

**Trickster tropes:  
Female storytelling and the re-imagination of social orders  
in four nineteenth-century southern African communities**

*Jimmy Pieterse\**

One can say that up to now folklore has been studied as a “picturesque” element ... Folklore should instead be studied as a “conception of the world and life” implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical and objective) to official conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) that have succeeded one another in the historical process. (Hence the strict relationship between folklore and “common sense”, which is philosophical folklore.) This conception of the world is not elaborated and systematic because, by definition, the people (the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed) cannot possess conceptions which are elaborated, systematic and politically organized and centralized in their albeit contradictory development. Antonio Gramsci<sup>1</sup>

The Reverend Henri Junod, a nineteenth-century Swiss missionary, noted that chiefly authority in southern Africa in many ways resembled households in which the father wielded absolute power over his dependents. He viewed this as a hierarchical social structure responsible for provoking discontent, and explained: “So in the evening around the fire, the women and the little ones take their revenge in the manner of the blacks, that is to say by saying what they think in a roundabout way.” He pointed in particular to the ways in which he believed that women used stories to critique power and authority. Junod hastened to reassure his readers: “Their intention is not to reverse the social order, the established order. Oh! Far from it! But they take a malicious pleasure in recounting the tricks played by the trickster and his companions.” The trickster to whom Junod referred is the central character in the stories from four nineteenth-century southern African communities discussed in this article. These trickster tales feature a protagonist born under unnatural circumstances; his deceptive actions throughout the story contravene commonly accepted local social and cultural understandings and practices. Junod explained that such stories appealed to the powerless because the trickster, too, was “given no advantage by nature or by birth, but nonetheless prevails against the powerful, over the chiefs themselves, through his cunning”. Junod argued that it was more than “simple coincidence” that several of the stories he recounted concluded “with the death of a chief, caused by the Machiavellian skill of the malicious trickster”.<sup>2</sup> Junod’s understanding of female storytelling in nineteenth-century southern Africa was, in some ways, quite insightful. He saw it as a product of unequal social relationships. It functioned, he argued, as a

---

\* Researcher, Centre for the Study of AIDS, University of Pretoria; and research co-operator, Department of Historical and Heritage Studies, University of Pretoria.

1. Q. Hoare (ed), A. Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), pp 188–9.
2. H. Junod, *Les Chants et les Contes des Ba-Ronga de la Baie de Delagoa* (Lausanne, Georges Bridel, 1897), p 82. The French word “lièvre”, which translates literally as “hare”, is translated here as “trickster”. Junod explains that the character who sometimes appeared as a hare in the stories he collected was always a “trickster, a crafty person”. See Junod, *Les Chants*, p 80.

manner in which women could express their unease about the way in which societies were organised. He also posited that women deployed trickster figures very frequently and effectively to express these concerns. However, his contention that women did not connect these tales with the subversion of the existing order and to question how social reproduction took place is flawed. On the contrary, the trickster was an important figure precisely because he consistently upended the established order. Especially in times of crisis, women crafted and told stories about tricksters to debate the directions in which their societies should move forward.

Female storytelling is a valuable source for historians who seek to write about nineteenth-century southern African women – about their “realities” and lived “experiences” and the ways in which they drew from inherited cultural vocabularies to talk about the good and just society – without constantly having to rely on male authored accounts.<sup>3</sup> It presents historians with a way of writing about the people of southern Africa in the nineteenth century without getting bogged down in the quagmire that is the ethnographic object. Yet the infantilisation of female oral narrative has seen to it that this genre of storytelling has been largely neglected as a historical source. In his path breaking work on pre-colonial Xhosa societies J.B. Peires, for example, lists only three types of oral tradition directly related to history: *iminombo* (genealogies), *izibongo* (praises) and *amabali* (tales that “explain how present circumstances come to exist”).<sup>4</sup> Peires thus finds it impossible to adequately address the positions of women in pre-colonial Xhosa societies.<sup>5</sup> It is my contention that, if one is to add stories told by women (*intsomi* in Xhosa) to Peires’s list, it becomes possible to do this, not only for women who self-identified as Xhosa or Zulu, but for nineteenth-century southern African women more generally.<sup>6</sup>

This article provides a comparative analysis across four geographical areas of a particular type of story that offers social commentary within the larger genre of female storytelling, namely trickster tales in which some form of unnatural birth takes place. The length of these tales indicates their importance to the women who told them; they are the longest and most complex stories that seem to have been recorded. By far the most narrative labour goes into them. Storytellers used the tales to talk

3. I use the term female storytelling to denote the genre that Harold Scheub calls *ntsomi*, because the commonly used term “folktale” tends to be a catch-all rubric and hence a rather blunt analytical instrument. *Intsomi* can be defined as “a performing art which has, as its dynamic mainspring, a *core-cliché* (a song, chant, or saying) which is, during the performance, developed, expanded, detailed, and dramatised before an audience”: H. Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975), p 3. These stories are mainly performed by women, and take place in the realms of the fabulous and the fantastic. Some were taken down and collected by missionaries and other interested observers as early as the nineteenth century.
4. J.B. Peires, *House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1981), p 193.
5. Peires, *House of Phalo*, p 47.
6. The extant literature on pre-colonial societies in southern Africa has an overwhelmingly Zulu focus. This has obscured the complicated dynamics of gendered politics, because it quite frequently has the effect of depicting ethnic groups as “discrete” or “frozen” entities. Scholars have thus overlooked parallels in the stories told by women across groups. Yet these similarities are crucial to an understanding of the political and cultural contexts in which the stories were told. Stories told in different contexts reflected different experiences across time, physical space and social geography of ethnic groups. What is more, these stories illuminate how people made sense of changing circumstances in shared metaphors. A shared history of southern Africa has been lost in the historiography in favour of the ethnic approach.

about origins and human nature.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Junod points out, the trickster characters in the stories highlight the possibility of interrogating or re-imagining the established order. I examine four main examples of these stories, each recorded by a European working in southern Africa in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Eugene Casalis, Henry Callaway, Henri Junod and George McCall Theal collected them in the areas known today as Lesotho, KwaZulu-Natal, southern Mozambique and the Eastern Cape, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Together these collections cover an almost uninterrupted stretch of Indian Ocean coastline from the Fish River in the south to Maputo in the north, and an area that extends inland across the Drakensberg into the highlands of the mountain kingdom. A comparison of the stories demonstrates that female storytelling drew on a shared cultural vocabulary to make sense of periods of social upheaval.

The stories I analyse are an especially rich resource for historians because they are multivalent, capable of conveying multiple meanings and appealing to several audiences simultaneously. Junod identified some of these layers of meaning: “I see in these stories a discreet protest by the weak against the powerful, of the spirit against brute force. Perhaps they contain a warning given by adults to children. And who knows if their ultimate purpose isn’t to affirm the value of the individual in this oppressive society?” Despite his uncertainty in interpreting the stories, Junod concluded that they were a “monument in which the popular spirit is represented, perhaps unconsciously, its ideas and its aspirations. They are thus doubly worthy of study”.<sup>9</sup> As Junod suggests, the ways in which female storytelling functioned as a meaning-making activity were complex. A study of trickster tales and the ways in which their protagonists subverted the established order shows how female storytelling enabled women to express their understandings of the changing worlds they inhabited, to debate societal wellbeing and to speculate about the future of communities.

\*\*\*

My analysis of female storytelling builds upon existing scholarship concerned with storytelling in nineteenth-century southern Africa, but complicates this literature through its comparative approach and attention to the trickster genre. Sean Hanretta has explored how gender roles were constructed through moral discourse. He argues that women in pre-colonial Nguni societies owed both their power and marginality to their liminal status within a patriarchal idiom.<sup>10</sup> His analysis draws on nineteenth-century Zulu “nursery tales” collected by the Reverend Henry Callaway; Hanretta

- 
7. S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).
  8. E. Casalis, *The Basutos; or, Twenty-Three Years in South Africa* (London, James Nisbet & Co, 1861); H. Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions, and Histories of the Zulus, in their own Words, with a Translation into English, and Notes* (Springvale, John A. Blair, 1868); G.M. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore: A Selection from the Traditional Tales Current among the People Living on the Eastern Border of the Cape Colony with Copious Explanatory Notes* (London, S. Sonnenschein, Le Bas & Lowrey, 1886); Junod, *Les Chants*.
  9. Junod, *Les Chants*, p 83.
  10. S. Hanretta, “Women, Marginality and the Zulu State: Women’s Institutions and Power in the Early Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of African History*, 39, 3, 1998, pp 389–415. Hanretta’s work builds on Harette Ngubane and Victor Turner. See H. Ngubane, *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine: An Ethnography of Health and Disease in Nyuswa-Zulu Thought and Practice* (London, Academic Press, 1977); and V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndemba Ritual* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1967).

suggests that these provided “women with a way of equipping children with the cultural metaphors with which to successfully conform their behaviour to the accepted norm of their sex”.<sup>11</sup>

But such stories did more than that. They helped form, and formed part of, the changing social discourses that shaped gendered identities. They were sites of struggle and contestation. The women who told them used them as a form of subtle subversion. For Isabel Hofmeyr, female storytelling represented “an important and potentially powerful cultural resource from which status could be wrung” and at times articulated women’s grievances about their positions in society.<sup>12</sup> Hofmeyr says such stories:

... can, indeed, be construed as subversive and unsettling accounts in which all known social categories and boundaries are upset. Men become women; animals become human; women fall in love with animals; people eat one another. The stories are also characterised by hallucination, vision and illusion that undermine “realistic” ways of seeing.<sup>13</sup>

Hofmeyr therefore sees this genre of storytelling as having performed cultural and ideological work; its content shaped perceptions and beliefs and its form provided a template for the next generation of storytellers. Stories represented simplified versions of cosmologies and often spread into historical understanding. Hofmeyr draws on the work of Robert Darnton and Adam Kuper to show how people made sense of demographic disasters and social transformations through the tales that they told.<sup>14</sup> She thus goes further than Harold Scheub, who views female storytelling as a mirror of societal mores and values.<sup>15</sup>

Yet Hofmeyr’s focus, which is neither female storytelling nor exclusively or even mainly pre-colonial societies, results in an account that sometimes understates the importance of female storytelling. She relies on Jeff Guy’s quasi-Althusserian approach to reproduction, derived from Meillassoux, when she does discuss pre-colonial female storytelling. She sees women’s narrative labour, being located in the homestead, as less valued than that of their male counterparts – much like women’s cultivation work when compared to men’s cattle keeping. Hofmeyr also argues that the accepted moral order is almost always unequivocally restored at the end of every tale. She thus still to some extent provides us with theoretical extensions of what men might have thought about women, and an account in which “His Majesty the Economy” determines in the final instance.<sup>16</sup>

The use of trickster stories as a historical source demands careful and critical engagement with the problems inherent in the four anthologies in which they appear.

- 
11. Hanretta, ‘Women, Marginality and the Zulu State’.
  12. I. Hofmeyr, *“We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told”*: *Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (London and Johannesburg, Heinemann, 1994).
  13. Hofmeyr, *We Spend Our Years*.
  14. R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, Vintage, 1984); A. Kuper, *South Africa and the Anthropologist* (London and New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).
  15. Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi*.
  16. L. Althusser, ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, *For Marx* (London, Verso, 1969), pp 87–128.

The tales analysed in this article were all collected in the mid- to late nineteenth century by male missionaries or by men involved at some point in what might be described as missionary projects. This is problematic on several levels. First and foremost, European men selected the tales that would comprise their anthologies based on a certain set of biases and culturally held beliefs. This necessarily filters or refracts the voices of the African women that I try to access through these tales. Then, of course, the men who recorded the stories were the very people that Jean and John Comaroff hold responsible for the “colonization of consciousness”.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the texts in which the stories appeared form part of larger attempts to change the signs and practices of the people among whom their respective authors spread the gospel.

The work of the Reverend Henry Callaway serves as a prime example, as it was missionary zeal that prompted him to undertake a study of the stories in his anthology. He collected his compendium of Zulu “nursery tales”, which was published in 1868, throughout his tenure, beginning in 1857, as an Anglican missionary at the Springvale Mission station near Richmond in southern Natal. Callaway, who had accompanied Bishop Colenso to South Africa from England in 1854, collected these tales at first because he wanted to become acquainted with the Zulu language, but later “as a means of obtaining a knowledge of Kaffir customs, histories, modes of thought, religion, &c”.<sup>18</sup> He was convinced that these tales showed that “the Zulus are a degenerated people; that they are not now in the condition intellectually or physically in which they were during ‘the legend-producing period’ of their existence; but have sunk from a higher state”.<sup>19</sup> He believed that Zulu people were not themselves capable of retracing “the footsteps of successive generations” but that “regeneration” was possible “under the power of influences which may reach them from without”.<sup>20</sup> He thought of them not as savages but “savage *men*, who only need culture to have developed in them the finest traits of our human nature”.<sup>21</sup> He saw it as his god-given task to instil this culture into his flock. In order to do so he thought it necessary to know “their minds and mode of thought”, and thus to study and record their language and folklore.<sup>22</sup>

- 
17. J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa 1* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991).
  18. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p ii.
  19. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, preface to the first volume.
  20. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, preface to the first volume.
  21. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, preface to the first volume.
  22. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, preface to the first volume. George McCall Theal, Henri Junod and Eugene Casalis held similar views and had similar career trajectories. Theal assembled his anthology during his early career, a period that preceded his appointment as Cape Archivist in 1879. He spent the most of this time in an area known as British Kaffraria that was ruled by Xhosa chiefs through Xhosa laws until it 1866 when it was absorbed into the Cape Colony as the districts of East London, King William’s Town and Stutterheim. Theal filled positions that varied from mission teacher to border magistrate. For a time he also managed the printing works at Lovedale Seminary outside Alice. The stories in Theal’s anthology were collected and printed “with a view of letting the people we have chosen to call Kaffirs describe themselves in their own words”. Junod joined the Swiss-French Mission in 1886 and was sent to Edinburgh to study medicine and surgery in 1887. He was then posted to Portuguese East Africa to set up a mission in Lourenço Marques. Like Callaway, who he had met whilst in Edinburgh, Junod set out to learn the local language but soon found himself collecting and analysing stories and songs so as to better understand the mental life of the Baronga people among whom he lived. Casalis joined the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society in 1830 and was sent to South Africa after being ordained in 1832. Casalis and a few other missionaries

There are additional problems in terms of how the tales were collected, recorded and transcribed. The majority appear in translated form: Theal and Casalis's in English and Junod's in French. This loss of the original language closes off certain interpretive avenues. Callaway's are a notable exception in that they appear in English translation alongside the original Zulu. Intended audiences were mostly European. The texts are therefore littered with comparisons to European folklore and biblical texts, and similarities are heavily emphasised.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the tales do provide us with a relatively close approximation of women's experiences in their own words. Most of the tales included in the collections were told by women. Theal, for instance, found the best narrators to be "ancient dames".<sup>23</sup> Junod held similar views. His main source was a woman, Chiguyane, who he believed to be the best storyteller he had ever met. She told him many of the stories in his collection, including the tale re-told here. He felt, however, that he had not nearly exhausted her repertoire.<sup>24</sup> Junod and Callaway both believed that "women are the depositories" of these tales.<sup>25</sup>

Stories were told in homesteads, usually at night. Young and old alike would congregate and, according to Junod:

... begin to tell stories. Often they begin by posing riddles to one another. But they invariably finish with a properly told story, a marvellous tale that makes one both laugh and tremble. In the shadows, the work of the day finished, the native experiences a singular joy at evoking gracious scenes, hilarious or terrible, from olden times.<sup>26</sup>

Properly told stories were performed by "women of mature age", some of whom knew "ten, twenty, thirty stories" and were able to "tell a fresh one each night for perhaps fifteen days, without having completely depleted their store of tales". Young people would learn the craft by trying to repeat the stories they had heard (both locally and from far away for stories, it seems, travelled extensively). When they made mistakes, more experienced narrators would say: "This is what defeated you", and point out where they had lost the thread or mixed up incidents.<sup>27</sup>

Though flawed, these collections of tales in many ways represent, by nineteenth-century standards at least, astute ethnographies. Junod, for example, explains:

Are you curious to know what method we used to obtain the stories in the most precise form possible? First it is necessary to gain the confidence of the indigenous person, to get to know them and have them get to know you. It's very imprudent to arrive with one's pencil and paper, wanting to immediately begin writing down what they dictate. Forced to speak more slowly, distracted by your questions, they forget the prettiest expressions and give you only a pale version of their story, if it isn't lost altogether.

---

founded the Morijah Mission Station on land belonging to Moshoeshoe in 1833. Shortly thereafter Casalis and his wife moved to Moshoeshoe's capital, Thaba-Bosiu, where they opened a mission station and lived for the next sixteen years.

23. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, p vii.

24. Junod, *Les Chants*.

25. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 1. Junod also describes women's relationships to the tales by saying that women were "the real depositories of the tradition". See Junod, *Les Chants*, p 71.

26. Junod, *Les Chants*, p 69.

27. Junod, *Les Chants*, pp 69–71.

Treat them well to get a more lively version, then do not interrupt the first time the story is told, but remember all subsequent events and picturesque words. After that, ask them to begin again more slowly; get clarity on obscure points. If, while disrupted in their habits, they skip half of the events, you will remember them and arrive in this manner at way of writing the story that keeps the flavour that would otherwise have disappeared.<sup>28</sup>

Theal, in turn, took care to “give absolutely not a single sentence in any of these tales that has not come from native sources. Most of them have been obtained from at least ten or twelve individuals residing in different parts of the country, and they have all undergone a thorough revision by a circle of natives. They were not only told by natives, but were copied by natives.”<sup>29</sup> Callaway was every bit as thorough.

When we look at past missionaries’ eurocentrism, their religious zeal, and their borderline obsession with the ethnographic object, and compare their assembled tales across time and social, ethnic and linguistic geography, an interesting and untold story of nineteenth-century southern Africa, as told by its women, emerges. Such a comparative approach allows a way to ascertain that a shared cultural vocabulary appears in more than one story, and hence that it was employed in different places and at different times to make sense of changing circumstances.

In order to access the cognitive worlds of “the” Basotho, “the” Baronga, “the” Zulu and “the” Xhosa, Callaway and his colleagues were very interested in what they thought of as “purity” and “origin”. They thus tried as best they could to lay bare “contaminations” in the texts they collected, and went to some length to show outside origins. For Callaway, talk of “good and malicious genii ... seem to give the Tales an antiquity of origin, referring them back to a very different social condition from that now existing”.<sup>30</sup> Junod clearly also spent sleepless nights vexing about origin. He stated that one might believe at first glance “that they [the tales] are modern products of the imaginations of the blacks”. He believed that this was not at all the case, however, for he continued: “The narrators themselves are all in agreement in their declarations that they come from the traditions of their most remote ancestors. And we have no difficulty in admitting it.” Junod observed that similar tales were in circulation elsewhere in southern Africa and thought it unlikely that recent borrowing was responsible, given the great distances between some of the peoples who told these tales. He concluded: “[T]hey date very far back and belonged to an original strain and were taken up by these diverse tribes in the course of their migrations.”<sup>31</sup> This led him to believe that African cultures were ancient, static and atemporal and explains his dismissal of female storytelling as an attempt at subverting the established order.

Junod’s assumptions on when and how borrowing took place are not borne out by the information presented in his anthology. While working in the Delagoa Bay hinterland he recorded a tale that was told in the local language but included a song in Zulu.<sup>32</sup> This seems to indicate that Zulu tales were being told by non-Zulu-speakers, or that elements thereof were being incorporated into local tales. Though anecdotal, this suggests that tales were portable in the nineteenth century and that they did,

---

28. Junod, *Les Chants*, p 77.

29. Junod, *Les Chants*, pp viii–ix.

30. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 2.

31. Junod, *Les Chants*, pp 9–10.

32. Junod, *Les Chants*.

indeed, travel extensively. This complicates Harold Scheub's belief that stories told by women were locally produced narratives; the craft being passed during the performance by the adult women of a region to the young girls of that area.<sup>33</sup> Scheub's interpretation is perhaps a product of a focus on stories that seemed "authentic" rather than those he considered "corrupted". It seems reasonable to assume that nineteenth-century southern African women employed stories as a shared cultural vocabulary with which to make sense of their lived experiences, and that they did so far beyond and across the boundaries that made for ethnic divisions.

These lived experiences depended on context and the stories consequently changed depending on when and where they were told. Junod thought it "something characteristic in the manner of the indigenous storyteller" to introduce her own circumstances and to add very subjective details whilst "faithfully reproducing a story". Chiguyane Camilla, for instance, placed the village in a story she recounted to Junod atop the hill of Lourenço Marques where she lived and she wove contemporary chiefs of that area into her tale. Junod held the opinion that the names of the chiefs would change in future iterations of the tale in order to reflect changing circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

Trickster tales collected by Casalis, Theal, Callaway and Junod simultaneously reflected changing circumstances and re-imagined social orders. What follows is a synopsis of the four trickster tales. I agree with Hammond-Tooke's assertion that these stories should ideally be presented in full form, along with their translations, because pockets of "non-sense" that are often glossed over prove to be the most fruitful areas for the interpretation of myths. What is more, these stories are "forms of artistic expression and their complexities carry both aesthetic value and meaning".<sup>35</sup> In addition, they have narrative arcs that on the surface at least, might seem unusual or even strange. To analyse them without an abbreviated re-telling would, at best, make this discussion very difficult to follow or, at worst, render it utterly incomprehensible. The tales are condensed for the sake of brevity, but all the main episodes are included. The analysis that follows the tales elaborates on certain incidents as necessary.

\*\*\*

### **Nouamoubia, defeater of ogres (Junod)**

The tale starts with an "unnatural" birth. The wife of a chief is pregnant. Her husband has the ability to cast spells, which he uses to call his unborn son out of her womb every night. The father, who is a great hunter, teaches the baby all that he knows before the baby's birth. After the baby is born, he grows very quickly, becoming a "grand garçon" within five days. Shortly thereafter the chief prepares to go hunting. The boy, Nouamoubia, says he will go, but his father tells him that hunting is too dangerous. Nouamoubia follows his father anyway. When his father discovers that Nouamoubia has been following him, he tries to send him back, but the boy insists on going along.

---

33. Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi*.

34. Junod, *Les Chants*, pp 184–5, n. 1.

35. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, "Twins, Incest and Mediators: The Structure of Four Zulu Folk Tales", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 62, 2 1992, pp 203–220.



They see a bird that shows them where to find honey. Nouamoubia's father goes to collect it and eats some, but tricks Nouamoubia by pretending that it tastes very bitter. After eating some of the honey, Nouamoubia's father goes for a drink of water at the edge of a lake. He forbids his son to go into the water because he is too small. Nouamoubia responds that all will be fine because his father has taught him everything he knows. So his father challenges him to a race across the lake. While his father is swimming, Nouamoubia eats all the honey his father collected, ensuring the gourds that contained the honey will still feel full by filling them with water, then dives into the lake and wins the race. When they get to the other side, the father has sudden back pain and asks for medicine (honey).<sup>36</sup> He is very upset to discover that all of it is gone, but Nouamoubia convinces him that some unknown passerby took the honey.

They continue on and begin hunting. Nouamoubia's father summons one kind of animal after another and each time Nouamoubia kills the animal, including lions. This unsettles the father, who becomes afraid that his son is stronger than he is and might kill him. They proceed on their journey and see smoke coming from a village. Nouamoubia is sent to investigate and finds the village full of Chihouboulébabé, who eat people. The cannibals want to eat Nouamoubia, but he tricks them into eating their own children by putting the children in a pot and cooking them. He then flees and returns to his father; father and son hide. The ogres realise that Nouamoubia has escaped and pursue him. He distracts them by summoning swarms of insects, but they continue the chase. The ogres capture and eat Nouamoubia's father.

To avenge his father's death, Nouamoubia develops a plan that begins with marrying the daughter of one of the ogres. He goes to the ogre village, pretends he has never been there before, and says it would be pointless to try to eat him because he is a great hunter. As proof of this claim, and as bridewealth, he offers the meat he and his father had hunted. The ogres accept Nouamoubia and eat the meat. Nouamoubia builds his own village, including many huts for his wives. He tricks all the ogres into drinking a great deal of beer, which causes them to fall asleep in their huts. While they are asleep, Nouamoubia sets fire to the village. After he kills the ogres, Nouamoubia returns to his mother, who mistakes him for his father because he has aged so much. He explains to her what happened and they go into mourning.<sup>37</sup>

### Uhlakanyana (Callaway)

An unborn son tells his mother: "Mother, give birth to me at once; the cattle of my father are being devoured by other people". The father hears and tells his wife to give birth to the child. This she does. As soon as he is born, the boy, Uhlakanyana, stands up, speaks to his mother and cuts his own umbilical cord with his father's spear. He then leaves the hut, sits at the fireside and eats some of the meat that had been cooking there. The old men exclaim: "So then it is a man, an old man!" They praise

---

36. The father tells Nouamoubia to bring him "la médecine", which he says is in the gourd he had previously filled with honey. It appears that Nouamoubia's father is referring to the honey when he asks for medicine. See Junod, *Les Chants*, pp 208–209.

37. Junod, *Les Chants*, pp 203–222.

him as a “great child among the king’s children”. The women remain sceptical, however, and the boys, too, see through his deception.

His career of trickery soon begins. Uhlakanyana tells his father and his father’s counsellors that he will carry their meat to their houses for them, then steals the meat and leads them to believe that someone must have carried their meat away. He leaves the village, steals birds from traps that someone had set at river’s edge and takes them to his mother’s house. Overnight, he steals them out of the pot his mother had been storing them in, and in the morning blames her for their disappearance. He tells his mother that he is very old, not her child and not his father’s son. He uses this as an excuse to leave home and travel the world.

A cannibal catches Uhlakanyana stealing birds from the traps that the cannibal had set for them. The cannibal takes him home with the intention of cooking him, but Uhlakanyana tricks the cannibal by cooking his mother, donning her clothes and feeding her to the cannibal. When the cannibal realises what has happened, he pursues Uhlakanyana, but he manages to evade capture by turning into a weeding stick. The cannibal, frustrated at losing Uhlakanyana, subsequently throws the stick over a river.

Uhlakanyana captures a hare, cooks him and fashions a whistle from one of his bones. An iguana steals the whistle from Uhlakanyana. Uhlakanyana then steals bread from an old man, steals and eats a leopard’s cubs and kills the leopard. Then the trickster meets another cannibal, tricks him out of his cows and leaves him to die. He meets yet another cannibal who sees through his deception and refuses to acknowledge kinship ties with Uhlakanyana. Uhlakanyana eventually deceives the cannibal into acknowledging kinship and then into moving into a house with him. He then kills the cannibal, steals his calabash, takes possession of the house, and makes other cannibals his dependents; thus establishing a homestead unit. But Uhlakanyana cannot forget his whistle.

He thus sets out after the iguana that stole it, beats and kills the iguana, and takes possession of his whistle. Upon his return to his homestead he finds it burnt down and decides to return to his mother. When he arrives home he establishes social relationships through the exchange of gifts. He digs up umdiandiane (a tuber) and gives it to his mother. She gives him a milk pail, which he exchanges for an assegai. He swaps the assegai for an axe, the axe for a blanket, the blanket for a shield and the shield for a war assegai. He is thus reintegrated into society.<sup>38</sup>

### **The story of Hlakanyana (Theal)**

The wife of a chief is barren. Oxen are slaughtered in an attempt to make her fertile. Whilst this happens, she hears a voice calling from inside of her: “Bear me, mother, before the meat of my father is all finished.” She heeds this call and gives birth to a son, Hlakanyana, with the face of an old man. Hlakanyana asks his mother for a robe, puts it on and goes outside. He joins his father and his father’s counsellors at the fireside and asks for some meat. His father is sceptical at first but his counsellors

---

38. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, pp 6-40.

convince him that Hlakanyana is his son and that he should be given meat. Hlakanyana then offers to hang their meat for them but steals it. He leads them to believe that their wives and children were negligent and that they let the dogs get to the meat and devour it.

He goes to sleep with his cohort, but the boys see through his deception and do not want to accept him as one of their own. While they are asleep, Hlakanyana sneaks out, kills two oxen, eats them both and smears one of the boys with blood. In the morning the bloodied boy is discovered and put to death for having stolen the oxen. Hlakanyana goes on to trick and steal until one day he is caught doing so by members of his cohort who report his transgressions. He flees for his life, pursued by the chief's army, but manages to evade capture by turning himself into an old woman who misdirects the pursuing warriors.

Hlakanyana then meets an old woman and tricks her into getting into a cooking pot. After cooking her, he puts on her clothes and feeds her to her sons. Her sons realise that they are eating their mother and set out to kill Hlakanyana. When he comes to a river he turns himself into a little round stone. Frustrated by Hlakanyana's disappearance, one of the sons picks up the pebble and throws it across the river. Hlakanyana reassumes his form and escapes and continues traversing the world.

He meets a boy and they hunt together. Hlakanyana tricks the boy out of the birds they catch and makes the boy believe it was his own fault. The boy gives Hlakanyana his digging stick as compensation. Hlakanyana goes on his way and meets people making clay pots. He offers them the use of his digging stick, which breaks. They give him a pot as compensation. The process is repeated several times, and the pot is replaced by a goat, the goat by a calf and the calf by a cow.

Hlakanyana sets off again. On the way he meets another boy who becomes his travel companion. Hlakanyana convinces the boy to throw away his knife, spoon and awl. He then refuses to let the boy use his when the boy wants to remove thorns from his feet, and again when they reach a village and are given meat and millet to eat. He thus appropriates the boy's share. After consuming the food, Hlakanyana sets off again.

After some time he stumbles upon a village where a girl is busy herding goats, because there are no boys in the village to do so. Hlakanyana convinces the girl's father to give him his daughter as a concubine in return for herding his goats. Hlakanyana eats all the goats and goes on his merry way.

He finds bird traps and steals birds from them, but is caught in the act by the cannibal who owns the traps. The cannibal takes Hlakanyana home and prepares to cook and eat him. Hlakanyana offers the cannibal a cow to eat in his stead. The cannibal accepts his offer, but pursues him regardless. Hlakanyana escapes by making a stone sing so as to distract the cannibal.

Next he steals food from baboons and a hyena. He then steals an *ugwali* (musical instrument) from an iguana, after which he steals a leopard's cubs and eats

them. Hlakanyana then goes to the village of the animals, steals fruit from their chief and eats it.

He decides to return home. Upon his return his father orders an ox slaughtered. Hlakanyana gets fatty meat to eat. On his way to cooking the meat at his mother's place Hlakanyana meets a tortoise and offers it a piggy-back ride. The tortoise gets on his back but refuses to dismount when they reach Hlakanyana's mother's house. Hlakanyana's mother tries to remove the tortoise by pouring boiling fat on it, but it lets go as she pours, so the fat falls on Hlakanyana and burns and kills him.<sup>39</sup>

### **Kammapa and Litaolane (Casalis)**

A giant monster named Kammapa devoured all the men in the world. One woman remained on earth. This woman somehow conceived and gave birth to a son (Litaolane). In the time it took Litaolane's mother to gather straw and make a bed for him, Litaolane grew into a man and began to speak like an adult.

Upon being told that all the men had been eaten by Kammapa, Litaolane took a knife and set out after the monster. He let it swallow him whole and then cut it open from the inside, freeing all the people imprisoned within the belly of the beast.

But the men he had freed were suspicious of him. They thought him a monster, not a man, because he did not experience childhood. They thus made numerous attempts to kill him, but none succeeded. One day while he was being pursued, Litaolane came to a river and turned himself into a stone. His pursuers, angered at losing track of him, picked up the stone and threw it across the river. Litaolane thus escaped.<sup>40</sup>

\*\*\*

Recurrent themes run through the stories above. These provide evidence of portability and show that tales travelled extensively. They also show how people made sense of issues that affected how they lived as communities by employing a shared cultural vocabulary. We meet a cast of fabulous characters who collectively constitute a large part of the *dramatis personae* of these tales. This assortment of creatures, especially cannibals, is most often used to express and think through anxieties about interaction with neighbours and those not considered part of communities during times of crisis. Most importantly, in all four stories, a trickster figure subverts the established order by raising questions about notions of kinship, gendered power, and equitable distribution of resources in times of scarcity. Similarities and differences in the endings of the tales explain how people thought of the futures of their respective communities. The ways in which the tales resolve the crises created by the trickster demonstrate how female storytelling enabled women to re-imagine the social order.

---

39. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, pp 89–117.

40. Casalis, *The Basutos*, pp 347–350.

Several elements of the tales situate tricksters as heroic figures, even though their behaviour might not always seem to suggest this. Tricksters are as a rule born under supernatural or unnatural circumstances. Junod says that “[t]he heroes of African stories are miraculously born willingly” and that “[i]n general, these miraculous children grow very quickly. They need only a few days to become men. Sometimes they immediately begin to show their prowess”.<sup>41</sup> Trickster figures also frequently outwitted their opponents by magically turning into inanimate objects, which were subsequently thrown over rivers. Whilst this might sound trivial, Reverend Callaway notes that:

Ukweza, “to help to cross a river”, or *ukweza ngamazibuko*, “to help to cross over rivers by the fords”, is used to celebrate the praises of braves, by recounting one after another their praise-giving names, which they have gained by great actions. Amazibuko is used metaphorically for the difficult things they have accomplished. Thus, if a man has interfered between two fighting bulls, or between two contending parties, and so has obtained a praise-giving name, Umulamula-nkunzi-zi-lwako, “He-separates-fighting-bulls”, they pass him over the river by this name.<sup>42</sup>

The ability to cross rivers thus situates the trickster as a “brave” or a hero. It is not surprising to find that some trickster figures had praise-names. Callaway’s Uhlakanyana, for instance, went by the name of Umathlab’indoda-i-s’-emi (“He who stabs first”, denoting bravery).<sup>43</sup>

The names of the four tricksters facilitate processes of re-imagining. According to Heidi Gengenbach, names often reflected the most salient circumstances of life at the time of birth. They also often commemorated distress – especially conflict between affines – and served to arm women with a way to help ward off future suffering. Critically, naming practices also gave women the ability to claim to belong to different worlds and to assert trans-ethnic kinship.<sup>44</sup> Their unnatural births enabled trickster figures to claim to belong to a different world. In crossing rivers they also show the ability to cross boundaries, and to traverse many lands. Naming practices often further enhanced this capability.

The narrator of Casalis’s tale used a name to situate the trickster as a wise healer of the corporeal body and the body politic. According to Casalis, Litaolane was a term used to denote a diviner.<sup>45</sup> David Coplan posits that the terms “poet” and “diviner” (also defined in Sotho as *ngaka*) have long been conflated in Sotho oral tradition.<sup>46</sup> This is due partly to “personal enculturation and experience and partly to a fundamental poetic conceit of the equivalence of poet – man of knowledge, conjurer with words, healer of social rifts and ills – and *ngaka*, the traditional healer and

---

41. Junod, *Les Chants*, p 204.

42. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 5, n. 7.

43. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 5, n. 7.

44. H. Gengenbach, “Naming the Past in a ‘Scattered’ Land: Memory and the Powers of Women’s Naming Practices in Southern Mozambique”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33, 3, 2000, pp 523–542.

45. Casalis. *The Basutos*.

46. D. Coplan, “In the Time of Cannibals: BaSotho Working-Class Aurature and the Meaning of SeSotho.” Paper presented to the Africa Seminar, Centre for African Studies: University of Cape Town, 29 March 1989.

diviner”.<sup>47</sup> But Litaolane was not just any healer. He was born with magical charms around his neck. He was the product of an unnatural birth, able to walk, speak and act like an adult very soon after he was born, and caused himself to be thrown across a river. He was thus positioned as a heroic figure, one who was able to populate the earth, create a people, and see to it that they prospered.

Naming practices also reflected and complicated notions of kinship. Junod notes that Nouamoubia means “son of Moubia”.<sup>48</sup> In the story, Moubia was the name of the most ancient chief remembered in the country.<sup>49</sup> Nouamoubia therefore represented all the “children” of the land, and his trials and tribulations were also theirs collectively. His travels (which include the crossing of bodies of water, in this case a lake) and interactions defined those who were classified as affines, those who were not, and how interactions with these people were imagined. Callaway and Theal’s tales talk about conflict between affines during times of crisis. It is possible that the names Uhlakanyana and Hlakanyana are derived from the root \*-kana “to deny” and with the addition of the reflexive suffix denote “the one who denies”.<sup>50</sup> According to Theal, the word Hlakanyana means “little deceiver”.<sup>51</sup> In both Callaway and Theal, the first trick played by the trickster figure is the theft of his father’s meat. He thus denies his own kin meat. This can be read as a re-negotiation of how resources should be distributed during times of scarcity, or a critique of chiefs, or both.

The trickster’s theft of the meat, which follows the description of his unnatural birth, also raises the roles of gender and kinship in the stories by complicating the trickster’s relationships with his parents. In Callaway’s version, the trickster calls to his mother to give birth to him. His mother is apprehensive at first, but heeds his demand after his father sanctions it by saying: “... give birth to him, so that we may see if it is a man or not.”<sup>52</sup> The mother’s role in the process is almost entirely passive. She is similarly passive in Theal, Junod and Casalis’s versions. In Theal’s tale the trickster himself plays a more central role than his mother in his birth. He comes into the world in much the same way as Callaway’s trickster; the main difference is that his father’s role is downplayed. Junod’s trickster is magically coaxed out of his mother’s womb by his father. In Casalis’s tale, Litaolane’s mother, who “conceived and brought forth a son in an old stable”, has the most active role of any of the mothers in the stories.<sup>53</sup>

Beginning each tale with a passive and marginalised woman enables the narrator to establish the family and gender order that will be subverted by the trickster’s actions later in the story. Sean Hanretta uses the moment of unnatural birth in the Callaway tale to argue a case for liminality. The birth, Hanretta posits, was the source both of pre-colonial Zulu women’s power and of their oppressed status and

47. Coplan, “In the Time of Cannibals”, p 3.

48. Junod, *Les Chants*.

49. Junod, *Les Chants*.

50. See Malcolm Guthrie’s work for an explanation of the root \*-kana: M. Guthrie. *Comparative Bantu: An Introduction to the Comparative Linguistics and Pre-History of the Bantu Languages* (Farnborough, Gregg International, 1967–1971).

51. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, p 223.

52. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 7.

53. Casalis, *The Basutos*, p 347.

thus reinforced their marginality. According to Hanretta, women's liminality crystallised in "transitional moments", such as menstruation or childbirth, in which their inherent "danger could be consolidated or permanently inscribed in ritual symbols. These moments were more likely to be accompanied by anxiety on the part of society about their successful completion, and this anxiety, of course, necessitated more stringent forms of control." Childbirth, in particular, represented a moment in which women's bodies served as "doorways" that threatened to allow the "other world [to] penetrate into daily life".<sup>54</sup> Hanretta posits that in Callaway's rendering of the tale, Uhlakanyana "takes control over his own birth, shouting from the womb and demanding to be born". This framing "dramatizes Zulu anxiety about the child-birthing process".<sup>55</sup> The story, and others that portray women at liminal moments, thus "turn on women's and society's unsuccessful negotiation of these crucial moments", and "depict a disruption in what was considered normal behaviour for women".<sup>56</sup> Hanretta concludes that due to the didactic nature of folktales, "the most important tools for socializing gender roles served to entrench [women's] marginality by associating it with particular images of women's bodies and associating it with every aspect of their lives".<sup>57</sup>

This understanding of the Uhlakanyana story is greatly complicated by an examination of the remainder of the tale, which suggests that its message is the subversion of women's marginality rather than its entrenchment. Hanretta's arguments regarding the meanings of the trickster story rely on his reading of the unnatural birth at the beginning of the tale as the most important moment in the narrative.<sup>58</sup> However, the passive role played by Uhlakanyana's mother at the beginning of the tale is called into question by the rest of the narrative, which emphasises the subversion of the existing order. Hanretta's contention that the story reinforces women's marginality does not seem to take into account the overarching theme of the tale.

Moreover, a comparative analysis of the trickster narratives recorded by Callaway, Theal, and Junod demonstrates the consistency with which the main character in each upends existing notions of kinship and parental authority. In Callaway's story, Uhlakanyana confirms his mother's passivity and lack of authority in the first moments of his life. He will not even permit his mother to cut his umbilical cord and insists on doing it himself, using his father's spear, saying: "No indeed. Don't you cut me. I am going to cut myself." Once he has done so, Uhlakanyana leaves his mother and goes to join his father and the other men.<sup>59</sup> Similar events unfold following Hlakanyana's birth in Theal's narrative. The trickster immediately

---

54. Hanretta, 'Women, Marginality and the Zulu State', pp 395–396.

55. Hanretta, 'Women, Marginality and the Zulu State', p 396, n. 22.

56. Hanretta, 'Women, Marginality and the Zulu State', p 395.

57. Hanretta, 'Women, Marginality and the Zulu State', p 397.

58. It is possible that Hanretta focuses on the beginning of the tale because he is drawing on Scheub's explanation of core clichés. For a definition of the term, see Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi*. However, comparative analysis of the Callaway story with other trickster tales reveals that the unnatural birth of each trickster is by no means the only shared element. This, in turn, suggests that it is worthwhile for historians to look beyond the beginning of the tale, as other portions of it drew on shared cultural vocabularies and were not simply added at the discretion of individual storytellers.

59. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 7.

commands his mother to provide him with a skin robe so that he may go join his father and other men in the process of slaughtering an ox.<sup>60</sup> Nouamoubia scorns his mother's milk and demands that he be given the same food that his parents eat. After Nouamoubia's rejection of her milk, his mother was "very surprised at his refusal, but did not insist".<sup>61</sup> In this case, too, the mother follows instructions from her child rather than exercising authority over him.

Each tale begins with an affirmation of the marginality of women, assigning them a passive role even in childbirth and denying them authority over their children, but the tricksters also move very quickly to subvert their fathers' authority. In Junod's tale, Nouamoubia openly defies his father's order to remain at home while he goes hunting.<sup>62</sup> Nouamoubia, Uhlakanyana, and Hlakanyana all steal resources from their fathers; it was honey in the case of Nouamoubia, meat for Uhlakanyana and Hlakanyana. After taking his father's honey, Nouamoubia also defeats him in a race.<sup>63</sup> The very first trick played by both Uhlakanyana and Hlakanyana is the theft of their fathers' meat. Moreover, in taking meat from their fathers, both assert their manhood as part of their broader claims to freedom from parental authority. Uhlakanyana proposes a test that will enable him to prove himself superior to the other men, a competition that he tells his father is necessary because "I perceive that you, for your part, think I am a child".<sup>64</sup> He tells his father to throw a piece of meat below the kraal, and he will race the other men to see who will be the first to retrieve it. Hlakanyana demands that his father give him meat, and when his father acquiesces, he announces: "I am a man to-day."<sup>65</sup>

Stolen meat also leads to a final rejection of parental authority by the tricksters in Callway's and Theal's tales. Each brings the meat to his mother and tells her to cook it. Stealing meat from their fathers and giving it to their mothers might seem to hint at an affirmation of the centrality of their mothers. However, because the marginality of the mothers has already been established in the tales, giving the meat to them serves only to highlight the ways in which the theft undermines the fathers. This point is further reinforced as both Uhlakanyana and Hlakanyana simply order their mothers to cook the meat. More importantly, stolen meat plays a critical role in separating the tricksters from their families. Uhlakanyana asks his mother to cook birds that he had stolen from traps set along the river and to keep them for him. That night, while she is asleep, he sneaks into her house and eats the birds in the pot, replacing them with dung. In the morning, he blames her for their disappearance. Hlakanyana, too, ate the meat that he had asked his mother to cook, then held her responsible for the missing food. In both stories, this is the event that prompts the trickster to reject his family and venture out into the world. Uhlakanyana uses the incident to explicitly deny both of his parents:

I am old. I am not your child. And father whom you are with, he is not my father; he is a mere man, one of our people, and nothing more. As for me, I merely lay down in you,

---

60. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, p 90.

61. Junod, *Les Chants*, p 205.

62. Junod, *Les Chants*, p 206.

63. Junod, *Les Chants*, p 208.

64. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 8.

65. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, p 92.



you being his wife. We will not live together. I shall set out on my own account by myself.<sup>66</sup>

The episodes of unnatural birth at the beginning of the tales are indicative of other concerns in addition to those of gendered power. The stories recorded by Theal and Callaway reflect concerns regarding crises of social reproduction and of accumulation. Uhlakanyana and Hlakanyana are called from their mothers' wombs in almost exactly the same manner. Both beseech their mothers to give birth to them because cattle belonging to their fathers, both chiefs, are being devoured. The critical role that rapidly diminishing cattle stocks play in the births of the main characters in the tales reflects the centrality of cattle in the concerns of the storytellers.

Cattle represented both a source and a favoured store of wealth. In "Zulu" societies, cattle represented the medium of exchange that enabled bridewealth payments. It was also used as tribute, gifts or to establish clients. According to Jeff Guy, cattle were the physical manifestation of the movement of expended and potential labour power.<sup>67</sup> Cattle were similarly important to "Xhosa" people. It represented a means by which one might invoke and propitiate deceased forefathers, a store of wealth and a means of exchange, the accumulated product of past labour and the key to all future production and reproduction. Moreover, cattle were male prestige objects and represented the linchpin of patriarchal "Xhosa" social structures.<sup>68</sup>

Events that took place approximately a decade before Theal assembled his collection likely had a profound effect on the lives of the narrators of those stories. British scorched earth policies, wars of dispossession, lung sickness, poor rains, non-cultivation, crop failure and the collapse of grain supplies between 1854 and 1857 contributed to enormous cattle losses and widespread famine in 1857.<sup>69</sup> Jeff Peires estimates that roughly 400 000 head of cattle were slaughtered during this period.<sup>70</sup> What is more, the most fertile lands had been lost, there remained little or no seed stocks to plant and what could be planted was killed by drought.<sup>71</sup> The societal effects were enormous. Thousands of people died of starvation or were displaced. The "Xhosa" population of British Kaffraria dropped from 105 000 in December of 1857 to 25 916 by the end of 1858. Chief Sarhili was driven from his land and Mhala, Phatho and Maqoma lost all they had owned. The land at Chiefs Anta, Sandile and Kama's disposal was greatly curtailed. Total loss of land amounted to 600 000 acres. According to Peires:

The impact on the Xhosa themselves is difficult to express in words. Their national, cultural and economic integrity, long penetrated and undermined by colonial pressure, finally collapsed. Sandile and some other traditionalist remnants clung on grimly to

---

66. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 15.

67. J. Guy, "Production and Exchange in the Zulu Kingdom", in J.B. Peires (ed), *Before and after Shaka: Papers in Nguni History* (Grahamstown, Institute of Social and Economic Research: Rhodes University, 1981), p 45.

68. Peires, *House of Phalo*, pp 8–9.

69. J. Cobbing, "Review of *The Dead Will Arise, Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–57*, by J.B. Peires", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 2, 1994, pp 339–341.

70. Cobbing disputes this figure, which he sees as an overestimation. See Cobbing, 'Review'.

71. H. Bradford, "Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones", *Journal of African History*, 37, 3, 1996, pp 351–370.

what remained of the old precolonial way of life, but they became increasingly irrelevant not only to the colonial authorities, but to the mass of the Xhosa population immersed in a world of which the chiefs and their cohorts knew nothing. When Sandile rose for the last time in the 1877 Frontier War, the occasion was of emotional significance only. Ethnically based resistance had long ceased to be a realistic strategy on the Eastern Frontier.<sup>72</sup>

A comparative examination of stories of unnatural birth complicates this notion of ethnically based resistance. During this time of social dislocation, as Peires argues, people who thought of themselves as “Xhosa” had to re-negotiate and re-imagine their identities. Whilst “ethnically based resistance” may have ceased to be a realistic strategy to define and keep intact those identities, storytellers relied on an older, shared cultural vocabulary to make sense of drastically changing circumstances and to plot the way forward. Hence the narrator of the story of Hlakanyana emphasises the trickster’s demand: “Make haste and bear me, mother, before the meat of my father is all finished.”<sup>73</sup> Hlakanyana’s birth puts a stop to the death of cattle as well as the infertility of the chief’s wife, leading to the re-population of the land with both people and cattle.

However, Callaway’s story features a very similar incident, which highlights both the importance of older cultural vocabularies in making sense of changing contemporary circumstances and the importance of cattle to “Zulu”, as well as “Xhosa” identity. In the case of Uhlakanyana, the voice states explicitly that “the cattle in the kraal are coming to an end”.<sup>74</sup> After Dingane was defeated by the Boers in 1836, the power of the Zulu state diminished, its expansionist drive was largely curtailed and its hold over tributary states weakened. These developments threatened important trade routes that had been controlled by the Zulu state. The internal logic of expansion altered accordingly. A civil war in the 1850s caused disruption and dislocation and undermined political cohesion. Accumulation and social reproduction became harder in the time of Mpande than it had been in the time of Shaka and Dingane. Uhlakanyana’s birth signifies the end of the dying of cattle and is symbolic of fecundity and fertility.

Worries about food scarcity pervade all of these trickster tales. This is especially clear in Theal, where the trickster’s main activity is stealing food from virtually everyone he meets. He steals all manner of foodstuffs from people and animals alike: oxen from his kin; birds from his hunting companion; food from his travel companion; goats from his concubine’s father; birds from a cannibal; food from a baboon and a hyena; and fruit from the chief of the village of animals. Moreover, Theal states: “I have greatly reduced this story in bulk by leaving out endless repetitions of exactly the same trick, but performed on different individuals or animals.”<sup>75</sup> In Callaway and Junod, too, theft of food is the order of the day.

The story of Nouamoubia opens by emphasising the difficulty and importance of ensuring an adequate supply of meat, both as food and as a medium of exchange.

---

72. J.B. Peires, *The Dead will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Cattle-Killing Movement of 1857* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), p 321.

73. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, p 90.

74. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 6.

75. G Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, p 223.

Even before Nouamoubia is born, his father uses magic to teach him to hunt. Hunting constituted an important subsistence activity in the Delagoa Bay hinterland; the area was milk-poor and meat therefore provided a major source of protein. Meat from hunting also supplemented foodstuffs accumulated by gathering activities during times of famine. Furthermore, skins, bones and animal fat were used domestically and traded locally. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a large market for animal skins opened, as men increasingly adopted what Harries calls the “Zulu-Gaza form of dress”.<sup>76</sup> Kilts made from monkey, genet and civet cat skins accordingly replaced the braided palm leaf previously used to cover male genitalia. Soldiers hung an assortment of skins and tails on their military equipment. Chiefs wore lion and leopard skins and claws. These items were traded locally and in Gaza, Swazi, Zulu and other Natal Nguni areas.<sup>77</sup>

The Nouamoubia story addresses crises of accumulation as sources of sustenance and income increasingly came under pressure. Following the Boer colonisation of the area to the west of Lourenço Marques in the 1840s, its animal population steadily decreased. The Boer presence also, for practical purposes, made ivory hunting and trading in the area impossible. Boer legislation first limited African competition and later classified Mozambican hunters as poachers. African hunters operating west of the Lowveld were required to carry passes and were generally forbidden from owning rifles and horses. From the 1860s, overcapitalisation of ivory hunting in the vicinity of Lourenço Marques drove elephant herds north. The hunting economy disintegrated. Access to a major source of protein was virtually terminated. It became almost impossible to cater to the demand for small and big game alike. In order to eke out a living people increasingly turned to selling their labour for wages on the diamond and later the gold fields of South Africa, and were eventually forced into badly paid jobs on Portuguese plantations.<sup>78</sup>

The story of Litaolane speaks directly to the origin of a people and a polity, namely the BaSotho under Moeshoeshoe. Many settled southern Sotho communities on the South African Highveld disintegrated as the wars for supremacy in Northern Natal burst and overflowed in the 1820s. Many fields were destroyed or could not be sown or reaped. There were widespread famines. The BaSotho polity came into existence after the unification of many of these “scattered” refugee peoples under the protection of Moeshoeshoe in his mountain stronghold of Thaba-Bosiu. In a process that Denoon and Nyeko call “defensive nation building”, Moeshoeshoe exploited the system of *mafisa*, a custom of cattle ownership and use, to bolster his following. He avoided building a community in which power was centralised, and came to rule over what might be called a confederation. In such a polity social and political cohesion was of the utmost importance.<sup>79</sup> In this context, myths of origin proliferated. In the story of Litaolane a boy is born under unnatural circumstances after a monster, Kammapa, had eaten all the people on earth save the boy’s mother. The Reverend Casalis, who collected the story whilst living with Moeshoeshoe, speculates that the

---

76. P. Harries, *Work, Culture, Identity: Migrant Labourers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860–1910* (Portsmouth, James Currey, 1994).

77. Harries, *Work, Culture, Identity*.

78. Harries, *Work, Culture, Identity*.

79. D. Denoon and B. Nyeko, *Southern Africa since 1800* (New York, Longman, 1984), pp 37–48.

monster represents the devil. It seems likely, though, that Kammapa represents Hlubi, Ngwane or Tlokwa refugees who attacked and raided Moeshoeshoe's followers during the Mfecane (Difaqane in the Sotho language).

Fabulous creatures were clearly employed by BaSotho storytellers to depict threats in times of crisis. Cannibals, David Coplan states, were "identified with those who take the opportunity to feast on others in the midst of general disruption and deprivation".<sup>80</sup> In a case study on cannibalism in late nineteenth century Sekhukhuneland that draws heavily on anthropological literature on cannibalism and anthropophagy, Alan Kirkaldy demonstrates how tales of cannibalism served as a vehicle for "othering", a metaphor for disorder and social dislocation during particularly violent periods of history, and a commentary on the importance of state formation and stability.<sup>81</sup> During the disruptions caused by the Shakan wars, Moeshoeshoe's grandfather, Peete, was allegedly captured and eaten by a band of cannibals when the Bakoena emigrated from Butha Buthe to Thaba-Bosiu in 1824. According to legend, Moeshoeshoe refused to punish the culprits when they were captured and brought before him. Instead he opted to give them gifts of land and cattle and to incorporate them into his fledgling polity.<sup>82</sup>

The many cannibals in the *dramatis personae* of nineteenth-century southern African folktales can be explained, as Kuper has argued, in terms of the high incidence of famines that ravaged the area during the period.<sup>83</sup> This sentiment is echoed by Junod and also by Callaway, who writes that his informants believed that cannibalism "was introduced at a comparatively recent period, having arisen in times of famine".<sup>84</sup> An informant told Callaway that cannibals "were called Amazimu; for the word Amazimu when interpreted means to gormandise, – to be gluttonous. So they rebelled against them; they forsook them; and men drove them away".<sup>85</sup>

Tricksters' interactions with cannibals helped storytellers and their audiences re-imagine established ways of structuring their own dealings (on a societal level) with neighbours or people otherwise excluded from the in-group, defined as it was through notions of kinship. This re-framing relied upon multiple strategies. In some cases cannibals were simply duped and their resources appropriated. In others the trickster was caught stealing and was forced to give up some of his own resources and to flee so as to avoid being devoured. In Theal's story, Hlakanyana was caught stealing birds from traps set by cannibals, and must give them one of his oxen to dissuade them from eating him.<sup>86</sup> In others, tricksters and cannibals somehow became kin (or kinship was feigned), tricksters became important individuals with many cannibals as their dependents, or a trickster and cannibal started a homestead together, as was the case in Callaway's story. This cannibal initially refused to acknowledge kinship ties with Uhlakanyana, but the trickster ultimately persuaded him to do so,

80. Coplan, "In the Time of Cannibals", p 6.

81. A. Kirkaldy, "'There is No Meat that Tastes Better than Human Flesh!' Christian Converts' Tales of Cannibalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Sekhukhuneland", *Historia*, 50, 2, 2005, pp 25–61.

82. Coplan, "In the Time of Cannibals", p 6.

83. Kuper, *South Africa and the Anthropologist*.

84. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 158; Junod, *Les Chants*.

85. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 156.

86. Theal, *Kaffir Folk-Lore*, pp 108–109.

whereupon the two established a homestead. Once the ties had been established, however, he subverted the obligations of kinship by killing the cannibal, stealing his possessions, and establishing a homestead unit in which other cannibals became Uhlakanyana's dependents. Other stories demonstrate that in fact the quasi-kinship status quo never held. When cannibals killed Nouamoubia's father, he avenged the death by marrying one of the cannibals' daughters and, when he had won their confidence, locking them inside their huts and setting fire to the village, thereby killing all and sundry.

Judging by the fate of cannibals, peaceful co-existence in the nineteenth century seemed rather difficult for storytellers to imagine. Lydia Ukasetemba told Callaway a story in which the protagonist, Umbadhlyana, kills a cannibal. Umbadhlyana resembles Uhlakanyana in many ways, and the two terms, according to Callaway, are comparable, although the meanings are not clear.<sup>87</sup> In the story a cannibal steals Umbadhlyana's *ukcilo* (a tuber eaten by children). Umbadhlyana promptly rolls himself into a ball and propels himself into the cannibal's nostril. This causes the cannibal to sneeze violently and "all the cannibals, when they saw that Umbadhlyana had gone into the nostrils of the cannibal, fled; and then Umbadhlyana came out of his nostril, and the cannibal died".<sup>88</sup>

In each tale, the trickster returns home soon after severing his ties with cannibals; the stories' conclusions generally reaffirm the subversion of the established order carried out by the tricksters. The status quo is thus not unequivocally restored at the end of tales, as some scholars have argued.<sup>89</sup> Though each trickster returns home after his initial rejection of notions of kinship and parental authority, other elements of the stories' endings make it clear that some changes in the social order will be more long lasting.

The similar yet starkly different endings of the stories reflect how their narrators envisioned the future of the societies in which they lived. Callaway's narrator had the most positive vision. Though accumulation and reproduction was more difficult than it had been in previous generations, the Zulu state was still relatively strong and centralised. The future therefore did not seem so very bleak. When he arrives home, Uhlakanyana initiates a process of gift giving, which is reciprocated. He thus successfully establishes social relationships while also re-establishing kinship ties. This suggests that the narrator of the tale envisions a world that though slightly altered, still accommodates social reproductive processes. Though there is an attempt at a resolution that would enable life to be lead in a way that approximates "normality", society does not mirror its image at the beginning of the story. The Nouamoubia tale ends with the trickster and his mother mourning his father's death. They thus find themselves in a world in which they must come to terms with not being able to sustain and reproduce society in ways that had been the norm before hunting became virtually impossible. The outlook of the narrator of Theal's story, which takes place in the aftermath of drought, crop failure, cattle loss and colonial occupation and annexation, is by far the grimmest. The trickster figure, Hlakanyana, who represents the entire community or even communities, is

---

87. It is entirely possible that the two words are derived from the root \*-kana, discussed before.

88. Callaway, *Nursery Tales*, p 155.

89. See Hofmeyr, *We Spend Our Years*.

inadvertently killed by his mother. He is not reintegrated into society, indicating that the narrator felt that, to paraphrase Peires, the pre-colonial way of life had become irrelevant and that chiefs and their cohorts did not know much at all about the world in which their people now lived, leaving them rudderless and adrift at sea.<sup>90</sup>

\*\*\*

Female storytelling played an important role in the creation and regeneration of social identities and institutions during the nineteenth-century. It served as an aesthetic tool with which to encode the impact of “social forces and political and economic relations in rooted and resonant metaphors, values, and structures of self-expression”.<sup>91</sup> Read into a wider historiography, an analysis of these stories promises to complicate and further current understandings of southern Africa in the nineteenth century. A comparative analysis of tales produced in this genre sheds light on how women made sense of the societies in which they lived and of the changes taking place within and outside of those societies. It also exposes a shared cultural vocabulary used across ethnic divides and borders to grapple with moments of crisis and other pressing social issues. Differences in the stories highlight different societal contours, different pressures and different anxieties, while similarities expose shared concerns. Characters such as cannibals complicated notions of kinship and thinking about relationships with outsiders. Other characters, most notably trickster figures, were deployed to subvert established orders and to re-imagine processes of social reproduction and, indeed, the very terms in which societal wellbeing was defined.

### Abstract

Women in nineteenth century southern Africa used storytelling, especially tales in which tricksters were the central characters, in order to make sense of – and often to critique – rapidly changing social and political orders. The stories they told constitute an underutilised historical source. This article draws from four anthologies compiled by men engaged in missionary endeavours in the region to explore these points. I argue that these tales complicate our understanding of ethnic and gendered identity construction during the period and promise to cast new light on contemporary understandings of social reproduction, especially during times of societal upheaval.

---

90. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*.

91. Coplan, “In the Time of Cannibals”, p 1.

## **Opsomming**

### **Truukster-trope: Vroulike storievertelling en die her-verbeelding van sosiale ordes in vier negentiende-eeuse suider-Afrikaanse gemeenskappe**

Negentiende-eeuse suider-Afrikaanse vroue het stories, veral stories waarin truuksters die hoofkarakters gespeel het, gebruik om sin te maak van vinnig-veranderende sosiale en politieke ordes, en gereeld ook om dit te kritiseer. Die stories wat hulle vertel het, verteenwoordig onderbenutte geskiedkundige bronne. In hierdie artikel maak ek gebruik van vier negentiende-eeuse bundels, saamgestel deur mans wat hulle in sendingwerk gebesig het, om hierdie punte te ondersoek. Ek argumenteer dat hierdie stories die manier waarop ons etniese- en gender-identiteitsformasie verstaan, kompliseer, en nuwe lig mag werp op die wyses waarop daar aan sosiale reproduksie in tye van sosiale wanorde gedink word.

#### **Keywords**

Folktales; tricksters; cannibalism; women; gender; ethnicity; nineteenth century; southern Africa; social reproduction; kinship; oral narrative; isiZulu; isiXhosa; Baronga; BaSotho.

#### **Sleutelwoorde**

Volksverhale; truuksters; kanibalisme; vroue; gender; etnisiteit; negentiende eeu; suidelike Afrika; sosiale reproduksie; verwantskap; mondelingse oorvertellings; isiZulu; isiXhosa; Baronga; BaSotho.