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by: Isabel Hofmeyr

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The Narrative Logic of Oral History

Over the last decade, the use of oral testimony has been gaining momentum in southern African studies. Used initially as one source among many, oral testimony has come to occupy a more and more central place in an increasing number of studies.[1] As most of these attempt to chart the terrain of popular culture, consciousness and knowledge, they have turned to oral sources as the ones that can best illuminate these areas of experience.

Alongside this interest in oral accounts has been some tandem awareness of the properties peculiar to such a source. As Bozzoli says: '...the testimonies of the poor, far from being mere illustrations which may supplement "harder" analysis, are themselves a rich source of understanding'.[2] Elsewhere she says: '...such design as may lie behind the subject's presentation of him or herself is the major form of self-expression to be found amongst the illiterate South African poor, a form of autobiography in fact'.[3] It is a similar point that Guy and Thabane make in their assessment of the evidence of the gangster, Johannes Rantoa who

> through his accounts of the varied incidents of his life is developing the thesis that he presented at the start of our interviews: that although he lacks formal education (in contrast, it is implied, to us) he is wise in the ways of the world (perhaps also in contrast to us)...Embedded in his account of his life is the story of a man who, in the final analysis, has succeeded in what he has done: of a man who acted in a manner consistent with his philosophy and in so doing triumphed over a world which by its nature means to bring him down.[4]

What these sentences suggest is that an awareness of the formal properties, narrative structures and literary conventions in oral testimonies can enhance

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1 These would include Jeff Peires, 'The Legend of Fenner-Solomon', Patrick Harries, ' "A Forgotten Corner of the Transvaal": Reconstructing the History of a Relocated Community through Oral Testimony and Song'; Don Pinnock, 'Stone's Boys and the Making of a Cape Flats Mafia'; Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea: A Participant's Perspective'; Jacklyn Cock and Erica Emdon, ' "Let Me make history please": The Story of Johanna Masilela'; and Eddie Webster, 'Workers Divided: Five Faces from a Hidden Abode' all in Belinda Bozzoli ed., *Class, Community and Conflict* (Johannesburg, 1987) as well as Peires, 'Piet Draghoender's Lament' and Bill Nasson, ' "She Preferred Living in a Cave with Harry the Snake-Catcher": Towards an Oral History of Popular Leisure in District Six, Cape Town, c. 1920s-1950s', both papers presented to the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Feb. 1987. See as well Belinda Bozzoli, 'Migrant Women and South African Social Change: Biographical Approaches to Social Analysis', *African Studies*, 4,1 (1985).

2 Belinda Bozzoli, 'Introduction: History, Experience and Culture' in *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal* (Johannesburg, 1983), 14.

3 Bozzoli, ed., *Class, Community*, 11.

4 Guy and Thabane, 'The Ma Rashea', *Ibid.*, 455.

and deepen the insights to be gained from such material. However this position remains by and large a minority one and the linguistic and literary codes of testimony do not come into analytical focus as often as they might. Indeed these features are often considered an active disadvantage: one still for example frequently hears people bemoaning the way oral history individualises issues which seems rather like lamenting the fact that Commissions of Inquiry never note the colour and style of their informants' dress. A similar sentiment animates the following comments on the oral testimony drawn from a particular community.

> The Kat River people did not relate the loss of their lands to the tobacco boom, or to the capitalisation of agriculture, or to the speculative potential of a free market in land. Unable to conceptualise the changing political economy of South Africa or their own place in it, they naturally tended to blame everything on the malpractices of one wicked man.[5]

A quote like this would seem to involve a misrecognition of the nature of oral sources and as a result it adjudicates rather unfairly against the testimony of the Kat River people and all such testimony which speaks of the detail and experience of everyday life in individual terms. But in doing so, these sentences are no doubt attempting to raise the question of whether highly individualised oral sources can be made to speak of broader social circumstances. Can the words of one give insight into the experience of many?

In debates about the appropriate use of oral sources, this question is and always will be an intractable one and this paper does not pretend to resolve the issue which in any event has no straightforward answers. However one possible line of response to it would hold that the formal aspects of testimony offer a fruitful terrain from which one can begin to think about the social in the individual. After all, informants speak from the 'ensemble of relations' within which they have acted and struggled.[6] Such 'ensembles' will be represented in oral accounts by a range of social voices and a variety of cultural forms whose provenance is deeply social and hence wider than the one voice that utters it. The impulse to 'fictionalise', to grasp the world through figures of the imagination and to construct it, not by imitation, but through narrative cognition, is a fundamental cultural activity. It would seem important then to attune one's ear to the conventions through which informants find a voice, particularly if one wishes to grasp 'the kinds of understanding (that people) brought to their experiences and...the kinds of actions they took on behalf of this understanding'.[7]

The response that points like these are most likely to attract would primarily be concerned with application. How, in other words, does all of this work

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[5] The quote from Peires, 'The Legend', 88 is possibly a misleading one since Peires is a distinguished oral historian who in practice is fully cognisant of the issues this paper raises.

[6] Quote from Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method', R Johnson *et al*, ed., *Making Histories* (London, 1982), 236.

[7] James E. Young, 'Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs', *New Literary History*, 18, 2 (1987), 406.

in practice? How does one begin defining these figures of the imagination, these 'fictional' conventions of oral testimony and having done so what insights can they offer? These question are again difficult ones to answer in simple terms since it is much like asking how narrative expression itself works, a question that effectively fuels literary studies as a discipline. However recent research in various areas has attempted to probe some of these problems and this paper will first of all review this literature and then move on to analyse some oral testimony dealing with an episode of Transvaal history - the 'Makapansgat' story. The first half of the paper will have more to say about the testimony of personal experience or life history. The second half will deal with a slightly different category, namely oral historical 'traditions'. While many consider these as distinct categories, an issue which the paper addresses later, I have grouped them under the roof of one paper as I am attempting to grapple with certain features peculiar to all types of oral history.

One body of investigation that has probed the relationship between oral accounts and literary form has been African oral historical research and it is worth reviewing its findings briefly.[8] One major objective of this research has been to define the specifically historical dimension of oral history. This type of investigation was often pursued to counter anthropological insistences that much 'traditional' evidence was 'presentistic' and could render only ahistorical cosmological or religious information.

In response to these allegations, many historians involved in African oral history sought to locate and define those 'kernels' of 'possibly historical matter' in oral testimonies of various types.[9] What is interesting to note for our purposes here is that these 'kernels' generally turned out to be those parts of narration involving a high degree of linguistic formalisation. One such 'kernel' is the 'core cliche', a term derived from an oral literary scholar, Scheub who coined it in his analysis of some 3 000 *iintsomi* (tales) that he collected. The term itself refers to the mnemonic core around which narrative episodes are elaborated and it can take the form of a proverb, song, chant, saying or image. Other possibly historical kernels with this literary dimension include structuring (in the Levi-Strauss sense) as well as the use of epochs and genealogies as organising principles of narration.

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[8] The literature on this topic is vast. I have relied on and found useful Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London and Nairobi, 1985) and his 'Comment: Traditions of Genesis', *JAH* 15, (1974) also his 'Is Elegance Proof? Structuralism and African History', *History in Africa*, 10, (1983); Joseph C. Miller, 'Introduction: Listening for the African Past', *The African Past Speaks Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone and Connecticut, 1980); David P Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition* (Oxford, 1974); Elizabeth Tonkin, 'Investigating Oral Tradition', *JAH*, 27, (1986) and her 'The Boundaries of History in Oral Performance', *History in Africa*, 9, (1982) as well as her 'Steps in the Redefinition of "oral history": examples from Africa' in *Social History*, 7,2 (1982) and Andrew Roberts, 'The Use of Oral Sources in African History', *Oral History* 4, 1 (1976).

[9] Miller, 'Introduction', 8.

In adopting such an approach, much recent African oral historical scholarship has committed its energy to understanding how oral historical narratives are made rather than simply looking at the content of 'traditions' which supposedly pass smoothly and agentlessly through time. As Miller in an excellent introduction has said:

> (African historians) examine how oral historians construct their narratives, what evidential material they have at hand and by what procedures they combine these into purported representations of the past. These authors have moved from examining the means by which an entire 'tradition' might have been transmitted through time to studying how its miscellaneous components have come to the oral narrators who combine them into finished stories. These historians thus perceive a composite of many diverse parts, rather than a single integrated tradition.[10]

Let us stop for a while and consider an example that illustrates some of these issues. The excerpt comes from testimony I collected concerning the Makapansgat incident. The story I wanted to hear, my informant said, began a long time ago.

> The whole thing started like this, when out there in Bulawayo, near Stanger, when the chief quarrelled with Chaka over a woman called Bambatha. Chaos resulted and chief Khona and his people had to run away.[11]

In factual terms this episode could of course not be more wrong, but it does nonetheless embody certain types of historical understanding. Anticipating as it does genealogical disruption and a narrative of migration, this opening passage encapsulates many of the themes of 'traditional' history. Furthermore this narrative clearly functions in the realm of '"magical" rhetoric'[12] through which 'traditions' are often imagined and narrated. It is a realm where the concern of strict chronology and historical exactitude are unknown and lack cognitive validity. From this perspective, the informant's opening gambit can be understood as a standard and unremarkable composition procedure for oral historical narrative. An oral historical account, as others have pointed out, often requires a crisis to initiate narration whose telling will in all likelihood comprise further episodes of catastrophic and sudden reversals. Gradual change as Miller points out never features in such narratives. After all it doesn't make a good story.[13]

What this example illustrates most clearly is the way in which an historical event has become an abstraction from the narrative itself. In other words, it is through the plot that historical events - in this instance genealogical disruption and migration - attain definition. This symbiotic relationship of narrative and historical understanding is one whose validity has been

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[10] Miller, 'Introduction', 8.

[11] Interview of Patrick Mahula Kekana with Edwin Nyatlo, Mošate, Valtyn, November, 1987.

[12] Phrase from Miller, 'Introduction', 36.

[13] *Ibid.*

established by the so-called 'narrativists' working within the philosophy of history.[14] The voices supporting this position all start from the assumption that narrative - in its lowest common denominator definition - is a sequential or chronological organisation of information with a central or continuous subject focusing mainly on human action rather than broader social circumstances.

Narrative becomes a fundamental form through which the ramshackle of experience is given shape and intelligibility. 'Narrative as such is not just a technical problem for writers and critics but a primary and irreducible form of human comprehension, an article in the constitution of common sense'.[15] While history's use of evidence apparently differentiates it from fiction, their methods of organising information are in many ways hardly distinct. The ways in which narrative embodies historical understanding are of course many and various. As Hayden White puts it: '(Historical events) are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like - in short, all of the techniques that we would expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play'.(Emphasis original)[16] In understanding an historical account, one follows then a series of complex narrative procedures and 'rules' as well as being lulled along by a range of rhetorical effects. Taken together, these features offer one a type of configurational knowledge that some would argue is peculiar to narrative.[17]

In dealing with oral testimony, it may be argued that such a narrative approach is only applicable to 'traditions', rather than the apparently artless testimony of everyday. Are not oral traditions more flagrant in their often epic and mythic literariness and hence more susceptible to narrative analysis than the more humble and modest expression so characteristic of the accounts of personal experience?

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[14] This topic is of course terrifying in its immensity. I have found useful W.H. Dray, 'On the Nature and Role of Narrative in Historiography', *History and Theory*, X, 2 (1971); W.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London, 1964); A.R. Louch, 'History as Narrative', *History and Theory*, VIII, 1 (1969); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London, 1978) and 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory' *History and Theory*, XXIII, 1 (1984); Louis O. Mink, 'Philosophical Analysis and Historical Understanding', *The Review of Metaphysics*, XXI, 4 (1968), also his 'History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension', Ralph Cohen, ed., *New Directions in Literary History* (London, 1974), as well as his 'Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument', Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (Madison and London, 1978). My thanks to Debra Nails for patiently attempting to guide one so philosophically untutored as me through the field.

[15] Louis O. Mink, 'Narrative Form', 132.

[16] Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', *Tropics*, 84.

[17] Louis O. Mink, 'History and Fiction', 117.

This distinction between tradition and testimony or personal reminiscence is one that most people from Vansina onwards have firmly entrenched, often with good reason. Testimonies or personal reminiscences are said to be more recent (generally involving memory within one to three generations), private, personally experienced and individually idiosyncratic in their telling. Tradition on the other hand is older (beyond three generations), not personally witnessed, public, as well as being more rule-governed and hence more stable in its recall and narration.[18] Each of these categories would in turn comprise smaller divisions like praise poetry, genealogical recitation, and oral historical narrative on the one hand, with things like joke, anecdote, personal experience tale, life story episodes, gossip, rumour, dream and so on falling into the testimony category.

While one would wish to keep an awareness of these categories and their distinctiveness in view, it seems equally important to note that both tradition and testimony share certain common features of composition. 'Tradition' then is not more susceptible to literary forms of analysis than testimony. Both have to confront a series of logistical storytelling problems made more acute by the exigencies of oral narration. Briefly put, oral accounts of past experience compel people to speak from two worlds at once: the world of the here and now and the remembered world which must he recreated in the present. Informants have consequently to negotiate fairly complex problems of point of view as they attempt to narrate diverse levels of information simultaneously in their testimony.[19] The ways in which tellers solve these problems and the formal strategies they adopt then become of interest, not only for their inherent craft and skill but for the cultural insights they have to offer.

There are a number of aspects to this problem some of which have been addressed by a growing body of primarily linguistic analyses focusing on areas like everyday narrative, conversational anecdote and life stories.[20] Some areas which they bring into analytical focus include shifts between first and third person point of view, tense variation and the representation of direct and indirect speech. These are available resources that an informant or narrator can call on in negotiating the problem of speaking from two 'places' at once. The use of direct and indirect speech for example involves filling one's speech with other people's words or at least the representation of other peoples' words.[21] Such a procedure opens up the possibilities for a range of social observation. Equally the act of claiming to speak on behalf

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[18] See for example Miller, 'Introduction', 9-10, and Vansina, *Oral Traditions*, 8-10.

[19] Livia Polanyi, 'Literary Complexity in Everyday Storytelling', Deborah Tannen, ed., *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy* (Norwood, 1982), 155-56.

[20] Polanyi, 'Literary Complexity'; William Labov, 'The Transformation of Experience into Narrative Syntax', William Labov, ed., *Language in the Inner City*, (Philadelphia, 1972); Charlotte Linde, 'Private Stories in Public Discourse'; Elisabeth Gulich and Uta M. Quasthoff, 'Storytelling in Conversation', both in *Poetics*, 15 (1986). These studies all come from a linguistic direction. For a more sociological approach see Martin Kohli, ed., *Biography and Society* (London, 1981).

[21] Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event* (Cambridge, 1986), 54.

of someone else or of disavowing a particular group can sometimes be effected through subtle changes in point of view. In manoeuvres like this, one can begin to read off certain nuanced form of political information.

The complexities of these issues can perhaps best be illustrated with some examples randomly chosen from contemporary southern African studies. By choosing quotations of which I do not know the full context I may of course be doing considerable violence to the material. If this is the case, I can only plead in mitigation that my intentions are honourable since I merely wish to indicate how a consideration of formal features in the testimony may have enhanced the writers' insights.

The first example comes from Paul la Hausse's paper and can be used to illuminate ideas around the representation of others' speech. The quote is an excerpt from an old gardener's testimony and in it he recalls mass political meetings in Durban in the 1920s. 'At meetings we learned about history. We were taught that whites did not own this country but that it was given to them by Shaka...those men who fought with Cetshwayo were not conquered. My father also told me this when I was young'.[22] The passage deals with representations of different kinds of social languages. The first tells of the public, political domain, remembered appropriately enough through the more formal passive voice while the second recalls the more private language of the home. It is as though the first experience of the father's views is recalled, re-experienced and re-interpreted in the light of the second political experience. This process under description here has of course to do with the interaction of 'inherent' and 'derived' ideas and it would seem that a very careful consideration of something like the representation of speech and social voices in testimony - as Bakhtin has done for the novel - may open more detailed insights into these areas.[23]

The second example concerns point of view and comes from a paper by Andrea van Niekerk based on the oral reminiscences of women who worked on the Zebediela Citrus Estate. The informants in van Niekerk's paper frequently recall their work experience through anecdotal episodes whose often complex internal organisation can reveal a great deal. Take the following example where a woman describes her memory of living in crowded hostel conditions. 'Daar was 'n Rita. Sy trek haar net so kaal uit, dan staan sy teen haar bed, en sy poeier en trek haar aan. Net so kaal. Hulle was nie skaam die een vir die ander nie'.[18]

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[22] Paul la Hausse, 'Ifalesizwe: Petros Lamula and the Creation of Zulu History', paper presented to the Workshop on Regionalism and Restructuring in Natal, University of Natal, Durban, 28-31 Jan. 1988, 36.

[23] This is a point made by Stephen Clingman but only in relation to written material. See his 'Biography and Representation: Some Analogies from Fiction', paper presented to the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Feb. 1987. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination Four Essays*, Michael Holquist, ed., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans., (Austin, 1986).

[24] Andrea Van Niekerk, 'Changing Patterns of Workers Accommodation, Zebediela Citrus Estate, 1926-53: The Dynamics of External Restraint and

The teller begins by assuming the vantage point of a removed omniscient narrator, speaking in the past tense. She then plummets into the present tense and also appears to assume the view point of a participant. These switches as well as the repetition of the phrase 'net so kaal' signal the shocked immediacy with which she must have experienced the event and with which she still recalls it. However she then distances herself from the entire situation by reverting back to the past tense and reassuming a distinct third person point of view. This desire for distance is sealed by her use of the third person plural pronoun 'hulle' which dissociates her from both the event and its memory.

As van Niekerk makes clear, the Zebediela women came from patriarchal, authoritarian Northern Transvaal homes and generally acquiesced to the authority of the hostel and workplace. Many of them also understood their worker status as a temporary one before they moved on to marriage and as it turned out a wider social salvation and upliftment by the Nationalist party state. I would argue that the complexities of this social position ghost through this passage and its subtle point of view shifts and tense changes.

Another factor which arises from the 'simultaneous telling' inherent in oral narration has to do with the context of performance or interview. As much oral literature scholarship has stressed, the actual words of any oral interaction carry a relatively low proportion of the meaning.[25] Instead much meaning is tied up with what goes on in the context of performance which would include interaction with the audience, elements of dramatisation, use of bodily gesture, linguistic intonation and so on. Unless one grasps the dense complexities of the performance event, a lot of voices warn, one can end up doing considerable harm to one's subject matter. Needless to say most of the scholars urging this position are those involved in collecting clearly defined genres of oral literature like praise poetry and tales, all performed 'in concert' as it were. The gatherers of oral life histories and recollection on the other hand, do their work in much less spectacular circumstances where the shaping presence of performance and audience is weaker.

These difficulties notwithstanding, there are still insights to be gleaned from a careful meditation on the interview interaction, particularly as every informant faces the problems of all storytellers. In Benjamin's terms he has to make his story and the experience it embodies continuous with the experience of an audience or interviewer. 'The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale'.[26]

Self-discipline', paper presented to the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Feb. 1987, 11.

[25] Ruth Finnegan *Oral Literature in African* (Oxford, 1970); Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event* (Cambridge, 1986); Harold Scheub, 'Oral Poetry and History' in *New Literary History* 1987 as well as his *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (Oxford, 1975). William Bascom, 'The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives' *Journal of American Folklore*, 78, 307 (1965) and Dan Ben-Amos, 'Folklore in African Societies', *RAL*, 6, 2 (1975).

[26] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), 87.

The way in which informants then attempt to hitch their narrated experience onto their perception of the interviewer's world provides a potentially fruitful terrain of investigation. (It might of course be urged that in certain situations it is the translator who adopts this task). In Guy and Thabane's piece there is a strong awareness of this process and the illumination it provides contributes much to the originality of the articles. The insights it opens up have a lot to do with what I would call for the nonce, narrative power. If, as much contemporary literary theory has shown, narratives not merely reflect but actually constitute social reality, then, even if only briefly, informants can claim forms of transitory cultural power through controlling the 'world-creating predicate', 'imagine that'.[27]

Much everyday storytelling both in and outside interviews then opens up the possibility of reliving experiences or imagining them as one would have liked to have lived them; it allows one to present the self in a multiplicity of ways and to enter a range of identity claims into social interaction; it permits one to participate in the 'daily plebiscite'[28] of defining and narrating a community. It is in short a complex cultural resource which can be used in unexpected and surprising ways to shape the web of social relations that make up the self. These 'aesthetic actions' as others have pointed out elsewhere, can in turn become 'forms of liberation from external obligations and the deathly routine of everyday life'.[29]

Thinking through the issues surrounding the context of interviewing also helps to foreground an important feature of any interview, namely its oralness. As Elizabeth Tonkin has pointed out, one's way of thinking about oral performance remains deeply shaped by textual metaphors. Particularly when it comes to 'traditions', one still thinks in terms of an 'invisible text which is somehow talked out again and again, with varying degrees of corruption and interference', instead of imagining 'only living speakers, who speak and remember at need'.[30] Also one still inevitably thinks of oral interviews as 'things' and 'documents', all categories which implicitly obscure the orality of the encounter.

What the precise significance of such orality may be has itself become an extensive area of investigation which would take a long time to set out.[31] As this paper is short, I will, in passing, mention just one point related to orality as a particular technology of memory. Viewed in this way, oral narrations can be said to favour 'consistency between past and present and

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[27] P. Bange, 'Towards a Pragmatic Analysis of Narratives in Literature', *Poetics.*, 15 (1986), 83.

[28] Phrase from Geoff Eley, 'State formation, nationalism and political culture in nineteenth-century Germany', R. Samuel and G. Stedman-Jones eds., *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London, 1982).

[29] Wolf-Dieter Stempel, 'Everyday Narrative as a Prototype', *Poetics*, 15(1986), 215.

[30] Tonkin, 'Investigating Oral Tradition', 207.

[31] This would include the work of people like Ong and Goody. I have relied on Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5 (1962-3).

(make) criticism - the articulation of inconsistency - less likely to occur'.[32] Writing, on the other hand, which can compare conflicting accounts is better equipped to articulate inconsistency. While the claims of this argument are broad, I think they have interesting implications for an understanding of the habitual romanticisation of much oral recollection which can arguably be seen to reside in the particularities of this form of memory itself.

In conclusion, a few comments on whether these notions on narrative will travel across diverse cultural situations. Might one not say that without a detailed ethnographic background, much of the narrative analysis suggested here would be foolhardy? Indeed it would. But at the same time, one needs to hold in one's view the notion that narrative *is* 'translatable' across cultural situations. As a convention used to transform 'knowing into telling', it 'fashion(s) human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture specific'.[33] These two positions of course represent two distinct poles which one has always to keep in view to steer one's way through the intervening territory.

Having cleared some conceptual ground, let us now turn to the oral accounts of the Makapansgat siege itself. The account that follows is based on seven interviews done with old people (six men, one women) in and around Mahwelereng, near Potgietersrus.[34] The events to which they refer concern the Kekana clan of the Ndebele who, in 1854, took refuge from Boer commandos in some caves just north of present-day Potgietersrus. The Boers with their Bakgatla allies laid siege to the cave for three weeks while those inside died of hunger, thirst and Boer-created smoke. Overall estimates of fatalities range from one to four thousand.

The incident properly belongs to a longer story of growing Boer incursion into the north-western Transvaal between the 1840s and 1860s. During this period, Ndebele communities around present-day Potgietersrus felt the burden of the Boer presence particularly keenly, largely because they lived on the major 'highway' that linked Pretoria to Schoemansdal, a major ivory centre in the northern Transvaal. Increasing tension over Boer cattle and slave

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[32] Goody and Watt, 'The Consequences', 325.

[33] Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 1 (1980), 5-6.

[34] My informants were as follows: Madimetša Klaas Kekana, (27 Nov. 1987), Leka Thinta James Mokhonoana and Patrick Mahula Kekana, (12 Dec. 1987), all interviewed at Mošate, Valtyn, with Edwin Nyatlo and Peter Kekana. Zaba Maluleka, (Feb. 1988), interviewed with Johannes Maluleka at Makapansgat, Potgietersrus area. (Transcriptions and translations of these interviews by Charles Makgoba). J. Mosoamadite Kekana, (19 March 1988). interviewed at Mošate, Valtyn with Johanna Moima and John Maselela Maleka and Helen Morongoa Kgosana, interviewed at the same time in Mahwelereng also with Johanna Moima. (Transcriptions and translations of these interviews by Peter Lekgoathi). Three dots represent the omission of informants words. Three dots in brackets represent the omission of on-the-spot translation.

raids simmered in the region with Boer and Ndebele communities in a state of undeclared war. In 1854, two Ndebele clans - the Langa and Kekana - attempted to force matters and in three separate incidents they severely mutilated and killed 28 Boers. The Boers called up a commando and the Kekana under their leader Mokopane, took refuge in the huge caves 16km north of Potgietersrus as they had done in the past when threatened by enemies.

The major written accounts of this event fall into two traditions: a great and a small. The initial nineteenth century accounts constitute the smaller which arose from a context of mission inspired polemic against Boer slavery and indenture. These accounts tend to highlight the figure of a notorious slave trader, Hermanus Potgieter who is often portrayed as being single-handedly responsible for the hostilities.[35]

The 'great' tradition emerged in the twentieth century and was tied up with developments within Afrikaner nationalism and the part played by Gustav Preller, a major creator and populariser of the key icons of Afrikaner nationalist thought. As part of this popularising project, Preller took on the task of writing up the Makapansgat event as an historical short story entitled 'Baanbrekers'. In many ways, the story is an attempt to create a Transvaal Blood River mythology and the episodes of 'black barbarism' are turned into an exculpatory myth to 'naturalise' white authority and power.[36]

The oral versions of the Makapansgat story that I have collected thus far fall into three traditions: those who know the story well, those who know parts of it and those who know it hardly at all. According to those who 'know' the story, a category I shall expand on below, the event would seem to reside in four episodes. The first of these refers to the prelude of the siege and insistently portrays the Ndebele as the aggressors and initiators of the conflict. Actual details of the siege itself feature hardly at all, and the accounts focus instead on an event involving a 'fake chief'. I have termed this the second episode and it tells of how the Ndebele in the cave shoot a Boer leader and the Boers in return demand the Kekana chief. A substitute chief is sent out and this hoax dupes the Boers - but only temporarily. Realising they have been taken in, they return to the cave, demanding the real chief.

In what I designate the third episode, Mokopane, the child heir to the chieftainship is handed to the Boers. The adult chief said to be present in the cave is referred to as Setšwamadi. Mokopane is indentured to a Boer farmer and is not heard of again until some migrant workers on their way to Kimberley stop at a farm to drink water from a dam. There they see a group of herd boys, one of whom they recognise as the child chief. After negotiations with the farmer, the young chief is bought back and restored to his rightful place. The final episode concerns the consequences of the

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[35] See for example the anonymous pamphlets in the Preller collection, Transvaal Archives/A 787/Volume 201/File 120 - Makapanspoortmoord.

[36] For a fuller discussion of both the episode itself and Gustav Preller see my 'Popularising History: The Case of Gustav Preller', paper presented to the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, July, 1987.

siege. The remnants of the Kekana regroup and seek refuge with the Mashishi. In no time, they have relieved the Mashishi of their land and authority and have re-established themselves as people of some regional authority. Or in the words of one informant, '(The Kekanas) stayed for a while and then said if the boers had taken their land, they might as well take it from the Mashishi'.[37]

Those who know only parts of the story will tell one or two of these episodes while those who know it hardly at all are aware that the story exists but can suggest only its barest outline.

How does one begin to think about these various versions of the story? Is it merely a matter of individual skill whereby some are better storytellers than others? While this is clearly an important factor, I would suggest that bearing the first section of the paper in mind, there are possibly certain insights to be gained from focusing on how the story is told. Let us begin by examining excerpts from the 'child chief' episode as told by two informants I have designated as knowing the story.

In the first version, some Kimberley-bound migrants stop at a farm and recognize the child chief. They hasten back to inform their chief and then return the following morning to the farm. The story continues:

> Then they said, "Ha, are you herding a boer's sheep?" They (the herdboys) said, yes. They said, "Who might you be?" One said, "I'm Swartbooi". Another said, "I'm Kleinbooi". The small one said, "I'm Klaas". (...) One of the old men who knew him said, "You are Klaas whom?" Then he said, "I am just Klaas". He had long left, mind you. They then said, "Aren't you Klaas Mokopane?". He said, "Yes". One of them said, "By the way , we belong to the white man". They then said, "Which white man?" (...) The following morning, when the boer came out, they were in the bush. The boers dog barked at them and "hou, hou". The white man was sitting on the stoep. He saw the man coming. They said, "Morning baas, morning baas". They said, "His excellency, we have lost something we are seeking". "Hee, what are you seeking?" They said, "We have lost a child. He was since captured by the boers". He said, "No, these are mine". He then called them, "Swartbooi, Kleinbooi, Klaas!" They said, "Master?" They stood there, the three of them. He said, "These are mine, do you see them?" They said, "Baas, will you listen to us?" He said yes. They said, "This boy here is the son of our chief. He is the one we are looking for, baas". Then he said, "Is that so? Are you looking for this one?" They said yes. He said, "I see, if you want him you have to pay me".[38]

The story goes on to tell that the Boer demands a ransom of 30 sheep and tusks. These are in turn raised both from the Kekana as well as from the neighbouring Langa and Molekwa. Finally amidst splendid rejoicing, the chief is brought back and restored to his rightful place.

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[37] Testimony of Patrick Mahula Kekana.

[38] Testimony of Madimetša Kekana.

The second version is briefer but makes the same points.

> After he was sold to the Boer, there came a time when the men were coming from the diamond mines (...) They found him there and asked for water, thereafter they asked him who he was. He said, "I am Makapan". He knew neither Ndebele nor Sotho. He spoke Afrikaans only. His name was no longer Mokopane but Makapan. He looked familiar to them. They said they would report the issue to the chief so that if it is him, we would get him back. Then Mošupye said, "If it's him, go and negotiate with that man for the release of that boy". (...) The boer said he wanted 100 sheep (...) The tribe did as asked and produced 100 sheep and he was released. He came home and stayed for a while. After a year he ruled.

[39] While the outline of these two stories is similar, their styles of telling are clearly different. The first relies on extensive direct quotation which allowed the informant to dramatise the story and particularly in his portrayal of the boer, to turn it to satirical ends. His apparently sparse style would seem to bear traces of a typical oral historical style of narration in so far as generalisations in such an under researched area can be made. Existing research[40] suggests that much oral historical narration is characterised by repetition, short sentences and 'overlapping' where the last word of the sentence becomes a mnemonic spark for the next. Some typical sentences in this style, from the same informant, are 'Chief Kgaba is the one who was reigning when the boers arrived. When they arrived, they went to negotiate for land. He made agreements with them. After agreeing with them, he changed his mind and attacked them during the night'.

From these particular features, one can assume that this informant is well versed in techniques of narrating oral historical narrative. The second informant's version is, by comparison, curtailed and merely conveys the substance of the story. This might lead one to deduce that he lacks the same narrative skills. But this is not necessarily the case since from other parts of the interview, it was clear that he was conversant with a range of oral techniques of narration including praise poetry. I can only assume that he chose this terse style of telling because he was attempting to make the narrated experience continuous with his perception of my world and understanding, a strategy which presupposes another whole set of narrative skills and insights. A man of considerable ingenuity, who has inter alia worked as a photographer on *Drum*, his range of storytelling talents is indeed wide. (There may of course be a far more mundane explanation for this variation in style. The first informant had spent a considerable amount of time dealing with a University of Pretoria anthropologist. He clearly saw me in the same category which could explain his use of 'traditional' telling techniques.)

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[39] Testimony of Patrick Mahula Kekana.

[40] See A.M. Jones and Hazel Carter, 'The Style of Tonga Historical Narrative', *African Language Studies*, 8 (1961), and comments by Ben-Amos, 'Folklore', 178-79.

A further point to note is that both of these informants (to whom I was repeatedly referred)[41] had no hesitation in telling me the story, unlike many of the others. These people as I indicated above fell into those who knew some of the story and those who knew very little. Those who knew bits of the story gave brief renditions of the 'child chief' episode and the Kekana/Mashishi clash. The others who did not 'know' the story offered accounts like:

> I do, I do not really know properly because I was still small...my father used to tell me that their aunties...they died in, they died in there. They told me that they were fighting against the Boers...they, they, they stayed in there, grinding their mealies, and ate in there. Now you know the Boers saw them when the Ndebele came from the river to fetch water...They recognised them when they went to the river... (...)Now they arrived at the spot and made fire at the entrance.

[42] Informants like the one just quoted mostly expressed hesitancy to tell the story because they felt they lacked the 'authority' to do so. For example many said they weren't there and hence could not know what happened. Others said they knew bits of the story but as it was a true one, they didn't wish to lie in their telling of it. Most of them instead ended up substituting their own stories of historical episodes which they felt to be both important and true like the 1918 'flu epidemic and experiences of fighting in Egypt. These informants would happily tell *dinonwane*, (tales) involving storytelling methods that would appear to be widespread.[43] But in order to tell the story, it seems that informants had to be possessed of very particular storytelling skills relating specifically to oral historical narration.

While one can note these variations in storytelling style, accounting for them is difficult if not impossible. The transmission and practice of storytelling as a craft is an extremely slippery process to pin down. Storytelling inevitably seems like breathing. One does it without thinking and it relies on a series of skills that come from a slow cumulative experience and practice that in the end seems intuitive. Hence in attempting to chart the provenance of these skills, one faces a difficult task. All I can do for the moment is note that it seems important to disaggregate storytelling into different kinds. In this instance one is dealing specifically with skills of historical narration in which the idea of knowing the story is inseparable from knowing how to tell it. Historical memory and understanding, in other words, is implicated with narrative skill and technique.

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[41] There was a third informant, James Leka Thinta Mokonoane, to whom I was also often referred. While well-versed in 'traditions', he wanted only to tell me about the written versions of the story which he had read, assuming that this is what I wanted to hear. He came to the interview bearing van Warmelo's *Transvaal Ndebele Texts* and along with Madimetsa Kekana, he had been the main 'front man' to deal with the Pretoria anthropologist who had spent time in the area.

[42] Testimony of Elizabeth Morongoa Kgosana.

[43] These stories came respectively from Helen Morongoa Kgosana and and J Mosoamadite Kekana.

Attempting to specify what type of historical understanding these stories open up is difficult to do with any precision. One feature which can give some guidance is the idea of the core cliche, a device that crops up in the two quoted excerpts in the form of 'Then he said, "I am just Klaas"' and 'He said, "I am Makapan"'. These two sentences have become the core around which the episode is elaborated. It can also be considered a core that summarises the historical 'point' of the episode which has of course to do with slavery and indenture, both themes crucial to the history of the region. It is a memory that has all but been wiped out of written versions and present day popular perceptions, both black and white. But in the story, which has been around for some time,[44] the fact of indenture survives in the figure of the child chief. It is also something stored in the landscape and in place names as much oral 'tradition' always is.[45] In one version, Mokopane goes back to attack his erstwhile enslaver. That is why today, according to one informant, the spot still bears the name Makapanstad.[46] Another place name which stores the memory of indenture is Middelfontein, near Nylstroom. According to the same informant, it was originally an *inboekseling* settlement, and was the place for people 'who had already forgotten where they came from'. That is why today as he explained, everyone at Middelfontein has Afrikaans names and is mad.

Another area of understanding that the 'child chief' episode opens up has to do with issue of politics and identity. By enslaving the legitimate heir of the Kekana, the Boers symbolically appear to have rooted out the political and cultural heart of the society. The chief, as both versions tell us, has lost his identity and so has became comprehensively enslaved. In the story that follows he is bought back at considerable cost. In a massive social effort, which must surely be read allegorically, the Kekana collect the required ransom and it is through this collective social effort that the chief and the social order that goes with him is restored.

These stories are all clearly 'about' the issue of chieftainship and the genealogical transmission of legitimate political authority. From episodes like the 'fake chief' saga placed alongside the 'child chief' episode, it is obvious that these stories conspire to construct a world in which chieftainship is unassailable. Read in detail, the narratives generate a sense of an hierarchical world, contingent on the prerogatives of chiefly power. An entire sense of time, sequence and social order depend upon the continuity of chiefly authority: time itself for example is measured and recorded by listing chiefs. As one informant - also a praise poet explained - one needed to know about the past in order to know 'where you come from, who you are and where you might be going'. And from whence does one come? A long line of chiefs.[47]

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[44] A researcher in the 1930s makes mention of hearing such a version. See D. Nel, 'Die Drama van die Makapansgrot (Soos deur die naturelle vertel)', *Die Huisgenoot*, 24 March 1933, in Transvaal Archives/A 787/Volume 201/File 120 - Makapanspoortmoord.

[45] See for example Richard M Dorson, 'African and the Folklorist', in Dorson, ed., *African Folklore* (Bloomington and London, 1972).

[46] Testimony of Patrick Mahula Kekana.

[47] Testimony of Patrick Mahula Kekana.

In Bakhtin's terms, this is an absolute, epic past world of 'fathers, beginnings and peak times' which seems walled off from contemporary time. It is also, he notes, a 'specifically evaluating category' which puts all good and meaningful things in the past. It can also be a socially differentiating category which separates the 'fathers' from others around them by a distance that is epic.[48] While this epic, absolute dimension is often faint, it is this realm which is appropriate for the 'swelling spectacle'[49] of chieftainship. According to one informant who was talking more generally about the idea of chieftainship and its ideals of military heroism and conquest said, 'When we were greeting the chief, we would say "Sekete" (Thousand) because he had killed a thousand people. That is how a chief had to be known'.

Alongside this 'absolute' time, we have as well in Bakhtin's terms, a relative sense of time. It is a more chronological understanding of sequence that ushers into the here and now. The past does not appear 'walled off' but has a pulse that can still be felt and a causative outline that can still be glimpsed.

These two sense of temporality are both evident in the tellings and are resources through which the oral historian can generate meanings. Moving from this absolute time on to issues of more 'relative' time, the distinction between the two is best seen in an example like the following:

> From then onwards there was constant squabbling until in 1881 when Captain Dunn called them all together. He called all the chiefs and told them to stop fighting among themselves(...)...that is the end of our history.

If the exact historical circumstances to which this passage refers are not clear, then the more general historical point is. An external authority, with considerably more clout than the Boers were beginning to make themselves felt. From now on, time will be measured in years and calendars rather than chiefly epochs.

In this relative sense of time, the pulse of the past can be strongly felt. To live in the present, is to feel the aura of time gone by. Summing up the meaning of the whole cave episode, my first informant spoke about the Moordrift monument erected early this century to commemorate the Boers killed by the Kekana in 1854. It was because of the siege episode that 'we are not on good terms with the boers. Every white child if it misbehaves is taken to the monument and told, "Jy kan bietjie lees daarso. Lees! Kyk wat die kaffers gemaak het" '.[50]

This sense of a relative past which ushers into the present is qualitatively different from the sense of absolute epic time when a chief could kill a thousand men and a lost heir could be miraculously found. While Bakhtin saw the relative past as something liberating that freed one from epic

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[48] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 15 and 21.

[49] Phrase from Scheub, 'Oral Poetry and History', 485.

[50] Testimony of Madimetša Klaas Kekana.

authoritarianism, for these narrators the present and the recent past are times that have withered.

The meaning of this chiefly world and its politics has of course extremely local manifestations, a 'lesson' encapsulated in the final episode of the story where the Kekana apparently through a hoax involving hunting relieve the Mashishi of their land. The versions that I have collected thus far have all been from a Kekana point of view, but I am told that the Mashishi have their own story to tell which I hope in time to collect. In the meanwhile, all one can do is reiterate the resolutely local dimension of these stories. From this perspective the 'meaning' of the episode is tied up with its local consequences. This is a Kekana world in which the Kekana chief controls decisions of where and when to fight. And even if they should suffer a catastrophic defeat, this could be contained, if only in narrative, by the resources and continuities of a local culture. The Boers came and went, but the important business of history, the ebb and flow occasioned by genealogical dispute, local conquests and migrations continued.

That this structure of continuity should enclose events that are so obviously catastrophically discontinuous clearly requires comment. One possible line of explanation would argue that this stress on consistency is inherently tied to the oralness of the medium which as I mentioned earlier runs past and present into a seamless whole which muffles contradiction and inconsistency.

In a way this takes us back to our starting proposition that particular literary forms, in this instance oral ones, enable particular types of historical understanding. The initial part of the paper also made the claim that an attention to issues of narrative form and social 'voice' would help us grasp the social dimension of individual testimony. The second half of the paper has heeded only one of these 'voices', namely that which could broadly be termed 'traditional' narration. There are no doubt many other 'voices' embedded in the text which still remain to revealed. This paper has also had relatively little to say about the wider social insights that this 'voice' has opened up. I have attempted to indicate in broad terms how this narrative mode gains its imaginative energy from a particular sense of a chiefly social order.

This testimony represents as well one particular type of historical understanding. It is however one known largely only to the old and one that would seem to be on the wane. The cave itself acted for a long time as a landscape mnemonic and people apparently went once a year to make sacrifices and pour libations to the ancestors. When in the late 1930s, the cave, an important fossil site, was declared a national monument, popular access ceased and so too did one of the reasons for the continued memory of the episode and quite possibly the skills of narration that went with it. It is of course a memory that can never disappear entirely and it will always be available for resuscitation. But the way of its telling and the understanding it will open up shall, I am sure, be very different.

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