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Singing with Mr. Tortoise: South African Children's Oral Narratives and Value Education

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Abstract

This essay explores links between positively psychology, contemporary political history, narratology and education. Its primary objective is to examine the system of values encoded in a genre of South African children's oral narrative, with a view

towards expanding comparable data available to positive psychology and proposing a role for this genre in formal value education.

Concern about contemporary anomie not only involves positive psychology, but also public interest in 'indigenous' knowledge, particularly ancestral values that ground social checks and balances, and engender harmonious relations. The children's narrative genre is shown to involve the tacit communal production of ancestral virtues, character strengths and norms. The essay motivates the potential incorporation of the genre into foundational phase education, while its pedagogy and capacity for subject integration are briefly considered.

Introduction: A Quest for Virtues

Particular virtues are "universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as meanings of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). A common challenge involves unethical relationships between public and private sectors (Kok, 2023). The United States of America (USA) faces "a character crisis on many fronts, from the playground to the classroom to the sports arena to the Hollywood screen to business corporations to politics" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 5). Nevertheless, the country is ahead on the world corruption perceptions index with a score of 67/100, compared to The Republic of South Africa's (RSA) grade of 41/100 (www.transparency.org). The South African government has been infiltrated by the private sector to the point of 'state capture.' In addition, the ruling elite is accused of allowing "the proliferation of forms of lumpen radicalism that privilege a politics of expedience in lieu of a disciplined politics of principle" (Mbembe & Robins, 2012). The chasm between the country's acclaimed constitution and governing practice is manifested in perpetual violent protest against infrastructural disintegration, lawlessness and experiences of pervasive disrespect and lack of 'democratic values' (Kubow & Min, 2016). The quest for benign values and character traits therefore is a key endeavor shared by the USA and RSA, and Peterson and Seligman (2004) direct the attention of positive psychology to processes and roles in value education.

Indigenous Knowledge and the Curriculum

Peterson and Seligman (2004) explain that the absence in their work of data from 'nonliterate' cultures is attributable to lack of access. Worldviews in these cultures may be extracted from

historical and contemporary ethnographies[1] and, as the authors imply, they need to be taken into account for a more comprehensive view on human values.

Thabo Mbeki in 1996[2] revitalized Diop's philosophy of an African renaissance involving indigenous languages and their capacity for autonomous definition. This led to the promulgation of the Indigenous Knowledge (IK) Act, which embeds these languages and their epistemologies as foundational for social transformation (President of the Republic of South Africa, 2019).[3] The first two decades of this century accordingly involved the extensive production of occasional scientific publications on local IK, as well as the founding of a dedicated journal in this field[4] (Dichaba, 2018; Gabashane, 2022; Hlalele, 2019; Keane, 2008; Kruger, 2021; Kruger & Verhoef, 2015; Mapesela, 2004; Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020; Mbele et al., 2015; Mvanyashe, 2019; Ronoh, 2017; Seehawer, 2018; Zakaza, 2014).

Indigenous knowledge is commonly viewed as the totality of local knowledge which is inherited and rooted in land, memory and history. It is also dynamic and continuously reflects on that which has always been regarded as good and respected, and can serve the aims of sustainable development (Clifford, 2013; Keane, 2008; Ronoh, 2017; Saurombe, 2018; Shava & Manyike, 2018; Stears, 2008). Local IK is correspondingly often conceptualized as "the knowledge that existed before (school) education" (Badugela, 2019, p. 118). Such knowledge integrates material, spiritual and social experience and therefore produces connected selves (Kruger & Verhoef, 2015; Mbeki, 1996). It is underpinned by the virtues of *ubuntu*[5] as well as *melao/milayo*[6] customary law, which codifies norms. Respect (*hlonipa*) is cited as the foundation of harmonious relations in Zulu culture (Mbele et al., 2015). Similarly, Venda "cultural techniques" designed to maintain good relations may be crystallised as "courtesy, neighbourliness and kindness" (Blacking, 1969, p. 70). Local communities often insist that ancestral virtues and practices like these transcend time-space. Mapesela (2004) notes that "some Basotho people still revert to the use of IK when all else that is modern fails to salvage them" (p. 322). Tshivenda-speaking parents in Limpopo Province similarly remark that "we are not comfortable seeing children going to school just to learn to read and write. We want them to be taught about respect, humility and cultural dances" (Badugela, 2019, p. 159).

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[1] For South Africa, see examples in Blacking (1969), Hammond-Tooke (1981), Junod (1913), Krige (1936), Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1989), and Stayt (1931/1968).
[2] During the promulgation of South Africa's new constitution (Mbeki, 1996).
[3] "Valuing indigenous knowledge systems: acknowledging the rich history and heritage of this country as important contributors to nurturing the values contained in the Constitution." https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/NationalCurriculumStatementsGradesR-12.aspx
[4] Indilinga – African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems https://www.ajol.info/index.php/indilinga
[5] This ubiquitous African concept essentially signifies mutual consideration.
[6] Sesotho and Tshivenda. Also, *mekgwa* and *mikhwa*.

Gabashane (2022) in turn describes life in a rural Pedi community, noting the juxtaposition of school and indigenous value education, the latter by means of girls' dances.[7]

Approximately 43% of South Africa's children live in rural areas, mostly in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces (Hall, 2023). Hlalele (2019) observes that their voices "are seldom heard, their knowledge is underappreciated and their needs are barely addressed in broader national development strategies" (p. 95). However, the knowledge many young people identify with may be far removed from 'traditional' life, "instead relating to specific, current social experiences" (Stears, 2008, p. 132). Keane (2008) notes appositely in her study of a school in rural KwaZulu-Natal that "the political and practical tensions between high status and low status knowledge, and between conventional science syllabi and [the] community-centred farming curriculum, remain unresolved" (p. 23). The author also identifies a contradiction between older cultural practices and current human rights policies involving, for example, gender equity and a ban on corporal punishment. Ronoh (2017) similarly observes that Xhosa girls' circumcision is viewed by some as violating human rights, in contrast with the *intonjane* rite of passage which remains acceptable, because it teaches "humanity and responsibility" (p. 83).

Local communities thus constantly review and redefine values and norms, articulating the need to "put the knowledge together, the knowledge from [the place] where we live, and (…) Western knowledge" (Badugela, 2019, p. 127). An appropriate model for "African indigenous education" accordingly requires the "conceptualisation of community engagement within an education system in a rapidly globalizing world" (Rajah, 2019, p. 6). An expanding local perspective on social transformation urges the moulding of better scientists as well as human beings who "have been enriched by deeper and broader understandings through drawing on both an Afrocentric and Western worldview" (Keane, 2008, p. 24). Put succinctly, the curriculum should deliver connected selves imbued with a social conscience, a spirit of philanthropy and the capacity to make ethical judgements and decisions (Blignault, 2017; Keane, 2008; Rajah, 2019).

Connected selves were characteristic of "the olden days when respect was a virtue and the family and community structures were used to deal with health and social problems" (Makhubele & Qalinga, 2008, p. 164). The authors address the current transformation of such family functions as well as notions of reciprocity, shared welfare and belonging. Colonization

[7] "The group taught us self-respect too as well as how to conduct ourselves. Since taking part in the group, we did not have time for the streets. We would come straight from school and do our chores, thereafter, go to rehearsals. There was no time for boys. None of us in the group back then fell pregnant early. This grandmother (the group coach) groomed us through the use of music" (Gabashane, 2022, p. 71).

and globalization led to altered modes of economic production, settlement patterns and family structures. This requires that learners "often have to make their own decisions with regard to life situations," underscoring the expanding role of the school as guardian (Stears, 2008, p. 70). Ambrosio (2018) consequently concludes that "notions of *ubuntu* that are disconnected from the needs, concerns, and experiences of communities are likely to fail" (p. 3). He questions the view of *ubuntu* as an unambiguous "narrative of return to a traditional past" and favours the kind of reflection on older values that would "open up new possibilities for individual and group transformation" and address ethical issues in a practical and experiential manner (p. 3).

It is clear that the curricular application of older forms of IK requires a nuanced approach which takes the needs and complexities of place-specific, current social lives into account. Furthermore, IK in educational practice often goes no further than mere rhetoric, while its implementation involves a quest for institutional support, meaningful integration, specified content, resources, teacher skills and suitable pedagogies (Badugela, 2019; Hlalele, 2019; Keane, 2008; Manyau et al., 2018; Seehawer, 2018).

Children's Oral Narratives and the Curriculum

Research participants in Eastern Cape Province note that local IK "is hidden in indigenous literature and folklore" (Ronoh, 2017, p. 82). Such literature can contribute towards "nation building" in Africa by addressing "the situation whereby our esteemed values are steadily going towards disorder and disintegration" (Kehinde, 2010, p. 32). Zakaza (2014) accordingly describes the successful utilization of Xhosa *ntsomi* children's narratives in value-driven maternal health education. Gabashane (2022) in turn describes how IK is retained in memory and externalized in ritual interaction in a rural Pedi community. Her research reveals communal dance as a core domain for social construction, and this explains why indigenous expressive forms are viewed as basic curricular resources (Badugela, 2019; Dichaba, 2018; Ronoh, 2017; Shava & Manyike, 2018).

Germane here is the appeal for indigenous narratives to be sourced for curricular purposes, instead of "non-African stories that have no value" (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020; Ronoh, 2017, p. 82). This discussion consequently explores the utilization of a children's genre which is not only common to all local African languages[8] but also throughout the sub-Saharan region

[8] Tshivenda/Chishona: *ngano*; IsiZulu/IsiXhosa: *ntsomi*; Sesotho: *tsomo*; IsiNdebele/Sesotho sa Leboa: *nonwane*; Setswana: *leinane*; Xitsonga: *ntsheketo*. Some of their themes also characterize narratives in Khoekhoen, San dialects and Northern Cape Afrikaans.

where it retains its vitality in countries like Zimbabwe (Mapara, 2014) and Malawi.[9] Its form is characterized by a fixed chanted response uttered by young children during adult narration,[10] and the genre is therefore generically identified as responsorial.[11]

The MASARA[12] Oral Arts Project

While a substantial number of responsorial narratives have been published,[13] access and format present challenges that few educators are likely to take up. Many narratives are buried in historical or academic publications; they are often commercially restyled written versions of the original oral forms; most are in translated or original languages only; very few offer explanations of deep narrative symbolism; original narrative chants and songs are routinely absent, either as verbal or musical transcriptions, or in recorded form; and their narrators generally are unknown.

The MASARA Oral Arts Project (MOAP) was consequently founded as an online space "committed to researching, archiving and sharing oral expressive forms by means of which local communities engage their socio-economic and natural environment" (MOAP, 2022).[14] The project is inter alia a depository for 130 Venda *ngano* narratives.[15] Utilising an ethnographic approach, the narratives were collected in rural areas of the north-eastern Vhembe district[16] in Limpopo Province by Kruger (2004, 2014, 2021), Kruger and Le Roux (2007), and Le Roux (1996) during 1986–1994 and 2005–2016.[17]

Once a pervasive domestic ritual, few instances of spontaneous contemporary *ngano* performances have been documented, and local knowledge of the genre mostly resides in the

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[9] Discussion with staff and students at the University of Malawi at Zomba (September 2022).
[10] https://youtu.be/ScPcpYYL_JM In the recording, as in all Venda responsorial narratives, the fixed response is *Salungano!* In Xhosa *ntsomi* the response is *Chosi ntsomi!* (Zakaza, 2014).
[11] See French *cante fable* and German *Singemärchen* (sung narrative or song-story).
[12] The research entity Musical Arts in South Africa: Resources and Applications, which is situated in the School of Music at Northwest University (Potchefstroom Capmpus).
https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/masara
[13] See inter alia, Baumbach and Marivate, 1973; Callaway, 1868/1970; Gordon, 2002; Granger, 2007; Jacottet, 1908; Jordan, 1973; Junod, 1913; Le Roux 1996; Lestrade, 1949; Marolen, 1990; Martin, 1942; Maumela, T., 1968; Mavhina et al., 1977; Nenzhelele, 1961; Phophi, 1990, 1992; Postma, 1950, 1957, 1974; Savory, 1965; Scheepers, 2013; Sigenu, 2017; Siteyini and Miller, 2006; Smith, 1989, 2004; Stayt, 1968/1931; Tracey, 1986.
[14] https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/masara-oral-arts-project
[15] https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/masara-oral-arts-project-moap/online-resources
[16] Mostly in the villages of Folovhodwe, Muswodi, Tshiungani and Mabvete, situated in the Musina and Mutale districts.
[17] The narratives are communal intellectual property. Performers gave written permission for the non-profit educational and research application of the narratives, biographical data and audio-visual material. Field research was continuously monitored by local gatekeepers.

memory of older people.[18] However, induced performances during field research were attended by groups of enthusiastic children varying in age from very young to early teens, as well as adults. These events were popular and young participants found them captivating (Fig. 1). In a few cases older children were even narrators.[19] The narratives documented from twelve-year old Zachary Tshamano (Kruger, 2014, 2021) had been inherited from his grandmother and they served as templates of ideal character strengths that inspired him to persevere with his schooling. Born and raised in a poverty-stricken rural area, he thus managed to complete his school education as well as tertiary training. For nineteen-year-old Aluwani Kwinda from the same region, narratives about local history and culture kept his family's claim to land restitution alive (Kruger, 2021). In addition, some narratives remain a popular cultural resource. This pertains specifically to their songs, which are performed at school and by community choirs.

The narratives in the MOAP collection were recorded in audio and video format, and transcribed and translated with the assistance of a team of Tshivenda-speaking collaborators.[20] The transcriptions were then returned to narrators for validation and detailed explanation by them. All 95 narratives in Kruger (2014, 2021) are presented in their original Tshivenda as well as translated English form.[21] They contain transcriptions of narrative songs and chants, and provide links to video recordings. Extensive accompanying analyses of performance practice and content are useful for complete understanding of narrative functions and meanings.

[18] This is attributable to evolving settlement patterns, economic practices, moral discourses and media forms since the late 19th century (Kruger, 2021).
[19] https://youtu.be/rOwqoUD0l-k
[20] Mr. Mathuvhelo Mavhetha, Dr. Pfananani Masase, Mrs. Tshifhiwa Mashau, Mr. Tshilidzi Ndou, Mr. Michael Madzivhandila and Prof. Koos van Rooy.
[21] The seven narratives in the 2004 collection (Kruger, 2004) were submitted in English by students at the University of Venda, while the original Tshivenda versions of the narratives in the translated collection (Kruger & Le Roux, 2007) are accessible in Le Roux (1996).

Figure 1. Narrator Selina Mavhetha in Action.

Note. The book on Mavhetha's lap (centre) contains a list of narrative titles. Muswodi-Tshisimani, Limpopo valley, June 2005.

The Pedagogical Challenge

The intangible, shifting and multi-modal qualities of the genre defy facile curricular application. While "the science curriculum can integrate indigenous technologies very easily, the integration of indigenous beliefs, myths and legends is a more challenging prospect" (Stears, 2008, p. 132). Proverbs and idioms are a readily accessible resource, but finding original responsorial narratives is challenging, while their integration and pedagogy remains incipient (Lillejord & Mkabela, 2004; Mvanyashe, 2019; Ramagoshi & Joubert, 2016; Stears, 2008).

The interest in IK motivates current attention to responsorial narratives as a potential resource in value education. The only readily available evidence substantiating their wider utilization is the successfully induced narrative events staged during field research. The discussion that follows can therefore only envisage a potential space for them in formal value education.

Pedagogy has been described as "a deeply civic, political and moral practice (…) a practice of freedom" (Giroux, 2016, p. 9). To speak of indigenous literature at school "is to speak of text and pedagogy as (…) inseparable", and "a pedagogy that brings forward the indigenous should ultimately strive towards decolonising the curriculum, as well as classroom practice" (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020, pp. 4, 18). This has two important implications for the integration of responsorial narratives into the curriculum. The first involves the multimodal

nature of performance, comprising spoken narration, chants, songs and dramatic gesture.[22] The second involves indigenous pedagogy, defined as experiential learning rooted in local values (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

The original time and setting of narration were winter evenings in the cooking rondavel with its dying fire, where older female narrators enchanted their young charges with tales of magic and adventure. Put differently, narration did not involve formal education, but an enchanting mode of tacit social and epistemological production involving selves connected by shared moral concerns and participatory performance.[23] However, this practice has a tense, unspecified relationship with rationality and the demand for constant assessment in the curriculum. Mavhiza and Prozesky (2020) explain that, "as much as CAPS (Subject Curriculum Policy Statement) stipulates that there should be creativity in the literature classroom, the structure of the annual teaching plan makes such creativity almost impossible" (p. 5). Similarly, the practical integration in the creative arts of aesthetic and social skilling is challenging and often only vaguely specified, while the fragmentation of dance, drama and music in the higher phases fails to account for the multimodality of indigenous performance art.

The older female *ngano* actant often is "guardian, spiritual advisor and religious authority, instructor of sexual mores and marriage counsellor" (Kruger, 2021, p. 37). The frequent narrative pairing of grandmothers and grandchildren is a corollary of their actual narrator-audience and caretaker/educator-dependant relationship. Given the role of the school as guardian, the social organisation and artistic practice of performance correlate the closest with the teacher-learner relationship as well as the pedagogy and objectives of the foundation phase (Grade R–3; ages 5–8). This phase develops basic skills, values and concepts, as well as physical, emotional, cognitive personal and social capacity, also by means of the creative arts (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The outcome of such development is self-awareness, self-confidence, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking and mutual respect (De Kock, 2022).

Importantly, pedagogical practice in the foundation phase involves holistic, experiential learning, integrated with incipient formal learning. The narratives are well suited to value education in this phase, which furthermore is not marked by the divide between and within

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[22] Narrators are seated and use their torso, face, arms and hands for dramatic expression. https://youtu.be/Td_1LQG8sDs (Kruger, 2021).

[23] This is the reason why some *ngano* narrators prefer to initiate a story with a participatory performance of the song it contains. https://youtu.be/vyaA8PpooeM (Kruger, 2021).

literature and the creative arts in the higher phases. The discussion that follows addresses *ngano* as moral resource and briefly reflects on its pedagogy and integration of content.

Narratives and Value Education

Peterson and Seligman (2004) explain that psychology "should downplay prescriptions for the good life (moral laws) and instead emphasize the why and how of good character" (p. 10). They note that society provides institutions and rituals for cultivating strengths and virtues which "can be thought of as simulations: trial runs that allow children and adolescents to display and develop a valued characteristic in a safe (as-if) context in which guidance is explicit" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 27). Analysis has correspondingly been approached from the perspective of cognitive narratology, which addresses "the transaction between narratives and the audiences that bring them to life," especially "the nature of specific incidents judged by storytellers to be significant" (Abbot, 2009, p. 309).

White (1996) argues that "where there is no rule of law, there can be neither a subject nor the kind of event which lends itself to narrative representation" (p. 278). The German word *märchen* (folktales) correspondingly derives from *maere*, denoting "a consistent guide of conduct", and the famous Grimm collection may be described a system of law (Mueller, 1986, p. 217). *Ngano* are fittingly referred to as *milayo nyana*, or "small laws" that differentiate between "obedient and disobedient children"[24] (Dederen, 2012, p. 86; Phophi, 1990). They articulate values and character strengths "that are common across different versions of *ubuntu*, may have social resonance and could contribute to the reconstruction of South African society" (Ambrosio, 2018, p. 4). The genre typically inculcates virtues, character strengths and norms involving hospitality, generosity, self-denial, self-sacrifice, humility, respect, bravery, diligence, friendship, cooperation, obedience and honesty (Kruger, 2021).

While *ngano* offer moral instruction and embed the foundation of customary law, they do not constitute simple "wisdom-trafficking" (Burger, 2018, p. 67), but a processual, ambiguous mode of critical moral reflection (Kruger, 2021). Humility and obedience may seem to spring from an immovable bedrock of silence (Kruger, 2007), but the genre (as with several categories of older music) is replete with the ritual enactment of structural conflict as a strategy to ensure that all social behaviour is guided by *ubuntu*, and that the balance of power is maintained (Dederen, 2008; Kruger, 1999, 2000). Lack of dignity and responsibility by husbands, wives, children and political office bearers is incisively (and often humorously) undermined. In this way many narrative portrayals offer a historical basis for the

[24] *Nwana muvhuya, nwana muvhi.*

conceptualisation of contemporary values and norms. This is evident in narratives that address the transforming role of wives and traditional political leaders, crude materialism, land claims as well as discrimination against the disabled (Kruger, 2004, 2014, 2021; Kruger & Le Roux, 2007; Kruger & Verhoef, 2015).

Singing with Mr. Tortoise

This discussion presents three *ngano* about Tortoise, who features prominently in African narratives, and as such migrated with slaves to the United States. The South African Department of Basic Education includes a version of the narrative in their Big Books Series (Grade 2) in all official local languages.[25]

Depictions of Tortoise defeating Hare in a race need no introduction. Their embryonic, seemingly innocuous engagement with competition, status and virtues resonates fittingly with the moral dilemmas marking contemporary South Africa.

Hare and Tortoise[26]

Tortoise challenges Hare to a race. Hare boasts of his certain victory, remarking condescendingly that Tortoise "cannot even walk properly." The race starts at the homestead of a traditional leader and ends at the village school. Tortoise places a friend at the start line, and another halfway at a ward in the village, while he waits at the finish line. In this way Tortoise (with his friends) wins the race, and Hare complains in song that "something small" (Tortoise) broke his hip:[27]

(Narrator)
He, kula kunwe kwo mbvungekanya khundu mulovha.
Hey, something small broke my hip yesterday.
He, kula kunwe kwo nthovhekanya khundu mulovha.
Hey, something small smashed my hip yesterday.
(Chorus)
Tshibode tshila tshinwe.
The other tortoise.[28]

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[25] Department of Basic Education (2011, Book 8).
[26] Mashau Tseisi, Muswodi-Tshisimani, 5 October 2012 (Kruger, 2021). https://youtu.be/TYkw8bv6vUU
[27] Narrator Mashau Tseisi was unable to remember the song, and this performance features Nditsheni Ramukhuvhathi of Madamalala (17 March 1991). https://youtu.be/RDJzUkAeRnU
[28] Referring to being defeated by a team of tortoises.

Mr. Tortoise Takes a Bath[29]

There is drought and big animals are digging for water to the accompaniment of a chant:

(Narrator chants)
Pandu, pandu, pandu!
Dig, dig, dig!
Mavula matshena, pandu!
Dig for lots of clear water!
(Chorus chants)
A vha mavula matshena!
And there was lots of clear water!

The big animals find no water, but when Tortoise takes his turn to dig, the water magically starts to flow. However, "Mr. Tortoise was flung far away (by Elephant). All the animals started to drink." Tortoise reacts by stopping the flow of water. Alarmed, the animals bribe him with two oxen. The water flows once more, and Tortoise jumps into it and mocks the big animals.

[29] Masindi Maliyehe, Sanari, 5 June 1992 (Kruger & Le Roux, 2007). No recording is available.

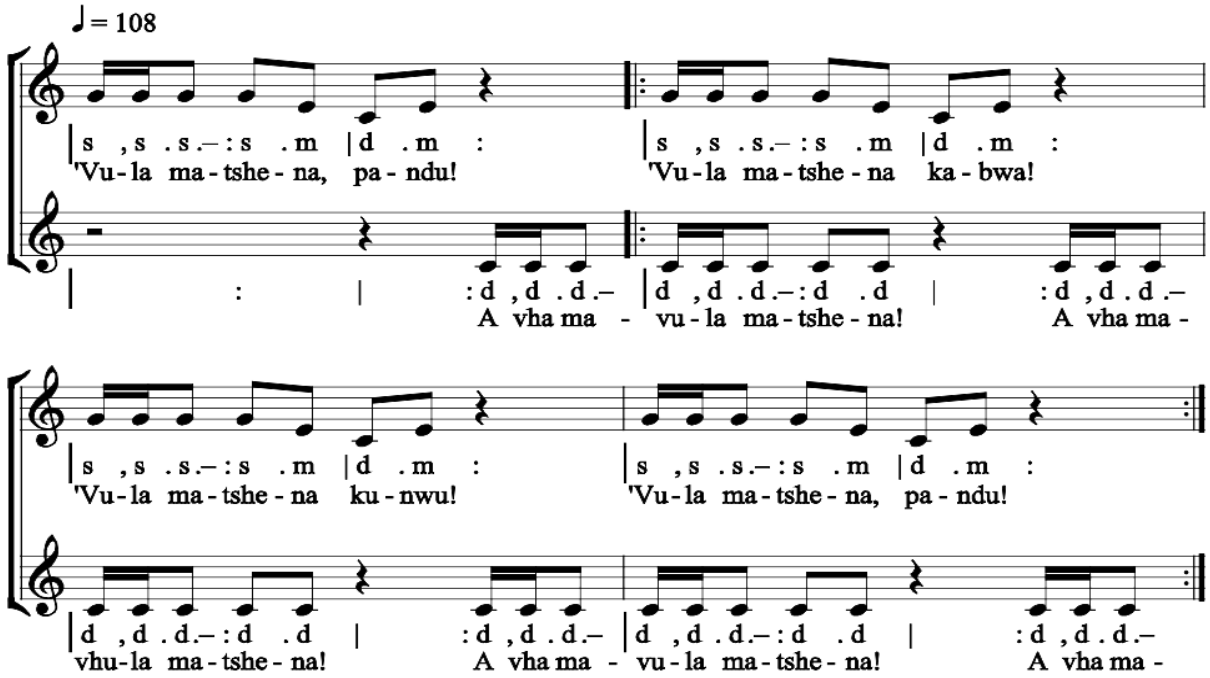

Figure 2. Singing and Chanting in *"Mr. Tortoise Takes a Bath."*

Tortoise and Duiker[30]

Mr. Tortoise races Mrs. Duiker. Tortoise quickly falls behind. He starts complaining and makes a pass at Duiker to slow her down:

(Narrator)
Goli, wa ntsia kolovhia.
Goli, you left me behind.
Sweety, wa ntsia kolovhia.
Sweety, you left me behind
Bala, wa ntsia kolovhia
Bala, you left me behind.
(Chorus)
Wa ntsia!
Left me behind!

[30] Elelwani Singo, Folovhodwe, 1 October 2012 (Kruger, 2021). https://youtu.be/TokQsmTRrKk

Once again collaborating with his fellows, Tortoise insists that he has already arrived at the finish line. However, the animals doubt his claim and the race is repeated. Tortoise loses once more, and now protests that he is very small and impeded by the weight of his shade (shell). He is accused of being an arrogant liar. Mr. Baboon (the race official) plucks off his shell and eats him.[31]

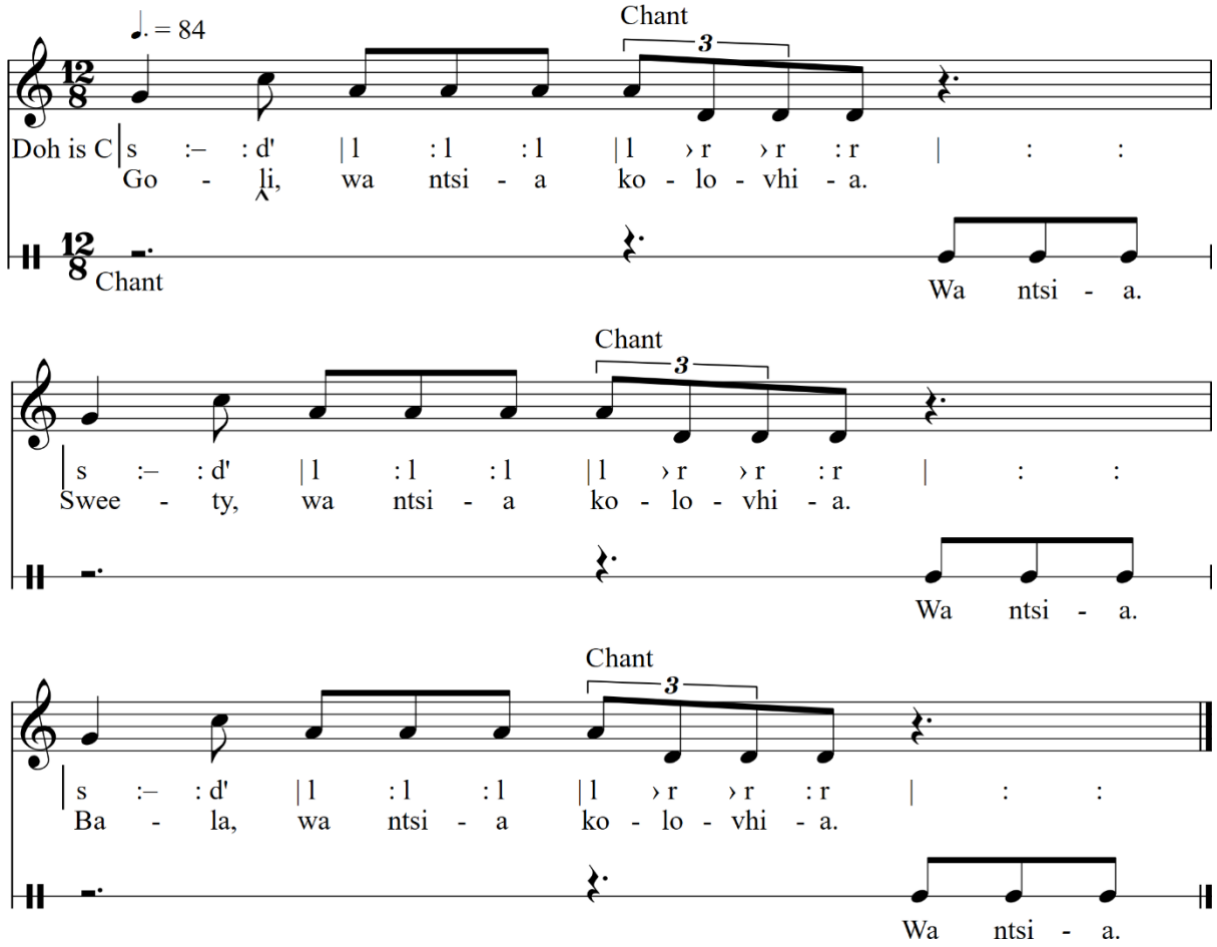

Figure 3. Chanting and Singing in *"Tortoise and Duiker."*

[31] Such images of mortal punishment are common. However, they should be interpreted as hyperboles intended to scare the young into obedience.

Lessons from Mr. Tortoise

The selection of specific animals as narrative actants is calculated: Hare is agile and Tortoise slow. These qualities trigger plots directed less at the animal world than human behavior. Put differently, animals are good to think with (Lévi-Strauss, 1964, p. 89). Narratives about the contest between Hare and Tortoise commonly characterize the former as arrogant and lazy, and the latter as patient, determined, clever and collaborative. In this way, narrative reflections on the world articulate ideal and proscribed values, character strengths and norms. However, such reflections are also differentiated by local worldviews and practices. Venda and Shona[32] narratives thus routinely portray gender identity by means of specific animal actants, which may involve stereotyping. Python and Lion are symbols of male virility, while Rock-Rabbit is the jealous, childless woman. Trickster-heroes like Mr. Tortoise are usually male.[33] Tortoise depicts "the quiet, determined, and resistant character," which corresponds to "the usual African ideal for a man, who should (…) bear the changes of life stoically" (Kriel, 1989, p. 158). As his actions at the fountain indicate, Tortoise is really harmless, except in self-defense. He teaches others lessons in humility, yet also succumbs to belligerent arrogance when he jumps into the animals' drinking water. He is otherwise the small but hardy symbol of "righteousness, justice, equity, perseverance and all those qualities that will ultimately ensure the wellbeing of society" (Kriel, 1989, p. 158).

Another fundamental norm that narratives about Tortoise inculcate is seniority. This is a cornerstone of social organization and *ngano* commonly portray the authority of older persons and political offices bearers. The size and status of an animal is an important signifier: Lion is king of the nation and head of the family, while Elephant, Hippopotamus and Bull are big and powerful. Those of lesser size and importance include Tortoise, Hare, Mongoose, Mouse and Jackal who must rely on ingenuity (and even magic) to assert themselves.

Narratives about Tortoise emphasize that the young must yield to the experience and skills of their elders. Tortoise refuses to acknowledge his subordinate status (which is evident in his short legs and slow gait) when racing Duiker and pays the price (being eaten) for his arrogance. However, while authority accrues automatically to those who are older and more experienced, it is not exempt from ethical prescription. So, when Elephant flings Tortoise away from the fountain, the other animals admonish him, remarking, "For an adult, what you are doing is not right. Don't do that." *Ngano* are thus always directed at underscoring the

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[32] Zimbabwean neighbors of Venda people with whom many cultural attributes are shared.

[33] This role is apparently related to hunting and warfare. Coming of age narratives featuring boys depict their conflict with wild animals and cattle raiders, and they are consequently accorded the qualities of ingenuity and courage. Female heroes are not unknown, but similar narratives about girls – as future mothers – more often depict them as naive and therefore sexually vulnerable (Kruger 2021).

responsibilities attendant on all statuses. Furthermore, the race between Tortoise and Hare not only depicts ingenuity as a recourse for the vulnerable, but also the outcome of cooperation, a self-evident social imperative. This is evinced in the collaboration between the tortoises and externalized in interactive narrative performance.

Mr. Tortoise in the Classroom

Responsorial narratives are characterised by the integration of verbal, musical and dramatic modes, and their pedagogy involves imitation and rote teaching-learning in real-life, supportive social settings – an enduring strategy in much South African community and professional theatre practice (Steyn-Delport, 2021). The inclusion of such narratives in the curriculum should therefore consider their original form and pedagogy (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020). Variables are likely to include setting, familiarity with the genre, teaching-learning skills, language and performance capacity, and resources. Narration, chanting and singing may take place in original languages where intelligible, or in translated form, requiring various forms of linguistic and musical adaptation and creativity. In any case, incipient formal learning may involve prior learning of chants and songs, making animal costumes and masks, drawing pictures of the animals and their antics, and learning to read and write key terms related to narrative content. The outcome of this process is that learners should be able to construct their own meanings of the narratives, and retell, recompose and redramatize their content according to their skill levels and in ways meaningful to their lives.

Responsorial narrative not only integrates language and expressive modes, but also other fields of knowledge. The integration of subject areas in the foundation phase enables learners to develop their cognitive, emotional, creative and social skills (Estrada et al., 2023; Moodley & Aronstam, 2016). African oral narratives inter alia integrate politics, history, religion, social relationships, medicine, the cosmos, the natural world, climate and agriculture. Narratives about Mr. Tortoise offer an opportunity to explore the natural world, geography, climate and mathematics. The latter could involve basic addition and subtraction (for example, involving the number of race participants), as well as the basics of time and distance which could be experienced in a reenactment of the race between Tortoise and Hare.

Conclusion: The Wisdom of the Little Ones

Although delivered some three decades and 9,000 miles apart, landmark speeches by Martin Luther King (“I have a dream”) and Thabo Mbeki (“I am an African”) are shared poetic expressions during times of moral turbulence that in certain respects remain current. Children’s narratives, in contrast, could seem irrelevant, naïve whispers in fiery national debates on political ideals. However, the concluding *ngano* marker “This is the death of the

child who is a story"[34] signifies that, just as there always must be children, so there must be forms of artistic expression that engage social life incisively (Le Roux, 1996).

South African children's responsorial narratives as a means for value education have a long precolonial history. Junod (1913) describes them as "the wisdom of the little ones" (p. 194) and argues that they are "a discreet protest of weakness against strength, a protest of spiritual against material force; possibly they may contain a warning to those in power from those who suffer" (p. 205). The issues they "raise in relation to self-actualisation in the moral landscape engage the dynamics of contemporary South Africa, and its destiny" (Kruger & Verhoef, 2015, p. 13). Messrs. Tortoise, Hare and Baboon are ancient actants who remain alive in local popular consciousness where they engage ruling ideologies (Kruger, 2014, 2021; see Figures 4 and 5). Their antics resonate with the quest for dominance, power and resources involving arrogance, lack of responsibility, corruption, violence and disrespect. Narratives about them involve the universal human need for redemption from destructive rivalry; they also constantly underscore the interdependence of social and material wealth. Connected selves are those who not only have land, cattle and crops, but also family and friends, all situated in a caring, moral universe. Cultural role models are not arrogant or deceitful, but altruistic and ingenious; they do not abuse their power and seniority but act responsibly and value collaboration with others; they may even be roguish tricksters who constantly challenge hierarchies and help to maintain the balance of power. And so Mr. Tortoise with his short legs and cumbersome shell may rise to a position of benign authority on the basis of his character, not his appearance.

[34] *Ha mbo di u vha ha nwana wa lungano.*

Figure 4. Mr. Hare

Note. Unknown sculptor, 1994. Wood and shoe polish. 12 inches/300 mm. Author's collection.

Figure 5. Mr. Baboon

Note. Unknown sculptor, 2022. Painted wood. 10 inches/240 mm. Author's collection.

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