

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ZULU ORAL TRADITIONS

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### Introduction

With reference to the discussion by Jaco Alant on orality, I would like to emphasise certain points raised which correlate with my overview of 'Zulu Oral Traditions'. Firstly, 'the study of orality deals specifically, not so much with speaking in its everyday sense ... but, in fact, with particular culturally defined forms of speaking. As such, orality studies are about oral genres'.

Secondly, 'the crucial factor in distinguishing between orality and literacy should lie in **certain characteristics of the language used**. An oral conception of language may well, at times, manifest itself as writing, just as a highly literate conception of language may be put across orally'. Ong makes the important point that 'oral cultures concern themselves with doings, with happenings, not with being as such: they narrativize their own existence and their environment'. (1988:8).

In this discussion I am going to concentrate not exclusively on the form of oral tradition, but the **functions** that its various forms play in modern society.

Literature forms part of the human communication system, and when the language is used with particular care in terms of images and words chosen, it can be said to represent an artistic expression. However, it is **when** these expressions are used in particular ways in a society and **how** they are used that echoes Ong's sentiment of an oral 'culture'. The 'literary expressions' that are dealt with here, are based in orality, some sections having been recorded in writing only since the latter half of this century.

'Oral residue', a term coined by Walter Ong, pertains to the characteristics of orality which remain in the world of literacy even after the introduction of writing. This term encompasses the psychology of the 'oral mind' which is determined by both environmental and hereditary factors.

Oral traditions are part of the heritage of the Zulus' cultural wealth in its various forms and expressions. Folklore is the main source of these oral traditions, and this lives on, regardless of whether it is recorded in writing or not. It continues in a parallel fashion to written records, often intermingling with them.

Alan Dundes (1965:1-3) defines the term folklore in two separate parts. He says that folk 'can refer to any group of people who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is ... but what is important is that a group ... will have some traditions which it calls its own'. He then goes on to define lore as traditions which are orally transmitted, but makes the point that the 'oral transmission' criterion is not sufficient, as not everything that is orally transmitted can be called folklore, and not all folkloristic items are necessarily orally transmitted. Dundes lists a number of folklore forms which correspond to the criterion of traditional material orally transmitted, covering such things as myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, curses, oaths, insults etc.

### 1. Categorization of Traditional Zulu Oral Forms

The Zulu Language Board has recently categorised the various forms of poetry in oral traditional literature in the following way:

- *Imilolozelo* (lullabies)
- *Amahubo* (poetry accompanied by song)
- *Izibongo* ('praise' poetry)

Under the heading of *amahubo*, we have various divisions which encompass wedding songs, funeral songs, political songs, war songs, hunting songs and work songs.

The form of oral poetry known as *izibongo*, or praise poetry, is divided into four major categories viz. *izibongo zabantu kumbe izihasho* (the praises of ordinary people known as *izihasho*); *izibongo zezinto ezingaphili* (the praises of inanimate things); *nezibongo zamakhosi/izibongo zabantu abakhulu abagqamile* (the praises of kings/praises of famous and important people), and *izithakazelo kanye nezibongo* (clan praises).

The categories of traditional oral prose forms are made up of:

- *Izinganekwane* (folktales)
- *Izishofizaga* (idioms & proverbs)
- *Iziphicaphicwano* (riddles)

## 2. Characteristics of Oral Texts

Central to oral forms is their performance without which they eventually die out. Oral performance involves visual dimensions as well as aural dimensions. These aspects tend to heighten the emotional and dramatic impact, and bring about a great degree of audience participation. The involvement of the audience is also vital to the performance as it is essentially a communal experience. This aspect brings oral 'literature' closer to dance, music or drama which rely on the performance to be enjoyed and appreciated, than to fixed written forms of literature. There is no rigidly fixed form handed down from generation to generation, as rigidity is foreign to the tradition. There are, however, traditional cores which a performer uses, as well as external and internal devices which are common to the various forms.

Ong proposes that as oral cultures produce mnemonic thoughts, they think in mnemonic patterns shaped for easy oral recollection. These patterns include rhythmic, balanced patterns consisting of repetitions and antitheses, alliteration and assonance, epithetic and formulaic expressions and standard thematic settings.

These patterns are evident in the eulogistic and extended praise poems of the Zulu Kings (*izibongo zamakhosi*), as well as in the oral narrative form of Zulu folktales (*izinganekwane*).

## 3. The Function of Oral Texts

In examining the characteristics of the language used, it is pertinent at this stage to investigate the function of these oral texts in Zulu society bearing in mind Ong's definition.

- 3.1. In terms of the *izibongo zamakhosi* (praise poems of kings and their modern counterpart in the praises of politically prominent people), these are praises which are considered to embody the most sophisticated poetic art of all the oral traditions. They describe the events and lives of the Zulu kings, as well as incorporating physical and personality descriptions. These are heroic poems which contain the epic of a whole nation, personified in its sovereign, and are performed by professional bards. It is worth noting, that the current Zulu *imbongi*, Dlamini, who praises the king at all formal occasions, is totally illiterate, having received no formal education whatsoever. In 4 versions recorded of him 'performing' his praises, there are several differences,

some chronological, some in terms of new praises composed recording a recent event, which are then incorporated into the praises during their next recitation.

The recitation by the *imbongi* of the *izibongo zamakhosi* play an important role as an 'oral tradition':

- a) they instill in the audience a sense of pride and 'nationhood';
- b) by praising the king, they are an expression of the loyalty and pride felt by his subjects, serving to exult and honour him;
- c) they are the channel of public opinion between monarch and subjects;
- d) they play a religious role in that the *imbongi*, by calling out the names of the ancestors, becomes an intermediary between the living and the dead;
- e) they are used as an urge to greater valour and endurance (this was especially the case in days gone by, prior to battle);
- f) they are an oral record of historical and cultural events;
- g) they serve as a warning to potential enemies by virtue of the exclamation of the kings achievements.

3.2. The modern counterpart to these traditional praises is found in the praises of the common man - *izihasho*. These can be seen as an ongoing counterpart of the traditional oral poetry and form an oral history of the ordinary man in the street. A person, with no royal connections or even special status is still imbued with pride in being recognised by his praises. This is even the case with those people whose 'praises' lack any element of true praise in them. However, within the Zulu communal society, being known by one's praises, provides a person with a distinct identity which is important to his ego and self image. The functions of this type of 'praise-poem' are essentially:

- a) as a form of encouragement to achieve greater heights (whether on the battlefield, when giya-ing or on a sportsfield);
- b) to honour or humour, appeal to or to appease a person;
- c) to record the personality, physical characteristics and noteworthy achievements of one's life as well as infamous deeds;

- d) to criticize, admonish or warn someone about behaviour patterns deemed unacceptable by the immediate society;
- e) to expose or humiliate a person whose behaviour is made public through his 'praises'.

These oral poems are of an informal nature as they are not composed by professional bards, and are normally recited at non-formal occasions, such as on the playing fields, or where men get together to talk or drink (perhaps as a way of introducing a newcomer), or in recognition of the return of a man to his home area after a lengthy absence, at wedding or engagement parties etc.

3.3. *Izithakazelo* are the third category of *izibongo* which is the corresponding praise name accorded to every Zulu surname. In Nguni society, the basic unit of the family bears its identity by means of the clan name or *isibongo*, which is normally the name of the original kraal head, founding father, or some particularly famous member of the clan, e.g. Zulu, Buthelezi, Dlamini etc. In addition to the *isibongo*, every clan has a particular address name or praise name. The *isithakazelo* is normally the name of a famous ancestor of the clan, and is usually taken from the first or second line of the clan praises, e.g:

<i>Isibongo</i>	<i>Isithakazelo</i>
Buthelezi	Shenge
Bhengu	Ngcolosi
Nxumalo	Zwide
Mkhize	Khabazela
Zulu	Mageba
Zondi	Nondaba
Zungu	Manzini

Clan praises play an important part in Nguni society and are performed in a wide range of situations. They need not be recited in their entirety, but this is normally the case on serious occasions such as private family rituals and ceremonies. These praises act as a cohesive force binding the members of a clan together into a solid social unit.

The *isithakazelo* may be recited as a form of respectful greeting to a man, in circumstances of consolation or comforting, as an expression of appreciation and congratulation, in marriage negotiations and formal betrothal, at marriage ceremonies, as well as at sacrificial ceremonies. The content of clan praises consists of references to past events, and constitutes a brief summarised record of the history and behavioural traits of the entire clan or of certain prominent ancestors.

- 3.4. *Imilozelo* are lullabies, or songs used essentially to lull a child to sleep. Being poetic in form, they make use of traditional poetic linking devices, especially rhythm, but also alliteration, assonance, parallelism, bold imagery etc. In addition to the soporific function they perform, these songs may also be used in certain instances as a type of melic poetry which is used in the communal setting in order to make a verbal attack on someone. Children are adept at picking up the words of these rhythmic songs and may often repeat them. This repetition serves to drive a point home or deliver a message to the desired target, heightening the torment of the victim.
- 3.5. *Amahubo* include work songs which are chanted in a solo-chorus fashion in group work situations and serve to lighten the burden of manual labour. They create a sense of team effort and often contain derisive but amusing words aimed at a particular person or group of people. The other categories of songs included under *amahubo*, such as love songs, elegiac songs, political songs and war songs fall beyond the scope of the present brief overview.
- 3.6. The category of oral prose is made up of *izinganekwane* (folktales), *iziphicaphicwano* (riddles), proverbs and idioms. The main difference between the modern written forms (the novel and short story) and traditional oral forms is to be found in the methods of composition (oral versus written), the characters and setting.

The folktale is composed in performance, out of traditional material, following the traditional compositional canons as expounded by Axel Olrik (1908). They rely for their survival on mnemonic principles and techniques, such as strong polarity, repetition, stereotyped characters, and the inclusion of motifs and images from the general reservoir common to a

whole community. Folktale characters are also stereotypes and are often fantastic creations: animals, ogres, cannibals or humans with superior powers. In terms of settings which refer to time, place and social conditions, the folktale often deals with mythological times, and is set in a world which crosses between the real and the fantastic. This world expresses the desire for a perfect society and wrongs can often be righted by supernatural intervention.

3.6.1. The **riddle** as oral art form is used to stimulate a child's imagination and his spirit of observation and to identify the various meanings of words. They are introduced by set formulas, and involve highly allusive word play, e.g:

*Ngiyakuphica ngezinkomo ezimhlophe ezaluswa yinkunzi ebomvu.* (I quiz you about the white cattle herded by a red bull) > *Amazinyo nolimi* (the teeth and the tongue).

3.6.2. By far the most prolific form of oral prose in the Zulu oral tradition, is the **folktale**. These are nearly always performed (not just told) by the grandmother, who is the acknowledged expert on traditions and customs of the people, and the educator in the family. A story, in order to be effective, must be suitable to the moment, not an abstract creation which may be 'read' in the future. Any performance entails an impromptu creation within a traditional framework. (Finnegan, 1970).

Gough (1986) describes the creative act and its development in terms of memory activation: the storyteller has stored in her memory bank, 'tale chunks' as well as a number of other traditional elements. Her short term memory is activated by the immediate circumstances, by the title and the main character and by the refrain of her tale. Her long term memory sets in motion the cueing and scanning faculty. (Scheub, 1975).

The adaptation of the material at hand takes the form of cueing and linking while the grandmother presents her tale. Cueing consists, on the one hand, in identifying the narrative elements normally connected with a particular character or core image, and the dissemination of details which are going to be made use of at a later stage (cueing to the story), as well as, on the other, in determining the audience's reaction to what is being represented and directing it towards the story's intended goal (cueing to the audience). Linking entails the choice of suitable episodes for the main characters in the story, and the proper linking of these episodes through the dissemination of

important narrative details (interlocking details and images). This is achieved by making use of relevant transitional details. Propp uses the term *function sequences* for connected actions, which are expressed in content units called *core-images* (Scheub). Ong (1982:60) describes these units as: 'a float of themes and formulas out of which all stories are built'.

Formulae and linking techniques are essential in helping the performer concentrate on the actions of the story rather than on the actual wording. The use of language, ideophones, expressive idioms, repetition etc. are equally part of this texture.

Ong (1982:9) affirms that, in an oral society, one learns by apprenticeship, discipleship, listening, repeating, mastering proverbs, combining and re-combining materials and participating in a kind of corporate retrospection. These are also the means by which a storyteller is gradually trained.

### 3.7. Bascom highlights 5 basic functions of folktales:

- a) amusement or entertainment;
- b) validation of culture, beliefs and ritual practices (giving charter to social institutions);
- c) education through approval or reprimand of behaviour;
- d) etiology;
- e) survival of ethnic solidarity.

With regard to Zulu folktales all these functions apply, except for the fact that possible contradictions occur between the concept of the educative function and the anti-social behaviour of the **trickster**, which is so common to many of the Zulu folktales. The trickster's unscrupulous handling of social institution and traditions wreaks havoc in society. Trickery seems to be an all-pervading element in Zulu folktales. It produces fun and laughter by the portrayal of the unexpected, which in turn serves as a valve to release pent-up tensions, often caused by strict social rules. The folktale lives in the fantastic world where humans and animals meet and interact quite freely; trickery seems to have no role to play in purely human society. At the end of a performance based on the trickster, both performer and audience spit on the fire, as if to purify their lips of all the 'impurities' which have passed through their minds and tongues.



This is symbolic of the fact that whatever may be permissible in the fantastic world, the real world of human society has different and more pure rules, by which one must abide.

#### 4. **Conclusion: The Role of Satire in Zulu Oral Tradition**

Prominent in virtually all forms of Zulu oral traditions are various forms of censure, reproof, disapproval of broken norms etc. This is often represented in a satirical manner. As an 'oral' form (being totally dependent on performance and requiring an audience), Zulu folklore is an obviously suitable medium for the expression of satire within the realm of Zulu oral literary traditions.

One interesting aspect of Zulu oral tradition and folklore is the expression of its view of itself: its control system works either by means of positive encouragement of socially acceptable forms of behaviour, or by punishment of negative attitudes, law breakers and social deviants. It is the latter aspect that is the source of satire in Zulu oral tradition. It has been practised as a form of social control as part of communal entertainment, not only in days gone by but in present times as well.

The type of satire that is prevalent in the poetry and narrative forms of Zulu oral tradition or folklore is not of the type practised by a class of the social elite, as for example in eighteenth century English literature. It is not abstract or intellectual, but is distinctly popular in nature, concerning itself, as Ong has mentioned, with social transgressions. It functions primarily to ensure that certain patterns and modes of behaviour are adhered to. When they are not, it gives rise to public protest and indignation which manifests itself either in the form of oral poetry aimed at the individual, or in the form of folktales with an ethical base.

The Zulus have always been a community orientated society, placing great importance on good social relations between neighbours and others within the community. Direct confrontation is not an acceptable form of behaviour in this environment, hence the importance of allusive satirical 'messages' which occur in various oral traditions. These coded forms of language are typical of the euphemistic and allusive language that is common in the speech of Zulu speaking people and they

serve a significant function in 'working out tension, ... in minimizing friction ... or in providing a means of indirect comment when a direct one is not feasible'. (Finnegan, 1970:470).

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