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The Shape-Shifter on the Borderlands: A Comparative Study of the Trickster Figure in African Orality and in Oral Narratives concerning one South African Trickster, Khotso Sethuntsa

Felicity Wood

Introduction

The trickster is one of the most well-known figures in African oral literature. This study investigates the career of a real-life trickster, Khotso Sethuntsa, who lived and worked in South Africa in the days of white minority rule, comparing and contrasting him with trickster figures in African orality. In this process, light is cast on a key feature of African oral narrative.

Khotso, as he is commonly known, was a millionaire *inyanga* [medicine man] and purported worker of magic.¹ He was born in Lesotho and lived and worked in Kokstad and thereafter in the Transkei, from 1898 until his death in 1972. Khotso acquired a near-legendary status in parts of southern Africa as a result of his extraordinary life, his tremendous wealth, the eccentric kingdom that he constructed around himself and the astounding tales that have arisen concerning him. A mysterious figure, the origins of his fortune are shrouded in secrecy and the exact nature of his powers are unknown.²

Khotso became a prominent and influential presence in the Transkei and East Griqualand, known for his lavish lifestyle, his luxury cars (at one stage he purchased a new Cadillac every year, paid for in cash) and his array of baroque blue and white mini-mansions with their statues of lions, stained glass, ornate columns and minarets. Khotso exerted a great personal

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charisma, attracting a large following. He lived surrounded by white-robed disciples and retainers; and hosts of clients came flocking to his houses for his medicines for healing, wealth, success and sexual potency, among much else.

Of all the places in which he resided, Khotso was most at home in the country of story. He would thrive especially on jokes and deception, possessing a flair for turning tall tales to his advantage. Information concerning Khotso comes primarily in the form of oral accounts, and there is a considerable body of stories concerning the man, many of which are contradictory, controversial or incredible.³ Khotso told remarkable many stories to promote himself and his business and ensured they received widespread circulation. In this respect, his tales provide an example of what Russell H. Kaschula describes as entrepreneurial oral literature (2002, 8–10).

Not only did Khotso rely on stories, but in some significant respects, he seemed to belong in the area of story himself. This arises in part from the striking resemblance that he bears to the trickster figure of African oral narrative. The trickster thrives on the flaws, fissures and fault-lines in society, just as Khotso did. Thus, the trickster exploits the weaknesses, fears and longings that are intensified by the imbalances and inadequacies in the society in which he lives. (The masculine pronoun is used here; since the subject of this study is a man.)⁴ Further to this, the trickster slyly takes advantage of the powerful, revealing their areas of vanity and insecurity and the ways in which they are open to manipulation. Khotso resembled the trickster figure in all these respects. A trickster may also come to the fore in times of uncertainty, upheaval and tension as indeed Khotso did in a South Africa ruled by a succession of increasingly authoritarian, restrictive white governments. He rose to a zenith of wealth, power and influence in the days of the apartheid establishment.

In terms of the traditional belief systems of the southern African Xhosa-speaking, in the Zulu and Sotho communities within which Khotso lived and worked, the otherworldly is believed to flow through physical actuality in the same way that rivers and streams wend their way through dry land.⁵ Indeed, as has been stated of these cosmologies: “Nature, Man and the Unseen are inseparably involved in one another in a total community” (qtd. in Hodgson 1982, 17). An awareness of this nature would have been especially alive in Khotso’s day; and he would draw upon it, as he advanced himself in his career as a medicine man, depicting himself as a person with extraordinary, even paranormal capabilities. Khotso achieved much renown on account of this. Yet there was much in his life that seemed shadowy and obscure. This was, in part, connected to his origins and his way of life.

A Person of the Borderlands

Khotso belonged to the Phuthi people, who live in the mountain valleys of southern Lesotho, and in areas adjoining the South Africa-Lesotho border. In this and other senses, Khotso was a person of the borderlands. He and his family moved back and forth between Lesotho, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape as they made their way in life. Moreover, Khotso's houses were situated on the edges of the towns in which he lived, and he maintained a distance between himself and the surrounding communities. But Khotso inhabited another kind of border area too. Many who knew him maintained that he shifted so often between tall tales and the truth, fabrication and reality, that he and his life history could never be clearly situated within one or other of these territories. For all these reasons, Khotso remained an outsider throughout his life, never completely at one with the communities he inhabited: among them, yet clearly not of them. He remained a mysterious, enigmatic person, and he used his stories to build up an aura of secrecy and mystery around himself.

The trickster, too, is a person of borderlands. In a study of South African oral literature, Harold Scheub observes that the trickster "is always on the boundaries, the periphery." A zone of this nature suits the trickster well, Scheub continues, because this assists him in pursuing his sly and cunning business. A paradoxical being of border zones, he cannot be contained, controlled or pinned down, as would be the case with Khotso (1996, 300–03). As Liz Gunner and Graham Furniss maintain, marginality does not necessarily silence and disempower. It has, sometimes, the potential to open spaces and allow for greater flexibility and mobility (1995, 18–19). Such a position would suit Khotso's purposes.

Although he was a trickster himself, Khotso depended on another African trickster figure at the outset of his career, for he began to amass his fortune with jackal bounty hunting.⁶ In the remote stock-farming area adjoining the Lesotho mountains, where Khotso lived, jackals became the bane of many farmer's lives and a skilled bounty hunter might earn a great deal (Beinart 2003, 195).

The young man who would become skilled in the art of illusion and deception had to pit his wits against creatures renowned as tricksters. Historian William Beinart draws attention to the fact that "the jackal often played the role of a person full of tricks and cunning in San, Khoikhoi and African folktales" (2003, 205). More broadly, Ruth Finnegan has noted that the jackal features as one trickster figure in a range of African oral traditions (2001, 344–45). Beinart cites one farmer, who maintained, in

1905, that “the wily jackal has a trick of rendering himself invisible to the human eye” (2003, 205–06). Decades later people would claim that Khotso could make himself invisible, or could change shape at will, so that he could slip past unnoticed as he went about his risky, shadowy dealings. In such stories, and in other aspects of his career, Khotso would surpass the cunning jackal of southern African oral tales in his ingenuity and wiliness.

The Path of the *Inkanyamba* and the Road to Renown

The specific event which marked the beginning of Khotso’s rise to fame and fortune took place in 1925, on Eric Scott’s farm, just outside Kokstad, where Khotso was employed as a farm worker. This occurrence laid the foundation upon which Khotso’s career as an inyanga and also as a master trickster would be constructed.

Scott felt that Khotso was bringing stolen livestock onto his farm and told him to leave his employment. Shortly thereafter, a tornado struck Scott’s farm, destroying his farm buildings and sweeping right through his house. There is an element of mystery here. The tornado might have been pure coincidence, but it was striking that it went straight through the centre of Scott’s farm house a week after his dispute with Khotso.⁷ The latter would take advantage of this, by drawing upon areas of deep-seated supernatural power: water and the snake.

In terms of traditional southern African beliefs, the tornado takes the form of a snake in the sky (the *inkanyamba* in Xhosa).⁸ This being lives in deep pools, except for short periods when it sweeps through the air, wreaking havoc where it descends. Water pervades the belief systems of southern African peoples: both as a liminal zone within which the otherworldly and the physical intermingle, and also as a gateway into another dimension. It is believed that rivers and deep pools provide dwelling places for beings and creatures of mystical and magical potency.⁹ Some are ancestral figures; others are more menacing paranormal presences, many of which take a serpentine form.¹⁰ These latter beings would feature prominently in Khotso’s career, starting with the *inkanyamba*.

The sky snake, it is said, can be controlled by someone with great occult power, a wielder of strong magic. Khotso would take advantage of this perception, using it to instill belief in his supernatural powers. Moreover, Khotso’s link with the *inkanyamba* at this early point in his career helped pave the way for his association with other fearsome mystical snakes, including the perilous *mamlambo*, a wealth-giving serpentine being often envisaged as a mermaid woman.¹¹ She bestows great wealth on those who enter in a pact with her, but at a terrible price. This pact is known as

ukuthwala: the Xhosa term for ownership of a wealth-giving being, which often takes the form of a snake.¹² Ukuthwala is believed to be a powerful and hazardous procedure for obtaining wealth on a sustained basis. Khotso was believed to be involved in this practice and he would become one of the most renowned sellers of ukuthwala in southern Africa. His short-term, quick-fix medicines for material success and luck were also much in demand. The fact that Khotso was so wealthy himself helped reinforce belief in his powers as a seller of ukuthwala.¹³

Commenting on the fact that, according to traditional African beliefs in the spiritual and supernatural, humankind “lives in a more than human context,” Isidore Okpewho indicates that “[m]agic therefore exists in traditional life and lore as a means of asserting the human will in a world which poses severe dangers to human existence” (1983, 179–80). Khotso was an individual from poverty-stricken, remote rural origins and a black inhabitant of a country under oppressive white minority rule. Accordingly, he turned to the supernatural as a means of manipulating circumstances and attaining power and wealth which would otherwise have been beyond his reach.

Khotso’s clients, predominantly black South Africans from impoverished areas, who felt the impact of apartheid policies particularly strongly, would behave comparably, as they turned to Khotso for his medicines for good luck and wealth (including the long-term wealth-bestowing ukuthwala procedure) in order to exert some measure of control over their lives. It should, however, also be noted that a considerable number of whites made use of Khotso’s services.

After the tornado swept through Scott’s farm, Khotso began making use of stories, especially dramatic and extraordinary ones, to win fame and wealth. He encouraged others to believe that he had brought the tornado down on Eric Scott, and many of those around him began to believe in his supernatural powers.

Disguise, Deception and Illusion

Through stories of this nature, which related extraordinary occurrences for which there was no solid factual proof, Khotso created a sense of mystery around himself, thus fuelling much speculation concerning his wealth and power. Aware that public interest can thrive on riddles and secrets, he used stories to surround himself with these. Luise White draws attention to the potency of rumour and hearsay (2001, 286), a factor of which Khotso was no doubt aware, as he made use of stories to enhance his renown.

One major mystery that remained undisclosed, giving rise to recurrent speculation, concerned the possible sources of Khotso's wealth. Possibly there were practical reasons why Khotso was so fond of secrecy. While Khotso's herbal practice was undoubtedly flourishing, it was alleged that he was also engaged in covert dealings in drugs and diamonds. His regular visits to Lesotho, where diamonds are found and dagga is clandestinely cultivated, helped fuel such speculations. By the 1930s, Khotso was becoming rich; and in the region in which he lived, illicit diamond-buying could provide one means of acquiring wealth speedily.

While the police had their suspicions about Khotso, they were never able to capture him smuggling dagga or diamonds. The tales concerning Khotso's shape-changing abilities trace their origins back to these days. "He could change into a snake, a donkey, a pig, any shape he wanted to be," remarked one man who grew up in the 1960s, near the Transkei town where Khotso lived and worked at that stage in his career (Wood/Mpayipheli, 2002). At one point, it was even said that Khotso could change himself into mist to elude would-be captors.¹⁴ By disguising himself through altering his appearance, stories went, Khotso could carry out his business in secret and evade anyone he wished. One popular tale was that the police did not see the black millionaire passing in his Cadillac, but a white woman in a modest middle-class car, apparently carrying out innocent household chores around town.

As the stories that describe of the diversity of shapes Khotso adopted symbolically suggested, he became increasingly difficult to pin down in the course of his career. "He was an elusive man," said one of Khotso's regular clients in the 1960s, who purchased good luck medicine from him. "He'd never tell anything straight" (Wood and Lewis/Yako, 2004). Even today, there are aspects of Khotso's life which many find mysterious and bewildering.

The trickster in African oral narratives slips from one shape to another. This is evident, for example, in the case of one South African trickster, Chakijana, a character in Zulu oral tradition. He would find an avatar in Zulu history: a freedom-fighter named Sukabekuluma, so renowned for his acts of cleverness and craftiness that he would adopt the alias of Chakijana, as he sought to outsmart and evade the white colonisers during the Bambatha rebellion of 1906 in KwaZulu-Natal (Scheub 1996, 334). One Zulu oral storyteller and historian's description of Chakijana's almost supernatural capacity to elude his would-be captors calls Khotso's own almost magical capacity to evade capture to mind:

And the whites continued to seek him; they doggedly persisted in their efforts to capture Chakijana, but they were always unsuccessful. [. . .] It truly seemed that there was something enchanted about him, something that enabled him to sense that the Europeans were almost upon him, about to ambush him. He would invariably find a means of escape.

Chakijana's craftiness was varied. He even changed himself into a woman once he realised that 'The White men are here!'

(Scheub 1996, 335)

"Disguise, deception and illusion are [the trickster's] tools and weapons," Scheub observes. Such devices, he continues, are employed as the trickster "moves through the universe undertaking to satisfy his basic appetites" (1996, 300). This applies well to Khotso, who drew on his resources of craftiness and guile to obtain that for which he hungered: money, fame, sex and material opulence. In order to further his own ends, Khotso chose to operate within the system, seeming to accommodate himself to the white minority government and seeking ways of exercising his cunning on them. In this and, as we shall see in other respects, he displayed the essential amorality of the trickster.

All the while, as Khotso accumulated his wealth, he wove a glittering web of stories, through which he wished to attract and ensnare those around him. In this arachnid aspect, he calls to mind one of the best known African trickster figures of all time, the spider. Okpewho has noted that this creature is probably the most prominent trickster figure in African oral tales (1983, 83). For instance, in Akan oral narrative in Ghana, he takes the form of Ananse, the spider man, who would cross the ocean and feature in Caribbean tales as Anancy. Khotso shared various qualities with Ananse. For example, the spider man is said to be both wise and cunning, but can sometimes become unscrupulous when driven by greed. On such occasions, he uses his cleverness to take advantage of others, just as his human South African counterpart would.¹⁵

The Trickster meets the Broederbond

Because Khotso was a skilled storyteller who could relate convincing stories, a number of people came away from encounters with him believing that he truly possessed the magical powers to which he laid claim. Journalist Jack Blades, for one, experienced this:

Whenever I drove out through the tall gates of Mount Nelson after talking to Khotso, I knew that he had once again put a spell on me. I knew that this roly poly man in his finery of ostrich feathers and beads, who bounded around with such superb confidence, shouting and marshalling his harem and polishing lumps of glass he pretended were diamonds had the secret of making people believe exactly what he wished, at least for a little while.

(1982, 140)

It appears that one grouping of people over which Khotso may have exercised this type of influence were a number of leading Afrikaner politicians during the apartheid era. Various leading politicians from the Nationalist Party government, including Prime Ministers H. F. Verwoerd, D. F. Malan and J. G. Strijdom visited Khotso. Verwoerd first met Khotso on the eve of the 1948 general elections. He came away from Khotso's house bearing a muti bottle.¹⁶ Thereafter, when the Nationalists swept to victory in the elections, people said it was because they had Khotso's medicine.

The man Khotso called his 'prime minister,' his close friend and confidant James Lunika, posited that Khotso might have sought to convince his guests that a degree of faith in his supernatural abilities might be of practical use to them. He thinks that he may have succeeded in this, as do various members of Khotso's family and other individuals closely connected to his household. "The Nationalists believed that he had supernatural powers, but they did not want to be open about it," Lunika maintained (Wood and Tloti/Lunika, 2004). They were seeking Khotso's medicines for political power, his family and friends claim.

Moreover, Khotso would maintain that he viewed the Afrikaner people as his spiritual kin. He claimed that his parents had worked for Paul Kruger and said that he had a spiritual bond with the deceased president, who would visit him in visions. He emphasised his special relationship with Oom Paul by adorning his headquarters with concrete busts of Kruger, Kruger memorabilia, and celebrating Kruger Day (10 October). He also liked to hint that his wealth might have derived from the long-lost Kruger millions! Khotso frequently told people, especially visiting journalists, about his personal connection with Paul Kruger. Furthermore, in 1956 he outlined his family connection with Kruger in a deposition submitted to Kruger House, the president's one-time domicile. Khotso concluded the deposition with the declaration that that "he learned to love Paul Kruger's children from his mother."¹⁷

Khotso's stories about his connection with Paul Kruger, one of the founding fathers of the nation that had become South Africa's political masters, were designed to draw him closer to the ruling elite. He also knew that such tales were bound to excite interest and generate publicity in the white South African community, where the power and money lay. In this regard, these narratives provide an illustration of what Kennedy Chinyowa describes as the strategies of survival adopted by African orality to strengthen, restore and benefit one specific group that is dominated by others (2001, 131).

In her study of African oral narratives, Ruth Finnegan observes that the one signal quality possessed by the many and varied trickster figures in African oral tales is their adaptability: "They are able to turn any situation, old and new, to their advantage" (1976, 345). Trickster figures are cunning and resourceful, able to meet challenges and adjust artfully to changing circumstances. One example was real-life Zulu trickster, Chakijana, who could confront the white settlers on their own ground and outwit them (Scheub 1996, 299, 334). Khotso, however, would adopt a different approach. Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of his career was the way in which he succeeded in luring leading representatives of the apartheid establishment into his own terrain and then exerting his influence over them, as he shifted, chameleon-like, into a figure that blended oddly into their political terrain. This relates, in a figurative sense, to his shape-changing abilities.

The veracity of Khotso's accounts of the Kruger connection is questionable.¹⁸ He may have devised such tales not only to serve his own interests, but also because he enjoyed practical jokes and delighted in playing tricks on people. Those who knew him well, including family members and close acquaintances, have commented on this aspect of his nature. For instance, one of Khotso's principal wives, MaMjoli Eunice Sethunsa, once remarked:¹⁹

Half the things he said, like having twenty-three wives and two hundred children, were not true. You see, he was a practical joker who found capital fun in entertaining his guests and the Press with myth. I should know, because I was his wife. Many people could never tell when Khotso was serious or joking because he was a great leg-puller.

(Mohlomi 1974, 2)

Khotso's delight in tall tales and trickery endeared a number of people to him. Yet, to a certain extent, it also set him apart from those around him.

Morality Tales and Extended Jokes

Okpewho's description of the tortoise, the most popular trickster figure in southern Nigeria, is applicable, in certain respects, to Khotso's career: "[The tortoise] is frequently a misfit in organized society" Okpewho argues, "because he is ever at pains to upset, by sheer force of his over-active wit, the contrasts and constraints that society establishes in the interests of stability" (1983, 151). As noted, Khotso was not part of the societies in which he lived, partly as a result of his wealth, his strange life and the multiplicity of astonishing stories surrounding him. Moreover, he was a maverick on account of his paradoxical, incongruous position in South African society, and his cunning ways. He was a black millionaire under apartheid, who flaunted his wealth in some of the most poverty-stricken parts of the country; and who succeeded in enticing leading members of the white minority regime to seek him out, perhaps for his medicines. In this respect, he and some of his stories had the potential to destabilise certain fixed perceptions in white-dominated South Africa. They indicated that wealth and power could be accessed beyond the set socio-economic parameters of a closed, hierarchical society that sought to keep prosperity and authority in the hands of the white minority. Oral literary historian Isabel Hofmeyr draws attention to the way in which oral narratives can disrupt or pose challenges to established versions of reality: "[I]n upsetting social order and dissolving dominant ways of seeing, [. . .] these stories have a manifestly subversive potential that would be available to the teller should she require it" (2001, 254).

But Khotso's character had paradoxical qualities, as did his career. Indeed, as we shall see, contradictions form part of the nature of many of the trickster figures he resembled. While Khotso's association with Afrikaner Nationalist politicians provided him with a means to greater self-empowerment, he also paid a price for it.

Khotso was regarded with suspicion by many around him on account of his connection with the Nationalists. But this did not guarantee him the preferential treatment he imagined it would. The Group Areas Act (1950) began creaking into place all over South Africa during the 1950s; and by the latter part of this decade, Khotso discovered that he was no longer allowed to live and work in the palatial house he had built for himself in a white urban area in Kokstad. He did not want to leave his home, situated by the river, near the deep pools where he carried out some of his ukuthwala work, and conducted special rituals intended to draw attention to his mysterious powers. Khotso had to relocate to an area set aside for black people, and so

moved to the Transkei. He was a proud man, so he must have felt humiliated to be reduced to the level of a second-class citizen and consigned to a rural backwater. He must also have felt a sense of betrayal, for the Nationalists, people he had regarded as friends, were banishing him from his home.

Okpewho refers to the way in which certain tricksters, such as the tortoise, pursue “the path of misguided ambition supported by cunning” (1983, 150). The ill-advised, imprudent nature of the tortoise’s actions becomes clear as the stories concerning him unfold, and he eventually receives his come-uppance. Okpewho also observes that the trickster figure of the spider frequently comes to grief, as a moral lesson to others that they should take care to avoid his behaviour (1983, 83). Various aspects of Khotso’s life history and the stories arising from them have a similar quality of moral fable about them.

Although Khotso’s wealth and renown continued, in his new abode in the Transkei, there are those close to him who maintain that a decline in his supernatural powers can be traced from this point. Moreover, he experienced suffering and betrayal in his later life and died a painful death, his body swollen by illness. But Khotso and his extraordinary life history elude confinement within the reassuringly secure category of moral fable. This becomes evident when we consider his last moments on earth.

Conclusion: the Last Laugh

A contradictory, capricious figure, who found comedy at the most incongruous of times, Khotso went out of life in the spirit in which he had lived it. One of his wives, Ellen, relates this story: “In the Durban hospital, he told everyone around him that he was going to have his last laugh. And he went ahead and had a good long laugh, despite his pain and imminent death. He laughed so that the world might remember the good times and the lively joking medicine man who loved money, sex and laughter” (Lewis/Jones, 1997).

This tale seems appropriate, because Khotso believed that, above all, life was to be enjoyed. He wanted his funeral to be a party and did not want his deathbed to be an occasion for tears. Yet laughter might also have been fitting because Khotso could die jubilant in the knowledge that he would leave many mysteries behind him. Through the public persona he presented and the stories he spread about himself, all too often Khotso was concocting a series of extended jokes; not only at the expense of many of his listeners and spectators, but also those who might seek to define and interpret him after his death.

Yet there are further dimensions to Khotso, and to the tricksters in African oral tales that he so closely resembled. For instance, there was a shadowy, dangerous side to the man, beneath the jovial, affable exterior. Certainly, too, there is much that could be said about the ruthless, sometimes even sinister aspects of the trickster figure. There is thus no unified, categorical way of viewing the man himself and the trickster figure. Both combine various, divergent qualities: shady customers in some respects and colourful, genial characters in others.

Finnegan notes that trickster figures are often bundles of contradictions, for they can be simultaneously powerful, foolish, mischievous and kind (1976, 345). Khotso displayed these qualities too; and he was also a paradoxical character in many other respects. For example, he was both generous and tight-fisted, wily and childlike, merciless and forgiving, stern and soft-hearted, and a libertine who loved purity. He would, too, often greet important guests with a peculiar mixture of obsequiousness and braggadocio.

The contradictions within Khotso's nature, the myriad stories he spread concerning himself, many of them running counter to one another, and the belief that he possessed the capacity to change his shape suggests not only the elusive, bewildering nature of the man, but also of the stories that attempt to give shape to him and pin him down. More broadly, this indicates the multifarious, multipurpose nature of orality itself. Finnegan, for instance, refers to oral narrative as a "multiplex and changing creature" (1976, 279). As she indicates, stories proliferate and mutate, refusing to be confined to one fixed form or a single, clear-cut meaning. Finnegan and various other oral narrative theorists, such as David Maines, draw attention to the way in which a single narrative can alter, depending on the narrator, his or her audience and the circumstances under which it is told (Finnegan 1976, 320–322; Maines 1993, 22).

Further to this, Ken Plummer observes that the meaning of stories is not fixed, for narratives shift and change, and are perceived differently in various contexts (1993, 336). Sometimes this contextuality may be temporal. For instance, a story may seem more or less effective, depending on the specific period during which it was related. Pascal Makeka, an old man residing in a Lesotho mountain village who knew Khotso when he was embarking on his career as an *inyanga* in the earlier part of the twentieth century, draws attention to this, when he reflects on Khotso's descriptions of the magical potency of his medicines and charms: "The impression I have now is that it was psychology he was using. But I want to go away and think of that in terms of that time. That time we thought Khotso Sethuntsa had very good medicine to stop thieves" (Wood and Lewis/Makeka, 2004). As

Makeka indicates, Khotso launched his career as a herbalist during a period when those in the societies in which he related them were more inclined to believe his stories. Later, his listeners might have evaluated his tales more critically and sceptically, as indeed Makeka and many others do today.

Next, cultural dynamics can shape the ways in which stories are understood. As we have already seen, Khotso utilised both the image of the snake, in the form of the inkanyamba and the mamlambo, and water, as an element imbued with mystical potency, to instill and reinforce belief in his magical powers. He knew that these had resonance in his specific cultural context. Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni and Kopana Ratele discuss the significance of the cultural context of oral narratives, making specific reference to a Truth Commission testimony could only be adequately comprehended once this aspect was taken into account. They observe that

every narrative is rooted. In order to really 'hear' a story we have to take its rootedness into account [. . .]. Understanding the 'ground' from which narratives sprout is sometimes only possible through the input of those who have deep knowledge of this 'ground.'

(2009, 46)

Further to this, comic elements are an integral feature of many trickster tales, and as we know, humour can be culturally specific. Indeed, this is another aspect that had a bearing on the way in which some of Khotso's stories were received. For instance, as many newspaper articles testify, his stories concerning his spiritual bond with Paul Kruger provided an ongoing source of fascination and entertainment to white South Africans, the majority of whom were very aware of Oom Paul's status as a revered historical figure and an Afrikaner icon. As such, he formed a well-known feature of their cultural background. For that reason, white South Africans tended to be particularly struck by the dramatic quality and the comic incongruity of Khotso's Paul Kruger tales. One story that evoked a marked reaction of this nature was Khotso's account of how he received a visitation from the spirit of Oom Paul the night before the 1954 Durban July, during the course of which Kruger revealed the name of the horse that would win the race. As press reports indicate, the claim that the dour Calvinist Kruger had manifested himself as a spiritual guide to an African medicine man, and had offered racing tips to him proved a source of much delight to many white South Africans.²⁰ An accomplished trickster and weaver of far-fetched tales, Khotso was no doubt aware that his intended audience would find his Kruger stories all the more memorable for these reasons.

Economic and political dynamics and regional factors can also have a bearing on the way in which certain narratives are perceived. For instance, Khotso worked in and near some of the poorest areas in southern Africa, and the stories describing his prowess as an *ukuthwala* practitioner arose during a period when the need for his medicines for good fortune and prosperity came increasingly to the fore in these regions. In Khotso's heyday, during the 1950s and 1960s, the Nationalist government was tightening its grip and the rural poor experienced a growing downward economic spiral, particularly in those areas that became the Bantustans. Even in the earlier part of the twentieth century, when reserve areas were delineated in the 1913 Land Act, these territories had not been sufficient for a sustainable livelihood. Over the decades, conditions had worsened. Khotso initially resided on the edge of, and later within the area that would eventually become the Transkei, which was fast becoming one of the most poverty-stricken regions in South Africa. Meanwhile, economic deprivation was widespread in Lesotho, from which Khotso drew a large number of his clients.

Moreover, Khotso spent much of his life in Kokstad, and many of the African inhabitants of this town and other parts of East Griqualand also experienced considerable hardship. One woman from Bhongweni, the area adjoining Kokstad that had been set aside for black habitation, commented on this. "The black people used to *nyamezela* [persevere] because they couldn't do otherwise," she said. "Even before the Group Areas, things were hard, because they realised they were poor and nothing could make them rich" (Wood/Tloti July, 2004). Under such conditions, Khotso's stories of his miraculous wealth-giving medicines exercised a powerful sway over many who heard them.

All in all, the impact and significance of Khotso's stories was bound up with contextuality. They resonated in diverse ways, depending on the specific milieus within which they were related. Meaning and truth, it has often been said, are relational constructs (See Lillejord and Soreide 2003, 92). More broadly, this suggests the slippery, evasive nature of the actuality we seek to define and to which we attempt to give shape to through story. Hayden White observes: "[W]e never say precisely what we wish to say or mean precisely to say. Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them" (1978, 1).

In its enigmatic, paradoxical and elusive aspects, the trickster figure has a comparable quality. A character such as Khotso still has the last laugh. If we try to pin down the trickster and define and interpret him, the joke is on us. The trickster changes shape or turns himself into mist and evades our grasp.

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NOTES

1. On the first occasion, Xhosa, Sotho or Zulu terms are used, they are italicised, but not thereafter. Many terms have become part of South African English, and have no concise, appropriate English equivalents.

2. Some of the principal research findings in this paper are drawn from a study of Khotso Sethuntsa's life, aspects of indigenous knowledge systems concerning him and oral narratives surrounding him, see Wood and Michael Lewis, 2007.

3. The oral accounts upon which much of this study is based derive from interviews conducted between 1997 and 2005 in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho. Those interviewed included individuals close to Khotso, such as family members and close friends were interviewed, people residing in areas where Khotso lived, who knew him personally or had received information from those who knew him well.

4. In African trickster tales, the trickster tends to be depicted as male. Yet, many trickster figures are shape-shifters, sometimes adopting female form. For instance, it was said that the Zulu trickster Chakijana did this and, as this study mentions, some believed that Khotso occasionally changed himself into a white woman.

5. General points concerning traditional spiritual convictions and perceptions of the supernatural inevitably have their limitations, since southern African beliefs are varied, fluid and mutable. Nonetheless, while acknowledging cultural diversities, there are certain key features in common.

6. Detailed information about Khotso's work as a jackal hunter is contained in interviews with his grandson, Thabo (Wood and Tloti/Thabo Sethuntsa, 2003); his right-hand man, James Lunika (Wood and Tloti/Lunika, 2003); and senior wife, MaDlamini (Lewis/MaDlamini Sethuntsa, 1997).

7. Jill and Elizabeth Scott, the Scott family members who now run the family farms outside Kokstad, commented on this (Wood/Jill and Elizabeth Scott, 2004).

8. Most terms used to describe Khotso are in Xhosa, for various reasons. Firstly, he belonged to the Phuthi people, whose language is primarily Xhosa, with a strong Sotho flavour. Next, during the period of his life when his fame and wealth were at their height (1960–1972), he lived in Lusikisiki, north-eastern Transkei. Earlier, he lived and worked in East Griqualand (KwaZulu-Natal-Transkei border), a region inhabited by many Xhosa-speakers, as well as Sotho- and Zulu-speakers. Ethnic distinctions sometimes blur in this region, as are aspects of the languages. For instance, the word *inyanga* means “herbalist” in Zulu, yet when Khotso and various Xhosa-speakers who knew him employed the term, they used it to denote a specialised and skilled practitioner with not only a knowledge of herbalism but also authority over mystical forces.

9. Peires shows that the spiritual significance of water arises, in part, from the crucial importance of water in southern Africa. Much of this region is dry, with human settlement following watercourses (1981, 3). Some very ancient sacred ceremonies known have been conducted to invoke rain. Among many peoples, water plays a vital role in training spiritual healers and diviners. Manton Hirst notes that the initiation of a Xhosa *igqirha* (the Xhosa term for a traditional healer and diviner) is *ukuthwetyula*, to be called under the river, and involves a real or symbolic submersion in water. Another example of the spiritual potency ascribed to water is evident in references to the *abantu bomlambo* (Xhosa), the people of the river, sometimes associated with the ancestors, who live in the dry world at the bottom of pools (Hirst 1997, 219–220).

10. For example, the *amakhosi*, the ancestors, can manifest themselves as snakes, while dangerous supernatural presences such as the inkanyamba and the mamlambo also take the form of snakes. As W. D. Hammond-Tooke has pointed out, the serpent is the creature that occurs most frequently in the symbolic structure of Zulu and Xhosa cosmology (1975, 27).

11. ‘Mamlambo’ is more fully given in Xhosa as *u-Ma-Mlambo* (the mother of the river), because she is said to dwell in deep water. The female pronoun is used here, as in most accounts in which the mamlambo adopts a human form, she is said to appear as a woman. However, tales concerning male mamlambos are now increasing, partly because many women are now the principal economic providers of their households.

12. *Ukuthwala* is not to be confused with *ukuthwasa*, which denotes the period of initiation that an individual who receives a special calling to be an *igqirha* must undergo. The term *ukuthwala*, although the infinitive form of a verb, also functions as a noun (as is evident in this study).

13. Some information about Khotso’s life, fame, work as an *inyanga*; and the *ukuthwala* procedure derives from interviews with Lunika, Sicwetsha, Sijentu and Mabongo (see below).

14. For instance, Lunika related that it was as if Khotso had turned himself into mist when he inexplicably managed to escape would-be captors who were closing in

on him during the Pondoland Revolt (Wood and Tloti/Lunika, 2004). During this period, Khotso was regarded with suspicion on account of his friendship with Chief Botha Sigcau, and the fact that he was visited by Afrikaner Nationalists.

15. Some information about Ananse derives from: <<http://www.lehigh.edu/~tqr0/ghanaweb/folktales.html>>.

16. Ellen Jones, married to Khotso at that time, witnessed Verwoerd's first visit to Khotso, and described it in an interview (Lewis/Jones, 1997). Other members of Khotso's family, his close friends and individuals who formed part of his household, including Lunika (Wood and Tloti, 2004) and Khotso's wife MaMjoli Eunice Sethunsa (Tloti, 2005), testify that Verwoerd and other prominent Nationalist politicians, such as Malan and Strijdom, visited Khotso. Journalist Jack Blades corroborates this (1982).

17. Khotso dictated the Kruger House Deposition to C. J. R. Fortein, a Kokstad schoolteacher, in 1956. Much information in this paragraph and the preceding one is drawn from this document.

18. For example, none of Khotso's family members and old family friends in Ha Ramokakatlela, his home village deep in the Lesotho mountains, have heard about his family connection with Paul Kruger, although they know about Khotso's father, Motumi, and how he founded the village (Wood and Lewis, 2004: interviews with Lefu MaThabo Motumi, Teboho Mokakatlea and Lazarus Rabukana).

19. Three of Khotso's wives, MaDlamini Catherine Sethunsa, MaMjoli Sethunsa and Ellen Jones, and his daughter, Mametsi-a-Leoatle Sethunsa, described his delight in jokes, tall tales and tricks (Lewis/MaDlamini Sethunsa, 1997; Wood/Mametsi-a-Leoatle Sethunsa, 2003; Tloti/MaMjoli Sethunsa, 2005; Lewis/Jones, 1997).

20. This is evident, for example, in the first article in which Khotso received press publicity, a prominent feature subtitled "He Prays to Kruger [. . .] and Gets Results!" (Daily Dispatch, 17 July 1954).

INTERVIEWS

Information contained in this article derives from interviews with the following people. (This list excludes respondents who do not wish to be mentioned by name.)

Lewis, Michael. 1997. Interview with Ellen Jones. (She lived with Khotso, as one of his wives.)

———. 1997. Interview with MaDlamini Catherine Sethunsa. (Khotso's senior wife.)

Tloti, Sylvia. 2005. Interview with MaMjoli Eunice Nomantombazana Sethunsa. (Khotso's wife.)

Wood, Felicity. 2002. Interview with Tsolwana Mpayipheli. (He grew up in Lady Frere in the Transkei. He knew many individuals who had met Khotso. During that time, Khotso lived in Lusikisiki, and his fame was at its height.)

- . 2002. Interview with Vuyo Sijentu. (He grew up in the Transkei, near the areas where Khotso lived and worked. He heard many stories about Khotso as he was growing up.)
- . 2003. Interview with Mametsi-a-Leoatle Sethuntsa. (Khotso's daughter.)
- . 2002 and 2003. Interviews with Anele Mabongo. (His family comes from the Transkei, and some of his relatives worked for Khotso.)
- . 2002 and 2003. Interviews with Fanele Sicwetsha. (A student researcher from Pondoland, Transkei. He has met many people who knew Khotso.)
- . 2003. Interview with Thabo Sethuntsa. (Khotso's grandson.)
- . 2004. Interview with Jill and Elizabeth Scott. (Relatives of Eric Scott, they now run the Scott family farms in Kokstad.)
- Wood, Felicity and Michael Lewis. 2004. Interview with Pascal Makeka. (He knew Khotso in the earliest part of his career, when he was establishing himself as a herbalist.)
- . 2004. Interview with Teboho Mokakatlela. (One of the oldest inhabitants of Ha Ramokakatlela. He knew Khotso when he was a young man.)
- . 2004. Interview with Lefu MaThabo Motumi. (Khotso's niece, born in 1919. She lives in Khotso's birthplace, the Lesotho mountain village of Ha Ramokakatlela.)
- . 2004. Interview with Lazarus Rabukana. (He also resides in Ha Ramokakatlela. Another one of the village's oldest Inhabitants, he too knew Khotso in his youth.)
- . 2004. Interview with Lala Yako. (He regularly visited Khotso in the 1960s to purchase medicines for good fortune for his business.)
- Wood, Felicity and Sylvia Tloti. 2003 and 2004. Interviews with James Lunika. (Khotso's close friend and confidant, known as his prime minister.)
- . 2004. Interview with Miriam July. (She and her family were longstanding Kokstad residents, who knew Khotso when he lived in that town.)

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