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Song Stitchers and Knowledge Keepers: An Introduction to Traditional Storytellers and their Craft

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Abstract

Storytelling is the process of sharing events, real or fictional. Oral storytelling is a human activity as ancient as human history. It is also a part of every culture and age and may remain so despite the introduction of more sophisticated means of communication, transcription and recording. Oral storytelling predates writing and involves narrative, music/musical instruments and dance and in some cultures art as well. The stories include history, myths, legends, fables and folktales and may contain poems, chants, rhythms, songs and prayers. Throughout human history, stories have been used to give meaning to a culture's history, to teach life lessons and to communicate a people's connection to the earth, to its flora and fauna and in the process to nurture their verbal language. In other words, storytelling has been a primary means to preserve a culture, its history and its language. As such, storytellers were the repositories of cultures and the conduit vital to the survival and continuation of cultures.

Keywords: Orality, storytelling, repository, culture, tradition.

Introduction

"If you listen carefully, at the end you will be someone else" (Book 1 of The Mahabharata).

Ancient societies understood the value of the activity known as storytelling. Not only were ancient storytellers regarded as highly valued members of the society but storytelling sessions were often conducted in a ritualistic and ceremonious manner. While entertainment and amusement were basic ingredients of these sessions, to varying degrees, it was understood by all that they were participating in an important ritual which connected them to the world of their ancestors and also to the world of the generations that will follow theirs. Some cultures have refined storytelling to a form of specialised art that may be practiced only by the chosen ones; those privileged to be blessed with the 'gift' or those privileged to be born into the craft. But all those who undertook this commission did so only after years of grueling training and practice.

Some of the cultures with distinctive and definitive storytelling traditions down the ages:

Singer Bards and Rhapsodes/Song Stitchers of Ancient Greece: For hundreds of years, writers have taken the works of Aesop and Homer as models and inspiration for their own greatest poems and stories. Homer's 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey', the first and greatest stories in western civilisation are considered the basis of Greek and Roman history, religion and morality and the backbone of humane education. Aesop's fables or the Aesopica, besides being a basic part of children's literature, has several additional purposes. Over the centuries, they have taught people of all ages and races how to choose correct actions or suffer the consequences of incorrect actions; they have been a tool which the weak in society may use to fight the strong; or simply to illustrate or support a specific point in an argument. During their times, the 'Iliad'

and the 'Odyssey' as well as the 'Aesopica' were oral tales. They were oral narratives with which the *Aoidoi/Singing Bards* and *Rhapsodes/ Song Stitchers* thrilled audiences. The stories were told from memory and passed down from one generation to the next. Only later they were preserved in writing from the memory of these storytellers. Rhapsodes were itinerant performers of epic-poetry who were also known as '*Homeridai*' or disciples of Homer. The term '*rhapsode'* is derived from '*rhapsoidein*' which means 'to sew songs' and illustrates how the oral-poets uses the outer framework of an epic while shifting its content of myths, tales and jokes according to the taste of his current audience. Homer's own term for a poet was '*aoidos*' or *singer* and according to scholars this supports the theory that the Homeric tradition was an oral tradition and was passed down by word of mouth.

Elders/Knowledge Keepers of the Aborigines of Australia: *Songlines,* also called *'Dreaming tracks'* are a form of indigenous storytelling of the Australian Aborigines. A sacred narrative of creation, *The Dreaming* or the Dreamtime, is seen as a continuous process that links traditional Aboriginal people to their origins. "Dreamings" are significant means of intergenerational knowledge transmission, which in pre-contact days occurred entirely by word of mouth" (Adetunji, 2014). Aboriginal Creation myths tell of totemic beings who wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path - birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes - and so singing the world into existence. *Dreaming Tracks* are stories about the path of a creator-spirit during a time, the dream times/Dreamtime/Dreaming, when the earth was first formed and the land was inhabited by the heroic ancestral figures. Although there are about 500 different Aboriginal peoples in Australia with their own language, culture and customs, the religio-cultural worldview of the '*Dreaming'* is a commonality to all. The *Dreaming* not only explains the origin of the universe and workings of nature and humanity, but it shapes and structures Aborigine family life, relations to people, and to land and spirits. Elders and Knowledge Keepers were the custodians of these Dreaming stories which were the sources of ecological, medicinal, environmental, cultural and spiritual knowledge. These were passed on through various customs such as

ceremonial body painting, storytelling, song and dance. *Elders* and *Knowledge Keepers* are gifted their teachings by other *Elders* and *Knowledge Keepers* over years of mentorship. They are taught how to care for these teachings and can share this knowledge with others only when permitted to do so.

Mo'olelo/Stories of Hawaii: *Mo'olelo* comes from two words: *mo'o* meaning *succession* and *olelo* meaning *language* or *speaking*. Thus, *mo'olelo* means "succession of language" since all stories were oral. Hawaiian *mo'olelo* or stories are considered critical to a full understanding of Hawaiian culture and the preservation of the breathtaking natural world which is embedded in the stories. Ancient Hawaiians used stories to document their history, knowledge and fact and beliefs for the generations to come. The accounts were recollection of events and experiences which were passed down from *Kupuna/ Elder* to *Keiki/Child* and consisted of *Mele/Song*, *Oli/Chant* and *Hula/ Dance*, a line age that spans back thousands of years. "Storytelling is the opportunity to channel stories from our past. You allow (listeners) to not only see it, but partake in it", says Lopaka Kapanui, native Hawaiian storyteller (Jay, 2020). Storytellers in Hawaiian culture were the historians as well as the recorders of genealogy and were honoured members of the society.

Griots/Jelis of West Africa: "The *griot* knows everything that is going on...He is a living archive of the people's traditions...The virtuoso talents of the griot command universal admiration. This virtuosity is the culmination of long years of study and hard work under the tuition of a teacher who is often a father or uncle." (Bebey, 1983).

The *griots/jeli* were historians, advisors, arbitrators, praise singers and storytellers. Their traditional role was to preserve genealogies, historical narratives and oral traditions of their people. Some griots were attached to courts as advisors and diplomats, some served as recorders, historians and educators of several villages. Alex Haley, the American writer of *Roots* speaking of his encounter with a *griot* during his research into his family history in Africa: "The *griot* would speak, bending forward from the waist, his body rigid, his neck cord standing out, his words seeming almost physical objects. Spilling from the griot's

head came an incredibly complex...clan lineage that reached back across many generations; ... To date things the griot linked them to events, such as "- in the year of the big water".

Seanchaí/Bearers of old lore of Ireland: In 1284, Edward I of England ordered all Irish bards to be killed. Because of their great power to sway people he feared they might incite an Irish revolt against his rule. The Irish is a culture with deep appreciation for the "spoken word" and as such has one of the richest folklore and storytelling traditions in the world. *Seanchai/Bearers of old lore* were the custodians of Irish tradition and history. Their repertoire was more than a thousand historical ballads passed down from one generation to the other orally, through storytelling. Jack Lynch, Chair of *Aos Scéal Éireann*, *Storytellers of Ireland*, describe the Irish bards as "reporters, entertainers and historians" rolled into one. Traveling from village to village they told their folklore, fables, heroic myths and fighting faeries tales while recording and passing on local history. Making the everyday interesting, embellished and embroidered with each re-telling, recognised everywhere as the Irish way of storytelling has been a tradition since the times of Gaelic chieftains.

The role of storytellers as the primary means of preserving culture, histories and literary records cannot be overstated. In oral cultures, in the absence of written records, stories provided the cohesion required to connect the people to their past, to the land they inhabit, to the living things they share the world with and to their future generations. From basic skills like how to make fire to the intricacies of political treaties, from how the universe came to be to why the crow is black, stories and their tellers have instructed, educated and guided countless generations without the help of the written word. "Each time a story is told, it breathes life into the culture, cultivates their verbal language. It gives meaning to the tribe's history..." (*Murray, 2015*).

A creation myth of the Khasi tells the story of an ancestor who was sent to an appointed place in the mountains to meet God, *U Blei.* For eight days, *U Blei* instructed him on the history of the Khasis, and the religious and moral principles which should govern the life of the Khasi. He was also given a manuscript which contained the alphabet

along with written instructions of *U Blei's* teachings. But on his trip home while struggling to cross a river in spate, the man accidentally swallowed the manuscript which he had clenched with his teeth for safety from the water. Returning home empty-handed, the man had to pacify his disappointed and irritated people by offering to repeat everything that *U Blei* had taught him. Beginning with the story of the creation of the world, how man was sent from heaven in order to be wise rulers of the earth and how man may seek God through respect for man and nature, the man passed on everything he had learned to elders and representatives of the people who then took the stories home to their families and people. This is how the Khasis lost the alphabet and also how their tradition of storytelling began. Each Khasi *hima* (traditional kingdom under a *syiem*/king) has thousands of stories "invested with symbolical significance and deliberately rendered interesting so as to be guile listeners..." (Nongkynrih, 2007). With the "twin objective of instruction and entertainment "they have been handed down orally through generations of village storytellers and family elders to children:

"Like vines tying everything
into a knot of one race of skin
and blood, chanting the songs.
The stories burn our memories like
A distant meteor..." (Kharmawphlang, 2009)

Among the Naga tribes, the onus of storytelling appears to have rested on the shoulders of village elders and family elders rather than designated storytellers. "Folktales and the oral tradition of storytelling have long been a rich repository of entertainment, values and wisdom among the Nagas." (Prelude to *Retelling Naga Narrative*). For the Aos, the *morung* and *tsuki* were institutions where young men and women "...learned various practical skills, art and the oral history of the people" (Imsong, 2009.). An important part of the instructions were folktales narrated by the elders to the youngsters."One cannot undermine how ethnic Naga identity and its history are embedded in folktales... the body of knowledge found in the oral traditions and folktales cannot be ignored". (Imsong, 2009). Storytelling provided a "... comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge systems, incorporating

art with reality, history with imagination and the ideal with the practical" (Datta, 2019).

Traditionally, for the practitioners of storytelling, training began early in life, sometimes as early as 8 (eight) years old and continued for decades until they mastered the skills required to perform the hundreds of songs and stories that made up their heritage. Theirs was no mere storytelling, they were equipping a people with survival skills and survival kits. Theirs was also not a simple task. "To solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thoughts must come into being in heavily rhythmic balanced patterns, in repetitions and antithesis, in alliterations and assonance, in epithetic and other formulary expressions..." (Ong, 1982).

Conclusion

The fear of cultures disappearing in the wake of western civilisation has seen a rush in activities to transcribe and record folklores and folktales. This means that good portions of the world's oral narratives are now safe in seemingly indestructive forms. The ancient philosopher, Socrates did not write down any of his thoughts but his student and protege, the philosopher Plato, recorded their discussions. On the deficiencies of writing Socrates said, "[Writing]… will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory".

The forefathers, ignorant and illiterate, reposed their collective wisdom and knowledge in the memories of a chosen community of people known as storytellers. When the occasion demanded, this knowledge could be called forth through the "voices of unnamed narrators, the tones that convey horror, surprise, indifference or humour, the nuances in expression, the additions, subtractions, multiplication or division of details in various versions, gestures, improvisations or other embellishments." (Lotha, *et al.* 2014).

All of which are absent in the absence of the storyteller.

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