



African Trickster Tales and their Relevance in Contemporary Politics

By Okiya Omtatah Okoiti



*Here in this zinc coffin
lies a dead person
or his legs and his head or
even less of him
or nothing, for he was a
trouble-maker.*

*He was recognised as the root of all evil.
Dig him in. It will be best
if his wife goes alone to the knacker's yard with him
because anyone else going
would be a marked man.*

*What is in that zinc coffin
has been egging you on to all sorts of things:
Getting enough to eat
And having somewhere dry to live
And feeding one's children
And insisting on one's exact wages
And solidarity with all*

*who are oppressed like yourselves.
And thinking.*

*What is in that zinc coffin said
that another system of production was needed
and that you, the masses of labour in your millions must take over.
Until then things won't get better for you.*

*And because what is in the zinc coffin said that it
was put into the zinc coffin and must be dug in as a
trouble-maker who egged you on.*

*And whoever now talks of getting enough to eat
And whoever of you wants somewhere dry to live
And whoever of you insists on his exact wages
And whoever of you wants to feed his children
And whoever thinks, and proclaims his solidarity with all who are oppressed -
from now on throughout eternity
he will be put into a zinc coffin like this one
as a trouble-maker and dug in.*

~Bertolt Brecht, "Burial of the trouble-maker in a zinc coffin"

When awful things happen in our lives, such as the brutal and senseless twin murders of human rights activists John Paul Oulu (also known as GPO) and Oscar Kingara, they ought to compel us to challenge our idea of humanity.

For me the annual Oulu-Kingara Human Rights Memorial Lecture is an event of great significance that must keep us conscious of GPO's and Oscar's goals and our common struggle and suffering, and the state-sponsored terrorism that has accompanied us through the years.

These memorial lectures are our way of getting back at the system that runs our county, where it has always been and continues to be that only those in power have chosen and continue to choose what is to be recorded and remembered. For example, recently they chose to record and remember the so-called Githeri Man - a total distortion, if not negation, of our struggles. The local newspapers and other media outlets lionised him as a great achiever, if not a revolutionary. They thought that they were giving us much-needed comic relief but to me it felt like an eerie calm before the storm.

The reality that the brutal twin murders of our two comrades remain unsolved and are totally forgotten leads me to the question: Have we grown numb to extrajudicial killings?

The unforgettable brutal deaths of our two comrades must sear themselves into our consciousness, awake us from our moral sleep, and drive us to demand our space and roll back the suffocating state capture.

The reality that the brutal twin murders of our two comrades remain unsolved and are totally forgotten leads me to the question: Have we grown numb to extrajudicial killings?

We have not grown numb even though every day we witness the painful genocide of youngsters eliminated by state actors. We are all still revolted whenever we encounter the death of an innocent person but we feel helpless. Yes, we feel anger but in equal measure we feel helpless in the face of

what it would take to hold the state and its actors accountable.

We are not numb; we are overwhelmed by those in charge of the rogue state, which even general elections cannot hold accountable.

To win against the rogue state, we must become tricksters.

I will now examine what I call the hope of democracy in Africa's trickster tradition.

In his foreword to my play titled, *The Voice of the People*, Professor Peter Nazareth, writes that "every culture has tricksters who challenge the legitimacy of conventional wisdom and traditional pieties, to achieve change".

The trickster is not a moral person in any conventional sense of the word, but he does have an ethic to make society gain from his labours. The trickster expands reality, allowing us to see imaginative potential that conventional wisdom restricts or ignores altogether. A trickster's role is one necessary to all societies that hope to change for the better.

Tricksters are dynamic creatures; they are not static. Secondly, tricksters deal in lies, but lies which reveal a larger truth.

Moralists cannot easily fault the trickster because he does not personally live a lie, but deals in lies to bring out the bigger truth. He plays with what is widely accepted without question to be the truth. On the surface, his public acts are deceitful because his success is based on a lie, but on deeper examination this "lie" turns into a larger "truth".

African culture is replete with trickster stories in which a figure outwits more powerful creatures by using the system of power against itself and by playing language and mind games to get past barriers society has built.

Tricksters are agents of change in society; they perform this necessary social function because they have the imagination to see a possible future and the skill and tenacity to make that vision a reality. They don't let an injustice remain; they destroy it. The trickster's loose way with the "truth" is necessary if he or she is going to help society rethink its conventional wisdom while creating new social values.

African culture is replete with trickster stories in which a figure outwits more powerful creatures by using the system of power against itself and by playing language and mind games to get past barriers society has built. The trickster looks simple or foolish or wears other masks.

My favourite African trickster tale is the proverbial race between the hare and the tortoise. The tortoise wins the race by placing relatives at strategic points along the route, including at the winning post - relatives the hare does not know about - so that however fast the hare runs there is always a tortoise ahead and, most important, the race is already won.

Trickster figures in African folklore engage in trickster strategies to defeat injustice; they are not passive participants in systems that are skewed against them.

However, to guard against complacency in their camp and to give false hope to those they oppress, colonial powers distorted this tale to have the hare lose the race because of reckless pride and

laziness - for example, the hare falls asleep during the race - which led to this moral of the story: "Slow and steady wins the race." This concept is not only impractical but totally unacceptable to the oppressed since it prescribes **hard work** as opposed to **working hard**; since it seeks to justify injustice and the current totally unjust imperial world order that puts the West at the top of the food chain without any care about its social and environmental costs; since it eliminates justice as a key component of (the West's prescription of) morality.

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Before you wax moral about the deceitful tortoise, ask yourself: What level playing field is there in a race that pits the swift hare against the slow tortoise? The disadvantaged tortoise is destined to lose the race even before it starts. But since his survival (place in the forest) demands that he participate, then it is his duty to change the rules of the game to subvert the hare's unfair superiority.

Is our trickster tradition responsible for the political trickery that passes for leadership in Africa today? By demanding that the underdog does whatever it takes to get justice, Africa's celebrated trickster tradition invites us to overcome fear and a sense of helplessness in order to be part of the solution, to realise our hidden potential and to move to defend our right to self-determination against all odds. The trickster seeks to open our inner eye to know how to win for change.

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit."

Ideally, a democracy is a government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives. It rests upon the principles of majority rule, coupled with individual and minority rights. The most dramatic and visible aspect of a democracy is the conduct of regular, free and fair elections open to all citizens to authentically compete for the support of the people.

Citizens in a democracy have the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms. And democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation and compromise. Democracies recognise that reaching consensus requires compromise and that it may not always be attainable. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit."

Whereas the practice of democracy assumes a level playing field, the conditions in the African post-colony - where the state has been scourged by political tribalism rather than moral ethnicity - are far from ideal. First and foremost, African society is today in a state of stasis and is comprised of a standoff between the nations (the tribes governed by values) and the alien post-colonial state that utilises its monopoly of violence to lord it over the former. Naturally, citizens are loyal first to their nation (tribe), then to the state. Secondly, the parasitic elite, like the hare, are unfairly endowed with means and resources that give them unfair advantage in elections.

Since the trickster's ability to adapt to the necessities of change allows him to prevail, he must not waste all his energy throwing himself at the oppressor; rather, he must simultaneously embody alternatives that give him the opportunity to create new political realities.

In order to win for change and to subvert the yoke of imperialism to expand democratic space, it is important to demystify the prevalent mantra of moral rectitude that is worn by so many of our political activists to the self-destructive exclusion of any possible recourse to strategising and the

use of common sense.

Too many of our protests are bogged down in arenas of struggle that cannot deliver the systemic shifts we need. We are blind to the fact that most of the conventional venues for political engagement - legislation, elections, courts, single-issue campaigns, labour struggles - are so co-opted by the elitist system that it is difficult to imagine how to use them to realise self-determination.

Foolhardy militancy is, of course, at the superficial level, popular yes, but very little, if anything, is achieved through this route. The intellectual hero motif must be brought to a new paradigm that seeks to demystify the demagogic, ideological and moral convictions spearheaded by some in the movement for liberation, by specifically asking for a *rethink* and the other possibilities that are available. Acquiescence should not be mistaken for approval. The point here is that collaboration then ceases to be merely acquiescence to tyranny but instead a call to careful thought and *rethink* becomes a necessary condition for the continued project of struggle for national liberation.

Protest in the form of rallies, demonstrations, boycotts and civil disobedience is a strategy employed by the relatively powerless who lack substantial resources to push their agenda within a system. To succeed it is essential that they don't waste all their energy just throwing themselves at the state machinery; they must simultaneously embody alternatives that give them the opportunity to create new political realities.

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This very dangerous trend underscores the need for a visionary political leadership that thinks outside the box to step in and explore new arenas of struggle to manage the protest and transform it into a springboard for true progress and social change.

This article is adapted from an Oulu-Kingara Human Rights Memorial Lecture he gave in February 2018.

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