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► **To cite this version:**

Russell H. Kaschula. Myth and Reality in the new South Africa: Contemporary Oral Literature. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2004, Founding Myths of the New South Africa / Les mythes fondateurs de la nouvelle Afrique du Sud, 24, pp.95-110. hal-02344099

HAL Id: hal-02344099

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344099>

Submitted on 3 Nov 2019

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Myth and Reality in the New South Africa: Contemporary Oral Literature

*Russell H. KASCHULA
University of Cape Town*

Abstract

This article explores the way in which the South African reality is presented through myth, urban legend and oral poetry. Furthermore, the way in which power is perceived and presented through oral literature is highlighted. Examples of transition myths, as well as examples of oral poetry depicting important events (such as the release from prison of Nelson Mandela) are given.

The three-way-dialectic between orality, literacy and technology is also explored in this article. In other words, the fluid movement of oral literature between, for example, the Internet and the printed text is highlighted.

Introduction

The political and social rejuvenation, which began taking place in South Africa, as early as 1990, led to the creation of a number of myths. Furthermore, the social commentary, which accompanied South Africa's transition process, reflects the emergence of a critical voice, sometimes based on reality and sometimes on myth. The extension of biblical myths into contemporary

reality is a strong feature in the poetry produced in honour of Nelson Mandela. The link between the past and the present becomes evident in this way. Furthermore, if one looks at myths associated with food substances, there is also a strong link between past and present.

Ethnographers have long since realised that oral performances cannot be divorced from the socio-political contexts in which they take place. Okpewho (1990: 3) states that this approach brought a welcome change to oral literary studies, "... because it ultimately aimed at representing social man in a creative capacity within the context of a system of signs recognized by his community." Similarly, Finnegan states that [w]e are now more sensitised to the importance of looking to the "communicative event" and its inner dynamics as a whole, to the constructive interaction of many participants... and to a whole range of non-verbal as well as verbal stylistics... and of ways in which "performance" may need to be seen not as an "extra" to the poetic genre but as of its essence (1992: x).

This is in line with the view initially put forward by Hymes (1962) who developed the term "ethnography of speaking" and the concept of an "ethnographic framework" for the study of language within specific social situations. Hymes (1962: 101) sums up this approach as follows: "The ethnography of speaking is concerned with the situations and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right."

This approach serves to illustrate how oral performances are employed as acts of communication, and sometimes even defiance, between individuals and groups, in Southern African society. These communications often happen in situations which are politically delicate. Through the subtle (or not so subtle) use of language a critical message is conveyed from the performer to the audience. A number of crucial historic and political events in South Africa's transition history can be assessed through the eyes of the performers, on the assumption that literature can be a credible reflection of the society within which we live. Barber & Farias (1989: 1) succinctly point out that there is a need to "combine a sociology with a poetics of oral literature."

Let us look now in more detail at the two genres of contemporary oral literature, namely the folktale/legend and oral poetry, in order to explore the relationship of these genres to the South African context as a socio-political unity.

Food-myths and contemporary transition

In the African folktale, food has often been associated with poison. The trickster, through the poisoning of food is able to achieve certain objectives. One only needs to think of the notion of greed and how it is depicted in the African folktale. The moral of the story is that one should eat in moderation.

Not so, say the politicians in the pre-1994 election campaigns. One should not eat at all, especially food that is offered by an opposition party.

Indulge me for the moment and pretend that you are the key role-player in the following scenario:

You are an active campaigner for the African National Congress (ANC). In fact, in 1989 you organized a “coup d’état” in the homeland of Transkei, thereby becoming a young leader in Southern Africa. You are thirty three years old. Your name is Bantubonke Holomisa and you are a Major General in the Transkei army. Your allegiance, however, is not to the Pretoria regime who trained you, but at that time, to the ANC. You are addressing a rally in the Eastern Cape province, trying to whip up anti-Nationalist party sentiment. It is March, perhaps the ides of March, or so many people thought. You are addressing a large crowd at the University of Port Elizabeth. Your speech goes something like this:

If you are a black person attending a nationalist Party rally and they offer you pap (porridge), do not eat it! It is porridge laced with invisible ink. Why would they do something so strange? Well, the answer is simple. The invisible ink will show up under the ultraviolet rays or lamps on election day. All blacks who eat that porridge will be disqualified from voting for the ANC.

In April you address another crowd in Peddie in the Ciskei. You lead the crowd in a chant:

Down with the porridge of the boers! We will not go to their rallies!

The National Party is not happy with you. They lodge a complaint with the Independent Electoral Committee (IEC). You contest the complaint at the hearing. You lose and the ANC has to pay the costs. You are also reprimanded and given a warning.

According to Goldstuck (1994: ix-x):

“Porridge and ink” sums up the urban legends of 1994: where the reality of people’s everyday survival collided with the future shock of politics, legends new and old flourished in a stew of horror and hilarity.

The urban legends of the elections went far beyond their traditional role as cautionary tales. For the first time in this country, urban legends truly lived up to their alternative label: modern mythology.

There is nothing new about the myth outlined above. It has been around colonial Africa as well as Asia for a very long time. The modern South African version goes back at least fifty years. In 1946 a rumour swept Bulawayo that meat from government stores was contaminated. A legend was in the making: The colonial authorities had doctored the meat with a chemical which would leave all black men sterile. Riots erupted. A few years later the same legends swept the Copper Belt, leading to riots in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

These legends seem to have the same sociological explanation. They make use of foods which are a traditional source of strength to black people, *i.e.* porridge and meat and subvert these foods into agents of impotence (inability to vote) used by fearful whites.

There are many legends, myths and folktales, which use food as a sociological metaphor. Surely one of the oddest legends to emerge at the dawn of the New South Africa was the ‘AIDS in the orange’ legend. This legend almost brought the entire citrus industry in South Africa to its knees. In July 1993 rumours hit the cities that oranges had been infected with HIV-positive blood.

These rumours contained elaborate plots, mainly centering around the right wing. Firstly, it was widely believed that a right-wing Natal farmer had sprayed his orange crops with his own Aids-infected blood. Secondly, the myth went that an AWB supporter had injected his labourers' infected blood into oranges. The story swept through Soweto, Johannesburg, spreading to Zululand and so on. Apparently the story began in the Eastern Cape where shoppers warned each other not to buy oranges as they had been "injected with AIDS-infected blood."

According to Outspan International (formerly the Citrus Board) this legend coincided with the picking and marketing of the rare blood oranges, of which no more than 300 bags come onto the market each year. The flesh of these oranges has a deep red pigmentation and resembles the colour of blood. This legend seriously damaged the hawkers trade in South Africa and temporarily crippled the orange industry. At one point the chairman of the African Council for Hawkers and Informal Business, Lawrence Mavundla, called an emergency press conference in order to counter the rumours.

The legend never stopped with oranges. It also began to threaten the apple industry: An office worker bought an apple from a vendor. The worker cut the apple open and found blood inside. She took the fruit to a chemist. The fruit was sent away for tests. The chemist phoned her back a few days later: the laboratory had reported that the blood was HIV-positive.

One thing is sure: urban legends cannot be controlled. They are stories that emerge from people's subconscious fears and prejudices, developing a narrative structure which is impossible to control. AIDS is one of the diseases which is mysterious, deadly and invisible, a true breeding-ground for legend. Perhaps the most destructive, humiliating and misinformed myth is that the rape of a virgin will cure one from being HIV-positive. This has led to a dramatic increase in child rapes in South African society.

The Return of the River Monster

A good example of a contemporary myth was found reported in the *Sunday Times*, 4 May, 1997. This shows clearly how myth and folktale have adapted themselves to the new South Africa. The following is an extract from this article.

Riddle of the river monster

Villagers live in fear of a creature with the head of a horse and the body of a fish.

Captain Elias Mkuzo has a serious problem. He has to find a monster that is terrorising the people of Mount Ayliff in the Eastern Cape by luring villagers and goats to a watery death in the Mzintlava River...

Stella Ninisa, who works in a Kokstad hotel, remembers her parents discussing the monster 35 years ago but says it has never been so active. This year it has killed four people, last year its tally was three.

Descriptions of the creature vary. Some say it has the head of a horse and the body of a fish. Others, like Zovuyo Mazaza, a petrol attendant, say it changes its form. What they all agree on is its *modus operandi*. It drags its victims into the deep pools of the Mzintlava River and drowns them. Then it tears away their eyelids and top lip and sucks out their blood and brains.

The victims are discarded but their bodies are often only found a week later—completely bloodless. Eye contact with the monster must be avoided because its gaze is hypnotic. Its hunting time appears to be in the morning and it has never been seen at night...

Nontya Tyambo studies English and education at the University of Transkei and teaches at the training college.

She has no doubts about the monster. She first heard about it when she was seven years old: "It has always killed people but not at this rate."

She describes it as about a metre long and thick. She says the monster used to stay in the water but has recently become more vicious and bold...

The junior school principal, Robin Hood Sekeleni, says sometimes children are too frightened to cross the river to get to school.

Masima Mngomeni believes the monster killed her 12-year-old son, Mpukwana, in January. Mpukwana was swimming with friends and it sucked him down under the water. His body was found three days later with a torn throat.

Leonard Jojo is one of the village elders. He saw the monster last year while crossing the river early one morning. Mindful of the rumours, he took four stones with him for self defence.

He was in the middle of the river when he saw the monster swimming upstream towards him.

“It had a head like a cow and huge eyes,” he says. “I threw my first stone at it. I hit it with the second and it went down. By the time I threw the third rock I was on the bank.”

An officer from the conservation department, Wycliffe Ngquseka, has been dispatched to investigate the situation but so far has not come up with much.

It was reported that the DP leader in the Eastern Cape legislature, Eddie Trent, has suggested the monster be sued as a tourist attraction in the same way as the Loch Ness monster in Scotland: all very well except Nessie is not feeding on locals and killing goats.

It is easy to be sceptical about the monster when you are hundreds of kilometres away. But for the people of Mount Ayliff, it's real.

Again the message is clear: oral art represents a thread by which humanity is bound (from the river monster to Loch Ness) and its development can be influenced by a number of factors. Already in the above newspaper article there is a hint at the commercial value of oral tradition in the second last paragraph. This is the nature of transition. In any event, the media plays an important role in disseminating contemporary oral traditions. (Perhaps it could be argued that the modern media and its reporting is mythical by its very nature!). Goldstuck (1994: xi) has already acknowledged that “a large proportion of the material I collected would not have reached me were it not for the Internet.”

Oral poetry and transition

The link between socio-political oratory and “myth” has been explored above. Another important genre where this link can easily be made in South Africa is that of oral poetry. Already in 1975, Ruth Finnegan notes that

[t]he political role of poetry is not just of recent origin in Africa ... Panegyric is an obvious example, involving propaganda and support for the authorities... Poetry can also be used to pressurize those in authority... (1975: 272-273).

There would seem to be an intricate relationship between those who control power, and their continued legitimisation through political oratory produced by the poet.

Examples of poetry performed by well-known contemporary *imbongi*, Bongani Sitole, are included here to further show the link between oral performance and politics around the time of transition in South Africa. Furthermore, the biblical mythology used by Sitole is explored here. Alongside the metaphors and images used to portray Mandela, the use of the comparative biblical metaphors serve to create a mystical character imbued with power and longevity, a character who is greater than life itself.

Sitole was born at Mqhekezweni location near Umtata in the Eastern Cape on 21 June 1937. He worked as a migrant worker before returning to Umtata in 1976. He began praising whilst still at school in 1954. Although Sitole is functionally literate, all his poetry is spontaneously produced. Sitole retired to Mqhekezweni in 1995, but his role as a political commentator, especially from 1990 onwards, is clearly supported by his poetry. Prior to this point he had stopped praising and “rolled up his skins” due to the harassment that poets were experiencing. Again this is clear evidence of manipulation by those in power. Sitole was one of those poets who was silenced.

After 1990, during the transition period, he was the first poet to be “placed” within the ANC, at least in the Eastern Cape region, after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. In 1991 Mandela visited his former home for the first time since his release from prison. Sitole praised him. It is in the metaphors used that Mandela takes on mythical qualities. In the following translated extract Mandela is referred to as a Christ-like figure, followed by his disciples:

... they call him even if they don't know him,
 They call him even if they've never seen him before...
 An example of Jesus followed by many people...
 Things are approached carefully if they're to succeed...
 He's steady,
 The son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe...

He's accompanied by his disciples,
Like Jesus,
He's accompanied by Sisulu and Mbeki,
He's accompanied by Mhlaba,
He's accompanied by worthy men.

In another poem, Sitole places Mandela above truth as known to humankind. Untainted by worldly characteristics such as greed and lies, Mandela is portrayed as a lawyer of truth:

He finished his education and they joined the law of truth.
Imagine, lawyers representing themselves.
They just stood and defended themselves,
Because the truth could not be perverted.

In another poem about Mandela (1991), Sitole refers to him as follows:

Yinkunz' ethi yakugquba kulal' amatye...
A bull that kicks up dust and stones...

Again it is metaphors such as these, which give him mythical, greater than life powers. Reverend Xozwa, another *imbongi*, compares Mandela to Moses, leading his people. Again, this brings continuity between the past and the present, between two great leaders.

*Xelelani okaTutu ooNyawo-ntle bathandazele uNelson;
Kaloku nimcelele impilo-nde, ntle njengoMosisi de sifike
enkululekweni.*

Tell Tutu that he must inform the priests that they must pray for Nelson;
So that intercessions should be made for his health and long life, like Moses, until liberation is obtained.

Naturally, much poetry was performed in honour of Nelson Mandela in the run-up to the elections as well as on election day. Sithembile Mlanjeni was one of Mandela's praise singers at his presidential inauguration. His performance included a description of how the inauguration "aroused from the graves" former ANC leaders such as John Dube, Albert Luthuli and Chris Hani. It was

when Mlanjeni was interviewed by the *Sunday Times* that his praise singing developed into an urban legend (Goldstuck 1994: 206-207). He spoke about the role of praise singers as one of encouraging soldiers to be brave when going to war, and later being able to comfort the bereaved. Some readers took the first part of the statement far too literally. When they heard about “war” and the fact that even the “boers” would have to respect Mandela, some interpreted this as a challenge of war and a threat to kill the boers. In a letter to *The Star* one reader commented as follows concerning this matter: “How hollow did the President’s message of peace and reconciliation sound afterwards!”

Contemporary oral literature and technology

It may now be timeous to undertake studies of contemporary oral literature against the backdrop of the emergence of what is being called “global culture.” These studies, as well as the emergence of such a culture are facilitated by modern technology. At the end of the day it may simply mean the recognition of the dynamism of culture which allows for common ways of expressing human reality, whilst acknowledging that this reality is not experienced simultaneously by humankind, but rather at different times on what could be termed a human continuum, hence resulting in perceived cultural and political diversity.

The influence of Ong’s “secondary orality” and the interplay between “secondary” and “primary” orality as a result of the influence of literacy needs to be taken into account when exploring contemporary oral performance (Ong 1982: 68). On the one hand it must be borne in mind that the oral form exists regardless of writing and of the influence of social changes brought about through the influence of writing and other forms of media. On the other hand, the literary encounter between oral, written and what I will term “technauriture,” formed across the barriers of time, language and genre in South Africa reveals rich insights about the nature of social structure, belief, ethnicity and literature, past and present. Arguably we are living in a post-primary, partly pre-secondary and secondary society, where the interaction between

orality, literacy and technology is becoming increasingly evident. This is clearly illustrated by Arthur Goldstuck whose research on urban legends is directly influenced by his ability to access these myths and legends as they enter from orality onto the information highway. They are then down-loaded and published in written form. This provides a clear illustration of the three-way-dialectic between primary orality, literacy and technology—hence the author’s term “technauriture.”

This dialectic is particularly fueled by the Internet. Finnegan (1992: 168-169) acknowledges, in regard to oral poetry, for example, that the “modes of transmission, distribution and publication... turn out to be complicated, and not... confined neatly to two distinct traditions, one oral, the other written.” Besides the overlap between written and oral face-to-face media, Finnegan (1992: 168) speaks of new media such as radio, television and tape-recorder.

Wynchank (1994: 13) takes this point even further by exploring the role of the griot in relation to contemporary cinema in Senegal, arguing that the cineaste represents a type of modern griot in West Africa, which is neither “primary” nor “secondary.” Wynchank argues that “there exist two types of orality: a secondary orality which is recomposed of writing in a milieu where writing predominates over the voice, and an orality which is mechanically transmitted, deferred in time and space.” Although the latter may be true of cinema, this mechanical transmission is becoming less deferred and more immediate as far as the Internet is concerned. Sitole’s spontaneous oral performances were, for example, initially video-taped, then reduced to writing in a book entitled *Qhiwu-u-u-la! Return to the Fold!* (Kaschula & Matyumza, 1996). His poetry was then transferred to the Internet in its oral form, thereby completing the three-way dialectic. This is also true of Goldstuck’s book of legends discussed in this article, dealing with legends told during South Africa’s transition to democracy.

Many “transition performers” have been exposed to the three-way dialectic between “print, performance and the more self-contained orality of the older culture.” (Gunner 1989: 55). This is

explored further in previous research (Kaschula, 1997). This dialectic lends itself toward exploration in relation to the Internet.

Today, it is the use of the Internet which has the potential to revolutionize the composition, transmission and reception of performance literature, thereby providing a new basis to document transition, transformation and re-birth in any society which has been exposed to secondary orality. Poetry can, for example, be orally performed and simultaneously translated to a global audience through the oral word. Thereafter it could be downloaded and published in book form. The purchasing of Sitole's poetry by Microsoft marks the beginning of the process and a return to what one could term a technologised orality, namely, technauriture.

Globalisation has led to certain changes when it comes to oral performances. This can be directly linked to the nature of capitalism and globalisation. In Southern Africa today many oral performers have agents who organise their performance dates and look after their monetary matters. An oral poet can charge anything up to 1000 rands per performance depending on the reputation and status. Some performers such as Mzwakhe Mbuli (now imprisoned on bank robbery charges) and to some extent Zolani Mkiva have successfully adapted tradition in order to negotiate the international music market. Many performers no longer receive gifts, but rather royalties from books published containing orally performed transcribed poetry, or from the sales of compact discs, tapes and so on. As a saleable art form, Sitole's poem was sold to Microsoft for use on a web-page. Gcina Mhlophe, the renowned story-teller has adapted the folktale tradition. She now has her own show on SABC television. She has also published a number of books containing folktales. Her performance art has become her livelihood. It is now timely to place any orality-literacy debate within the context of a fast-changing, world-wide technological boom. This boom can be directly associated with South Africa's transition to democracy and economic reform. This will facilitate an understanding of the oral-literate continuum more holistically in a society with ever-increasing numbers of cell-phone and computer users.

Contemporary oral literature and power

It may be asked: to what extent have political influences been brought to bear on oral literary performances? It is clear that there are influences. It is evident in the emerging myths and legends as well as the poetry examples provided above. What is more intriguing is the possible manipulation of the art in the interests of power. In relation to oral performances in Tanzania, Mlama posits the following:

Another problem which needs more attention than it has been given to date is the manipulation of oral art for the benefit of the ruling classes, leading to its domestication and disempowerment. (1995: 24)

The “ink in the porridge” myth is a clear example of political manipulation and domestication of this art form. This has been explored in Kaschula (1991) where it is shown, on the one hand, how political influences were brought to bear on the Xhosa *imbongi* during the apartheid years. On the other hand, the legitimisation of leaders such as Mandela is highlighted in Kaschula (1991, 1993). Arguably this type of “Mandela poetry” may be a type of “domestication,” but it would also arguably have the genuine support of the audience and the poet, hence it would be difficult to argue that it is disempowering the tradition, though much of this poetry is partisan by its very nature. Even so, Sitole manages to criticise Mandela, prior to the 1994 elections, during the height of the Inkatha-ANC feud. In the same poem where Mandela is referred to as a lawyer of truth, Sitole admonishes him for his lack of critical leadership in dealing with then homeland Minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi, now Minister of Home Affairs in Mbeki’s government:

We will never change,
Shangaans, Sothos, Malawians, Xhosas, Vendas, Tswanas,
No men, even Zulus,
We are all black people.
Please!
Please, son of Mandela,
Please go and fetch Gatsha Buthelezi and arrest him,
The problem is there.

Here Sitole appealed for unity among black people. He also calls for the arrest of Buthelezi in order to create a climate of unity in the struggle. In doing so, Sitole implicitly legitimises the power of the ANC and subverts that of Inkatha. Interestingly, he avoids blaming “ethnic” differences for the pre-election ANC/Inkatha conflict, emphasising that Zulus, too, are part of an overall black unity.

As it turns out, Sitole was in fact correct. Buthelezi and De Klerk must have known of the sinister forces at work. These forces were in their interests alone, given a looming election in which the ANC would no doubt win hands down.

The oral word is a powerful political tool, hence this type of literature has increasingly been used and manipulated as part of political rhetoric. Finnegan states that

[s]ongs are now accepted by African political parties as a vehicle for communication, propaganda, political pressure, and political education... As such they are a powerful and flexible weapon in many types of political activity. (1975: 284)

These songs were used by the Mau Mau movement in Kenya in the 1950s. Song and poetry was also used during Nkrumah’s imprisonment by colonial authorities (Finnegan, 1975: 283-285). In Southern Africa it is true to say that the poetry of D.L.P. Yali-Manisi is rich in anti-colonial sentiment (Opland, 1983: 90-116). Oral literature has formed part of election campaigns as far back as the 1950s and 60s. For example, Senegal and Sierra Leone in 1957, Nyasaland in 1961, and Northern Rhodesia in 1962. South Africa was no exception in 1994.

Quite clearly it is those who hold power and the performer’s ability to be innovative as a contemporary socio-political commentator, as well as the people in general who legitimise power in a democracy, who will continue to influence the tradition which remains a micro-context within the wider macro strategy of power and ideology in South Africa. The use of opening epithets in oral poetry such as “Amandla!” “Power” show directly the correlation between performance art and political power/rhetoric.

Conclusion

This article confirms the adaptability of tradition and culture in the face of transition towards democracy. It is exactly this dynamic which ensures its continued survival, even through modern technology such as the Internet. The transition performer in South Africa remains rooted within their context, commenting on present-day happenings and recent history, whilst at the same time weaving a literary tapestry for future generations. This article furthermore confirms the continuity between the past and the present. The contemporaneous use of food images in legends as well as the Mandela Christ-like metaphors show how the past informs the present in the South African literary tradition.

Russell H. KASCHULA¹
University of Cape Town



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¹ School of Languages & Literatures, African Languages & Literatures Section, Private Bag, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa 7701, Email: Russell@humanities.uct.ac.za

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