

The Value of Preserving Indigenous Knowledge through Storytelling and Oral History

By Phumeza Mntontishi



Figure 1: Phumeza Mntontishi is thanked by Trish Middlebrook after her talk

Introduction

African storytelling often incorporates elements of history, mythology and moral lessons, using vivid language, rhythm and song to captivate audiences. These narratives, shared within communities, serve to preserve cultural heritage, reinforce social bonds and transmit knowledge across generations. They are often taken as pointers of our life directions, meaning the type of society that is expected in future.

"It takes a village to raise a child. Raising a child is a communal effort that requires the support and involvement of the entire community, not just the parents."

Storytelling is tremendously important in all societies, serving a far more diverse purpose than simply entertainment. It teaches lessons of religion, morals, history, roles and societal codes. It builds strong bonds among generations and helps people share experiences and ideas. Legends tell of cultural heroes and important ancestors who were intelligent, courageous and generous. Therefore, young people learn about these illustrious ancestors through story telling. In a very real sense, these ancestors participate and influence the lives of people today. Sadly, all these important life values have been replaced by destructive technological devices stealing away the role of natural societal healers who typically share information during trying times.

Both Chinua Achebe and Leslie Marmon Silke highlight the importance of unity amongst diverse groups, sharing a common goal towards achieving or forging a society that is rich with history and knowledge ready to be passed on to the next generation. This is not a role for one person to play nor is it confined to one gender. It has also been shown that irrespective of the ethnic group one belongs to, it is possible to share common cultural practices that help install peace and harmony for better life for all.

The lesson to take home is to continue educating our young generation to be proud of their history and heritage. Elderly people in society - male or female, traditional healers, educators, writers and praise signers - are normally the people trusted to carry on with the tradition. However, they are now faced with the challenge of being replaced by modern technological gadgets meant to advance our lives, but which are now taking over the role to some extent.

The dominance of modernisation has twisted or shaken many valuable tools formerly used to build a moral society. The migrant labour system, which was meant to provide financial support, has also played an important part in the destabilization of our society through the disruption of normal family life. Experiences of our former intimate inter-cultural roles have vanished to some extent through time.

Symbolic meaning and uses of Nature, Animals and Plants in our Cultures

I would like to illustrate the power of storytelling using an example. Some familiar features of the folktale, a common kind of story around the world, can be discerned in Tortoise and the Birds, an Igbo folktale recounted in Chinua Achebe's acclaimed 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*.

"Once upon a time, she began, all the birds were invited to a feast in the sky" as Achebe renders the traditional Igbo folktale into English. The story explains a cause, origin or reason for something, that is, it gives an "*etiological explanation...at the end*". In this case, this is used to explain why the tortoise shell is "not smooth" (Obie China, *Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel*).

The story dramatizes a moral: A greedy Tortoise, "*full of cunning*" who is eventually punished. The tortoise falls from the sky and "*his shell broke into pieces*". In folktale worlds, the tortoise represents a "*naughty*" but not "*irredeemably wicked*" character. In the story "*a great medicine-man in the neighborhood*" patches Tortoise's shell together again.

In concluding, it should be noted that despite these universal features, the particular narrative meanings, themes, genres and styles of storytelling around the world differ from culture to culture.

Sources of Information

Phumeza N.Mntontishi - Albany Museum Anthropology Dept & Traditional Healing Archives (From 2010-2019)

Peter Magubane - *Vanishing Cultures Book* (1993)

Leslie Marmoth Silko book - *Epigraph to ceremony*(1977)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o *in case studies and folk laws*