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TRADITIONAL AFRICAN STORIES AS LEARNING MATERIALS

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ORAL STORY-TELLING, conducted through many generations of Southern African peoples during the period before the onset of Western colonial influence, provided one of the most significant developments in traditional African education and continues to offer extensive opportunities for research and development in the present day.

In the first place, the stories contain invaluable data concerning the values and attitudes of the holistic philosophy through which Southern African communities endeavoured to maintain their way of life as pasture-farmers, during the years after they had crossed the Zambezi river from the interior of the continent. Holism represented an attempt to come to terms with the basic needs and aspirations of African pastoral life. It emphasized the essential unity and interdependence of all powers and objects in the universe, under an almighty Creator (*Nkulunkulu, Modimo, Mwari, Musikavanhu*, etc.); the common humanity of all mankind; and the sharing in certain carefully-defined rights and obligations by all the members of each social group, living or dead. These ideas were implanted in the minds of each successive generation, as a means of maintaining continuity with past experience and avoiding precipitate changes in the future.

In the second place, the stories illustrate the teaching approaches and techniques which prevailed in traditional Southern African society. In contrast to Western society, where folk-tales were usually recited or read, traditional African story-tellers tended to employ a variety of media in their presentations. The recitation of a story was very frequently interspersed with songs and dances. This approach helped to ensure, on the one hand, a characteristically vivid and stimulating experience of the values being imparted, and, on the other hand, a high degree of co-operation between the story-teller and his audience, emphasizing holistic attitudes towards the shared responsibilities of members of a social group. At the same time, the infrequency of standardized versions of particular stories, such as developed elsewhere as the result of publication in written language, left the individual story-teller remarkably free to follow his own particular inclinations, exploiting his artistic talents to the greatest possible effect and adopting both content and presentation to his audience's special educational needs. For this reason, apparently, we find several versions of the same story circulating among different local communities and — perhaps particularly among the Xhosa and Zulu — a tendency for episodes in different stories to be spliced together in a number of combinations. Moreover, African communities believed in lifelong education, and so the stories were to explain values and

traditions not only to young people but to older age-groups as well. In this way the stories can be seen to have supported a distinctly African concept of the 'spiral curriculum', the same concepts being considered in ever greater depth during a person's experience of life.

Finally, as a means of developing awareness and understanding of one's own and/or other Southern African cultural traditions, the stories appear to hold considerable possibilities for curriculum development at various levels. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how any effective programme of multi-cultural education in this region could be structured without them.

CLASSIFICATION OF STORIES

Some stories are distinctive to particular local communities or tribal cultures. Others have clearly been influenced, to greater or lesser extent, by traditions which are shared by different groups in Southern Africa and beyond. Evidence of these common traditions may prove to be a useful means of plotting the movements and inter-relationships of particular tribes after their appearance south of the Zambezi.

It is also possible to distinguish three broad classifications of content. Firstly, there are those concerned with real or fanciful descriptions of tribal history. Secondly, there are the animal fables primarily intended as a means of moralistic or didactic instruction. Thirdly, there are a series of epic narratives of varying length and complexity, which helped to give expression to some of the most deeply-felt ideals and longings of African thinkers in the past.

The tribal histories

As in other cultures, African peoples frequently preserved legends about their forefathers which, although highly imaginative in content, nevertheless served a practical purpose in promoting a high degree of commitment towards the group. Among prominent examples was the Zulu tale of how their earliest ancestors, a man and a woman, came out of a reed or cluster of seeds. Much the same story was told among the Thonga in Mozambique, with the additional detail that the seed exploded as soon as the man and woman appeared. The Herero of Namibia said that their earliest ancestors came out of a certain tree. As the Herero were great stock-breeders it is, perhaps, not surprising that their story explained that their cattle also came out of the same tree. However, sheep and goats were said to have emerged from a hole in the ground! The San, or Bushmen, who had been displaced in their territory by the Herero, were also declared to have come out of the hole.¹

¹ G. Parrinder, *African Mythology* (London, Hamlyn, 1967), 39.

Somewhat more accurate information was apparently contained in the genealogical lists which were often recited to young people and memorized by them as a necessary part of their preparation for full adult membership of the group. The ancestral lists memorized by young men for the purposes of the Basotho initiation rites were used extensively by the Revd D. F. Ellenberger in his pioneer study of the Basotho tribal histories.² Similar lists used for initiation among the Xhosa, Zulu and Batswana almost certainly contribute a large part of our current knowledge of the early history of these peoples.

However, the transmission of historical data through oral tradition must always be regarded with caution. The tribal histories provide very little indication of chronological background. Moreover, disagreements between various editions of the lists suggest that names have been misplaced, omitted or forgotten. Thus, to take a prominent example, the Basotho and Batswana have various conflicting accounts of their early rulers. All accounts agree on the existence of an early father-figure, Masilo. However, some speak of Mohurutshe, founder of the Bahurutshe, as Masilo's son, while others say he was the offspring of Masilo's heir, Malope. Again, some stories declare that Kwena, Ngwaketse and Ngwato (founders, respectively, of the Bakwena, Bangwaketse and Bangwato) were sons of Malope, while others suggest that Kwena was Malope's brother. According to the traditions of the Bakwena of Mogopa in Botswana, Malope had a daughter called Lehurutshe and a son called Kwana, from whom Ngwaketse and Ngwato were descended. The traditions agree that there was some kind of split between the Bangwaketse and Bakwena soon after Malope's death; some say that the Bangwaketse and Bangwato broke away from Koressa at about the same time, but this is apparently in conflict with other evidence.³

These shortcomings should not lead us to underestimate the value of the historical stories as a means of preserving the values and attitudes of past generations. African audiences most frequently have been roused to high endeavours by the deeds of such remarkable ancestors as Langa (c.1730-93), the renowned Xhosa hunter, whose ingenious escape from capture by the San is commemorated in a story preserved among the communities to the west of the River Kei;⁴ or Mohlomi (c.1730-1815) the Bakwena philosopher-chief whose qualities of wisdom, humanity and clairvoyance appear to have made a far-reaching impact on Southern African society during the immediate pre-Christian

² D. F. Ellenberger (comp.), *History of the Basuto: Ancient and Modern*, transl. by J. C. MacGregor (London, Caxton, 1912).

³ See *ibid.*, 15-16, and A. Sillery, *The Bechuanaland Protectorate* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), 104-5.

⁴ J. H. Soga, *The Ama-Xosa: Life and Customs* (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1932), 19, 23 and 31.

period;⁵ or Nxele (c.1780–1821), the Xhosa religious leader and commander in the attack on Grahamstown, whose life ended tragically during an unsuccessful attempt to escape from imprisonment on Robben Island;⁶ or Chirisamaru (c.1780–1831), last of the Rozvi rulers at Great Zimbabwe, who met his death with great dignity, sitting on the traditional Mambo's throne, after a final stand against his Nguni enemies;⁷ or Mzilikazi (c.1790–1868), founder of the Ndebele military state, who preserved his people against a variety of internal and external dangers;⁸ or Mbuya Nehanda (c.1860–98), heroine of Zimbabwe's first *chimurenga* struggle against White colonization.⁹

The animal fables

Through ascribing human qualities and traits to animal characters, traditional African story-tellers developed an artistic and apparently highly successful approach to the teaching of morality and social responsibility. Among the most familiar characters, in Southern Africa and beyond, were the extraordinarily clever but physically weak Hare (*Umvundla*, *Mmutla*, *Tsuro*), whose exploits have crossed the Atlantic in the form of the Brer Rabbit stories, first recounted by West African slaves; the lordly and arrogant, but sometimes rather stupid and credulous, Lion (*Ingonyama*, *Tau*, *Shumba*); the terrifying, yet kind and merciful, Crocodile (*Ingwenya*, *Kwena*, *Garwe*); and the selfish and universally detested baboon (*Imfeme*, *Chwene*, *Gudo*). Among the Xhosa and Zulu the qualities of the Hare are sometimes depicted in the Jackal (*Impungutye*). However, the quick-witted Anansi, the Spider, well known in the folklore of West Africa, does not appear in the Southern African stories.

Various accounts of conflict between the Hare and the Lion emphasize the lesson that relatively weak or humble people can overcome the powerful and proud. One characteristic Shona story told how the Hare became angry when he heard the Lion's boasting that he was the bravest and most handsome among the animals, and resolved to call his bluff. As the Lion was returning to his home, late one night after a predatory raid on the chickens in a nearby village, he was terrified and put to flight by a hideously-dressed stranger. Subsequently, he was enraged to discover that he had been deceived and humiliated by the Hare. On his way to punish the Hare he met a number of powerful but apparently seriously-wounded animals, who had been instructed to tell him about their defeat at the

⁵ Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto*, 90–8. One story recounts how Mohlomi summoned the learned men of his people to search for a shield which he had previously hidden. When they failed, he apparently made the point that even the most trusted methods cannot be regarded with certainty.

⁶ S. M. Molema, *The Bantu: Past and Present* (Edinburgh, Green, 1920), 100–2.

⁷ O. Ransford, *Rulers of Rhodesia* (London, Murray, 1968), 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77–119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 302–3.

hands of the Hare. At last, thoroughly discomfited, he fell into a trap and was forced to accept the Hare as his master.¹⁰

According to another Shona tale, the Hare tricked the lion into entrusting him with looking after his four young cubs during a time of famine. Each evening the hare killed one of the cubs as food for his own family but concealed the fact from the Lion, by showing him one of the cubs more than once to pretend that all were alive.¹¹ In a Tswana version, the Lion is tricked when the Hare offered to help him build a house but fastened one of his paws to the roof. At length the Lion freed himself and went in pursuit of his tormentor, only to become involved in a series of further humiliations. The most remarkable of these occurred when the Hare, finally cornered, persuaded the Lion to remain with his paws pressing against an overhanging rock, by saying that it was about to fall on them.¹² Yet another version, common among the Barotse, told how the Hare persuaded the Lion to destroy himself in a fire by declaring that certain magic powers could preserve him from harm.¹³

The Hare assumed a more directly didactical role in the Shona stories of how he taught a naïve duiker the reasons for human conflict (by making two men fight)¹⁴ and the nature of misfortune (by causing him to be chased by dogs).¹⁵

His role as an exemplar of good deeds to the unfortunate or oppressed is illustrated by a small number of fables, perhaps most notably the Xhosa story of how he restored speech to a young woman rendered dumb by witchcraft,¹⁶ and the Shona story of how he rescued a man from a trap laid by a leopard.¹⁷ His ability to act as society's avenger against wrongdoers or outcasts is indicated by the Shona story of how the Baboon was tricked into eating a stew made from his own tail.¹⁸

In each of these last three examples there is an underlying moral question for debate: Were the methods used by the Hare to effect a restoration of the girl's speech (they included a degree of lying and deceit) justified in the circumstances? Should the Leopard (who had been tricked into exchanging places with his intended victim in the trap) be released or left to suffer the same fate which he had intended for the man? Did the Baboon really deserve to be treated in this manner? It is a characteristic of African story-tellers generally that they seek to engage the

¹⁰ Told to the author by students in the M.Ed. class, Univ. of Zimbabwe, 1982.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² P. Savory, *Bechuana Fireside Tales* (Cape Town, Timmins, 1965), 71–5.

¹³ Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 133–4.

¹⁴ F. Posselt, *Fables of the Veld* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1929), 129–30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118–21.

¹⁶ P. Miller, *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa* (Cape Town, Bulpin, 1979), 114–15.

¹⁷ Told to the author by students in the M.Ed. class, Univ. of Zimbabwe, 1982.

¹⁸ G. Bloomhill, *The Sacred Drum* (Cape Town, Timmins, 1960), 29–31.

active participation of the listener in making up his own mind on such issues. Yet the Southern African story-tellers apparently never accepted the highly-stylized 'dilemma tale', common in West Africa, which often developed into rather pointless argument concerning relatively trivial or non-contentious questions.¹⁹

Although the Hare generally emerged successfully from his various exploits, he was not above occasional failure. A well-known Shona fable describes the manner in which he was challenged to a race by the slow-moving Tortoise, and was defeated through an ingenious ruse. At various stages along the route the Tortoise placed other members of his family, each of whom appeared in turn as the Hare approached and pretended that they had passed him a short time before.²⁰

Kwena the Crocodile was portrayed in a group of Sotho and Tswana tales as an all-powerful and very terrifying figure who, nevertheless, showed great kindness to the unfortunate or oppressed. There are several different versions of the delightful tale of how he befriended and eventually married a young deformed girl who had been rejected by her own family (a totally unacceptable break with traditional African morality). Thereafter, she lived happily in Kwena's pleasant home deep under the bed of a stream (an interesting image of plenty in a land where the presence of water is crucial to life).²¹ In another tale, Kwena helped to restore the fortunes of a brother and sister who had run away from their family after a misdemeanour.²²

Bird characters appear in many of the Sotho-Tswana stories and very frequently in those of their more southerly neighbours, the Xhosa and Zulu. Sometimes the Bird was given a natural form, as in the Zulu tale of the Little Red Bird whose discontent with his humble status resulted in a series of requests to Nkulunkulu to change him into various more powerful creatures, with an eventually tragic outcome.²³ Another example was provided by the Xhosa tale of how the birds failed to choose a king because of individual rivalries among themselves.²⁴ Sometimes the story-tellers spoke of a supernatural Bird, exquisitely beautiful, who might do harm (by causing death and destruction or carrying away children) or good (frequently by providing a delicious food in time of famine).²⁵ The virtue of trustworthiness was emphasized by the Xhosa account of how a

¹⁹ Cf. A. Jablow, *Yes and No: Dilemma Tales, Proverbs, Stories of Love, and Adult Riddles* (New York, Horizon, [1961]).

²⁰ P. Savory, *Matabelo Fireside Tales* (Cape Town, Timmins, 1962), 64-8.

²¹ M. Postma, *Tales from the Basuto*, transl. by S. McDermid, (Austin, Univ. of Texas Press, 1974), 17-22.

²² Savory, *Bechuana Fireside Tales*, 38-45.

²³ Miller, *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa*.

²⁴ A. C. Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1973), 266-77.

²⁵ Savory, *Bechuana Fireside Tales*, 38-45.

magnificent supernatural bird punished a woman because she had broken a promise not to reveal that she had spoken to him when engaged in gathering sticks. Like many other Southern African stories, this fable was usually supported by listeners through the singing of a descriptive song:

*Ungaz' utsho kwabakwa Ndlela,
U'b' ukhe wayibon' intak' enkulu,
Egeba-liqeba lubilo-bilo!*²⁶

You must never tell the people of Ndlela
That you've seen the mighty bird,
With the huge throat and neck!

Among a small number of fables which attempted to explain the metaphysical mysteries was the Shona and Ndebele/Zulu account of the origins of death. The Creator, it was said, decided to reward men for their good behaviour and sent the slow-moving Chameleon with a message that they could live for ever. However, the Chameleon delayed on his way and was overtaken by the speedier Lizard with a second message saying that the Creator had now become displeased with men and had decided to bring death among them.²⁷ In this way listeners were encouraged to contemplate the relationship between death and original sin, and the drastic consequences of disobedience to the natural laws. This is echoed by a graphic proverb in Ndebele and Zulu, *Sizwe elikaNtulo*.

The epics

Like the fables, the Southern African epics tended to have a strongly moralistic emphasis. Yet they frequently went far beyond morality to reveal the story-tellers' deepest convictions and yearnings about the perfect society which they would have wished to achieve.

A large number of these stories are concerned with the qualities of perfect womanhood. Almost certainly one of the finest examples is the Shona romance of the chief's daughter who dared to visit a fearful python in his hillside cave to ask him to heal her father from a mortal illness.²⁸ An equally inspiring theme was adopted in the many alternative versions of the saga of the Mbulumakhasana, part woman, part lizard, who succeeded in impersonating the orphaned daughter of a chief among her father's relatives, in a manner broadly similar to that depicted in

²⁶ Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa*, 241–51.

²⁷ Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 56.

²⁸ Bloomhill, *The Sacred Drum*, 107–15.

the Western traditional story of the Goose Girl.²⁹ The Ndebele version was sometimes summarized by the words of the following song:

*Lakhona engasidade ngalutho
Kwathiw' angiyi koMkondonkomo
Ngahlangana loMbulumakhasana,
Wangamuk' izambatho zami
Wangenz' imbulumakhasana!*

The year my father and mother died,
I was told to go to the place of my aunt,
I met the non-human Lizard creature,
Who took away my clothes
And made me into a Lizard myself!

The heroes of the African epics were invariably men who emerged triumphantly from a lengthy testing of their qualities of courage and self-sacrifice. Bulane, the legendary Sotho chief, proved himself by overcoming many dangers during a quest for the living heart of a leopard, needed to cure his favourite wife from a deadly disease.³⁰ Another Sotho character, Monyani, whose father's enemies had placed him under a spell, was forced to live for many years in the form of a python; at length, like the hero of the Western tale of Beauty and the Beast, he was restored to human form through winning the love of a girl.³¹

Many stories of the Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu reflected a reaction to situations of extreme cruelty and brutality, perhaps because of relatively close relations with the more insensitive San (Bushmen), perhaps in response to experiences during the destruction which followed the Mfecane (or scattering of the south-easterly tribes) during the 1820s. Thus, for example, the child-characters Demane and Demasana were depicted as struggling to extricate themselves from the fury of the man-eater, Zim (Xhosa and Zulu).³² Other children were tortured and threatened by an elderly female cannibal (Xhosa).³³ Takole, a Sotho heroine, was made to undergo various cruelties at the hands of a rejected lover before rejoining her family unharmed.³⁴

A rejection of cruelty and injustice provided the theme of a group of Xhosa epics, which, because of the skilful structuring of their plots and the wealth of philosophy contained within them, appear to rank among the greatest products of

²⁹ Posselt, *Fables of the Veld*, 18–21.

³⁰ M. Martin, *Basutoland: Its Legends and Customs* (London, Nichols, 1903), 163–6.

³¹ Postma, *Tales from the Basotho*, 58–70.

³² E. L. McPherson, *Native Fairy Tales of South Africa* (London, Harrap, 1919), 125–34.

³³ P. Savory, *Xhosa Fireside Tales* (Cape Town, Timmins, 1963) 33–8.

³⁴ Miller, *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa*, 178–9.

the African literary tradition. Among these, the story of Siganda and Sigandana, like the Biblical account of Cain and Abel, described how two brothers grew up on a relationship of deep affection for each other, but eventually quarrelled over a mutually-desired possession, a splendid white cow.³⁵ According to the story-tellers, when Siganda returned home with a false description of his brother's death, the truth was revealed by a supernatural bird who sang:

*Phants' emwonyweni, phants' emwonyweni,
 Ulaph' uSigandana, uhlel' ulindile;
 Asemnand' amanz'omfula-mhle
 Isaqinil' intamb' esinqeni;
 Kodw' ukhala ngoncedo, Ngoncedo, Ngoncedo,
 Kuba ngekhe abuy'aphume.*

Down in the ravine, down in the ravine,
 There Sigandana is, alive and waiting;
 The water of the beautiful stream is still sweet.
 The rope around his body is still tight;
 But he cries for help, for help, for help,
 Because he cannot come out again.

Perhaps the most remarkable of all the old Xhosa epics was *Nomxakazo*, a romantic account of the futility of war and lust for material power. *Nomxakazo*, favourite daughter of a successful warring chief, became discontented with the gifts which her father sent and demanded that he give her so many cattle that they 'would darken the sun'. When, at length, her demand was granted, it proved to be the means of a long period of exile and captivity. This experience was salutary, and she returned to her own people with a changed character, determined to work selflessly to extricate them from the misfortunes which had happened to them. The story-tellers provided much colourful detail in contrasting the situation of *Nomxakazo's* people with that of her father's former enemies, who had achieved great prosperity through peaceful labour. They also described how *Nomxakazo's* skill in diplomatic procedures as they were practised in traditional African society enabled her to arrange peace between the two peoples, in addition to marrying the husband of her choice.³⁶

THE EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Thus far, there has been relatively little academic investigation of Southern African folklore. Progress on the collation and publication of traditional stories has been achieved by a small group of scholars, including A. C. Jordan, S. E. K.

³⁵ Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa*, 219-40.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108-54.

Mqhayi, G. McC. Theal, and J. H. Soga among the Xhosa;³⁷ the Revd H. Callaway and V. C. Mutwa among the Zulu;³⁸ D. F. Ellenberger and Minnie Postma among the Sotho;³⁹ S.M. Molema and Alexandra Sillery among the Tswana;⁴⁰ Frederick Posselt among the Ndebele and Shona;⁴¹ Michael Gelfand and A. C. Hodza among the Shona;⁴² and Geraldine Elliott, Penny Miller, Ethel McPherson and Phyllis Savory among various tribal cultures.⁴³ Yet much remains to be done, both in the preservation of materials and in analysing the values and attitudes which they were used to portray. Moreover, there is an equally insistent need to arrange traditional stories in a form suited to classroom teaching in contemporary Africa, and to incorporate them effectively in curriculum programmes. In this last endeavour, four considerations must certainly be kept in mind.

Firstly, teachers and schools should be expected to play a foremost part in gathering such traditional stories as are available from the local communities which they serve, and, in the process, to create wider opportunities for synthesis between the culture of the school and that of pupils' homes.

Secondly, it is necessary to consider not only the content of traditional learning materials, but the multimedia methods with which they were normally presented. As was developed in the art of the traditional story-tellers, very considerable opportunities for active learning can be created in contemporary classrooms by encouraging pupils to express certain concepts through traditional dances, music and drama.

Thirdly, it must be remembered that the educational potential of folklore has a particular significance in multicultural societies, where the way to a broader vision of humanity almost certainly lies through deeper understanding of both one's own and other people's cultural traditions. Accordingly, there may be considerable sociological advantage in a much wider and more imaginative use of the traditional stories of Southern Africa than is currently evident in the

³⁷ See Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa*; S. E. K. Mqhayi, *Ityala Lamawele: Namanye Amabali AkwaXhosa* (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1955); G. McC. Theal, *Kaffir Folklore* (London, Sonnenschein, [1882]); Soga, *The Ama-Xosa*.

³⁸ See H. Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions and Histories of the Zulus, Vol. 1* (Springvale, Natal, Blair, 1868); V. C. Mutwa, *Indaba, My Children* (Johannesburg, Blue Crane Books, [1964]); V.C. Mutwa, *Africa Is My Witness* (Johannesburg, Blue Crane Books, 1966).

³⁹ See Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto*; Postma, *Tales from the Basuto*.

⁴⁰ See Molema, *The Bantu*; Sillery, *The Bechuanaland Protectorate*.

⁴¹ See Posselt, *Fables of the Veld*.

⁴² See M. Gelfand, *Shona Religion* (Cape Town, Juta, 1962); A. C. Hodza, *Denhe re Nouri ne Nhorimbo* (Salisbury, Univ. of Rhodesia, Dep. of African Languages, 1977).

⁴³ See G. Elliott, *The Long Grass Whispers* (London, Routledge, 1939); G. Elliott, *Where the Leopard Passes* (London, Routledge, 1949); Miller, *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa*; McPherson, *Native Fairy Tales of South Africa*; Savory, *Bechuana Fireside Tales*.

curriculum of either primary or secondary schools in most Southern African countries.

Fourthly, although we cannot doubt that the deepest wishes of traditional African thought and expression is most effectively imparted through the medium of the vernacular, there is much educational value to be gained from translations into the other languages currently used in schools. Indeed, the time may be opportune to go further and suggest that efforts should be made to share Africa's heritage of story-telling with schools and societies outside this continent.



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