

# A.C. Jordan's *Tales from Southern Africa*

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Jordan's 1940 novel *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (translated into English in 1980 as *The Wrath of the Ancestors*) has a place of honour in Xhosa literature. Not at all as well known is his 1973 collection, *Tales from Southern Africa* (Jordan 1973a), which he wrote in English. In the collection of essays which appeared in the same year (*Towards an African Literature*—Jordan 1973b), Jordan himself wrote that 'the English-speaking world knows far less about ["the tales about men and women"] ... [than about] myths and animal stories' from Africa (Jordan 1973b:4) and he suggested that

the cultural world is looking for just these and other traditional artistic possessions, of which South Africa itself has not become aware (Jordan 1973b:14).

In 1990 Noverino Canonici wrote that 'the folktale tradition ... permeat[es] not only literary forms, but all forms of life' (Canonici 1990:128), though simultaneously acknowledging many signs of the decline of this cultural resource (Canonici 1990: 134-136,140f). If it is true that 'cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature' (Morrison 1992:39), the various strands of South African literature may be thought of as dangerously or unhealthily detached from the awareness of those who are non-literate (known to be a large majority of South Africans). Renewed interest in and use of our folktale resources may be one way of bridging this gap. For, as Isidore Okpewho insists, 'the mythopoeic fancy ... concerns itself with the entire spectrum of the social universe' and he recognises its engagement with what he calls 'actualities' as well as 'mysteries' (Okpewho 1983:114)<sup>1</sup>. In the following brief discussion of Jordan's *Tales* (Jordan 1973a) I shall demonstrate how wide ranging and socially pertinent the themes of these stories are.

Without presuming to know the principle(s) in terms of which Jordan selected

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<sup>1</sup> In *We Spend our Lives as a Tale that is Told*, Isabel Hofmeyr concludes: 'oral literature quite literally forces scholars to lift their eyes from the page ... one not only has to confront context as a very material reality, one also confronts anew the complex links that unite producer, text, audience and the world (Hofmeyr 1993:181).

the thirteen *Tales* included in the collection, this reading finds in his re-telling<sup>2</sup> of these traditional stories a discernible focus on processes of social adjustment, especially in the overcoming of social crises. In his work *Myth in Africa*, Isidore Okpewho (1983:69) suggests that

the more 'poetic' a tale is, the stronger is its content of intellectual play and thus its availability for exploring larger cultural or existential (as against experimental) issues.

Jordan's *Tales* do not merely enshrine reaffirmations of 'custom', but portray challenges to, enlargements and adaptations of 'custom' itself<sup>3</sup>. It is also evident that this author's interest lies more in the discovery or employment of 'internal' mechanisms of adjustment to pressures or threats to the societies which he shows us, than in celebrations of military or muscular force. Confirmation of this tendency is the preponderance of female protagonists in these *Tales*, whether in heroic or in socially transgressive roles (and frequently transgression itself precipitates heroism). The argument of this essay is that Jordan's *Tales from Southern Africa* can be fruitfully read as a composite portrait of societies capable of achieving vital adjustments in response to a variety of challenges.

A good place to begin this brief introduction to Jordan's *Tales* (most of which seem to have been told to him by women—by 'the widow, Nofali'; by his great-aunt and by an unnamed 'woman from Qumbu' (Jordan 1973a: xxiiif—from the 'Foreword' by Z. Pallo Jordan) is with the last one in the collection: a hilarious 'Parliament of Fowls'<sup>4</sup> story in which all the birds of the world come together in seemingly orderly

<sup>2</sup> Scheub (in Jordan 1973a:10,13,11f) in his 'Introduction', comments that 'the narratives ... have not been retold by A.C. Jordan so much as recast by him'. 'He used techniques of the short story to bring life to the skeletal outlines' to compensate for the devices (gesture; tone; audience participation; etc.) at the disposal of the oral performer of the *ntsoni*.

<sup>3</sup> In a section of his 'general' Introduction to Jordan's *Tales*, Scheub (Jordan 1973a:9f) writes that the 'broad theme [of the Xhosa *ntsoni* tradition] centers about the need for an ordered society, a stable and harmonious community ... this ideal society ... thematic movement from an impure society through purification and into a healthy social order. This odyssey is often expressed by means of a dramatic enactment of the male and female initiation rites, and usually finds its metaphorical perfection in symbols of nature'.

<sup>4</sup> I am alluding to the fourteenth-century English poem by Geoffrey Chaucer, which (many scholars suspect) may contain disguised allusions to contemporary politics, although the ostensible subject is courtly love. Thokozile Chaane, in a paper called 'Orality and Narratives: The Art of Story Telling', delivered at the December 1991 *New Nation* Writers' Conference, indicates that 'A general practice was the use of animal characters in the stories. This came in handy when wrongs in the society had to be pointed out without causing embarrassment by directly accusing anybody—another peace-keeping device' (p. 3).

fashion to choose a leader according to the (apparently) perfectly sensible and appropriate criterion of which of them can stay in the air the longest. The story, in Jordan's handling of it, becomes a brilliantly satirical anecdote, exposing the extent to which a combination of power-hunger, pomposity and chicanery can turn a neatly hierarchical and bureaucratically organised situation into a nightmare of competing political groupings and legalistically irreconcilable contestations: Grass Warbler hitches an undetected ride on the majestic Eagle's back and flutters and flips about in the air triumphantly *after* Eagle's return to the earth, with consequent argument, counter-argument, outrage and scapegoating in a display of ambitious power competition. Although this story is formally one of those animal fables along the pattern of 'Why such-and-such a creature behaves in such-and-such a fashion' (like the two previous *Tales* in the collection: 'Why the Cock Crows at Dawn', 260-262, and 'Why the Hippo Has a Stumpy Tail', 263-265), Jordan's 'Choosing a King' (266f)—in its comparative length and in the delightful, biting vividness of its portrayal of individual bird 'characters' in recognisable political roles—is evidently a cautionary tale as enjoyable as it is potentially educational. Is it incidental that this one story has no female characters?

The tale which Jordan placed first in the collection (18-31) is called 'The Turban'—which refers to a woman's headscarf or *doek*. It is a moving, delicately-told story of marital love gone wrong, faintly like Shakespeare's *Othello*, but unlike that play in the degree of emphasis Jordan places on the larger familial and social context of the tragedy. The story features a younger wife, devotedly loved despite her childlessness. The husband has children by his elder wife and so intense is his passion for the younger woman that he resists pressure even from her own family that he take another wife to 'compensate' for her barrenness. When both wives gather honey on an expedition, the prudent older woman saves some for her children and her husband. Expecting that his childless wife will have saved even more of the delicacy for him, the husband is so appalled to find that she failed to keep him any that he gives her a blow which, to his horror, kills her. Any remaining sympathy for this man (compromised by his petulance, impetuosity or harshness) is seriously undermined when he proceeds literally to cover up his deed by stealthily burying the dead woman and her belongings before setting out towards her people where both he and she are expected at a wedding festival. As Scheub writes,

It is his ability to continue with life, almost as if in a stupor, as if nothing had happened, that invests the story with much of its horror, and which simultaneously, strongly underscores the love that he had for his wife (Jordan 1973a:16).

A favourite with her people, he is nevertheless summoned from dancing and ritually, wordlessly executed by them when an eerie little bird, a 'form' of the dead wife's

turban, reveals his guilt to them. But the story is put in a realm beyond affirmation of custom<sup>5</sup> when it ends with the dead man's arm rising to press the woman's turban to his heart. Fascinatingly, the story indicates the unusual intensity of this passion as recognised by this society: as both destructive (and punished when it goes awry) and yet finally, poignantly beyond the reach of the customary, outliving even its own protagonists. The tale is a fascinating introduction to a group of stories of the type usually taken to have the principal purpose of unambiguously affirming social cohesion and time-tried habits.

A tale that in Jordan's telling foregrounds domesticity by showing its disruption and eventual restitution is called 'Demane and Demazane' (34-54) after the boy-and-girl twins who are its chief protagonists. The first part of the story is the well-known 'amasi bird' episode in which the bird who undoes the field-clearing labours of the parents is captured by the father and ransoms itself in captivity by yielding amasi to his family in a time of general drought. Under peer pressure the twin children break the father's rule of secrecy and the bird escapes. Terrified of paternal punishment, the twins flee into the bush, find shelter and set up their own version of domestic cosiness in the 'Rock-of-two-holes', only to encounter a cannibal (or Zim)—from whom they escape when a mother-bird, reassuring them that they are loved and longed for at home, flies them home to a reception on their mother's best kaross. One might see this story as portraying a restoration to civil ordinariness and social and familial harmony. Yet it is noticeable that adventurousness is portrayed as admirable; although it cannot last (the amasi bird is lost; the children return home from their camp), it is shown to have been enriching. Like others in the collection, this story foregrounds unusual and transgressive conduct without merely warning of the inevitability of disaster.

A story with a similar pattern of a family break-up and eventual reconstitution is called 'Nomabhadi and the Mbulu-Makhasana' (155-177)<sup>6</sup>. The first part of the girl Nomabhadi's life takes place in a village where drought and consequent starvation have killed all the children except herself and her two brothers. Jealous of the younger brother's bigger portions, the elder kills him and is himself put to death when his sister reveals the fact. The eeriness and stress of the situation is indicated also in the surrealist detail that everyone here has earlier stopped speaking; the sense of doom is intensified when the news of the sibling murder leads the other adults to kill one another—as if that murder has severed some final sustaining ideal. Social breakdown culminates in yet is offset by the parents' decision to send Nomabhadi off to her prosperous uncle while they set fire to themselves and their homestead. Nomabhadi, the sole

<sup>5</sup> Here I disagree strongly with Scheub, who concludes that 'the narrative thus becomes an affirmation of tradition over boundless emotion' (Jordan 1973a: 17).

<sup>6</sup> Compare the *ntsomi* Scheub prints on pp. 547-551 of his book (Scheub 1969).

survivor of the doomed community, fails to obey her mother's final injunction to look neither back nor to left or right. Because of this failure her life is invaded and her role at her uncle's homestead usurped by the nearly-human but repulsive Mbulu-Makhasana (perhaps a 'recurrence' of the elder brother's jealous greed?). The infiltration of the family by this new form of anti-social greed is abruptly stopped when its uncontainable intensity is exposed in a public ritual or test: the Mbulu-Makhasana's hidden and bound-up tail bursts out and yanks her into a trough of milk. But not even then is the envy of this sub-human creature finally defeated, for a pumpkin plant grows nightmarishly out of the Mbulu-Makhasana's grave and the fruit attacks Nomabhadi while she is being prepared for womanhood. Once again Jordan's telling of the story emphasizes not only a need for perpetual vigilance, but for courage, meticulous care and social cooperation.

The tale of 'Sonyangaza and the Ogres' (193-216) similarly portrays the necessity of a rescue—and here, too, its success is not the sole achievement of the dashing hunter-hero, but comes about partly due to the resolution, spirit and intelligence of both his abducted twin sister and her little half-caste daughter, with the reunion of the three as a family group rounding off and crowning the story (215-216), after the defeat of the ogres.

The tale called 'Siganda and Sigandana' (219-237) is a well known story of sibling rivalry that turns murderous. Nevertheless, Jordan's telling intensifies the poignancy in especially two aspects: by portraying the brothers as unusually close and loyal in their tenderly mutual affection and by the strongly empathetic portrayal of the way the beautiful white cow arouses the more cowardly elder brother's envious desire and greed. It is unmistakably a novelist's talent which juxtaposes (the younger) Sigandana's spontaneous and joyous hymn to the loveliness of the white cow (227: given in both Xhosa and English versions) with the guilt-ridden, nervy, fevered musings of the elder brother about this cow (230) (after he has abandoned his sibling to probable death in order to steal it). The 'happy ending' is deeply shadowed by the earlier brotherly betrayal and the grief (and dismay) it causes both father and brother. What happens is at the end contained by the wider community, from which Siganda expels himself by fleeing from impending retribution.

A more troubling and eerie story of social transgression and exclusion is the one called 'The Woman and the Mighty Bird' (241-248): a tale with distinct emphasis on a male power structure in the society depicted here and with little by way of individualising characterisation. The story is starkly told: there is, we are informed, a powerful taboo against going into 'the depths of the forest'—

[t]he depths were greatly feared by the whole community, and though no one ever gave the reason why, the women were constantly warned by the men never to go anywhere near the tall trees (241).

The woman of the title is, we are told, 'beautiful' and 'young' (241) and the only wife among the women who, when during a long spell of cold sufficient wood is harder to find, decides to risk going into 'the depths', where she finds many bundles of ready-cut wood, guarded by a fearsome and huge bird—'the mighty bird/Of manifold wind-pipe and manifold dewlap' (243), as he announces himself in a song. He allows her to take a bundle of wood on condition that she promises never to say to 'those of Ndela' (245)—i.e. her husband's family—that she has seen him (the bird being described in emphatically male terms: 'a big tall man'; 'a great bull'; 'a giant bull'—242). She does this three times; her husband grows predictably suspicious and when he threatens to kill her unless she tells the truth, she admits to having seen the giant bird—who then surges up to the house, causing the husband to faint in a fright, and swallowing the woman before 'reced[ing] to the depths of the forest' (248). If the function of this story is merely to endorse a patriarchal social and familial structure, as Scheub suggests (238-240), there are nevertheless oddities and ambiguities in the temporary duration of a secret pact between the woman and the giant bird and in the initial benefit this brings. The woman is, as has been said, hardly individualised, though the pattern of her conduct seems to indicate that she represents marital (indeed, 'female') untrustworthiness and its rightful punishment. Yet the bird does not seem to have any sense of alliance with the human male, the woman's taboo-upholding, disciplinarian husband. Perhaps the story can be read as obliquely recognising the unacknowledged or unacknowledgeable danger of female adultery in a society that caters for male polygamy (even though this husband has only one wife). This story is mysterious in Jordan's handling of it and, if the woman comes across as sly and manipulative, the husband is evidently harsh and unheroic: amongst all the tales this is also the one in which there is least evidence of social mediation.

The story called 'The King of the Waters' (179-191) forms an interesting counterpart to the 'Mighty Bird' story; Jordan first introduces the ostensible, male hero, the 'renowned hunter' (179) prince Tfulako, who is denied a desperately needed drink by the waters of a spring. 'The King of the Waters' relents when Tfulako promises him 'the most beautiful of [his] sisters to be [his] wife' (181). This peremptory though life-saving decision is reported when he gets home,

[b]ut everybody, including the beautiful princess, felt that this was the only offer Tfulako could have made in the circumstances. So they awaited the coming of the King of the Waters (182),

though no-one knows in what shape he will appear. Nkyanyamba, the 'King of the Waters' (182), eventually appears from a cyclone in the form of an inordinately big snake. He takes up his place as a 'burden round [the] body' of the princess, 'rest[ing]

his head on her breasts and gaz[ing] hungrily into her eyes' (182)—an evidently phallic and erotic, but threatening and alien presence. This young woman (to whom the whole focus of the tale now shifts) also betakes herself to 'her mother's people, far over the mountains'<sup>7</sup>. As she travels, carrying the python, she expresses her revulsion and distress in song, to which the snake replies, also in song, proclaiming his worthiness; as Jordan puts it, they journey 'singing pride at each other' (183). On arrival the princess pretends sexual and social capitulation; on the pretext of needing time to beautify herself, she confers with her maternal uncle and his wife to make a plan to save herself. Jordan vividly conveys the shuddering stress of the situation for this young woman, who yet manages to steel herself to execute the family plot. She goes back to the snake so well oiled that, when invited to embrace her, the creature slips down repeatedly and is stunned—she can then go out and lock the door before the hut is burnt down with the python in it. She is nevertheless not declared free and ready to return home until she can handle the skull of the snake with casual fearlessness, deciding to take it back as a washing vessel for her brother: a ritual indicative of her promotion in status attained by her courage and endurance in overcoming lingering fears. A slightly ironic touch at the end is Tfulako's belligerent posture and fierce decision to 'save' the sister who has already extricated herself from the coils of 'The King of the Waters': the closing song echoes that of Tfulako and his hunters at the beginning (181), but changes it to proclaim the defeat of the snake, largely his sister's victory<sup>8</sup>, which is sung of as a communal achievement (191).

Scheub tends to see all the tales as validations of custom; my reading discerns both validation and interrogation of (some) customary practices in Jordan's telling of the stories. The tale called 'Sikhamba-nge-Nyanga' ('She-who-walks-by-moonlight': 252-259) shows how custom can function to validate the abuse or neglect of exceptionally valuable individuals—a wife is neglected for supposed barrenness, but is capable of giving birth to a daughter of matchless beauty; Sikhamba-nge-Nyanga should not be subjected to the customarily honoured but naggingly selfish demands of a withered old woman, as a result of which the whole community (including her own small baby) temporarily loses her. This, too, then, is a story of restitution after loss and exclusion and it shows the need to be flexible, also about 'time-honoured' customs; here, too, a young girl (the *mpelesi*—256) is the unobtrusively daring saviour-figure of the tale.

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<sup>7</sup> Like Nomabhadi in 'Nomabhadi and the Mbulu-Makhasana' (Jordan 1973a:155-177).

<sup>8</sup> Despite the 'feminisation' of the focus of the tale after its opening, it is interesting that 'the princess' is never named, remaining 'Tfulako's sister' (190) to the end.

The two stories which by their unusually lengthy and detailed unfolding achieve the central position in this collection are placed back to back. They are called 'The Maidens of Bhakubha' (57-98) and 'The Story of Nomxakazo' (108-152) and in both the female protagonists are the main focus of attention and reattest profoundly communal values after social breakdown.

In the land of Bhakubha the princess, the youngest member of a large group of (about two hundred) maidens, is so charming and so much a favourite that she is affectionately nicknamed Nomtha-we-Langa (i.e. 'Mother-of-the-Sunbeam'). The girls spend their days together and delight especially in swimming in the pools of the river which separates their kingdom from the neighbouring one. They make teasing but courteous acquaintance with the young men of that kingdom, whose prince Sidlokolo picks the young princess as the loveliest among her peers during a playful yet ceremonious encounter. At her first menstruation the lively young princess is, however, obliged to 'undergo custom' (60) during a period of social isolation. Mischievously, she plays truant in order to join her friends on one of their picnic outings and she chooses the unknown and feared 'Lulange pool' (61) for them to swim in. Just as they intend leaving this pool to return home, they discover that a slimy monster has stretched out on their clothes so that they are obliged to beg him to allow them to retrieve their clothing. This creature, too, is explicitly male and described as gazing lewdly at each maiden as she makes her request. Princess Nomtha-we-Langa alone, the last of the maidens, scornfully refuses until she eventually 'screwed her face and so shaped it that it looked as ugly as the monster's' (65), mocking and defying him—to which he retaliates by biting her in the thigh. This transforms her into a monstrous version of herself while the 'Slimy One' (65) itself disappears. If the wilfulness and disobedience of the Princess have 'be-monstered' her, the effects also reach far beyond herself: the story fascinates because it moves beyond the obviousness of retribution to the difficulties of restitution.

Besides indicating the protective effects of sexual schooling which members of this culture are required to undergo, Jordan's telling of the story exhibits the far-reaching social consequences of this crisis and the widespread and socially cooperative effort required to solve it. The story portrays two societies remarkable for the degree to which their members generously accept responsibility both for themselves and for others (see especially Jordan's depiction of the deliberations of the Bhakubha court on pp. 70-74). The author heightens one's sense of civilisation as the product of human dealings and renewed compacts, compensating for human weaknesses and failings. The social sophistication exhibited here is demonstrated in the way culprits are not simply expelled or ostracised; a type of containment is still operative. Jordan is evidently fascinated by and interests the reader in the courtesies of the many human interchanges he depicts. The maidens of Bhakubha are indeed sent into exile, but are



given respectable shelter by Prince Sidlokolo of the neighbouring kingdom, while he himself sets out to fight the monster and to find the princess who has herself been sent away to an outpost—it seems, partly to punish and partly to protect her from ridicule—by her own father. In Jordan's vivid formulation, 'Sidlokolo and the youths of his age group ... resolved to get themselves fully involved in this matter' (74). The situation is nevertheless subtly entangled and difficult. No monster rises from the pool to the prince's repeated challenges as if to emphasise the atypical nature of the threat confronted in this story—almost as if to show up the shallower imagining of the typical 'rescuing prince' tale where the monster is defeated in battle or through guile. Before setting out to find Nomtha-we-Langa, Sidlokolo is warned by one of the grandmother guardians of the princess that 'a rare kind, a deeper kind of bravery' is required by this situation: 'the bravery to bear agony' (78). He must promise not to try to see her in her altered state. When he and his braves eventually locate her, he is thus overcome with melancholy. For her part, the princess has to endure the bleakness of her isolation as well as her sadness with dignity:

She never sees anyone .... The door opens ever so little and a hand and arm, all covered with gloves made of buckskin, stretches out to receive the food .... She walks to and fro, to and fro, to and fro ... Thinking about home, thinking about the other girls (Jordan 1973a:82).

She has been ostracised, but her deed caused the expulsion of many other women. Watching from afar the outpost where the princess is kept, the prince and his companions see a strange, towering wall of white (surplus milk that has welled up out of an earth pit) and 'just as the first sunbeam of the morning struck it' (92). Nomtha-we-Langa plunges into it and with great joy recovers her own shape. Predictably, she and the prince marry soon after the other maidens are returned home (many of them also marrying young men of the adjoining kingdom). But far more than a superficial happy-ever-after fairy-tale, Jordan has drawn the lines of a social growth process possible only in a healthy and flexibly complex society. Although the miracle of her healing may be regarded as a lucky accident, there is a sense in which it is the culmination of the many caring, tactful and committed efforts made by those in the story who love Nomtha-we-Langa, the restoration of the princess rising—like the milk wall—from their courage and determination to contribute mutually towards the healing of the disrupted community. Something of the complexity of the achievement is recognised in the charming speech of the chief counsellor at the prince's court: 'All your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers at this meeting', he tells the prince, 'envy you this great deed' (96), although he killed neither monster nor enemies.

Scheub's introductory commentary on the last story dealt with in this essay,

'The Story of Nomxakazo'<sup>9</sup> (108-152; Scheub's comments 99-107), is interesting and useful. This is also a tale of a maiden and of her maturing as it affects the fate of a whole nation, but this young woman, whose very name brutally recalls the slaying of men in the battle which took place on the day of her birth (109), is distinctly less pleasant and more obviously spoilt than the princess in the preceding story. Intoxicated by his victory on his daughter's birth-day (in a battle which establishes him indisputably as the most powerful ruler of the region through the defeat of his closest rival), her father the king rashly vows to mark her maturity by bringing her enough cattle to 'darken the sun' (110). His is indeed a distinctly warlike, rapacious society—a point subtly criticised by the tone and terminology of Jordan's opening descriptions (e.g. 108-109).

When Nomxakazo duly comes of age, successive offerings of cattle are all met by her smile of contempt (112), necessitating greater and greater devastation of surrounding communities to raid enough cattle. Eventually the scouring warriors encounter an extremely strange, huge creature, Maphundu (or 'You-of-the-Nodules'), who is strikingly described as a huge tract of the earth itself (113). Showing no respect for 'great creating nature'<sup>10</sup>, they raid his abundant herds of cattle. At last Nomxakazo is satisfied: the feasting which follows leaves 'thousands of carcasses rotting on the plains' (113). The excess continues until the time for her 'coming-out' feast occurs—but then Maphundu arrives to take Nomxakazo away in exchange for his raided cattle. Her father's military might cannot save her. Maphundu first humbles and disciplines her in his own peremptory ways and then deposits her in a cave far from her native land. She is, she discovers, in the country of one-legged cannibals called the Dlungu-ndlebe<sup>11</sup>. Her beauty saves her from being eaten by them and yet again she becomes a king's pampered darling until she is so repulsively fat that they decide to eat her instead. But she prays for rain, and three times the fire is put out, the third time killing the old cannibal king. Now the Dlungu-ndlebe fear her and let her go.

In hunger and hardship she makes her way home,

begging for food ... among people whose youthful men have been slaughtered ... homes destroyed ... cattle ... looted, by her father's warriors, to satisfy her father's vanity and hers (Jordan 1973a:130)

<sup>9</sup> A Zulu version of this tale (with an English translation) is recorded in the Callaway collection (Callaway 1868:181-217).

<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare: *The Winter's Tale*, 4.3.88.

<sup>11</sup> Scheub points out (Jordan 1973a:100) the irony that these creatures were formerly exiled by Nomxakazo's people because their cannibalism was considered disgusting and sub-human; these same proud people have now become more degraded than the cannibals!

in words which by their bleakness and doom-like rhythm hammer home the cost of Nomxakazo and her father's ugly self-indulgence.

She eventually reaches her now wretched home, to be told by her mother that 'death ha[s] entered this land' (133). So appalled is she now that she asks: 'Who am I that anybody should pity me'? (135)—and that moment of deep self-abnegation begins her recovery and that of her people. If we think of truth and reconciliation in a shattered land, this tale portrays the slow, humbling process needed to soften the previously mighty before repentance can begin.

In the meantime the son of the rival king whom her father defeated decides that, although he wants this most beautiful young woman for himself, he will deliberately humiliate her father by not going through the obligatory marital formalities—also an arrogant illustration of excessive privilege. Nomxakazo is magically enticed and then kidnapped—but she asserts herself and redefines the situation by consenting to go to the prince. The abduction becomes a state visit; she so impresses her would-be captors that one of the prince's old counsellors is moved to declare:

She has the heart of a human, she has a liver, she is alive in the head ... she ... means to go back to her people still a maiden—She has ... left us only the straight road to go by—the road of custom (Jordan 1973a:148).

Not surprisingly, her return home becomes the occasion for a formal proposal of marriage with much bride-tribute in cattle—now her own people foresee that once married she will be 'a mother to all homeless wanderers' (152). Her role has inverted: from the destructive daughter she has changed to the saving parent and leader.

Unlike the typical fairy-tale with its focus on personal or perhaps also familial happiness, the author stresses the social, 'national' dimensions of the story. Jordan's telling embellishes and vitalises a story in which devastation among nations and the internal rot of greed are overcome in a process of social restructuring<sup>12</sup>; by the end of the story, representatives of both societies participate together in the re-achieved courtesies of 'feasting and rejoicing', their 'mingl[ing]' now that of 'friendly' people (152). The 'Callaway version' or recording of the story (Callaway 1868:181-217) is notice-

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<sup>12</sup> Scheub (in Jordan 1973a:107) sees it as follows: 'Her odyssey leads her to a respect for custom which has but one purpose: human relations based on respect and made beautiful through love'. In his Foreword, Z. Pallo Jordan (1973a:x) characterizes the aim of the traditional ruler as 'the reconciliation of parties rather than the interpretation of points of law'. He also suggests that A.C. Jordan (his father) 'sought to transform the tale into a great collective symbol around which the African people could be mobilized for social and political change' (Jordan 1973a:xxii). It seems particularly inappropriate of the folklorist Richard M. Dorson (in the introductory editorial essay, 'Africa and the Folklorist', to the volume *African Folklore* (Dorson 1972:30), to single out A.C. Jordan as one of those who 'lose sight of the contemporaneity of folklore'!

ably briefer in its depiction of what in Jordan's version becomes the reconstitution of social relations—depicted in full and subtle detail. Earlier, the prince had told Nomxakazo: 'We thank you for making humans of us' (149). She has also redeemed and rehumanised her own broken people.

Jordan's *Tales* have no ring of nostalgia. If they commemorate and celebrate a proud and complex African civilisation to dispel the blind condescension of European racists, they do also point forward to what a combination of peoples in this land must rediscover and regain in their own rites of passage towards mutual recognition. These *Tales from Southern Africa* exhibit the hard-won achievements of communities beset by threats from outside as well as from within, constantly driven to redefine humanness. I conclude by citing Toni Morrison:

The imagination that produces work which bears and invites rereadings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language .... Living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer .... How stunning is the achievement of those who have searched for and mined a shareable language for the words to say it (Morrison 1992:xii).

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