

THE TRICKSTER IN ZULU FOLKTALES

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Introduction: The Storytelling Event

In ancient times, before the upheaval caused by white colonization, the main means of intellectual and moral education for a Zulu child consisted of listening to the stories told by his grandmother and to the talk of the elders of the clan. In this way the child learned what his society 'told itself about itself' (Vansina, 1982:143). He also learned the language in all its beautiful nuances, the proverbs according to which to regulate his life as they represented the distillation of that ancient wisdom passed on from generation to generation, and the practical ways in which to take his proper place in society. Mindful that 'in an oral society what cannot be recalled is wasted' (Ong, 1982), the whole communication system was concerned with the creation of 'memorable thoughts' (Ong, 1982), encapsulated in striking images presented in linguistic and structural patterns that helped memorization and recall.

In the evenings, around the fire in winter or under the stars on warm summer nights, the stage was set for a session of entertainment, but also of education, since everybody had the continuation of the clan's life at heart, and nothing came 'free of charge' in a traditional society: there was no conception of 'art for art's sake'. The performance was the product of the co-operation of both the living and the living-dead, whose span of immortality depended on being regularly remembered by the members of the lineage.

Thus the hearth was considered the energetic centre of family life, and the performance acquired a nearly sacred quality, the more so since religious practices were centred on the veneration of the family ancestors, the fathers and the grandfathers who had passed on the gift of life to the present generation.

Donny Mhlongo, a well-known Zulu writer, poignantly expresses the centrality of the hearth in a little poem which serves as an introduction to his book of traditional oral literature, called *Iziko, The Hearth* (1987):

Indawun'ethe dingilizi maphakathi nendlu: IZIKO.
Kuyabaswa kothiwe kuyo: IZIKO.
Kungaphakwa kudliwe kusuthwe: EZIKO.
Izinkuni zingaphenduka umlotha: EZIKO
Ungashokoshwa ngokwesab'amathongo: EZIKO.

A smallish circle at the centre of the room: the hearth.
Fire is lit, and one warms oneself there: at the hearth.
One cooks, eats and is satisfied: at the hearth.
Firewood is transformed into ashes: at the hearth.
One cowers in veneration of the shades: at the hearth.

Grandmother, the venerated link between the present and the future worlds, as one who has experienced life to the full and spends her days preparing to join the kingdom of the shades, is the centre of attraction. She has the best stories, and the soundest wisdom to impart the knowledge of the past and to comment on the present.

The children come to sit around her after they have finished their house chores. The small circle thus created becomes a living stage on which the main actors are grandmother's hands and fingers - like animate actors in a puppet show - and her whole body, as she impersonates the characters in her stories, their walk and movements, their body position, etc., while also miming their animal calls with subtle fluctuations of her own voice. Some riddles may be thrown about, to sharpen the children's attention. Then the storytelling session begins:

Kwesukesukela! (Once upon a time, it happened!)
Cosu! (Go easy, tell the story drop by drop)
UChakijana neBhubesi. (The small slender mongoose and the lion)
Sampheka ngogozwana! (We have cooked her in a tiny pot! We have got her cornered)

Trickster folktales

Chakijana is one of the most entertaining characters in Zulu folktales. His name constitutes the diminutive personal form derived from *ichakide*, the slender mongoose, small in body, but fast and determined in his movements, with those intensive eyes that quickly size up any situation. Together with *Nogwaja* the hare, who shares many of the mongoose's characteristics and with whom he is interchangeable, he is the star trickster, self-centred, egotistical, without any real feelings, nor any scruples, but always very entertaining. He represents the victory of intelligence over brute force, of small over big and powerful, brain prevailing over brawn, the extrovert ever ready to test new ways and to take advantage of the

weak points of his opponents, who are thus condemned as stupid and unimaginative. Other animals may also be attributed characteristics normally assigned to the trickster. As in most traditional cultures world-wide, the trickster is physically small, or is an animal taken almost for granted, or even despised by its larger or stronger counterparts.

South African Nguni people divide the world of their experience into three sections: the forest (*ihlathi*), the grassy veld or the savanna (*ithafa*), and the homestead (*umuzi*). The inhabitants of these three zones are also neatly categorized: large carnivore animals, such as lion, leopard, elephant, hyena inhabit the forest; smaller, mostly grass-eating animals, live in the savanna; domestic animals and man live in human settlements (Cf. Prins and Lewis, 1992:135).

The forest is the dark place of evil, where man can get lost or killed, and where large animals prowl especially by night, and the dreaded witches strike up murderous pacts with wild beasts as they go about collecting the various forestal substances to prepare their deadly concoctions.

Chakijana the Slender Mongoose, or Nogwaja the Hare, inhabit the middle ground, the savanna area, which gives them easy access to either side. Prins and Lewis (1992) maintain that Thokoloshe, the river spirit of Nguni mythology who is also a trickster, is often identified with the small Bushman, who also used to live 'outside' the human settlement, in grassy places or in rocky caves. Tricksters live and prosper on the boundaries of animality and humanity, so to speak, and they perform frequent inroads into both realms in order to display their superior intelligence and to perform their tricks (as the Bushman did with his magical medicines). Tricksters are, however, mostly animal figures, and their true or supposed physical characteristics are often sharply defined and made use of in the stories.

In most world literatures animals are used as metaphors, or as figurative representations of human character types. This is why there is a mixture of human and animal qualities and attributes in animal stories. Animals seem to enjoy greater freedom than humans, as their actions are not bound by human social laws; they thus represent a kind of escapism from social restrictions. The trickster can thus speak and interact with both humans and animals, constantly moving from the veld to the forest or from the savanna to the human settlements, transgressing natural boundaries and causing that chaos in which comedy finds its mainspring. His is the art of the unexpected: he sees an opportunity and immediately jumps to it, with a stroke of genius, or simply by posing as the most innocent and helpful creature in the

what they have just witnessed and warn the boy's parents about the danger that such extraordinary events may be manifestations of witchcraft, or of the interference of the dark magic forces of the forest into the life of the homestead:

*Namuhla kuzelweni na?
Uzelwe umuntu onjani na?
Ngeke sikubona loku.
Nibe nimthumelani na,
njengoba niyabona ukuthi unguHlakanyana?
Nithi ungumuntu waka wanje
Okwazi ukukhuluma kangaka esemintwana,
aqine kangaka,
ahlule amadoda la amadala.
Nibe ningamboni yini ekuthatheni kwakhe umlenze wenkabi?
Ninganiqondile lapho,
ukuthi lo muntu akamithwanga;
ungene nje lapha enkosikazini;
ungene-nje, akamithwanga.
Nenkosi ayiyena uyise wakhe.
Uzokwenza imihlola, ngoba naye ungumhlola.*

(What was born today? What kind of a person was born? We never saw anything like it. Why did you send him? Don't you see that he is Hlakanyana? What kind of a person would you say he is, who can speak so fluently being just a child, who is so intelligent as to surpass the elders? Did you not realize this by the way he took the leg of beef? Can you not see that this person was not conceived in the normal way? He just entered into his mother; he just entered, he was not conceived. And the king is not his real father. He will work prodigies, because he too is a prodigy).

What had begun as a joyful celebration of a new life, and a ceremony to reinforce the nation's links with their king, ends disastrously, with suspicions, fights and divisions. Hlakanyana's mission of 'scattering about' - sowing confusion - has begun.

Hlakanyana picks up the notion that he is not really the king's son (traditional women indulging in extra-marital relationships used to blame Thokoloshe's surreptitious night visits for unexpected pregnancies) to find an excuse to distance himself from a typical human environment in which he feels ill at ease. He leaves the men to argue and fight, and goes off into the surrounding veld, into his own true element, as he can only cause troubles among people. He finds some bird traps set by herdboys. He can't resist the temptation to steal whatever belongs to others, or what is the result of other people's work. He empties the traps and brings the birds to his mother that she may cook them for his breakfast the next morning. The birds are placed in a pot, and this is covered with a lid. Then Hlakanyana goes to sleep

with the boys, who however belittle him and refuse to accept him as one of their own. He gets up during the night, slips under the door of his mother's hut, eats all the birds, fills the pot with manure and places the birds' heads on top, then slips out of the room again. In the morning he comes to his mother and finds that she is still asleep. 'Why are you so lazy? The sun is already high! I bet your laziness has caused my birds to turn into manure'. And sure enough, only manure is found under the birds' heads. Hlakanyana starts performing like a furious madman. His mother is not trustworthy and he wants to have nothing to do with her! She gives him a milking pail, and he sets off on his wanderings into the veld and the forest.

It might be interesting to make a few observations at the end of this initial section of the Zulu trickster's life:

- a) Hlakanyana's first foray into the world of men has provoked chaos, because his actions are unexpected and contrary to all the rules of human behaviour. He manifests the unbridled confusion proceeding from the interference of the world of veld and forest into the human world, of animality into humanity, of disorder into a strictly regulated society, where any physical abnormality is viewed as a sign of witchcraft.
- (b) Hlakanyana has shown already his ability to turn any situation to his own advantage through fraud and deceit, and also his fantastic greed and unbelievable capacity for devouring any amounts of food, especially meat. This is considered an animal trait, as well-behaved people know when and how to say 'I have had enough', especially in Zulu society where etiquette condemns all excesses.
- (c) There are several parallels between the mythical narratives of the world and the events of Hlakanyana's birth. These may point to the Zulu trickster as part of a higher level of metaphor, that of religious belief or mythology, as are Paul Radin's (1956) Winnebago trickster, or Robert Pelton's (1982) West African Anansi and Legba. Hlakanyana is not considered, however, a demi-god or a Culture Hero, that is, the legendary character responsible for the foundation of the nation and of its socio-political structures. The stories might, however, be an echo of more ancient narratives, possibly connected with ritual forms which have disappeared long ago (cf Lord Raglan's [1936 in Dundes 1965] Hero of Tradition). The Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp wrote, in 1928: 'Everyday life and religion die away, while their content turn into a folktale'.

- (d) It is interesting to draw some parallels with narratives referring to the birth of the Greek trickster god Hermes: He too gets out of his mother Maya's room by slipping through the keyhole on the first day of his life. He sees a turtle, kills it and, with some leather strings, invents the musical lyre, which he plays until he tires of it. He then sees Apollo's cattle and drives 50 cows away into a ravine masking their hoof prints by having them walk backwards. He then returns unobserved to his mother's room by slipping through the keyhole again and goes back to sleep.

The Trickster's Travel Adventures

After leaving his parents' village, Chakijana also tries his hand at producing music and at herding the cattle of some chief, normally a highly valued task for any ordinary Zulu boy, as he has the chance of becoming known to the chief and his people, as well as of learning the manners of high society.

After killing a leopard, the trickster makes a flute with its shinbone and walks around playing happily. He meets a rabbit with a flute that sounds better than his own, gets the rabbit to lend it to him and puts the rabbit to sleep by playing the flute. He then builds a mud dome over the sleeping rabbit and lets the animal die there, while he goes off with the latter's flute.

On his wanderings, Chakijana comes across grown men herding cattle. 'Isn't there any boy to fulfil this boyish task? - I am Chakijana Bogcololo. Herding is my middle name. You can trust me with your eyes closed.' The men happily introduce the little dwarf to the chief, who agrees to hire him. Everything goes well as long as there is plenty to eat at the chief's place, but when the meat supply is finished Chakijana does not like to be fed on vegetables only. One night he steals the spear of one of the chief's soldiers and slaughters the chief's prize black bull, which had been reserved for a special ceremony. He then replaces the spear beside the sleeping soldier. There is great commotion in the morning. Nobody has heard or seen anything or anybody. Chakijana suggests that, before going around the countryside to find the culprit, all weapons of war should be checked on the spot. The soldier's bloody spear singles him out as the culprit and he is put to death. The men cut up the bull and the women start the fires to cook the meat. Chakijana does not like to share all that abundance with the whole assembly and comes up with a plan. He goes off with the cattle and drives them into a remote and deep valley where nobody should be able to find them. He then returns home to the chief

and announces that the herd has either been stolen or has gone lost. Mindful of the loss incurred the previous night, all the populace go towards the veld to look for the cattle. Only an old man stays behind, too old to walk any great distance. Chakijana returns to the village unobserved, and sends the old man to fetch fresh water from a river with a large calabash. While the man is away, he steals the meat and hides it in the vicinity of the place where he normally herds the chief's cattle, then puts manure into the cooking pots. When the old man returns, he is so tired that he falls asleep, and Chakijana takes some fat and smears it on the old man's mouth, and leaves some bones at his side, then goes off, retrieves the lost herd and is acclaimed by everybody as a champion shepherd. On their return they notice with consternation that all the meat has disappeared. The old man is accused of the theft, and, in spite of all his protestations of innocence, is put to death.

On his travels Chakijana comes across primitive and unsophisticated people who make use of rudimentary tools to accomplish their tasks: he gives them the proper tools and expects something in return when his tool gets broken or is lost. Thus he meets some herdboys who are milking into pieces of broken pottery, thus spilling most of the precious substance. He lends them the milking pail given him by his mother. They use it, but then allow the last cow to kick and break it.

'Give me back my milking pail
The pail my mother gave me
My mother let my birds turn to manure
The birds I had found in the veld.'

The boys give him an axe. He meets women who are chopping firewood with flintstones and lends them his axe, which the last woman duly breaks. Chakijana is once again furious:

'Give me back my axe;
The axe given me by the boys
The boys I gave the pail to when milking into broken dishes
The pail given me by my mother
My mother who had let my birds turn to manure
The birds I had found in the veld'.

And the formula tale continues with Chakijana accepting newer and newer tools and lending them to careless people who eventually have to give him something more. Here the trickster appears as a teacher and a promoter of progress, an occasional benefactor, but his stories

show that progress can only come about through real costs, and the ambiguous nature of the trickster's actions is further emphasized.

Another popular event concerns Chakijana, or Nogwaja the Hare, offering himself as nursemaid to a lioness with three cubs, or to a gazelle with 7 foals, or to a woman with 10 babies. The trickster promises to look after the young ones, to clean the house, to cook, so as to give time to the mother to attend to the more pressing business, such as hunting for the lioness, pasturing for the gazelle, tilling the family gardens for the woman. The modern problem of a mother's priorities, whether working at a career or looking after her young family, is as old as mankind, and is clearly highlighted here. The mother accepts the offer of services by a complete stranger and goes off to her work. Chakijana cooks one baby per day, shares the meat with the mother in the evening, then brings out one baby at a time for suckling, presenting one baby twice in order to make up the proper number, so that the mother does not realize the cruel ruse except when it is too late and she has lost all her family. No moral code applies to the trickster's actions: he is an outsider, one who lives on the social boundaries and cannot be expected to comply with human norms, and so he makes a mockery of them, even of the most sacred ones, such as the duty of a family to have children and to look after them properly to ensure the continuation of the clan's chain of life.

The trickster often manages to get his victims to perform the most abominable actions (e.g. mother eating her babies, children eating their own mother, etc.), so that they (the victims) become abominable to themselves; they condemn themselves through their own actions. They get the feeling that they are the scum of the earth, unworthy of belonging to the human family, and finally frustrated in their efforts to take revenge and to punish the trickster for something that they have done themselves. They are thus shown as gullible and inferior to their opposition.

One could be tempted here to apply to the Zulu trickster the categories identified by Mary Douglas in 1966 (*Purity and Danger*) or by Barbara Babcock-Abrahams in 1978 (*The Reversible World*). Both authors deal with serious mythological figures whose actions carry a great weight in terms of the symbolic structure of thought and society. The Zulu trickster should rather be seen as an irrepressible character, full of mischief, but cut down to the size expected in young children's stories and in the simple comic system of irony and education. He is the soul of comedy, because he is the master of the unexpected turn of events, the one

who is for ever able to dissect a situation, to see the weak points of his intended victims, and to act decisively and to his own advantage.

He also represents, however, the ambivalence prevalent in society, as well as the indirect African system of castigating the culprit in an indirect way: the depraved person is not attacked directly, but by showing how superior his opponent is. Interestingly this indirect criticism is also apparent in the African attitude towards the white oppressor. Protest has generally been muted in African languages literature. Rather than debating the superiority of one culture over the other, African writers have limited themselves to extolling the positive aspects of their own culture while clearly reflecting the obtuse immorality of the oppressor.

Narrative structures

Most trickster folktales are built on a simple frame, consisting, according to Propp's morphological analysis, of the following 'functions':

Lack (or Need) either of the trickster or of his intended victim;

Contract, where the trickster offers help to a needy character;

Fraud, where the trickster surreptitiously breaks the contract;

Discovery, where the victim realizes the deception;

Flight and Pursuit, where the trickster runs off, often gloating about the victim's discomfort and is pursued by the victim's party;

Escape, where the trickster gets away.

Should the trickster be caught during the chase sequence, the structural formula is repeated, until he finally manages to escape, after having wrought havoc on the whole of society.

An interesting variation of the basic structure is found in stories where the trick-initiator is not the trickster, but some bully trickster imitator. This is often represented by the ogre, the Zulu *izimuzimu*, who is for ever blinded by his greed for food. He also strikes up a contract with Chakijana who quickly finds a way to thwart the contract to his own advantage with serious consequences for the ogre. Thus we find Chakijana caught stealing birds from traps laid by an ogre. Chakijana asks not to be eaten immediately and orders a series of ritual actions to be performed to ensure his conqueror's complete satisfaction. The stupid ogre leaves Chakijana in the care of his (the ogre's) old mother, and the wily one convinces her to play the game of *ukuphekaphekana* (cooking one another), so that she may regain her lost youth.

A fire is made, and Chakijana gets into the pot first, then asks to be taken out. When the old woman gets into the pot, however, the trickster does not remove the lid until she is thoroughly cooked. To add insult to injury, he serves the mother's body to her own children when they return from their daily hunting trip, and then runs away, triumphantly shouting 'You have eaten your own mother! You have eaten your own mother!'

Special narrative patterns in which the trick initiator becomes a victim of his own trick seems to be prevalent in cultures where trickster and anti-trickster are clearly identifiable as two distinct animals in terms of their specific (positive and negative) symbolic characteristics. Thus Beidelman found, among the Kaguru of Tanzania, Hyena and Hare as the negative and positive trickster figures respectively, while Denise Paulme Found Anansi (the Spider) opposed to a number of negative trickster characters.

Anansi, however, is not a constantly successful trickster, but he often appears as the unbridled creative force that becomes a danger to himself. The fumbling inept trickster motifs are also prevalent in Radin's Wajungaka figure among the Winnebago, as well as in Evans-Pritchard's *Ture among the Azande of Southern Sudan*, or in the Legba of John Argyle and Robert Pelton's Dahomey populations. In Zulu oral traditions one finds *Imfene* the baboon or *Impisi* the hyena as stupid and rather innocuous trick initiators. But this wholly negative characteristic is especially the trademark of *Izimuzimu*, the ogre or cannibal, and of *Imbulu*, the monitor lizard. These two characters represent everything that is evil in human society, especially *ubuthakathi* or witchcraft. They mostly interact with human beings, whom they are intent on destroying often for the *izimuzimu's* pot. The heroine, who is normally the intended victim of such sinister characters, is protected by the good ancestors, who appear in the guise of birds or magic old people to mediate the solution of the crisis.

Also human tricksters, who foolishly initiate a trick sequence to get the better of their opponents, are normally doomed to failure (unless they use trickery as a reaction to a trick unjustly initiated against themselves), both in the traditional oral narratives and in modern fiction. The trick turns on the trickster, except in cases where there is a complete 'conversion' or change of direction and life style.

Conclusion

One could go on and on speaking of the various and interesting adventures of this little creature, whose exploits, in different shapes and details, delight the children's imagination not only in Africa but all over the world. One could also draw parallels to show how most Zulu folktales, even those which are not normally connected with trickster figures, present solutions based on cunning and trickery.

The adventures of the Zulu trickster fill many pages of literature, as well as many evenings of oral narrative around the hearth. As he wanders around the world, in and out of the confines of forest, veld and the human habitat, his quick intelligence and dogged perseverance fire the imagination of his young audience and sharpen their attention to read the characteristic signs of people who are either smooth talkers or very fast actors, and to distinguish between the inveterate pretender and deceiver on the one hand and the benefactor genuinely interested in the welfare of his neighbours on the other. This is the kind of preventive education that trickster folktales intend to impart to the young: be careful to recognize any clever dick; don't trust him as he is bad news, even if he shouts his impressive and impeccable credentials to the four winds.

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