

Strategizing renewal of memories and morals in the african folktale

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“As histórias são sempre as da minha infância. Cresci no meio de contadores de histórias: os meus avôs, e sobretudo a minha avó, e também a minha mãe, os meus irmãos mais velhos. Estou a ver-me sentado debaixo do canhoeiro, a ouvir ... Essas histórias estavam ligadas à mitologia ronga, a fabulas, e eram encaradas como um contributo para a nossa formação moral.”

Malangatana Valente Ngwenya³

Introduction

In Africa, keeping oral traditions alive is a way of transmitting history and culture and of preserving individual and collective memories, as well as a matter of survival for the individual and the society in which he lives, for it allows the knowledge and experiences of the older generations to be transmitted to the younger ones. Considered in their historical dimension, oral traditional genres which relate past events and have been passed down through time cannot be dismissed simply as “myth,” as they are effectively the source for the construction of African history and are as reliable as other non-oral ways of recording and passing on experiences.

For Amadou Hampaté Bâ “tradition transmitted orally is so precise and so rigorous that one can, with various kinds of cross checking, reconstruct the great events of centuries past in the minutest detail, especially the lives of the great empires or the great men who distinguish history”. His saying “In Africa, when an old man dies, a library disappears” has become so famous that is sometimes mistaken for an African proverb”:

African knowledge is a global knowledge and living knowledge, and it is because the old people are often seen as the last repository of this knowledge that they can be compared to vast libraries whose multiple shelves are connected by invisible links which constitute precisely this

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³ Malangatana Valente Ngwenya, Mozambican artist in an interview to *Tabu*, No. 188, 9 April 2010, p. 40.

'science of the invisible', authenticated by the chains of transmission through initiation.⁴

However, the very nature of oral performance dispenses with the notion of library or repository, as these are concepts associated with writing and the production, transmission and preservation of written or recorded documents and "finished" works. They also seem to overlook the polyvalent participatory role of the public in attendance at these performances. In reality, the very content of the performance text is partly fashioned by the audience which, apart from taking part in this phase of the composition (through its manifestations of approval or dissatisfaction by way of applause and boos, by throwing in contributive and/or retributive interjections, by sometimes singing in unison with the artists on performance stage, for example), is simultaneously receiver and critic, as well as the jury before whom the integral performance text is presented at a given moment in its existence.

Understanding the above-mentioned nature of oral performance presupposes an appraisal of the concept of "text" in orality, as opposed to that of writtenness, which is anchored on visible elements, requiring the intervention of the eyes only: a line of verse, a poem, or the published works of an author of a period, implying notions of spatiality and unity (Yai 1989, p. 61), elements which impose a delimitation of the object of analysis. Similarly, any concept of text that creates a dichotomy between text and context would be creating what Yai calls an "objective fallacy" and a "false dualism"⁵

Text and context in oral tradition are therefore inextricably linked and created by live bodies in interaction, the performer(s) receiving immediate feedback and reinforcement from the participatory-receiver audience, because, again as Yai explains,

... Unlike the criticism of writtenness which is in essence a criticism of mediation, oral poetics is indivisible with its poetry; it is self-productive. It is also generative as long as it aims at arousing creative impulses in the audience. It is also expansive when considered from the point of view of mode whose corpus it helps to proliferate. Oral poetics is also metamimetic and ameliorative. Its objective and function are not only to make poets do better and to arouse more poetic vocations, but more important, to make each poet excel his predecessors and his contemporaries or to give self-transcending performances at every occasion. It is in several respects participatory. (Yai 1989: p. 65)

It is on this shared production, transmission, reception, criticism and recycling for retransmission in the spirit of *mouvance*, that the epistemology of performance text draws its validity as global social product and cultural knowledge worthy of acceptability and recognition as "truth". Besides, it has to be emphasized that the text, and consequently the "truth" it enunciates, is not

⁴ Interview with Amadou Hampathe Ba about Knowledge. <http://www.jamtan.com/jamtan/fulani.cfm?chap=5&linksPage=276>, Accessed on 2009-02-17

⁵ Yai 1989: p. 61

finite, circumscribed or finished. It is, as Paul Zumthor says, “ce que le regard de l’oraliste” cherche à découper dans la continuité du réel, (...) des discours plutôt que des textes, des messages-en-situation et non des énoncés finis, des pulsions plutôt que des stases, ou (...) *energeia* plus qu’*ergon*”? (Zumthor 1983, p. 126). It is this aspect which makes oral literature a living, pulsating, energized and energizing knowledge.

There is a rich, fertile legacy of oral tradition in Africa and its Diasporas. African oral traditions and other elements of collective traditional wisdom thrived for generations due to (and in spite of) the absence of printed material. When secular texts that attempted to translate oral into written traditions began to appear, it became clear that written texts could not replace the role and appeal of the traditional storytellers, or of the professional storytellers and performers, known as griots — traditionalists who preserve the past through song and verse, and who even now continue to play a role in West African societies. These “specialists”, in effect, functioned as historians, motivational speakers, genealogists, poets, and musicians. They maintained cultural traditions by performing them to large audiences.

Reception and retransmission – *mouvance*

The afore-mentioned differences between oral and written texts, however, do not detract from what is essentially a symbiotic relationship between orality and writtleness, and, as mentioned elsewhere in this study, both traditions constitute complementary stages in the process of *mouvance*, which deals with the reception and retransmission in various forms and in different places and times of a given oral performance. It should also be pointed out that other forms of text, such as imagetic and plastic representations, can and do play an important role in this process.

As discussed earlier, the context of each performance is closely linked with the configuration of the “oral text”, which again emphasizes the social dimension of oral performance. If inseparability of text and context is stressed in considering linguistic forms, there is, at the level of non linguistic forms, which Zumthor prefers to qualify as “socio-corporal”, an augmented social factor anchored in the presence and agency of human bodies, at once individual and social in the tenor of their interventions. These are the forms which Zumthor defines as

... l’ensemble des caractères formels ou des tendances formalisantes résultant, dans leur origine et leur finalité, de l’existence du **groupe social**, d’une part; et de l’autre, de la présence et de la sensorialité du **corps** physiquement **individualisé** de chacune des personnes engagées dans la performance, et celui, plus difficilement cernable, mais bien réel, de la collectivité, tel qu’il se manifeste en réactions affectives et mouvements communs. (Zumthor, 1983, p. 82-83, emphasis added)

Apart from the formal (“caractères formels”) and ritualistic (“tendances formalisantes”) elements of performance, attention is drawn here to the sensorial expression of the artists and the affective reactions of the receiving-participating audience as part of a cohesive social group with a shared body of

“truth” because, as Richard Shusterman (2000) reminds us, quoting Wittgenstein, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They show themselves. They are mystical.”⁶

The oral specialists that we have talked about, therefore, count on the co-authorship, feedback and criticism of the larger society, together with whom they keep alive the various aspects of the oral tradition.

Continental Africa

On the African continent, folk tales, myths, legends, riddles and other forms of oral texts serve as a means of handing down traditions and customs from one generation to the next, but not as finished products, artefacts or caskets of precious objects to be “preserved” in vaults or safes and only aired and cleaned out ceremonially from time to time. Even as documental texts, they form part of the process of *mouvance* and are, therefore, a living legacy working and manifest in living bodies, and ever undergoing transformations, adaptations and recreations in form and content, and in constant communication with other cultures and traditions which they influence or by which they get influenced.

Folk tales can be educational and recreational. They convey cultural traditions and prepare young people for life, as there are many lessons to be learned from the tales. The history of the African continent is inevitably linked to North America, South America, and the West Indies by the forceful transplanting of people into slavery. This fact explains why the same folk tales exist on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They are told with little variation, for the tales were spread by word of mouth and were kept among the African population.

Modern African writers are identifying “with the literary traditions of their people in terms of content and technique” (Okpewho 1992, p. 293). During European colonial domination African culture was generally misunderstood, misrepresented and interpreted in the wrong way. Okpewho points out that to launch the right image of their culture and to demonstrate that Africa had traditions to be “respected and a culture to be proud of”, an effort was made “to collect and publish texts of the oral literature of their people as practiced by them over time and to use that literature as basis for writing original works [...] to demonstrate that traditional African culture is not obsolete but relevant for the articulation of contemporary needs and goals” (Okpewho 1992, p. 293).

Africa in the American Diaspora

African American folktales are rooted in West African literary and cultural forms of expression. When Africans were taken from their homeland to America as slaves, they took with them their individual cultures, languages and customs. However, white slaveholders forced them to suppress part of their heritage and

⁶ Shusterman, Richard, *Performing live: aesthetic alternatives for the end of art*, Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 136.

they had to find other ways of expression, mainly storytelling and songs. The practice of the (oral) storytelling tradition acted somewhat as a means of empowerment for them.

For Eric J. Sundquist “the line between folklore and literature is difficult to establish in black oral narrative” (Sundquist 1993, p. 306). Long before Sundquist, Zora Neale Hurston came to the same conclusion and proved that oral tradition is the foundation of African American cultural expression. In the twenties, Hurston seemed to be in the right place at the right time. She was born among the folktales, superstitions, jokes and lying sessions in Eatonville, the first incorporated all-black town, on the outskirts of Orlando, in Florida.

Hurston saw African American culture as a vital component for the African American individual to achieve cultural affirmation and political emancipation. “The vitality of the folk, which can be seen in signifying, storytelling, indirect discourse, and humor [were] instruments of resistance and self-empowerment Hurston used in her work” according to Deborah G. Plant. Her effort to collect and preserve African American folklore “before it was too late” is evident in the fieldwork she undertook. Years later Hurston would participate in the effort carried out during the late 1930s and early 1940s by the *Works Progress Administration* (WPA) Federal Writers Project to preserve oral traditions and record life histories in the different states.

In spite of the difficulties in documenting black speech and black folklore referred to by white folklore collectors and anthropologists, Hurston always incorporated Black English and Negro folkways in her work. To portray black cultural practices it was necessary to convey the vitality of black oral dialect in written form, transmitting the flexibility and fluidity of voice. Black dialect was the very substance of Hurston’s work; she knew that the simplest men and women had a wealth of images at their lips, ready to use if the setting was right. Spontaneous image making was at the centre of rural black speech and Hurston proved to be a brilliant exponent of dialect.

In what can be seen as an eloquent illustration of the symbiotic relation between orality and writing, all of Hurston’s work draws upon her deep interest in African American folklore, particularly the folklore of the South, from her home state of Florida and her hometown Eatonville. According to Deborah G. Plant, “Hurston saw culture – her own culture – as the source of renewed Black national dignity and pride” (Plant 1995, p. 64). Hurston documents her culture in a way that nobody else was doing in the twenties and the thirties as she identified with the rich oral culture of the rural black folk at the center of her anthropological and fictional work. Her interest was the rural, southern, (illiterate) agraphal black culture and she devoted a great part of her time and career to collecting, recording, documenting and (saving) recycling that culture, showing white America how different black America was. In her article “Characteristics of Negro Expression” she attempts to highlight (document) the distinctiveness of black culture. As one of the few (collectors) students, researchers of black American folklore of historical importance, the bulk of Hurston’s work on Southern rural communities provides important historical information about the beliefs, values and practices of an essential segment of the African-American population. While Hurston was growing up, the relevance

of black culture was being discussed in black intellectual circles and the symbolism of African art was being discovered and called “primitivism.”

Hurston followed Boasian ideas regarding fieldwork; as a participant-observer she became part of the local communities to collect and analyze folklore texts, the oral history of the people, and everyday conversations. Like anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset, Hurston also showed concern regarding the disappearance of the “precious secrets of folk history” (Fauset 1992, p. 241). She realized that time was running out and the folklore might be forgotten, so she explains to the store porch congregation in her anthology *Mules and Men* why she was recording the material from the lying sessions; to ensure that folk culture would not vanish with the death of the tellers, to preserve black folk culture and to share the culture with many people: “They are a lot more valuable than you might think. We want to set them down before it’s too late” (Hurston 1995, p. 14).

Zora Neale Hurston’s folklore and fictional writings recorded the treasures of African American oral culture showing her remarkable command of language and her uses of literary dialect. “The Eatonville Anthology” reflects all of Hurston’s future concerns and interests, combining a study of African American folklore, the preservation of history and culture, and a study of social relations and folk characters. Written in 1926, before Hurston’s folklore research trips to the South of the United States, the “Anthology” was put together from her childhood memories. The sketches in the “Anthology” reflect Hurston’s knowledge of the powerful sense of community found among small rural communities in the South of the United States. Storytelling plays an important role in these communities because it is the means by which a community and its customs and culture can be preserved through the telling of stories from generation to generation. Hurston was aware of the treasure that could be found in these communities and she worried that her/their culture could be lost forever. She was “weighed down by the thought that practically nothing had been done in Negro folklore when the greatest cultural wealth on the continent was disappearing without the world ever realizing that it had been there.”⁷ In the “Anthology” the Eatonville residents “signify on” each other telling exaggerated tales about their fellow citizens. It combines the different elements of storytelling – story, exaggeration and “lying” – in a complex process in which the storyteller manipulates the tale and the audience by using different levels of meaning, “signifying on” them. “Signifying on,” “playing the dozens,” “specifying on” are expressions for situations in which African American people try to get an upper hand in a conversation or in storytelling through the use of words, showing their verbal skills in out-talking each other. The “Anthology” closes with a Brer Rabbit tale, explaining why the dog and the rabbit hate each other, a tale which is also told in *Mules and Men* (Part I, Chapter VII).

Before Hurston collected African American folktales, Joel Chandler Harris published his *Uncle Remus: His Songs and his Sayings* in 1880. These Uncle Remus stories were told by Uncle Remus, a former plantation slave to a little white boy, son of the plantation owner. Uncle Remus was a fictional recreation

⁷ Letter of Hurston to Thomas E. Jones, October 12, 1934. (Hurston 2002, p. 315).

of Joel Chandler Harris, a white Southerner trying to make the readers believe that Uncle Remus was a representative of his race, a man with “nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery” (Harris 1982, p. 8). The animal tales in the book, like the Brer Rabbit tales, had long been part of the African American folk expression and passed from one generation of slaves to the next before Harris wrote them down. Harris claims that his purpose in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and his Sayings* was “to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity” and to that extent he has “in every instance [...] retained that particular version which seemed [...] to be the most characteristic, and have given it without embellishment and without exaggeration” (Harris 1982, p.39).

Anthropomorphic characterization

In the African folk tales, the stories reflect the culture where animals abound. Consequently, the crocodile, elephant, giraffe, monkey, baboon, lion, jackal, ostrich, hyena, cheetah and tortoise (or turtle) are characters in the tales. The animals and birds take on human characteristics of greed, jealousy, honesty, loneliness, etc. and through their behavior valuable lessons are learned.

The African tale type known as the trickster tale is also found in African American culture. These tales are mostly of animals, but also of human characters and have “to do with trickery and breach of faith” (Okpewho 1992, p. 176). In trickster tales, the one who appears weaker or less endowed physically or mentally gets the upper hand in the end against a stronger opponent. The trickster figure is clever, witty, cunning, unscrupulous, and sometimes mischievous. He uses his wits to make up for what he lacks in size and strength, as do trickster figures all over the world. The triumph of brain over physical strength is a common thread that runs through the trickster tales from Africa and the United States.

In the Uncle Remus stories, Brer Rabbit is the outstanding trickster figure. In the Introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and his Sayings*, Robert Hemenway describes Brer Rabbit as “folklore, a communally created universal outlaw whose revolutionary antics satisfy deep human needs.” For Hemenway,

Brer Rabbit is black from the tip of his ears to the fuzz of his tail, and he defeats his enemies with a superior intelligence growing from a total understanding of his hostile environment. He is the brier-patch representative of a people living by their wits to make a way out of no way” (Harris 1982, p. 9).

The main trickster characters in African tales are the tortoise, the hare, the rabbit and the spider. The trickster Hare, or Little Hare, appears in this role in the eastern part of Africa, Nigeria and Congo. The tortoise is a primary trickster figure among the Yoruba, the Edo and the Ibo of Nigeria. The spider trickster is associated with West Africa, particularly Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast.

There are different versions of the same tale. An example is that in the African versions of the tortoise and hare tale, the tortoise wins because he uses

his wits and tricks the opponent. In the European versions, on the other hand, the tortoise wins through sheer endurance and perseverance.

Anansi, the Spider, is one of the major trickster figures in African folk tales. Like any trickster the spider can be wise, foolish, witty, or even lazy – but he always has a lesson to teach. Anansi personifies the spirit of rebellion; he is able to baffle the Devil and cheat Death. Even if Anansi loses in one story, one knows that he will overcome the difficulties in the next.

Some examples of folktales

Anglophone Africa

Anansi and the Turtle

Author: unknown

One day Anansi the spider picked some very fat and tasty yams from his garden. He baked them with much care and they came out smelling quite delicious. He could not wait to sit down and eat them.

Just then there was a knock at his door. It was Turtle, who had been traveling all day and was very tired and hungry.

“Hello, Anansi,” said Turtle. “I have been walking for so long, and I smelled the most delicious yams I’ve ever smelled. Would you be so kind as to share your meal with me?”

Anansi could not refuse, as it was the custom in his country to share your meal with visitors at mealtime. But he was not very happy, for Anansi was a little too greedy and wanted the delicious yams all to himself. So Anansi thought to himself and came up with a scheme.

“Please do come in, Turtle. I would be honored to have you as my guest this evening. Sit down, have a chair and help yourself.”

Turtle came inside and sat down, but just as he reached for a yam, Anansi yelled, “Turtle, don’t you know better than to come to the table with dirty hands?”

Turtle looked down at his hands and saw that they were filthy. He had been crawling all day and had not had a chance to clean up. Turtle got up and went to the river to clean his feet. He walked all the way back up to the house and Anansi had already begun to eat.

“I didn’t want these tasty yams to get cold, so I had to begin,” said Anansi. “But please do join me now, Turtle.”

Turtle sat down again and reached for a yam, but again Anansi yelled at him.

“Turtle, did you not hear me before? It is not polite to come to the table with dirty hands!”

He looked down and saw that his clean hands had turned dirty once more, since he had to crawl on them to get back to the house. So he walked down to the river once more to wash himself off. And when he returned this time, he was careful to walk on the grass so his hands would stay clean. But by the time he sat down at the table, Anansi had finished up the last bit of the tasty yams and not so much as a morsel was left.

Turtle looked at Anansi for a moment and then said, “Thank you for sharing your meal with me. If you ever find yourself near my house,

please let me return the favor.” And then he slowly walked out the door and continued on his way. The days went by and Anansi thought more and more of that meal that Turtle had offered. He got more and more interested in a free dinner and finally could not stand it anymore. He set off one day to find Turtle’s house.

He found Turtle sunning himself on a riverbank just around dinnertime.

Turtle looked up and saw him and said, “Hello, Anansi, have you come to share evening meal with me?”

“Oh yes, yes!” said Anansi, who was growing hungrier and hungrier by the minute. Turtle went underwater to his house to set up the dinner table for the two of them. Soon he came back to the bank and said, “Your place is waiting and the food is ready. Please join me, Anansi.”

And then he dived underwater and began to slowly eat his meal.

Anansi jumped into the water, but could not get down to the bottom of the river. He tried to swim down, but he was so light that he kept popping back up to the surface.

He tried diving. He tried belly flops. He tried a running jump, but nothing would help him get down to the river bottom.

In the meantime, Turtle was slowly eating his meal.

Anansi was not about to give up a free meal, and was running around wondering what he would do. Finally he had an idea. He started grabbing stones and rocks and stuffed them into his jacket pockets.

Now when he jumped into the water he sank right down to the bottom and was able to take his place at the table.

The table was so beautiful and full of delicious foods. Anansi could hardly believe how many tasty foods were before him and could not wait to start his meal.

But just as he reached for the first morsel, Turtle stopped eating and spoke. “In my country, we do not wear our jackets to the table.” Anansi noticed that Turtle had removed his own jacket before sitting down. Anansi started to remove his jacket, and as soon as it was off of his shoulders, he went zooming back up to the surface and popped out onto the riverbank. He stuck his head down into the water and saw Turtle slowly enjoying that wonderful banquet.

Moral of the story: When you try to outsmart someone, you may find that you’re the one outsmarted.

This Anansi story aims at instilling the recognition of, and consideration and respect for the peculiar characteristics, be they qualities or handicaps, with which each individual, species or group is endowed or afflicted. It also exhorts people to be flexible and understanding in the observance of local customs and traditions in the context of alterity relations. In a given historical moment or social context, this moral is often sacrificed, either through the implacable application of existing rules and practices, or by the opportunistic imposition of the will of those who consider themselves more complete and able-bodied.

In his greed, Anansi was taking advantage of the quadruped nature of Turtle to deprive the latter of access to the dining table, forgetting his own limitation of weight. Turtle's revenge represents a practical demonstration of just how fragile we all are, relatively and respectively, in given situations. The tit-for-tat formula seems to suggest that it is only through practical experience, that is, being in the other's shoes, that people can be made aware of the plights of others.

Past experiences, both personal and collective, can be evoked, and awareness of present and future instances of this sort of discrimination can be awakened by the artistic narration of this tale and drive home the truism in the saying that nobody is perfect, and that all our fingers are not equal, but all have a role to play to the benefit of the individual and society.

For Horned Animals Only⁸

Source: Horned Animals Only: Rapid Reading series

Even though the elephant, as you know, has no horns, he once gave a party "For Horned Animals Only." Nobody quite knew why, except his wife, for he said to her before he sent out the invitations, "if we invite the horned animals only, we won't have to entertain the lion and lioness. How I despise that strutting pair! If they had not been here, I should definitely have been elected King of Beasts, and you, my dear, would have been my Queen."

The hare was not, of course, invited, as he had no horns, but he hadn't been to a party for a long time so he decided to gate-crash (*attend without an invitation*) the elephant's affair. Taking a pair of old antelope horns that had been lying about the place for some time, he stuck them firmly on to his head with beeswax, laughing with delight as he observed his comical reflection in the pool's placid waters. And away he hopped to the party.

All the horned animals were there - the springbuck, buffalo, impala, kudu, rhinoceros, sable antelope, all of them, with the ladies admiring the headgear of their husbands who pranced and strutted about as if they were the stars of a fashion parade. When a black wildebeest made the remark that it seemed odd for the hornless elephant to throw a party for the horned animals, the kindly kudu bull was heard to say, "But of course his tusks are really horns growing upside down, aren't they?"

It was a marvelous party, with plenty to eat - shrubs, berries, fruits, juicy grass in little piles, and the finest aromatic roots. And beer there was in plenty, so much so that everybody who saw the horned hare thought that he was some exotic species of buck. In fact, when the rhinoceros asked him where he came from, saying at the same time that he had never seen such a fantastic animal before, the hare replied that he was a visitor to those parts from Burundi and was actually the last surviving member of his tribe.

⁸ "For Horned Animals Only" in http://www.motherlandnigeria.com/stories/horned_animals_only.html. Accessed on 2010-02-26.

As the beer flowed like water, the spirits rose higher and higher. The rhinoceros and the buffalo did a thundering tap-dance together (so thundering that the hare feared the vibrations might shake his beeswaxed horns loose), an impala troupe performed a ballet, the elephant trumpeted grandly, and the warthog's song was as sad as his appearance.

All night long the revels continued, with the stars winking above the clearing and the moon lighting up the festivities. The hare, having drunk far too much beer, fell asleep under a peach tree.

When he awoke, - with a splitting headache brought on by the beer he had so greedily and recklessly drunk - he felt the sun's rays tapping at his eyelids, but he was shrewd enough not to open his eyes immediately, for he knew instinctively that something had gone wrong. And his heart thumped in fear as he heard the elephant rumbling near him:

"Look, friends, at the despicable little hare, the uninvited guest, with the beeswax melted by the sun and his horns lying at his side. We've been tricked by this impostor who came to our party under false horns. He must be punished - and punished severely - for mocking all us horned animals."

"Hear! Hear!" the frightened hare heard the other animals saying, and he opened his left eye ever so slightly. He was surrounded by a half-circle of horned animals and his mind was working swiftly. He noticed that the rhinoceros - who had also drunk too much beer - was not very steady on his legs, and he thought to himself that the rhino would not be able to move quickly in that condition.

So, before the animals quite knew what had happened, the hare jumped to his feet and scooted through the rhino's legs. The startled animal tried to turn, fell with a crash, and some of the other animals stumbled over his massive body, giving the hare a chance to escape.

But he didn't get very far, for even a hare is not so swift as a buck, and as he realized that he would be caught he scurried into a tiny cave in the hills. It was just big enough to contain his body, and he thought he was safe until he felt somebody pulling his tail.

But his quick mind did not let him down, even though the pain was agonizing.

"Ha! Ha!" he laughed, "You think you've got hold of my tail, don't you, but what you are pulling is a root. You're fooling yourself, whoever you are" - for his nose was stuck in a corner of the tiny cave and he couldn't see behind him.

Whoever was holding him let go, and at that moment he heard the elephant trumpeting, "There's his tail! Pull him out! Pull him out, the hornless rascal!"

After great effort he managed to turn around so that he could look out, and he was delighted to see the elephant pulling a root that was growing just outside the mouth of the tiny cave.

His eyes twinkled with merriment. "Ouch!" he cried. "Oh, don't be so cruel, O horned creatures. You're pulling my tail and the pain is unbearable. Oh! Oh!"

Spurred on by his cries, the elephant pulled even harder, the rhino

pulled the elephant, the warthog pulled the rhino, the small antelope pulled the warthog, and so on, until a long chain of animals was straining to pull out the root they thought was the hare's tail.

And the hare pretended to be crying in agony.

Suddenly, the root came out of the ground in a rush, and the animals tumbled backwards, falling upon one another in great confusion, the drunken rhino lying on his back with his legs waving feebly in the air.

The hare jumped out of his cave, leaped upon the belly of the helpless rhino, danced a brisk tattoo upon him, screamed with laughter. And was gone before a single animal could rise to its feet. "I'm a brilliant fellow," he thought as the sand spurted by under his speeding feet. "I've foxed all the horned animals, and now, with that experience behind me, I can surely fool my old enemy the tortoise."

But that is another story.

This is an excellent example of the folk tale as an instrument of satire in modern society, where qualifications, so-called standards, trappings of class, elements of identity and belongingness, etc., may be contrived or explained off according to convenience, especially to please benefactors, favorites and the powerful. This instance of an elephant with down-growing horns is a clear travesty or miscarriage of justice and standards. Qualifications may be borrowed or feigned (as in the case of a horned hare) in a context of rife corruption, and appearances may deceive (as in the confusion between tail and root).

In a typical context of political electioneering campaign, for example, such a tale may serve as a timely warning against impostors, nepotism and demagoguery, while, in the final analysis, prepotency is under attack, and the weak is made to get the better of the big bully through a brilliant display of wit and guile (the proverbial witchcraft turning against the witch), but also making fun of the powerful, as in the burlesque turn of the hare jumping on to the belly of the helpless rhino and dancing "a brisk tattoo upon him", and screaming with laughter.

Lusophone Africa

The Lion and the Jackal

O leão tinha um bode; o chacal possuía uma cabra. O chacal vai ao leão e diz: Majestade, empresta-me o teu bode para fazer criação com a minha cabra. Quando esta tiver parido, eu virei trazer-te o bode com o respectivo pagamento. Depois de ter ficado coberta, a cabra pariu dois cabritinhos: uma fêmea e um macho.

Então o chacal agarra o bode e a pequena fêmea, leva-os ao leão e diz: Cá tens o teu bode e também o pagamento. O leão pergunta: Nasceu só este cabrito? O chacal diz: Nasceram dois. Então onde deixaste o outro? Um deles, o pequeno macho ficou para mim, para fazer criação com a mãe. O rei da floresta, quando

viu tal, ficou zangado e disse: Vai já, já, procurar o outro cabrito, para mo entregares. O quê? Tu queres roubar-me? Se o meu bode não tivesse fecundado a tua cabra, teria porventura tido cabritos? Os dois cabritos são meus, pois o meu bode é que os gerou.

O chacal diz: Isto não pode ser de forma nenhuma! Ai, sim? Tu queres roubar-me porque és rei! Vamos chamar todos os bichos da floresta para fazer um julgamento, a fim de ver-se, se sou eu que quero roubar-te ou se és tu que me queres roubar a mim.

Diz o rei da floresta furioso: Os animais da floresta vou mandá-los vir para amanhã de manhã cedo. Mas se eu obtiver razão, hei-de acabar com toda a tua raça.

Quando o chacal se separou do leão, foi à procura do cágado e disse-lhe: Amigo cágado, amanhã tenho um julgamento com o senhor da floresta. Vem defender-me. Que julgamento é esse? Pedi-lhe emprestado um bode para fecundar a minha cabra. Agora que esta pariu diz o leão que ambos os cabritos são dele, porque foi o bode que os teve. Está bem. Encontrar-nos-emos amanhã na residência do rei, mas não deixes começar o julgamento sem eu estar presente.

Assim, na manhã seguinte, todos os bichos se põem a caminho da *ombala*. Pergunta agora o rei da floresta: Estais cá todos? Sim, viemos todos. Então vamos ao julgamento, para ver se chegamos a uma conclusão.

O chacal diz: Não, Senhor, não pode ser! Ainda falta chegar um. Quem é que falta? O cágado.

Estiveram os bichos à espera, até que o sol se ergueu a prumo. O cágado não há meio de chegar. Alguns impacientaram-se e dizem: Façamos o julgamento, homens! Porque ficar à espera de um só? Será este porventura mais inteligente do que nós?

Ainda não tinham acabado de falar, quando o cágado se apresenta. Assim que ele chegou, disse a hiena: Ah! Sim! Foi este fedelho que fez de nós os seus criados! É este bichinho de casca que pretende ser mais inteligente do que todos nós. Toda a manhã estivemos à tua espera, com o rei da floresta. O que andavas a fazer então? Todos os teus companheiros já vieram muito cedo. Tu és muito malcriado!

Diz o cágado: Está calada e não me ralhes. Eu tive que fazer em casa, porque o meu pai deu à luz!

Todos os bichos ficaram muito admirados com esta desculpa e perguntaram uns aos outros: Todos vós que estão aqui presentes! Quem é que viu um macho que desse à luz?

Não sabiam o que haviam de responder ao cágado, ficaram embaraçados e disseram: Nunca vimos um macho que parisse; são só as fêmeas que dão à luz. Deve ser o seu pai o único a dar à luz nesta terra!

Diz o cágado: Ah! Sim? É só o meu pai que teve filhos? Então a causa do julgamento por que estais reunidos, qual é? Não sois vós que dizeis que o bode teve dois cabritos?

Então os bichos põem-se em pé, resmungam e dizem: Aqui não há causa justa!

E assim o leão foi declarado vencido por todos os bichos, e ficou o chacal com ambos os cabritos.

Translation:

The lion and the jackal

The lion had a he-goat; the jackal had a she-goat. The jackal goes to the lion and says: Your Majesty, lend me your he-goat to breed with my she-goat. When bears kids, I'll bring back your he-goat with the appropriate payment. After becoming pregnant, the she-goat brought forth two kids: one female and one male.

The jackal then takes the he-goat and the female kid to the lion, saying: Here you are with your he-goat as well as the payment. The lion asks the jackal: Was it only this kid that was born? The jackal says: Two were born. So, where did you leave the other? One of them, the male kid, remained with me, so that it can breed with the mother. Upon hearing this, the king of the forest got angry and said: Go and bring the other kid to me right now. What? You want to cheat me? If my he-goat had not crossed your she-goat, would she perchance have had kids? The two kids are mine, since it's my he-goat that produced them.

The jackal said: No way! This can't be! Is that so? You want to cheat me because you are king! Let's call all the animals of the forest to judge this matter, to see whether I am the one trying to cheat you or you are the one trying to cheat me.

The king of the forest said angrily: I'll order the animals of the forest to come early tomorrow morning. But if I'm proved right, I'll destroy your whole race.

When the jackal left the lion, he went to look for the turtle and told him: Turtle, my friend, I have a judgment tomorrow with the lord of the forest. Please come and defend me. What's this judgment about? I borrowed a he-goat from him to cross my she-goat. Now that she has given birth, the lion is claiming both kids, because it was the he-goat which had them. It's alright. We shall meet tomorrow at the king's palace, but don't let the judgment begin without my presence.

So, the next day, all the animals find their way to the *ombala*. The king of the forest then asks: Is everybody here? Yes, we are all here. So, let's get down to the judgment, to see if we can come to a conclusion.

The jackal says: No, Sir, this can't be! There's still one person to arrive. Who is missing? It's the turtle.

The animals waited and waited, until the sun was high overhead. The turtle was nowhere to be found. Some animals are beginning to get impatient, saying: Let's do the judgment, men! Why do we have to wait for only one person? Is he more intelligent than the rest of us?

They hadn't quite finished talking when the turtle appears. As soon as he arrived, the hyena said: Oh, yes! It was this stinking creature that treated us like his servants. It's this shelly creature who thinks he's more intelligent than us all. We've been waiting for you all morning, with the king of the forest. What were you doing all that while? All your friends arrived very early. You're so insolent!

Says the turtle: Just take it easy, and don't be mad at me. I had a lot to do at home, because my father put to bed!

All the animals were surprised at this excuse and said to one another: All of you here present, who has ever heard of a man putting to bed?

They did not know what to tell the turtle, and in their embarrassment, they said: We've never heard a man put to bed before; it's women who put to bed. Your father must be the only male to put to bed in this land!

The turtle says: Oh, is that so? Is it only my father who had children? Then what's the case that you've assembled here to judge? Aren't you the ones saying that a he-goat had two kids?

Then the animals rise to their feet, complaining and saying: There's no case here!

Thus the lion was declared a loser by all the animals, and the jackal kept both kids.

The lion and the jackal is a tale that deals with the discourse of power, and reminds us of another one – The Pig and the Hog – also of Angolan origin and published in text form by Luandino Vieira⁹. They are both about the power game involving giving and receiving.¹⁰ This, therefore, is a tale which seeks to characterize, in general, the relations between the powerful and the weak, rich and poor, the elite and ordinary folk, and also about the exploitation of the worker by the employer.

In the domain of capital and productivity, the story portrays what one would call savage capitalism, whereby loans only end up by impoverishing and killing the client, whether individual or corporate, and even at the level of nations, taking, for example, what occurs between developed and under-developed nations, when the application of certain International Monetary Fund and World Bank formulas only end up ruining and bankrupting the so-called beneficiaries.

The socio-political dimensions here are very instructive. In a situation of conflict, it is hereby recommended that even the weak and small be courageous and insist on democratic rights and principles, as did the jackal in the face of the all-powerful king of the jungle, the lion. Discriminatory and disdainful finger-pointing, calculated to pander to the whims of the mighty, of the type engaged in by the hyena, is sure to fall flat when the intended victim, like the turtle, maintains an elegant ethical poise even within the context of his superior moral and intellectual standing.

It is equally not far-fetched to posit, on this tale, a vindication of women's rights, as the tendency in most patriarchal societies is to bestow on the child an almost entirely paternal identity, a practice symbolically established through the attribution of paternal surnames or family names, and administratively and materially affirmed in the systems of inheritance and succession. The child, it seems, belongs only to the father.

⁹ Luandino Vieira (2008): *Kiombokiadimuka e a Liberdade. Uma Fábula Angolana*. Leça da Palmeira: Letras e Coisas.

¹⁰ cf Luandino's observation that there is always an element of power in the hands of the one who gives. He was commenting on the *Kiombokiadimuka* tale, which he had narrated during the FEIRA DO LIVRO / SEMANA DAS ARTES do Agrupamento Vertical de Escolas de Castelo de Paiva, on May 6, 2009 during which the students awarded him the Prémio Camões sculptured in paper.

In other dimensions, the knowledge or knowhow possessed by the subaltern, often despised and marginalized – in this case, the turtle, becomes valuable and invested with the quality of holistically established hermeneutic universalism, in view of the inalienable interpretation of its enunciation as well as the empirical force of the contradiction evoked in the thesis as enacted by the turtle. This procedure, therefore, brings together elements of “interpretation” and “understanding”, as conceived by Shusterman¹¹, to constitute truth which is capable of serving as an instrument for the resolution of inter-personal and social conflicts, and, therefore, of social sanction.

Force, power, clientelism, conspiracy and the likes must tumble down and be subdued by the force of shared wisdom, social or communal truth, “natural” plain truth, which dispenses with subjective interpretation. Through the technique of face-to-face comparison or inverse mirroring or exchange of positions, whereby the aggressor is placed at the receiving end, the lion and its followers were made to face the ridiculous hypothesis of a male progenitor or “bearer” of kids, within a context where their vested interests are not stake.

This apparently simple tale seems to have been molded on the “art or practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments”, that is, on the sequential processes of the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (or rather, Abstract-Negative-Concrete or Immediate-Mediated-Concrete) in which the first term would correspond to the matter at hand, the case to be judged between the lion and the jackal; the second to the mediation effort or ingenious enactment on the part of the turtle, revealing the gaping contradiction (antithesis) of the lion’s proposition (thesis), while the third would represent the resolution or easing out of the tension between the litigants (synthesis)¹².

The theme of this story, therefore, provides a formula that can be applied in situations of conflict. Justice is done, and is seen to have been done (There’s no just cause here”) when the matter is free of the strangleholds of habitual situation, constituted authority, and discourse of power, and subjected to the discourse of satirical play, logic and philosophy.

O Rei dos Pássaros / The king of the birds

This tale is about the quest for an acceptable leader of the kingdom of animals, a sort of experimentation with several political “typologies”, based on the qualities and defects of the birds. The pumumu (bush turkey) only groans, lacks good health and, as Carlos Estermann observes, is a bird of sadness and laziness; its successor, the swallow, is swift in flight but changes course ever so often. It is lively, but lacks seriousness. (Estermann 1983, p. 292). It is therefore not focused or reliable.

¹¹ Shusterman, Richard, 2000, Chapter 6, Beneath Interpretation, p. 115-136,

¹² This synthesis has everything to do with the idea of social sanction. To describe the activity of overcoming the negative, Hegel also often used the term *Aufhebung*, variously translated into English as “sublation” or “overcoming,” to conceive of the working of the dialectic. Roughly, the term indicates preserving the useful portion of an idea, thing, society, etc., while moving beyond its limitations.).

However, the black bird possesses a balanced flight and has, as his minister, the teaser bird, whose strong point is vigilance and a quick reaction in the face of any danger, and so is able, in critical moments, to alert others by emitting a characteristic strident cry by way of alarm code. Besides, to crown its gift of equilibrium, the black bird knows how to play, but at the right time: "It doesn't fail to give a display of twists, but only when it is about to perch" (Estermann 1983, p. 292). Together, both the black bird and its minister form an ideal pair to handle the tribe's affairs of government.

The leadership qualities being recommended here are quite clear: balance, perspicacity, efficiency and humanistic or artistic culture. It is pertinent to note that the quality of teasing (attributed to the minister) is indicative of literary creativity (witness the performance of sung poetic duels – Brazilian *cantorias* of *pelejas*, for example), while those artistic or acrobatic twists would be equivalent to festivity, dance and even sporting activity. The political leader, then, must be a "complete" human being, in the sense of ethical, professional and cultural integrity.

Of equal importance is the proactive attitude of the other animals, who play their legitimate role as citizens by paying close attention to the health and performance of their leadership and resorting to quick remedial measures whenever necessary.

However, there is a caveat: although the qualities revealed in the birds featured in this political experimentation are inherent in their respective natures, and for that matter proper to their species, the same cannot be transplanted wholesale on to the human or psychic plane, as Estermann seems to suggest (p. 292), as if there were qualities and defects that are innate or peculiar to all members of certain ethnic groups, political parties, regional groups, etc. Such an interpretation would lead to the permanent enthronement of one sole group, party or ethnicity, to the detriment of the others, who would then be permanently marginalized. Unlike animals, the human being is endowed with the possibility of overcoming any limitation, thanks to the "historically determined consciousness" which is a manifestation of the self-realising Absolute Rational Will".¹³

African American

Old Boss, John and the Mule¹⁴

Well, one time Old Boss had a man, workin' for him named John. If they was anything this John liked best, it was sleepin'. He'd be up at cockcrow, all right, chop up a stack of stove wood, and get started out to the field.

First, he'd hook up Old Boss' mule, talking sweetlike, "We goin' to plow a good stretch for Old Boss today, ain't we, Jim?" All that was just in case Old Boss might be watchin'. But when John got out

¹³ Jano Stojanow. 2003: "Philosophy of the Absolute Rational Will": « The real historically determined consciousness is no more than a manifestation of the self-realising Absolute Rational Will, which does not have to wait for any interpretation since it and only it is the living process of its own carrying into practice. »

¹⁴ Courlander, Harold (1976): *A Treasury of Afro-American Folklore*. New York: Marlowe & Company. (p. 420-422)

there on the new ground he'd plow three-four furrows and then head for the big maple tree in the far corner. He'd tie the mule up and lay down in the shade and go to sleep. Every day it was like that, John couldn't wait to get up in the morning so's he could go out there and get some sleep.

After two-three days Old Boss say, "Ain't you got that field plowed yet, John?"

And John say, "Boss, that mule is the laziest, orneriest mule I ever work with."

Old Boss say, "John, you got to *encourage* him. Use the stick a little every once in a while."

Well, after that, when it was time to come home, John'd drive the mule up on the hill and whack him with a stick four-five times, hollein', "Git movin', you lazy, good-for-nothin' mule! You give me a mess of trouble today! When I say walk, *walk!*" Then he'd come in and take the harness off and get ready to eat.

But next mornin', naturally, he'd head for that big maple tree and do some more sleepin'.

One day when John was just settlin' down for shut-eye, the mule turned his head around and talked to him. He say, "Reckon it's about time I had a good talk with Old Boss."

Well, that John sat right up straight and looked around. Looked north and south, then up in the air, but he didn't see no one but the mule.

"Who said that?" John say.

"I said it," the mule say, "and I'm goin' to do it too."

John he commence to shake so hard he couldn't get up.

"You the first mule I ever hear could talk," John say.

"You ain't heard no talkin' yet to speak of," the mule say. "Goin' to mention how you get out here every mornin' every mornin' and go to sleep in the shade, 'stead of workin'. Then on the way home you take me up on the hill and whup me up with that stick, like I give you trouble all day. I'm goin' to give Old Boss somethin' to think on."

When John hear that, he got up and sold out, headed for home. Old Boss see him burnin' up the ground comin' in to the barn..

"What's up, John?" Old Boss say.

"Old Boss," John say, "I quit. I ain't goin' to drive no mule that talks. And besides that, if the mule tell you something about me, it's a big lie."

John he went in the barn and sat down. Ain't nothing Old Boss could say to make him go back after the mule. After a while he went himself, with his yellow dog runnin' along after him. Found the mule under the big maple tree, right where John left him.

"Hear you can talk," Old Boss say to the mule, but the mule don't say a thing, just grazin' in the grass.

Old Boss drive the mule home and put him in the barn.

Then he give John a good talkin' to, tellin' him if he don't mend his ways he goin' to have to get a new field hand.

All John would say was, "Boss, I don't fool around with talkin' mules."

"I'm pretty put out with you," Boss say and start on up to the house. Halfway there he shake his head again, saying, "Don't know what I'm goin' to do with that boy. Sure don't know."

Right then his yellow dog speak up, sayin', "Fire him, Boss. You got no choice."

"What's that?" Boss say, lookin' at the dog.

“Sure, fire him,” the dog say. “When a man start to imagine things like that boy does, ‘bout time to get rid of him.”
Well, now, which one you think is the fool, John or Old Boss?
‘Course, it don’t say if Old Boss fired him or not. But if Old Boss is hearin’ animals talk too, it don’t hardly put him in a better position than John, do it?”

The above tale dramatizes in a deeply satirical vein the conflict in the command chain of a typical societal structure built on slavery. The culture of dependency, be it between man and man, or between man and beast, is marked by downstream egocentric exploitation which cuts across frontiers of species involved in this anthropomorphic literary space and ends up, as it were, returning, this time upstream, the witchcraft to the witch. In what appears to be yet another enactment of the Hegelian dialectic, the underdogs (characters from the animal kingdom) have the upper hand, after launching a successful opposition (antithesis) to the status quo (thesis) and shocking their human oppressors out of their wits, and establishing a sort of dynamic equilibrium (synthesis) in which the humans would either behave themselves or be exposed.

Stepping out of the literary into the social context, John (here most probably a servant or, as the text says, a farm hand; in effect, a sort of overseer slave) will be wary of abusing and oppressing his subordinate, the mule (which may represent other, less fortunate slaves or servants), while Old Boss, the white plantation owner, not only knows that John may, after all, be speaking the truth (and so cannot dismiss him), but also does not dare admit, even to himself, that his knowledge and authority have been undermined and challenged in his own version of the shocking experience with the animal world. The dog speaks and, more than that, teaches him, sarcastically and defiantly, what to do in such a critical situation: “Fire him, Boss. You got no choice.” ... “When a man start to imagine things like that boy does, ‘bout time to get rid of him.”

The solidarity of the subaltern wins the day, and makes for a more just and “humane” society, where everybody does his work and bears the glory or responsibility for his actions. Though universal in nature, this moral is particularly relevant in the African American context of slavery, for its immediate social therapeutic effect, and its aftermath, for its potential both as a historical document and as an extrapolation of contemporary labour and alterity relations of a hierarchical nature.

The Elephant and the Whale¹⁵

(From Alice Fortier, *Louisiana Folktales*)

One day Compair Lapin (Rabbit) and Compair Bouki (Hyena) were going on a journey together. Compair Lapin often took Bouki with him to make fun of him, and to hear all the news which Bouki

¹⁵ Dance, Daryl Cumber (2002): *From my People: 400 Years of African American Folklore*, New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company. (p. 50-52)

knew. When they reached the seashore, they saw something which was very strange, and which astonished them so much that they stopped to watch and listen. It was an elephant and a whale which were conversing together.

"You see," said Bouki, "they are the two largest beasts in the world and the strongest of all animals."

"Hush up," said Lapin, "let us go nearer and listen. I want to hear what they are saying."

The elephant said to the whale, "Commère Baleine, as you are the largest and strongest in the sea, and I am the strongest and largest on land, we must rule over all beasts; and all those who will revolt against us we shall kill them, you hear, commère"

"Yes, Compair; keep the land and I shall keep the sea."

"You hear," said Bouki, "let us go because it will be bad for us if they hear that we are listening to their conversation."

"Oh! I don't care," said Lapin, "I'm more cunning than they; you will see how I am going to fix them."

"No," said Bouki, "I'm afraid I must go."

"Well, go, if you're so good for nothing and cowardly; go quickly. I'm tired of you; you are too foolish."

Compair Lapin went to get a very long and strong rope, then he got his drum and hid in the grass. He took one end of the rope, and went to the elephant: "Mister, you who are so good and so strong, I wish you could render me a service; you would relieve me of a great trouble and prevent me from losing my money."

The elephant was glad to hear such a fine compliment, and he said: "Compair, I shall do for you everything you want. I am always ready to help my friends."

"Well," said Lapin, "I have a cow which is stuck in the mud on the coast; you know that I am not strong enough to pull her out; I come for you to help me. Take this rope in your trunk. I shall tie it to the cow, and when you hear me beat the drum, pull hard on the rope. I tell you that because the cow is stuck deep in the mud."

"That is all right," said the elephant. "I guarantee I shall pull the cow out or the rope will break."

Compair Lapin took the other end of the rope and ran towards the sea. He paid a pretty compliment to the whale, and asked her to render the same service about the cow, which was stuck in a bayou in the woods. Compair Lapin's mouth was so honeyed that no one could refuse him anything. The whale took hold of the rope and said:

"When I shall hear the drum beat I shall pull."

"Yes," said Lapin, "begin pulling gently, and then more and more,"

"You need not be afraid," said the whale; "I shall pull out the cow, even if the devil were holding her,"

"That is good," said Lapin; "we are going to laugh." And he beat his drum.

The elephant began to pull so hard that the rope was like a bar of iron. The whale, on her side, was pulling and pulling, and yet she was coming nearer to the land, as she was not so well situated to pull as the elephant. When she saw that she was mounting on land, she beat her tail furiously and plunged headlong into the sea. The shock was so great that the elephant was dragged to the sea.

"What," said he, "what is the matter? That cow must be wonderfully strong to drag me so. Let me kneel with my front feet in the mud. Then he twisted the rope round his trunk in such a manner that he pulled the whale again to the shore. He was very much astonished

to see his friend the whale. "What is the matter," said he, "I thought it was Compair Lapin's cow I was pulling."

"Lapin told me the same thing. I believe he is making fun of us.

"He must pay for that," said the elephant. I forbid him to eat a blade of grass on the land because he laughed at us."

"And I will not allow him to drink a drop of water in the sea.. We must watch out for him, and the first one that sees him must not miss him."

Compair Lapin said to Bouki: "It is growing hot for us; it is time to leave."

"You see," said Bouki, "you are always bringing us into trouble."

"Oh! Hush up, I'm not through with them yet; you will see how I shall fix them."

They went on their way and after a while they separated. When Compair Lapin arrived in the wood, he found a little dead deer. The dogs had bitten him so that the hair had fallen off his skin in many places. Lapin took off the deer's skin and put it on his back. He looked exactly like a wounded deer. He passed limping by the elephant, who said to him: "Poor little deer, how sick you look."

"Oh! Yes, I am suffering very much; you see it is Compair Lapin who poisoned me and put his curse on me because I wanted to prevent him from eating grass, as you had ordained me. Take care, Mr. Elephant, Compair Lapin has made a bargain with the Devil; he will be hard on you, if you don't take care."

The elephant was very much frightened. He said, "Little deer, you will tell Compair Lapin I am his best friend, let him eat as much grass as he wants and present my compliments to him. "

The deer met a little later the whale in the sea. "But poor little deer, why are you limping so; you seem to be very sick."

"Oh! Yes, it is Compair Lapin who did that. Take care, Commère Baleine," The whale also frightened, and said: "I want to have nothing to do with the Devil; please tell Compair Lapin to drink as much water as he wants."

The deer went on his way, and when he met Compair Bouki he took off the deer's skin and said: "You see that I'm more cunning than all of them, and that I can make fun of them all the time. Where I shall pass another will be caught."

"You are right indeed," said Compair Bouki,

The ubiquitous Brer Rabbit is seen in action here with a land and marine cast, some clad in French names and titles (Brer or Buh = Compair, corrupted from Compère, with the feminine as Commère, the characters themselves being Lapin = Rabbit, Baleine = Whale), in verisimilar adaptation to the Francophone legacy of its source, Louisiana. From this semi-habitual, semi-exotic setting, this folktale takes a swipe at super power politics, reminiscent of the erstwhile Soviet bloc versus Western bloc power tussle. The two storydom giants, the Whale and the Elephant, just like their nation-state counterparts, each dominate a nigh hermetically sealed area of influence and control, agreeing between them a reciprocal recognition and respect of each other's domain. Each entity has the authority of life and death over the members under its authority and, imbued with a heightened sense of vanity and self-consciousness, is easily amenable to flattery and manipulation.

Under them is a varied cast of laid-back and/or cowardly characters (Hyena), but more importantly, sharp-witted opportunists who, like Compare

Lapin, know how to play one giant against the other. And get away with it, with a combination of guile, mischief, subterfuge and blackmail. After all, the greedy egos of the powerful ones must be seen to be upheld by a combination of threats, acts of aggression and high-handedness, and conspicuous display of largesse and forbearance.

That said, one cannot overlook the presence of the well-established moral formula of the weak and small, but smart (Rabbit/Lapin) making a fool of the big and strong (Whale and Elephant). Is that not, in the final analysis, the lesson to be driven home on the human stage of shifting hegemonies?

Folk tales and social pragmatism

In all these tales, the animal is used as an immutable symbol in time and space, and for that matter of eternal relevance in all situations. Their natural or physical qualities are conjugated with moral and epistemological considerations which elevate them to the same, if not higher, level, in relation to the human beings with whom they sometimes interact. Past, present and future are interwoven to produce a moral mosaic that can stand the test of time, using the animals as fabric and live-wire, in diachrony and synchrony.

Like the slaves, the spider tales crossed the ocean during the Atlantic Slave Trade, traveling from Africa to the Caribbean Islands and to the United States. The spelling of the name changes: Anansi to Ananse, Hanancy to Aunt Nancy. In Jamaica, the spider is called Anansi, in Haiti, Ti Malice.¹⁶ Anansi stories entered the United States through South Carolina and spread among the Gullah in the South-eastern part of the country.

For an oppressed people, trickster figures like Anansi or Brer Rabbit conveyed the message that freedom and dignity were worth fighting for, at any odd. “The revolutionary quality makes Brer Rabbit a universal figure. Brer Rabbit expresses archetypes of human emotion because one identifies with his liberating sense of anarchy – an imperative of liberation embedded deep in Afro-American history” (Harris 1982, p. 30).

By way of comparison, one observes some stylistic and structural differences between the African continental and Diaspora traditions. The African tales tend to be more oral-based and cryptic, relying on direct dialogue and effectively combining enunciation and reticence (“les dits et les non-dits”) in a prose marked by the absence of reported-speech, quotation marks, introduction of enunciator and other features typical of writtenness. The African American tales, on the contrary, are more verbose, deliberately explanatory, openly didactic and pedagogical. Also, unlike the case in the Diaspora, in the African tales there is hardly any comment on the dénouement, and the conclusion is left to the reader or audience.

In the African traditions, the role and significance of the folktale involving animals assume a complexity which may not be unconnected with its habitual double layered metaphorization: at one level, we have animals (such as the jackal and lion in the above example) assuming human roles and even rearing

¹⁶ Other names for Anansi: Anancy (Jamaica, Grenada), Anancyi, Ananse, Aunt Nancy (US), Hanansi, Compé Anansi, Kweku Anansi (Akan), Nansi, Ti Malice.

animals (he-goat, she-goat, or billy-goat and nanny-goat); at another, they are all just animals in the animal kingdom, but conducting themselves as in human societies. Confounding both levels leads to the blurring of the frontier between man and beast, thus reinforcing the moral of the tale.

On a wider scale, lots of these tales involve not only humans and animals, but also deities and supernatural characters and forces, which gives the story-telling activity the spiritual thrust needed for its role as an instrument of societal cleansing

Similarly, leveling the playing field for both humans and animals in the African American tradition creates an enabling atmosphere for the inculcation of the intended moral message.

We can reasonably surmise, therefore, that the art of African and African-American folktales is part of what seems to inform Shusterman's concept of pragmatism¹⁷ which sees a unifying role of meliorative change and hope for art, stating that

This serious yet humorous use of popular art purveying philosophy blurs the lines not only between high and popular culture, it also unites the roles of philosophy and art, linking philosophers with critical insightful comics. (Shusterman 1997, p. 135)

Strategizing the renewal of individual and collective memories and morals as an element of social pragmatism draws on the modus operandi of folktale narration, and its symbiotic relation with writing, as enshrined in the homeostatic aspect of the psychodynamics of orality, on which Walter Ong (1982) concentrates much of the third chapter of his *Orality and Literacy: The technologizing of the Word*.¹⁸ Oral societies, by contrast with literate societies, he says, , can be characterized as homeostatic, by which he means to say that "oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance" (p. 46). In a primary oral setting, the conditioning of words is in the present, *the hic et nunc*. The meaning of each word, he explains, is controlled by what Goody and Watt (1968, p. 29)¹⁹ call "direct semantic ratification", that is, by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now. On the other hand, in print cultures, which depend on dictionaries "in which various meanings of a word as it occurs in datable texts can be recorded in formal definitions", words are known to have layers of meaning, many of them quite irrelevant to ordinary present meanings. Dictionaries, Ong observes, advertise semantic discrepancies, while oral cultures have no dictionaries and few semantic discrepancies. What is more, in orality,

(...) words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary , simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real spoken word

¹⁷Shusterman 1997, Chapter 5, Art in Action, Art Infracation, p. 135.

¹⁸ Some psychodynamics of orality, (viii) Homeostatic, p. 46-49.

¹⁹ Goody, Jack and Watt, Ian (1968). "The consequences of literacy", in Jack Goody (ed.). *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 27-84.

always occurs. Word meanings come continuously out of the present, though past meanings of course have shaped the present meaning in many and varied ways, no longer recognized. (Ong 1982, p. 46-47)

The improvised poem of the Brazilian poet/cantador, Oliveira de Panelas, comes in handy as a poetic take on the Homeostatic essence of orality, on how every change ends in the present²⁰ :

O passado não existe	The past does not exist
O futuro nunca vem	The future never comes
Pois quando ele chega	For when it does arrive
Vira presente também	The present it also becomes

In his attempt to characterize the differences between understanding and interpretation, Richard Shusterman appears to further the cause of homeostasis and clarify the concept of truth (that is, interpretation and understanding) in a typical primary orality context such as the universe of the folktale, where both verbal and non-verbal (body) language constitute understanding. "First", he argues, "the distinction between understanding and interpretation is not a rigid ontological one, where the two categories cannot share the same objects. Second, they cannot be distinguished by epistemological reliability, where understanding implies univocal truth while interpretation connotes pluralistic error. Nonetheless, understanding and interpretation are epistemologically different in terms of their functional relations: understanding initially grounds and guides interpretation, while the latter explores, validates, or modifies the initial ground of meaning."²¹

Quoting Wittgenstein, he declares: "There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They show themselves. They are mystical" He goes on to argue that what Wittgenstein fails to emphasize here is that

the ineffable but manifest is as much ordinary as mystical, and it is mystifying only to those disembodied philosophical minds who recognize no understanding other than interpretation, and no form of meaning and experience beyond or beneath the web of language. (Shusterman 2000, p. 135-136)

Conclusion

Concern with the preservation and survival of oral traditions in Africa and the United States led to the gathering and recording of oral texts in written and audio format on the part of scholars and researchers. However, the written form does not transmit the totality of the oral performance. Part of the performance that accompanies the storytelling ritual, that is, the part which contains "meaning and experience beyond or beneath the web of language"²² is lost, for

²⁰ Gadzekpo, 2007, p. 515.

²¹ Shusterman 2000, p. 134

²² Shusterman 2000, p. 136.

the written form cannot convey the gestures and facial expressions of the storyteller during the performance, nor the audience's reaction listening to a story around a fire, under a tree or sitting on a front porch, for African and African American storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience. Almost everyone in traditional African societies participates in formal and informal storytelling, an interactive oral performance, and such participation is an essential part of traditional African communal life. It is the way of conveying culture, experience, and values and a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes in oral societies; the way of updating, renewing and reaffirming individual and collective memories, morals and identities.

For the benefits of this social participatory dimension and pragmatism to be brought to bear on the community in question, the processes of creating, narrating and diffusing folktales need to be strategized and infused with the perceived moral philosophical concerns of the people, within the overall Hegelian dialectic context of a moral imperative, as well as the aesthetic and homeostatic characteristics proper to the proxemics and kinesics of orality, be it in performance mode or written format.

Admittedly, given the diverse historical and material development processes experienced especially since contact with Europe, one cannot talk of a single, unified African identity across the continent, let alone in the Diaspora, because, as Kwame Anthony Appiah aptly points out in his *In My Father's House - Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*,

To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century – if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluation ; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology – would have been “to give to aery nothing a local habitation and a name.” (Appiah 1992, p. 174)

Nevertheless, we believe that there is what Paul Radin calls the intercommunicability of the different parts of the African world, a view shared by Alice Werner, who Radin quotes as saying that “whether one studies Africa geographically, ethnologically and psychologically, one feels the absence of definite frontiers more and more as one goes on”²³ and this, in spite of the variegated and rather disruptive influences from the Mediterranean and beyond over the past two thousand years. The African and African American folktales sampled above, therefore, can be seen as representing a continuous effort of the peoples concerned, irrespective of their particular circumstances, to keep alive in written or recorded form, a practice of composite imagination, incorporating relevant scripts of ever-changing realities, a literary and entertainment genre grounded on orality and social cohesion, and an instrument of identity construction.

²³ Radin 1983, p.7.

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