BRER RABBIT'S ANGOLAN COUSIN: POLITICS AND THE ADAPTATION OF FOLK MATERIAL

Linda S. Chang

Most Americans of a certain age can easily recall one vision or another of the figure of Brer Rabbit. As children we may have been introduced to him as the star of Walt Disney's feature-length movie **The Song of the South.**(1) Later we encountered Brer Rabbit and the other characters from the Uncle Remus tales of Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) in grade school anthologies alongside such memorable protagonists of the American literary canon as Rip Van Winkle and Huck Finn. Usually the Uncle Remus excerpt served primarily as an example of regional exoticism, an exercise in deciphering a written version of post Civil War black plantation dialect with the aid of animated cartoon memories from which all of the sound track had been erased, except perhaps for the Oscar-winning theme song "Zip-a-dee-do-dah" and its cheerful affirmation that "everything is satisfactual."

We may or may not have been told that the clever rabbit who outsmarts larger and stronger animals and lives to laugh another day is a stock figure not only of Afro-American folklore but also of other folkloric traditions around the world. We almost certainly were not asked to see anything revolutionary in this cotton-tailed predecessor of Bugs Bunny. Yet "revolutionary" is precisely the word used by Robert Hemenway in his insightful introduction to a recent republication of the text of the first edition of **Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings** (1880), the first book in Harris' series which attempted to record traditional black stories of his time in the American South.

The Brer Rabbit tales document one revolutionary turn of events after another. The world of superior force is undermined, but so is the notion that the meek shall inherit the earth; cunning often results in victory, but the trickster can also be tricked. Brer Rabbit exhibits the revolutionary consciousness necessary to survive in an oppressive system. ... What is certain is the need to improvise, to hang loose, stay cool, avoid sticky situations, shun rigid interpretations of events. Brer Rabbit shows that anarchy undermines all systems which mask reality. His lessons inculcate a revolutionary consciousness because they teach that one never has to accept limitations on the self, that one can never be denied the radical possibilities of being human (1982:29).

Another revolutionary vision of the figure of the trickster rabbit is Angolan writer Manuel Pedro Pacavira's didactic utilization of the folktale of the hare and the leopard in his 1979 historical novel **Nzinga Mbandi.**(2) Like the Brer Rabbit tales, Pacavira's version of an Angolan story is elaborately framed. A griot-like narrator sketches a scene in which the young Nzinga (1582-1663), who will one day lead her people in armed struggle against the Portuguese, is part of group of women clustered about a female storyteller whose tale we are invited to overhear. In a lively tale complete with extensive dialogue and sound effects, a hare on his way to bring home a sackful of calabashes from the fields encounters a leopard along the way. The leopard, a traditional figure representing an enemy who hides his claws and pretends to be a friend, casts doubts on the hare's ability to carry so much, and the hare retorts by betting the leopard he could carry even him. Eager to call his adversary's bluff, the leopard enters the sack, whereupon the hare ties the mouth of the sack and bludgeons the leopard to death, adding that if he did not kill the leopard first, the leopard would soon have killed him. As the hare delivers the final blows, a breathless messenger appears urging the women to take cover since a war with the

Portuguese is beginning (1979:72-75). Nzinga chooses instead to join the men who will organize the resistance movement, clearly evoking the twentieth century context of Angola's war for independence which took place during the 1960's and 1970's.

In a list of bibliographic sources at the end of this novel, Pacavira cites a recent Portuguese edition of a collection of Angolan folktales gathered from native informants during long years in that country by the Swiss ethnologist Héli Chatelain, and originally published in Kimbundu and English in 1894 for the American Folk-Lore Society. Chatelain's collection includes a very similar story of a hare and a leopard; although the dialogue is somewhat less elaborated here, there are few differences in the plot. In Chatelain's version, the hare carries a basket rather than a sack, agrees to let the leopard beat him if he drops the basket, and kills the leopard with an axe rather than a club. The most important distinction may be the final line of the version collected by Chatelain. After killing the leopard, the hare returns home and eats him.

Even a carnivorous hare like Brer Rabbit wouldn't do that, for within the allegorical framework the consumption of an adversary which is neither in man's normal diet nor that of the animal in question smacks of cannibalism. Cannibalism was an issue almost as sticky as the Tar Baby in the case of Nzinga, so the interruption of the tale by the messenger was particularly opportune for Pacavira. There is no question that Nzinga practiced cannibalism. This and other bloody rituals including human sacrifice and infanticide were adopted by Nzinga during her association with the warlike Imbangala and subsequently carried over into the military units of her own Mbundu tribe. Such practices not only horrified the Europeans of her day, but also entered their chronicles as a

strong argument for their own moral and ethnological superiority, which in turn provided a convenient justification for the master/slave relationship which eventually became the norm in colonial Angola.(3)

In a recent interview, I asked Pacavira why he had not included the eating of the leopard in the version found in his novel. He replied, quite simply, that the story was no longer being told that way.(4) On the one hand, this suggests an Angolan evolution in the folktale away from the motif of cannibalism, a pattern paralleled in the evolution in Afro-American trickster rabbit tales. In terms of the version in **Nzinga Mbandi**, however, the question does not necessarily end there, since elswhere in the book Pacavira used whatever pre-twentieth century sources were available to him to give increased authenticity to his historical novel. In that context, the decision to update available historical material in this particular case may indicate the involvement of other considerations in the omission of the cannibalistic conclusion of the tale of the leopard and the hare. The European perception that cannibalism marked those who practiced it as somehow sub-human was ironically closely akin to the rationale that seems to have governed the use of this custom by the Imbangala and by those who copied their techniques. As Joseph Miller (1976:244) explains in his book on state formation among the early Mbundu, cannibalism was "a favorite means of describing non-human outsiders in cultures all over the world," and most Central African authorities followed a pattern which has appeared in numerous other times and places by committing "deeds strictly forbidden to normal humans" in order to establish themselves as something more than human and therefore fit to rule normal people. The Imbangala carried the strategy a step farther, encompassing all of the warriors of the

kilombo, or war camp, within the status of non-human/"superhuman". On the one hand, this strategy allowed them to be perceived as invincible, both in their own eyes and in those of their enemies. On the other, it strengthened discipline within the war bands and provided a strong incentive for valor in battle, since mortality or flight could be attributed to failure to fulfill the laws and rituals which guaranteed invulnerability, and could result in fallen or cowardly warriors being eaten by their comrades in order to purify the camp.

The cannibalism of the Imbangala also served other purposes, but it is to this one, to this strategy of setting the ruler apart from his or her people and one warring group apart from all others, that I would like to call attention.(5) In a particular time and place it served the Imbangala, and later Nzinga's own troops, well. Yet because the novel **Nzinga Mbandi** is not primarily a novel of time and place, but rather a modern-day evocation of native Angolan resistance against the Portuguese, in which Nzinga serves more as protoheroine that as protagonist, it was politically appropriate for Pacavira to deflect attention from this particular aspect of sixteenth century warfare. Indeed, the entire thrust of Pacavira's novel is to accentuate the closeness of Nzinga to her people and the alliances effectuated by her in the course of her efforts to oust the Portuguese, and to thereby portray the resistance movement as a common cause which throughout Angola's history had bound together people of courage and foresight despite their differences of ethnicity, class and sex.

In order to be successful, the independence movement needed not only to reconcile tribal and class differences, but also to find ways in which to bring the women of Angola effectively into the movement for independence and the subsequent push for national reconstruction.

The figure of Nzinga Mbandi, the warrior-queen, lent itself well to this end, and the framing of the rabbit tale in the novel is as illuminating an example of twentieth century political influences as is the avoidance of the cannibalistic conclusion.(6) The chapter in which the tale appears opens with the narrator's description of the Mbundu people feverishly preparing their fortifications for war. So great is the intensity of their spirit, we are told, that "se oferecem até filhas-de-mulher. Como não há nestes momentos nem servos, nem senhores, nem nada. Não pode haver. Os rancores de parte." ("even daughters-of-women offer themselves. Since in these moments there are neither servants, nor masters, nor anything. Nor can there be. Animosities laid aside.") (Pacavira 1979:72). Pacavira then depicts the adolescent Nzinga among a group of women who are doing traditional female tasks as they listen to the story, which is told by a woman and is thereby shown to be her story as well as that of the male hare and the male narrator of the novel as a whole. As a result, when Nzinga joins the men at the end of the tale, she assumes for both her people and her sex the challenge to assert themselves with courage and intelligence. This additional nuance given the moral of the tale is an example of the sort of felicitous improvisation which is a stock-in-trade of both the clever rabbit figure himself and the traditional African storyteller, and to which contemporary Angolan writers like Pacavira have had recourse in their attempts to forge a new national identity combining the modern and the traditional.

Joel Chandler Harris' handling of Afro-American trickster rabbit tales was similarly governed by his particular socio-political vision, that of a white southerner coming to terms with the ideological flux of the Reconstruction period. Although Harris was

always adamant in his claims that none of his tales were invented, or as he put it "cooked" (Harris 1918:157), his role obviously included an editorial function, not only in the framing of the tales within the commentaries of Uncle Remus and the little white boy, but also in the selection of the variant he judged "most characteristic," and in the artistic skill required to recreate stories from notes taken while or even after hearing them. This was accomplished in such a way as to result in a fairly homogenous collection of tales despite a large number of different oral informants.(7)

To illustrate the extent of Harris' own literary adaptation of the folktales themselves as they appeared in print (disregarding the frame for the moment), Stella Brewer Brookes (1950:39-40) quotes the following note sent to Harris by a black correspondent in Senoia, Georgia:

> Mr. Harris I have one tale of Uncle Remus that I have not seen in print yet. Bro Rabbit at Mis Meadows and Bro Bare went to Bro Rabbit house and eat up his childrun and set his house on fire and make like the childrun all burnt up but Bro Rabbit saw his track he knowed Bro Bare was the man so one day Bro Rabbit saw Bro Bare in the woods with his ax hunting a bee tree after Bro Rabbit spon howdy he tell Bro Bare he know whare a bee tree was and he would go an show and help him cut it down they went and cut it an Bro Rabbit drove in the glut [wedge] while Bro Bare push his head in the hole Bro Rabbit nock out the glut and cut him hickry. Mr. Harris you have the tale now give it wit I never had room to give you all can finish it (Harris 1918:197-98).

Brookes follows Harris' daughter and biographer Julia Collier Harris in asserting that this scanty outline was the basis of the story which appeared in the first Uncle Remus book under the title "The End of Mr. Bear" (Harris 1918:197). Florence Baer (1980:53) disputes this, noting that the outline is described as being sent to Harris in 1881

whereas "The End of Mr. Bear" was published in 1880, and reminding her readers that Harris solicited such outlines to remind him of tales he had heard earlier or for use as an entry to local black storytellers. Actually, the sketch just cited is described by Julia Harris (1918:197) as precisely a response to such solicitations, and as "characteristic of the form in which many of the legends came to their 'compiler.'" While Julia Harris may have been mistaken regarding the date of her father's initial contact with a particular tale, she was familiar with the way in which he worked, and obviously wished to indicate that his contribution with respect to the tales themselves went beyond mere compilation and the addition of the Uncle Remus frame. Regardless of how much of that contribution was realized at the writer's desk and how much amid the give and take of a circle of storytellers, it remains of interest for this study to note the simultaneous existence in the Afro-American folk stream of a variant which is distinguished from that published by Harris not only with respect to length and literary style, but also in the extent and nature of the violence it contains.

In the Senoia version, Brer Rabbit seeks revenge upon Brer B'ar after the latter has eaten the rabbit children and burned his house, and the conclusion of the tale leaves the bear clearly dead. In the Harris version we are told only that due to what had happened between them earlier (this tale appears near the end of the collection), "dey wa'n't no good feelin's 'tween Brer Rabbit en ole Brer B'ar." Furthermore, the "end" of the title is not necessarily death, but an inconclusive fate which lingers on beyond the end of the tale. After convincing Brer B'ar to put his head in a hole in the tree, Brer Rabbit stirs up the bees nest below. The bear's head becomes so swollen from bee-stings that he is unable to withdraw it, leaving Uncle Remus to

close the tale as follows: "But dar ole Brer B'ar hung, en ef his head ain't swunk, I speck he hangin' dar yit--dat w'at I speck" (Harris 1982:136).

It is worth pointing out that in adapting folklore to the political propensities of their literature (whether this involved selection of variants or actual changes in a given variant), Harris and Pacavira were working from folk traditions which were in some respects similar. Harris wrote some of his animal stories in the voice of a fictional character named Daddy Jack who spoke the "Gullah" dialect typical of the coastal rice plantations and of the Sea Islands of the South Atlantic States. A late nineteenth century work on plantation society describes the word "Gullah" as "very probably a corruption of Angola, a country of West Africa, shortened to Gola ... from which a great many negroes were brought to this country in the days of the slave trade" (Williams 1895:xi).

In addition, Harris was familiar with Héli Chatelain's work, and while he did not use the tales collected by Chatelain as the basis for any Uncle Remus stories, he did recognize in some of those tales an affinity with ones he had collected in the American South. Speaking of the stories that made up the fifth book in the Uncle Remus cycle (1905), Harris observed in a 1903 letter to James Whitcomb Riley:

> I had in my notebook a number of unverified outlines of stories, which I had thrown aside. But some one sent me a copy of Heli Chatelain's book on Angola, and in that I have verified every outline that I had practically thrown away. The book lay about the house for months and months before I opened it, and then I found what a treasure I had discovered (Harris 1918:488).

As Baer has pointed out, "the letter implies that there were a large number of tales involved when in fact only three of the stories told by Uncle Remus in **Told by Uncle Remus** have

analogues in **Folk-Tales of Angola**" (1981:192). One of these three **Told by Uncle Remus** stories is "How Wiley Wolf Rode in the Bag." This tale opens with a cautious truce in force between Brer Rabbit and his old enemy, Brer Wolf. They live on opposite sides of the road ("not close nuff fer ter quoil 'bout de fence line" [Harris 1905:44]), but they pay each other formal social calls and their children play together. At his father's request, young Wiley Wolf introduces a game in which the youngsters take turns pulling each other around in a bag, and later tying each other in the bag. Wiley has been told that eventually he is to tie young Riley tightly in the bag and then return home. Brer Rabbit, however, happens along and sees through Brer Wolf's plan. He has his own son tie the bag tightly on his turn and sends him home. Returning from work, Brer Wolf sees the bulging bag in which his son has fallen asleep, believes it to contain Riley Rabbit, carries it home and plops it into a pot of boiling water.

Baer finds an Angolan analogue for this story in Chatelain's tale "The Young Leopard and the Young Goat" (1894:191-95). While there are a number of plot differences, the game in this tale is similar to that in the Uncle Remus story. At the end, however, the young goat himself (although at the instigation of his father) kills his playmate, knocking his head with a staff after tying him in the bag. The father leopard arrives, carries the bag home, and puts it in the pot. Chatelain's version, however, does not end there. The young goat hides in the leopard's house, and further tricks the leopard into eating his own son, reveals what he has done and then escapes.

Although it is not mentioned by Baer, the Chatelain collection also contains another analogy to the Wiley Wolf tale--the very rabbit tale used by Pacavira. The principal correlations between the Chatelain rabbit tale

and the Wiley Wolf one are that a stronger species is tricked by a rabbit into allowing himself to be tied into a basket/bag, resulting in death or presumed death for the stronger species. The involvement of an **innocent** second generation of briarpatch peers in the Harris version significantly colors the ideological implications of Harris' tale. (The young goat of Chatelain's playmate tale, it should be noted, is as much a deadly trickster as his father.) Uncle Remus, Harris' mild and minstrelly narrator, seems to find in the death of Wiley Wolf only another hilarious prank of Brer Rabbit, but separated from its narrative frame this tale can be seen as a negative analogue of the Golden Rule (try to do others in and they may do you in) mixed with a warning to keep a sharp eye out for trouble, rather than a mere triumph of cleverness over brute strength. The Uncle Remus frame may have served to distact white readers from the full implications of this folk parable of Reconstruction days, but the core story, when compared to the Angolan version collected by Chatelain, remains as evidence that the "folk" were themselves quite adept at adapting their tales to the needs of a particular time and place.

Pacavira's trickster rabbit differs from both his cannibalistic cousin of the 1880's, Chatelain's hare, and from his Afro-American cousin of that same period, Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit's aggressiveness, while still quite evident to those who chose to see it, was somewhat blunted not only by Harris' adaptation of the tales to serve the socio-political cause of post Civil War reunification, but also by the fact that the survival tactics of the original tellers had changed during the course of the American experience. The hare in **Nzinga Mbandi**, willing to strike a deadly blow based on historical enmity, and framed by Pacavira in a context of unity among underdogs, is likewise a

reflection of a particular socio-political situation: one which combined revolution against one enemy with the simultaneous and resultant need to reconcile other animosities. The flexibility of these tales, shaped by the distinct yet parallel experiences of slavery and colonialism, is shown in their literary adaptation by two very different writers in the service of two different ideologies: Joel Chandler Harris, who tempered their grimmer side to make black liberation seem less threatening to himself and his white audience, and Manuel Pedro Pacavira, who wove his country's folklore into a blatant banner of national revolution.

NOTES

1. This film was first released in 1946 and played for some twenty years before being shelved due to criticism of the narrator, Uncle Remus, as a racial stereotype. It was re-released in 1980, the centennial of the publication of the first Uncle Remus book, to large multi-racial crowds (Hemenway 1982:7,8).

2. Manuel Pedro Pacavira was born in 1939 in Golungo Alto, Angola, an area in which the memory of Nzinga is especially strong. He was active in the struggle for independence from Portugal and wrote most of Nzinga Mbandi and an earlier collection of stories, Gentes do Mato (1974) while serving in various colonial prisons. Elected a member of the Central Committee of the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) in 1974, Pacavira has served in various political and administrative capacities since independence, and is currently Angola's ambassador to Cuba.

3. These practices related to what was then known as the "Law of the Jaga" are detailed in the accounts of Cavazzi, a Capuchin missionary who knew Nzinga in the final years of her life. Gerald Moser (1976) has summarized the conflicting versions of Nzinga given in this and other important sources in a very useful but unfortunately not readily available article, "Queen Nzinga in Fact and Fiction." Some modern writers, especially those emphasizing the achievements of the Portuguese in Africa, continue to voice the traditional association between cannibalism and morality in juxtapositions such as the following description of Nzinga: "Her morals were not doubtful: they were non-existent. She enjoyed eating human flesh, and made sure that there was plenty of it for her to eat" (Egerton 1957:49).

4. Manuel Pedro Pacavira, personal interview, 17 April 1986, East Lansing, Michigan.

5. For example, ritual consumption of specified portions of the bodies of slain adversaries (usually the head and the heart) was related to the warriors' desire to tame the spirits of their opponents, and human sacrifices followed by cannibalism on the occasion of the installation of a new Imbangala king "demonstrated the ruler's powers of life and death over his people" and tested the chief's own control over the spirits which governed a sacred weapon associated with his mandate (Miller 1976:247-48). Miller also notes that both the Imbangala and the Europeans exaggerated the extent of cannibalism practiced. Much of the European exaggeration resulted from a failure to recognize the broad nature of the Kimbundu word for "eat" which the Mbundu used to describe not only consumption by the Imbangala, but also such concepts as capture, appropriation of possessions, or incorporation of captives into the war band (Miller 1976:249).

6. Marga Holness notes in the introduction to a volume issued by the Organization of Angolan Women (OMA): "The social transformations set in motion since the armed struggle was launched in 1961 have been intrinsic to the process of nation-formation. One such transformation was the uniting of women and the measures taken to ensure their advancement first in the struggle against colonialism and subsequently in the stuggle for national reconstruction" (1984:12,13). Holness refers to Nzinga as an early heroine of the resistance (1984:14), as does Ruth Neto, National Coordinator of the OMA in the Report of the National Committee of the OMA to the Congress of that organization (1983) cited in the same volume (1984:86). The extent to which a full incorporation of women into the political life of the country was an important part of the MPLA agenda can be seen in the opening speech of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos at that same Congress (1984:77-83), and in the earlier attention given some of the problems of women's status by the late President Agostinho Neto (1984:56-57).

7. Julia Harris (1918:155-56); Joel C. Harris (1982:39). What Harris considered "characteristic" may be surmised not only from the figure of Uncle Remus, "who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" (Harris 1982:47), but also in Harris' commentary in the same introduction on a variation of the tale of the Hare and the Tortoise in which he finds that story "thoroughly characteristic of the negro" because "It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice but mischievousness" (1982:44). The aggressive nature of the rabbit tales which form the core of the Uncle Remus stories, rationalized by Harris as mere mischief, is incisively confronted in Bernard Wolfe's article on "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit: 'Takes a Limber-Toe Gemmun fer ter Jump Jim Crow.'"

REFERENCES CITED

Baer, Florence

1981 "Joel Chandler Harris: An 'Accidental' Folklorist." Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris. Comp. and Intro. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. Boston: G.K. Hall.

1980 Sources and Analogues of the Uncle Remus Tales. Folklore

Fellows Communications 228. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.

Brookes, Stella Brewer
1950 Joel Chandler Harris--Folklorist. Athens: U of Georgia Press.

Cavazzi de Montecúccolo, Pe João Antônio
1965 Descriçâo Histórica dos Tres Reinos do Congo, Matamba e Angola. Trans. and ed. Pe Graciano Maria de Luguzzano. 2 vols. Lisboa: Junta de Investigaçôes do Ultramar. Trans. of Istorica Descrizione de trè Regni, Congo, Matamba e Angola. Bolonha, 1687.

Chatelain, Hèli, comp. and ed.
1964 Contos Populares de Angola: Cinquenta Contos em Quimbundo. Portuguese ed. and prologue, Fernando de Castro Pires de Lima. Portuguese portion trans. from the English, M. Garcia da Silva. Lisboa: Agencia-Geral do Ultramar.
1894 Fifty Tales, with Ki-mbundu Text Literal Translation Introduction, and Notes. English portion trans. from Kimbundu, H. Chatelain. Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society, I. Boston and New York: Houghton.

Egerton, F. Clement C.
1957 Angola in Perspective: Endeavour and Achievement in Portuguese West Africa. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Milwood [N.Y.]: Kraus Reprint, 1973.

Harris, Joel Chandler
1905 Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation. New York: McClure, Phillips & Co.
1982 Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings. New York: Penguin American Library. Ed. and Intro. Robert Hemenway. Originally published 1880.

Harris, Julia Collier
1918 The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris. Boston and New York: Houghton.

Hemenway, Robert
1982 "Introduction: Author, Teller, and Hero." In: Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings by Joel Chandler Harris. New York: Penguin American Library.

Miller, Joseph C.
1976 Kings and Kinsmen: Early Mbundu States in Angola. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Moser, Gerald
1976 "Queen Nzinga in Fact and Fiction." Neo-African Literature and Culture: Essays in Memory of Janheinz Jahn. Eds. B. Lindfors and U. Schild. Mainz: B. Heymann.

Organization of Angolan Women.
1984 Angolan Women Building the Future: From National Liberation to Women's Emancipation. Trans. and Intro. Margaret Holness. London: Zed.

Pacavira, Manuel Pedro
1974 Gentes do Mato. Lisboa: Africa Editoria.
1979 Nzinga Mbandi. 2nd ed. Lisboa: Ediçôes 70. (1st ed., 1975)
1986 Personal interview, 17 April, East Lansing, Michigan.

Williams, John G.
1895 De Ole Plantation. Charleston: Walker, Evans & Cogswell.

Wolfe, Bernard.
1981 "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit: 'Takes a Limber-Toe Gemmun fer ter Jump Jim Crow.'" Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris. Comp. and Intro. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. Boston: G.K. Hall.