery in Seventeenth-century Ukrainian Preaching. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 1-26.
- Bopape, H.D.N. and Mphahlele, L.L. 1984. Lenong La Gauta. *South African Journal of African Languages*, (4)2: 9-13.
- Chidester, D. 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. 1997. *Of Revelation and Revolution, vol. 2, The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- De Saussure, F. 1974. *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Fontana.
- Eco, U. 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. London: University Press.
- Frey, L., Botan, C., and Kreps, G. 1999. *Investigating Communication: An Introduction to Research Methods*. (2nd ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- GADE, C.B.N. 2012. 'What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations Among South Africans of African Descent.' *South African Journal of Philosophy*. 31(1):484-503.
- Gobodwana, A. 2024. The strategies in teaching isiXhosa semantics in Foundation Phase: A systematic review. *Reading & Writing*, 15(1), 1-10.
- Hall, S. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications.
- Ismail, M. 2020. Judging Grade 10 History Textbooks by their Covers. MA Dissertation. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Jiang, M. 2021. 'Book Cover as Intersemiotic Translation: Between Image, Text, and Culture.' *Asia Pacific Translation, and Intercultural Studies*, (8)(3):219-235.
- Loots, O. 2018. Translating Word to Image: A Comparative Intermedial Study of Flame in the Snow's Two Covers. *Visual Studies*, 1-70.
- Lwana, B.K., Ahmend, S., Rizvi, S.T.R., and Dengel, A. 2016. Judging a Book By its Cover. ResearchGate.
- Mbiti, J.S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- McKee, A. 2001. A Beginner's Guide to Textual Analysis. *Metro Magazine*. 138-149.
- McKee, A. 2003. *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. Taiwan. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Morgan, D. 2005. *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (1st ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morgan, D. 1998. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- O'Connell, K.C. 2010. Young Adult Book Cover Analysis. MA Dissertation. Wilmington: Yunibesithi ya North Carolina.
- Peirce, C.S. 1931. *Collected Writings* (8 Vol.) (Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W Burks). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Picton, J. 2020. 'Christian Art and African Modernity.' In Bridger, N.J, and Picton, J. (Eds). *Christian Art and African Modernity*. Pp.13- 84. Glienicke: Galda Verlang.
- Promey, S.M. (Ed). 2014. *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*. London: Yale University Press.
- Sonzogni, M. 2011. *Re-Covered Rose: A Case Study in Book Cover Design as Intersemiotic Translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

- Thete, I.P. 2023. Letlakalantle la Padi Bjalo ka Khuetsō ya Ponelepele ya Diteng Tša Puku: Tshekatsheko Dingwalweng tše Di Kgethilwego tša Sesotho Sa Leboa. MA Dissertation. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg.
- Van Der Merwe, A.P. 1992. The Didascalies as Sign-system in Three Dramas by M.S. Serudu. MA Dissertation. Johannesburg: University of South Africa.
- Zao, B., Zhang, H., and Feng, Q. 2023. Book Covers and State Translation Programs: A Multimodal Approach to Book Covers in the Panda Books Series. *Sage Open*. 1-5.
- Zebediela, M.H. 2001. A Structural, Semiotic Analysis and Interpretation of L.Z. Sikwane's Play: *Matsbediso* with Emphasis on Didascalies. MA Dissertation. Potchefstroom: University of Northwest