THE TRICKSTERS OF KARAMOJA

MUSTAFA KEMAL MIRZELER
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

I

Karamojong oral tradition provides several trickster characters such as the rabbit, the self-appointed moral guard. This rabbit pretends to defend the weak and the powerless, yet secretly steals from them, but in the end gets exposed for what it really is. Then there is the clever fox, which skilfully tricks people with its clever manipulations, convincing them that it is honest and upright, not unlike the rabbit, but then it too gets caught stealing. Napeikisina, the one-breasted villain trickster, the symbol of humanity's penchant for evil, masquerades her insatiable cannibalistic propensities and desire for recognition, but her penchant for evil eventually becomes apparent, thus frightening people, and like all the other tricksters she too gets caught.

Ben Knighton seems to possess some of the attributes of some of these tricksters. With amazing legerdemain, he skilfully manages to conjure up oral and written texts in an attempt to persuade people to believe that what they read is authentic, in order to offer himself as the paramount authority on all matters Karamoja. But he too ends up getting caught, like all the Karamojong tricksters.

II

Luckily, there are lessons to be learned from Knighton's otherwise inexplicable departure from accepted editorial norms. These are not limited to the violation of certain principles that govern intellectual disagreement, fairness, and justice, but also the integrity of the historical record.[1] By his

[1]For example, see the American Historical Association's Statement's on Standards of Professional Conduct, which stipulates that honoring the historical record "means leaving

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distortions—which can only be purposeful—of both oral and written texts, his silent inattention to details, and his repeated departures from editorial norms, Knighton creates not only a fictionalized MY2000, but also a fictionalized Karamoja.

Knighton cannot simply claim that he put inverted commas to "five sentences" with an intention of checking with the original article and that for some obscure reason his "intention was never executed." Anyone reading chapter 5 of Knighton's work, which is the most important chapter of his book since all the reviewers refer to it, would realize that his main arguments have been derived from a version of my work which he has mangled virtually beyond recognition, forcing my texts to say things that I clearly neither said nor implied.

III

Knighton's assertion regarding the voice of Amuk is no less flawed, since Amuk's statement refers neither to the Teso district nor to the Seredo sorghum. At the same time, his labored definition and discussion of warlord-vs-war-leader merely protracts a moot argument of no obvious significance. While he extensively disputes that Nakapor was and is a firemaker, he claims that he had sadly forgotten to ask "Lodoc [*sic*] about fire-maker" when he interviewed him on 14 October 2005. Knighton has been so fixated for the last several years with Nakapor *not* being the firemaker that he has challenged that fact in all his various publications in ways that portray me as a fabricator of stories, yet he asks readers to believe that he forgot to ask Lodoch about this fact when he interviewed him in 2005?! Moreover, Knighton did not ask that burning question to Nakapor himself, even though he lives next door to Lodoch. It is not a rhetorical question to wonder how Knighton could not know who the firemaker is, since this is common knowledge among people who live in the area, and since Nakapor has been an important politico-religious functionary of the Jie people for many years—and lives next to one of his chief informants. Nor is this knowledge arcane, nor confined to the Karamoja. For instance, in narrating her memory of Nakapor, Sr. Camilla Roach states that:

> It is in connection with sorghum that I remember the man Nakapor, the firemaker. When I was in Kotido I did hear of this man and that he was a very important person. I got to see him on an occasion when I was invited to attend a sorghum ritual. I was part of a group going to this celebration. I remember the wild excitement of the other groups on the road with elders and warriors dressed in their

a clear trail for subsequent historians to follow" (16 May 2006: 2): http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/professionalstandards.cfm?pv=y

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> beads, ostrich plumes and AK47s. The women glistened with ghee carrying their gourds of sorghum seed. This seed, I was told, came from the gardens of these women. Upon nearing the *manyattas* [homesteads] where the celebrations were to occur, clouds of dust from the vibrating dance could be seen everywhere. Once within the *manyatta* and caught up in all this frenzy, stench and joy, I saw the people depositing their sorghum seed into a large central granary. At one point in that afternoon amidst much drinking, shouting and dance I saw one of Nakapor's women stirring the contents of this granary. It was Nakapor, then who took one gourd at a time and filled each with seed from the granary. I was told that it was this new seed given back in turn to each community that would bring forth the new harvest. The Professor [Mirzeler] was present this day and participated himself, alongside Nakapor (Sr. Camilla Roach, personal communication, 8 November 2005).

IV

Knighton's editorial legerdemain and his distorted criticism of MY2000 are not confined to his book. In fact in my paper I targeted only a few of his deformed transcriptions, truncated and transposed sentences, and silent emendations of my text. Knighton's book as well as his later paper (Knighton 2006), however, are replete with mistranscriptions, distortions, and misrepresentations beyond imagination. Take, for instance, the following passage from Knighton (2006), which he claims derives from MY2000. The distortion of the passage is astounding, and it would infuriate anyone who reads it in context, but everyone interested in academic honesty must read it nevertheless.

> Nakapor, the current *ekoworan* [*sic*] (politico-religious leader who demonstrates his traditional power by making fire from wet branches of essegese tree) of Jie, says that 'today, the overarching political context of the current warfare in Northern Uganda is defined as a secular state war, and that Uganda as a national entity takes precedence over traditionally defined ethnic identities and supersedes the spiritual ramifications of death from AK-47s during clashes from the government' (Mirzeler and Young 2000, p. 420).[2]

[2]I must observe that in 2001 Knighton used this same distorted passage above when he first challenged MY2000. Crawford Young and I had pointed out this particular distorted passage and pointed out the problem of unilaterally added quotation marks that do not exist in the original text. Knighton's paper and our rebuttal never got published, but the editor shared our response with Knighton, so Knighton was presuambly aware of the problem. Hence Knighton can hardly claim that this was an unintentional mistake. During the time when I was preparing a rebuttal paper, I was also carrying out oral history

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Note that Knighton quotes the passage from our text *as if* it was direct speech coming from the mouth of Nakapor, by inserting quotation marks that do *not* exist in our text. He then immediately scores in the footnote (Knighton 2006:282n), based on the added quotation marks, by stating that, "[i]t is incredible that such academic-speak could appear on the lips of Nakapor, the alleged traditional fire-maker, in any language." Continuing with his dispute over the position of Nakapor as the firemaker, Knighton maintains that, "Mirzeler and Young are unaware that the succession to the role of fire-maker has long been contested, so that none is recognized as consecrated, and an interregnum persists (J2, 31)". So he maintains (Knighton 2006:282) that "it would appear that Nakapor had been telling Mirzeler stories (Knighton 2005, pp. 182-184)." It is true enough of course that Nakapor did tell me both fictional and non-fictional stories, since he was one of the Jie storytellers whom I worked with. However, Nakapor neither put words into people's mouths nor did he surround the words of others by constructed quotation marks to make it look like a direct speech when reporting the views of others.

It is self-evident in MY2000 that we paraphrased Nakapor's testimony, yet Knighton's added quotation marks make it appear as if we quoted Nakapor directly. Here is how the same passage appears in MY2000.

> Nakapor, the current *ekeworan* (the politico-religious leader who demonstrates his traditional power by making fire from wet branches of the *essegese* tree) of **the** Jie, **explained to us how some of the young kraal leaders persuade warriors to dissociate themselves from the forms of unblessedness and soullessness of automatic weapons. In the words of Nakapor, they dismiss the spiritual consequences of deaths caused during national defence. Nakapor** says that today, the overarching political context of the current warfare in northern Uganda is defined as secular state war, and that Uganda as a national entity takes precedence over traditionally defined ethnic identities and supersedes the spiritual ramifications of death from AK-47s during clashes for the government (Mirzeler and Young 2000: 420).

research with senior scholars of the Karamoja Plateau and Lake Turkana region, which was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation. When I shared the distorted passage above with P.H. Gulliver, Pamela Gulliver, Paul Spencer, Rada Dyson-Hudson, Neville Dyson-Hudson, James Barber, and Elizabeth Marshal-Thomas, they were all astonished by the manner in which Knighton had manhandled my text. I want to take the opportunity to thank these scholars for their moral support and their guidance. I also would like to thank my colleagues Robert Ulin, Bilinda Straight, and Ann Miles for reading portions of this paper, and for their invaluable suggestions. While I acknowledge the assistance of all these scholars, I am at the same time solely responsible for the information and arguments in this paper.

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As the readers can see, there are *no* quotation marks—and *no* direct quotations—in our report of Nakapor's testimony in the passage quoted above, and that Knighton has added these while professing to quote from MY2000. As well, he has silently omitted a sentence and phrases from our text, without taking the trouble to insert ellipses, which I have indicated in boldface type. Did Knighton *accidentally* insert quotation marks which made it look like a single direct quotation from MY2000, and then forget to remove them in the same way as he has claimed to have done in his book? We don't know, because Knighton offers no explanation for the silently omitted sentence and phrases and missing ellipses? This, and the numerous other egregious misstatements, force me to believe that these distortions was not unintentional at all.

Not only did Knighton distort textual materials, but also oral sources. For instance, when he stated (Knighton 2006: 282) that "Mirzeler and Young are unaware that the succession to the role of fire-maker has long been contested, so that none is recognized as consecrated, and an interregnum persists (J2, 31)," he failed to offer any verification. After all, the oral source 31 is only a number, perhaps plucked from the ether—not even a tribal initial has been assigned as with his other oral sources.

No less curiously, in his response paper "Of War-Leader and Fire-Makers: a Rejoinder," conjoined herewith, Knighton quotes the same passage—slightly differently of course—from his 2006 work in the following manner: "the writers are unaware that the succession to the role of firemaker has long been contested, so that none is recognized as consecrated, and an interregnum persists (J1, J2)." Readers will notice that the oral sources for the statement in this paper is identified as J1 and J2, whereas the sources for the very same statement in his 2006 paper are identified as J1, and 31. Why, I can only wonder, did Knighton omit oral source 31 and introduce J1 in its place? Are the true sources of this statement J1 and J2, or J2 and 31, or none of the above? This is the kind of artful methods—confusion confounded—Knighton uses when making categorical statements about the Karamojong people. All this suggests that Knighton is persistently unable to quote either his written sources or his oral sources accurately.

V

Readers will need to decide for themselves, but I have no choice but to be totally unimpressed with Knighton's response, and will do nothing further than point out that his peculiar notions of acceptable citations of oral and textual sources and interpretation *necessarily* cast all his arguments, including those in his other published works, into unfathomable doubt, rendering his book and other publications of decidedly dubious value.

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I am naturally curious about the motivation of Knighton's repeated distortions and misuse of his sources, including, but hardly confined to, my work. Multiple, possibly conflicting perspectives are among the ineluctable partial truths that festoon ethnography and history. One of the most basic tenets of academic trust is adherence to established editorial norms when citing and quoting, ensuring not only accurate and fair textual transmission of information, but also the representation of that knowledge. I hope Knighton will move on and make better use of his time, rather than feeling unduly fixated on my work, trying desperately to find mistakes at the expense of rendering his own work suspect. In this instance at least, like the fictional tricksters of Karamojong oral tradition, Knighton has been caught out.

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