

## PRELUDE

### *The Uncoiling Python*

And Michal took an image, and laid it in the bed,  
and put a pillow of goats' hair for his bolster, and  
covered it with a cloth.

—1 Samuel 19:13

The python is the operative image in this discussion of the place of oral traditions in the 350-year struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The Zulu people, Axel-Ivar Berglund has written, “are convinced that” the python is “the coolest of all the animals in the whole world,” a result of “the coolness of water, especially that of deep pools”; in addition, “there is the coolness related to calmness and an even temperament. A python is said to have no *amawala* (careless, hasty and haphazard action).”<sup>1</sup>

How did the Africans endure the sustained assaults on their liberties? The secret to survival is to be found in the imagery of transformation and rebirth in the traditions of the San and Nguni peoples. The uncoiling python is an apt poetic mirror of this transitional process.

An informant told Berglund, “This animal is never seen working hastily or in anger. It is always slow and steady, thinking a long time before it does something. So it is clear that it has no *amawala* at all. That is why we say that it is cool.” Berglund further noted, “The python is also the symbol of great power, expressed in physical strength and ability. A man in the uMhlatuze valley where pythons are found said: ‘It is the strongest of all, only he (the Lord-of-the-Sky) being stronger. It is stronger than all the animals, being able to kill anything. Even bulls are killed by it.’” Its physical strength is linked with its coolness: “The python itself

is said to be very difficult to kill ‘because of its coolness all the time, even when it is facing death.’” Berglund quoted a diviner as saying, “It remains peaceful, doing nothing. So many times people think that it is dead and commence working (i.e. removing the skin). But when they look inside (the skin) they find that it is living. They fear very much and take it very quickly to the shadow of a tree. There they cut off the head, letting the blood run out on the earth under the tree, the animal all the time just remaining quiet and doing nothing.” In addition to coolness and quietude, Berglund noted, “pythons symbolize togetherness, undivided oneness.”

The thought-pattern of togetherness is the underlying idea in the use of a python’s skin in the *inkhatha yesizwe*, the emblem of national unity and loyalty. It is only when the *inkhatha* has been enveloped with the skin of a python that it is really and truly the national emblem, even though it could lack other ingredients. But under no condition may the skin of the python be omitted. “How else could we say, ‘We are the children of Mageba and Zulu’ if this thing was not there, binding us together.”<sup>2</sup>

The python is a poetic example of rebirth. In the praises of kings and other significant figures, this is a common image, as is evident in the following poem directed to Ofisi Kona:<sup>3</sup>

*Ovuk’ emini akabonanga nto,*  
*Kub’ akayibonang’ inamb’ icombuluka.*  
 The person who rises late has seen nothing,  
 Because he has not seen the python uncoil.

The same is true in this poem for Mhluti Tini:<sup>4</sup>

*Phumani bantu baseBhotwe anibonanga nto*  
*Kub’ aniyibonang’ inamb’ icombuluka.*  
 Come out, people of the palace, you have seen  
 nothing  
 Because you have not seen the python uncoil.

Magagamela Koko created a poem for his son using the same imagery:<sup>5</sup>

*Ndiza kuphinda ke ndibonge*  
*Into yam enkulu<sup>6</sup>*  
*uBantwana bayaxathula<sup>7</sup>*  
*Abanye bafund’ ukuhlala*  
*Abanye bafund’ ukuhamba*

*Abanye bafund' ukuthetha*  
*Ovuk' emini' akabonanga nto*  
*Kub' akayibonang' inamb' icombuluka . . .*  
I will praise again  
My senior son,  
Children-walk-in-shoes,  
Some are only beginning to sit,  
Some are only starting to walk,  
Some are only learning to speak.  
The late-riser has not seen anything,  
He has not seen the python uncoil.

And Nongenile Masithathu Zenani, speaking of her craft as a poet, recalled how, in the old times among the Xhosa, the poet addressed the king:<sup>8</sup>

*Hoyiiiiini na! . . . hoyiiiiini na! . . . ovuk' emini ngobudenge*  
*akabonanga nto . . .*  
*ngokuba yen' engasoze wayibona inamba xa icombuluka*  
*Hoyiiiiini na! Hoyiiiiini na!*  
The late-riser has foolishly seen nothing . . .  
Because he will never see the python uncoil!

Mditshwa Diko, a Mpondomise king, was compared to the python:<sup>9</sup>

*Ulala ngemva kula' ingwenya yakwaMajola ngaphambili.*  
He sleeps behind, the Majola python sleeps in front.

As was Sarhili Hintsu, a Gcaleka king:<sup>10</sup>

*Yinamb' enkul' ejikel' i-Hohita.*  
*Ovuk' emini akabonanga nto,*  
*Kub' engayibonang' inamb' icombuluka.*  
It is a big python that surrounds the Hohita,  
The one who rises late has seen nothing,  
For he has not seen the python uncoil.

And Gumna Sandile:<sup>11</sup>

*Yinamba yakwaNzunga*  
*Eyajikel' eKubusi mhlana yafika.*  
He is the python of Nzunga  
That encircled Kubusi when it arrived.

## SURVIVING 350 YEARS

I have been preparing to write this book ever since I began collecting oral traditions in southern Africa in July 1967. In a trilogy,<sup>12</sup> I attempted to explain the complexities of performance of oral stories in southern Africa; in *The Tongue Is Fire*,<sup>13</sup> I presented historical stories and commentaries that deal more directly with apartheid in South Africa. My experiences collecting these materials<sup>14</sup> and the writing of these books were the foundation for this book, in which I attempt to show how the oral poets and storytellers, through their traditional materials, dealt with the day-to-day inhumanity of the racist system and kept their audiences from succumbing to the daily tedium and irrational weight of this system.

How did the African people survive 350 years of apartheid? They did not have the weaponry with which to confront the interlopers. Many went to the cities and farms to work for the whites. But most remained in the rural areas, continuing to farm as they had for generations. Some were nomadic, migratory; others were sedentary. And they told stories, stories that were ancient—fairy tales, the stuff of the “noble savage,” primitive, animistic, and obvious, hardly an adequate shield against the daily onslaught of the colonial powers.

When I began my research in July 1967, I was not prepared for the real force of those oral traditions. I was aware of the motifs, the surface themes. What I did not fully anticipate was the active role played by the audience, the pivotal role of the storyteller, and the startling and subversive use made of ancient and seemingly hackneyed images. As I learned more and storytellers and audiences provided me with the tools that I needed, I was able to move beneath the obvious and unthreatening surfaces of these stories. And I slowly became aware of something extraordinary, something splendidly seditious; I gained insight into the way the African peoples protected themselves, how they were able to survive the years of apartheid.

At the same time, I inevitably became sensitive to the daily incivility of the system under which Africans lived. In a journal entry dated January 26, 1976, I wrote of the comments by a Xhosa woman named Nongenile Masithathu Zenani on race relations in South Africa. The black man, she says, is better off as a fly or dog. The white calls the black a “kaffir,” *inkawu*.<sup>15</sup> She fears that whites will fly over in airplanes and bomb the blacks, so that the blacks die a fearful death. However, when Hitlani, the young autocratic headman of this area, extorts a fifth of brandy from her, she is furious but complies, for she wants no problems. She does not like whites but fears black rule if Hitlani is to become a ruler. Similarly, on February 11, 1976, I wrote more about Masithathu’s

life-experience. She tells of the *imantyi*, the white magistrate, who would not accept that she is seventy years old and therefore qualified for a government pension (her deceased husband worked for the government years ago, and at the time Masithathu qualified for a pension of about fourteen dollars a year). He made her bare her head, to see whether her hair was gray; this act was an ignominious one because, she explains, a mature woman never bares her head in the presence of a man who is not her husband.

In Soweto, I had been playing tapes of some of the stories that I had collected in the South African rural countryside, and doubting young Africans argued that the lack of any clear statements about apartheid revealed that these traditions were antiquated and not relevant to contemporary issues and history in that country. When I returned to the countryside, I told some of the storytellers what the youthful Africans had said. One storyteller said, “Our traditions were here long before apartheid came to South Africa, and our traditions will be here long after apartheid is gone. How do you think we have survived these three hundred and fifty years? It is the truths embodied in the images of the stories that helped us to endure. The stories deal with eternal truths, not with the exigencies of the moment.”<sup>16</sup>

A. C. Jordan, the Xhosa writer, told me of how, when he was an education supervisor, he moved from town to town in the African areas of South Africa, always accompanied by white officials who, Jordan said, made certain that nothing subversive was being said. Jordan was regularly able to circumvent these watchdogs by telling stories to his audiences, stories that seemed on their surface to be simple traditional tales but that were, if one understood the language of storytelling, deeply subversive and significantly important in the sense that they enabled members of audience to continue to bear the world they lived in. Jordan, using “oral tradition as a political weapon,” was able to

attack[] the white rulers in an oblique fashion, creating *iintsomi* in Xhosa, the meaning of which would not escape the Xhosa members of his audiences. He told of the contest between the birds, for example, how the birds met together to participate in a contest to discover who could soar highest in the sky. That bird would become the king of the birds. The eagle flew highest—or so it appeared. But unknown to the eagle, a tiny bird was hiding in its feathers. And when the eagle had reached the apex of its ascent, and started descending, the little bird flew a few feet higher, then itself glided to the earth.<sup>17</sup>

The oral and written traditions of the Africans of South Africa have provided an understanding of their past, particularly the way the past relates to the present and the continued shaping of the past by the present (and vice versa). When colonial forces first came to this region in 1487, those traditions were also a bulwark against what would become 350 years of colonial rule, characterized by the racist policies of apartheid. The people retreated into themselves, finding a harbor in tradition.

From the indigenous San and Khoi populations of southern Africa to the fifteenth century, when Bantu-speaking peoples moved into the southern part of the continent, people later to become known as the Xhosa, Zulu, Swati, Ndebele, Sotho, Tswana, and Tsonga, this part of Africa was a rich amalgam of interacting peoples. The coming of the whites added to and dramatically altered these interactions. Although they did not initially consider themselves a colonizing power, the whites became determined from an early period to bring the African peoples under their rule. With superior firepower, and through one hundred years of war, the subjugation was made permanent.

The Africans did not submit to colonial rule from the beginning. There were open insurrections and also subversive means whereby the Africans effectively contented with the whites. Probably the most effective and least apparent of these has never been wholly understood: the indigenous storytelling and poetic traditions of the Africans gave them the means whereby they could withstand the daily humiliations of colonial rule. In areas where there were no radios or television sets, no computers or iPods, the storytellers were the daily news broadcasters, conveying the daily news in extraordinarily penetrating ways: through the traditional stories of the people. The storytellers were by turns or simultaneously Walter Cronkite and Jon Stewart,<sup>18</sup> placing the contemporary world into the context of the traditions of the people.

This book is an effort to understand the force and the effectiveness of these traditions, virtually unknown and never appreciated or understood by the white overlords. The whites viewed the Africans as “noble savages,” a view that derived from an eighteenth-century doctrine of simplicity and innocence unencumbered by the complexities of civilization. If the Africans had a religion, it was the concept of animism, emphasizing a “preliterate” belief in a natural world in which plants and animals have souls, as do humans. These concepts persist in contemporary times, especially when considering the San and other African groups.<sup>19</sup> This may seem to explain the simple oral traditions of such people—the fairy tales and repetitious poetry—but those who view these people as “simple” have no understanding of the complexities of the people and their traditions.

Noble savage? Animist? No, there was something more, something that escaped the racist Western clichés. When I listened to the oral stories of the Nguni peoples and read the Bleek and Lloyd collection of San poetry and stories,<sup>20</sup> I knew that I was in the presence of extraordinary intellectual and imaginative works, not something that could be dismissed in such a flippant and ugly fashion. I was determined, from the first stories that I heard (among the Mpondomise people of the Transkei), to attempt to reveal the complexity of a people who have been dismissed as merely simple.

The first thing that I needed was an analytical method that would enable me to study more closely what I was witnessing every day. I adopted the method that was taught to me by storytellers and their audiences, as this became something of a detective story for me and has preoccupied me for fifty years.

This volume is an effort to reveal some of this subversive activity. I have selected San poems and tales along with Nguni and Sotho poems and tales from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some of which I collected in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Mainly, I have allowed the poets and storytellers to speak for themselves, but I have added analytical commentaries from time to time.

It is the seamlessness of all of creation that the San artists speak of: the movement from human to tree, from human to bird, from human to cloud, and back again. The San creators of rock paintings had this in mind also, as they created images of humans, placing these images against images of gods, so that there was a visual interplay between them. That interplay is what characterizes the art of the San and lies at the heart of the oral traditions of the Nguni peoples of southern Africa. It is also touched upon in contemporary written works when the authors have the sensitivity to comprehend what the San artists had been portraying centuries earlier.

The metaphor is created by a series of links (just as a loom is created) as a human becomes enmeshed with a tree, a bird, a cloud. The poet slowly connects the two, and in the end it is no longer a metaphor, because the two have become one. The process is metaphorical, but the result is a union that defies metaphor. When the process is complete, one does not have a claim to the country,<sup>21</sup> for there is no difference between the human and the country: a poetic metaphorical journey has moved us to that union. The poetry and the stories reveal the relationship between the people and the land—and reveal how it is that Africans survived 350 years of apartheid.

The interplay of history and story has been a pulse through time. The one informs the other; the one is composed of shards of the other

and is then developed into a fictional metaphor of the other. The San and the Khoi people, early inhabitants of South Africa, and the Nguni and Sotho people, later residents of the region, were at war with the whites for centuries, first with the Dutch, then the British, as the San were driven into the Kalahari Desert and the Nguni and Sotho engaged in sporadic warfare with the whites. Initially, it was the land that they fought over; later it was diamonds and gold. From the beginning, the whites enforced restrictions on the Africans that would later be codified into the laws of apartheid. Africans were destroyed, imprisoned, forced to work for the whites, and forcibly relocated to the least favored lands of the region. Deprived of essential rights and not allowed to vote, they were considered in every way lesser than the white masters.

How could they endure these decades that rotted into centuries? They were considered savages, primitives, and barbarians, and their imaginative and intellectual lives were thought to be less than civilized. True, they did have storytelling traditions, but these were not taken seriously by the Europeans. Nevertheless, these traditions were a part of the strength of the Africans, means whereby they were able to tolerate the persistent onslaught. On the surface, the poems and stories seem harmless enough.

What I have attempted to do is reveal the uncoiling python.

#### FROM A NOTEBOOK

*June 22, 1975.* The reasoning process takes place against a regular background characterized by repetition (I have variously called this background a “grid,” “expansible image,” etc.). But *why* repetition? How do the images *work* with repetition? How do the images work *generally*? The image and narrative—discursive reasoning: How does it work? Why the image? *The image and feeling*: the image evokes and holds feeling, but it is not feeling itself, it is not *composed* of feeling. Is it held together by feeling? or is its function limited to *evoking* feeling? It evokes feeling; is it evocative rather than creative? What precisely is the image? How is it constructed? And of what? How is it retained in the tradition over the years? How does it change over time? How does it *hold feeling*? Is the holding of feeling within an image the purpose of repetition of image? Once trapped in the image, feeling is kept there through repetition of the image? Is this what happens? And what then does repetition do to the feeling trapped in the image? Heighten it? Dissipate, dull, dilute it? Repetition of the feeling-trapped-in-

image: this image is then blended with yet other images which evoke and hold yet other (related?) feelings.

*A San Poem*

A MAN BECOMES A TREE

By ||kábbó

The man here climbs the mountain,  
he plays the goura.<sup>22</sup>  
The girl looks at him as he comes,  
he stands fast; as he comes,  
he holds the goura in his hand,  
he holds the goura in his mouth,  
it is he who stands playing the goura.

As he stands, the sun has set,  
as he stands; he still stands,  
as he holds it,  
he holds in his mouth the goura,  
for it is the girl,  
she listens to the goura with her ears,  
the man stands,  
he still stands,  
he has his legs,  
he has his feet,  
he is a man,

he was a man,  
he becomes a tree,  
and his feet, they are,  
he has his arms,  
because the maiden looks at him  
with the maiden eye.  
The maiden looks,  
fastening him to the ground,  
and it is so:

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Bleek Archive, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/data/stories/184/index.html>, Lloyd Book II-2, 295-305; July 1871. I have made some changes in Lloyd's original translations.



Figure 1. ||kábbo (San). Bleek Archive. *Courtesy of University of Cape Town Libraries*

his legs are those of a man,  
 he is a tree,  
 his arms are those of a man,  
 he holds the goura with his mouth,  
 he is a tree,  
 he has his eyes,  
 because he was a man,  
 he has his head,  
 he has his head-hair,  
 because he is a tree  
 which is a man,

he is a man,  
 he is a tree,  
 he has his feet, he is shod,  
 he has his nails,  
 he has his mouth,  
 he has his nose,  
 he has his ears,  
 he is a tree,  
 because he is a man,

he is a tree,  
 and it is so that he plays the goura,  
 he is a tree,  
 he plays the goura  
 while he is a tree,  
 he is a man,  
 he plays the goura,  
 and it is so that he is a tree  
 which playing the goura stands,

because he does look, with his eyes,  
and it is so that he does play the goura,  
because he does look.  
And another fast stands:  
he carried the arrows,  
he held the bow,  
he was returning,  
holding a jackal's tail's hair,  
the maiden looked at him,  
and it is so that he stands fast,  
and it is so that he still stands,  
as he holds the jackal's tail's hair,  
he did hold it, standing fast,  
as he stood; he also held the bow,  
he stood,  
because he did still stand,  
and it was so that he did become a tree,  
as he stood,  
he held the hair,  
for he was a man,  
and it was so that he did hold the hair,  
he is a tree,  
he stands,  
he has his legs,  
because he formerly had his feet,  
and it is so that he does indeed stand,  
he was shod in gemsbok skin sandals,  
he has his legs,  
he has his feet,  
he has his arms,  
he has his nails,  
he has his eyes,  
he has his nose,  
his head remains,  
he has his head-hair,  
he has his ears,  
he has his spear,  
he has his tinderbox.

Another man mounts the mountain  
he is seeking,<sup>23</sup>

he comes over the mountain:  
as he comes,  
as he carries the quiver  
and it is so that the maiden looks at him  
as he comes,  
he also, he stands,  
as he carries the quiver on his shoulder,  
he stands,  
holds the bow,  
he stands,  
he holds the stick,  
he stands,  
it is so that he still has his legs,  
and it is so that he still stands,  
he carries the quiver,  
he is a tree,  
he is a man,  
he carries the quiver,  
he has his arms,  
and it is so that he indeed still carries the bow,  
he still holds the stick,  
because he still has his hands,  
he still has his nails,  
he still has his eyes,  
he still has his nose,  
his eyes remain,  
he is a tree,  
he has his head,  
he has his head-hair,  
he talks,  
he is a tree,  
for it is he who was a man who talked,  
and it is so that he talks,  
while he is a tree,  
he waits standing on the mountain,  
he carries the quiver,  
he is a talking tree,  
which talked standing,  
for he was a man,  
the maiden looked at him,

and it is so that he became indeed a tree,  
and it is so that he talks,  
for he was a man,  
and it is so that he became a tree which talked,  
for he was a tree,  
he looked,  
he talked,  
his mouth sat,  
his tongue remained,  
to indeed talk with,  
he is a tree which has his head-hair,  
he also has his eyes,  
he looks, he is a tree which looks,  
he is a tree,  
he looks,  
he has his flesh,  
because he was a man,  
and it is so that he stands. . . .  
he is a lion,  
he has hands,  
he talks. . . .

#### COMMENTARY

“Metaphor,” wrote Aristotle, “is the application of the name of a thing to something else, working either (a) from genus to species, or (b) from species to genus, or (c) from species to species, or (d) by proportion.”<sup>24</sup> During the millennia since that definition was first written, metaphor has been broadened somewhat: “Metaphorical thought is normal and ubiquitous in our mental life, both conscious and unconscious. The same mechanisms of metaphorical thought used throughout poetry are present in our most common concepts.”<sup>25</sup> Zoltán Kövecses observes, “In the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain.”<sup>26</sup> Michael Spitzer writes, “A rhythmic pattern allows the mind to hold distant points of time together, to survey a temporal event as if it were an object or a concept.”<sup>27</sup>

“The maiden” is the poet in the San poem. She encounters three men: under her gaze, the men are transformed into trees, fastening

them to the earth. Each is still a man, but he is in the process of becoming a tree. “Man is a tree” is the metaphor, but what we experience in this poem is the transformation from the one to the other, the man remaining a man even as he becomes a tree. Metaphor has to do with the process, the act of becoming. It thus involves more than the two stark sides, involving the transformation itself. The rhythmical patterning in the poem expresses this act of becoming. And always, both sides of the metaphor are joined: the metaphorical process links the two inexorably.

The storyteller is also the San artist who, in an ancient rock painting, depicted a youth’s quest for birds by means of a dramatic pattern: replicating the birds and in the process revealing the quest. This is also what happens in the spoken tale.

The San oral storyteller creates a metaphor in the presence of the audience. As the man becomes a tree, the audience can experience the transformation as the image shifts from man to tree and back again; in the process, a metaphor, a dancing metaphor, is born. A man becomes a bird, a man becomes a cloud, a man becomes a tree: the San oral poet attempts through words, images, and patterning to reveal a metaphor in the process of becoming. In that rhythmical verbal dancing, the audience is woven into the transformation just as the poet and the transforming man are. This is the mythic center, the place where the various components of metaphor come to a boil, the place of the dancing metaphor. It is the trope laboratory.<sup>28</sup> The audience is necessarily involved in the metaphorical process; its anticipation and prediction during that process is integral to the success of metaphor.

Metaphor becomes process: the audience is emotionally locked into the evolvment of the metaphor. In stories, neither of the two sides of the metaphor is reality. But one side is masquerading as the real part of the metaphorical equation. The other side is typically fantasy, mythic, often clearly *unreal*. The storyteller manages the movement from the one to the other, erecting a temporary artifice: the storyteller is always a trickster, bringing the audience to a brief shimmering sense of reality that is all smoke and mirrors. Within that smoke and mirrors, the storyteller reveals a defense against external bombardment, a defense woven of the emotions of the members of the audience. A world is created and a domain established<sup>29</sup> that is impenetrable by alien forces, composed as it is of images and image-linkages known only to those initiates who remember and reconstitute them.

WALTER BENSON RUBUSANA

Walter Benson Rubusana was born February 21, 1858, at Mnandi, in the Somerset East district of Cape Colony. His father was Rubusana kaMbonjana, a councilor of the paramount chief, Sandile kaNgqika. Walter Rubusana was influenced by the Christian missionaries; he was educated at Lovedale College, the Free Church of Scotland mission school. He received the Cape Teachers' Certificate with distinction in 1878. In 1880, he was a teacher and an assistant pastor at the Peelton mission station. In 1883, he married Deena Nzanzana, and he later became the father of a son and five daughters. In 1884, he was transferred to East London, where he remained for the rest of his life. He was given an honorary Ph.D. from McKinley University in Chicago. He was an executive committee member of the South African Native National Congress and in 1909 was elected president of the South African Native Convention. When South Africa became the Union of South Africa in 1910, Rubusana was among those to protest before the king of England. He was the first black member of the Cape Provincial Council, representing the constituency of Thembuland. He was a pastor at the Congregational church in Newsam's Town, East London, in 1888. In 1892, when Africans were forcibly removed from this area, he founded the East London branch of the Native Vigilance Association. He helped to establish the newspaper *Izwi Labantu* (*The Voice of the People*) in East London. His collection of Xhosa poetry and stories, *Zemk' Inkomo Magwalandini* (*Away Go the Cattle, You Cowards!* or *There Goes Your Heritage, You Cowards!*), was published in 1911. Rubusana died April 19, 1936, at the age of seventy-eight. He was buried in East London.

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