

Tribalism again? Annie Saumont's ghostly story and the kalela dance paradox

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Abstract. I draw attention to how Annie Saumont's "You Should Have Changed at Dol" provides a solution to the paradox. With appropriate background knowledge, Saumont's story, despite its modern form, displays various convergences with Descartes' meditations; likewise the Bisa dance may feature convergences with traditional dance.

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A ghost constructed by my brain

In a dream—on a train.

The judge he bites his nails

In this book of French tales.

Here is Richard Werbner presenting the paradox of the kalela dance, from Clyde Mitchell:

Mitchell was struck by a paradox in the dance. In some tribal dances, people dressed up in all their tribal paraphernalia and danced traditional dances, while chanting traditional songs. By contrast, the *kalela* dance included no tribal elements or insignia. The dancers were immaculately dressed in smart, modern clothes, and the main roles performed were modern – the king, the leader (blowing football referee's whistler), a doctor, and a nurse. They performed before a popular audience distinctive of town, drawn from a wider public than

any tribe or ethnic group. The language of the dance was the town argot, *chicopperbeliti*, a mix of Bemba, English and a Creole of Zulu called *Fanikolo*. Yet in an apparent paradox, the composition of the performing team was tribal – they were nearly all Bisa – in the team best known to Mitchell; they came from the same tribal group under chief Matipa and were almost all Roman Catholics, with one Muslim. And in a tribal tradition of praise singing, ‘they set out to praise the Bisa in general, and their chief Matipa in particular.’ (2020: 111)

And here once again is my statement of the paradoxical set of components:

- (a) In this situation, different tribes dance to express who they are
- (b) The participants in the kalela dance are (nearly) all from the Bisa tribe.
- (c) The dress and dance style of those in the kalela dance does not demarcate the Bisa tribe. Notably there is no use of traditional dress or dance.

“How can we keep all three? Surely one must go.” On the basis of a fiction by Annie Saumont, I propose that it is at least possible that (c) is false.

The fiction in question is entitled “You Should Have Changed at Dol” and is translated in a collection entitled *French Tales*. If one reads it without suitable background knowledge, it is just a well constructed story with a good claim to literary value – it scores quite well on idea, on characterization, on organization of material, on imagery, and so forth. “Yes, but surely one can just go to a local writing group and find someone who can write such a piece,” or so one might think. “And there must be literature teachers or students all over the country who can produce something like this, no worse.” (Even without the material below, I have doubts about that.)

But examining it carefully, although the fiction uses a more contemporary form, there are or seem to be a set of connections to Descartes' meditations, from centuries ago, which use a meditative literary form rarely used today:

- (i) The themes of what is dream and what reality and methods of distinguishing them.
- (ii) The use of a ghost, or ghosts, to address these themes.
- (iii) The use of "They will think I'm mad" in Saumont, echoing Descartes' use of those words, at least in my translation.
- (iv) The sequencing of material, such as the theme of madness then what is dream.

For all we know, members of the kalela dance use a contemporary form, in terms of dress and dance, but if we have sufficient knowledge, we realize that there are a number of convergences with traditional Bisa dance and dress. And the most likely explanation for those convergences is that they are on purpose. Of course, this is an armchair speculation but perhaps the anthropologist could do with a suggestion or two, especially if such dances start appearing here, there, and everywhere.

References

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