

Redemption, Resistance, Rebellion: the three “R’s” of African folklore

J. Kruger & I. le Roux (editors), *The Flamboyant Rooster and other Tshivenda Song Stories*

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The Flamboyant Rooster in many ways is a contemporary version of the admirable pioneering research by the German linguist, Reverend Bleek, and the Swiss missionary anthropologist Junod. Both men recognised the intellectual and social significance of African folklore, at a point in time when little attention was being paid to indigenous narratives, other than “adapting” them for consumption by a European

audience. African folklore, it was generally held, was “crude and long-drawn, and not at all to European taste until clipped into shape”.⁴

Bleek and Junod did not find it necessary to clip the stories they recorded. On the contrary, motivated by a sincere concern to preserve a rapidly fading heritage, they meticulously transcribed and translated the vernacular and made it accessible to the general public. In their understanding, story telling was a “monument upon which the soul of the race has recorded ... its ideas and aspirations”.⁵ For those who were prepared to see, it offered a window on the moral and spiritual aspects of indigenous culture.

The editors of *The Flamboyant Rooster* (Kruger and Le Roux) are similarly intrigued by the less obvious, deeper dimensions of storytelling: the “artistic maps of the human condition”, and the “privileged view of human relationships” (p 7). This is not an academic monograph, though. The study is conceived as a resource book, with teachers and learners in the arts and culture realm as its main beneficiaries.

The editors kindly acknowledge the storytellers as the authors of the book. Together with the narrators, they present 27 *dzingano* tales from the Venda-speaking region in the Limpopo province. These were initially collected by Le Roux in the early 1990s for her doctoral project.⁶ Some of the stories have previously been published in *The Talking Drum* by the Pan African Society of Musical Arts Education. Teachers and learners from a variety of learning areas (music, literature, life orientation and social science) will certainly benefit from this publication. In my opinion, *The Flamboyant Rooster* also makes for a good introduction to this fascinating realm of folklore, which has remained largely unexplored by social scientists.

The narratives, songs and music, are presented together with their authors, the ten Venda narrators. There is a short but thorough introduction, which provides a general background to the region and to the very special literary genre of *dzingano*. The editors also examine, intensively, the most important themes expressed in the narratives. The discussion which accompanies each individual story, is generally kept short. A host of informative cultural data and analytical comments, on the other hand, is presented in the form of endnotes.

A separate section is dedicated to the essential characteristics of *ngano* as a performance category. Here, the reader is offered important ethno-musicological insights, which, I must emphasise, are usually lacking in the discussions of African folklore. They include such innovative topics as “word painting” (song texts as an artistic medium); the emotional meaning of sounds and the story as an interactive performance. Photographs sourced from Kruger’s decade-long fieldwork in the region and exquisite pencil drawings by graphic artist Deon Coetzer enlighten the text.

4. G. Bloomhill, *The Sacred Drum* (Howard Timmens, Cape Town, 1960).

5. H.A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe II* (Macmillan, London, 1927), p 211.

6. I. le Roux, “Net die woorde het oorgebly: ’n godsdiens-wetenskaplike interpretasie van Venda volksverhale.” D.Litt. & Phil. proefskrif, UNISA, 1996.

The English text is kept as close as possible to the vernacular original, by means of the use of shortened sentences, the inclusion of onomatopoeia and Tshivenda song texts. For the same reason, the editors have retained grammatical constructs of the original, such as interjections and repetitive elements, in the text. Even the idiosyncratic styles of the individual artists have been preserved where possible.

The particular human universe which emerges from the narratives, the authors propose throughout the study, is not a happy one. It is a universe controlled by class, patriarchy, seniority and physical power. Women, children and the underdogs of society (the poor, the disabled, and orphans), are preyed upon by primordial desires, jealousy, selfishness and the vested interests of the powerful. They are rejected, kidnapped, sexually assaulted and even murdered (p 7).

Many tales, we are told, depict the suffering of “the perpetual minor”: Woman. They define gender relations in terms of violent, primordial images of male aggression. Men are depicted as marauding animals and monsters who do not shy away from abduction, rape and incest. In addition, local rulers, whilst occasionally being portrayed as caring, also feature, in human or animal shape, as corrupt beings with absolute power (p 13).

However, all is not lost. Victims are not completely helpless: “their physical frailness belies a spirit of rebellion that enables them to escape and even undermine those who abuse them”. Indeed, many of the *dzingano* offer redemption to the persecuted. Emotional healing is provided by water and rain. Big trees and other natural features offer protection to the weak (pp 9, 10). Siblings protect one another (p 12). Other narratives are said to depict resistance. Mister Hare, the major character in the trickster tales, undermines the social order. Mister Tortoise rebels against his seniors. Both defeat the brutish, dull-witted power of mighty Lion, Hippo and Elephant (p 10). These stories, the editors suggest, remind the listeners of the possibility of a different social order (p 7). Resistance against male and royal power, aspirations of freedom and the possibility of an alternative, new social order are important themes emerging from the narratives. Venda tales, therefore, can be redefined as “a symbolic domain on which an unmistakably rebellious streak and a notion of freedom play out in a tense struggle with dominance” (p 15). The “resistant ideology” of *dzingano*, Kruger and Le Roux propose, should be appraised as “an enduring artistic objective and human endeavour” (p 7).

The conflict theme within African storytelling was first revealed by Junod⁷, who discussed it under the label “wisdom of the little ones”. It was explored in more detail by Kriel⁸ and, incidentally, also features strongly in folklore elsewhere in the world.⁹ The views expressed in *The Flamboyant Rooster*, however, are conspicuously more radical than those of their predecessors.

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7. He explored “resistance” quite extensively under the label “wisdom of the little ones”.
 8. A. Kriel, *An African Horizon* (Permanent Publishing House, Cape Town, 1971). The study (based on a doctoral project) investigates Shona “ideals and values” through the medium of folklore. He particularly focuses on the “protest against muscular power, against the power of status, the power of knowledge and the power of erotic attraction”.
 9. For example, the “triumph of the despised” in the folktales of the Zuni. See R. Benedict, *Zuni Mythology I & II* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1935).

The interpretation of Venda narratives in terms of resistance and rebellion as a kind of counter culture, suits the intention of the editors (and the purpose of this publication) very well: to provide teachers and learners with an educational resource that matches the transformation or social action approach on which the present South African curricula are modelled.¹⁰ I am not sure, however, how faithfully this perspective reflects the actual nature of the stories. For an alternative reading, I will briefly revisit the material from three distinct, but also partly overlapping angles: continuity, discontinuity, and voice. I will start with discontinuity, a historical perspective.

In the absence of written evidence, our understanding of the pre-colonial nature of folklore (and orature in general) is, of course, limited. However, a few points can be made. First of all, only two out of twenty-seven narratives relate to the trickster hare Sankhambe, whereas there is a vast body of tales out there in which Mister Hare terrorizes his fellow animals. Trickster tales are clearly underrepresented in the selected sample. There is a good reason for this: they do not dwell primarily on marital relations, jealousy of co-wives, the fate of orphans and other social issues which form the core focus of the analysis of Kruger and Le Roux. I would like to suggest that they, once, formed a separate category of folklore, satisfying a special didactic need of a particular audience.

Both the audience and narrators commonly describe the personality of the trickster as “clever and naughty”. The same behavioural traits are strongly associated with young males, and, rather ambiguously, frowned upon and admired at the same time.¹¹ “Boys will be boys” is a general commentary used for the (mis)behaviour of male youths. Furthermore, in the not so distant past, boys were separated from their sisters at an early age. They had their own sleeping place in the household, and were expected to spend the evenings at their own fire. In short: they formed a separate stratum in the social hierarchy.

Also, stealth was perceived as an important component in the survival skills training of pubescent youth at the initiation lodge. It seems therefore not unreasonable to suggest that, at least formerly, trickster tales were designed for and consumed by boys and young men, and that the general spirit of the stories prepared boys for initiation into manhood. A similar kind of continuity, I will indicate shortly, exists in the social realm of women, and in the stories designed for them.

Sankhambe tales regularly depict the main protagonist outwitting his opposition: Lion, Elephant and other Big Ones who symbolize rulers, seniors or elders. It cannot be concluded from this, however, that the trickster tales evidence a “resistance ideology”, as the editors suggest. In many stories, the trickster clearly confronts other, if not all other, animals too. The behaviour of the central character is marginal. His “subversive” actions are not of this world. They rather belong to a topsy-turvy, world-turned-upside-down.¹² Confrontation in trickster stories in any case seems to feature only secondary to the main theme of stealth.

10. “The general outcome of the lessons based on *ngano* is that young learners should be aware of their political and social rights” (p 7).

11. This ambiguity is found also in the trickster tales from which Mister Hare emerges simultaneously as hero and as villain.

12. The “misbehaviour” of initiates (insulting language; the mock fight against seniors of the lodge; stealing from relatives, and so forth) can be accounted for along the same logic. The initiates live in seclusion outside the normal social order.

Furthermore, the unpopularity of chiefs in the real world, we are told, partly accounts for the rebellion against Big Ones in *dzingano*. The origins of the infamy of the Venda ruling class is traced back to their invasion of the Soutpansberg around 1700. Is it possible that commoners (*vhasiwana*) express their resentment, resistance or rebellion against the royal families (*vhakololo*) by means of storytelling, 300 years down the line? Certainly.¹³ However, this would mean that negative perceptions have become petrified; that the nature of chieftainship has remained static over the past three centuries; and that dominance (read: abuse of power) has almost become a built-in, permanent feature of Venda kingship.

We know from archaeological and ethno-historical sources that many chiefs lived with their subjects in fortified hideouts in remote and inaccessible places, throughout the nineteenth century. The Soutpansberg and its dense subtropical forests offered perfect locations for the Venda people to survive the turmoil and displacement of the era. Towards the end of the 1800s, in the period of colonial conquest, chiefs were forced out of their strongholds and commoners settled all over the landscape in independent homesteads or villages. In the 1960s, they were forced to reunite with their rulers in the grid settlements that resulted from one of the recommendations of the Tomlinson Commission. At the same time, chiefs reconsolidated their power base through participation in “local government” structures.

Surely, these changing socio-political contexts must have shaped and reshaped roles and perceptions of rulers and the ruled? Class distinction, therefore, should be conceived of as a fluid concept, in need of detailed diachronic analysis. To define its meaning, or reduce it, in terms of a poorly documented 300-year-old conquest, seems next to meaningless.

The proposed thesis of a rebellious popular culture expressed in folktales, can be interrogated further from a conceptual perspective. It is important to note – as the editors did – that rulers appear somewhat ambivalently as both “caring and corrupt” (p 13). The source of this ambivalence, I would like to suggest, lies in the very nature of power itself. At a transcendental level, “power” is conceived as a neutral entity, which can be used positively and destructively. This is best exemplified by the belief that healing power is not essentially different from bewitchment.¹⁴

In the narratives, His Majesty is represented metaphorically by big animals (Hippo, Elephant) or by dangerous predators (Lion and Crocodile), which display the same ambivalence of power. All have ferocious powers of destruction.¹⁵ On the other hand, the same animals can, of course, employ their strength and bravery to protect those who side with them. Phrased differently: there are good rulers and bad rulers. When narrators lament the fact (or the possibility) that the Big Ones “eat” (read destroy, murder, kidnap, rape, exile, and so forth) the little ones, they might very well simply describe the evil ruler (read senior, or elder).

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13. The perception of a clear class distinction and the unpopularity of Venda rulers is a theme that runs through the many publications of government ethnologist N.J. van Warmelo. It also features strongly in the early writings of the Berlin Mission, which shaped his thinking.
 14. Early anthropological literature defines these two strains of power as “white” and “black” magic.
 15. Three of them are man-eaters, a feature that might have misled the editors into believing that rulers are perceived as naturally abusive.

Narratives of the evil ruler, I would like to suggest, are created to remind the Big Ones of the balance of power,¹⁶ that unwritten social contract on which all social action is based. Thus these tales confirm that “a chief is only a chief because of his people”; that “one hand washes the other”; that “the children of a man are like the fins of a fish”; that “the children of a man divide even the legs of a locust”, and a host of other aphorisms that indicate the importance of reciprocal obligations. No need to resist those who can protect you. No use rebelling against a divinely ordained order. No point incurring the wrath of the ancestors ...

Next continuity will be examined. Folktales are not created in isolation of other literary categories; neither can storytelling be isolated from other cultural institutions. Narrators use proverbs and idiomatic expressions; borrow songs and music from other avenues of life; make reference to a variety of cultural beliefs and social institutions, et cetera. Trickster tales, I mentioned earlier on, provide continuity in the life cycle by preparing male youths for their rites of passage. Similarly, many narratives are associated with the training of young girls for their roles as wives and mothers. In fact, on closer scrutiny, both the subject matter and expressive style of folklore closely resemble the form and content of the pedagogic experience in girls' initiation schools.

One obvious resemblance pertains to the interactive response which both the narrator of tales and the instructor of the initiation lodge employ in order to capture their audience. A more substantial analogy concerns the general mood – a curious mix of play and mystery – created by narrator and initiator alike. Storytelling is conceived of as a game. It is meant to arouse excitement and to entertain, much in the same way as riddles and musical games do. The tales are, after all, created for an audience of children. The songs, dances, bodily exercises and mimes of the girls' initiation schools also feature an element of play, be it in a less obvious fashion. Many girls are attracted to the music of the lodge, and convinced by their friends to join the school on account of the singing and dancing.

The presence of symbolic words, objects and body movements on the other hand is meant to bring home to the listener/initiate the importance of the implicit and explicit messages conveyed by the narrator/instructor. Contrary to our Western conception of education, not everything that is said or happens, is meant to be understood by the listener/initiate. Some of the meaning escapes even the narrator/instructor! The cryptic elements in the tales and the pedagogy of initiation serve a double purpose. Firstly, they promote non-cognitive (experiential, emotional or affective) learning. Folktales create a fantasy world. The realm of initiation is a magical mystery tour. Both realms remove the child from everyday life and the “real” world. Through ritual and instruction they catch a glimpse of the “other” world. In addition, the inclusion of mysterious or incomprehensible elements confirms the continued relevance of cultural heritage; expresses the ancestral origins of present-day social knowledge and social order; and grants a certain authority to the narrator/instructor.

16. Kruger and Le Roux use the term “interdependency” (pp 13, 15) to refer to the balance of power between superordinate and subordinate. However, this concept does not seem to play any substantial role in their analysis.

Folktales are multivocal. So far, two types of voices have been mentioned. The first voice, the most obvious one, speaks of fun and fantasy. Traditional storytelling was for both its practitioners and consumers primarily a form of entertainment – a game. It was considered by some to be “the most refined and most pleasing”¹⁷ of all games. Stories were created to provide a magical experience for children. Narrators skilfully manipulated word, body and sound to move and enchant their audiences. Most of the excitement derived from the fact that the child-hero was placed on the centre stage of the narrative plot.

Whether in human or animal form, the little ones emerge from the plot as morally better, physically stronger and cognitively brainier. Are these little heroes resisting the social order? Are their adventures expressive of a rebellious spirit? The narrators certainly express their sympathy with the younger, smaller, lesser ones. After all, everybody has had to endure the hardships of being the younger one. Also, when growing older, everyone is given the opportunity to do unto others what had been done to them! That is, after all, how a social hierarchy operates and survives. For small children, many a story reads: “Do not worry, you will be a senior too one day!” For older ones, the message is different: “Do not be too hard on your juniors!” In addition to empathy, maybe, the stories are expressive of feelings of guilt too.

The second voice (mystery), is less audible. The symbolic references in the narratives can generally be explained by the narrator (or the anthropologist!). Some elements remain obscure. Either way, they are not really meant for the little listeners. They do not, I believe, weaken the first voice. They actually contribute to the creation of the fantasy realm in which the little heroes act out their heroic roles. In the trickster stories, they seem to remain, on the whole, underdeveloped. In the stories designed for a young, female audience, on the other hand, they seem to feature abundantly.

Here, the analogy (and the continuity) between the realm of storytelling and initiation becomes obvious again. In the rituals, songs, body movements and aphorisms of the girls’ lodge, males are generally depicted as lions and other predators. There is an obvious reason for the omnipresence of the man-beast. The protection of a young lady (*khomba*) against the sexual hunger of men is as central a theme of ritual pedagogy, as it is a real threat in real life outside the lodge. The purpose is plain: avoiding unwanted pregnancies and safeguarding the institution of matrimony. Similarly, folktales depict men (read predator, beast, or monster) and their sexual advances as a threat to girlhood. Can these stories be read as rebellious against masculinity? From a feminist stance, certainly.

From a less radical insider’s view, things will probably look different. The sexual symbolism employed by the narrator is very reminiscent of the one encountered in *milayo*, the sacred-secret aphorisms which girls are required to memorize (not necessarily to explain or to understand) as part of the initiation experience. These aphorisms (together with other symbolic didactic means) are aimed at promoting correct moral behaviour and female etiquette. Many stories, I believe, similarly simply depict good and bad conduct. The protagonists of these stories – the wise girl, the disobedient daughter, the abusive husband, the dangerous

17. Junod, *The Life*, p 211.

stranger, the jealous co-wife, the unfair father and more – are all variations on the theme of (im)moral conduct.¹⁸

The third voice is probably the most contentious one: the artistic or personal voice of the narrator. When comparing the narratives presented by Kruger and Le Roux with older versions of the same or similar stories, one realises that elements of contemporary life have been added in. There are references to the city, to migrant workers, to modern music, to modern technology, and more. At the time of the recording, Venda folklore was still a “living” tradition, meaning that narrators adapted their material to a changing society. Not unlike elsewhere in the world, the craft of storytelling provides a limited space for the expression of personal perceptions, taste or style. Also, folklore is not static. There is no “fixity of tales”, Ruth Benedict once remarked, and the suggestion that tales might have originated from some “mystical source called communal authorship” is simply inaccurate.¹⁹

There is no real limit, on the other hand, to the modification of narratives, when they are performed for an outsider audience. I feel that several narratives in this collection might have been modified beyond “normal” limits, perhaps to match the researcher’s overt display of empathy, and explicit interest in the plight of the poor and oppressed. The story entitled “The Lourie who was not a Bird” exemplifies such a modified narrative.

The editors interpret this *ngano* as a warning against paedophiles and rapists. The paedophile in the story is a beautiful Lourie, who lures three girls into his homestead, sexually abuses the eldest, while holding the others captive. After a long time he returns the girls to their homestead, presents himself as their saviour and receives a reward from the local ruler. Moral of the story: when females are abused, it is of little use to complain to the chief, especially when the culprit is a member of the royal kraal (p 124).

“The Lourie who was not a Bird” appears to be a modified version of a very common story type, in which male predators meet with girls at the river, convince the girls to follow them and almost succeed in eating them. The girls are magically saved by a little animal and returned home safely, where a mat is spread out and a beast is slaughtered or given to the hero.²⁰ The moral of the story: little heroes succeed where others fail; do not trust men; do not disobey your seniors.

In conclusion: it goes without saying that a critical approach to culture is a deserving goal to pursue. To find examples of female resistance against the patriarchy in a conservative context, is a most rewarding exercise. However, folklore is perhaps not the right place for this endeavour.

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18. The editors are aware of the general moral-didactic function of the *dzingano*. Some of the narrators, they suggest, defined *ngano* as *milayonyana*, little law. However they then go on defining this function in their usual critical way, as “formalizing conformity and submission” (pp 13, 15).

19. For example, Benedict, *Zuni Mythology*, from p 236, on the individual artist in Zuni mythology.

20. For the Shona versions, see: Kriel, *African Horizon*, p 71.