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The Social Life of Sankambe and Friends: Notes on Social Discord in African Oral Literature

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ABSTRACT

African tales of animals, humans, fantastic beings, villains and heroes are, much like their counterparts elsewhere, created for the entertainment of an audience of children. At a more implicit level, on the other hand, the same stories also portray and thoughtfully reflect on human nature. They comment on the moral strengths and weaknesses of human beings, they praise their solidarity and expose their differences and divisions. Opposition, strife and rivalry feature commonly in the realm of story telling. They form the focus of this essay and their discussion is derived from the analysis of four selected monographs, supplemented by over a hundred narratives collected by the author in the late nineties. From the monographs, which represent almost a century of research in the field of African folklore studies, emerge different perspectives on the subject of social discord. These are briefly defined. Subsequently, the paradigmatic horizons against which they arose, are identified. The remaining sections of the essay explore the wider cultural and social contexts of storytelling.

It is suggested that the conflict theme is best explained in terms of the close affinity between the realm of storytelling on the one hand and the ritual pedagogy of initiation on the other. Furthermore, the theme of social discord, it is proposed, should be read as social commentary, rather than as being expressive of a spirit of rebellion against those who wield social power. The realm of children's narratives, generally, seems supportive of the socio-political status quo, rather than subversive.

***Keywords**: folklore, conflict, ubuntu, power*

1. THE REALM OF STORYTELLING

Sankambe and the Farmer[1]
Salungano! Salungano!
There was a man – salungano!

[1] Narrative recorded by the author in the Venda speaking region of the Limpopo province, South Africa, in 1998. The story is somewhat unusual in that it depicts interaction between the animal world of Mr. Hare (Sankambe) and the human world. It is presented here in its indigenous format, i.e. with the interjection '*salungano*!', which is shouted by the youthful audience, added in after each of the narrator's phrases. *Salungano* contains the general term used for narratives (*ngano*; pl. *dzingano*), and could be translated, freely, as 'continue!', meaning: 'we are listening!'. The title was added on (there are no titles in the indigenous format).

He owned a piece of land – salungano!
He farmed maize on this land – salungano!
And then – salungano!
He had a problem of maize theft – salungano!
And then – salungano!
He thought of a plan – salungano!
He put a hat on a big log of firewood –salungano!
And then – salungano!
He found that it made no difference as the maize was still being stolen – salungano!
And then – salungano!
He thought of another plan –salungano!
He carved a wooden pole –salungano!
He disguised it as a human being – salungano!
He smeared resin on it – salungano!
He dressed it up in clothes – salungano!
He also put a hat on it – salungano!
He put some water and food in front of it – salungano!
And then – salungano!
Sankambe arrived – salungano!
He found the food, there – salungano!
He said: "Old man! Let us wash our hands and eat." – salungano!
The pole kept quiet – salungano!
And then – salungano!
He said: "Hey, old man, I said wash your hands and let us eat. Don't you hear me?" – salungano!
That pole kept quiet – salungano!
And then – salungano!
Sankambe got irritated – salungano!
He said: "I will end up beating you! Are you listening?" – salungano!
The pole remained quiet – salungano!
Sankambe launches his right fist – salungano!
His hand gets stuck – salungano!
He says: "Old man, don't play catch, you coward!" – salungano!
And the pole kept quiet – salungano!
"Hey, old man, I will use my left!" – salungano!
And the pole kept quiet – salungano!
He flung his left fist – salungano!
And the hand got stuck – salungano!
And again he said: "You are catching me again, mad one!" – salungano!
And the pole kept quiet – salungano!
And then – salungano!
He said: "I will kick you!" – salungano!
And he kicked with the right knee – salungano!
And he got stuck – salungano!

He said: “Are you holding your legs too?” – salungano!
“I will kick you with the other one!” – salungano!
And he kicked with the left knee – salungano!
And it got stuck – salungano!
“I will use my head now!” – salungano!
And he used the head – salungano!
And the head got stuck – salungano!
And he said: “You, man, let go of my head!” – salungano!
And the pole remained quiet – salungano!
The owner of the farm arrived and found Hare fixed to the pole – salungano!
And he removed it and put it in a bag – salungano!
And told his son that it should be cooked by the time he came back – salungano!
And then – salungano!
On the way to the house – salungano!
Sankambe said: “Did you hear what your father said?” – salungano!
The boy had already forgotten what his father said – salungano!
“Your father said that when we get home you must kill the hen, prepare a meal, and give it to me!” – salungano!
The boy did what Sankhambe had instructed him to do – salungano!
He killed the hen, prepared a meal and served it – salungano!
And then – salungano!
Sankambe ate and hid the bones in his pocket – salungano!
And then – salungano!
The father arrived – salungano!
He was tired and very hungry – salungano!
He asked his son whether he had followed his instructions – salungano!
The son told him about the Hare’s instructions – salungano!
And then – salungano!
The father got very angry and called his dogs – salungano!
And then – salungano!
Sankambe managed to run off – salungano!
When the dogs caught up with him, he threw the bones – salungano!
And so Hare escaped and this is where the story dies.

The stories of the trickster hare, Sankambe, have been told and retold in many variations all over Southern Africa. They represent a rich heritage of popular oral literature in the region and portray a realm of fantasy, primarily created for an audience of young listeners. In addition to these animal tales, there are narratives in which humans rather than animals feature as protagonists. On closer scrutiny, the animal and human stories, far from being exclusive categories[2], are both found to depict real life and real people. They contain implicit references to the social categories of rulers and ruled, men and women,

2 As is exemplified in our story of *Sankambe and the Farmer*.

rich and destitute, young and old, and to the opposition, the differences and the conflicts between these categories.

2. Four Variations on the Conflict Theme in African Storytelling

The social realm of storytelling is not always a happy one. Antagonism is a recurrent theme. It features in multiple forms: sibling rivalry, enmity between relatives, jealousy between co-wives, domestic strife etc. The conflict theme has been interpreted in a variety of ways by different authors.

In Southern Africa, Junod (1897,1927) was the first to identify social discord in indigenous lore. He discussed it under the label 'wisdom of the little ones'. Junod suggested that the triumph of wisdom over brute force constituted not only the *raison d' être* of a separate category of stories (namely the trickster tales), but inspired the majority of Ronga narratives. In the animal tales, Hare, Tortoise and Small Toad played clever tricks on huge beasts such as Elephant, Lion and Hippotamus. Similarly, in the Ogre tales feeble creatures defeated horrible and cruel monsters. Finally, in a third category of Ronga narratives – the human stories – the miserable, the dull witted, the disinherited and the despised triumphed over their elders and those who hated them. The youngest sibling, the son of the neglected wife, the insignificant goat-herd: all were depicted as succeeding in life more fruitfully than their persecutors, whose benefactors they sometimes became at the end of the story (1927: 213, 222, 223). The missionary anthropologist Junod, by the same token, suggested that these stories contained a discrete protest against the hierarchy, or social ladder, which allows the strong to dominate over the weak. Perhaps, he concluded, they depicted a protest of spiritual against material force. Possibly, he pondered, the ultimate object underlying many narratives was to assert the value of the individual in a collective society. And this hidden feature of the narratives, he appreciated as 'highly moral and philosophical'[3] (1927: 224–5).

In *An African Horizon* (1971), Kriel pursued a similar thread of analysis, be it in a more systematic fashion than his predecessor. Many narratives, we are told, depicted characters that were lacking in power. When these narratives awarded victory to the powerless, they actually stated that the very identity of the particular power which the main characters lacked, was being protested against. Phrased differently, the narrator indicated to the audience that this or that kind of power was being overrated within the community (1971: 82). The youngest member of the family, for instance, lacked the power of seniority or status. She was most commonly depicted as victorious over senior siblings. Equally successful in contesting their lack of social status, were orphans and other types of destitutes (1971: 103, 109). Further, Kriel proposed, Shona stories reflected, in a symbolic way, some of the most profound desires of the human

3 Junod's perspective, needless to say, bears the trade mark of his Christian mission.

spirit. People told stories about issues which they valued deeply (1971: 35). Kriel classified these ideals or powers in eight different but related types: procreation, physical power, social status, magic, knowledge, obligation, rapport and erotic attraction (1971: 80–1)

Scheub, a contemporary of Kriel, pioneered a new, performance-based approach to the realm of African storytelling in his study of Xhosa and Zulu folktales (1975). In Scheub's understanding, the narrator is a creative artist who aims at the aesthetic expression of one or more core images, using body movement, gesture and vocal dramatics (1975: 168). In addition to being creatively shaped by the narrator, Scheub suggested, the plot of each and every tale (*intsomi*) was embodied in what he called 'the basic structure of conflict and resolution'. Here conflict refers to a tension in the narrative, to any kind of obstacle between the central character and what she strives for, and to the fragmentation of the life of the central character. Clearly, this is a more literary understanding of conflict, than the one discussed by Junod and Kriel. The conflict theme is further typified and expressed by the opposition between the known, the real and familiar world, and the fabulous magical world of supernatural creatures (the amasi birds, helpful frogs etc.). It is resolved by the removal of the hindrance and restoration of harmonious relationships with others (1975: 3, 157).

A final, more contemporary perspective on social discord, is exemplified by *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature* (Furniss and Gunner 1995), a monograph which resulted from a University of London conference. It represents yet another position. Here, conflict has become the actual focus of analysis, not an interesting by-product, or a literary tool, as was the case in the previous studies. Different forms of oral literature, including folktales, are perceived as popular expressions of the key social issues of power and marginality. Folktales, the contributors to this monograph agree, are powerful tools capable of provoking, moving, directing, preventing, overturning and recasting social reality (1975: 3, 4–5, 10). This particular window, as well as the previous ones, are all expressive of underlying ideological strands, which I will now briefly identify.

3. TALES OF TALES

A closer look at the epistemological grounding of the four texts reveals the paradigms of evolutionism, structural-functionalism and conflict theory. A brief discussion of these paradigms, I would suggest, paves the way for the social analysis of the conflict theme in the second half of the essay.

Junod's approach to indigenous literature and to African culture in general, aligned itself with the spirit of his time: evolutionism[4]. Fortunately, much of what has been published in the early days of anthropology on the subject of

4 Junod was, unsurprisingly, also influenced by the German diffusionist writing of his time.

'primitive cultures' and on the slow progression 'from barbarism to civilization', has now long been discarded as unscientific, biased, or even racist. The critique of evolutionist writing, however, continues to be relevant. As a matter of fact, Junod's monograph, '*The Life of a South African Tribe'*, has been renounced very recently as being part and parcel of the colonial intellectual enterprise, in a remarkable study on the subject of early missionary thinking in Southern Africa (Harries 2007). In my opinion, Junod deserves better.

In addition to the paradigm of biosocial evolutionism, which admittedly has produced some rather distorted interpretations of non-Western societies, there has been an older, much more liberal stream of evolutionism. The origins of this older strand can be traced back to the Enlightenment and to the general Social Science, formulated amongst others by the Scottish moral philosophers almost a century before Darwinism. Junod's approach to African culture, I feel, belongs to this stream. His liberal thinking is exemplified, amongst others, by his firm belief that *all* humankind had one single origin, and by his rejection of any biological base for the classification of humanity. Stagnation of culture, he added, could be undone by the attempts of humanitarian missionaries and concerned scientists to uplift or better indigenous societies (Harries 2007: 223, 4, 5).

Incidentally, a similar brand of liberal and humanist thinking underlies the history of origin and the theology of the christian denomination to which he was attached. Both his anthropological training and religious affiliation explain his open-minded understanding of the conflict theme in Ronga narratives, as well as his admiration for the 'moral and philosophical value' which he identified in them. Junod, recognized the intellectual and social significance of storytelling at a point in time when little attention was paid to indigenous narratives, other than 'adapting' them for consumption by a European audience. Junod did not 'clip' or 'prune' the stories he recorded. On the contrary, motivated by a sincere interest in a fading heritage, he meticulously transcribed and translated the vernacular and made it accessible to the general public. In his understanding, story telling was a monument, a record of the beliefs and aspirations of a people. For those who were willing to see, Junod proposed, folklore offered a fascinating window on the social, moral and spiritual aspects of indigenous culture (1927: 211).

'*An African Horizon'* (Kriel 1971), relates to evolutionist writing too, be it in a more roundabout way. The eight powers or ideals which feature centrally in Kriel's analysis, and which account for his understanding of the conflict theme, are inspired by Placide Tempels and his controversial classic '*Bantu Philosophy*' (1959). In this pioneering work on indigenous philosophy, Tempels proposed that a careful study of the vernacular holds the key to a deeper understanding of 'the African world view'. With reference to the Bantu languages, he singled out 'vital force' as the core philosophical concept, the true foundation of an emic understanding. In the African world view, he declared, the vital force is not only the one great good desired by everybody, it is believed to dominate all social

life. It exists in all beings, living or inanimate and defines being (Tempels 1959: 44 ff; Kriel 1971: 36–7).

Tempels assumed that his enlightened approach defied the evolutionist thinking of his days, and that in the face of his conception of vital force 'the universally accepted picture of primitive man, of the savage, of the proto-man living before the full blossoming of intelligence' would vanish 'beyond hope of recovery' (Tempels 1959: 167–8). He also confronted the evolutionist idea of 'imitative magic' (1959: 53, 59). However, his position remains evidently reminiscent of the animism proposed in the classics of Tylor and Frazer (1959: 57). In short, he remains partly indebted to the culture history school that dominated anthropological thinking in the early years of the Science of Man. His theory, it must be stressed, has left a legacy both in Europe and in Africa, in philosophical and anthropological circles[5]. And even at the time when his paradigm became generally rejected by anthropologists and philosophers alike[6], it was hailed with equal vigour by africanists in the *Négritude* movement.

At face value, Scheub's analysis of Xhosa and Zulu folktales may not seem very relevant in a socio-cultural discussion of the conflict theme in African folklore. Indeed, in his theoretical analysis of *iintsomi*, the concept of conflict seems more of a literary than of a social nature. On the other hand, his textbook remains, up to date, the most extensive southern African theoretical treatise in its kind. A careful epistemological examination reveals perceptions which prove useful to an understanding of the genre of storytelling in general and of the conflict theme in particular. '*The Xhosa Ntsomi*' (1975) is structural-functionalism at its best, both in terms of literary theory and anthropology. Scheub's analysis of the *intsomi* performance dwells on narrative structures, i.e. structural devices used in the composition of narratives. More importantly, the author also investigates the underlying (read: deeper) structural organization of the narrative surface. Even if Scheub makes no references to the theoretical underpinnings of his literary analysis, the affinity with the structuralist paradigm is manifest throughout the monograph.

Scheub makes no mention of the anthropological grounding of his work either. There is no need to, since the presence of structural- functionalist core concepts such as 'cultural homeostasis' and 'organic analogy', is obvious from the onset (even if these concepts are never mentioned explicitly). He perceives society as a balanced organism governed by solidarity and social harmony. He explains the central meaning or function of social processes and practices as attempts at restoring balance, should any disturbance occur. Scheub refers to the restoration and maintenance of the social order, in literary terms, as 'the drama of conflict and resolution', which comprises the narrative focus of the performance (1975: 76). The structural-functional conception of culture is most clearly manifested in his discussion of the didactic purpose of the *iintsomi*.

5 E.g. Foster's theory of the 'limted good'.

6 Nauta (1987) provides an excellent critique of Tempels, and of ethno-philosophy in general.

Narratives we are told, explore, affirm and internalize productive and significant social relationships. They dramatize and idealize proper social responses through representations of e.g. the ideal herd boy, the obedient daughter, the perfect mother-in-law. As such they fulfill the need for order (1975: 173). The reader is informed that *iintsomi* celebrate, in words and action, time-sanctioned customs as the finest means of achieving harmony. Society and social customs, it is stated, are modeled on nature. In sum: social harmony is patterned on natural harmony and the child is encouraged, through *iintsomi*, to identify with nature (1975: 85–7).

The paradigm which underlies more recent approaches to the conflict theme is of course diametrically opposed to the structural-functionalist study of Scheub. I do not want to dwell on Conflict theory other than stating that it rejects, by means of a variety of theoretical windows, the concept of harmony and the static societies in which it is said to be found, as illusionary and as irrelevant to the analysis of social institutions. Instead, it identifies dissent as unavoidably part of the human condition and as a most useful tool for the discussion and understanding of social issues. In addition, discord amongst humans is seen by many as a necessary condition for social change. The monograph edited by Furniss and Gunner (1995) clearly sustains this paradigm.

4. Storytelling and the Realm of Men

Junod, I have mentioned, observed in the different categories of Ronga tales signs of discontent, evidence of 'the wisdom of the little ones'. More particularly, in the animal trickster tales he noted how protest appeared to be directed against those people who represent traditional authority. 'The triumph of wisdom over brute force' seemed, in his understanding, to symbolize the victory over an 'all powerful Chief,…an autocrat with power of life and death over his subjects'. Phrased differently: social hierarchy has become the object of popular critique. The voice of protest against the local rulers, however, he reminds the reader earnestly, is symbolic, never direct. And he explains further:

> 'They [the storytellers and their audience] do not try to upset the existing state of affairs. Far from it! But they take a malicious pleasure in telling of the clever tricks of the Hare and his associates!' (1927: 224)

Many of the human stories, Junod added, contain similar roundabout messages of protest against those in power (1927: 223, 224).

The Tshivenda *dzingano* (stories) of Sankambe similarly seem to speak of protest against those in power. The powerful are commonly represented by the bigger and stronger animals (elephant, lion and crocodile). In the following popular narrative, Elephant becomes the victim of Mr. Hare:

Sankambe kills Muzhou[7]

Sankambe and Muzhou had planted a fruit tree at their place. This tree, named muthathalidzhane, bears fruits covered in hard peels. The fruits were ripening. They agreed that they would collect and eat these fruits together. Sankambe ate some of the fruits. During the night he put the peels in Muzhou's pockets. The next day they woke up and discovered some of the fruits had been stolen. They went to the King's place and called all the animals. Sankambe said: "Let us jump high, and we will see who ate the fruits. The one who stole the fruits must be killed." All the animals agreed. Sankambe was the first one to jump. He jumped really high and smiled. Then Muzhou jumped! Shame… Even Muzhou himself was surprised when the peels fell out of his pockets. Sankambe said: "Your Majesty! Muzhou must be killed!" The King agreed and Muzhou was killed. Sankambe demanded the foreleg and shoulder. The King agreed. On the way Sankambe handed over the meat saying: "This is too heavy, give me the stomach!" The King agreed. They walked and walked. Then he asked for the liver. The King agreed. They walked and walked. Sankambe sang: " I have eaten the fruits. I have eaten the fruits. I took the peels and put them on Muzhou so that you would kill him." "What did you just sing?" asked the King. "I sang: the meat is too heavv, Sir!" They walked and walked and Sankambe sang: "I have eaten the fruits…" "What did you just sing Sankambe?" the King asked. "I sang: give me the liver, Sir!". They walked and walked and Sankambe sang his song. The King then called for all the animals to catch Sankambe. He jumped in the water. One of the animals shouted: "I caught that rascal!" Sankambe replied: "You are holding the roots of mutulume!" He let go and Sankambe escaped.

And so Sankambe makes a fool of the King. The small hare, yet again, deceives or defeats that mighty Elephant. He demands the best parts of the slaughtered animal. Worse still, he is going to eat the royal parts or metaphorically 'eat' (= destroy) the King! In other, similar stories Sankambe mocks Crocodile and Lion. Is the narrator, perhaps, transpiring or even fuelling popular sentiments of discontent against traditional authority? I would agree with Junod's position that the trickster stories are *not* the right place to look for a 'spirit of rebellion'. The full meaning of the average trickster tale, I believe, can only be understood when it is conceived as a separate category with its own particular audience, created to serve a specific didactic need.

Granted, Junod and Kriel did classify the animal tales as a separate category. However, they then go on noting the resemblances between animal stories and the other types, thus blurring the distinction. Scheub, on the other hand, excludes the animal tales from his analysis, and by doing so, perhaps confirms their individual character. Unfortunately, the reader is left in darkness as to the

7 Adapted from a *ngano* collected by the author in 1996.

reasons for their omission from his study. Yet, the particular identity of these tales should become clear even from a cursory reading. Animal trickster tales distinguish themselves, firstly, in that their protagonists are primarily, if not almost exclusively, male. Secondly and more importantly, they do not dwell on marital relations, jealousy of co-wives, the fate of orphans and other social issues which often constitute the plot in human narratives. Finally, the trickster tales are somewhat opaque in terms of their moral lessons. This feature has puzzled many researchers, including myself. For anybody interested in the didactic function of traditional folkore, the immoral, anti-social behaviour of Mr. Hare is puzzling to say the least. Moral conceptions, Kriel concluded from his analysis, seem to have disappeared from these tales:

> 'Hare is most often the victor, and he achieves this position by outright fraud and deceit. He betrays his uncle Baboon, devours the lion cubs entrusted to his care, and gets away with it all.' (1975: 40)

The adventures of Mr. Hare seemingly glorify negative social relations and exalt deceit and treachery: hardly suitable subjects for the purpose of moralizing and educating an audience of young listeners. Mr. Hare, Kriel observed, is not just a symbol of cleverness, he seems to possess a sadistic streak (1975: 63). Surely, Kriel wondered, the Shona wouldn't teach their children that deceit is smart? (1975: 154). Junod argued similarly that the Ronga animal folklore seems to be 'absolutely devoid' of moral lessons (1927: 223).

One way of explaining the anti-social behaviour of Mr. Hare would be to suggest that his adventures state in a negative way what society considers morally right, or depict society's worst nightmares[8]. There is a much easier way to un-riddle this mystery. Given the fact that the stories are primarily meant for a young audience, one could simply and justly argue that the adventures of Mr. Hare are meant to entertain rather than to educate morally. This is, in the final analysis, exactly what narrators do. They use all available tools and tricks of the oral performance to create entertainment. In addition to laughter, they provoke amongst the youthful listeners feelings of surprise, fear, horror, shock, confusion and amazement. But in the end, it's all just fun and games. Mr. Hare may appear to be a villain in terms of moral codes, however, he is primarily, as Junod and Kriel have indicated, a metaphor for the 'little ones', i.e. for the audience of prepubescent youth, the uninitiated, those who are considered not yet 'fully human'. Sankambe is truly *their* hero, on account of his entertaining trickery, and his actual size.

There is more. The personality of the trickster is commonly summed up by narrators and audience alike, as 'being clever and naughty'. In the story of *Sankambe and the Farmer*, he steals food and when caught, he uses the farmer's son to get his favourite meal, the farmer's hen. In *Sankambe kills Muzhou* he breaks a social agreement. In fact, he breaks one of the most fundamental

8 This is a strong theme in Ruth Benedict's culture and personality approach to the study of Zuni mythology (1935).

agreements: communal sharing. When he is cordial and humble, it is mere pretence. He abuses the communal meeting at the royal court. He taunts the King when singing his confession. Having helped to rid society of a thief, he has indebted the King and demands the best parts of Muzhou. There seems to be no end to his cunningness. Being clever and naughty are behavioural traits strongly associated, in popular culture, with young males, and, rather ambiguously, frowned upon and admired at the same time. The (mis)behaviour of male youths is generally tolerated more than accepted, and often commented upon with an inconclusive 'boys will be boys…'. A similar ambiguity applies to the appraisal of Sankambe, who features both as hero and as villain in the trickster stories.

Informants (from the Venda speaking research area) agreed that in the not so distant past, older boys were separated from their sisters at an early age. They had their own sleeping place in the homestead and spent the evenings at their own, separate fire. Later on, under the control of married men, they would join the *thondo*, a space reserved for male initiation at the chief's village. Until the introduction of colonial rule in 1899, the *thondo* also served as military barracks. After initiation, but before marriage, young men were allocated a separate fire in the public meeting place or royal courtyard (*khoro*). In short: young, men formed a separate, somewhat liminal and temporarily unsettled stratum in the social hierarchy. More importantly, stealth, Sankambe's major personality trait, was perceived as an important component in the survival skills and military training of pubescent male youths at the initiation lodge. It seems not unreasonable to suggest that, at least formerly, trickster tales provided a masculine role model for boys and as such prepared them for initiation into manhood. Other stories, it will be indicated shortly, were possibly designed to prepare girls for their roles as mothers and wives.

Kriel hinted at another important dimension of 'being clever' when discussing the Shona power/ideal of knowledge, one of the eight manifestations of Tempels' 'vital force'. He linked 'cleverness' (*kuchenjera*, *kungwara*) or 'making a plan, a scheme, finding a solution' (*mazano*), to the masculine ideal of wisdom and knowledge. In addition, he defined wisdom as the possession of oratory skills. In the past every Shona adult male was expected to participate actively in public political meetings and court cases in the courtyard (*dare*). Those who 'lacked plans', or did not participate in discussions, were strongly advised 'to go and tan skins' (a euphemism for calling them fools , 1975: 63, 111–4). Knowledge and wisdom were expressed in a distinct form of speech in which the use of proverbs featured centrally. This type of politico-judicial discourse was (and to a certain extent has remained) a common feature in rural life throughout Southern Africa.

I must emphasize that the kind of trickery and stealth that formed an important part of the curriculum of the initiation school, was aimed at preparing the male youths for collective hunting and military expeditions, hardly anti-social activities. Also, the 'subversive' deeds of Mr. Hare do not really belong to this world. Rather, they are confined to the imaginary realm of personified animals, created by the narrator at night around the fire. Similarly, when novices

of the initiation lodge are expected to 'misbehave' (like their fictitious counterparts in stories they swear, steal and fight), they do so under the strict supervision of the elders and within the seclusion of the initiation lodge, where the normal social order is suspended, if not inverted. It is clearly neither the intention of the masters of the lodge to teach, nor to encourage the novices to steal from fellow citizens, or to be disrespectful, as many early observers and researchers have wrongly concluded. Finally, initiation lodges are organized under the auspices (and for the political and economic benefit) of local or regional rulers. It stands to reason that the same rulers would not allow their authority to be undermined in these institutions. I repeat, the trickster tales (or human tales for that matter) which prepare prepubescent youths for participation in the lodge, are most unlikely a cultural site for the creation or the maintenance of a 'spirit of rebellion'. This is not to say that no indigenous African society has ever produced narratives that categorically express feelings of popular mistrust, even enmity, against the very institution of chieftainship. The following Lyela story clearly demonstrates such rebellious sentiments:

> *The King who ate Raw Cereals*
> A certain orphan lived alone. He had nobody to prepare food for him. He ate his cereals raw. 'How does he eat his cereals raw?' the king wondered. He went to visit the boy and demanded the medicine that allowed him to eat uncooked food. The boy agreed but requested that the king would fill his bags with millet, sesame, groundnuts and corn. They walked for a long time in the forest and the boy told the king to sit down and wait for him to return with the medicine. The king got hungry and started eating the raw cereals. It started raining and he looked for refuge in a cave. Inside he found wild animals. Monkey agreed to take him back to the royal village.[9]

The hero of this story is an orphaned youth, a common protagonist and popular symbol for the weak, the unfortunate and the oppressed. As is the case in many Lyela stories, he emerges as the wise one. The king is depicted as the fool who carries the boy's bags of cereals, is forced to eat them uncooked and gets lost in the forest. Steinbrich estimated that ten per cent of the Lyela tales depict the king as a buffoon. During her study she discovered that the unpopularity of the chieftainship can be explained historically. The French colonial administration had imposed a new 'indigenous' political hierarchy to replace the somewhat atomistic political organization of the Lyela. In precolonial times, clans were placed under the semi-formal, religious rulership of shrine priests (Steinbrich 1995: 92–5). The institution of the chieftainship (referred to as 'kingship' in the oral literature) was never really accepted or integrated in social life. It was merely tolerated. The art of storytelling, then, became a means to vent discontent. It allowed the people to resist colonial rule. Lyela tales also used the

9 Abridged from Steinbrich in Furniss and Gunner 1995:99-100.

chiefs/kings as scapegoats for internal tensions, created by the mistrust and enmity between members of the original clan division (1995: 101, 108).

Similarly, Le Roux (1996) discovered a tradition of contemporary storytelling in the Venda speaking region of the Limpopo province of South Africa, in which men in general, and local rulers in particular, are depicted as being intensively abusive of women and children. Many of these stories, I would like to suggest, are adaptations of the repertoire of older narratives that are found throughout the region. They can only be fully understood, I believe, within their idiosyncratic spatial and temporal contexts: the internal colonialism of the Venda Bantustan; the social wretchedness of the South African migrant labour system; the severe drought of the early nineties etc. These, I hope to explore elsewhere in more detail.

5. STORYTELLING AND THE REALM OF WOMEN

> The Girl and the Lions
> One day four young women and a small girl accompany their newlywed sister to the homestead of the bridegroom. They have been sent to help the bride with the stamping of peanuts. The five women take turns in stamping. When busy pounding, each of them hears a voice: 'With whom do you eat and sleep at home?' 'With men' they reply one after another. Finally it is the little girl's turn. A small rat warns the girl not to reply in the same fashion as the elder sisters did. 'I eat and sleep with grandmother' she replies. When the evening falls, all four sisters are eaten by lions. Only the small girl remains unharmed, hiding under her grandmother's skirt (tshirivha).[10]

Trickster tales provide continuity in the life cycle of male youths and prepare them for their rites of passage. There is also a vast body of narratives which display close resemblance to the training of young girls for their future roles as adult women. The Tshivenda *ngano* of *The Girl and the Lions* is one of many variations on the theme of the disobedient or disrespectful female youngster. They can be found in the folklore of all languages in the South East African region. The similarities between different versions of this type of stories, in different languages, are often astounding. They provide evidence for a shared, cross-cultural ownership of these stories; for the existence of a cultural region and the trans-cultural traffic of selected cultural traits. More importantly, they exemplify the social significance which societies in the subcontinent attach to the cultural values and moral lessons expressed in these stories.

This particular Venda narrative exemplifies *par excellence* the continuity between storytelling and the ritual pedagogy of girls. The key link is grandmother's leather skirt, the *tshirivha*. N.J. Van Warmelo, chief ethnologist

10 Adapted from a *Tshivenda* narrative, recorded by the author in 1995.

of the Union of South Africa, defined *tshirivha* in the 1930's as 'a goatskin back apron of married women' (1989: 421). Today, many Venda women refer to it as 'our traditional wedding gown'. It is rarely seen outside the context of girl's initiation rites, where it serves as a didactic tool used by the masters of the initiation. It is also worn as part of the initiation regalia by the initiates during the 'coming out' ceremony. As graduation uniform it marks social maturity and readiness for marriage. As a 'wedding gown' it symbolizes a young woman's readiness to provide the groom's family with progeny and to continue the name of his patrilineage.

In the story of *The girl and the Lions*, the heroine is the youngest of the women, as is so often the case. She is the wisest of the five. She is the one that obeys the female elders (represented by the grandmother). She represents the prepubescent girl, for whose benefit the stories are created. The message is simple: see what happens when you sleep with boys! The moral girl is rewarded, whilst immoral behaviour is punished. The *tshirivha* skirt, which in the real world marks the social status of a married woman, features in the *ngano* as the protector of womanhood. Unmarried girls need to be protected against men, the lions, powerful beasts, wild animals who are ready to devour womanhood. In the ritual pedagogy of the *vhusha* initiation ceremonies, the very same leather garment features as a teaching aid. The lesson consists of the identification of the different parts of the garment, and an explanation of the meaning of the motifs and decorations which are found on it (e.g. concentric circles, parallel lines). The initiates memorize these interpretations in a ritualized question and answer form, known as the *milayo*, the 'laws' or aphorisms of the initiation. One of the motifs is explained as 'the footprint of the lions'. The instructor reminds the initiates that the lions are the men that threaten their virginity. In doing so, she links the process and product of initiation to the means and function of the *ngano* performance of storytelling.

Indeed, a more intimate reading of many stories reveals how both the subject matter and expressive style resemble the form and content of the pedagogic experience in girls' initiation schools. The technique of interactive response (question-answer; song-chorus) is used both by the narrator of tales and the instructor of the initiation lodge, in order to enchant and instruct the audience. A more substantial analogy concerns the general mood of the tales and instructions: a curious mix of play and mystery. Now the temper appears to be light, the next moment it becomes heavy hearted. In the same fashion the discourse of the instructor/narrator varies between informal, almost casual conversation and deep, formalized speech.

Play. Storytelling is conceived of as a game. It is meant to arouse excitement and to entertain, much in the same way as riddles and musical games do. The tales are, after all, created for an audience of children. The songs, dances, bodily exercises and mimes of the girls' initiation schools also feature an element of play, be it in a less obvious fashion. Many girls are attracted to the music of the lodge and are convinced by their friends to join the school on account of the singing and dancing. Furthermore, some of the ritual displays (*matano*; litt.

shows) performed by the instructor, are designed to give the girls a break from the more strenuous or serious activities in the lodge.

Mystery. The enigmatic mood of the tales and of the pedagogy of initiation is generated by the omnipresence of symbolic words, metaphorical objects and body language, some of which are unintelligible (but nevertheless meaningful) to the young audience or participants. Folktales create a fantasy world. The realm of initiation is a magical mystery tour. Both realms remove the child from everyday life and the 'real' world to a realm of pain and pleasure, excitement, fear and surprise. Through ritual and instruction they are allowed to catch a glimpse of the 'other' world. This other-wordly experience, however, serves worldly ends. Social norms and values are brought home to the youths, through the mediation of non-cognitive (experiental, emotional or affective) paths of communication and learning.

6. Some Final Notes

Appearances are misleading. The pioneering perspectives of Junod, Kriel and Scheub – much as they may seem outdated or incomplete in some aspects, remain, in my opinion, relevant in the analysis of storytelling. Junod and Kriel were aware of the moral value of these tales, even if they found themselves somewhat confused when faced with the trickster tales. Junod, in addition, noticed the tension between the opposing values of individualism and collectivism, as possibly meaningful. I believe that this tension holds unexplored explanatory potential for the meaningful understanding of the conflict theme. It is certainly present in all aspects of indigenous culture. On the one hand communalism is time-honoured and practiced in the widest variety of ways (e.g. communal working parties; age-group ceremonies and activities; sharing within the nuclear and extended family; sororate and related marriage practices etc.). It is also manifested by numerous proverbs and idiomatic expressions. On the other hand, one finds proverbs that clearly 'undermine' the collective social charter and encourage individual behaviour. There are similar types of tensions that are structurally part of the traditional cultural universe and remain largely unresolved. They feature in oppositions of social categories such as commoner vs. ruler; female vs. male and young vs. old. Maybe, storytelling is one of the cultural means to 'deal' with these tensions? Which takes us back to *The Xhosa nstomi.*

Scheub, who at first seemed the least relevant of them all, could very well be the most significant. When he points out that in the human tales, conflicts are being resolved and tensions removed, and when he discusses the natural balancing mechanisms of culture, he may not be far from the truth. Indeed, many of the children's narratives leave the reader with a general feeling of reconciliation. They do not depict the social categories of father, husband and ruler as inherently evil. They do not praise the removal of established forms of

authority. They certainly do not preach rebellion. If there is any protest, it is directed against unacceptable forms authority (lousy fathers, irresponsible husbands, corrupt rulers etc.) not against authority (*vhuhulwane*) *per se*. As such, the narrators and their narratives could be seen to support a balance of power and to celebrate *vhuthu* (empathy and humanness, known as *ubuntu* in Southern Africa).

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