What is a South African Folktale?
Reshaping Traditional Tales through Translation and Adaptation

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He arrived at home and it said, 'No! Let me go! I'm a bird that shits amasi!'[1]

He said, "Please shit, that we may see!'

It produced some amasi. Oh, the man tasted it, he tasted it. He ate it.

(Scheub 1977, p. 47)

'Kethani, don't harm me. If you spare my life, I'll make milk for you.'.... And Kethani watched as the weeds became uprooted and then ordered the bird to make milk for him. He took out a calabash and the bird filled it with thick warm milk.

Kethani savoured the milk as it slithered down his dry throat. It had been a very long time since he had tasted milk.

(Heale & Stewart 2001, p.18)

The first extract is taken from a Xhosa tale recorded in 1967, and transcribed and translated by a Wisconsin researcher, Harold Scheub (1977). The second is taken from a recently published collection entitled *African Myths and Legends*, and was written by Dianne Stewart in 1994 (Heale & Stewart 2001). The striking discrepancies between these two accounts of the same tale were the motivation for an examination of the ways in which traditional South African tales have been the object of rewriting and appropriation by English writers and translators over a period of one hundred and fifty years, initially in a colonial context, and more recently in a postcolonial context.

Written English versions of oral narratives from the different linguistic and cultural groups of Southern Africa constituted the first genre of South African children's literature, with the earliest collections published in the 1860s (Bleek 1865, Calloway 1868). These were, however, originally intended for scholars and students, and the first collection intended for children (*How The Ostrich Got His Name And Other South African Stories For Children* by Annette Joelson) was only published in 1926.

Even though the early collections were aimed at adults, certain elements in the tales were nevertheless deemed unsuitable for readers of the time, and hence the process of rewriting and adaptation began. In the extract above,

Scheub chooses to translate the word 'shit' directly, rejecting any kind of euphemism, and he does the same for the four versions of the story that he collected in the 1960s (Scheub 1977, pp.46-54). In contrast, the early missionaries expressed distaste for what they described as the bluntness of African languages in certain fields of discourse, and proverbs including words such as *mokota* (shit) were either changed or removed from their teaching (Ngcongwane 1988, p.186). In the introduction to his 1868 collection Bishop Calloway comments, almost in passing:

Whilst on the subject of translation, it may be as well to remark that among the natives, as among all uncultivated people, there is great freedom of speech used in allusion to the relations between the sexes. Whenever I could soften down such expressions to suit our more refined taste, I have done so. (Calloway 1868, p.ii)

W.H. Bleek makes a similar statement in the introduction to his 1864 collection:

To make these Hottentot Fables readable for the general public, a few slight omissions and alterations of what would otherwise have been too naked for the English eye were necessary, but they do not in any essential way affect the spirit of the Fables. (Bleek 1864, p.xxii)

Of course, any translation may be regarded as a rewriting of an original text, potentially exercising both positive and negative effects. All translators are constrained by the difficulty of transferring cultural elements in a form accessible to their new audience, and are themselves to some extent locked into culture-specific textual and conceptual grids which affect the way in which they approach their task (Lefevere 1999, pp.76-77). Thus the text is inevitably manipulated, in order for the translations to 'fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant, ideological and poetical currents of [the] time' (Lefevere 1992, p.8). While such rewritings may introduce new elements and promote literary innovation, they may also distort and manipulate (Lefevere 1992, p.vii). If a translation or rewriting is to read fluently, and appeal to the target audience, the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text will be softened, or even effaced, and the text becomes part of the target-language discourse. The text is thus 'rewritten in the transparent

discourse dominating the target-language culture and is inevitably coded with other target-language values, beliefs, and social representations' (Venuti 1992, p.5).

Contemporary English versions of South African folk tales provide an interesting example of a process of rewriting and appropriation between widely differing cultures and narrative traditions. While the genre of 'folk literature' as a form of children's literature is a major area of study (for example, Bettelheim 1976, Bottigheimer 1987, Zipes 1979, 1982), and the rewriting of traditional European tales has been explored (for example, Beckett 2002), very little work has been done on South African folk tales within the context of translation studies. Articles on the translation of African folk tales into English have appeared (Jenkins 1988, pp.191-202; Jenkins 1993, pp.8-26; Mutahi 1994, pp.26-35), but the bulk of research has focused on the form and morphology of traditional oral narratives, and on the difficulties involved in transforming oral performance into the written medium (Jenkins 1988; Scheub 1971; Soko 1986). These studies reflect the dramatic changes which take place in the transformation from the oral to the written form, involving difficulties in transferring, or compensating for, 'expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity or humour' (Finnegan 1970, p.3).

The desirability of publishing South African folktales in English is not contested. Both writers and publishers have recognised the need to provide literature which could bring together the different peoples of South Africa and contribute to racial harmony, an awareness of a common natural environment and a form of 'cross-culturalisation' (Jenkins 1993, p.26; Canonici 1990, p.142).[2] Such cross-culturalisation may well be a positive phenomenon, but in practice the process seems largely one-way, with writers rarely demonstrating any awareness of the appropriation implicit in their activity. For example, Jenny Seed—a well-known and well-respected South African children's writer—consciously imposed her own cultural interpretation on an early collection of San tales (Bleek 1923), reshaping and publishing the stories in 1975 as African tales of the creation (Seed 1975). In her Author's Note, she writes:

Like the pieces of pottery an archaeologist might find in some ancient midden, none of the tales seemed by themselves complete, but joined together they made a meaningful shape – a shape which, I feel, is not very different from that which the Bushmen intended ... It seemed to me that they were, in fact, the story of the Creation, Bushman style ....
(quoted in Jenkins 1993, p.13)

Although she may have been unaware of the arrogance implicit in her attitude (Jenkins 1993, p.13), it is an intrinsic part of any interpretation and rewriting of African folklore in a Western tradition. Jenkins, I think inadvertently, highlights the reasons for such rewriting when he comments that 'the dreadful stories of cannibals, ogres, monsters and cruel treatment of women and children to be found in some collections are likely to repel young white readers' (Jenkins 1993, p.16).

Early collectors were motivated by a scholarly desire to preserve the tales in writing, but subsequent motives almost certainly included cultural superiority, nostalgia for a 'pre-European African paradise', and post-colonial guilt (Jenkins 1993, p.25). Indeed, the process of rewriting has been regarded with suspicion by some African oral specialists, who are not convinced that it benefits the literature it purports to protect and who suggest that the translated texts 'may not be authentic at all', as 'the whole essence of oral literature, which is to express the African's vision of the world, is by and large lost in the process of translating it.' (Soko 1986, pp.113-114). This raises a number of issues around the publication of contemporary English versions of oral tales, all related to the central question of the nature of a South African folk tale.

Postcolonial translation theorists have recently drawn attention to the very complex relationship between source culture discourses and the target texts produced (Robinson 1997, p.43).[3] In this case, some writers state clearly that their tales are not in fact 'folk tales retold...but original stories inspired by African world-views' (Poland 1987, back cover). Others, however, present their stories as South African folk tales, but often remove a number of those features perceived as unpleasant or brutal, and add in elements more appropriate to target-language conventions. This inevitably involves assuming an ideological standpoint

and deliberately rewriting the stories in a different tradition. For example, the cover of *Marriage of the Rain Goddess* (Wolfson 2001), which won the United Kingdom Reading Association Book Award in 1997, includes snippets from reviews which describe the tale as 'a hauntingly beautiful retelling of a Zulu myth', while 'vast pictures conjure up another continent in all its mystery and magic'.[4] Such descriptions contribute to the wide-scale romanticisation of the tales as in some way 'other' and 'exotic'.

Examples of this kind of trend in adaptation and rewriting can be found in four versions of a Zulu tale about a barren woman who acquires a child with the help of magical birds. Four versions of this tale are examined, the first English translation by Calloway (1868), two modern English versions (Savory 1971, Poland 1983), and for comparative purposes, certain aspects of a modern version in Zulu

(Msimang 1987).[5] The major differences can be grouped in a number of broad categories:

- Titles, opening and closing sentences
- Personalisation of individual characters
- Romanticisation and interpersonal relationships
- Potentially frightening or 'unsavoury' elements
- Assumed cultural knowledge
- Repetition and rhyme.

Bishop Calloway's version gives the story the title *Ukcombekcantsini*, which translates literally as the *grass mat-marker*, referring to the way in which the woman hides her children—by covering the entrance to her hut with grass mats. Similarly, the modern Zulu version of the tale is entitled UNyumba-katali, a personal name ascribed to the woman which refers to her barrenness, but also to her tenacity. The two modern English versions are

Version	Calloway	Savory	Poland	Msimang
Opening	There was a certain king of a certain country; he used to have children who were crows, he had not one child that was a human being; in all his houses his children were crows.	Somakhehla's heart was full of sorrow, for Nobakhatoli, his much loved wife, was barren, and it seemed he would go childless to his grave.	Away in the heart of Zululand, where the old Tugela river slides down green and brown as a crocodile between the hills there lived a headman called Dumudumu and his many wives.	Kwakhukhona... - Cosu! Kwakukhona inkosi... - Imh!
Closing	The damsels plucked grass, and thatched the whole village of the bride; they then departed and went back to their people. And she then reigned together with her husband.	Now, as Nobakhatoli heard her husband's words, she brought out her roll of woven mats. These she unrolled from the doorway of her hut right down the pathway that led to the council tree where Mveli's headman sat, and bade Fihliwe walk with pride along the path for all to see – a fitting bride for Mveli's royal kraal.	And Fikile would tell them with pride of her grandchildren, the sons and daughters of the chief and Nomajuba, child of the doves, the girl who walked with the moon.	Siyabonga! Yaze yamnandi indaba yakho!

entitled *The Song of the Doves* (Savory 1961) and *Child of the Doves* (Poland 1983). Here the titles focus on the birds which help the woman to have a child, but were also no doubt chosen for ease of pronunciation for the new target audience.

In traditional oral narrative, opening and closing formulae often signal the start and end of a tale. In Western tales there are also formulaic openings and closings but their use is more flexible and less common in the written form. The table presents the first and last segments of each of the four versions.

The opening of Calloway's version sets the scene of the story anonymously. No characters are named, but the reader or listener would recognise the reference to the king's many houses as indicating that he has many wives, while the reference to 'crows' is a direct translation of a term in Zulu cultural history which referred to deformed children (Horsburgh 1990, p.61). In contrast, Savory introduces her characters with personal names, and implies that the chief has only one wife. Poland locates her tale from the beginning in a real place, most probably known to her target audience, thus using the story to educate the readers. The Zulu version uses a traditional folk tale opening, in this case a remote setting formula indicating that the tale takes place in mythical time rather than historical time, and reflecting entrance into the world of the ancestral spirits. The closing sequences reflect similar preoccupations: Calloway's version remains anonymous, but as with the English versions, ends with the marriage of the daughter, while Msimang ends with the formulaic closing.

The use of personal names conforms to modern Western conventions, contributing to the individualisation of the characters. The early version and the later Zulu version use descriptive labels such as *UNyumba-katali*, but the majority of characters have no specific names. Poland gives names to all of the central characters, not always with any specific meaning, except for the daughter who is called *Nomajuba*, meaning 'child of the doves'. Savory also gives her characters names, and in the case of the daughter and the wife, uses names which carry meaning in Zulu—the daughter is called *Fihliwe*, meaning 'hidden one', as her mother hides her until she reaches puberty, while the mother is called *Nombakatholi* (a variant of

Unyumba-katali describing her barrenness and including an element of mockery. The English target audience is unlikely to understand the significance of these names, however, given the low number of English-speakers with knowledge of Zulu. Nevertheless, the use of such names adds to the otherness of the text, making it more foreign, more African.

In the same way, while Calloway and Msimang do not include any hint of romance in their tales, the two later English versions turn the story into one of romantic love. Savory transforms the chief with many wives into a monogamous chief who loves his wife dearly—an example of purifying elements considered unacceptable in the target-language culture, which frowns upon the practice of polygamy. In addition, when the chief meets the daughter he is described as being 'tongue-tied as he looked upon her sweetness'. Poland introduces a younger man, the son of a neighbouring chief, who is also bewitched by the young girl: 'spellbound, he gazed at her'.

The differences described above are also examples of the cultural assumptions and beliefs underlying the stories and which the different audiences are presumed to share. For example, the naming of inadequate or deformed children as 'crows' reflects the stigma attached to disabled children in many South African cultural groups. It would also be commonly known that if the chief wife does not bear children, then there is no heir, and this would be a genuine reason for grief and commotion. This aspect is reinforced in the modern Zulu version of the tale, but Savory chooses to make her characters monogamous and therefore removes the allusion to 'crows'. Poland does not indicate whether or not Fikile is the chief wife, an omission which removes the significance implicit in the original tale, where the lack of children carries meaning only if it is the chief wife who is barren. In the modern Zulu version, Msimang places a good deal of emphasis on the social stigma attached to the wife's inability to bear children. She is banished from the main hut in the kraal and sent to live in a shack at the entrance, symbolising her demotion on the social ladder (Horsburgh 1990, p.62). When the chief finds out about his twin children, he orders the slaughter of the crows—the other wives' children—and returns his chief wife to a high status with the others acting as her servants.

The birds that assist the woman in acquiring a child or children also carry different cultural and ideological significance, especially as they feature in the titles of the two later English versions. In Western culture the dove is a symbol of peace and love, and the title indicates the probable happy outcome of the story. The Zulu word used in the oral tale is *amavukuthu,* or rock pigeons, which are associated with sorrow in Zulu culture, and represent the power of the ancestral spirits who traditionally help the needy (Msimang, quoted in Horsburgh 1990, p.65).

In Calloway's version the birds ask the woman for a horn and a lancet, and take blood from her back, which she is told to place in a vessel and to hide 'until two moons die'. When she looks inside the vessel, there are two children. The twins are retained in the modern Zulu version, adding an element of suspense to the story because in Zulu culture twins may signify either extreme luck or extreme evil (Horsburgh 1990, p.66). The doves in Savory's story simply tell the woman to make a bed in a pot, and to look only when 'the moon has gone to rest', thus removing any reference to blood, or to the cycle of the three moons. She finds a baby girl in the pot, whom she names Fihliwe (hidden one). Poland retains the instruction to put blood into a clay pot, but the doves tell her that they will open the pot, with no reference to time.

One of the most characteristic features of oral narrative in South Africa is the extensive use of repetition and rhyme. Indeed, repetition is at the root of oral performance, both structural and thematic (Scheub 1977, p.40). It is not surprising then that Calloway's early version retains these elements, nor is it unexpected that Msimang also retains these elements in his Zulu version. There is no use of either repetition or rhyme in either of the modern English versions of the tale, reflecting the way they have been adapted to target-language conventions.

It is significant that the later Zulu version is closer to the version published by Bishop Calloway over a hundred years before. This may well be an indication that Zulu rewriters and narrators are writing in a very different context and tradition from their English counterparts, or that the language of the retelling itself plays a significant role.

The extracts cited at the beginning of this article provide a further, marked example of the kinds of transformation that can be observed. The story focuses on a couple hoeing a field. Each day a bird arrives after they have left and makes the weeds grow again. The man catches the bird, who claims to be able to defecate *amasi.* The man keeps the bird to feed his children, but his children tell their friends and inadvertently let the bird escape. There are several identifiable features in the original tale (of which Scheub collected eight different variants). The most obvious characteristic is the use of extensive repetition, a key feature of oral performance, referred to above:

> *Tsiro! Tsiro! Tsiro!*
> *Tsiro! Tsiro! Tsiro!*
>
> *How can you start plowing*
> > *when the chief has not yet plowed?*
>
> *How can you start plowing*
> > *when the chief has not yet plowed?*
>
> *Land, join together! Close in!*
> *Land, join together! Close in!*
>
> *Let it be as it was!*

Similarly, the request to produce *amasi* is repeated five times (Scheub 1977, pp.46-47). The sentences are short and simple: 'In the morning they travelled, they went to the fields. They hoed, they hoed, they hoed and hoed.' (p.46). And, finally, the language used is direct: Then he said, "It shits, it shits *amasi*!" He said, "Please shit, Bird, so that we may see you do it!"' (p.47)

The content of the different versions varies slightly. In one of the eight variants collected by Scheub the man has two wives, whom he banishes after they let the bird escape (Scheub 1975, p.315). In another version the father chases his three children away from the house when he finds out that the bird has gone, and the children are caught by a talking animal which roasts and eats one of the children. The other two escape and run home. The tale ends with the father threatening the remaining children: 'From today, when I put a thing anywhere and you take it, then you'll end up with the animals!' (Scheub 1975, p.333) This clearly

is intended as a potentially frightening warning for the children listening to the *ntsomi*.

The version of the tale written in 1994 and recently re-published is very different in several ways. There is some attempt to retain the repetition, but in a reduced form. Thus each time the bird makes the weeds grow again, it utters the same sentence: 'Weeds, grow again in Khethani's field', repeated three times. It is also notable, culturally, that while in the Xhosa versions discussed above the story begins and ends abruptly, the story is now contextualised and given a background, fulfilling an educational function for the new audience who may not understand the significance of ploughing the fields:

> It was spring and the villagers came to life as though they were waking from a long winter sleep. From sunrise to sunset, the Xhosa people worked in the fields, preparing the dry ground for seeds. As they loosened the iron hard earth with hoes, they dreamed of the first spring rains that would soften the ground and bring life to their planting.
> (Heale & Stewart 2001, p.16)

Reflecting the trend towards the individualisation of characters in contemporary versions, the central character is here personalised and given a name—Khethani, and his individual identity is reinforced by sharing his inner worries and concerns with the reader. For example, Khethani is described as worrying about the drought affecting his village. The bird is also described in a positive way as the 'beautiful bird'—reinforced in turn by the extensive and lavish illustrations.[6] The lexical items used have been chosen to suit the target audience and the target culture's conventions. The bird 'makes' 'sour milk'—both words representing more general terms with fewer associations. The reader is told by means of a text box that the sour milk is called *amasi* or *maas*, which all South African children will recognise from the shelves in the supermarket. Explaining what this is, together with the explanations accompanying other stories, indicates that the book is aimed at an international market.

Finally, the ending of the story is more reassuring, with any element of threat or menace removed. The children try to chase after the bird when it escapes, as in other versions, but after being menaced by 'a cruel old man', they are rescued by an eagle and returned to their parents, who express their relief that the children are safe. The story concludes reassuringly: 'And as he said this, the first drops of rain hit the dry, iron-hard earth.' (Heale & Stewart 2001, p.19).

Similar trends can therefore be identified in both the examples examined here. Understanding the source language tales, told in a specific manner and context, requires a fundamental understanding of the 'traditional themes, motifs, beliefs and values expressed in the traditional folktale' (Horsburgh 1990, p.25). The English-speaking target audience cannot be assumed to have such an understanding and so the tales are softened, contextualised and elaborated with explanations of elements implicit in the source language texts or with the elimination of certain elements considered undesirable. In making them into 'South African' tales they are no longer Zulu, Xhosa or Sotho tales. To ensure that the contemporary target audience understands the cultural and linguistic codes behind the tales the narrators have adapted the message in accordance with the conventions of the target language and culture.

Publishing these tales in a new form, more in keeping with target-language and target-culture norms, may well be an attempt to create a new identity for South African children. Tötemeyer suggested in 1989 that 'African mythology, which is an essential ingredient of African culture, should become fused with western and other values enabling all children from Africa to internalize it as part of their common culture.' (Tötemeyer 1989, p.397). It is by no means certain whether such an exercise is valuable, or whether such a deliberate process of fusion through rewriting has had a positive or negative effect. What is certain is that these are not the tales told around the fireside centuries ago; they are the tales being read by children and adults today. As stated at the beginning of this article, translation inevitably involves a degree of rewriting and appropriation, especially in this kind of context, but to present such tales as 'South African' is somewhat misleading.

In the context of postcolonial translation studies, it has been suggested that there is a need for indigenous texts to be retranslated 'so as to reinterpellate the once-colonized as increasingly decolonised' (Robinson 1997, p.24). With

reference to Indian literature, Niranjana suggests that the reason for this is that many educated Indians came to know their own culture through English translations, while English education in general 'familiarized the Indian with ways of seeing, techniques of translation, or modes of representation that came to be accepted as "natural"' (Niranjana 1992, p.31). It would seem that such retranslation would be most productive if it were literalist—remaining as close as possible to the original text (Robinson 1997, p.89). However, the situation in South Africa is rather different. The folk tales of South Africa have continued to exist, and to live, in parallel performances and retellings in many rural areas and settings. Moreover, many children do have the opportunity to hear these tales in their own languages. How do we make the stories accessible to all the children of South Africa while retaining the cultural elements of the source texts, of which in each case there may be many? A study of modern versions of the tales in their original languages, together with a project of retranslation, could perhaps achieve the aim of 'reinterpellation' for all the language groups of the country. Within the context of translation studies, such a project could also provide an opportunity for the identification of what might eventually be designated a 'South African folktale'.

END NOTES

1. *Amasi* is a thick, naturally soured milk, rather like yoghurt, very commonly eaten in Southern Africa.

2. There are also some collections in Afrikaans translation which have appeared during the last century. Jenkins suggests that the two developments form part of a single tradition of children's literature (Jenkins 1993, p.9), but further study would be required to establish whether or not similar processes of translation and rewriting are at work in those versions.

3. The theorists referred to by Robinson (1977) include Niranjana (1992), Jacquemond (in Venuti 1992), and Asad (1986).

4. The classification of stories as myth or legend is problematic in itself, since these are Western literary categories. If a myth is understood as a tale set in 'the dawn of time' which provides its audience with an explanation for some of the unknown mysteries which humankind faces, then such tales are less common in Southern Africa, despite their often being collected and published as such (Beier 1966, Seed 1975, Heale & Stewart 2001). Most Southern African Bantu languages do not classify stories in the same way. Where there are terms for different kinds of tales, these most often define the context in which a tale is told (Finnegan 1970, p.365). The general Xhosa word for a tale is *ntsomi*, which is a performing art, constituting a

fabulous story, unbelievable, a fairy tale, a seemingly insignificant piece of fantasy, endlessly repetitious. It is also the storehouse of knowledge of Xhosa societies, the means whereby the wisdom of the past is remembered and transmitted through the generations, an image of private conduct and public morality, a dramatisation of values, an externalisation of the Xhosa world-view. (Scheub 1977, p.37)

In Zulu, the general term for folk-narrative is *umlando* or *ezasendulo*, where *umlando* literally means story in the sense of history. The word *inganekwana* refers to children's tales, fables or legends, while *izibongo* refers to praise-poetry and other eulogies of living or historical figures (Vilakazi 1976, pp.xii-xiii).

5. All references to the Zulu version published by Msimang in 1987 are taken with acknowledgement and thanks from Susan Horsburgh's unpublished MA Research Project, submitted in 1990 for the degree of MA (Translation), University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

6. The use of illustrations in contemporary versions of South African folk tales would be a profitable area of further study.

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Judith Inggs is a Senior Lecturer in Translation and Interpreting Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She completed a PhD on Soviet Russian children's literature in 1997 and then began work on South African children's literature, with a specific focus on young adult fiction. She has recently published an article in CREArTA entitled 'Grappling with change: the English language youth novel in South Africa', while another article called 'Race and space: the contemporary South African youth novel' will appear in the collection from the 15th congress of the IRSCL to be published by Greenwood Press this year. Judith combines her interest in children's literature with her work in the field of Translation Studies, and had an article on the Russian translations of the *Harry Potter* books published in the journal *Meta* in 2003.