

Through Ambiguous Tales: Women's Voices in Chokwe Storytelling

Rachel I. Fretz

Introduction

Chokwe women, living in Zairian villages, always run from mask-figures.¹ Throughout their lives—as children, adolescents, and mature adults—they dart away from the *akishi*'s threatening pursuit. During the dry season, a series of masked figures wander through the bush and village, dancing and chasing women and children away from the men's circumcision camp. For women therefore, a masked figure recast as a story character brings frightening nuances to a scene. His presence evokes anew that threat of attack. Such allusions in the traditional tales called *yishima* (sing. *chishima*) stir vivid memories of the mask appearances during the circumcision festivities (*mukanda*).

What sense then can we make of the following ambiguous tale? The story is puzzling because a mask kidnaps and supposedly kills a woman, but, as the narrator later reveals, actually marries and has children with her. Mama Mwazeya told this tale to an audience of men, women, and children by Chief Shatambwe's fireside. Here is a brief summary of that performance, recorded in Shatambwe village, Bandundu, Zaire.²

A young childless woman repeatedly gives birth to an infant who dies and then returns as the next baby. A healer resolves the "fertility"

¹ This study of traditional storytelling is based on research conducted among the Chokwe of Zaire: in Shaba (1976 and 1977) and, funded by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad, in Bandundu (1982 and 1983). Additional inquiries, in preparation for this article, were supported by a grant from the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, 1989.

² See appendix for complete translation.

problem by confining her to a hut (*masolo*) and by giving her an interdiction—"Never go digging for rats." However, when village women go rat-hunting, she joins them because her infant cries for that food only. Unlucky at hunting all day, she stays alone at dusk and keeps on digging until she accidentally unearths a mask. Emerging, the mask-figure sings to her enticingly: "Wait for me, you who cut the raffia knots [and disrobed me]." Dropping her hoe, she races to her village enclosure to hide. Still the mask pursues, so she runs to the men's pavilion where the elders can usually restrain a masked spirit. But the mask enters, cuts off her head, and escapes, kidnapping mother and child.

But actually he whisks them to the spirit world, where mask-villagers greet their mask-chief with his new bride, this Chokwe woman. Years pass and the woman gives birth to many children. Finally the woman and her mask-husband return to present their children to the matrilineal village. The woman's family, rejoicing, gives the mask-husband many goats and chickens; then he leaves and the woman stays with her people.

This tale, about one young woman's encounter with an ambiguous mask-figure, appears to be a subversive rendition. The couple's relationship does not conform to established patterns in *yishima*; for example, listeners expect the woman to be punished. Nor does the tale fit Chokwe behavior in everyday life; a woman would certainly not stay alone in the bush. The narrator, Mama Mwazeya, seemingly undermines Chokwe cultural expectations for gender roles. In the story outcome, she rewards the female protagonist even though she violates her healer's interdiction and breaks a taboo by unearthing a ritual mask. The infertile woman bears many children, apparently as a result of circumventing several gender-specific cultural norms. Does Mama Mwazeya, indeed, voice a dissenting—even subversive—perspective on female roles?

The narrator clearly plays with *yishima* storytelling conventions and cultural symbols in ways that create an ambiguous tale, and in her ending she does offer an alternate version to the usual outcomes for broken interdictions. However, were her point of view explicitly subversive, the Chokwe men and particularly the chief would have objected outright during the performance or even silenced her—as such privileged audience members not infrequently do. Nor was her performance rejected as nonsensical by male or female audience members. Perhaps Mwazeya intentionally creates a puzzling tale. It seems that she imaginatively plays with an ambiguous mask-figure and invites her audience to make sense of reversed outcomes. Without alienating her audience, she leaves a complex

situation obscured by contradictions and ambiguity.

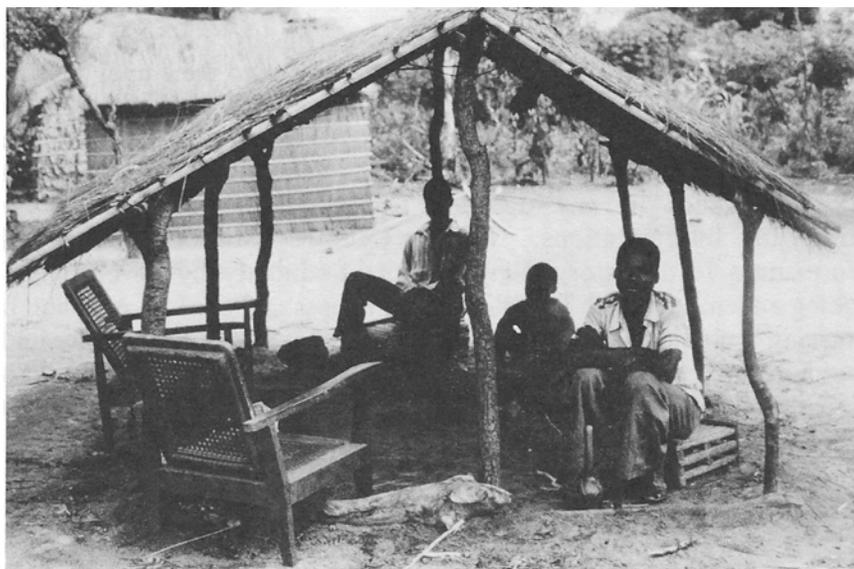
Explanatory Modes: Ambiguity and Narrative Play

Several researchers explain ambiguity as a purposeful strategy in African oral expression (Fernandez 1986; Jackson 1982). Narrative scholars examining other traditions also describe imaginative play as intentional (Basso 1985; Briggs 1988). Thus we might interpret Mwazeya's tale as an artful construction with reversals that listeners can discern by reflecting on the tale, as Jackson suggests. Or we might consider her tale as inviting participants to search for meaning beyond the expression itself, in another framework, as Fernandez does for African riddles. Both suggestions do offer beginning points for understanding some aspects of this tale. Both perspectives suggest that ambiguity can be deconstructed and situated in an explanation. But Mwazeya's tale points to ambiguity itself as her statement about a complex situation typical for Chokwe women. It seems that she invites listeners to ponder and accept ambiguity as irreducible.

Indeed, it is a story's ambiguity, notes Jackson in his study of Kuranko storytelling in Sierra Leone (1982), that invites listeners to create significance. Through pondering ambiguous figures and reversals of expected behavior, listeners explore the possibilities in their universe. They willingly puzzle over paradoxes. Some types of ambiguity are readily deciphered, Jackson suggests; listeners can discern inverted patterns and recognize commonly used ambiguous images. Through reversal or familiarity, these decipherable ambiguities affirm conventional views and established customs (40-54).

But sometimes, I counter, an ambiguous story is not that decipherable: it is just ambiguous and does not convert into conventional patterns. Such stories intentionally validate the experience of uncertainty; they mirror, for listeners, their confusion when faced with irreducible complexities. Fernandez (1986) suggests that many African expressive forms depend on reasoning via images and that expression with mixed or ambiguous images read like a "puzzle." Such puzzling expression, like an indeterminate riddle, inspires a search for a transcendent whole that encompasses the disparate parts—a whole that lies outside the expressive form itself (178-79). In such a reading, the taboo-breaking woman and

ambiguous mask-figure invoke in listeners a search for a framework that encompasses these incongruities. But when pondering ambiguity, Chokwe listeners do not feel compelled to reduce the tale to some clear-cut didactic message or persuasive explanation.



Chokwe people gather in the evenings in the *chota*, the village pavilion, to visit and tell stories.

Storytelling itself is an explanatory mode, a reasoning through images that invites exploration. As a temporal mode that emerges with one audience's response, storytelling allows for momentarily overridden expectations. As Basso points out (1985:3-6), storytellers creatively manipulate narrative conventions in order to express personal viewpoints or to accommodate cultural changes. Such imaginative play allows people to confront otherwise frightening or risky propositions. Through storytelling, Chokwe women express their dissenting views, their perplexities and frustrations as well as their aspirations. Especially when addressing such potentially explosive and gender-specific topics as a women's failure to bear children or her conflicts with a co-wife, female narrators resort to exploratory play with conventional images. Given a cooperative audience, narrators can imagine the impossible action or relationship even though that

fantasy leaps beyond generic and cultural expectations. Women's voices, though muted in public and male-dominated situations, can be heard by discerning the ways in which they toy with conventional narrative strategies and couch their explorations in sufficient ambiguity so as not to affront the potential silencers in their audiences.

Indeed, because narrators compose during performance for responding listeners, skilled performers always create their tales in ways that accommodate that audience and situation (Fretz 1987:243-50). For this very reason, the ongoing interpretations become embedded in the performance, as Briggs notes (1988:18-22). Textual and contextualizing markers, evident in any detailed transcription-translation, reveal participants' interpretations. Indeed, Chokwe narrators situate their performances in that storytelling session, frequently by developing or invoking a theme set forth in earlier performances and even on occasion by countering a previous storyteller's views. Moreover, narrators also allude to concurrent events and seasonal or situational details easily recognized by their audiences. Thus, the session rather than the solo performance ought to be taken as the minimal unit of analysis (Fretz 1987:360-63). Many clues to participant interpretation become evident as the evening unfolds. For example, the parallels between Mwazeya's tale and an earlier performance by Chief Shatambwe suggest contrasting and gendered interpretations about a woman's judgment when caught in an ambiguous situation.

Based on textual features and contextualizing markers in that session, I read Mwazeya's well-crafted tale as an artful and intentional ambiguity and analyze the narrative strategies through which she establishes that ambiguity. Initially, in the narrative opening she sets up irreducible incongruities; then, by alluding to the concurrent circumcision event, she highlights gender reversals; in addition, she creates a confusing symbolic character, the mask-figure, by associating disparate images. Thus, through incongruity, reversals, and symbolic play, she creates an ambiguous tale and mutes her rebuttal to an earlier performance. In the most immediate sense, then, Mwazeya's tale invites listeners to consider women's fertility crises and delineation of gender roles as inherently ambiguous. At the same time, she uses that "suggestion" to veil her subversive feelings and potentially threatening argument with the Chief about women's decision-making abilities and general wisdom.

Narrative Opening: A Problematic Situation

Chokwe narrators orient their listeners to a problematic situation in the tale opening. In her first sentences, Mwazeya sets forth infertility as the thematic concern by introducing a young mother whose newborn baby always dies. Based on a cultural assumption, Chokwe listeners suppose that the mother repeatedly gives birth to the same infant. Thus, the story topic—a woman's infertility—sets forth a highly emotional situation. Mwazeya places the female protagonist in the nexus of a family crisis. Since Chokwe reckon descent matrilineally, the young woman's actions and decisions have import not only for herself, but also for the well-being of the lineage. Therefore, the husband calls a healer to cure her.

It is a woman's story, for it dramatizes a relational problem causing great anguish to Chokwe women. Infertility—defined as childlessness more frequently than as sterility—is a gender-specific crisis. For although Chokwe men also desire children (fertility), it is men who divorce childless women to remarry and not vice-versa. A woman's fertility ranks among the top priorities for her success in marriage and for her self-realization as a woman. Her biological fertility not only promises a literal abundance—children, working hands, and enlarged influence—but also a symbolic fecundity indicating ancestral blessing.



This woman is digging for field rats out in the bush.

Immediately, Mwazeya complicates the crisis with an interdiction. According to narrative convention, an interdiction in the opening sets up an implicit tension among various possibilities—fulfilling, avoiding, or breaking the interdiction, all of which have consequences. The healer's cure is problematic because his interdiction focuses on a common activity—rat-hunting—that during the dry season is not only a prime food source, but also a time for visiting with other women. Furthermore, the interdiction compounds an already problematic situation because it accentuates the conflict between family-nourisher (digging for food) and lineage-bearer (taking this restrictive fertility cure). Both roles are essential to her success as a Chokwe women.

Through this device of interdiction, Mwazeya's tale also draws attention to opening and closing by linking rat-digging to sexual activity and subsequently to mask-unearthing. During the dry season when women hunt for rodents, they dig into mounds exposed by bush fires and, after catching the rat, they cover the hole. This healer forbids the rat-digging activity that through penetrating action is associated to sexual intercourse. Opening and closing the rodent mounds symbolizes her fertility problems: namely, the infant's repeated entries and exits from her womb. Healers typically give interdictions based on associative thinking that ties two images—the prohibited action and the consequential desired or avoided action—by similar movement or visual details. It is a kind of sympathetic magic. Mwazeya's tale extends the healer's associations to mask-unearthing: rat-digging and mask-unearthing are linked by common time (dry season) and place (bush locale) as well as by the penetrating action (uncovering and removing).

Mwayeza further complicates the initial problematic situation with additional incongruities. She says that this child will eat only the forbidden food, thus implicating the mother in trouble through a double-bind. Caught in a dilemma between her child's needs and her healer's interdiction, the woman listens to the infant's demands and digs for rats, breaking her interdiction.

By *yishima* convention, trouble always comes to a character who breaks an interdiction or who stays alone in the bush. That the woman's digging unearths a mask is ominous but not surprising. When she does this, listeners realize that she has inadvertently crossed a gender boundary by entering the *mukanda* ritual domain, and they know as well that only a male specialist may unearth masks without reprisal. Thus they no doubt surmise

that she will be punished for her dual infractions: crossing of gender boundaries and infringement of fertility mandates.

Indeed, in the very opening, the narrator places her female protagonist in a situation riddled with incongruities. By convention, audiences expect her judgment to bring her inevitable trouble because she is caught in contradictions. But, although this female character crosses many gender boundaries, she cannot be faulted as subversive because she did so inadvertently while caring for her child. In this way then, Mwazeya establishes an initial ambiguous situation. Listeners must ponder whether, given her situation, this young woman could have taken any appropriate, wise action.

Contextualizing Framework: Allusion to Cultural Event

By referencing her tale in another event (text), the *mukanda* ritual, Mwazeya situates the female protagonist in a highly charged and gendered context. Thus she accentuates the thematic focus on a woman's infertility by a contrasting and threatening masculine figure, a *mukishi*, who generally marginalizes women during this central, cultural event.

Called by the narrator simply *mukishi*, the generic term for mask, the figure is associated for listeners with the circumcision festivities. Although Chokwe audiences generally link *akishi* to that ritual event, Mwazeya's listeners in particular would locate a chasing *mukishi* in that context: the performance took place during the dry season when masks regularly appear during the festivities. Mwazeya depends on that implicit contextualizing, for throughout her performance, the dramatic action centers exclusively on the mask's and the woman's evolving relationship. She seems to take for granted the gender-delineated *mukanda* framework.

Both narrator and audience can assume a common knowledge of this major seasonal event and its contextualizing relevance for this tale. *Mukanda* is not only a role-delineating rite of passage for Chokwe boys when mentors instruct them on becoming men, but also a gender-delineating occasion for the whole village when masks guard the masculine rite from female intrusion. During these months, mask figures separate women and children from the initiates by chasing them through the village as well as from the bush paths near the camp. Because women never know when a *mukishi* might attack, they avoid working in the fields

or going to the river alone. Certainly a woman would never intentionally dig for rodents near the secluded male camp, where several masks are buried each year. For even when a mask is unearthed accidentally, that dangerous mask-spirit comes forth.

By having a female character uncover a mask, Mwayeza invokes an unrestrained, and thus threatening, energy. Her listeners assume that only the *nganga-mukanda*, the master of the camp, can unearth these masks without potential harm to the community. They believe that the boundless energy of these “spirits,” once called forth, can be contained only by the chief of ceremonies and that therefore only he should direct the unearthing of the masks. During these *mukanda* months, he usually calls forth the whole range of Chokwe masked figures, who are identifiable by appearance and distinctive actions. Each has a particular significance; several mask figures are known to activate potent phallic or fertility energies (Bastin 1988). At this point in the performance, whether the protagonist stirs a mask-figure whose energy will destroy only her or will harm the community is open to listener speculation.

As background then, this ritual resonates through the tale, sharpening the gender contrasts and prefiguring actions between the key characters: a mask must chase and a woman run. Listeners expect the encounter to reflect the gender distinctions that mark activities during this season; they expect the mask to maintain his usual threatening pose and to reaffirm the familiar gender boundaries. And they listen for clues to the mask’s identity in order to surmise his potential threat.

Symbolic Play: An Ambiguous Figure

In this tale, however, the mask becomes an ambiguous figure, because unnamed he is identifiable only by his actions. And since his actions evoke a plethora of mask-figures, he accrues multiple nuances. By simply calling him *mukishi* and then playing on associations to several different ritual mask-figures, Mwazeya creates a polyvalent symbol. Even when they appear as story characters, masked figures—as dominant cultural symbols—stir ideas and emotions associated with their ritual performances, as Victor Turner has reminded us (1967:29-32).

The narrator invokes, in turn, *Cihehu*’s eroticism, *Cihongo*’s social control, and *Cikunza*’s fecundity—never settling on a single unambiguous

identity. Initially, the narrator connotes *Cihehu*, a seductive jokester who flashes a long cloth penis; in essence, he is a playful comedian who flirts and dances with women. However, because he often appears during this season, the women run away from his advances just as they do from the more threatening masks. In fact, it is rumored that Chihehu's enormous penis could seriously harm a woman if he caught and impregnated her. Next, when the mask-figure decapitates the woman, the narrator invokes the chastising figure *Cihongo*, the axe-thrower, who as an agent of retribution and social control attacks those who fail to adhere to Chokwe social conventions—such as breaking interdictions or infringing on ritual terrain. But when the mask whisks her away by his magical powers, he transforms her into a chief's bride. Here, the narrator calls up by association *Cikunza*, the chief mask-spirit who opens the *mukanda* season and represents abundance and fecundity. Indeed, by impregnating the kidnapped woman and returning her with many children to her mother, the mask-husband increases the lineage.

By not describing the mask's appearance and only implying characteristic actions, Mwazeya can play with this cultural symbol. She shifts the identifying actions from a chasing-calling seducer, to a killing-punishing figure, to a marrying-fathering one. The mask's incongruous actions—seducing, punishing, and impregnating—induce listeners to grapple with the contradictions; and, through association, the mask-figure eventually links eroticism, social control, and fecundity. By indirection, Mwazeya offers a more complex view of human sexuality, fertility, and gender delineation than the culturally defined one she knows so well. That complexity, she implies, can be grasped only through an ambiguous force.

For listeners attributing meaning, this polyvalent symbol becomes an encompassing “whole” that brings together disparate actions. Subtly persuaded through contradictory images of mask-and-woman, Mwazeya's audience comes to reflect on women's fertility problems: not only do mask and woman link eroticism, control, and fecundity, but they also blur the gender boundaries so clearly delineated during *mukanda* and reverse consequences for broken interdictions.

Mwazeya creates a mask-figure who “runs” as a powerful presence throughout her tale. For Chokwe women, such entities generally loom over them as potent, threatening figures—even as story characters. Not only do they stir memories of specific frightening encounters, but they also “carry” the culturally defined ideas and sensations women have learned to attribute

to them. Indeed, as Armstrong suggests, masked figures running through a village have more than a symbolic impact; their presences have an immediacy and force, an “affecting presence” (1981:5-6). But Mwazeya not only invokes that power, she transmutes it from a dangerous threat into an amiable, though forceful, presence. Especially when set in contrast to Chief Shatambwe’s previous tale, the mask-presence delights the women in the audience that night; for, rather than kill, he creates life and leaves the woman with many children. Mwazeya turns the mask-and-woman into a transformative force, not easily forgotten as mere story-figures.

Situational Referents: Session Dynamics

The storytelling session functions as the most immediate framework for interpreting this performance. When attributing meaning to a performance, astute participants listen for indirect talk between performers—for double entendres or oblique criticism. Although each listener brings his or her own interpretive competence to a performance (Fretz 1987:244-45; cf. Briggs 1988:18-19), each also draws on the common experience of that storytelling session. In this instance, the search for a “transcendent whole” encompassing ambiguity also grows out of a situational dynamic—a female narrator’s response to an earlier male performance.

Indeed, through storytelling, Chokwe people often address each other in metaphors; that is, in order to convey a message or to comment on the stories told previously, the narrator adjusts the story images to fit the critiqued situation (cf. Cosentino 1982:144-63). Usually, the storyteller obscures the message in an apparent ambiguity so that only the intended might discern the meaning. Only those keyed to the referent context, whether a recent event or the previous performances in the session, will understand the veiled message, called a *misende*. Through an artistry of intentional ambiguity, then, performers can express diverse opinions.

Mwazeya is countering a previous storyteller’s presentation of women as lacking good judgment when confronted by an incongruous situation. Unlike Chief Shatambwe, however, she validates the female protagonist’s judgment and thus refutes his implications that young women act unwisely. Both performances place a young woman in a problematic situation in which she must demonstrate her wisdom when confronted by

incongruities. Chief Shatambwe's protagonist must judge whether or not to tell her hunter-husband about an antelope who reappears in her fields and plays with her child. She tells him, causing the husband to shoot at the antelope and accidentally kill the child.³ Mwazeya's protagonist also confronts conflicting role expectations, breaks an interdiction, and inadvertently crosses into masculine ritual territory. But her narrative transforms the mask-woman pair from an antagonistic couple to jubilant, cooperative parents. Mwazeya's tale confirms the woman's judgment. Whereas Chief Shatambwe has the child killed as a direct consequence of the mother's poor judgment, Mama Mwazeya rewards the mother with many children, despite her risky choices and dangerous encounters.

Certainly, Mwazeya's reversed order not only contrasts sharply to Chief Shatambwe's tale but also breaks away from the usual and familiar patterns in *yishima*. Although a broken interdiction and an illicit crossing of boundaries normally bring harm, even death, the woman and her lineage are blessed with many children and continuity. Even though the woman's decision—to feed the babe and ignore the healer—led her onto masculine ritual territory, the female protagonist survives. Mwazeya implies that despite irreducible ambiguities, woman's judgment need not result in death. Not only does her mask-figure rescue an infertile woman from shame and the lineage from decline, but the tale closes with the mask and the whole village feasting together!

Conclusion: Ambiguity as Evocative

African folktales have too long been presented as didactic lessons with self-evident meanings, as Ruth Finnegan points out (1970:20-22). Although many Chokwe tales are straightforward and thematically explicit, especially stories told to children, performances by an excellent narrator before a gathering of adults are rarely explicit. Such ambiguity is a crafted, sought-after opaqueness. These tales often bypass causal resolutions and move to their conclusion through more indirect means such as reversals of common story patterns, associations between disparate images, and even intentional contradictions. These stories address life's complexities. Turning the Chokwe world upside down, such tales end without a clear-cut

³ See appendix for complete translation.

moral lesson.

Ambiguity in a tale, I suggest, enables people to accept the complexities of life that do not seem reducible to sensible patterns. By clustering disparate images, a story can be a vessel to contain the unnerving frustration and confusion linked to ambiguous situations and people. Similar to those African riddles with indeterminate answers described by James Fernandez, such complex *yishima* provoke ongoing interpretations of images remembered after the storytelling is ended. Fernandez calls this impulse to find answers that lie beyond the riddle “edification by puzzlement” and notes that such ambiguous expression calls for a “plurality of possible answers” (1986:178-79).

In addition, such ambiguous performance might be an immediate exchange among storytellers during a session. Through the artistry of intentional ambiguity, storytellers often veil messages by playing with metaphoric images. *Yishima*, thus, function as symbolic communication among storytellers and listeners, which remains purposefully obscure. That opaqueness allows narrators to play with risky maneuvers and enables listeners who ignore women’s talk as “nonsense” not to hear.

Performances often condense multiple layers of meaning and are open to varied interpretations even by Chokwe participants. Indeed, the very nature of such dialogic, interactive performances encourages such multi-layered ambiguity. Because anyone may speak up during these sessions, participants make frequent comments in response to the story action and storytellers often answer by refuting or complicating each other’s point of view. The immediacy and fluidity of storytelling inevitably results in performances imprinted with the ambiguities of human relations.

University of California, Los Angeles

References

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Armstrong 1981 | Robert Plant Armstrong. <i>The Power of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence</i> . Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. |
| Basso 1985 | Ellen Basso. <i>A Musical View of the Universe: Kalapalo Myth and Ritual Performances</i> . Philadelphia: University of |

- Pennsylvania Press.
- Bastin 1988 Marie-Louise Bastin. "Entités spirituelles des Tshokwe (Angola)." *Quaderni Poro*, 5:9-59.
- Briggs 1988 Charles L. Briggs. *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cosentino 1982 Donald Cosentino. *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers: Tradition and Invention in Mende Story Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fernandez 1986 James Fernandez. *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fretz 1987 Rachel I. Fretz. "Storytelling Among the Chokwe of Zaire: Narrating Skill and Audience Response." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Finnegan 1970 Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson 1982 Michael Jackson. *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Turner 1967 Victor Turner. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Appendix

The Woman and the Mask
 Narrated by Mama Mwazeya
 Shatabwe Village

It's said that long ago a man married a woman.
 Now, she gave birth. The child died.
 She gave birth again. The child died.

Then the husband said, "I'll go fetch a healer,
 to put her in a *masolo* enclosure."

He went to call a healer.

The healer came.

He put her in the enclosure and said,
“Don’t be someone who goes digging for, for—
what shall I say—rats.”

Then she gave birth to a child.

The child was named.

The name of that child was Yinyingi.

Now when the people went to dig for rats,
they came back, they took the rats,
they gave her some and said,
“Here. So that you can give food to the child.”
But the child would not accept them.
The child always asked,
“Did my mother dig them?”

Then early next morning,
the people said, “Today we will burn the bush.”

Nayinyingi said, “And I, I am going to dig for rats.”
But they said, “Really?
How is it that you are going to dig for rats?
It’s said that you were told—‘Never be a rat digger.’
Really don’t go dig rats.
How dare you say, ‘I’m going to dig for rats!’”

She said, “No. The child cries too much.
I’m going to dig.”

She dug to the bottom of the holes
and found no rats.
She dug to the bottom of the holes
and found no rats.

When they were ready to go back,
the others said to her, “Let’s go.
We’ll gather together some rats for you.”

She answered, “I
The child won’t accept them.”
She saw a mound around the hole

of a large *langi* rat.
 She stayed alone to dig.
 Then she dug.
 She dug.
 She pulled out a mat:
 “*Mam!* How does a rat bring someone’s mat
 to his hole!”

Then she dug, she dug.
 She took out a blanket.
 She pulled it out on top of the mound.

She tried to dig a second time like that.
 Then she saw a *mukishi*, a masked figure,
 coming out, towards her.

Nayinyingi took her hoe,
 she took her basket,
 she ran away.

The mask came out.
 He began to beat the dust off himself.

He sang a song there.

Song: I say, Wait a-a-a-a Nayinyingi a-a-a-a.
 I say, Wait a-a-a-a Nayinyingi a-a-a-a.
 You cut the knots off my mask.

Nayinyingi answered, “No. Yinyingi pulled them off.”
 Then she ran faster.

The mask sang again.

Song: I say, Wait a-a-a-a Nayinyingi a-a-a-a.
 I say, Wait a-a-a-a Nayinyingi a-a-a-a.
 You cut the knots off my mask.

Nayinyingi answered, singing,

Song: Mama,
 Mama-a-a-a.
 My son, Yinyingi
 pulled this one on me.

Nayinyingi arrived.
She sat down in the *masolo* enclosure.
She took her son and nursed him.

The mask arrived at the edge of the village.

Song: I say, Wait a-a-a-a Nayinyingi a-a-a-a.
I say, Wait a-a-a-a Nayinyingi a-a-a-a.
You cut the knots off my mask.

Then the people took her and hid her.
Still the mask sang and Nayinyingi answered.
Then they took her to the *chota*, the village pavilion.

The mask came.
He cut off her head.
He even took the son Yinyingi and left.

When halfway home,
the mask heard shouts of welcome from his village.
“*Obo. Obo.* The Chief has married a woman [has taken a wife].
The chief has married a woman.”

They took out mats [for the mask and the woman].
They put them on the ground and walked on them.

Time passed.
Nayinyingi gave birth to children.
Yinyingi married a woman.

Then the mask-husband said, “Let’s go.
I’ll take you back to your village.”

Nayinyingi’s mother in her village was sifting flour.
She heard children and said,
“I, I—my child was killed by the mask.
Now why should I have to listen to children around here?”

Then Nayinyingi and her children came up to her.
Nayinyingi said, “Mother, please give me water
to give my children something to drink.”

But the mother said, “Ah child.
The way the mask did me in!

He took Nayinyingi, the one who carried water for me.
Even the son Yinyingi he killed and took from me.
I am an old woman.
Water? Where shall I find it to give it to you?"

Then Nayinyingi asked,
"Mother, please give me tobacco."

But the mother answered,
"The way the mask treated me!
He killed my Nayinyingi.
He also took Yinyingi, the one who could buy tobacco.
He killed them.
How then could I find tobacco to give you?"

Then Nayinyingi said, "Mama. Mama.
I say, it's me, Nayinyingi."

Then the mother said, "Really?
That's why people are telling me 'It's Nayinyingi.'
Really? Nayinyingi?"

Then the people shouted welcome.
The husband said, "No. Although you say I killed her,
I didn't kill her.
See, I've brought her back."

The people took goats and chickens
and presented them to the mask-husband.
But he said, "I didn't come to stay many days.
I'm going soon."

He stayed awhile.
When he was ready to leave,
they gave him presents to carry to his people.

The man left
and the woman stayed
with her people.

*In telling a story,
you must make it clear,
otherwise the elders will be offended.*

A Woman and the Child-Guardian Antelope
Narrated by Chief Shatambwe
Shatambwe Village

A man and his wife had a very small child.
The mother said, "I will cultivate, cultivate I will."
She went, she did, to the place to cultivate.
Arriving at the place to cultivate with her child,
she put the child on the ground.
When she had placed her child on the ground,
an antelope came to look.

This antelope jumped and played,
bulia, bulia, bulia [ideophone]
and said to the woman, "I am the antelope child-guardian.
That which will come to take the child away
to eat it in the future,
it won't be me the antelope coming to eat the child."

She did, she did, the woman, she cultivated and cultivated.
When she was finished,
she left the place of work,
she went to the village.

The next morning she came with her child.
She laid her child down in the same place.
The antelope came,
he came jumping and playing, jumping and playing.

He said to the woman,
"But it won't be me who will eat your child.
That which will take your child away
to eat it in the future,
it won't be me."
Then she left.

The next morning
the woman came again with her hoe;
she laid the child in the same place.
She, with her hoe, she cultivated, she cultivated.
The antelope was there in that place.

He said, "My woman.
I am the antelope, the child-guardian.

Children, I guard them;
that which will take your child to eat it
is in your own mouth.”

Eventually the woman went to the village.

She called, “Men, men, men, come to see the antelope;
he is in the bush;
he is very imprudent, exceedingly unwise.
When I go, I take my child and I lay him on the ground.
The antelope comes quickly;
he comes and plays and plays and plays at that place.
My child is quiet.
That’s how I cultivate and cultivate there.
I myself tell you.
Antelopes like this—
I, as a woman, see large antelopes.
Men get your guns, get your guns.
Let’s go.
Let’s hunt the antelope.”

“Really,” they said.

“Yes, indeed.”

The men with guns finally arrived.

“Aha,” she said.

“You wait.

You watch when I lay my child down.”

She laid the child in the same place
where she usually put him.
Now this one, the antelope,
she finally aha came out.
Thus she did,
she played in order to quiet the child, again.

“You woman. You woman.

I am the child-guardian.

That which will come to take your child to eat it
will come from your own mouth.

Bulia. Bulia.”

“Men take your guns. Ehe.”

Tashi. Tashi. [sound of bullets]

Finally the bullets did not hit the antelope.
The bullets hit the child right there.

The antelope said, “What did I say?
I said, I did, ‘Woman, woman!’
Right in this place even—
‘I am the child-guardian,
that which will take your child to eat it is yourself.’
Now look.”

Eventually they came to the village.
The badly wounded child died.
And that’s the end of it.