The Uncoiling Python: South African storytellers and resistance

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Harold Scheub

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Harold Scheub is the well known author of a number of books on African tales (he prefers the term "story"), with a concentration on the Xhosa *ntsomi*. These books have been appearing since the early 1970s and have been influential and inspirational, while his magisterial essay "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature" was a very useful intervention in the debate around the local legitimacy of modern (especially Europhone) African fiction writing.

Scheub's latest offering is suggestively titled *The Uncoiling Python* – an image which he explains as having both a cultural and a political reference. A number of Nguni references are cited to show that, culturally, the python represents something like the quality the Romans called *gravitas*: an impression of power that is yet self-contained and unruffled. Politically, he makes clear, it was their possession of python-like qualities that enabled all oppressed South Africans to endure apartheid: "The secret to survival is to be found [Scheub argues] in the imagery of transformation and rebirth in the traditions of the San and Nguni peoples" (p.1). In this early quote aspects of the problematic features of the book's central argument may begin to appear. Subtitled "South African Storytellers and Resistance", the text sets out to make a claim that uneasily straddles between a very broad generalisation and a number of highly particular illustrations, viz. translations of /Xam and Xhosa traditional stories – tales whose demonstrable instantiations of transitions undergone by their protagonists do not seem to have a primarily political relevance. Scheub contends that he discovered "subversive activity" (p. 7) in the stories

he collected. While the thesis is an appealing one, Scheub's commentaries and contextualisations of the tales do not convincingly demonstrate how the stories disguised their subversive application from the ruling class, while simultaneously communicating this to the 'insider' audience – at least not in any detail.

The other main problem with Scheub's argument is that, while he is an authority on the Xhosa *ntsomi*, he is evidently rather less knowledgeable about the more recent research on the /Xam records (and English translations) of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd that are kept in the UCT archives – a collection on which he draws extensively. Perhaps one may presume that it was Scheub's intention to link the /Xam narratives with those of the amaXhosa in order to approximate an inclusive 'spectrum of the oppressed' in South Africa. However, he fails to validate this coupling methodologically and seems to assume somewhat naively that it needs no explanation. Further deficiencies in the choice and organisation of material drawn on, and how Scheub refers to it, are attendant upon this basic issue. Throughout, he employs the term "San" for the translations of the /Xam material; never indicating awareness of the problematic use of the word, derived (as is well known) from the derogatory Khoekhoe term for a people or groups that they saw as inferior, nor making a distinction between the /Xam culture and the many other Bushman cultures of southern Africa – simply conflating them in this unreflective choice of terminology. The sources to which Scheub refers, especially with reference to the /Xam material, are mostly quite dated. Nor does he refer to contemporary theorisations of the affective; comparative reading practice; or studies of trauma and its narrative articulation, all or any of which could have been enlighteningly used in his discussions.

In the anonymous section of the back cover blurb it is claimed of Scheub's text that among the "many collections of African oral narratives", there are "few as carefully organized as *The Uncoiling Python*". This reviewer cannot concur. On the first page of text proper, Scheub's Preface uses the word "history" no fewer than ten times, but in this text the author's broad historical contextualisation is minimal, apart from just over two-and-a-half pages (pp. xiii-xvi) of an "Historical Overview" spanning from "*10,000BC – Khoi and San*" to "*1990, 1994 – Freedom*" and certain details concerning the recording and collection of the Bleek/Lloyd material and the tales gathered by Scheub. The Preface is followed by a "Prelude" in which Scheub explains his title image and states that for this book he "selected San poems and tales along with Nguni and

231

Sotho poems and tales from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some of which [he] collected in the late 1960s and the 1970s" (p. 7), but I could not find Sotho examples in the text. In the same section we are then given half a page of Scheub's musings (from a 1975 Notebook) on how the images in [Nguni] tales "hold feeling", succeeded by "A San Poem" – actually an excerpt from the Bleek/Lloyd collection; in a footnote Scheub adds that he "made some [*unspecified*] changes in Lloyd's original translations" without claiming anywhere to have studied or learnt the /Xam language, or saying why or how he made changes (p. 9). Scheub's one-and-a-half page "Commentary" follows the poem, bewilderingly claiming first that the *protagonist* is "the poet *in* the San poem" (p.13, emphasis added) and later that:

> The storyteller is *also* the San artist who, in *an* ancient rock painting, depicted a youth's quest for birds by means of a dramatic pattern: replicating the birds and in the process revealing *the* quest. *This* is *also* what happens in the spoken tale. (p.14, emphases added)

The italicisations in the above quote are intended to indicate the non-specificity of Scheub's claims. He refers to "images and image-linkages known only to […] initiates", saying that by means of "that smoke and mirrors", a "domain [is] established that is impenetrable by alien forces" (p.14). After the Commentary, the Prelude ends (inexplicably) with a brief biography of Walter Benson Rubusana (p. 5).

The next chapter is titled "Metaphor" – a term Scheub applies very flexibly and uses almost interchangeably with "transformation" – his key concept. After a series of examples (of Ndebele and Zulu stories, pp.16-34), Scheub in a two-page commentary informs readers that:

> The storytellers thus reveal the oneness of a human and the world that human inhabits. *A* transformation *therefore* becomes a reassurance of and an emphasis on that tight relationship […] *and so* the storytellers provide the strength to their audience that enables them to endure assaults on that unity from without. (p. 35, added emphases)

This does not seem either adequate argumentation or effective theorisation, although it must be said that Scheub's often quite lyrically expressed enthusiasm for the existential importance of storytelling has an endearing charm. It is a tone and style discernible in all the commentary sections of this text and maintained to the end, where Scheub writes: "storytellers will reveal to us […] the only thing that is really worthy of learning: […] our oneness, our universality" (p. 200).

Scheub's two main chapters concern "San Metaphor" and "The Nguni Artist – The Collapsing of Time", both consisting mainly of large chunks of interesting cited stories. But although Scheub is supposedly showing his reader the historical-existential protective role played by the tales he selected, the commentaries tend to speak of the function of myth and metaphor in broadly generalising and timeless fashion. Many of Scheub's commentaries are rather beautifully expressed, but not sufficiently specific to function as scholarly analysis. *The Uncoiling Python* can be described as an academically unsatisfactory yet worthwhile reading experience, presenting a challenge to future researchers in the field to achieve what this book promises, but fails to deliver.

Reference

Scheub, Harold. "A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature," *African Studies Review* 28, nos 2/3 (June/September 1985): 1-72.