



## *Mandela's Favourite African Folktales*

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It might seem surprising that such a man and public charismatic leader, who in his thirties joined the freedom fighters, and who spent twenty-seven years in prison, could devote time and energies to the collection of fables and tales to be addressed to new readers as simple entertainment, or as educational tools. Yet, Nelson Mandela's choice of tales from all over the African continent, *Nelson Mandela's Favourite African Folktales* (2002) clearly testifies to his great humanity, culture, and open mindedness. This project might have been a life-long enterprise, for we read in his autobiography that, in 1959,

At 1.30 in the morning on 30 March I was awakened by sharp, unfriendly knocks at my door, the unmistakable signature of the police. [...] They turned the house upside down, taking virtually every piece of paper they could find, including the transcripts I had recently been making of my mother's recollections of family history and tribal fables. I was never to see them again. (Mandela 1994: 283)

In his most recent autobiographical writing, *Conversations With Myself*, Mandela claimed his double affiliation to both his own indigenous culture and to western culture. Moreover, he recalled a dear pastime of his childhood with affection:



After supper we would listen enthralled to my mother and sometimes my aunt telling us stories, legends, myths and fables which have come down from countless generations, and all of which tended to stimulate the imagination and contained some valuable moral lesson. (Mandela 2010: 10)

This affiliation to rural Transkei, to the rules of a society where the eldest are to be listened to for wise advice, where everything is discussed in democratic ways by the whole community and anyone has the right to speak, where children have responsibilities but also enjoy the open air, is something Mandela remained faithful to, all his life long.

Detecting affinities and differences, through a comparative approach, between the tales selected by Mandela and some of Europe's most popular fables is not meant as a Eurocentric analysis aiming at pinpointing common roots between heterogeneous cultural traditions and systems of thoughts. On the contrary, the purpose of the comparison is to pursue a dialogue between different sign systems, languages and consequently meanings. Dialogue is a logical, ethical and political praxis to Nelson Mandela, a practice he has always and strenuously adopted and searched for. Moreover, Mandela's choice of fables also offers us the opportunity to consider some expressions of contemporary African art, particularly painting, because the reworking of myths and tradition – for instance, the use of masks and of animal allegories – seems to work perfectly both in literature and in painting. All this will be pursued while considering theorization on children's literature.

Entertaining and teaching are not only the main aims of children's literature but they are also two key terms in Mandela's childhood, for his father "was reputed to be an excellent orator who captivated his audience by entertaining them as well as teaching them." (Mandela 1994: 6) These are the qualities that Mandela attaches to the fascinating local history of heroes and warriors he was learning as a child from his father. These are also the qualities he ascribes to tales and fables, particularly the ones transmitted by his mother:

My mother would enchant us with Xhosa legends and fables that had come down from numberless generations. These tales stimulated my childish imagination, and usually contained some moral lesson. (Mandela 1994: 12)

There are many examples in Mandela's selection of tales of this blending of imagination and moral lesson, which has been the main feature of most western children's literature through the centuries. One of these is *Mmadipetsane*, a story about a disobedient child, who refuses to listen to the warnings of adults. The story begins significantly with the catch phrase: "The old people tell the story *Mmadipetsane*" (Mandela 2007: 43-47). The story sounds familiar also to a European ear, for it contains suggestions of *Little Red Riding Hood*.



A mother sends her little daughter to fetch some vegetables in the fields. When she hears of the exact place where the girl has been to, she warns her never to go there again for she might fall victim of a sort of ogre. More than the plot, which is quite repetitive and predictable, one interesting aspect of the story that is worth noticing is the use of Sotho words. This typically African element has been preserved through the English translation.

The story originates in Lesotho and some words are typical of that area. For instance, the basket is immediately translated into “the seroto”; the monster with terrible animal-like features is called “the ledimo”, the man-eating monster; the creepy-crawly is translated into “a kgokgo”; the home is called “the hae”; the big rock is called “the lefika” and the jackal is called “the phokojwe”. The “big rock (lefika)” and the “dung heap” must be landmarks easily recognisable for villagers of rural areas. In his autobiography, Mandela for instance remembers that the huts of his native village, Qunu in the Transkei region, were:

beehive-shaped structures of mud walls, with a wooden pole in the centre holding up a peaked grass roof. The floor was made of crushed ant-heap, and was kept smooth by smearing it regularly with fresh cow dung. (Mandela 1994: 9)

Moreover, “roots from the veld” and “wild spinach leaves” must also be common consumables for the villagers of the veld area. There are some more specific elements characterizing the life of such an African village, such as the mother’s habit of “fetching water in the clay pot from the fountain”<sup>1</sup> and the measuring out of sunset before the hour of complete darkness, as in the monster’s expressions in imitation of the mother: “The sun is setting over the treetops in the west”; or, “It’s late, the sun is setting faster. It is now behind the branches of the trees”; or, “the sun is touching the mountaintops in the west.” (Mandela 2007: 46) One last very important image is that referred by the mother, who says that the monster “is more dangerous than the big water snake coiled up in the gleaming deep pool.” (Mandela 2007: 45) This might be a mythical reference not so much to a specific, real animal, but to the spirit of the place, or even to a creation myth.

Even more interesting are the metaphors and similes, which are numerous in the text and refer to the world of nature and particularly to the animal world. For instance, the voice of the monster is compared to “the noise the rainbird makes when he comes to lay his egg among the stones on the ground”; similarly, the little girl answers with a voice “like the wind blowing across the veld.” (Mandela 2007: 43) These similes refer to elements typical of the Lesotho landscape and to its seasonal fauna, which are familiar to the audience there, and make the western audience aware of an environment quite different from the dark woods of Perrault or of the Grimm Brothers.

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<sup>1</sup> “The water used for farming, cooking and washing had to be fetched in buckets from streams and springs. This was women’s work.” (Mandela 1994: 10)



The young, slim, clever and naughty girl is then compared to a field mouse for her rapid movements and her ability to slip into a hole in the ground. Moreover, when the ledimo swallows, he produces such a loud noise, "like the frogs when they jump into deep water," and he stomps the ground "like Puhu, the bull, with his hooves." In order to tease and taunt the monster the girl compares him to a creepy-crawley, "a kgokgo",<sup>2</sup> and she repeats that: "Sai Kgokgo, sai kgokgokgo-kgo [...] Sai! Sai!" (Mandela 2007: 45).

At this point the ledimo shows his weakness: "It hurts the ledimo's ears to hear her. It feels as though he has fleas biting him inside his ears: 'Sai!Sai!Sai!'" (Mandela 2007: 45) The ledimo's ears are too sensitive to the girl's insulting rigmarole to the point that he has to take refuge in his house not to hear her. On the contrary, the girl is "deaf" to her mother's warnings, to the point that her mother asks a rhetorical question, once again strictly connected to a cultural specific situation, typical of rural Africa: "Did the pigs bite off your ears when you were little?" (Mandela 2007: 45). In spite of this difference, the gigantic ledimo, as big as a tree, darker than night, and with teeth as a boar's tusks, and the little girl share an important quality: cleverness. Both of them are clever, they reflect on their actions, and they try to outwit each other. They both claim a hybrid essence: the girl says she is "as clever as the jackal," (Mandela 2007: 45) and "like a field mouse," (Mandela 2007: 43) so she shares qualities with animals. The anthropomorphized ledimo, on his part, is sensitive to derision and he is "even more cunning than the jackal," (Mandela 2007: 45) and, later, before acting: "he thinks, and thinks and thinks." (Mandela 2007: 46) The villagers use epithets to define him, such as "The Giant, The Strong One, the Dangerous One," (Mandela 2007: 46) even "the cannibal," and he has "huge hands".

For a long while the girl seems to be the winner; she hides in the jackals' hole and stays there. At this point, the story plays another familiar tune to the European reader's ear, for the ledimo applies a strategy that is similar to that of the wolf in the famous story of *The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats* by the Grimm brothers. The ledimo tries repeatedly to speak in the voice of the girl's mother, but his voice is unmistakably recognisable, for it sounds "as rough as the rock face of the mountain;" it is "strong and rough and it does not sound anything like the voice of a mother." (Mandela 2007: 46) Differently from what happens in the fable by the Grimms, where the wolf manages to imitate the voice of the mother and even covers himself in flour so as to show white paws, here the ledimo does not manage to cheat the child. A reversal of the two European plots is present in the ending of the fable. In the censored version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf is defeated by a hunter who drags out of his stomach both

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<sup>2</sup> "A Sotho word that implies scaring a small child into submission" (Wines 2014). Sotho expression "Kgo ... kgo ... kgodisa!" has been translated into "Hic...Hic...Hiccup", see Gowlett D., Rankin J. (Cambridge: 2002).



the old grandmother and the little girl and fills it with stones.<sup>3</sup> A similar ending also applies to the story of the seven little goats, where the wolf eventually drowns into a torrent, dragged down by a stomach full of heavy stones. Here, instead, it is the ledimo who finally fills with stones the jackal's hole in the ground where the little child used to hide, so that she can no longer find shelter there and she is finally taken away by the monster to be eaten up. The fable's final moral is: "This is the end of the story of a disobedient child and her punishment." (Mandela 2007: 47) The child's transgression is twofold. She not only disobeys her mother by going close to where the ledimo lives, but she also seems openly to invade his private space, for she overtly says she is "digging the roots which belong to the ledimo [...] and picking the wild spinach that grows in his fields!" (Mandela 2007: 45).

In conclusion, the reassuring ending of the plot of *Little Red Riding Hood* clashes against the fatal, cruel ending of the Lesotho tale, which is more realistically acceptable in an environment that can be violent and dangerous, where wild animals, personified as ancestral beings, might represent a constant threat to villagers.

Another story from the Kalahari desert, where the Nama people live, also deals with disobedience, although of a different kind: *Natiki* (Mandela 2007: 56-58). Exactly like Cinderella, *Natiki*, the youngest of three daughters is forbidden to participate in the local dance, and is given heavy duties and tasks instead. Yet, once she has accomplished her duties, she prepares herself and beautiful as she is, she goes to the dance. There, a young hunter notices her and finally walks her home. In order to reach back home quickly, *Natiki* had planted some porcupine quills in the ground. This latter trick is similar to the one used by Hansel and Gretel in Grimm's tale, finding their way back home from the dark wood, by leaving little white stones and some breadcrumbs as landmarks. Only, after a successful return which is not welcomed by the foster mother, the breadcrumbs get eaten by birds and the two children are lost and end up in control of the witch. In this South African tale, the girl is successful in going back home, but her mother is disappointed to see her younger daughter with her betrothed. Like the European *Cinderella*, *Natiki* goes away from home and from her miserable life of mistreatment and happily lives with her children and her husband, and as he had promised "there is always meat in her pots." (Mandela 2007: 58) If European fables normally start with the catch phrase "Once upon a time" and end with the formulaic "they lived happily ever after", here the fable insists on eventual happiness as derived from a diet rich in meat. Richness and happiness are therefore measured against abundance of food, and in this specific case abundance of animal proteins. Unlike the Prince Charming of European fables, here the future husband is a hunter, and that is why he can provide meat for his family. Moreover, this South African Cinderella has to accomplish tasks which are typical of the region where the

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<sup>3</sup> "The tragic ending of *Little Red Riding Hood* (who in the French version is simply devoured by the wolf) is inevitably substituted by the salvific intervention of the hunter in the Grimm's version." (Tosi & Petrina 2011: 157; my translation)



fable has its origins: “fetch goats before nightfall”, “bring along some wood and make a big fire so that the wild animals will stay away” (Mandela 2007: 56) are the tasks the young girl has to complete before night, so that the animals in “the kraal” will be safe.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the way in which Natiki prepares herself for the dance is ritualistic: “she rubs fat on her body until her skin looks like burnished copper and rubs a yellow mixture of crushed bark and fat on her face.” (Mandela 2007: 56) The beads she wears around her neck and the dried springbok ears filled with seeds she puts around her legs certainly belong to the traditional decoration for women. On the contrary, Mandela refers to a similar ritual for circumcised boys: “the first chore [...] was to paint our naked and shaved bodies from head to foot in white ochre, turning us into ghosts. The white chalk symbolized our purity, and I still recall how stiff the dried clay felt on my body.” (Mandela 1994: 33) The reason for including this particular tale in the collection might well have been the wish of reviving traditional rituals of rural South Africa, although Jessica Tiffin is very critical about it for the lack of philological contextualization of the tales in their intercultural relations:

More complex in genesis are those tales that appear to be Africanizations of familiar Western stories. Some tales, however, are close enough to well-known Western tales that questions of influence and transmission must be raised. “Natiki,” for example, is essentially the Cinderella story retold in African idiom. (Tiffin 2005: 305)

The tale goes on depicting the girl who immediately joins the women who are singing and clapping their hands and does so for a long while. Again, she stands on the side of tradition and enjoys the ritual dancing and singing. This is a typical tradition that Mandela remembers from his days as an adopted child, spent at the court of Mqhekezwemi after the death of his father, where, he says: “some nights I danced the evening away to the beautiful singing and clapping of Thembu maidens.” Once again, on the occasion of his circumcision, the ceremonial rite of passage from childhood to adulthood: “Women came from the nearby villages and we danced to their singing and clapping.” (Mandela 1994: 20; 31) In the tale, on the contrary, the two older and uglier sisters just spend their time yawning and thinking of eating more meat. Eating more, eating well, or eating enough is a value to be pursued rather than social status, wealth or being wooed.

*Kamiyo of the River* (Mandela 2007: 48-49) is another South African tale of Mandela’s native region of Transkei. A shepherd, who needs a wife before getting too old, sees a perfect tree with green leaves on it, along the riverbank, and he decides to carve a statue of a beautiful young woman. It is a common feature in South African rural life and literature to find a shepherd who is also a good carver. Mandela himself

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<sup>4</sup> “A kraal was a homestead and usually included a simple fenced-in enclosure for animal, fields for growing crops, and one or more thatched huts.” (Mandela 1994: 6)



mentions a similar first-hand experience: "I was no more than five when I became a herd-boy looking after sheep and calves in the fields. [...] we played with toys we made ourselves. We moulded animals and birds out of clay. We made ox-drawn sledges out of tree branches." (Mandela 1994: 11)

A touching instance is also to be found in Bessie Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1987), where a little herd-boy dies in the draught while looking after the cattle, leaving behind a small bundle of his carvings: a spoon for his mother, little local animals, little bucks, tortoise, monkeys, and birds. There was even a crocodile which could not be his own, for there are no crocodiles in dry Botswana. That crocodile must have been the fruit of a swap with a passer-by who appreciated a ten-year-old child's artefact. (Head 1988: 165)

In the fable, the carver manages to create such a lovely figure that as he breathes into her nostrils and touches her eyes she instantly became alive. The presence of the shepherd carver shows how the fable is rooted in the South African tradition, and yet, like Pygmalion, in the European tradition, the artist creator becomes a god-like figure and gives life to its own creature. He even names her Kamiyo of the River and asks her to keep her origins secret. As a creation myth about the woman born of a man, not exactly like Eve from Adam's rib, yet as a man's artefact, it is a very powerful one, for the tree in its best shape represents the world of Nature and the bond with Mother Earth or Earth Goddess. Soon Kamiyo becomes the object of desire for other young men in the area. After being separated from her husband and brought to live in another village, her husband manages to dispossess her of all he had provided his spouse with: an apron, a head ring, and finally her life. When two birds sent as messengers to her peck at her eyes, her body parts crumble one by one, till her trunk rolls down to the river and she becomes a huge tree with plenty of green leaves and that is where she has lived ever since. To look for a moral in this fable is a hard task: the message seems to be that Mother Nature should be respected and loved but should not be altered, for any attempt to change the natural order or law by transforming it into something artificial is doomed to fail. The symbolism of life as an attribute connected with the eyes is again very interesting and powerful, for – by closing her eyes – the woman dies and turns into a tree again. The metamorphosis from woman into a vegetal being is a leitmotif throughout Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, too. One final necessary remark on this fable is the presence of short songs sung by the magic birds and even of the music scores. This story finds two parallels in the collection of fables by La Fontaine, where a man loves his cat so much, that eventually she becomes a woman and his spouse. Yet, she will never lose the instinct to chase mice in their house, so as to say that the nature of any being cannot be changed. The second example is the story of the sculptor who carves out of white marble the statue of Jupiter and his lightning bolt. The statue is so well made that the sculptor is terribly frightened. The author – or better collector, as La Fontaine translates traditional fables from different traditions into verse – explicitly mentions Pygmalion, who, on the



contrary, fell in love with his statue. The moral for La Fontaine is that man is ready to transform his chimeras into reality and ends up believing what is false.

In general, what is striking in the collection of African folktales is that everything happens in the daylight, and this is a major difference with European stories, where darkness and dark forests are often the setting for terrible events. In Africa, the hour after sunset is feared, and therefore life and actions develop in the daylight. Darkness is much more dangerous in the townships, or black ghettos, where there was no electricity at all, or in urban areas more generally, rather than in nature:

Alexandra was known as 'Dark City' for its complete absence of electricity. Walking home at night was perilous, for there were no lights, the silence pierced by yells, laughter and occasional gunfire. So different from the darkness of the Transkei, which seemed to envelop one in a welcome embrace. (Mandela 1994: 88)

A great number of animal stories are present in Mandela's selection, as is typical of children's literature ever since the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In some of them he pays homage to the most popular and well-known tradition of the trickster. Here Anansi, a character from Nigerian mythology, plays a central role in the fable *Spider and the Crows* (Mandela 2007: 51-55). It portrays a clever and invincible spider, who plays tricks on other animals, first the crows, then the crocodiles. The story resembles similar fables by Aesop or La Fontaine, where animals are competitors for food and have to outwit others in order to be able to eat. The biggest animal is not necessarily always the winner. Sometimes it is the smallest who wins, not because of physical strength but because of cleverness and deceitfulness.

Anansi is a perfect point in case. He manages to steal all the figs the crows have gathered for themselves, hiding the fruits one by one in his claws while pretending to be carrying away some borrowed coal for his fire. When the crows generously agree to carry the spider to the fig tree he pays them back with selfishness, managing to get the figs for himself just by saying: "No, you can't! I saw it first! It's mine." (Mandela 2007: 53) When left alone, he has no other choice than plunging into the water among crocodiles. Again, he alone challenges animals which live in groups and are sociable. The crocodiles fall victim of his convincing rhetoric, when he pretends to be one of them. He even succeeds in their first test, which consists in making him drink a mud soup: he just pretends to drink it. Once he has accommodated himself in the hole where they keep their eggs, he prepares a strategy to eat them all, one by one. He is certainly characterised by a huge appetite that contrasts with his small dimensions, particularly if compared to the big crocodiles. No sooner than one hundred and one eggs are gone, the spider manages to escape from the community of those notoriously ferocious animals by asking transport from the oldest of them, who is also a bit deaf, and convinces him they are all urging him to deliver his load to the other

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<sup>5</sup> See Cosslett (2006).





side, while they are desperately trying to stop him. In spite of the fact that bullying others or cheating them do not seem exemplary qualities to be imitated, traditional cultures well accept that there is nothing to do against a trickster, and cleverness and resourcefulness are therefore celebrated. Although Anansi is a metamorphic being and a complex mythical figure, who changes according to the various literary genres, he might be compared to the fox of many a European story, always trying to outwit other animals.

Animals sometimes serve as moral exempla, and sometimes they speak or are humanised. La Fontaine's story of the woman's connection with a cat might refer back to mythical and ancestral motifs. The African tales here considered also involve an example of this connection. In order to explain a fact in mythical terms, that is, to explain how the cat developed into a domestic animal, the story *The Cat Who Came Indoors* (Mandela 2007: 12-14) is a light and humorous portrait both of women and cats. The story tells how the wild cat, roaming in the forest, is fascinated by the strongest animal she sees and she goes to live with him. First, it is the turn of the leopard, but soon he is conquered by the lion. Yet, the lion, too, is conquered by the elephant, till the elephant is killed by a hunter. Thus, the cat chooses to live with the man, she follows him and jumps onto the thatched roof of his hut. Finally, during a fight and the subsequent commotion inside the hut, the man tumbles outside, thrown out by his screaming wife. So, the cat decides to live with "the finest creature in all the jungle": woman. The cat comes indoors and sits by the fire "and that is where she's been ever since." (Mandela 2007: 14) This funny and entertaining gender-biased story creates a canonical hierarchy among animals, yet, surprisingly, it does not stop with man, and proclaims woman as the queen of all creatures. While the hunter is powerful and invincible with his weapons, the woman obtains her victory with her bare hands, and if the hunter is king in the wilderness, the woman is queen of the hearth. In this way the mythical domesticity of cats is explained and also the kinship between women and cats.

Another example of a mythical explanation for factual evidence refers to the spiky and rough hairs of the hyena. This animal story begins with an episode of solidarity between a wounded lion, Simba, and a generous hare, Sunguru, who provides him with food and water for he cannot hunt due to a wounded leg. Thus, a large pile of bones accumulates in front of the lion's cave and they attract the hyena, Nyangau. The latter begins flattering the lion, who is not easily impressed. The next strategy sees the hyena discredit the hare as a bad doctor and selfish animal only wanting protection from a sick lion. On her arrival, the hare needs to outwit the hyena and she admits that the best cure would be to have a large patch of hyena skin to dress the wound. The lion jumps on the hyena and takes off a long strip of skin and that is why the hyena has spiky and rough hairs along its back.

A similar story sees the lion as king of the forest, who invites all animals to his party and since he has little food to provide, namely milk and honey (the Bible's



emblems for the promised land), he gives them presents instead: *King Lion's Gifts* (Mandela 2007: 18-22). The presents consist mainly in horns that he places on heads (for bucks), mouths (for elephants), noses (for rhinos), and suits – dotted (for the leopard), striped (for the zebra) – and of a different fashion for each of the other species. All animals get the features by which they are known still today, and some of them are rewarded for their modesty, and some are punished for their greediness. Only the tortoise arrives late and “he still trundles around in the horny shell that Crocodile made for him”, while “Frog lives quite naked in the water. [...] he had gone for a quick swim, but someone stole his clothes.” (Mandela 2007: 22) Again, this nice story about generosity among animals becomes a creation myth: a secular explanation of the origins of different species. What is particularly interesting here is the assumption that “Animals are just like children: they don't have ears, and they don't want any, either.” (Mandela 2007: 19) The comparison of children to animals makes animals simply exemplary.<sup>6</sup> Here again, the leitmotif of allegorically “deaf” children is present.

In contemporary African art, too, animal iconography featured prominently. Of course, animals are the favourite subjects of traditional and modern carving. Painting too, privileges animals now and then.<sup>7</sup> In particular, *King Lion's Gifts* with its meeting of all animals summoned by the lion, create a dialogue with a painting entitled *Cour des Grands* (2005) by Chéri Chérin, from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The painting shows a meeting of all animals. They are disposed in a circle all around a big king lion who has a globe in his hands and his fierce mouth is open as if in an angry speech. He sits on a throne in a clearing of the thick forest and wears a dark suit and he has a huge black book in front of him. Other animals wear military uniforms and even carry guns, as is the case of the pig with a Kalashnikov. In the assembly, a Saudi Arabian rhino is quite prominent in his white head cover and suit, as is the wolf general with his white shirt and socks and blue marine suit, tie and papers, maybe representing a non-African power. Other animals are elegantly dressed, some only wear trousers and some are dressed as traditional African leaders, such as the monkey with a straw skirt and spear, or the bull with a purple gown and big medal on his chest. Some other animals are more realistically represented. The hare plays the photo reporter with a digital camera, while the fox walks on crutches, as if injured in a fight or incident. These are all wild animals, therefore an allusion to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1948) is not necessarily to be pointed out, although affinities might be detected.

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<sup>6</sup> “The child analogy is the most obvious: [...] most of the books address themselves to children, and provide examples of good and bad behaviour to animals by child characters. With this audience in mind, they also use animal behaviour and attitudes to give moral lessons on child behaviour.” (Cosslett 2006: 73)

<sup>7</sup> “Other representations that employ local images of power and violence such as lions and elephants rather than imported ones [...] are more durable.” (Sidney 1999: 35)



They all listen intently with worried inimical expressions, while only the westernized wolf and lion speak. They are probably there to vote, for a ballot box occupies the centre stage. This parodist assembly of nations seems to be discussing tremendously serious matters, maybe war and peace, which are faced with scepticism and expectations. The theme is political and it appears that these powers are looking for the place and role of Africa in the global scale.<sup>8</sup> The technique is close to naïf painting.

One more of Mandela's tales about generosity among animals hides a creation myth of the South African San people. *The Great Thirst* (Mandela 2007: 15-17) well pictures the landscape in which the San lived well, a harsh desert subject to droughts. The animals complain as they are starving for food and water. The elephant is willingly self-sacrificing, generously donating his flesh and blood to the animals to satisfy their hunger and thirst, and to the land to regenerate itself. Thus, the serpent poisons the elephant to death and soon there is nourishment for everybody. Yet, the animals start complaining again because of lack of water. The serpent then goes underground and spits water in torrents for the land and for the animals "and even today we hear of elephant grass and water serpent." (Mandela 2007: 17) This sad and cruel story about the elephant's self-sacrifice is a creation myth born out of a desert region. Yet, the flesh and blood that nourish animals is not only a realistic reference to carnivorous animals, but also a kind of symbolic form of sharing within a community, for each animal gets something from the elephant. The elephant admirably accepts to die to give life to others.

Strikingly, the elephant is not the only initiator or creator, but he needs the help of serpent, both vicariously, to cause his death, and actively for he provides or creates water. In the previous story, too, it was not only the lion who was the provider of furs and horns and typical features but also the crocodile, as if the principle of creation were a combination of earth and water forces: lion elephant and crocodile serpent, grass and water. The animals act as an extended family, or as a clan, where the king (lion) or father (elephant) dispenses goods or sacrifices himself for the greater common good of others. This story in particular might have personal implications, for Nelson Mandela has always been conscious of the necessity to sacrifice himself for his people:

In life, every man has twin obligations – obligations to his family, to his parents, to his wife and children; and he has an obligation to his people, his community, his country. In a civil and humane society, each man is able to fulfil those obligations

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<sup>8</sup> *Cour des grands* carries possible echoes of fables concerning a debate among animals, such as "The Council of Quadrupeds" in *Evenings at Home* by A. Barbauld and J. Aikin (1792-96) "where the animals are presented as an analogue to the natives of Southern Africa, in their persecution by the white invaders, while their social structure is a more general analogy to the weakness of human solidarity and the failures of revolution." (Cosslett 2006: 107; 123). See also Perkins (2003).



according to his own inclinations and abilities. But in a country like South Africa, it was almost impossible for a man of my birth and colour to fulfil both of those obligations. [...] I did not in the beginning choose to place my people above my family, but in attempting to serve my people, I found that I was prevented from fulfilling my obligations as a son, a brother, a father and a husband. In that way, my commitment to my people, to the millions of South Africans I would never know or meet, was at the expense of the people I knew best and loved most. (Mandela 1994: 750)

Undoubtedly, Nelson Mandela might have felt like the elephant. He was ready even to die for his country and his people, and certainly neglected his own family for a higher principle of democracy and a wider community, as he often reiterated in his life and his writings.

His collection of African tales shows its goal as the celebration of African folklore from north to south and from east to west, with a high concentration on South African tales. Mandela's own commitment to the African continent is once again affirmed. This particular edition was forged for publication, therefore it would be misleading to look for the African oral tradition in it, or orature.<sup>9</sup> Of course, there are elements of orality, such as catch phrases, repetitions, not only of lexical items but also of narrative patterns, so as to facilitate memory and recitation. Despite this, the publication included a precise project of translation of the single stories into English, and the names of the numerous translators have promptly been acknowledged, together with the names of some of the storytellers who occasionally presented them. Also, the illustrators have a space and precious role in this project.

In spite of the kind of criticisms that, for instance, Jessica Tiffin lists in her review, namely, that the collection is not really representative of the African continent (2005: 305), that the tales are not necessarily related to oral folklore, it is time to start thinking also of the African continent and of the African literature as a written down and printed cultural archive, for the era of the printed book with all its possible genres is well established by now. Furthermore, as Laura Tosi claims, in the last decades there has been a tendency to see tales and fables as a testimony to their cultural scenario. The literary fable is not the anonymous product of a community (even if it is impossible to ignore the essential contribution of the oral tradition) but it is strongly historicized. This minor genre, so to speak, includes the representation of social forces and institutions at play in a specific epoch. (Tosi 2001: 138, my translation)

In this project Mandela stands out as a sort of anthropologist, a collector and gatherer of local, indigenous and by now highly-hybridized folklore. In spite of the commercial value of this project, the selection is not dissimilar to ancient chapbooks, which "preserved the old traditional tales and rhymes for the benefit of later

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<sup>9</sup> "Orature is a recent but seldom used term that again emphasizes the oral character of the literature." (Okpewho 1992: 3)



generations of children [...] and for less privileged readers", and which also included French fairy tales and folk tales and *The Arabian Nights*." (Hunt 1994: 38-41; Lerer 2008: 134).

Moreover, this collection is also in line with the works of intellectuals such as La Fontaine, who translated into French stories from all over, to the point that they have been defined as Oriental fables: *A Hundred Fables of La Fontaine* (1900). Or, such as Count Lev Tolstoy, who gathered a collection of stories from the local peasant tradition, translated as *Fables for Children* (1904), when he was a schoolmaster and his aim was pedagogic, educational and moral. Or even such as Italo Calvino, who collected a huge volume of *Italian Folktales* (1956). While La Fontaine, Tolstoy and Calvino were professional writers, Mandela was mainly a politician. All of them have Aesop and Phaedrus as models and widely include stories of talking animals. Moreover, they all include fables of the Indian or Persian traditions.<sup>10</sup>

However, Mandela's own commitment to this editorial project shows how he interpreted his role as that of the "organic intellectual", in Gramscian terms – that is a leader, who is well educated, but never loses contact with his own people, their needs, their stories, their fantasies and dreams.<sup>11</sup> A leader who has at heart the education of the lower classes, of those who do not have easy access to educational institutions and metropolitan centres. Thus, he helped gathering an archive of myths, legends, fables and tales to be passed down to the newer generations and to remain inscribed in the intellectual and cultural life of Africa for the future.

The second painting I would like to mention in this paper is another enormous canvas, entitled *Defilé de modes* (2006), by Bodo, from the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is a huge canvas portraying a forest of trees, flowers and fruits and birds, where three strange creatures are parading. They are tall figures in human bodies, yet with animal heads. Their mouth has the shape of a beak and their gaze is fierce as if they were rapacious birds. They are two men and a woman. The woman on the far left is dressed in an outfit of green leaves which bares her muscular legs and arms and round belly. She carries heavy golden jewellery, but the most original pieces of attire

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<sup>10</sup> As for Mandela's selection, Tiffin claims: "This failure of contextualization is continued in the forms and patterns of the tales themselves. The Cape Malay, Afrikaans, and Islamic tales, which form a significant minority in the collection, could at least be seen as authentically "African" folklore in the sense that they represent cultures within Africa and a genuinely folkloric transmission of tale patterns across various levels of retelling and cultural influence. While existing partially in opposition to the collection's subtextual claims of black African heritage, there is certainly a sense in which they are 'African folktales.'" (Tiffin 2005: 305)

<sup>11</sup> "Se l'intellettuale non comprende e non sente, i suoi rapporti col popolo-massa sono o si riducono a puramente burocratici, formali: gli intellettuali diventano una casta o un sacerdozio (centralismo organico): se il rapporto tra intellettuali e popolo-massa, tra dirigenti e diretti, tra governanti e governati, è dato da una adesione organica in cui il sentimento passione diventa comprensione e quindi sapere (non meccanicamente, ma in modo vivente), allora solo il rapporto è di rappresentanza, e avviene lo scambio di elementi individuali tra governati e governanti, tra diretti e dirigenti, cioè si realizza la vita d'insieme che sola è la forza sociale, si crea il 'blocco storico'". (Gramsci 1975)



are her high-heeled white shoes in the shape of hungry animals. She walks elegantly and adjusts her long hair, while in the other hand she keeps a bunch of wild flowers, swinging her white handbag. The man in the centre seems to be dancing in a western type of suit. He raises his left knee to show in full details his shoes, which are bright yellow plastic tanks. His wide open and floating blue jacket makes a show of the tailors' trademark AGAR, and similarly does his enormous golden buckle. He also wears yellow braces on a striped stylish shirt and for a tie he wears a well-matching fish. Keys hang from his waist and golden rings decorate his hands. The third man on the right hand wears a bright yellow suit, shiny white socks and eccentric kinds of sandals made of green leaves. He has golden rings and a bracelet and he is walking in an assertive and positive mood. He is the only one whose hair shows a sort of "afro" look, of black curls. His jacket also shows a kind of trademark, but, in fact, it is the name or signature of the artist.

The moral of this animal story, where three little wild birds, realistically depicted, contrast with tall fake human birds, under three slanting sun rays, almost like spotlights in a disco, shows how Africa is changing. The animal heads replace traditional African masks, but signify rapaciousness, rather than rituality. The three almost dancing figures, like mannequins, parade in nature, but their clothes are sophisticated and eccentric, as if out of place, while they display wealth, in terms of gold, fashionable gadgets and accessories. This may very well be an allegory of modern Africa, where a new black bourgeoisie has flourished hand in hand with capitalism and consumerism. Another reference for both the literary fables and the two paintings here discussed might be to the masquerade theme, that is, tales where animals are requested to dress up as humans and vice versa, as a reminiscence of carnival-like public masquerade (Cosslett 2006: 53-54).

Bodo's poetics, in his words, consists in contrasting poverty and averting people's eyes in front of wars and terrorism. He defines his art "popular, surreal, satiric and dream-like," his technique seems closer to naïf painting with larger than life figures, brilliant colours and a realistic effect. The staged vanity fair, in spite of being a surprising portrait of Africa, looks like an extravagant vision.<sup>12</sup>

Both artists, Bodo and Chérin, lament the lack of visibility of their works and careers and the lack of impact on society due to poor infrastructures such as museums, art galleries and a proper art market. These two representations of Africa through animal iconography seem to match Nelson Mandela's project and establish a profitable dialogue with the tales discussed above. Both in painting and literature animal allegories and folktales which have their roots in ancient traditions prove precious to enhance and stabilize an original and innovative canon for African cultural productions.

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<sup>12</sup> A fringe of Congolese contemporary art is based on "a finely detailed representation of flora and fauna." (Sidney 1999: 51)



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