

Folklore in South Africa: A Short and Curtailed Overview

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ABSTRACT: South African radio currently hosts ghost anecdotes which affirm this wide-ranging belief. Since the 17th century the country has been recognized as a melting pot for European and Asian races as well as African. The country teems with folktales, folk story, songs and dances, the latter often performed for family occasions. Other lore embraces the weather, medicines, sayings, word craft and food. All these fields are ever-expanding.

Introduction

In January 2012 the South African radio station RSG (Radio sonder Grense—without boundaries) hosted a dial-in programme with the theme of ghosts. This followed on an email from a listener who accounted her experience in the museum of Graaff-Reinet, a town in the heart of the Karroo region of South Africa. She explained how she entered a specific room and immediately was grabbed around the throat, strangled for a few seconds and then released. The programme was flooded with calls from people who recently had experiences with ghosts or apparitions and a few from hard-core non-believers in anything of this nature. This programme illustrated an amazing phenomenon, namely that folk beliefs are alive and vibrant amongst South Africans.

As this article aims to point out, there are also other fields in folklore in this country that could not be totally obliterated by modern day technology and are still being practised widely.

Variety of Cultures and Folklore in South Africa

In 1685 Francois Valentyn, a clergyman from the Netherlands, visited the Cape on his way to Malaysia. He remarked the following on the population of the Cape:

All nations are found here, Dutch, English, French, Germans from all parts, Savoyards, Italians, Hungarians, Malays, Malabaris, Sinhalese, Macassar-folk, Banians, Amboinese, Bandanese, Buginese, Chinese,

men of Madagascar, Angolese, inhabitants of Guinea and the Salt Islands...¹

In the late 1990's the Centre for International Business Studies conducted research in South Africa against a seven-dimensional model that they developed.

The results confirmed that South Africa can be seen as a microcosm of the world. Not only black Africans from a variety of backgrounds, language, ethnicities, tribes etc., but also white people, European descendants, and a variety of Asian cultures, can be found in this fascinating continent.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner continue by stating that South African culture

has a triple heritage, from African society, Europe and Asia,

which all play a key role in human interaction.² If anybody had any doubt about the grounds for the designation of the term 'rainbow nation' to the inhabitants of South Africa, these two quotations confirm that the rainbow was formed more than three hundred years ago and since then just added more colours.

As it is impossible for a single person to be an expert on the folklore of all the different cultures, this article will make use of examples of mainly the Afrikaans speaking population, with references to other cultures.

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The various aspects of folklore that are still generally and quite comprehensively practised in modern day South Africa, are folk beliefs, storytelling, folksongs, folkdances and folk science, for instance folk medicine and weatherlore.

Folk Beliefs

It is important to differentiate between encounters with ghosts and occult happenings (which, as related by the people who experience them, illustrate folk beliefs), and actual ghost stories. The last mentioned are still told today, but the stories are mostly of a traditional nature.

As we all know, ghosts can appear in different forms and are not necessarily the spirits of deceased people only. In the spectre of

¹ F. Valentyn, *Description of the Cape of Good Hope with the Matters Concerning It*, Vol. I. (Cape Town, SA: Van Riebeeck Society, 1971), p. 171.

² F. Trompenaars and C. Hampden-Turner, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1998). Kindle version, location 4078-85.

traditional Afrikaans folk beliefs, the ghosts of animals were plentiful: baboons spitting fire, dogs without heads, cows that walk right through other cattle and even turkeys and ostriches.³ These phenomena are not commonly found in modern society. The most common ghosts today are the spirits of people that the living meet in a huge variety of forms. In towns and cities they are mostly found in old buildings, houses, museums and theatres and in the rural areas (the *platteland*) there are many ghosts wandering in fields, woods and along farm roads.

South Africa's most well-known ghost is probably the Uniondale ghost, who is a hitchhiker ghost. It is commonly known that hitchhiker ghosts are found all over the world, but, whereas many of them are ghost stories rather than real ghosts, this one near the town of Uniondale in the Southern Cape is very real. Accounts of apparitions of this female ghost have never stopped since the young girl died tragically in a motorcar accident in 1968.⁴ Like the famous vanishing hitchhiker of the United States told by J.H. Brunvand⁵, and many others of this kind,⁶ this story of the Uniondale ghost has also resulted in a ballad that tells the story of the woman hitchhiker who holds out her thumb and is picked up by travellers, just to vanish from their cars a few kilometers further.⁷

Ghosts or apparitions in the form of lights or fire are also very common. Car ghosts, for instance, are found all over the country, and some are quite famous. People often just see the lights of a car coming towards them, sometimes not on the same road but from another direction in the veld, and then it suddenly completely disappears without any obvious reason.⁸ This phenomenon is found worldwide,⁹ and, like the apparitions of hitchhiker ghosts, the boundaries between the folk belief and the ghost story are very vague.

Some intellectuals consider the belief in superstitions as the consequence of a small or uneducated mind, whereas conscientiously religious people of the Christian faith look at superstitions as unacceptable and going against their faith. Ordinary people who are not superstitious, are disdainful of these beliefs and consider them as old-

³ P.W. Grobbelaar, *Boerewysheid* (Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers, 1977), p. 41.

⁴ L. Retief, 'n Kultuurhistoriese Evaluering: Van die Afrikaanse Spookvertelling (Sage) en die Verband Met die Volksgeloof' (unpublished MA-thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 2000), p. 200.

⁵ J.H. Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meaning* (New York: Norton, 1981).

⁶ J.J. Dias Marques, 'The Vanishing Hitchhiker' Theme in Portuguese Balladry', in D. Bula and S. Rieuwerts. *Singing the Nations: Herder's Legacy* (Wissenschaftlicher: Verlag Trier, 2008).

⁷ P. de Bruyn, 'Blommetjie Gedenk Aan My': A South African Vanishing Hitchhiker Song, *FOAFTale News*, 20 (December 1990), p. 4.

⁸ L. Retief, pp. 225-229; H1-H4.

⁹ Guiley, R.E., *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (New York: Facts on File, 1992), p. 253.

fashioned and of no meaning.¹⁰ And yet, in spite of all these views, it is amazing to observe how ‘religiously’ superstitious many people still are: sports people, theatre people, fishermen and ordinary people who refuse to sit in row 13 or stay over in room 13, who dread Friday the 13th or will not walk underneath a ladder. Many of these beliefs derive from traditional folk lore or customs of which the original meaning had long since been forgotten, and all that is left is what today seems like a meaningless superstition.¹¹

Folktales /Storytelling

Another aspect of folklore that thrives in modern day society, in spite of fierce competition from the electronic media, is storytelling. Not only in the Afrikaans speaking communities, but in most other cultures in South Africa, the art of storytelling is an inherent part of folk culture, especially of traditional culture. Taking into account the rich wild life in this country, it is not surprising that hundreds of stories about wild animals are found in all the different languages. A well-known storyteller and author of international fame, Credo Mutwa, brought together a number of ‘tales and fables of Africa’ in his book *Isilwane, the Animal* (1996). In this book Mutwa not only relates stories about animals, but ‘combines poetry and humour, tenderness and violence, factual information and mystic beliefs (from the back cover). A collection of delightful stories from the Xhosa culture was published by A.C. Jordan as *Tales from Southern Africa* (1973). In the Afrikaans tradition of animal stories, the cultural historian, folklorist and author, Pieter W. Grobbelaar, collected many stories, re-told them, as Jordan did with the Xhosa stories, and published them as separate stories as well as collections.

The cross-cultural influence between African and Western traditions in South Africa is beautifully illustrated by the story of how the birds chose a king, the Xhosa-version told by Jordan as ‘Choosing a king’ and the Afrikaans version by Grobbelaar as ‘Die voëls kies ‘n koning’.¹² With regard to other Afrikaans folktales, Grobbelaar is still the collector and author who contributed most to the survival of traditional stories. Also in Afrikaans, but exclusively from the Malay community, are the stories retold and published by I.D. du Plessis, worldwide expert on the

¹⁰ A. Coetzee, *Waar die Volk Skep* (Stellenbosch: Genootskap van Afrikaanse Volkskunde, 1994), p. 37.

¹¹ P.W. Grobbelaar, *Boerewysheid*, p. 94.

¹² A.C. Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 266–277; P.W. Grobbelaar, *Mooiste Afrikaanse Sprokies*, 2nd edn (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1984), pp. 56-61.

South African Malay community. Like Grobbelaar, du Plessis also published many single stories as well as collections of stories.¹³

And to Story Telling

Storytelling as an art form has become an immensely popular form of entertainment in the Afrikaans-speaking section of modern day South Africa. In addition to a number of well-known storytellers who perform at various functions and festivals, there is also a boom in the publication of collections of stories, these mostly being connected to a specific region. Most of these modern popular stories are the author's or the storyteller's version of 'true' stories, in contrast to traditional folktales or fairytales. Some are legends, some can be called urban legends, but whatever they are called, there is no doubt that there is a substantial reading market for these stories. A few examples of popular writers of *kontreistories* (regional stories)—and some of them also duplicate as storytellers—are Jan Spies, Abraham de Vries, Jan Vosloo, Dirk van Schalkwyk, Abraham Brink, Gert Sarrisam, Helena Marincowitz and Gerrit Palmietfontein.¹⁴

True urban legends that cover most of the cultures in South Africa are to be found in the publications of Arthur Goldstuck. This author has collected an impressive collection of modern urban legends and published them as *The Rabbit in the Thorn Tree: Modern Myths and Legends of South Africa* (1990), *The Leopard in the Luggage: Urban Legends from Southern Africa* (1993), *Ink in the Porridge: Urban Legends of South African Elections* (1994), *The Burglar in the Bin Bag: Urban Legends, Hoaxes and Mass Hysteria* (2010), and also added a volume of ghost stories: *The Ghost That Closed Down the Town: The Story of the Haunting of South Africa* (2006).

Academic works on folk tales in South Africa naturally are enlightening in many aspects, as they present analyses, comparisons and in-depth discussions of types and individual examples. Most important of these are probably the dissertations of Pieter W. Grobbelaar on folk tales as cultural expression with the focus on Afrikaans (1984), Cecily van Straaten on the fairy tale as paradigm of inner transformation (1996), Leanda Retief on an evaluation of Afrikaans ghost stories (2002), and more recently of Michael Wessels on Bushman letters, interpreting /Xam narratives (2010).¹⁵

¹³ See I.D. du Plessis, *Doederomandro en Ander Kaapse Stories* (1973), *The Cape Malays: History, Religion, Traditions, Folk Tales: The Malay Quarter* (1972).

¹⁴ See Source List for full particulars.

¹⁵ See Source List for full particulars.

Folksongs and Folk-Dances

Afrikaans folksongs have gone through many phases of being created, performed, utilised, handed down through generations and becoming traditional. Then there were the phases of revival either in the original form, or as folkloristic manifestations. Over the past century research on folksongs has been done by collectors as well as academics and it is mainly due to the work of these individuals that the folksong has survived and is still being performed today.

In the 1970s the same Pieter W. Grobbelaar who compiled a comprehensive work on the Afrikaans folk tale, also contributed hugely to the conservation of folksongs. He hosted a radio programme in which he discussed traditional folksongs and invited listeners to send him songs that they still remembered. He received hundreds of songs in this way and supplemented his collections with widespread fieldwork.¹⁶ As a result of his work, many of these songs were revived by singers like Randall Wicomb and a few others. Separate from this movement, there are also other singers who made Afrikaans folksongs popular again, for instance David Kramer and Pieter van der Westhuizen. They did not necessarily sing original folksongs, but also created their own songs in folk style. Other researchers who did valuable work in the recording and transcription of traditional songs, are the pioneers S.J. du Toit (1924) and I.D. du Plessis (1935), and towards the end of the 20th century, M. Burden (1991).

Another manifestation of the folk song today is the way in which popular bands or individual singers transform the songs in an attempt to popularise them. Lyrics are changed and the accompaniment comprises modern instruments with sound effects very far removed from the traditional. New songs created in the present time by acknowledged singers can hardly be considered 'folk', unless the definitions and conceptualisation of traditional folksongs are changed.

With regard to folkdances, the African dances from the different indigenous cultures are very popular amongst tourists. They form groups and are trained to perform in cultural villages as well as on stage at different events. But the heartening fact is that people still perform traditional dances for their own sake, at initiation ceremonies, birthdays and other family festivals,¹⁷ the most important of which is the traditional wedding, where dances play a very big role.¹⁸ Ritual dances are still being performed by, for example, the AmaXhosa, Mfengu, Mpondo and Bacha in the Eastern Cape and the AmaZulu in KwaZulu-Natal. These

¹⁶ P.W. Grobbelaar, 1977–1987. Transcriptions of radio programmes on folk songs, *Die volk as digter*. Seven series of programmes on folk songs.

¹⁷ Xolani Mavela, email correspondence, 2012.

¹⁸ Ziyanda Manzana, email correspondence, 2012.

dances are identity-based, so they are accompanied by appropriate dress and songs. Recreational dances still occur both in rural and urban areas and often emanates a sense of nostalgia.¹⁹ In the Afrikaans community, the traditional dances (called *volkspele*) are still being performed, however, in very small numbers.

Coloured people in the rural areas of South Africa, especially those who are descendants of the Nama and other Khoi-khoi tribes, have recently revived the *rieldans* (a form of a local reel dance). They have an annual *rieldans* competition and they try to make the youth interested in this traditional dance by including them in the competition. This revival and specifically the competition, have grown immensely over the last number of years, with the result that the organisers had to start with regional knock-out rounds before the main competition.²⁰ It has the pleasing effect that people are now performing the *rieldans* spontaneously far more often at their own celebrations.

Folk Medicine

This is an area in folklore where the different cultures of South Africa have much in common. The main reason, of course, is the fact that the same natural environment is shared and utilised by all. The black indigenous cultures have the tradition of *sangomas* who are traditional healers and who, in addition to the shared knowledge, also make use of knowledge and methods of treatment that have not been transferred to the western population.

The Afrikaans term for folk or home medicine is *boererate*. These remedies have been used for centuries and most of the recipes have been tried and established as excellent treatment. But there are, of course, many so-called remedies that are based on folk belief rather than the medicinal value of the ingredients. Some are also just rituals and do not require any ingredients. Here the boundaries between folk beliefs and folk medicine are just as vague as between folk beliefs and ghost stories. It is exactly this phenomenon that Yvette Ferguson has investigated in her Master's study entitled *Die rol van volksgeneeskunde en die geassosieerde volksgeloof in die Katrivier-gemeenskap*²¹ ('The Role of Folk Medicine and the Associated Folk Beliefs in the Kat River Society'). The Kat River Valley is an area in the interior of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, where the AmaXhosa, coloured and white people live together and where the sharing of knowledge on folk medicine is one of the best examples of acculturation.

¹⁹ Christina Jikelo, email correspondence, 2012.

²⁰ Isabeau Botha, personal interview, 2012.

²¹ Y. Ferguson, 'Die Rol van Volksgeneeskunde en die Geassosieerde Volksgeloof in die Katrivier-Gemeenskap' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1999).

Boererate or folk medicine is a very popular subject in the Afrikaans-speaking society. In 1965 the South African Academy for Science and Arts completed a report on folk medicine, called *Volksgeneeskuns in Suid-Afrika*, which contains 8705 remedies.²² Over the years, several books on this subject have been published, some of which are very engaging because of the ingredients and especially the instructions that accompany the recipes.²³ Several radio programmes with this theme were also hosted over the years and at present the station RSG (mentioned in the introduction) has a weekly programme called *Kruie kraai koning* ('Herbs are the Kings').

Weatherlore

The state of the weather is almost the first subject about which people talk when they meet, and it is not surprising that a matter of such importance to comfort, health, prosperity and even life itself, should form the usual text and starting-point for the conversation of daily life.²⁴

This remark by the author Richard Inwards emphasises the obsession that many (or is it most?) people have with the weather. Go anywhere in the world and you will find that few people are totally indifferent towards this subject.

Traditionally the Afrikaners were farmers and most families today still have a connection of some sort with the *platteland* (rural area or farms). In a dry, water scarce country it follows naturally that the weather is of utmost importance, and weather forecasting plays a key role in organising farming activities. As farmers are inclined to be sceptical about formal weather forecasts—even though such advanced equipment is available today—they still depend mainly on their own observations. The reason for this is the fact that official weather forecasts in South Africa cover huge areas and people who live in those areas know that there are many sub-regions where weather and climate differ. For instance, the South African Weather Service nowadays uses the provinces as the boundaries for weather forecasting regions, which is a political and not a natural divide. And it is very well-known that some of the provinces have at least three or four different climatic regions.

In 1994 it was pointed out in an article on folk weather forecasting in the Southern Cape (part of the Western Cape Province) that there are several factors that are taken into account by the locals. As this region

²² Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, *Volksgeneeskuns in Suid-Afrika* (Unpublished Report, 1965).

²³ See, *inter alia*, D. Smuts, *Boererate* (Cape Town: Saayman and Weber, 1989).

²⁴ R. Inwards, *Weather Lore: A Collection of Proverbs, Sayings and Rules Concerning the Weather* (London: Senate, 1994), p. i.

lies between the Indian Ocean and the Outeniqua Mountains, there are far more elements to ‘read’, than, for example, in the Bushmanland which is flat and dry with no mountains and little vegetation. People of the Southern Cape or Outeniqualand, as it is colloquially known, use the principle of parallelism, people, the mountain, the sea, the mist, animals, general natural features and celestial bodies for forecasting and are usually very accurate—far more accurate than the Weather Service.²⁵

More recently, in 2010, a very comprehensive work on indigenous weather knowledge was published by Peter Alcock.²⁶ He brought together as much of indigenous knowledge on this topic as he could gather, including all races, languages and cultures in South Africa. He also referred to the related folklore, which really makes this an impressive work. There are of course other aspects of weatherlore apart from forecasting that are also still practised, for instance beliefs around thunder and lightning, and ways to influence the weather.

Conclusion

It must be evident from this short and very incomplete summary of the present state of folklore in South Africa, especially amongst Afrikaans speakers, that sophistication of life in general, the electronic media, globalisation and other influences have not affected people’s attitude towards folklore so deeply that nothing of traditional folklore is left and that nothing new is being created. On the contrary—even though it is in some cases necessary to pierce through layers of sophistication and even though people sometimes desperately want to appear indifferent towards folklore—they cannot really escape their association with nature, with the mystic and supernatural, their spontaneous reaction to life’s joys and disappointments, and their own often deep-rooted attachment to conventions.

There are several other areas in the discipline of folklore that have not been touched on in this article. In South Africa a field that can never be exhausted, for example, is that of eating and drinking customs and traditional recipes, no matter to which culture is referred. As part of language and word craft the most amazing studies have been made of sayings, expressions, riddles, jokes and place names, once again in all languages.

The final conclusion must be that folklore is well and alive in South Africa—some aspects of traditional folklore as well as new folklore that are being created every day.

²⁵ M. Burden, *Volkswewevoorspelling in Outeniqualand* (‘Folk weather forecasting in Outeniqualand’), *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 8.2 (1994), pp. 71-78.

²⁶ P. Alcock, *Rainbows in the Mist: Indigenous Weather Knowledge, Beliefs and Folklore in South Africa* (Pretoria: South African Weather Service, 2010).

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We notice with interest the many re-visitations of the almost mythical research bases and tragedy and loss in Antarctica that occurred at the beginning of the Georgian period, just prior to World War II.

Apart from maintenance done at McMurdo Sound, or the visiting of Ernest Shackleton's travels, there is also a determination to preserve the sites of those grand ventures and last idealisms, prior to the terrible disillusion of the 1914-1918 period.

Both Australia and New Zealand have a considerable stake in Antarctica, not least because of the problems of climate change, as well as the slaughter of whales done by others in the name of 'science'.

Perhaps it is true that, as the various centennials come to notice, the south sees that this sacrifice is another of the colonial and British idealisms, so many of which would bring a maturity to these newly emerging southern nations.

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