

October 2016

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Recommended Citation

Pereira-Müller, M.Margarida 177152 (2016) "The Universality of Traditional Tales of the Portuguese Speaking Countries," *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol11/iss1/11>

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The Universality of Traditional Folktales in the Portuguese Speaking World

M. Margarida Pereira-Müller

Abstract

Throughout the ages, the traditional tale has been the vehicle transmitting culture from generation to generation—the memory of a community. Since the beginning of mankind there have always been tales in all countries and cultures of the world. Many of the traditional stories we think are Portuguese or European are also found in other parts of the world, but are told in a very similar ways. Sometimes the only difference is the physical frame: the landscape, the flora and the fauna, how people dress or eat. Most of these tales have animals as main characters usually inserted in a social context, thus portraying humanity's intrigues, ambitions, generosity, violence, and justice. They are used to explain the origin of habits and customs, natural phenomena, and to teach fundamental concepts in human relations, as, for example, what is good and what is evil. This paper examines different categories of folktales in the Portuguese-speaking world emphasizing their role teaching important lessons of life often of universal appeal but through specific local context.

Ngungu, the Bird, and the Python

“It’s mine, it’s mine. This land is mine.”

Ngungu, the bird, spent his days singing, his eyes closed, craning his neck and shaking his wings. He sang laying the eggs. He sang while brooding the eggs. He sang searching for food.

“It’s mine, it’s mine. This land is mine.”

The other animals were outraged. They did not like these words at all.

“What does Ngungu mean with ‘This land is mine?’ The earth belongs to all of us. The earth is ours.”

One day the python decided to teach Ngungu a lesson.

“Let’s see what he will do when he sees what I’m up to.”

The python crawled to the leafy tree where the bird had his nest. As Ngungu was gone searching for food, the huge python climbed the tree and curled up in the nest, on the bird's eggs.

When Ngungu returned, he saw the huge python on his eggs. He was afraid and decided to sleep somewhere else.

"How is it possible? I don't understand. I am a bird and so I lay my eggs on the top of the trees. The python is an animal that lives on the soil. How did the python come to my nest?"

As soon as the sun rose, Ngungu returned to his nest to see whether the python had already left. But no. The python was still there, on his eggs.

"I don't understand this at all. I have to go to a sorcerer."

When the sorcerer heard the whole story, he just said, "My dear, there is no evil eye here."

"I beg your pardon? No evil eye? It's not possible!"

"The only thing that is evil are your own words."

Ngungu was astonished.

"I really don't understand anything. In my words?"

"Exactly. What do you usually sing?" the sorcerer asked.

"Well, I . . . I usually sing like this: It's mine, it's mine. This land is mine."

"See?! This is very bad! Do not sing 'this land is mine.' The other animals don't like it. Next time you'll have to sing like this: 'It's ours. It's ours. It's ours. It's ours. The land is ours.' You will see what will happen."

Ngungu returned to the tree where he lived and where he had his nest. The python was still there. For the second night he had to sleep somewhere else. As the first rays of sun appeared on the horizon, Ngungu sang, "It's ours. This land is ours."

And all animals answered in a choir, "It's ours. This land is ours."

Far away drums could be heard. Everyone was happy. The python stretched up and began to dance, shaking its head and crawling down the tree.

When the nest was free again, Ngungu went back and sat down on the eggs. Once the chicks were born, he taught them the new song, "It's ours. This land is ours."

And since that day, the bird never sang again, "It's mine, it's mine. This land is mine," but "It's ours. This land is ours." And Ngungu learned that shared joy is a double joy that your world is more than your eyes can see and that the higher the nest, the more modest should be your ambitions, because those who are on the ground, they can also climb . . . (Pereira-Müller, 2012, pp. 27-29)

I begin my article with an Angolan tale that features common elements of many such folktales.¹ Folk literature is primarily didactic, prepares for life, and tries to convey the information people need to carry on their lives properly. This is the rationale of most tales everywhere in the world: teaching young generations how to behave in society. Here in this story we learn:

- Shared joy is double joy;
- The world is bigger than what your eyes can see; and
- The higher the nest, the more modest you should be.

¹ This tale is translated into English here for the first time.

Before going on I have to admit that this is not necessarily the best time or format for such storytelling. Traditionally, in Africa, stories are told at night, around the fire. It is a belief that if a story teller tells stories during the day he/she will grow a tail. And we can follow this thought: if you sit to listen to stories it means you are not working. Therefore, the best time to tell stories is at night, around the fire. The story tellers used to be the elders of the village; they are a well of wisdom. In this mysterious atmosphere, only lit by the fire, they tell stories and they share love, betrayal and trust, luck and misfortune, consciousness and sub consciousness.

Bernardo Kusseri Cigaro Samatenje, the *kasesi*, or spiritual leader from Cahora Bassa, in Mozambique, says,

The Elders say
 The stories are to be told
 In the evening
 If you tell stories during the day,
 Your head swells.
 "That only happened in the past," you say.
 "The Elders say this because
 They wanted everybody to be there
 When they told their stories," you say.
 But I'll tell you:
 The stories are to be told
 In the evening.
 After you have eaten,
 When the fire is crackling,
 This is the time
 To open the book
 From long, long ago. (Tkacz & Muala, 2009, p. 51)

Storytelling is a social event for the whole community; it educates children and entertains adults. At night, around the fire, stories are told, riddle games are organized and proverbs are said.

Traditional tales are the residual history, linked to nature, to the memory of places, to superstitions; they are the justification of traditions that endure over time. We know that in societies based upon oral tradition, tales and proverbs are the most powerful means of information transmission. They are the memory of the people that goes from generation to generation. As Alfredo Hauenstein (1965) writes, they reflect our common roots, "wisdom and common sense monuments" (p. 11). The tales have a didactic nature, reflect the people's life philosophy, and serve to express what has to be said in an abstract and therefore non-threatening way. For example, through folk tales, revenge, or corrective-justice, is achieved through cleverness. Folk tales handle every issue: education, traditions, judgments, rewards, and myths.

How Can We Group the Folk Tales?

Many folk tales try to explain natural phenomena, the myths of creation, the origins of customs, a sort of science encyclopedia, describing the nature of various animals and plants, of such distant objects as the stars, or even the world itself. Examples include: the Mozambican tale “A lua feiticeira e a sua filha—ou donde surgiram os cágados” (The Sorcerer Moon and its Daughter—or Where Do Terrapins Come From), or where come drums from (in the tale from Guinea-Bissau “O macaquito do narizito branco”—The Monkey with the White Node), why lions eat hyenas or why hyenas eat rabbits (the Mozambican tale “O coelho, o leão e a hiena”—The Rabbit, the Lion, and the Hyena), why wasps always build their nests in special places (the Angolan tale “Peito celeste e a vespa”—The Blue Waxbill and the Wasp) or why cats and mice do not get along—as we can see in this Mozambican tale. I believe everywhere people say that cats and mice are enemies.

The Cat and the Mouse

Many thousands of years ago, cats and mice were close friends. Cats were even teachers at the mice school. They taught them everything they knew, especially how to flee when human beings chased them.

One day, the cat teacher came to class without having lunch. He blew his horn and all mice came in running. He started the class, but he could not think because of his hunger.

“What shall I do?” the cat was thinking while teaching math. “Wait, I have an idea.”

He ordered all mice to close their eyes and told them, “keep your eyes closed until I say you can open them.”

All the mice children thought it was a game and closed their eyes. The cat jumped, caught a mouse, and went with him outside to eat it. When he finished, he returned to the classroom and told his pupils that the game was over. The mice opened their eyes and noticed one mouse was missing.

“Master, where is our friend?” they asked.

“I ordered him to fetch an axe.”

The class ended and the mice went home. But the good taste of the mouse did not leave the cat’s mind.

On the next day, the cat played his horn as always before classes start and the mice children came to class. They did not know that the cat turned evil.

This time, the cat was not hungry, but he still remembered the good taste of the mouse in his mouth. So he asked the mice to close their eyes. As he did the day before he jumped, caught a mouse, went outside and ate it. When he finished, he returned to the classroom and told his pupils that the game was over. The mice opened their eyes and noticed one mouse was missing.

“Master, where is our companion?” they asked.

“I told him to get food.”

Day after day, the cat ordered the mice to close their eyes and ate one, telling a lie about his whereabouts. However, one day, while jumping on a mouse, he missed

frightening the mouse who ran away shrieking. The other mice opened their eyes and began to flee as well. Some went to the barn, others went to the bush.

But those who were in the barn could not leave because the cat was at the door waiting for them. And those who fled into the bush could not return because the cat would eat them. And so the friendship between cats and mice ended.² (Pereira-Müller, 2013, p. 17)

Like this, there are many folk tales that explain natural facts.

Let's consider other categories of tales. Very important are the tales that teach the ethics that help to train the character, complementary to family and tribal taboos. According to Henri Junod (1936), folk tales are a type of tribal ethics, being taught and repeated from generation to generation. They are "the quintessence of the moral education" (Hauenstein, 1965, p. 10). In this type we have folk tales whose main characters are animals or human beings that serve as a role model for the moral and cultural traditions of the community. Some examples:

- Those who follow the laws are rewarded and for misdeeds they are punished—as in "O grilo ladrão"—The Thief Cricket (Angolan tale)
- Friends who betray friends—a very common topic—as in "A hiena e o coelho" ("The Hyena and the Rabbit" or in "A raposa e a toupeira" ("The Fox and the Mole"), an Angolan tale that I will relate now.

The Fox and the Mole

Once upon a time a fox and a mole were very close friends, living together and eating together.

One day, they decided that the fox would go for chickens and the mole would steal the flour that the village women usually grind.

And so they did. In the morning, the fox left to hunt a chicken and the mole tried to steal flour. He made a hole in the ground where the women had the flour baskets and filled his bag. He returned home where the fox was already cooking the chicken. He prepared the cassava broth, and had a wonderful dinner.

The next day, they did the same procedure. But as the meal was ready to eat, the mole invited the fox for a swim in the nearby river before dinner.

"What a great idea!" said the fox.

What the fox did not know was that his friend had built a tunnel that connected the bank of the river to the house, as she knew the fox loved to dive and play the game who could stay longer under water.

When they reached the river, the fox proposed a game.

"Let's see who can stand longer under water."

The mole nodded and said to the fox, "You will not see me so soon!"

He jumped into the water and swam to the tunnel. He went to the house, ate a whole dinner and returned to the river. Then he came up to the surface and told the fox, "I can't stay no longer under water. Let's go home. I'm starving."

When they got home and saw that the food was gone, the fox asked astonished, "Who has eaten our food?"

"I do not know," said the mole, pretending to be astonished as well. "We went out together and we got back together. How can I know?"

² This tale is translated into English here for the first time.

So the fox had to go to bed starving. The next day, they did the same procedure again: the fox hunted a chicken and mole stole the flour. After the meal was ready, the mole suggested, “Let’s go to the river and take a swim.”

“It is better to eat first,” replied the fox. “Who knows if someone will come here and steal our food again?”

“What are you saying?” the mole replied. “Who would steal our food?”

“I do not know,” the fox said. “Look what happened yesterday.”

“Don’t be afraid. Nothing will happen.”

“OK, but let’s go fast.”

They ran to the river, and plunged. The mole swam to the tunnel, went home, ate the whole food, and returned to the river.

“OK,” the mole told the fox. “Now we go home and have dinner.”

But to the fox’s astonishment the pots were empty again.

“Haven’t I told you to eat first, and swim afterwards? Who has eaten our food?”

And once again, the fox went to bed starving.

On the next day, the fox told the mole he would hunt the chicken later.

“I’m going right away,” the mole said. “I cannot go later as the women only grind cassava in the morning.”

The mole went to the village, leaving the fox at home. The fox began to brood over who would steal the food every day.

“The mole is not worried at all. She is up to something. Is she betraying me?”

The fox went to the river and began to look around, trying to discover something suspicious. All of a sudden he discovered several mounds leading from the house to the river.

“Oh, there it is! The mole has been stealing the food. Let’s see who will have the last laugh.”

The fox gathered several sticks and set up a trap inside the tunnel.

Then he went to hunt a chicken. When he returned home, the mole was already there with the flour. They prepared the dinner, and as usual the mole suggested going for a swim in the river.

“Of course, with pleasure,” answered the fox.

When at the river, the fox dived and swam to the other bank. The mole plunged, entered the tunnel and was caught in the trap that the fox had prepared.

Seeing that his friend mole did not return, the fox went to the house. The food was still there! He returned to the tunnel and told the mole in the trap, “How did you dare to betray me? The game’s over. You were eating what I hunted. Now I am going to eat you.”

The mole died in the trap. The fox took it, took the fur and ate it. (Pereira-Müller, 2012, pp. 17-19)

Other topics of folk tales include: doing good deeds and not being rewarded, tales about seemingly weak or despised people who overcome dangerous situations because of their intelligence, courage, and heroism, as we can see in “O julgamento do coelho” (The Trial of the Rabbit—Guinea-Bissau, a tale that is very similar to “O avô crocodilo” (Grandfather Crocodile, about the Foundation of East Timor), or “O caçador, o coelho e a raposa” (“The Hunter, the Rabbit and the Fox” from Mozambique) or “O galo e o gato bravo” (“The Cock and the Wild Cat”, from Angola).

Some tales wrap up the whole essence of life: we all depend on each other, *no man is an island*, as we see in the Mozambican tale “Todos Dependem da Boca” (“All Depend on the Mouth”):

All Depend on the Mouth

One day, the mouth asked, “Although the body is one, which is the most important organ?”

The eyes answered, “We are the most important organ: we see what is happening.”

“No,” the ears said. “We are the most important, because we hear.”

“You’re wrong,” the hands said. “We are the most important organ because we grab things.”

That’s when the heart spoke: “I am the most important: I make the whole body work!”

“And I carry the food!” the belly said.

“Come on! The most important thing is to keep the body up, as we do,” the legs answered.

In the meantime, the woman brought the food for them to eat. The eyes saw the bread, the heart was touched, the belly waited to be fed, the ears heard, the hands could take bits and legs walked . . . but the mouth refused to eat—and kept refusing food for many days. All other organs gradually began to fail.

Then the mouth asked, “Well, who do you say is the most important organ in the body?”

“Art thou, o mouth!” they all answered. “You are our king!”

And so we see that we are all important, and that we need each other to live.³ (Pereira-Müller, 2013, p. 31)

Tales are characterized by a basic pattern and by narrative motifs, enabling them to cross language boundaries without much difficulty. Since their essence is oral and subject to its survival in the human mind, it is full of devices to aid memory—the same episode is repeated many times with little or no verbal change. For example, as a hero encounters his successive adversaries, the description changes only enough to indicate the increasing terror of the enemy always leading to a climax and usually to the hero’s success. These long repeated passages often enable the teller of tales or the singer of an epic to extend his performance as much as he desires. We can see this in the Portuguese tales “A formiga e a neve,” or “O coelhinho branco,” for example.

The White Rabbit (a Portuguese tale)

Once upon a time, a white rabbit went very early to his garden to get some sprouts for a soup. Back at home, he found the door locked from the inside.

He knocked and said, “I am the white rabbit. I went to the garden to pick up some sprouts for a soup.”

A goat answered from inside, “I am the Cabrês goat, I’ll jump upon you and kill you.”

The white rabbit was very sad. He sat on the door steps and was very sad. A dog came by and who asked him, “What’s the problem, white rabbit?”

³ This tale is translated into English here for the first time.

“I woke up very early, went to the garden to pick up some sprouts for a soup and when I came back, the Cabrês goat was inside my house. He’ll jump upon me and kill me. Can you help me?”

But the dog replied very fast, “I’m sorry. I’m not going in there. I’m afraid of the goat.”

The white rabbit sat again on the door steps and was very sad. A cock came by and who asked him, “What’s the problem, white rabbit?”

I woke up very early, went to the garden to pick up some sprouts for a soup and when I came back, the Cabrês goat was inside my house. He’ll jump upon me and kill me. Can you help me?”

But the cock replied very fast, “I’m sorry. I’m not going in there. I’m afraid of the goat.”

The white rabbit sat again on the door steps and was very sad. A cow came by and who asked him, “What’s the problem, white rabbit?”

“I woke up very early, went to the garden to pick up some sprouts for a soup and when I came back, the Cabrês goat was inside my house. He’ll jump upon me and kill me. Can you help me?”

But the cow replied very fast, “I’m sorry. I’m not going in there. I’m afraid of the goat.”

The white rabbit sat again on the door steps and was very sad. An ant came by and who asked him, “What’s the problem, white rabbit?”

“I woke up very early, went to the garden to pick up some sprouts for a soup and when I came back, the Cabrês goat was inside my house. He’ll jump upon me and kill me. Can you help me?”

And the ant replied very fast, “No worries. I’ll go inside and will solve the problem for you.”

The ant knocked on the door. A goat answered from inside, “I am the Cabrês goat, I’ll jump upon you up and kill you.”

And the ant replied, “And I’m the impertinent ant that is going to perforate your belly.”

The ant went inside the house through the key hole and killed the Cabrês goat. Then he opened the door, the bunny could come inside. He cooked his sprout soup and ate it with the ant. And from there on, they lived happily together. (Pereira-Müller, 1993, pp.3-6)

When talking about moral virtues, we know that intelligence and smartness triumph over power. The size does not matter: small beings overcome big and powerful animals, as we can see here in this tale of the “O coelhinho branco” (The Little White Rabbit, a story from Portugal), or in the “A velha e o ladrão” (The Old Woman and the Thief, also from Portugal) and many others.

We can also see here, as in almost any folk tale, the relation between the animal and the human is very close (Lucas, 2008). The cultural heroes who are responsible for the good and the bad in the life of the tribe may upon one occasion appear as men or women and upon another as animals, always acting as human beings. Folk tales are universal as they deal with issues that are important everywhere in the world. They send similar messages focusing on important cultural values. And that is why we can find different versions of what appears to be the same tale in many countries. However, the tales are not necessarily the same tales that have been transported and adapted as they were carried around the

Portuguese World from one locale to another, but arose independently from one another to emphasize similar if not universal values (Lucas, 2008).

Every folk tale has many versions, a direct consequence of the oral tradition and the absence of written documents. In general, the core of the tale, the main message to teach and pass along important cultural norms and values, is the same. Among tales with similar lessons, only the vicissitudes, the scenery changes. Furthermore, as consequence of the oral tradition we know that “Who tells a tale adds a tail.” According to Alfredo Hauenstein (1965), each traditional tale “has many versions, depending on the region, on the story teller, on the circumstances how they are being told” (p. 7). Each storyteller has the freedom to embellish the tale as long as he/she stays within the limits of local taboos. The folktale is anonymous and exists in many versions, all equally valid. Instead of being fixed like a literary document, it is in continual flux. But it is possible to establish certain norms of plot structure and to point with some assurance to the varieties of subtypes that give clues to its life history.

One example: the story of the crocodile that is found almost dying. We have a crocodile tale in East Timor—this is the national tale of the foundation of their island—and a very similar tale in Guinea-Bissau, two identical tales from two countries thousands of miles apart. In both tales we have a child who finds a crocodile that is dying. The crocodile asks for help and promises not to eat the child if he/she helps him to go to the river.

Although both tales figure a child, in the East Timorese tale we have a small boy and in the tale from Guinea-Bissau we have a girl. In both tales, the crocodile promises not to eat the child once it is saved but once it is in the water, the crocodile jumps to eat him/her. The main difference comes at the end: in the tale from Guinea-Bissau, the girl asks a rabbit for help—in Africa, the rabbit is the clever animal, just like the fox in Portugal, which is symbol for cleverness. He suggests the girl should show him how she managed to bring the crocodile to the river. She shows him, wrapping the crocodile’s mouth and legs. And then the rabbit says, “Now bring the crocodile to your parents, for them to make a nice soup, because you have to be grateful when someone does something good to you.”

In the East Timor tale, the boy asks other animals for their opinion. They all say the same: you have to be grateful when someone does something good to you. The crocodile acknowledges this and makes a pact with the boy: he will bring him wherever he wants. They have fun together until the day he dies and the Timorese island appears. We can clearly see here the didactic function of the tales: to honor one’s word and to be good to those who are good to you. Both tales give consistency to daily situations and structure them.

Another example: the Mozambican tale “The Antelope and the Snail” (“A Gazela e o Caracol”) brings the familiar topic of the animal races, like Aesop’s fable “The Tortoise and the Hare.” However, the Mozambican tale has a modern touch: paper and writing! Why would a tale of oral tradition talk about the importance of writing?

We have already noted that “Who tells a tale adds a tail.” Each storyteller tells the stories in his/her own way, enriching them with personal/tribal details, according to his/her imagination and his/her religious beliefs and cultural background. Here we cannot forget the influence religion and Christian missionaries had in Africa. The missionaries were the first to collect the African folk tales, proverbs, and riddles in writing—and by doing so they changed whatever they thought would not fit in their religious beliefs and social norms. The missionary storyteller interprets what he hears through the filter of his Western culture, of Jewish-Christian tradition, his white settler spirit and passes the story on to others (Costa, 2010). Furthermore we cannot forget that some folk tales lost their original meanings through linguistic misunderstanding. While the question of origins and dissemination of the folk tales is largely beyond the scope of this article, it is generally accepted that such sharing, borrowing, and adaptation of folktales is commonplace across cultural contact zones.

In the the Mozambican tale “The Antelope and the Snail” the paper sheet pollute “the whole structural line” as the anthropologist Viegas Guerreiro (1968) highlights: “The story teller wants to bring the attention of the reader to the paper” (p. 130).

The Antelope and the Snail

An antelope met a snail and told him with contempt, “Snails cannot run. All you can do is drag yourself on the floor.”

The snail did not like the way he was being spoken to and replied, “Come back on Sunday and we’ll see!”

The snail got then 100 sheets of paper and wrote on each sheet, “When the antelope comes by and says Snail, you’ll have to reply, I am here.”

The snail went to his friends and handed out the sheets of paper, asking them, “Could you please spread out and when the antelope goes by? You’ll have to say what is written in the papers.”

On Sunday, the antelope arrived in town, saw the snail and said, “Let’s run. But you’re going to be left behind anyway!”

The snail hid in a bush, and let the antelope run.

While he was running, he would call, “Snail!”

And there was always a snail that replied, “I am here.”

The antelope ran even faster and faster. Eventually he fell down, exhausted, out of breath. And the snail won the race, due to its cleverness of writing 100 sheets of paper.⁴ (Pereira-Müller, 2013, p. 23)

In many folk tales there is a race between unequal partners but most often brain is matched against brawn and the race is won by means of trickery or cleverness: either the slower animal jumps on the other’s back or tail and hops off at the end when the creature turns round to see where his challenger has got to, like in the São Tomé e Príncipe “A Aposta da Tartaruga” (“The Tortoise Bet”), or else he is deceived by lookalikes substituting themselves along the course—or

⁴ This tale is translated into English here for the first time.

writing papers. In this particular tale, the importance of being educated is highlighted, one of the aims of the missionaries in Africa.

Tales with a similar theme very often emphasize persistence or doggedness. In many tales the main characters are animals that act like human beings with their own personality, thinking like humans, fooling themselves, lying, cheating, betraying, loving, etc. They are a part of their environment and of their own social context. They are a mirror of life with intrigues, ambitions, generosity, violence, and justice. Social injustice is often dealt with through diplomacy and politeness - “tales show personality traits, notes of local traditions, political, social and religious system, and superstitions” (Costa, 2010).

Cleverness is one of the main features in folk tales—everywhere in the world. An example is the Portuguese tale about the “Stone Soup” (“A Sopa da Pedra”). Similar tales can be found in Hungary, France, Russia, and many other countries.

Stone Soup

In the story of the Stone Soup, a poor monk comes to a village, carrying nothing more than a stone. Upon his arrival, the villagers are unwilling to share their food stores but the monk tells them he can make a wonderful soup with his stone. One of the villagers becomes curious and asks how he can do it. The monk answers that he only needs a pot. The villager gives him a pot. Another villager walks by, inquiring about the stone soup; the monk answers he only needs a little bit of water. More and more villagers walk by, each adding another ingredient: cabbage, carrots, potatoes, sausages, and so on. Finally, a delicious and nourishing pot of soup is ready to be eaten and enjoyed by all.

We have seen that there are many features that are common to the tales of the Portuguese-speaking countries, making them really universal and serving as a guideline to educate the younger generations. Tales portray the intrigues, ambitions, generosity, violence, and justice of a community and have a didactic function, teaching fundamental values in human relations and explaining the origin of habits, customs, and natural phenomena.

I finish my article with a small text by Jorge Francisco Afonso, chief of Tamarara, Mozambique (Tkacz & Muala, 2009):

The spirits are like the wind.
They are with you wherever you go.
Can you see the wind?
Can you keep it in your hand?
Your spirits walk with you.
They are part of your family. (p. 15)

Let us stay with our spirits, with our stories, our tales, our proverbs, our riddles—as they help ground us in our humanity.

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