Subiya “Traditional Literature”: A Preliminary Survey

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Abstract
This paper attempts a description, using Lestrade’s framework, of Subiya oral literature by identifying some of its constituent parts such as fables, praise poems, indigenous songs, proverbs, idioms and provocative similes. From this preliminary survey it is evident that SeSubiya possesses a corpus of literature that needs further study. The paper concludes by recommending further investigation so as to record and identify other aspects not included here. This paper is therefore a contribution to the larger and on-going project of recording and studying Subiya oral literature.

Introduction
Part of this paper’s title is derived from Lestrade’s (1937)1 article “Traditional Literature”. I use Lestrade’s concept of “traditional literature” with four points in mind. First, that SeSubiya/ Subiya (or Chikwahane/Chikuhane/Ciikuhane2) has a corpus of literature (otherwise known as oral literature, oraliture or orature in modern critical parlance) which is yet to be recorded and preserved in the medium of print. Until this happens, it remains “traditional”, by which I mean “unwritten” (but by no means uncomplex) and transmitted only by word of mouth, and therefore not readily available. This exploratory paper is therefore a contribution to the recording and preservation of this corpus in order to avail it to the public. It is hoped that once available to the reading public, this literature will stimulate both academic and non-academic interest. Second, definitional problems of literature notwithstanding, the term is used to denote artistic composition presented via the medium of language for consumption by an audience within specific socio-political and economic circumstances, and which serves certain aesthetic or social functions. As will become clear presently, these typologies lend themselves to systematic inquiry on the exploitation of language, on context/occasion, purpose/function and/or reception. Evident in the following examples is a density of indigenous knowledge systems that is worthy of academic investigation. Third, Lestrade’s taxonomy provides a framework for this paper as I impose it on texts of Subiya oral material. Such an approach is likely to be problematic. For example, the typologies I provide are tentative (as the subtitle suggests) and mere conveniences of writing to paint a general picture on whose basis further research could be grounded. Neither are the categories impervious and clearly defined (for example, prose and verse are not dichotomous concepts, but interlocking).

Lestrade offers the two broad categories of Prose and Verse (see also Finnegan, 1976; Okpewho, 1992). These are further subdivided: Prose, he suggests,

Embraces two main categories: Narrative Prose including Myths and Legends, Fables and Tales; and Didactic Prose, including Proverbs and Riddles in prose. (292)

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Verse on the other hand:

Embraces three main categories: Didactic Verse, including Proverbs and Riddles in verse, and the miscellaneous Verse-Lore of tribal initiation; Lyric and Dramatic Verse, including all the various kinds of Song; and finally that genre intermediate between the epic and the ode which we have in the Bantu Praise-poems. (292)

This paper focuses on fables, songs, riddles, praise poems, proverbs and idioms. The selection is dictated by the availability of material³ from which examples will be drawn. These categories will certainly be expanded or revised when more data is available. Brief definitions of genres, their contexts and significance will be illustrated with examples from Subiya culture.

A note on orthography is necessary. SeSubiya is yet to be formally written, which raises questions of how to spell it and whether to write it conjunctively or disjunctively. Fortunately, orthographic work has begun. Following on the work of the late Daniel Shamukuni (1998), Chebanne (2005) has provided a working orthography⁴ which is nearing completion. This paper acknowledges and benefits from such pioneering work.

Fables

According to Lestrade, fables “comprise chiefly of the numerous animal stories of Bantu folklore, but also narratives about human beings and institutions” (292; see also Okpewho, 1992:209-225; Finnegar, 1970:335ff). Known as nsuno, fables occur (or at least used to occur) in abundance in Subiya culture, where they serve certain moral and aesthetic functions. Jacottet’s (1899) collection, by no means an exhaustive compilation, has more than 40 tales. Before the advent of modern forms of leisure such as television and radio, fables were a great form of entertainment. Certain stories were told to elicit laughter and humour. To a large extent, fables and stories were told by grandmothers to their grandchildren in the evening (chiku yizizwa or chiyizo), usually after the evening meal (mulalyiro) and just before bedtime. They were therefore a form of relaxation and bonding between the young and the old. It is not surprising that at times there was a stronger bond between grandmothers and their grandchildren than between children and their biological parents. Fables are also a vehicle through which indigenous knowledge systems are passed from one generation to the other, usually in hierarchical order from the old or experienced to the young and inexperienced members of society. Grandmothers or grandparents are the equivalent of modern day teachers and schools to which young members of society are apprenticed at early stages of their lives.

Besides their entertainment value, stories have didactic and moral functions (see for example, Obiechina, 1993:124). Some of them explain the order of things (aetiological functions) while others teach socially acceptable behaviour. The following story of Fish⁵ and other animals illustrates our point.

Once upon a time Fish used to live on land with other animals. It is said that Fish was a
great gossiper and a liar who spread lies against his colleagues, thus causing conflict. One day all animals agreed to teach Fish a lesson. They caught him and cut his tongue. In shame, Fish went to live in the water. This is why fish species have no tongue and live under water. That is the end of the story.

Various versions of this story would be told. This is in recognition of the fact that an oral text changes form with every performance, depending on the performer/story-teller and the target audience. A story-teller could therefore add or omit certain details in order to achieve specific aims. As Finnegan (1976:11) states,

The type of audience involved can affect the presentation of an oral piece—the artist may tend, for instance, to omit obscenities, certain types of jokes, or complex forms in the presence of, say, children…which he would include in other contexts.

Conscious of decorum, fables deemed “heavy” in terms of their language may have been consciously avoided, resulting in some of them being lost without any trace.

The above story could be used to influence acceptable behaviour by cautioning listeners (usually the young) about the dangers of careless and slanderous talk. It is emphasised that careless talk could lead to conflict between people and thus to social instability. This story will therefore be considered essential in the moral upbringing of children through its use of concrete examples. The animal context becomes a metaphor for the human world into which these youngsters are being initiated. This story also provides an explanation as to why fish species live under water and have no tongues. Largely serving aetiological functions, the story has aesthetic and moral implications as well.

Story-telling has other noteworthy aspects. The context of story-telling has its “formulas” and “protocols”. If there are more than two tellers taking turns, each introduces him/herself or his/her tale with phrases such as: “kangu ako/heri comes mine”. The active audience will respond “dikiti”. Neither the meaning nor origin of dikiti is clear. It probably comes from Mbukushu folklore in which Dikiti, a legendary figure, features prominently (Larson, 1963). Shamukuni (1972:161) records that the Basubiya, Bambukushu and Bayei once lived together “at Goha hills where they parted”. Being associated with traditional narratives in Mbukushu, it is not difficult to imagine how the Basubiya borrowed and naturalised the term as part of their traditional story-telling. The point is here, however, that the audience is ready to receive the tale and becomes part of the narration wherein they could interrupt, join in the singing of choruses, laugh or exclaim. This formula also challenges the audience to start preparing their contributions to the story-telling festivity. Sometimes tellers could compete in telling the funniest of tales. When the teller has finished, s/he concludes by saying “choku mana or mpu ka manina aha/that is where it ends”. Jacottet’s (1899:3) ending formulas include the title of the tale: “mpo zi manina za sulwe ne ndawu/heri ends the tale of hare and lion.”

The opening formula of stories is unmistakable: “kutewa, kuti or kalye-kalye/it is said, or once upon a time, or long time ago”. Such formulas emphasise continuous re-telling. The narrator is not strictly inventing the story, but draws aspects from society’s collective consciousness with which to address present situations. The formula tends to give the story detached and objective truth. These oral forms are therefore not static, but continuously being adapted. The contexts in which they are actualised influence their outcome. As Finnegan (1976:7) notes:
There are also cases when the performer introduces variations on older pieces or even totally new forms in terms of the detailed wording, the structure, or content... The extent of this kind of innovation, of course, varies with both genre and individual performer, and the question of original composition is a difficult one.

Such innovations or variations are partly influenced by the audience, as Finnegan has already told us.

Space does not allow for an elaborate illustration of tales, their functions and variations. But suffice to mention that there is indeed a great number of tales worth studying. The following examples serve aetiological functions: *Ulyimbe ne Unkombwe* (Hawk and Cock, to explain the enmity between the two and why to date chickens scratch the ground); *Untendereka ne Luwozeza* (Lizard and Chameleon, to explain the origins of death); *Unvuvu ne Mulyiro* (Hippopotamus and Fire, which explains why hippos live in rivers and are said to hate fires); and *Unzovu ne Untuumba* (Elephant and Basket, which explains similarities between elephants and human beings, and why elephants have round feet). From the latter emerged the taboo of not stepping in *vantuumba* lest one’s feet become round as those of elephants.

There are also Sesubiya tales about human beings. These include legendary tales of great warriors and of cowards. These tales portray acts of bravery and great achievements (or lack thereof) in war, hunting and other human endeavours. Hence these tales resonate with historical allusions, as in the case of the brave and valiant Nsundano discussed later in the paper.

**Praise Poetry**

Praise poems, *maroko* or *mavaando*, occur in relative abundance in Subiya culture. The collection I have made shows that the Basubiya composed praise poems on the following subjects: important personalities, mainly chiefs and warriors; places of importance to their lives; and natural phenomena, such as rain, rivers and animals (both wild and domestic). All these are significant in their social, economic and political organisation. In these compositions, the praises about the chosen subject reveal its admirable or outstanding qualities or characteristics. Often these outstanding qualities are worth emulating, and thus form part of social norms and values. Praises, as Westley (2002:152) suggests, may also be critical of their subject’s misdemeanours.

It is not certain whether the institution of bards or praise singers in Subiya culture was as elaborate and conspicuous as in other ethnic groups, such as Tswana (Schapera, 1965) and Xhosa (Opland, 1983). The poems in my possession were obtained from various people, who in turn advised that they had received them from other people (mostly their grandparents). None of my sources mentions a specific or known praise singer whose vocation may have been to compose and recite such praises. Shamukuni (1972:161) attributes praises to “a muSubiya elder” instead of special bards. This begs the question of the contexts in which such poems were made. Further research is necessary to establish the development (or lack thereof) of the institution of praise poets.

Some examples of poems praising people, places and animals follow here. Due to space constraints I confine myself to shorter pieces.

*Nsundano*

*Nsundano mukuvwe-mironga*
Mwe nfuma ni nkuvunga
Ngwena kani wondi.
Kache-mpati kuvulyera kazaambe ndwiizi
Nsundano lyiverenge, chisunda-manyika waka sunde nkaanda ne vuta.

Nsundano the one who wades in rivers
Wherein I rise to wade
Without being attacked by crocodiles.
The small in width but larger than rivers
Nsundano the peeler, the mover of countries who pushed the earth with his bow.

According to Shamukuni (1972), Nsundano I was the founder of Itenge, the Subiya kingdom along the present Chobe River. This able and brave warrior earned the praises of his followers or “bards”, and was approvingly referred to as chisunda-manyika, the pusher of kingdoms. For Shamukuni, liberenge (sic) derives from the Subiya verb bera (spelt vera in the new orthography), the equivalent of the English verb peel (1972:164). Nsundano’s bravery and valour are, according to this poem, recognised and respected by crocodiles, which dared not attack him even when he trespassed in their territory. It is Nsundano who is reported to have cursed (ku kuta, hence chikuto cha Nsundano) his warriors to perpetual servitude because of their cowardice. Shamukuni’s full remarks are worth reproducing here to clarify the point:

When Liberenge saw that his men were going away against his orders, he broke the shaft of his spear in rage, sat on his shield and uttered the following words Mubelyowa ciinenkuba, bahikana benu nibakamisuwe! (Be ye cowardly as doves, let thy slaves subdue thee). He was found there by the baLeya warriors who killed him...It is said that the baLeya cut off his head, but his mouth kept on opening and shutting itself and his eyes winking as though he was still alive for many days. (1972:165)

Having mentioned the Itenge kingdom, it is proper to cite its praise as an example from the category of places:

\textit{Itenge}

\textit{Itenge mukulu}
Ya venza wafwa
Wa shala kena cha wamba

Itenge the old/big
Which offends the dead
The living are left speechless

\textit{Itenge} teemed with a variety of wild game that provided a source of protein for the inhabitants. The Subiya were reputed to be skilled hunters who “like meat of hippo best” (Shamukuni, 1972:173). Shamukuni, for example, cites the case of Chief Nsundano II who “identified himself as a brave hunter, and spent most of his time at Ivuvwe (Huhuwe) hunting”. Consequently, he was deposed in 1925 (1972:167). One of the animals they hunted is the Kudu or Unzwa, and they sang its praises as follows:
Unzwa
Maboonga-boonga
Muche-katende
Musiru ha wana kiti kanyamazana.

Mabonga-bonga
The small footed
Mistaken by a moron for small game.

The praise name mabonga-bonga probably derives from the verb ku boonga, to feed voraciously or heavily. In the poem, it is probably a reference to the Kudu’s feeding or grazing habit, capable of feeding throughout the night. A full grown male could weigh more than four hundred kilograms. Its great size is however not revealed by its small hooves. To the uninitiated or inexperienced hunter, the size of its spoor might cause it to be mistaken for a duiker or steenbok, the smallest of the antelopes. Musiru, (novice/idiot/moron) could therefore be fooled by appearances, and thereby not pursue the kudu, thinking that there would not be enough meat should the hunt be successful. To some extent, the poem is a veiled counsel not to be fooled by appearances.

Animals, specifically wild animals, were not only a source of much-needed protein and the means by which men proved their manhood during the hunt, but also served another equally important function as totems (chivino, zivino for plural). Space does not allow for a detailed discussion of totemism, but it is sufficient to mention, as Pongweni does, that totemism entails the projection of a complex relationship between human beings on the one hand and animals, plants and non-human objects on the other. In his words:

A clan associates itself with an animal...this animal is chosen because of certain admirable characteristics of appearance, demeanour, etc which the members of the clan are supposed to emulate (1996:xi).

BaSubiya, like other African societies, have a discernible totemic system with complex “rules” or “laws” that guide human behaviour. For example, it is taboo to eat the meat from one’s totem. A transgression of this “rule” may result in a skin rash and serious illness. In some cases, members of a particular clan could develop skin rash by simply touching the skin or excreta of their totem or by stepping on its foot marks. No wonder the totem is known as chivino, - that which you should not come into contact with, or (in another context) an ‘enemy’ to be avoided. Common animal totems include Unsefu (eland), Unzeru (impala—mainly for the royal family), Unzovu (elephant), Undavu (lion), Unvuvu (hippo) and Unyati (buffalo). Those whose totem is the elephant will sometimes use the label unzovu to address other members of the clan. Alternatively, they could use some of the elephant’s praise names (gleaned from its praises) such as Mukwevu, Chuumbe-makaka. At times members will swear by their totem as a means of emphasising their position in a situation of potential conflict. My late maternal grandmother, whose totem was the elephant, would at times refer to her father as Unzovu, and in being emphatic she would say something like: “ho vona ni katuka hanu mbwita chi na mu vona unzovu ukeza vu tatamba/1 will only leave this place when I see an elephant sauntering in my direction.” We grandchildren, knew that she would not relent when she said this.

Following Pongweni’s reasoning, an elephant will be admired for its strength, stature, ability to travel long distances, and endurance. Members of the clan will therefore seek to
emulate these ideals. Similarly, the elephant’s mercilessness in dealing with its enemies could be a metaphor for that clan’s resoluteness in dealing with those that torment them. Beneath the veneer of majesty lies savagery, which is deadly when aroused. Following this line of argument, it is not surprising that Basubiya would refer to themselves as “va si cholerva kavaangu, ku mwaka ka ka vuke,” literally meaning “those in whom you cannot leave a spike because in time it will start itching and cause you a lot of discomfort”. To them, attacks or challenges were never left unavenged.

Indigenous Songs

In Subiya, songs are known as nziimbo (luziimbo for singular). This word is derived from the verb ku ziimba, to sing. Like other African societies, Basubiya are a singing society, with a song or songs for every aspect of their quotidian activities. They sing when they work on the land, when they pound maize/sorghum, at weddings, when they send their children to sleep, at puberty rites, and at healing and funeral ceremonies. Each occasion demands its own special songs. It is not known if the Basubiya had funeral songs prior to the spread of Christianity. The hymns I found in the University of Cape Town’s Manuscript Library are translations of published hymns from the Christian faith. Neither is it certain if they had an elaborate system of conducting funerals. Tshoganetso Ramodibana’s fieldwork reveals that songs were sung as part of post-funeral cleansing rituals (n.d.).

Two examples of contexts and the exploitation of song will make our point. Basubiya have a traditional dance known as chiperu. This dance is mostly performed on happy occasions such as weddings, puberty rite ceremonies, beer drinking sessions, visits by important personalities or any other occasion deemed worthy of celebration. Chiperu is a dance that involves both men and women who form a circle into which a pair will proceed to dance as songs are being sung. Ideally, the pair must consist of a male and a female. The male is said to peruka the female and vice versa. Accompanying the singing are other para-linguistic features such as ku kaamba, (clapping of hands and/or tins) and ku dokota (a bellowing sound produced either by the male or female dancer(s)). The dance has special attire for both sexes. The female attire consists of mushishi and mavaanda, while the male of chiziva although the latter is no longer as common as the former. However, the renewed interest in Subiya culture has seen an increase in the production of chiperu attire.

Mushishi is a multi-layered and coloured skirt whose back part is larger than the front one, earning the nickname of “peacock” from some observers in southern Botswana. The back part is waived gracefully up and down as the female twists and turns her waist revealing not only the many layers and colours, but sometimes the underclothing as well. Such movements, with their erotica or lewd suggestiveness, are referred to as ku yewula. Mavaanda is the blouse, while chiziva is the equivalent of the Scottish kilt. The dancers dance back and forth within the circle for some time before they give another couple an opportunity to dance together. The dancing is accompanied by majestic steps synchronised with the beat of the song. The lead male dancer usually has impindo, a whistle, which he blows in unison with the song rhythm. The lead singer, usually a female, is known as munembo and plays the role of introducing and even composing songs, ku lyeta. The songs are dramatic and poetic, and comment on social experience. Some songs are full of praises while others critique certain individuals, institutions and even social practices. Some songs abound with historical allusions. The following is an example of luziimbo lwe chiperu a chiperu song:
Kachopu-chopu
Yo suvira, zuna wangu kazwi munzira
Namachola

Kachopu-chopu/the sleek, agile/special one
My dear partner who is light in complexion is always on the move

The song is gender neutral, thus making it amenable to be used by both sexes in praise of their partners. The song distinguishes the partner from others and presents him or her as a special person. For those whose partners are dark in complexion, the adjective suvira is substituted with siha - the dark in complexion. The song is thus adulatory and appreciative of the partner’s qualities.

There is another Subiya dance in addition to chipelu, that deserves close investigation because of its exploitation of song and other para-linguistic features. Loosely referred to as ngoma/.nzira, this healing dance is in fact varied in its form and labels. These include muuva, muyaruke, muzuka, ushoange and idimwe. It is the latter which my informants claim to be typical Subiya, while others like muyaruke and ushaange are imports from the Lozi of Zambia. Although the terms ngoma and nzira could be used interchangeably, they do retain specialised and at times ambiguous meanings. Ngoma for example refers to drums, and could be used as a general label for the healing ceremony because of the ceremony’s utilisation of these musical instruments. While referring to the same dance, nzira is characterised by the absence of a specialised healer and sometimes with no drum accompaniment. This is sometimes known as chikambwerera, where the “disciples” of a known healer are in charge. This particular one does not go on for the whole night. These terms therefore indicate some hierarchy. What then are the features of this healing dance or ceremony?

Healing is an interactive ceremony that utilises song, drums, active audience participation, in-performance composition, improvisation, and mythical and divination powers, and at times results in serious conflicts which could lead to litigation. The ceremony is marked by the presence of a ngaanga (doctor/healer/diviner) who is endowed with certain powers to sumikiza (diagnose or detect afflictions in) muvalwere (patient[s]) and to sirika (prescribe appropriate remedies). The doctor is held in high regard by the audience, sometimes to the extent of ridiculousness. For example, rarely would anyone want to contradict him or her, let alone question his/her expertise or ability to diagnose patients’ maladies and make appropriate prescriptions. At times, the doctor oversteps the bounds of decency and trades obscenities with his/her audience and gets away with it. It is feared that, should one contradict the diviner, s/he might cast a spell on the offending and wayward spectator. When the doctor is precise in diagnosing the patient’s problem, s/he is considered to be a true doctor—“o vona, mukavo uzu muntu” literally, “s/he can see/is a tough one”.

The doctor wears special attire. Around his/her waist is a mashamba (a skirt made of reed tufts), which can be swung up and down almost like mushishi as the waist is twisted. The noise from mashamba adds to the musical effect of the ceremony. The movement of mashamba, like that of mushishi, is sometimes known as ku yewula. S/he also wears a head-scarf, usually of an animal skin and ikuumbi/mane of a lion or wildbeeste, that runs from one shoulder down to the waist. An nkolyi (a special cane draped in vuluungu/beads) will be held in the hand, as will a muchira (flywhisk) and an impindo (whistle), which s/he blows as part of the musical accompaniment. The flywhisk is dipped in medicinal potions and then used to sprinkle appropriate quantities of these potions on the patient and, should the need arise, on members of
the audience. Besides being the central figure, ngaanga introduces the appropriate songs, which are part of his or her divination. These songs will give indications as to who is responsible for the patient’s malady (which is invariably attributed to sorcery); recall past experiences to which the current maladies could be traced, or even diagnose some of the audience’s problems. This could be a marketing strategy for the ngaanga as s/he expands his/her client base. If the singers (usually women), are not performing to expected standards, the ngaanga encourages them by shouting “vasalyilcome on women”. Good and exuberant singing is necessary in creating the appropriate mood in which the divination takes place. The whole occasion should therefore be said to be “ikonderelit is not boring or it is lively”.

The doctor is not alone in this ritual. S/he is assisted by vasishambi/assistants. On the doctor’s instructions they mix, ku kankola mesamu (cut and chop medicine), ku ninzika (boil herbs), kwi hula inyungu (take pots on and off the fire), administering the potions on the patient either by ku zwamiza (letting patient soak the steam from the boiling pot under cover of blankets), zhima (sprinkling water from boiling pots by using grass brooms dipped in these pots) or even ku shanza (bathing the patient), ku sala (using razor blades to make incisions on the patient’s body and then apply appropriate herb concoctions), ku gunka (shaving the patient’s hair) and ku siinga (applying necessary ointments). Vasishambi are doctors in the making. Sometimes doctors exploit this institution by drawing husbands, wives or even concubines from it.

Vaoonzi are the drummers. They too have to be skilled and must perform well in creating the appropriate atmosphere. Usually three drums are used - chikumwa, ntunguni and ngoma inkando. The details of how these drums are played is the subject of ethnomusicologists. It is the latter drum, with its bass tones, which is indispensable to the occasion. The skill with which it is handled creates an appropriate mood for the ceremony. The patient, or other members of the audience could tukuka (dance, usually by moving shoulders and feet while seated) because of the way the drum is being played. The drummers receive tributes of money and drinks (ku tahinva) in recognition of the service they are providing. Ngoma e sena vaoonzi ka hena yo (this ceremony minus the drummers is incomplete).

Vakaanzi, mostly women, are the singers and clappers of hands. Among these are accomplished singers who could be the munembos’ of the occasion assisting the ngaanga. Songs vary, with some sung at the beginning and at the end of the ceremony. Not all songs will be known at the time of the ceremony, although certain tunes and beats will be known. Most of the songs are composed during the ceremony as a reflection of the uniqueness of each healing occasion. Known pieces are revised so as to suit the present moment, with names of culprits, known witches or sorcerers, and places being substituted for current ones.

The participants in this ceremony form a semi-circle, with drummers sandwiched between two halves of singers. In the middle of the circle will be the patient(s) sitting on minsi (pestles), all the pots necessary for boiling the herbs, the doctor’s stool, his bags and other paraphernalia. The patient is as much a part of the occasion as anyone else. The ceremony becomes a success when s/he begins to dance (ku tukuka), and when this happens, the singing and drumming are intensified to make the patient more active. It is believed s/he would be responding to the medication, music and divination. It is from within this space that the doctor will be operating, moving up and down, encouraging drummers and singers, engaging the audience by posing questions and making suggestive statements from which the audience is expected to decipher meanings. The doctor therefore speaks in ngulyi (parables, proverbs and veiled language). Usually these parables are directed at the patient’s relatives and are intended to help them arrive at the cause of current afflictions and what remedies to use. In responding
to these parables, the audience is said to *ku kaanga ingaanga* (to engage the doctor). At times the audience feigns ignorance, in order to encourage or prompt the seer to lead them further. The exchange would go something like this:

*Ngaanga: mukulukwame, mapo/overe a wola ku kopanera muraka?*/*old man, can two bulls share the same kraal?*

*Mukulukwame: yere Musere, kanizi, mbwita uwe yo vona/Yes doctor, I know not, only you who can foretell can conclusively know.*

While all this exchange proceeds, the music and drumming stop. On the basis of the answer, the doctor introduces a song as further explanation or challenge to the old man to unravel the current puzzle. *Yere Musere* (the meaning of which and possible source language are unknown) is a praise name for the doctor. Such exchanges constitute an important aspect of the ceremony, which could go on until late the next day.

**Proverbs and Idioms**

As in other societies, proverbs and idioms constitute another important aspect of Subiya culture. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines proverbs and idioms respectively as follows:

A short pithy saying in common and recognised use; a concise sentence, often metaphorical or alliterative in form, which is held to express some truth ascertained by experience or observation and familiar to all; an adage, a wise saw (1989:712).

A form of expression, grammatical construction; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a signification other than its grammatical or logical one (1989:624).

It is necessary to cite these definitions because the distinction between proverbs and idioms is at times tenuous. However, these figures of speech have discernible aesthetic and social functions (Finnegan, 1976; Mitchson & Pilane, 1967; Campbell, 1972; Okpewho, 1983; Starfield, 1991; Obiechina, 1993). Starfield, for example, illustrates how proverbs are the domain of the elderly who use them to educate, and assert their power over the young. Similarly, Campbell shows how they are amenable to use in various contexts, such as the settling of disputes, raising children and resolving political and moral impasse or disputes. Proverbs and idioms are therefore highly philosophical and contain the accumulated wisdom of the concerned ethnic group. Consider the following examples:

**Proverbs**

1. *Vuche-vuche unfuza a va luti Iyambezi—[bit by bit the tortoise crossed Lake Yambezi—ka bonya ka bonya khudu o tiodile noka ya Yambezi].*

   This proverb is used to encourage perseverance, patience and determination.
2. *Kalyimi ka mboma ka ku koomba nkaka kulya*—[the tongue of the python that laps you will eat you—*leleme la ilhware le le go latswang ke lone le le ila go bolayang*].

The proverb is used to caution against being fooled by appearances, and of the dangers that lurk behind smiles.

3. *Ku fwa nje munini kulya nje mukando*—[death is smaller than eating—*go swa go go nnye mo go jeng*].

This proverb is usually said to exhort bereaving people to eat as they need physical strength in dealing with their loss.

4. *Umbulu ku vaangi chikavo*—[with many, killing a monitor lizard is an easy task—*fa lo le bantsi go bolaya kgwthle ke tiro e potlana*].

Unity is strength. Collective efforts make the biggest task a labour of love and joy.

5. *Ku zwa kavya kuya kavya*—[whence came a dish, must return a dish]—one good turn deserves another.

This proverb influences acceptable behaviour in society. Acts of kindness must always be reciprocated. This is the equivalent of the Setswana adage “*mabogo dinku a thebana*”.

6. *Nfule-fule lya mbwene, nkutuke lya mbunge maani*—[blow, blow me when it sees me, but once I leave it gathers me grass—*o mpudula a mpona, fa ke emelela o mpua leswe*].

This proverb refers to a gossiper who will flatter you during your presence, but backbites you when you are away.

### Idioms

1. *Ku kwenga unsoho kululyimi Iwa menzi*—[literally, to sharpen a burble fish to the tongue of water—*go lootsa tuni ka leleme la metse*].

The idiom means letting your opponent know about your plans against him/her, thus forewarning him/her.

2. *Ku se kalwa inziyi kukaholo*—[not to let a fly settle on your mouth—*go sa kotangwa ke ntsi mo molomong*]

The idiom refers to a loose-tongued person who never keeps secrets and therefore must not be trusted.

3. *Ku chola mazwi*—[to break knees—*go roba mangole*]

It means to rest for a short time or to bend, especially when talking to elders as a sign of respect.
4. *Ku zumbuluka chiwulu*—[to go around an anthill—*go dikologa seolo*]

   It means to rot. It is a polite way of describing meat that is decomposing and may therefore
   not be fit for human consumption.

5. *Ku wonda ku menso*—[to hold somebody’s eyes—*go tshwara matlho*]

   The idiom may mean either to fool somebody or to wash one’s face.

6. *Ku sunta muzuni*—[to beat a big bird—*go itaa nonyane e tona*]

   The idiom means “to relax”, usually meant to encourage a person to take things easy
   especially in an argument or conversation. The Setswana equivalents are “*go diga
   makgwafo*” or “*go wela dibete*”. It may be possible that the idiom has other meanings
   unknown to me.

7. *Ku lyatika muntu kakala*—[to make somebody step on a small ember—*go gatisa motto
   legala*]

   It means to lure somebody into trouble, often as a way of punishing them for their
   misdemeanour or error of judgement.

Proverbs and idioms are sometimes introduced by narrative formulas, such as “*Vakulwana
vavati* /the old said”, *mukulu-mutanzi avatilthe* /the ancestor said”, *mwikuhane/mwikwahane
a va wambi nati/a Mosubiya said*”. These serve the functions of quotation marks, to give the
proverbs and idioms some objectivity and authority based on years of experience.

**Riddles**

Okpewho (1992:239) defines a riddle as “a verbal puzzle in which a statement is posed in
challenge and another is offered in response to the hidden meaning or the form of the
challenge”. If proverbs and idioms are largely the preserve of the old and their desired
dominance over the young, riddles are the domain of children. Writing on Kgatla riddles,
Schapera (1993:325) observes that,

Riddles are indulged in mainly by the children, of both sexes, when they are gathered at
night around the fire in lapa (household enclosure) or out at the cattle-post, and it is to
them just as much a game as any of their play activities. (See also Katenekwa, 1990;
Cole-Beuchat, 1957; Doke, 1947; Noss, 2006)

In Subiya, riddles are known as *miyla* or *tulavi*10. As a form of entertainment, riddles are
competitive and presuppose at least two participants, hereafter referred to as contestants. They
involve a question and answer situation in which participants take turns in posing and
answering questions. The listener will guess the correct answers until s/he fails, after which
roles are reversed or exchanged. Riddles, like other oral forms, are therefore inherently
dialectical. As Schapera (1993:325) writes, they are

10.
A trial of wits, a sort of dialectic combat... used by various peoples not only as a means of amusement, but as a means of education and even as a serious test of intellectual ability.

In SeSubiya, riddles are introduced by the formula “kangu ako/her is mine”. This is the formula that is invariably used to introduce folk-tales in a situation of many story-tellers. This sets the stage, prepares the listener for the delivery of the question to which s/he must supply a correct answer to demonstrate his/her intellectual capacity, and to hurry his/her turn in posing the questions. The following are examples of riddles:

1. Chi lyi ku konsi—izulu—it sits on you—nose
2. Kasamu ka lyi chumba vankomba—munino/the twig on which male lechwe rub themselves—tongue
3. Nzuvo ituva isena mulyango—iyi/a white house without an entrance—an egg
4. Ne hani chevuka kani chivoni—kankonkolyilikutwi/even when I look back I cannot see it—back of my head or ear
5. Ngani va kazaki karapa kangu kaka gapuluki—menol/since I constructed my yard it has remained intact—teeth
6. Mazuvo o vere mwi kanda—matwil/two houses in an open space—ears

Provocative Similes

Similes are comparisons identifiable by the use of such words as like or as (see Baldick, 1990:206; Abrams, 1985:64) In SeSubiya similes are identifiable by the use of words such iri, sina, mane iri and uvu, all of which are the equivalent of like or as.

Related to children’s games is another oral form known as makuvo, from the verb ku kuva, “to make fun of” or “to ridicule”. Makuvo are the equivalent of “ditshotlo” or “ditshauto” in Setswana. Appropriately labelled “provocative similes” by Seloma (2005), makuvo are highly imaginative, creative and dramatic in their utilisation of imagery and comparison to achieve the desired effect of ridiculing, putting down and provoking an opponent. While the system of makuvo is open to all people, ages and contexts, it is predominantly a boy’s indulgence, particularly at the cattle post or when on the veld minding livestock. Makuvo can also be competitive, and demands at least two participants who have to outwit one another in trading the funniest and most portent and derogatory descriptions of one another. The aim is to make fun and embarrass your opponent as much as possible by comparing him/her or his/her unattractive qualities to some equally unattractive or ugly animal or object. Contestants target their opponents’ physical attributes, scandals and other deeds which portray them in bad light and hence cause them embarrassment. Makuvo are therefore sick jokes, and it is not unusual for them to end up in physical fights. The following are examples of makuvo:

Vone menso akwe iri umbwa—[look at his eyes, they are like those of a dog—bona matlho a gagwe o kare ntsa—his or her eyes make him/her resemble a dog]

Vone menso alyo iri ibwa—[look at its eyes like a dog—bona matlho a lone ekete ntsa—its eyes make it look like a dog]

While the two are almost the same in effect, the second one is more derogatory. “Alyo/its”
portrays the target as physically ugly, usually huge, clumsy, stupid, fat and shapeless. "Ibwala fat, ugly and huge dog", further highlights the ugliness of the opponent, thus ridiculing or making fun of him or her. Makuvo could also be employed by any aggrieved person to pour scorn on whoever offends them. A woman who suspects another woman to be stealing her husband or partner could utilise makuvo to vent out her disgust. Usually, such makuvo will be accompanied by a great deal of obscenities not suitable for a sensitive audience and children. Bullies could initiate makuvo to start fights between unsuspecting youngsters, claiming that during their absence somebody said this and that about them. Although they can be in bad taste, makuvo could be aesthetically appealing, imaginative, hyperbolic, alliterative and use far-fetched similes, conceits and metaphors. They thus show some of the sophisticated and highly imaginative uses of language. Some people distinguish themselves as accomplished composers of makuvo. Further research is necessary as makuvo may not always be provocative, derogatory or even demeaning. They could, depending on context, be part of joking relationships or a means of cementing social relations. Cousins can trade makuvo because their relationship allows for such indulgences without any harm or provocation intended.

Conclusion
The purpose of this paper was to map out some of the cornerstones of Subiya oral literature. Clearly, not every aspect of this large terrain has been identified, and so the paper remains tentative. Further research is necessary to expand the cited categories and explore other aspects of Subiya orature such as memorates, lullabies, legends, myths, humour and jokes. By providing a ‘taste’ of Subiya oral forms, this paper wishes to spark a debate as to whether SeSubiya could indeed claim to have a corpus of literature that deserves study. To say literature is about language is to state the obvious. The examples given above show various contexts and purposes to which language could be put. It is the contention of this essay, therefore, that such multiple and nuanced manipulations of language—whether in celebratory or healing songs, riddles, poetry, exchanges between healer and audience or boys trading makuvo—deserve close attention to unravel the density of Subiya knowledge systems. This paper is intended as a modest contribution to this goal.

Notes
1. Lestrade’s paper happened to be one of the first readings I came across while researching for my then intended thesis topic Comparing the Incompatible: Tswana Praise Poets and Shakespeare’s Fools as Social Critics. This essay inspired me to try to make sense of some SeSubiya oral texts I have been collecting over time. Hence the choice of Lestrade’s framework for this paper.
2. Dubbed by Andersson & Janson (1997:100) as “a language of the North”, SeSubiya is spoken mainly in the Chobe District (Botswana) and the Caprivi Strip (Namibia). Pockets of BaSubiya are known to exist in the Ngamiland, Boteti, and Okavango areas of Botswana as well as in Seshake and Victoria Falls of Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively. While the terms SeSubiya and BaSubiya are commonly used to denote the language and its people respectively, these people prefer to call themselves Vekuhanel Vekwahane and their language as ChikuhaneiChikwahane/Cikuhane. I stick to the common terms SeSubiya and BaSubiya for ease of reference. I hope this will not be interpreted as being culturally arrogant.
3. I have since the 1980s been collecting Subiya oral texts mainly through what I loosely term ‘interviews’ and personal experience as a first-language speaker of SeSubiya. ‘Interviews’ involved mainly listening to an informant reciting a poem, using a proverb or an aphorism, which I then wrote down in my note-book.
Informants range from age-mates to the elderly (50 years and above). Some of these recordings were done at drinking sessions where an informant would, after a few drinks, recite some oral text (mainly poems) as a way of showing his/her knowledge of Subiya culture; some in a school dormitory where an age-mate would share with me what he gathered from his grandparents; and some as a result of ‘formal appointments’ where an informant would recite while I recorded the text in my note-book. Such sessions allowed for some interaction in which I would ask questions and receive answers or further explanations as to meanings of words or phrases. Unfortunately, some of my informants have since passed on. These include Ntukwa Munisola, Mowa Mazunga, Simulya Shakufweva, Tawana Mazunga and Nfwambi Mukono, (may their souls rest in peace). Ephraim Mukono, Ntema Kopane, Nsefwe Kalundu, Muche Shamukuni, Mambo Molongwane, Sinte Mashosho and Kamwi Kalundu still survive and have been very valuable sources of data. Lately, my mother (Muche Shamukuni) has been instrumental in expanding my collection. She would either write down or dictate to me some of the texts including genealogies, she recalls. I have so far collected 55 praise poems of people, animals (wild and domestic) and places; 18 riddles; and 20 idioms and proverbs. These have been compiled into a manuscript tentatively entitled Muses from Itenge. I continue to collect more texts through my participation in Subiya ceremonies.

4. Chebanne: The Orthography of Ciikuhane (unpublished). The orthography was officially launched by Minister Jacob Nkate at Kavimba on September 16, 2006.

5. One of the stories I remember hearing when I was a child.

6. See footnote No. 2

7. In the sense of the verb ku vina to mean being at loggerheads or being enemies.

8. I have not yet recorded any SeSubiya songs. I rely in this section on personal experiences and recollections of the actual songs and contexts in which they are sung.

9. So far there is a chipera group in the villages of Satau, Parakarungu, Mabele, Kavimba and Kasane, each with its own uniform. Efforts are being made to teach this dance to school pupils.

10. One of my informants used the terms milya and tulavi to refer to riddles. However, empirical research is necessary to determine the frequent use (or lack) of this verbal art in the context of modern forms of entertainment such as television, radio and night clubs.

References


