

The Struggle for Authority in George McCall Theal's *Kaffir Folklore* (1882)

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Abstract

This article focuses specifically on George McCall Theal's collection of folktale texts, *Kaffir Folklore* (1882), as an example of an early South African ethnographic publication, and argues that the folktale transcriptions contained therein, although a part of Theal's general colonialist project, are hybrid, containing the voices of both coloniser and colonised. The key argument is that the presence of the African voices in this text reveals simultaneously that Theal's editorial aspirations were never absolutely imposed, and that agency and influence (albeit limited) of the colonised Xhosa co-authors were present. The article offers an analysis of the paratext (the preface, the introduction and the explanatory notes) of *Kaffir Folklore*, rather than a close reading of the tales themselves. To facilitate an understanding of Theal's editorial practice, *Kaffir Folklore* is compared to Harold Scheub's *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (1975). More generally, drawing on postcolonial folklore and book-history scholarship, the article explores how folklore texts of the colonial era, although contributing to the establishment of a literary and cultural orthodoxy in modern South Africa, constitute a telling hybrid genre, which invites a re-evaluation of colonial relations, and of individual texts themselves. In short, these texts synthesise different literary traditions (European and African), different mediums (the oral and the written), different disciplinary approaches (ethnography, folklore, literature), and most significantly, the voices of different subjects. *Kaffir Folklore* (1882) epitomises this synthesis.

Theal's Editorial and Ethnographic Practice

In South African postcolonial book-history and folklore scholarship, understanding the specific literary field (Bourdieu, 1993: 42) in which a text is created and circulates is crucial. To unpack how folktale texts were, and still are, included as "cultural specimens" in an ethnographic publication requires a clear delineation of the literary field which spawned the publication. Van der Vlies (2012:11), drawing on Bourdieu (1993), describes a literary field as

[...] a series of interconnected cultural and social systems, each with its own hierarchies and overlapping structures of authority and prestige, additionally affect

authors and their books in various struggles to determine their works' relative cultural status, their cultural capital.

Theal published *Kaffir Folklore* in a complex colonial context in which lasting and devastating cultural and social hierarchies were being forged. The book reflects the sometimes subtle and often overlooked structures of authority which prevailed in the Eastern Cape in the nineteenth century, especially during the period of the Nine Frontier Wars. Also of interest in this particular book is the specific jostling of authorial voices, which, when examined today, significantly alter the cultural status of a text that a few decades would have been scorned for its outright colonialist and racist ethos. What follows in this section is a description of the literary field in which *Kaffir Folklore* was produced.

George McCall Theal, the “father” of South African history, was a Canadian migrant who arrived in South Africa in 1861 and enjoyed a chequered career as a reporter, a diamond prospector, a teacher, a labour agent, a magistrate, a historian, a folklorist and an ethnographer in colonial southern Africa. A veritable jack-of-all-trades, Theal, unlike his more famous contemporary Wilhelm Bleek who was a trained philologist, was an amateur ethnographer who embodied what Jean and John Comaroff describe as the “enlightened liberal humanism” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992, 202), which characterised the discipline of ethnography in its infant phase. In 1891 these varied and intrepid exploits culminated in Theal being appointed to the illustrious post of Colonial Historiographer, which he retained until his death in 1919. During these latter years he continued to write and publish voluminously. Theal is indisputably the most prolific historian in South Africa and he is arguably the most influential (Naidu, 2012:51–64). His *oeuvre* was the basis for history textbooks and high school history syllabi for most of the twentieth century, beginning in about 1909 with the publication of Maskew Miller’s *Short History of South Africa*. But despite this far-reaching and perhaps insidious influence of Theal, relatively little scholarship exists on his ethnographic and folklore publications.

The nascent phase of Theal’s writing career, when he was collecting ethnographic and historical material on the Eastern Frontier and in Kaffraria (circa 1860–1880), is the most fascinating because it was then that his desire to record the history of a “civilising colonialism” was born, though as I argue, this desire is coterminous with a compulsion to provide the Africans of the region with written records of their history and culture. In 1871 Theal began a stint as a teacher at Lovedale Mission at Alice in the Eastern Cape. The mission was established by Scottish

Presbyterians in 1842 with the aim of Christianising and civilising the Africans of the area. As Leon de Kock has noted, the institution had the combined power of influence of a school, of a seminary and of a printing press (1996:19). De Kock's central concern in his book *Civilising Barbarians* is to explicate the "making of a discursive orthodoxy by literary means", in colonial South Africa, and he appositely identifies Lovedale as 'crucial in constructing this literary basis' (1996:19). De Kock argues that the missionaries at Lovedale were engaged in constructing a new cultural order which coerced the African subject to accept a narrative of identity based on western, Christian subjectivity (1996). The young teacher, Theal, a vigorous example of this subjectivity, became, as his ethnographic and publishing endeavours suggest, deeply committed to this new order of "construct[ing] a colonial text for self-apprehension [...] a text which depended on the new edifice of literacy in English" (de Kock, 1996:48). But as this study of *Kaffir Folklore* uncovers, and as de Kock's (2012:53) more recent study of the impact of print culture on an individual such as Tiyo Soga claims, a singular "cultural order [...] was always contested and orders were regularly undermined, both subtly and otherwise". The Lovedale Mission, with its Presbyterian tenets and printing resources, offered Theal a means to fulfil his personal work ethic, and to propagate it through teaching and publishing. At this juncture, Theal encountered the indigenous folktale, a short oral narrative text which he transcribed, translated and edited, and then inserted, with its cacophony of voices, into his grand narrative of South Africa's history.¹

Theal's folktale transcriptions form a curious element in this narrative, providing "poetic interludes" for the literary or scientific reader in Europe interested in the indigenous cultures of the colonies. For African readers, Theal *intended* the texts (accompanied by lengthy ethnographic notes) to serve as an authentic record of their cultural heritage. Indicating a degree of perspicacity and a stab at liberal humanism, but generating more than a little irony, he noted in the preface to his collection of tales that: "It is with a view of letting the people we have chosen to call Kaffirs describe themselves in their own words, that these stories have been collected and printed" (Theal, 1882:vi). Clearly manifest, however, at this early stage in his writing career, is his appreciation of the significance of his work for the African reader (*Compendium* 2nd ed. 1876, n.p.):

The first edition was read by some hundreds of natives, among whom were many of the teachers of mission schools on the frontier, and as it is confidently anticipated that this issue will have a still larger circulation among them, it is but fair that

anything in the history of their people – even to the spelling of the names of the chiefs of old – should be accurately given.

But note that even though he intends the *Compendium* to have a large “native” readership, he addressed his prefatory remarks to a white audience (“*their* people”). This incongruity, one of many, is strongly evident in *Kaffir Folklore* (1882), where all his editorial comments are directed at the European reader.

In this article the discursive disjunctions in Theal’s collection of Xhosa folktales, *Kaffir Folklore* (1882) are of primary concern. In terms of methodology, the preface, introduction and explanatory notes of this publication are subjected to a close reading, as they, together with the tales, reveal details of Theal’s editorial and ethnographic practice. One of the most striking features of the collection is its multi-layered authorship, despite Theal’s bid for textual authority. In the preface, Theal (1882, viii–ix) makes a somewhat disingenuous claim regarding the authorship of the text:

Most of them have been obtained from at least ten or twelve individuals residing in different parts of the country, and they have all undergone a thorough revision by a circle of natives. They were not only told by natives, but were copied down by natives. The notes only are my own. I have directed the work of others, but have myself done nothing more than was necessary to explain the text.

The text is clearly a hybrid text, a collaborative work,ⁱⁱ containing at least three sets of authorial voices. The African oral sources (“ten or twelve individuals”), the African transcribers and revisors (“a circle of natives”) and the colonial ethnographer (Theal), together produced the manuscript. In this context, this is not an unusual literary practice. Hannah Jones (1995:601) has examined the phenomenon in South Africa:

Co-authoring is a common and longstanding phenomenon of South African literary endeavours. From the transcription by nineteenth-century missionaries of African oral narratives to the place of the proverbial ‘participant observer’ in the making of worker plays and poems in the 1980s, such relationships – often cross-cultural – are a ubiquitous presence, frequently ignored or under-researched.

Like Jones, Isabel Hofmeyr (1995:19) also comments on the neglect of this genre: “Another longstanding tradition of oral testimony activity is evident in one of the most neglected of South African literary genres – the co-authored text”. These co-authored texts, especially those compiled in the colonial era, when examined from a postcolonial perspective help to throw light on the intricacies of colonial cultural relations, some of which endure well into the post-apartheid present. Hermann Wittenberg(2012:677), identifying the publication of Bleek’s co-authored text,

Reynard the Fox in South Africa (1864) as a “foundational event in South African literary history” goes on to provide a thorough-going examination of the Bleek and Lloyd archive and its long-term implications for /Xam culture. Although Wittenberg (2012:678–679) aptly concludes that “the publication of *Reynard*, entailed a moral circumscription of the Khoisan imagination” which “thus helped to create a restrictive cultural politics in South Africa”, his study of the ethnographic practices of both Bleek and early twentieth-century ethnographer, Leonhard Schultze, does not pay adequate attention to the role played by the indigenous sources in the construction of these foundational publications. With *Kaffir Folklore*, it is useful to approach this text as a hybrid genre, or as Kapchan and Strong (1999:243) put it, as an “anti-genre, defying categorical definition”, because it synthesises different literary traditions (the African and the European), different mediums (the oral and the written), and different disciplinary approaches (ethnography, folklore, literature). The publication of *Kaffir Folklore* (hereafter KF) in 1882, arguably as momentous as Bleek’s publication of *Reynard the Fox in South Africa*, was the first of many such hybrid, “anti-genre” texts to be published by Theal. The hybridity of KF takes the form of an admixture of views and literary styles, which, although they coalesce, give rise to many telling disjunctions and disruptions.

Clearly, Theal’s colonialist discourse is disrupted by the multiple authorship of KF. At the same moment that Theal assumes authority over the text by articulating his discourse of the Xhosa ‘*other*’, he has to concede that the voices of the African subjects are crucial to the production of the text. In the preface to KF he proudly asserts his liberalism: “It is with a view of letting the people we have chosen to call Kaffirs describe themselves in their own words, that these stories have been collected and printed” (Theal, 1882:vi). Without entirely relinquishing his hegemony, Theal acknowledges the authorial voices of the African subjects – the presence of which often disrupts the “authority” of his own discourse.

Although this article aims to identify the different authorial voices at work in this specific text, it must be borne in mind that this text taken as a whole exemplifies Theal’s colonialist discourse. Theal uses his ethnographic discourse in KF to familiarise his audience with the Xhosa people. In so doing, he creates a complex and vivid, often negative, image of the Xhosa as ‘*other*’ for his intended European audience. It is possible to compile a profile of Theal’s ideal reader from the various references he makes to and about his audience. Moreover, Theal’s editing practice (as discerned from the differences between the Lovedale manuscript of KF, the 1882 publication and

the 1910 volume of ethnography), reveals that Theal was not unaware of the impact his writing had on the creation of cultural identities, for his subject, for his readers and for himself. The publication of KF in this literary field, despite the dissonances and disruptions identified, contributed to ‘the colonial literary order’ (Wittenberg, 2012:679) and to the interpellation of the Xhosa people as colonised subjects, and to the consolidation of Theal and his target, white audience as civilising colonisers.

Comparative Ethnographic Practices: Harold Scheub’s Comparable Collection, *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (1975)

To facilitate an analysis of KF, with the aim of elucidating Theal’s editorial practice, the text is compared to another collection of “unadulterated” transcripts of Xhosa folktales. Although published nearly a century after KF, I have chosen for this purpose Harold Scheub’s collection, *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (1975). Similar to Wittenberg’s (2012) comparison of Bleek and Schultze, the similarities and differences in editorial practice between Theal and Scheub are of interest, whilst the varying contexts of collection are also noted. Scheub’s methods of collection and his transcription techniques have been highly praised by scholars in general. Both Ruth Finnegan (1970) and Isidore Okpewho (1992) cite Scheub as being a pioneer in the study of the performance elements of the oral folktale tradition. In addition, Scheub’s structural explication of *iintsomi*, combined with postcolonial discourse theory, provides an appropriately tandem methodology for a cultural-literary analysis of Theal’s KF.

Scheub’s methods of collection and presentation are generally unlike Theal’s except in one respect. They both lived and worked amongst their collaborators in what Wittenberg (2012:676) describes as “an intimate context”. Incidentally, at the outbreak of the Ninth Frontier War, due to his “special knowledge of native character”, Theal was requested by the colonial government to visit the Xhosa (Gaika) chief, Oba, in order to persuade him not to take up arms against the settlers (Saunders, 1988:12). In *History of the Boers* (1887), Theal describes the five months or so that he spent at Oba’s kraal. However, Theal and Scheub’s descriptions of the form of the tales are not dissimilar. The main focus of Scheub’s study is performance and he therefore covers various elements of the creative process of composition. For example, using a structuralist approach, he explains how the tales are constructed by the performer who uses core-images and

core-clichés. Interestingly, Theal identified this feature of the art-form as early as 1877: ‘There is a peculiarity in many of these stories which makes them capable of almost indefinite expansion. They are so constructed that parts of one can be made to fit into parts of another so as to form a new tale’ (Theal, 1877:4). In this way, both Theal and Scheub acknowledge that tale types exist and that these tale types are subject to modifications with each performance.ⁱⁱⁱ Also, Scheub’s studies of the role played by the audience have shed light on the practice of indigenous criticism. Although he was working in southern Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, Scheub’s approach is imbued with the “sensitivity to the ethical and political issues of researching” (Finnegan, 1992:50–51) advocated by postcolonial theorists, as the following discussion of his practice reveals.

In KF, Theal does mention the performance context of the tales. His emphasis is on the setting and atmosphere. He is aware of the dramatic power of the tales and he appreciates the psychological effects produced by the combination of tale and ambience. However, his (1882:vi–vii) description is not without a slur against the “superstitious” beliefs of the Xhosa:

This is perhaps not so much on account of the evening being the most convenient time, as because such tales as these have most effect when told to an assemblage gathered round a fire circle, when night has spread her mantle over the earth, and when the belief in the supernatural is stronger than it is by day.

Scheub emphasises the individual characteristics of the performer and his attention to individual creativity has re-claimed agency for the performer. Through detailed descriptions of individual dramatic techniques and with the introduction of a series of photographs, Scheub has brought the role of the body in the *iintsomi* tradition into focus. Okpewho (1992:17) notes that “Scheub provides, as no scholar before him ever did, a variety of photographs capturing the dramatic movements of his narrators”. The lack of technology notwithstanding, Theal, on the other hand, mentions only one specific source in KF – not an oral performer but “an educated grandson of the late chief Moroko” (Theal, 1882:39) who wrote down a tale for Theal. Otherwise, the oral sources are referred to generally as “ancient dames” (Theal, 1882:vi).

Scheub also shows particular sensitivity to the problems of translation and transcription. Finnegan, in fact, uses Scheub’s observations on this issue to comment on the seriousness of the problems:

How does one effectively translate the verbal and non-verbal elements of such a tradition to the written word? ... It is impossible to consider the verbal elements of the performance in isolation from the non-verbal, yet there is no useful way of transferring the non-verbal elements to paper. ... [The Xhosa narrator] will leave gaps in the plot from time to time, which are filled in by the audience. To find an *artistically pleasing* means of filling in those gaps for an alien reader without interfering with the subtle balance being created by the artist in other regards is another special translation problem.

(Scheub in Finnegan, 1992:191; my emphasis)

Scheub's concern for finding an "artistically pleasing" transcription for the "alien reader" is a concern which Theal also shared, but Theal did not share Scheub's awareness of the complex practical and ethical problems associated with transcription. With the above in mind, it is arguable that Theal and his circle of revisors, in their translation, transcription and editing of the tale texts, did attempt to "fill in those gaps for an alien reader", but there are no means ultimately of verifying those processes. However, with the material available, these processes may be speculatively outlined.

Scheub has mainly been praised for his attention to the dramatic elements of folktales, but his method of collection has also received acclaim from folklorists. He spent two years in southern Africa where he collected a total of 3946 tales from 2051 different artists (Scheub, 1975:4). He travelled alone and by foot in order not to be intrusive. He is very careful to describe all the details of the context of an individual performance, such as the time of day, number and composition of the audience and his volume includes Xhosa transcriptions alongside English translations. He struck up a lasting relationship with one of his sources, Nongenile Masithathu Zenani, and he edited a volume of tales and observations by Zenani.

Despite his scholarly and ethical standing, even Scheub makes some naive assumptions. In an attempt to efface his 'otherness' Scheub (1975:5) claims that "[o]nce the performance was under way, I simply receded into the background, a member of the audience. I should add that I believe that the analyses I have made of the performances are much the same as those that members of the Xhosa and Zulu audiences would make". This statement is very similar to Theal's disingenuous claim regarding his unobtrusive role in the transcription process. Scheub's contribution to the field would have been enhanced if he had displayed the same sensitivity to his own 'otherness', as he did to the subjects of his study. Nevertheless, in the absence of any transcripts contemporary to Theal's, of the same tale types, Scheub's transcripts provide a useful

guideline for an analysis of the KF folktales, as well as providing a general point of comparison of editorial and ethnographic practices.

What follows is a description of the paratext of the KF publication. The differences between KF and the manuscript prepared by Theal in 1877 while he was employed at Lovedale (of which only a sample sheet was printed) are explored. Adjustments and revisions in *The Yellow and Dark-Skinned People of Africa South of the Zambesi* (hereafter YDSP) are also included in the discussion. KF is examined as part of Theal's colonialist discourse, and thus the various contradictions as well as conjunctions are noted, but most importantly, the disruption of Theal's discourse by the clamouring of different authorial voices in KF is uncovered.

***Kaffir Folklore* – The Publication**

The tales in KF were first published “in various South African papers and magazines, some as far back as 1874” (Theal, 1882:ix). Whilst at Lovedale Theal prepared the 1877 manuscript, which was to be published by the Lovedale Press. He began to print it in 1877 but he was interrupted by the outbreak of the ninth Frontier War. This first collection of tales was entitled *Stories of the Amaxosa* and, unlike KF, was intended to be a collection of tales in Xhosa “[w]ith English translations and notes” (Theal, 1877, title page). KF was eventually published in London in 1882 by W. Swan Sonnenschein and Co. Later in 1910, much of the same material was incorporated into YDSP. In total, KF contains a preface which serves as justification for the publication, an introductory ethnographic chapter, 21 Xhosa narratives, a selection of proverbs and figurative expressions, and lengthy explanatory notes. Most of the stories are to do with marriage and the observation of custom, or deal with the theme of famine. The stories contain fantastic creatures such as ‘zims’ (cannibals), talking animals, and five-headed snakes.

First, the visual presentation of this material is an important indicator of Theal's (and the publisher's) categorisation of the publication, and anticipated audience. The beginning of every section is heralded by a rectangular, scroll-like illustration, often resembling a coat-of-arms or crest. Each section ends with a smaller illustration, which is floral with birds or small animals. These pastoral images formed part of a European convention at the time, which romanticised folklore as “survivals” from an idealised, bygone era. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998:297) points out that the term folklore, when it was first used in the nineteenth-century, “referred to the purity of national culture preserved in rural backwaters outside the cosmopolitanizing reach of the

metropole”. In a similar vein, Briggs (1993:400) draws attention to the nostalgia and romanticism of the German poet, Herder, who was also a folklorist: “Herder equated the oral texts of the folk with emotionality and closeness to nature, and linked the written word to thinking, philosophy, and alienation from nature”. In KF, this dichotomy between oral, rural folk and urban, literate elite, which still dogs the discipline, is reflected in the visual panoply. But despite the floridly imaginative quality and (for a European reader) exotic content of some of the tales, there is no attempt to echo the content of the tales in the illustrations, and no design or motif which is remotely African (even though it was the arts and crafts of the Xhosa which Theal admired the most). This European framing of the text (at a quick glance the volume might be a collection of the Grimms’ *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*) jars not only with the content, but also with the claims to authenticity which Theal makes in the preface.

Why was the book conceived in this way? It is probable that Theal, the amateur ethnographer, made a bid for textual authority by targeting a select scholarly readership (“those who have made it their business to study mankind” [Theal, 1882:v]), for his first “scientific” text to be published in London. This speculation is supported by press reviews of *The History and Ethnography of South Africa* (1907–1910), which Swan Sonnenschein and Co. included in a mail advertisement for the same publication. Almost all the reviews recognise the appeal the texts hold for the “antiquary, anthropologist, and the folk-lorist” (*Times*).ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, Theal’s choice of presentation, assuming that the decision was not made entirely by the publisher, did not conform to the images of Africa which were prevalent in the popular, domestic media in England at the time. As McClintock (1995: 209) argues, the imperial project was given prominent visual form in

images of colonial conquest [which] were stamped on soap boxes...biscuit tins, whisky bottles, tea tins and chocolate bars ... No pre-existing form of organized racism had ever before been able to reach so large and so differentiated a mass of the populace.

But Theal opted for a sober, scholarly-looking package for his folktale texts. Perhaps KF, as “scientific” publication, not popular domestic literature, furthered Theal’s ambitions to establish himself as a bona fide authority on indigenous South African cultures and colonial history (an ambition which was realised through the publication of about 40 subsequent books).

A second issue is the selection of material. Theal claims that the tales in KF “have been so selected as to leave no distinguishing feature unrepresented” (KF), and indeed, the material

covered in KF is extensive. By representative Theal obviously means, representative *of* the Xhosa subject *for* European readers, who were, most likely, “[d]esk-bound anthropologists in London or Cambridge or Paris” (Vail & White, 1991:4). Theal selected material which would best describe every aspect of Xhosa life for the purposes of defining Xhosa cultural identity to these readers. Vail and White (1991:4) describe this sort of material as:

accounts of non-Western peoples written by explorers, travellers, traders, missionaries, and government administrators who were untrained as observers and predisposed to dwell upon the most exotic of strangers’ customs who could thereby define their own.

Theal, though living in close proximity to the Xhosa, was certainly untrained in any of the emerging social science disciplines of the time, and, as the explanatory notes in KF reveal, he did sometimes “dwell upon the most exotic of strangers’ customs”. Credit, though, must be given to Theal who it seems from his various skills, was something of an autodidact who got his training in the field.

Thus, in KF, Xhosa culture is explained, described and translated for the European reader with an interest in the human sciences. Also, constant reference to the culture of the reader, either in terms of similarity, or difference to the Xhosa, sets up or perpetuates the binarism so crucial to the rationale of colonialism. Briggs calls these formal processes (such as selection and editing) associated with producing particular types of texts in the service of social and political agendas “entextualization” (Briggs, 1993:390). Significantly, Theal’s attempts at entextualization are not consistent.

In order “to leave no distinguishing feature unrepresented”, KF covers a huge cross-section of themes and topics. However, on a stylistic level, there is evidence of Theal’s attempts to homogenise individual tales. For example, the *Hlkanyana* series of tales has been edited into one, very long tale: “I have greatly reduced this story in bulk by leaving out endless repetitions of exactly the same trick [...] in all other respects it is complete” (Theal, 1882:210). Finnegan (1970:360), commenting on the transcription of *Limba* tales from Sierra Leone, notes the imposition of a ‘western’ notion of order: “the stories are told as short independent narrations on different occasions, and their inclusion into one united narrative may represent the outlook of the Western systematizing scholar rather than the intentions of the narrators”. This appropriation and modification is designed to render the tales more accessible to a European audience. Theal

imposes his notion of ‘artistically pleasing’ on the text, thereby establishing a degree of authority over it.

Also, Theal edited the *Little Jackal* tale: “It is capable of indefinite expansion by the narrator, but the tricks of Little Jackal are always very silly ones. The above are among the best of them” (KF, 212). Here Theal has anticipated what might appear tedious or silly to his reader, according to ‘western’ values. In this way the tales are disparaged and, to some degree, infantilised. There is evidence also of sanitisation in the selection of specific versions of the same tale type. Speaking of *The Runaway Children*, Theal reveals that “One version makes Magoda escape with the children, and introduces a great deal of obscenity” (KF, 211). He predictably selected the version without the obscenities so as not to offend his white Victorian reader. Wittenberg (2012:667) has noted the extent to which Bleek sanitised and infantilised Khoisan folktales, concluding that Bleek’s editorial practice “entailed a Victorian circumscription of the Khoisan imagination, containing its libidinal and transgressive energies within the generic limits of the naïve European children’s folktale”. However, Theal’s editorial stance was evidently not as scrupulous as Bleek’s. In KF there are numerous instances of Theal’s circumscription, yet, subversively, some of the tales still contain violence, scatology or profanity.

The most intriguing and characteristically contradictory element of the preface is Theal’s enthusiasm to express how the tales “show the relationship between tribes and people of different countries and even of different languages” (Theal, 1882:v–vi). In the Lovedale preface Theal wrote an entire paragraph dedicated to this theme, but it was omitted from the KF preface. This paragraph reveals Theal’s desire to familiarise the audience with the material, and also his fascination with similarity and difference:

Many of the actors in these Stories of the Amaxosa will be familiar to Europeans. Animals of various kinds will come upon the stage and talk as naturally as did the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. Giants who feast on little children will appear, and Jack the Giant-killer, under another name, will play his well-known part. Long before the curtain falls it will be seen that *Africans and Europeans have more in common than is usually suspected.*

(Theal, 1877: 4–5; my emphasis)

This similarity, which Theal so excitedly presents to his audience in 1877, is banished from KF, which concludes with the following sentence not found in the 1877 preface: “The book is now issued, in the hope that it may be found useful, as throwing light upon the mode of life of a people

who *differ* from ourselves in many respects besides degree of civilization” (Theal, 1882:ix; my emphasis). This shift can be explained by noting that cultural similarity is a source of anxiety as well as fascination for Theal. In the 1877 excerpt Theal appears excited by his discovery and keen to share it with his overseas audience. This excitement and keenness have become barely discernible in KF where observations of similarity are qualified by reference to the evolutionary scale: “They [the tales] are evidences that the same ideas are common to every branch of the human family at the same *stage of progress*” (1882:vi; my emphasis). In the end, in order to maintain ascendancy on the ladder of civilisation, commonality has to be downplayed and differences have to be emphasised.

The preface immediately differentiates between the identities of author and intended reader, and object of enquiry. Theal, through his heavy use of first-person and third-person plural personal pronouns (‘we’, ‘ourselves’, ‘their’), creates a ‘speech community’ with the European reader. His use of social evolutionist jargon (‘stage of progress’, ‘degree of civilisation’) is a further indication of his target audience. There is strong indication in the preface that this target audience was specifically English: Theal (1882:vi–vii) makes reference to “English people”, “English literature” and “St. Paul’s” [Cathedral]. With a growing English settler community in the Eastern Cape, the advent of the Frontier Wars, and the fact that the territory was still under British rule, it was no doubt obvious to Theal that the ethnography and folklore of the natives of the area would be of interest to English readers.

Another significant feature of the preface is Theal’s preoccupation with ‘authenticity’. This claim is very similar to what other collectors in the same era were saying. The Grimms’ (1989:37) preface to *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* makes the same claim but with more poetic flair:

We have tried to write down these tales as purely as possible. ... No circumstance has been added through poetic efforts or embellished or changes, for we should have shied from augmenting tales that were so rich in themselves with their own analogy and reference. They cannot be invented.

The Grimms use what Briggs (1993:396) calls a “quasi-moral lexicon” to characterise the relationship between the printed texts and sources as unproblematic. Theal also glosses over the problematic processes of transcription and translation. He appears to succumb to what Briggs (1993:396) terms the “image of intertextual transparency”, which is the assumption that “texts created through transcription, translation and editing bear an intrinsic connection to their source

such that the former are extensions or synecdoches of the latter”. Theal tried to disguise his entextualization of KF by effacing his role in its production whilst drawing attention to the role of the African sources and transcribers. However, in stark contradiction, he also promotes his authority on the subject of Xhosa folklore.

In the following claims to authenticity, Theal emphasises the texts’ ‘connection to their source’ by omitting himself from the process. In KF (viii) he states, “They were not only told by natives, but were copied down by natives. The notes only are my own”. The Lovedale preface is more emphatic: “In point of fact, they have not only been told by natives, but they have been copied down by natives, the type has been set by natives, and, finally, the proof sheets have been read by natives. The notes only are the editor’s own” (Theal, 1877:5). Theal here even refers to himself in the third person.

Ironically, this confident claim belies an anxiety about the very issue on which he appears so adamant. Theal needs the presence of the ‘natives’ to establish authenticity for his text. This necessitates relinquishing some of his own textual authority, and admitting to his ‘*otherness*’. The over-emphasis on authenticity suggests that Theal was aware of the inevitable gaps between the oral and the written texts, and the claim to authenticity is an attempt to render those gaps invisible. A further question is why was the claim watered down in the 1882 preface? Could it be that in the earlier 1877 preface, written when Theal was resident in the Eastern Cape, before his career ambitions and political affiliations had crystallised, he dangerously ascribed too much agency to the African subject?

Certainly, the most incongruous point about this claim to authenticity is the lack of information about those whom Theal presents as the real authors of the text, ‘the natives’. We are never told who these ‘natives’ are, or given a full account of the process of recording and transcription, but we are urged to believe in the authenticity of the process. Liz Gunner’s (1996:115) words are apposite here: “Who were the informants – elders? Or schoolboys?”. To use Theal’s own stage trope, the ‘natives’ formed the backdrop or played minor characters in the colonial drama which he ‘directed’, despite the fact that he depended on them for the acquisition of ‘authentic’ material.

Theal (1882:ix) ends the preface with a note about his credibility as ‘director’ of this text. Even though he cannot claim authorship, he can claim authority through his “intimate knowledge of the Kaffir people”. This claim is a wry contradiction in Theal’s discourse because his assertion of

authority points to his crucial role as cultural translator, a role he earlier wished to downplay. This claim epitomises his struggle for textual authority, a struggle which creates a covert narrative in KF. In short, Theal attempted to establish in the paratext of KF: subject positions for himself, for his readers and for his object of knowledge.

The introductory chapter of KF is dedicated to ethnography of the Xhosa. Theal covers a wide cross-section of topics: language; history; geographical setting; the tribal system; physical description; manner of abode; farming methods; religion; superstition; and manufacturing skills. Although positivist in spirit, it lacks 'scientific' method and is a hotchpotch of information and opinions. Nevertheless the material has been selected by Theal to 'represent' the Xhosa as thoroughly as possible. Two features stand out in the introduction. One is Theal's sensitivity to the processes of acculturation that were occurring in the 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1992:4) of the Eastern Cape frontier, or in the 'seam', as de Kock (2005:73), borrowing the term from Noel Mostert, describes this paradoxical site of cultural suturing and incommensurability, and the other is his praise for the manufacturing skills of the Xhosa.

First, regarding Theal's sensitivity to the processes of acculturation, even though he extols the changes wrought by the European colonisers, he appears to hold some sympathy for the Xhosa. Take for example his remark about pottery: "Hardly less remarkable was their skill in pottery, an art rapidly becoming lost since the introduction of European wares" (Theal, 1882:26). In the preface he perceptively identifies the tales as a key indicator of change:

It will surprise no one to learn that these tales are already undergoing great changes among a very large section of the natives on the border ... Their tales are thus a counterpart of the narrators, in possessing an adaptability to growth and a power of conformation to altered circumstances.

(Theal, 1882:vii–viii)

But this sensitivity is outweighed on the whole by Theal's belief in the benefits of European morality, Christianity, and literacy for the Xhosa. The following remarks indicate that Theal's sensitivity did not extend so far as to apprehend the violent and oppressive nature of the changes wreaked by the European settlers:

- "Before the supremacy of the Europeans it was seldom that the individual who filled this office died a natural death" (1882:21). Referring here to the fate of the unfortunate "priest and witch-finder" in Xhosa society (1882:21), Theal neglects to mention how many Xhosas had died

unnatural deaths since the “supremacy of the Europeans”. He is attempting to illustrate the ‘civilising’ influence of the Europeans on the violent and superstitious Xhosa who killed erring priests, but he makes no comment on the number of Xhosa who had died in the Frontier battles which were waged since the ‘supremacy of the Europeans’ had been established.

- “Before the advent of the white man, the Kaffirs knew nothing of letters or of any signs by which ideas could be expressed’ (1882:10). This remark reveals that Theal was so deeply steeped in the bias of literacy versus orality, that he did not realise that in recording the tales, he was recording a most complex and effective system of “signs by which ideas could be expressed”. For Theal, the oral culture was not valued in itself, but gained status as the object of ‘scientific’ enquiry once reified in textual form. De Kock (1996:48) has identified the printing press of the missionary as the ‘foremost weapon of civilisation’, and certainly Theal, with his formidable writing career, embodied that spirit of progress through literacy.

Second, no other aspect of Theal’s ethnographic description is as positive as his comments on manufacturing. His antiquarian interest in artefacts is evident in his detailed description of each facet of manufacturing: metallic wares, pottery, wood carving, weaving, the treatment and use of animal skins. His tone is both one of wonder and genuine praise: “Many of their manufactures display considerable skill and ingenuity” (Theal, 1882:24); “In this laborious operation a vast amount of patience and perseverance was exercised, and the article when completed was very creditable indeed” (Theal, 1882:26). This entirely positive view of an aspect of Xhosa culture is incongruous, but the paragraph immediately following this lengthy and rare passage of respect and admiration, resumes the colonialist trope of negative ‘othering’: “Ingenious as they are, the men are far from being industrious. A great portion of their time is spent in visiting and gossip, of which they are exceedingly fond” (Theal, 1882:27). On top of calling them lazy and idle, he goes on to label them liars (“they are not strict observers of the truth”) and habitual cattle thieves (“though not pilferers, they are addicted to cattle lifting”). This derogatory generalising and stereotyping is unfortunately how Theal chooses to end his introduction.

Expanding Ethnography – YDSP

Material from this introductory chapter of KF was later incorporated into YDSP. In YDSP, the ethnography of the ‘Bantu’ tribes (a huge assortment of people he divides into ‘eastern coast tribes’, ‘interior tribes’ and ‘western coast tribes’) forms the bulk of the text. The significant difference between the 1882 and the 1910 publication is that the 1910 introduction does not mention the tales, or the *iintsomi* tradition. However, in YDSP, in the chapter on the ‘Bushmen’, Theal offers a surprisingly sensitive and ‘modern’ account of the performance of a tale, an account not found in KF:

But judging from the manner in which Bantu women tell such stories, *a great deal of their interest is lost when they are read in print*. A Xhosa woman when narrating one of them displays all kinds of gestures, alters her voice in the dialogues, and sings the parts capable of such treatment, in short, puts life into the tale.

(Theal, 1910:53; my emphasis)

In YDSP Theal reproduces the same tales contained in KF, in two chapters entitled ‘Specimens of Bantu Folklore’. He makes some crucial changes to the presentation, foregoing the scrolls and floral emblems of KF in favour of the newly accessible medium – photography. He also includes a Xhosa transcript of a tale as “a specimen of the language” (Theal, 1910:275). And in YDSP, Theal’s obsession with authenticity seems to have dissipated: “they are not indeed exact literal translations, but they are as nearly such as they could be made while at the same time they were put into English that can be easily read and understood” (Theal, 1910:275). Perhaps 28 years of experience as a historiographer and archivist had rid him of the desire for the “image of intertextual transparency” (Briggs, 1993:396).

The positive change in YDSP is Theal’s sensitivity to the intricacies of transcription which he no longer characterises as so facile a process. Nevertheless, in YDSP, Theal retains the ‘scientific’ jargon of his earlier ethnographic discourse, referring to the tales as ‘specimens’ and presenting the photographs as museum exhibits. Despite the improvement in other respects, Theal’s colonialist discourse in YDSP is more overtly racist. His construction of a racial hierarchy for the inhabitants of Southern Africa is more detailed and more strongly argued than in KF, where the foundations of his colonialist discourse were laid.

Conclusion

In KF, Theal assumes partial authority over the text by articulating his discourse of the Xhosa ‘*other*’, but at the same time, he concedes authority to the voices of the African subjects of that very discourse, who are not only the sources for the tales, but the co-authors of KF. Theal’s colonialist discourse, itself fraught with internal oscillations, is never able to fully assert its authority over the text. Instead, the voice of Theal, the voices of the transcribers and translators, and the voices of the *iintsomi* performers, all struggle for authority.

KF is a result of collaboration, and the encounter which it records is not one of absolute domination. Rather, it is a hybrid text, reflecting the combination of the Xhosa *iintsomi* tradition

with European folktale practice, as well as the complex power dynamics between coloniser and colonised. What is not clear is the exact measure and location of each influencing voice. But the different voices do exist, sometimes side by side, sometimes overlapping, sometimes struggling to assert themselves or to merely survive editorial process. The editorial processes which resulted in KF were not entirely deliberate, nor conscious. The different influences and voices were sutured together without full awareness of the stylistic and cultural heterogeneity which would result. This explains the awkwardness and flatness of many of the KF tale texts.

The impact of Theal's KF on the trajectory of South African folklore and ethnographic publishing is immense. First, in publications such as Bleek's *Reynard the Fox in South Africa* and KF we see the beginning of the process of infantilisation, which endures today in the categorisation of folktales as juvenile literature. Second, Theal's preoccupation with authenticity lingers in the discourse of contemporary authors and scholars, who are also attempting to represent an 'essential' or 'true' national or African identity. Third, Theal's modes of sanitisation and familiarisation are duplicated by authors intent on appealing to a wider, international audience. Fourth, the metamorphosis of *iintsomi* into written English texts heralded the dominance of print media and the English language over oral, Xhosa traditions, a dominance which still prevails. But, most significantly, what a twenty-first century study of a colonial ethnographic text such as KF reveals is that there is no seamless narrative of cultural domination or literary appropriation to be recounted. Rather, the narrative is one of struggle, willing or coerced collaborations, and of surprising contradictions.

Notes

- i. For a more detailed account of Theal's life and career see Naidu, S. "Three Tales of Theal: Biography, History and Ethnography on the Eastern Frontier", *English in Africa*, 39(1) 2012.
- ii. Another example of a collaborative folklore text is Ruby Agar O'Connell's *Iintsomi* (circa 1941). The translations were done by B.A. Bangeni and the illustrations by G.M. Pemba.
- iii. For example, *The Milk Bird* is a tale type. Many versions exist but there are enough core-clichés in common in the different versions for them to belong to the same tale type.

- iv. This extract from the *Times* review is from the Swan Sonnenschein & Co. order-form, circa 1910.

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