Oral History as Farce? - Oral History as a Changing Phenomenon*

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Summary

This article attempts to raise some issues in relation to the broader question of oral tradition as a phenomenon that changes in time. Common-sense views on this topic have tended to posit an evolutionary model in terms of which oral forms wither in the face of "stronger" literate forms. By contrast, other views hold that oral tradition - far from waning - thrives on fragments, and that its producers are like bricoleurs who go to work with material originally intended for another purpose. This article assesses these views in relation to a Northern Transvaal case study.

Opsomming

Bepaalde aspekte rakende die groter vraagstuk van orale tradisie, as 'n verskynsel wat gevoelig is vir tydsveranderinge, word in hierdie artikel bespreek. In algemene standpunte oor hierdie onderwerp word gewoonlik 'n evolusionêre model voorgestaan waarvolgens orale vorme sou kwyn wanneer hulle aan "sterker" geletterde vorme blootgestel word. In teenstelling hiermee word in ander standpunte die mening gehuldig dat die orale tradisie - in plaas daarvan dat dit sou kwyn - juis floreer op fragmente en dat die produseerders daarvan soos bricoleurs te werk gaan, wat gebruik maak van materiaal wat oorspronklik vir iets anders bedoel is. In hierdie artikel word dergelike standpunte na aanleiding van 'n Noord-Transvaalse gevallestudie geëvalueer.

As a number of commentators on oral tradition have noted, oral memory has a close mnemonic relationship with place and location, and in a variety of societies people often "bank" information in the landscape. In analyzing this process, scholars have examined the various ways in which landscape is used to record memory. Aspects of the landscape can, for example, serve to separate bodies of stories into coherent units; a series of topographical features may store a temporal sequence of events in a spatial order, while the surrounding geography may have the effect of preserving the life of a story when it might otherwise have disappeared (Harwood 1976: 783-96; Biebuyck 1978: 36-7). In addition, as Glassie (1982: 621) has shown in relation to oral history in an Irish community, landscape plays a crucial mnemonic role by providing "the artifacts in which [the] past is entombed".

Elsewhere he comments:

> In the noble native tradition, history in Ballymenone is part of the durable idea of place. Place is space rich enough to provide travel for the mind while the body sits still, space so full that it forces people to become responsible for its future. History is the essence of the idea of place.
>
> (Glassie 1982: 664)

Yet one question that such research has never persistently pursued is what happens when people lose access to the topography that helps to uphold memory. The common-sense answer to this question would be that such recollection withers and dies. However, the situation is by no means so simple. Much thinking on the production of oral tradition maintains that it thrives on fragments, and that its producers are like bricoleurs who go to work with material originally intended for another purpose (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 16-22; Werbner 1986: 151-6). Given this method of working, a fragment of historical recollection unmoored from its geographical anchor could just as well be appropriated in some other story as disappear entirely.

The issues raised by the question of the relationship of oral tradition to a changing geography are, in many ways, paradigmatic of the broader question of oral tradition as a phenomenon that changes in time. While there is a fairly substantial body of scholarship on oral traditions in South Africa, until quite recently, there has been no interest in questions of oral literature and historical change.[1] Where historical assessments *have* been made, these have tended to posit an evolutionary model in terms of which oral forms wither in the face of "stronger" literate forms. However, even a brief perusal of scholarship on orality and literacy from other parts of the world will demonstrate the inadequacy of this formulation. What this literature suggests is that oral forms are often tenacious and can transform the literate institutions they encounter.[2]

Largely because it has seen such radical social transformation, the South African instance has the potential to offer a particularly fascinating angle on these debates. Turning to rural societies where oral literary forms are often strongest, one encounters two major levels of change. The first relates to long-term structural transformation coming from mission, school, colonial state and a market economy. While these institutions occasioned major shifts in rural communities, the changes tended to be long-term and often "invisible" in the sense that societies maintained some semblance of coherence and could sustain at least a superficial veneer of traditionalism. However, from the 1930's, when the state embarked on more aggressive social engineering in the countryside, even this superficial veneer came under attack. This policy of direct intervention into rural societies or "betterment" as it came

to be known, gained considerable impetus after 1948.

What happens to oral literary forms under these circumstances? If they do not simply wither before the printed word, propagated by both school and state, in what ways do they change? The answer is, of course, complex and involves coming to terms with the manifold relationships that control the interactions of oral texts and audiences. On the very broadest level, such an analysis would entail tracing the institutions that support intellectual activity and the way in which these have shifted. One crucial forum in this regard is the household which, in previous years, supported a range of oral forms. Defined generically by gender, these forms were associated with the male and female areas that typified all rural homesteads. The male courtyard or *kgoro* hosted a number of forms, one of which was historical storytelling, a form that was generally assigned to men. Women, by contrast, tended to tell fictional stories (*dinonwane*) in the kitchen/hearth area.

While institutions like school and mission certainly influenced these forms by, for example, appropriating female stories into junior school readers and so infantilizing them, the semblance of an unaltered tradition could largely be maintained provided the household shape remained intact. Once this was radically altered, as the state's social engineering after the 1930's did, then this traditionalism was harder to maintain. The state's social engineering often took the form of forced removals which involved consolidating previously scattered cluster homesteads into grid-style villages. While female storytelling could transplant relatively smoothly to the new situation, the male courtyard could not find an equivalent space. Consequently, one of the cultural casualties of the removals was male historical storytelling.

Oral historical storytelling, however, has by no means disappeared. Some older men who did their "apprenticeship" in the pre-removal days, are still able to produce extensive historical accounts. Their narrative skill is, however, largely passive rather than active since the occasion for its performance is limited. Another route for producing oral historical storytelling comes via female story traditions which use substantially the same techniques as those involved in historical narration. By gathering ballast from sources like radio serials, text books, conversations and gossip, an apparently "traditional" historical style can be synthesized, despite the fact that one of the key institutions of its reproduction have been swept away.[3]

This paper documents some of this historical "invention". It begins by briefly examining some hallmarks of the "orthodox" and often aristocratic historical traditions associated with the male courtyards. Thereafter, the article examines some excerpts from less orthodox bricoleurs. My overall assessment of these *nouveau* historians is that while their versions may show all manner of inventiveness, at the end of the day they lack the intellectual

coherence of the chiefly tradition. While this interpretation may be read as an unwarranted valorisation of tradition, it is intended more as an exercise in raising questions around the literary institutions that ensure "coherence" for particular genres. As Tony Bennett has argued, a feature like generic coherence is ensured by a host of social relations and institutions. Genres, he says, are best viewed

> as being constituted in the particular socially organised sets of relations between texts, and between texts and readers, which obtain in particular circumstances in view of the reading formations and reading technologies which govern the relations between texts and readers.
>
> (Bennett 1990:105)

While Bennett is referring to written texts, the ideas could well be applied to oral forms, and the essay that follows partly attempts to do so by examining a case where the "formations" and "technologies" governing a particular genre have largely broken down. The research is based in a Northern Transvaal chiefdom, known as Mokopane or Valtyn, which is located just outside Potgietersrus.

I

The canon of chiefly history is one that is generally plotted on the earth and stored in the landscape. In chiefly memory, an area is imagined as being criss-crossed with the paths of secession, migration, and battles that make up the official history of the polity. Or as Tswana historians envisage it, a "map" is constituted by an intricate pattern of "ruins" or places where the chiefdom once resided, and together these points record the passage and migration of polities across an area.[4] Such organization, however, presupposes the integrity of both a real and imaginative map on which the epic events of chieftainship unfold.

In the past, this imaginative map of chiefly coherence was a powerful reality, and even after the Location Commission of 1890 had dispossessed the chiefdom a narratively constructed topography of control remained intact. In 1906, for example, Frans Nuku Kekana, in giving evidence to another Location Commission, said:

> In former days we used to own all the land round about here, down to and including the town of Pietpotgietersrust and the farms surrounding it, which of course no longer belong to us.
>
> (Transvaal Province 1906)

Some three decades later, in 1933, the incumbent chief, Barend Makapan, was claiming tribute from farmworkers as far south as Pienaars River - some 250 kilometres south of the chiefdom - on the basis that his jurisdiction properly stretched so far (Union of South Africa 1933). However doubtful these coercive claims might be, they do none the less illustrate some sense of a coherent political map.

It is a similar kind of map that one encounters in the testimony of experienced male historical narrators. One such is Molalakgori Kekana. His narration unfolds against the background of a world of Ndebele control in which the polity lies at the centre of a set of radiating relationships that link it to other societies. These societies with whom the polity "is acquainted", as he terms it, can be called upon to recognize the authority of the Kekana chief. Even if the political claims inherent in such a map were entirely without foundation, the notion of the "map" is important in so far as it sustains a coherent sense of the past. As regards another competent narrator - Madimetša Kekana - much the same situation applies, and his story plays itself out against a topography of Ndebele initiative and control.[5]

All the men mentioned above, with the exception of Frans Nuku Kekana, were born into a situation where the imaginative map of the chiefly world bore very little resemblance to the dramatically curtailed border of the chiefdom. Yet growing up as these men did in a world still centred on the *kgoro*, and being schooled in historical tradition, they could continue to keep the imaginative world of chiefly control in orbit long after its actual territorial base had been thoroughly shredded.

These men are (or were) able to do this largely because they are (or were) by no means ordinary citizens. All firmly within the aristocracy, they include some of the finest graduates of a chiefly education. Molalakgori Kekana, for example, is noted as a truly outstanding historian and narrator who acquired his knowledge from his father, Magube Ratanang, also a respected historical authority. From an early age, Molalakgori Kekana showed a strong talent and interest in historical tradition, and was, as one of his contemporaries put it, "always among the old people" (C.L. Kekana interview 1989). Amongst this royal group, the commitment to a chiefly system is understandably high. Since the aristocracy were often the first to move when betterment resettlements were instituted, they could settle with kin and so keep alive some semblance of old social relationships and cultural practices (A.L. Kekana interview 1990). Furthermore, as an ethnic minority in a Sotho-dominated homeland, the royal lineage has an added inducement to traditionalism (De Beer 1986: 455).

Yet this ethnic aristocracy is fighting against the tide. Many younger men, having experienced only formal schooling, are either entirely ignorant of

chiefly history or see it as quaint in much the same way as many people today see *dinonwane* as suspiciously fantastic and non-realistic.[6] In addition, for those without a royal background, or for those who had to settle amongst strangers, the attrition rate of the skills of historical narrative have been much higher. Without any props to hold these skills approximately in place, the impact of formal schooling has been more corrosive.

Yet the demise of the *kgoro* is recent enough to ensure that there are still a number of people who are familiar with the basics of historical narration which they gained in these courtyard arenas. In addition, as has been pointed out, the skills of historical narration can be "borrowed" from the *dinonwane* tradition, and since these are available from school and some households, albeit in an altered form, some tellers can supplement their lack of a proper historical education with techniques gleaned elsewhere. However, as the chance to practise these skills is limited and, for some, the foundation of their skill is, in any event, slightly shaky, the style and orientation of their telling show a number of differences from the "orthodox" tradition as exemplified by narrators like Molalakgori Kekana and Madimetša Kekana.

The first of these differences is predictable and involves a radical attrition of memory brought on by lack of practice. The second set of differences is more unexpected and involves amplitude rather than diminution. Let us examine each of these transformed traditions in more detail.

II

As Scheub (1975) has argued, oral narrative is stored in a series of core cliches or images that the teller recalls and elaborates on in performance. These cores are the units in which the story resides, and it is through constant practice and active performance that one gains the skill of expanding them into stories.[7] If such practice is lacking, it makes sense that the details surrounding the core will wither, leaving only the bare kernels from which the story has, in the past, been constructed.

This process is clear in the following testimony from Cecil Lesiba Kekana who narrated the siege of the Gwaša (or Makapansgat) episode in which the Boers besieged a Ndebele community in a cave, in the following terms:

> They discovered there are people, things, beasts, kids [inaudible] people and beasts there. They've, uh, oh, all the "Kaffirs are here inside". [Laughter] Wood, wood, wood, wood, wood [some bystanders talk but inaudibly]. And then that to bloody burn, bloody, mouth of the cave, thinking that they are burning people.

Suffocation here and because of sickness and the breath that was in the cave.
(C.L. Kekana interview 1989)

What we see in this passage are two core images of the Gwaša story. The first concerns the dumping of the wood in front of the cave and the resultant attempt to smoke out those inside. The second relates to the "disease of the breath" that was said to assail those in the caverns. In the excerpt above, these episodes have been stripped down to their most basic cores. Deprived of their animating detail, the cores have became a stark list made incoherent through over-drastic summary.

There are, admittedly, a number of factors which account for this incoherence. The informant was slightly drunk and he was speaking, by his own choice, in English. Moreover, the printed word does not convey the gesture and action that rendered the passage slightly more sensible. Yet, these factors notwithstanding, the story is still garbled and incoherent, and unless one has some prior knowledge of the story, the passage is incomprehensible. In recalling these core images, and in techniques like repetition and direct speech, the speaker indicates that he still has access to the basic skills of oral storytelling. Yet, overall, these skills have become so rusty that they can no longer produce coherence.

Let us examine another example from an interview with Mosoamadite Kekana:

MK: What I can say ...

JM: Mm.

MK: ... is one thing.

JM: Mm.

MK: Yes ... when the Ndebele were fighting against the Boers ...

JM: Mm.

MK: ... the years when this happened, that I can't remember. It is long ago.

JM: Mm.

MK: Now, when they were fleeing away from the Boers, they took refuge in that cave of Gwaša.

JM: Yes.

MK: Yes, that of Gwaša ...

JM: Mm.

MK: ... that's where many died, and now we go there to pray for rain, we go there ...

JM: Yes.

MK: ... when we realize that there is no rain.

JM: Yes.

MK: Do you see?

JM: Mm.

MK: Going beyond this, no. Now I don't think I can proceed.

(M. Kekana interview 1988)

The interviewee would not be drawn any further on the topic and instead steered the conversation towards a topic with which he was more familiar: his war experiences in Egypt. In this brief account it is only the barest outlines of the story that survive along with the knowledge that the chief's grave is a site for rain sacrifices. As with Cecil Lesiba Kekana, Mosoamadite Kekana was in his sixties and was regarded as someone with historical expertise. But as this expertise is seldom called upon these days it has largely atrophied.

But not everyone's skill has calcified in this way and there are any number of tellers who will talk in considerable detail. Familiar with the techniques of constructing oral historical narrative, they can generate extensive stories. The content of such tales, however, is often awry.

Let us examine some examples. The first concerns the skill of beginning a story. As Miller (1988: 36) has pointed out, the technique of initiating an oral historical account generally revolves around a crisis, "a sudden and visible shifting of fortunes". One informant, Mahula Kekana, clearly possessed such initiating techniques in his storytelling repertoire, and indicating that the story I wanted to hear had its roots far in the past, he began his account as follows:

> The whole thing started like this, when out there in Bulawayo, near Stanger, the chief quarrelled with Shaka over a woman called Pampata. Chaos resulted and chief Khona and his people had to run away.
>
> (M.P.S. Kekana interview 1987)[8]

In terms of technique, this opening episode is impeccable. Not only does it begin with the requisite crisis, it also anticipates the trajectories of genealogical disruption and migration along which the narrative will be funnelled. However, its content is less impressive, implying as it does that it was as a result of Shaka's activities that the group now known as the Transvaal Ndebele moved to the localities where they are presently settled. The Transvaal Ndebele moved into their present-day areas in the sixteenth or seventeenth century.

A second example concerns the historical skill of etymological deduction, a principle on which both historical and imaginary narration depends. Many people still use this form as a structuring principle in their historical narrations, but its content is often dubious. One informant, Moletsi Mahlangu, in telling the story of the Gwaša siege, linked it to the Berlin Mission station, Makapanspoort (Makapan's Gateway), at which he was telling the story. Here he explained that the mission had got its name because Makapan's footprints or *spoor*, as Afrikaans terms it, passed through the site on which the station now stands. As a result of this *spoor* which betrayed the whereabouts of the chief to the Boers, the mission came to be called Makapanspoor or Makapanspoort (M. Mahlangu interview 1990).

Another example of such form without content concerns the principle of using the landscape as a mnemonic reference and hence a crux of composition. Within the historical canon of the chiefdom, one such reference is a place referred to as Maroelaskop (Maroela Hill). According to one tradition collected at the turn of the century, Maroelaskop was the place to which the Kekana fled under the onslaught of the Pedi armies. Here they encountered the Kgatla (Transvaal Province 1907). This account of events is borne out by Kgatla tradition, also collected at the turn of the century, which maintains that it was at Maroelaskop that they were defeated by the Kekana.[9] In a tradition that I collected, Maroelaskop became the place to which the Boers sent a child chief captured during the Makapansgat siege (L. Kekana interview 1990a). For Madimetša Kekana, the Forest of Lions, a place of historical significance for the chiefdom, was also a place characterized by maroela trees (M.K. Kekana interview 1988). Since the first two episodes bear each other out, it seems reasonable to assume that the actual Maroelaskop was, in fact, well beyond the chiefdom's boundaries to the south in Kgatla territory. In the latter two versions, however, this core of content has largely disappeared, until Maroelaskop becomes a purely symbolic reference. Any more precise meaning that the place had, no longer exists.

One possible reason why this reference to Maroelaskop survives is that the maroela tree is extremely common in the Northern Transvaal. It is also

large and conspicuous and references to it could be construed as forming part of the *nonwane* technique which relies on constructing an ordinary quotidian background against which a fantastic plot can unfold. Seen from this perspective, any reference to Maroelaskop involves using an everyday botanical feature to create a credible background for the more legendary events of chiefly history. In addition, the tree becomes a repository for a number of historical events, and as a result a profusion of episodes could ostensibly attach themselves to the tree.

What this *ad hoc* historical system of recollection means is that the real co-ordinates of the epic map of chieftaincy are lost. In the narratives of Molalakgori Kekana and Madimetša Kekana, these geographical points served to anchor the plot of chiefly history and keep the story segments that surround them in some sort of regular orbit. With a loss of both the places for transmitting historical education in the *kgoro*, and the almost total erasing of the territorial world of chiefly control, it would seem that this orbit of plot segments circles out of control. The plot segments still remain, the skills which underlie them are still obtainable, but the social universe that held them in place has shifted substantially.

The sense of a chiefly landscape that underwrites any historical narrative can still be detected in much narration, but it and the memory of events it supports has contracted radically. Hence, for many informants the sense of an epic landscape has shrunk to the present-day borders of the chiefdom. Here only a handful of historical markers remain. These are set out in the following song:

We come from MmaChidi
We come from MmaChidi
And reached Ngwaditše quite well
We come from MmaChidi
We come from MmaChidi
And reached Ngwaditše quite well
Sefakaola has already arrived
Sekafaola has already arrived
Sefakaola has already arrived
At Mokopane's place
Sefakaola has already arrived
Sekafaola has already arrived
Sefakaola has already arrived
At Turfloop, at Ngwaditše.

(C.L. Kekana interview 1989)

The song marks three major historical points that bear on the nineteenth-century history of the chiefdom. The first of these is the previous site of the

chiefdom at Chidi, the second refers to the river at which the chief and his followers were said to have paused as they made their way to the third point, Sefakaola, the hilltop site of the relocated chief's capital. For skilled narrators like Molalakgori Kekana and Madimetša Kekana, these topographical references form part of a wider mnemonic web that stretches beyond the chiefdom's present boundaries. Yet for most narrators the shrunken sequence as set out in the song is all that remains of a wider chiefly map. This map still has some meaning because one of its points, Sefakaola, lies within the chiefdom's boundaries and can be seen for miles around. The river also used to be visible, but since it was diverted by the Potgietersrus Municipality it has been completely dry, and unless one knew that a river once ran there one would be none the wiser. So, apart from the hilltop, the geographical references in the song have literally become faint or distant.

This sense of a fading mnemonic system crops up in other contexts as well. For example, in his testimony Cecil Lesiba Kekana tried to think his way into history via the landscape. "If only I knew that piece of history from Zebediela", he commented, "you know those names when we left here to camp there at gaMmaChidi, where we arrived and camped .... You pass there when you climb the steep slope" (C.L. Kekana interview 1989).

This disappearance of the landscape as a system of mnemonic ordering does not mean that all recollection has disappeared. There are, of course, new historical markers that carry information of the past. Among these are schools which often bear the names of chiefs and so act as reminders of recent genealogy. There is a certain irony in this situation since many of these schools began to appear at the time of betterment resettlements which coincided with the spread of the National Party government's version of mass schooling known as Bantu Education. A widely-told popular rumour maintains that it was the promise of having a school named after him that finally pushed the chief into ratifying the implementation of the betterment proposals.[10]

Other historical markers that came to summarize information about the past were things like beacons and fences. Not only did the implementation of these features require that the objects of historical recollection shift to include a memory for meetings, boundary decisions and fence adjudications, but fences and beacons themselves could come to act as mnemonic resources in which the story of the struggles and circumstances surrounding their genesis could be banked.

Like beacons which stood as fixed reminders in the earth, monuments, too, became a form in which historical memory was stored. The town of Potgietersrus, for instance, supported a veritable culture of nationalist

monuments and historical re-enactments. While the obvious intention of these monuments and ceremonies was aimed primarily at creating and sustaining the idea of Voortrekker history, this was not how everyone saw them. For Madimetša Kekana, for example, one local monument which commemorated Boer deaths at the hands of Ndebele warriors, acted as a reminder of Afrikaner racism. Or, as he explained it:

> That [that is, the monument] is why we are not on good terms with the Boers. Every white child, if it misbehaves, is taken to the monument and then told: "You can read there, look what the kaffirs did" [the implication being that they will do the same to the child].
>
> (M.K. Kekana interview 1987)

There is much insight in this comment. The sense of an Afrikaner identity as put forward by various institutions has often been dependent for its definition on the idea of the threat of black violence and the ability to quell this menace. In discussing the monument, Madimetša Kekana clearly grasps the role that it plays in this process of cultural definition.

However, not everyone saw the monument, and the Voortrekker tradition it embodies, quite so critically and, as we shall see, many people have absorbed a Trekker model of history into their oral historical explanations. This "osmosis" can perhaps best be described as a process of bricolage whereby tellers cobble together different techniques, ideas, themes and resources in their historical narration. Since the basis of historical narration can be gleaned from *dinonwane*, and there are, furthermore, alternative sources of historical information that can be garnered from formal schooling or historical pageants in Potgietersrus, anybody with the inclination or talent can theoretically start processing historical narrative.

III

One such person is Lucky Kekana whose stories provide an interesting example of the corruption that a historical imagination sundered from its proper contexts of transmission and performance can undergo. This corruption is not one of diminution, it is rather one of proliferation. An outstanding *nonwane* teller, Lucky Kekana, uses her skills to generate a seemingly endless stream of oral historical narrative. Clearly influenced by a "Voortrekker" view of history acquired both in school and through observing life in Potgietersrus, her stories, with quite exuberant greediness, swallow up motifs from Afrikaner history and weave them into a well-nigh Rabelaisian farce. In this pageant the traditional admixture of the fabulous and the

quotidian, the extraordinary and the ordinary has been quite comically dislocated. In the narration of someone like Molalakgori Kekana, the fabulous energy of historical storytelling is kept in control by reference to a wider world of everyday detail, topographical references and geographical sequences that form part of a coherently imagined universe. In the tellings of Lucky Kekana there is little sense of a wider coherent chiefly world, and unfettered by these constraints her joyous penchant for the fabulous can run riot. Add to this an equally fecund but debased appropriation of a "Voortrekker" discourse, and you have a style of storytelling that is quite anarchically humorous. Let us consider some examples.

The first concerns an episode of genealogical history in which the "founder" of the Kekana lineage broke away from his brother Ndzundza. In the official chiefly canon, one explanation for this breakaway maintains that as a young girl in the group had begun to menstruate (*ukuthomba*), part of the group remained behind with her, and in this way a new lineage emerged.[11] Another name for the "founder" of the Kekana lineage is Mathombeni, and this name is said to derive from and commemorate this episode.

According to Lucky Kekana, however, things went slightly differently. Like all versions of chiefly history, her account begins with the movement of the Ndebele from Natal to the Transvaal. This movement, however, belongs to the period of the emperor Shaka and not, as it should, some three hundred years earlier. Be that as it may, in their wanderings in the area that we now call the Transvaal, the Ndebele encounter the unusual sight of a tree that grows only in Natal. The tree has a number of useful properties: it has tasty fruit, its roots have healing properties, and in its shade lies a well. The Ndebele duly spend three months at this welcome oasis and, as a mark of their respect, they name themselves after the tree which they know by the name of Mthombo. The story continues:

> LK: They called themselves after the tree, they said, "We are no longer Zulu, we are Mthombeni." That's right. Now they call themselves Mthombeni. They say, "We are Ndebele, we are trained under Ndebele."
>
> JM: We are trained under the Ndebele.
>
> LK: Yes, we are Ndebele. We are no more the Zulu. They call themselves after that tree Mthombo. They call themselves after this tree. Yes. They said, "We are Mthombeni." It means that this tree is father to them .... And their names are Ndebele names, they've been "Ndebeled" by this tree.
>
> (L. Kekana interview 1990a)

In this excerpt which purports to explain ethnic distinctiveness, the story-

teller takes a fragment of genealogical history and fuses this with a detail of the everyday world around her. In addition, she also draws on a well-known historical precedent relating to trees in the Potgietersrus area. The episode concerns a clump of rare trees that fell within the chiefdom's border. This cluster of *Acacia Abbida* or *anabomelapiesdoorn* as they are known in Afrikaans, were declared a national monument in 1949 (Union of South Africa s.a.).

Since the chief had unsuccessfully opposed the declaration of the memorial on grounds that someone's field occupied the area that was to become the monument, the trees must have been well-known within the chieftaincy (Union of South Africa 1948). In 1964 these trees again came into the news when eight African women were sentenced to forty days' imprisonment or a fine of R20 for chopping off part of the trees and damaging the surrounding fence. The local newspaper reported that the trees were unique to the Northern Transvaal and implied that the trees had been brought from Egypt by the ancestors of the Boers (*Die Noord Transvaler* 1964). The story has such striking parallels with that of the Mthombeni tree that one can only assume that this legend of the arboreal monument had seeped into the chiefdom and had in turn made its way into Lucky Kekana's narration.

In constructing her account of the Mthombeni tree, Lucky Kekana relies on an etymological principle which sets out to explain origins and derivations by using retrospectively deductive reasoning. This principle forms the basis of much *nonwane* telling but in Lucky Kekana's hands it becomes a relentless logic whereby any proper name forms the object of etymological speculation. For example, the main road in Potgietersrus, as with virtually all Northern Transvaal towns, is called Voortrekker Street. According to Lucky Kekana, this street was named after a man called Piet Voortrekker. By the same logic, a store called Waterberg and Gilbertson was run by Mr Gilbertson and Mr Waterberg. While Gilbertson is the name of a famous farmer in the district, the word "Waterberg" in fact refers to a geographical district (L. Kekana interview 1990b).

Apart from this slightly crazy etymology, Lucky Kekana also uses Voortrekker history as one of the sources of her history. In setting out the background to the siege event, she told the following story:

LK: Potgieter came here from Cape Town. They were using wagons. You see where Mr Smerk [Mr Smith] lives there at the dairy?

JM: That road when a person comes from Naboomspruit?

LK: Yes, when you come from Naboomspruit, there at Dromaleya [Drummondlea, the farm next door to Moorddrift].

JM: Dromaleya?

LK: That's right, just there at Dromaleya, you see that place?

JM: Yes.

LK: Yes, there at Mogalakwena. That's where Potgieter parked his white nation. Now the white man came to grow up, here on our land. They parked there and started building tents, alongside those useless cars [wagons]. Do you understand?

JM: Yes.

LK: While they were parked there, they started cooking with those great pots. So great [she indicates size]. You see?

JM: Yes.

LK: But mind you, Dingane was still alive at that time. I still remember the fight between Dingane and Potgieter. It was on the 16th, that's why this day, December 16, they say it is in memory of Dingane, because Potgieter and Dingane fought on this day.

JM: Yes.

LK: Dingane's herdsmen were busy taking care of the cattle. Then they see the white people wearing big hats with big dresses [that is, standard female Voortrekker garb]. They were busy cooking pork, do you understand? You must listen to me very carefully.

JM: Yes.

LK: While they were busy cooking that pork, mind you there were no clothes in that time, they were wearing *stertriems* [cruppers]. I don't know if you know a *stertriem*?

JM: Usually I see them in pictures.

LK: But does the woman [I.H.] know them?

JM: *Do you know setsiba, stertriem*?

IH: *Yes.*

JM: Right.

LK: Now, tell her I'm going to talk about something that might hurt her.

JM: *Now she says she is starting with something that will make you very, very uneasy.*

IH: *No, no, let her talk and not be afraid.*

JM: She says talk and be free.

LK: Yes, now the man wearing the *stertriem*, the Ndebele one who was busy herding cattle smelt some meat, pork in fact. Then he went to ask. He had to enter a river and swim across. He says, "*Thobela*", he greets. They don't give him an answer. A white man says, "What is this baboon?"

JM: Yes.

LK: And that young boy says, "Sir, I ask for meat, there is nothing in my stomach." But he doesn't know how to speak their language. You see?

JM: Yes.

LK: Then that white man says, "Oh, he is asking for food." Then another one says, "No, we cannot give a baboon food." They beat him with their hands. Then the poor herdsman ran away and fell into the water. Mind you, they were using those old guns, isn't it?

JM: Yes.

LK: They try to shoot him. He keeps on swimming until he arrives at an overhanging ledge. Then he tells the other ones, "You must always know that the whites are here, wearing big hats, they cook meat that smells very nice. I was so hungry that I went to ask for some but they beat me and shot me with a thing that goes dudum-dudum dudum."

(L. Kekana interview 1990)

In response to this aggression, the chief decides to attack the Boers. He summons up warriors and the fight again occurs on 16 December and this time Dingane kills Potgieter. Paul Kruger, identified by a praise name, "the hero, I don't load a gun but I can shoot", arrives and "the blacks run away to Makapansgat".

In this account, one can feel the weight of a "Voortrekker" interpretation pushing in on the story. One of the major interpreters of this movement was Gustav Preller who devoted considerable attention to the Makapansgat story. In popularizing this story, Preller attempted to portray the event of Makapansgat as a Transvaal equivalent of the battle of Blood River of 1838 (Hofmeyr 1988). This clash, which occurred on 16 December, has for some time been commemorated as a public holiday formerly known as Dingaan's

Day, but now referred to as the Day of the Covenant. In Lucky Kekana's account, the two events - the Makapansgat siege and the battle of Blood River - swirl together in a comic confusion that indiscriminately mixes up locations and names. So, for example, the Blood River scenario which occurred in Natal is relocated to the Transvaal. The major protagonists of the conflict, Dingane[12] and Andries Pretorius, are also shifted to a new locale, while Andries Pretorius's name changes to Potgieter. This confusion of Pretorius and Potgieter is, however, understandable since M.W. Pretorius and Piet Potgieter were the major Boer actors in the Makapansgat siege. To confound matters further, there is another Voortrekker leader, Andries Hendrik Potgieter. He, however, had nothing to do with either the siege event or the battle of Blood River. Given the similarity and duplication of these names, and given that Voortrekker history as taught at school is monotonously repetitive, this gallimaufry is to be expected.

In the burden of its explanation, Lucky Kekana's story with its emphasis on hospitality exemplifies another interesting parallel with Preller's story. Like his story, which was arranged around the idea of betrayed hospitality, her account portrays the cause of conflict as inhospitable behaviour, but this time on the Boer's part. I am not, of course, suggesting that her explanation is directly indebted to Preller's, since it is quite clearly drawn from every-day images of eating and hospitality. None the less, what her story does do is to invert the Preller model, and in this sense her account which responds to the "Voortrekker" version is in some way shaped by it.

This reactive model is further discernible from the stress that her story places on misunderstanding. By her account, one factor precipitating conflict between Boer and Ndebele is their inability to understand each other's languages. This emphasis on misunderstanding is one that frequently occurs in other oral accounts. In one of these, the Ndebele take a Boer woman captive and cover her in red ochre to protect her from the sun. They then release her and as she makes her way back to the Boer camp, the Boers see her in the distance and from her appearance believe that she has been skinned alive. On the basis of this, they institute the punitive siege against the Ndebele (F. Ledwaba interview 1988).

This episode, which resonates with the belief that one of the protagonists of the Makapansgat story - Hermanus Potgieter - was skinned alive, portrays the Ndebele as hapless victims of misunderstanding. The overall impression of such a portrayal is that the Ndebele were innocent victims of misplaced Boer aggression, and it is very much this form of explanation that Lucky Kekana's version embodies. This explanation, of course, simply inverts the Afrikaner interpretation which painted the Boers as hapless victims of Ndebele violence.

However, not all versions rely on this idea of misunderstanding and hapless victimhood. Madimetša Kekana, for example, portrays the Ndebele as noble aggressors initiating an attack against illegitimate interlopers. This aggressive intent of the Ndebele is made quite explicit in the way in which they appropriate a Boer woman and refashion her into an Ndebele, thus making her a signifier of male chiefly authority. But, in a climate in which the Voortrekker version of history presses in on the chiefdom from school, monument and pageant, this militaristic emphasis has become "tainted" largely because it appears to conform to the Afrikaner historiographical emphasis on unprovoked black aggression. So, instead of stressing Ndebele military initiative, someone like Lucky Kekana relies on a reactive model that simply inverts the major categories of Afrikaner historiography. Under such circumstances, the burden of explanation has shifted from one of initiative to one of reaction.

However, while much of its content may be drawn from the legends of Voortrekker historiography, the form of Lucky Kekana's story comes from the world of oral performance. Much of the story, for example, is told in accordance with the rule of two characters to a scene. Repetition and enacted speech also characterize her style, while the piece identifies Kruger by a praise name. In this narrative, the skill of oral narration is still intact. The content is so corrupted, however, that overall the story seems properly to belong to that other genre of accidental humour, the howler.

IV

In dealing with the testimony of Lucky Kekana, it might, of course, be argued that it is largely her status as a woman that has ordained this incoherence. Relegated to the realm of female storytelling and excluded from the *dikgoro*, when these existed, she can hardly be expected to exhibit historical competence. Indeed, one might argue that her exuberant style of telling is, in fact, a buoyant form of resistance to her exclusion from the male world, and contrasted against the world of silence to which women are generally relegated, the sheer volume and comprehensiveness of her narration represents no small achievement.

While these points do have some validity, her testimony can also be taken as a vivid illustration of the fate of oral historical narrative since it has become unmoored from the *dikgoro*. No longer so tightly controlled, it has in one sense become more democratic and can freely be exercised by a woman. Yet at the same time, because it no longer has an ideological centre of gravity, the meaning of such narration has become vapid, corrupted and

at times incoherent.

The idea that such oral history is "incoherent" or corrupted is, of course, controversial. Incoherent to whom? Corrupted by whose standards? Is this "invention" of history not something that has been typical of all oral history which, after all, responds to contemporary circumstances and is forever up to date.[13] Also, is an informant like Lucky Kekana, indeed, not much more creative than I allow for? Is she not perhaps the subversive bricoleur, the one who "breaks down the images and symbolism of dominant and subordinate cultures in order to recombine them in a way that subverts cultural dominance"? (Werbner 1986: 151). What of the idea that historical understanding is inseparable from narrative form? If the narrative form remains intact, then does it not, somehow, preserve a particular form of historical understanding?

To all these questions I would give a qualified no. To begin with the last question first, narrative form and historical understanding gain their meaning partly from a wider, institutional context which determines, firstly, their correct transmission and reception. The *kgoro* provided such a context. Its removal not only shattered the major forum of historical education, it also robbed people of their accustomed, everyday social spaces, one of the major sources we use for creating a context of meaning and continuity (Connerton 1989: 36-7).

In addition to creating an image of continuity, the *kgoro* also stood as a symbol of the chiefdom and an entire traditional order. By abolishing this daily, mnemonic, physical reminder of the proper social order of the chiefly universe, the resettlements marked a crucial threshold in the transformation of the chiefdom. They marked a decisive border beyond which the skills of an oral culture could certainly still be reproduced but with reference to a world that was entirely remade.

One crucial feature of oral historical narration is the implicit elaboration of a normative chiefly world, and it is against this background that events become coherent. Since 1890, when the chiefdom lost most of its territory, the possibility of imagining that chiefly world has been in doubt. Yet, given the tenacity and effectiveness of oral education, it proved possible to reproduce an imaginative notion of an epic chiefly world. But, when simultaneously both the institution in which historical education occurred and the last physical reminder of the chiefdom disappeared, the skill of historical narration rapidly disintegrated.

All that remained were the features of the landscape itself, and these alone were not strong enough to keep control on the galaxy of plot segments that made up the corpus of the chiefdom's official history. These topographical features still help people to recall certain events of the chiefdom, but it is

as if the centre of gravity has gone so that the plot segments float around in jumbled limbo, combining and reproducing themselves by an apparently aimless fission. While such fission has always been at the heart of both historical and non-historical storytelling, it has now become so aimless that it can no longer be said to be similar to the invention of history in the past. The type of comic invention I have documented in this chapter surely represents a qualitative departure from the more elevated narration and understanding embodied in the testimony of someone like Molalakgori Kekana. Combining both the skills of narrative ability, historical insight and an outstanding memory, his stories come close to the qualities of a good oral historian that Alpheus Ledwaba outlined. He phrased the issue like this:

> When we say someone is good, we mean a person who can memorize everything and know it, a person who would not forget when asked about old issues ... and also old things.

Elsewhere he added:

> When old people are with him [that is, a good oral historian] you find them endorsing his statements ... he should have a good memory and not rush over issues to conclusions. He should follow issues according to how they unfold themselves from the beginning to the end.
>
> (A. Ledwaba interview 1988)

One way in which Molalakgori Kekana obtained these skills was by spending a lot of time with old people in the *kgoro* (C.L. Kekana interview 1989). However, the possibility for others to follow his example has been radically curtailed both by migrancy and the disappearance of the *kgoro*. Wrenched out of its context in this way, oral historical knowledge has been irrevocably dislocated. It has also been marginalized by the teaching of history in formal education. Schools dispensed a massively institutionalized history in novel genres and unusual forms. A rigid sense of chronology - requiring that one "understand years" - became its defining characteristic (M.K. Kekana interview 1988). In terms of its content, history at school legitimated colonial dominance. "Traditional" history did feature in muted forms in certain reading books, but it never attained the same kind of prominence as *nonwane*. In addition, the "message" of such historical stories could be Christianized.[14] Also, as with *dinonwane*, the transference of oral history to print erased its performance aspects. Like *dinonwane*, too, such traditional history as did appear was relegated to the lower standards and so, it acquired a "junior", "child-like" status (Maibelo 1982: 4). And while formal education effectively ensconced a new style of history, it,

along with missions, dented the prestige of the existing institutions of oral history, particularly initiation schools.

Against this background, chiefly history was rendered more marginal and less coherent. But what of Lucky Kekana? Is her "cross-over" style that flagrantly draws on both formal school, public and oral historical sources, not more coherent? As a style that bridges a wide range of experience, could it not be said to be more accessible and meaningful than an "orthodox" chiefly tradition? Furthermore, could her narrative not be said to be subverting the cultural dominance of chieftaincy? While her story may unintentionally do this, Kekana herself sees the story as being an authentic and orthodox account of chiefly history. She is not alone in this view, and I was referred to her more than once as a historical authority. Also, her stories are not without appeal, and on both occasions that I interviewed her she held an audience of four or five bystanders spellbound.

Her stories with their humour, action and dramatic enactment clearly have some popular appeal. However, they are stories with little intellectual content. As we have seen, the "orthodox" proponents of a chiefly tradition, like Molalakgori Kekana and Madimetša Kekana, used their stories as intellectual explorations of chieftaincy and its wider meanings. In Lucky Kekana this intellectual foundation is entirely absent. One reason for this absence has to do with her gender which precluded her from the forum of the *kgoro*. Yet at the same time her work illustrates some of the more general tendencies of post-*kgoro* oral history. Deprived of a proper historical education in the *kgoro*, or alternatively having only partial or artificial access to a postbetterment, reconstituted substitute of the *kgoro*, many people have not mastered the intellectual rigours and traditions of chiefly history. Instead, such historical education as they have obtained in formal schooling has been a particularly debased and propagandistic version of the Afrikaner historiography which has for some time been taught in schools. Out of a combination of these two corrupted traditions, subject in turn to the oppressive climate of homeland politics, grows a kind of popular history which can best be described as comic. It is a case of history quite literally being repeated, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

Notes

1. The recent publication of Vail and White (1991) has placed questions of oral literature and historical change on the agenda.

2. The literature in this field is vast. For some major landmarks see Chartier 1989; Clanchy 1983; Finnegan 1988; Goody 1986; Graff 1979, 1981 and Street 1984, n.d.

3. For fuller discussion of these points see Hofmeyr 1991.

4. Testimony of M. Mathware, collected in Head (1981: 10) and M.K. Kekana interview (1988).

5. Paragraph based on interviews with M.J. Kekana 1988; M.K. Kekana 1987, 1988.

6. This point is based on teaching and conversing with students at the Mokopane College of Education.

7. Scheub (1975: 90-100). See also Gough (1986: 187-8). My thanks to Molly Bill for the latter reference.

8. It may seem that the informant is confusing Pampata with Bambatha, the leader of an anti-colonial uprising in Natal early this century. Shaka, however, was known to have a liaison with a woman, Pampata. For details see Ritter (1971: 125-7).

9. Transvaal Native Affairs Department (1905: 29). However, other Kgatla-traditions, while mentioning interaction with the Kekana, do not specifically mention Maroelaskop. See, for example, Van Warmelo (1944: 3-6).

10. While nobody was prepared to go on record with this story, it was often told informally.

11. Coetzee (1980: 297-8) based in turn on Van Warmelo (1944: 14). See also L.T. Mokhonoane interview (1987), which gives the same explanation.

12. The spelling of the name, "Dingaan", is an Afrikanerized rendition of "Dingane".

13. For a discussion of this point see Scully (1978: 66-7, 118-9).

14. See for example "Masasara", in Schwellnus (n.d.: 24-6). Maibelo (1982: 4) identifies this as a story that comes from oral historical tradition.

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