

PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE | PEER REVIEWED

Once were Stories: A Celebration of Black African Folklore

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Abstract

Each culture appears to have the phenomenon of Storytelling. In some cultures, Storytelling has taken the form of writing. While writing is an amiable enterprise, spontaneously spoken stories have an import that we cannot capture in words on a piece of paper with ink. In most of traditional Africa, we are faced with a clash of cultures, evidently resulting from the continent's colonisation. We sit with the push for literary advancement. Academic advancement has added permanence to some of our folklore. What we lose in such progress is the plasticity of artful Storytelling. While Africa is striding towards the physical archiving of stories in books partly due to rapid urbanisation and social changes, most continental cultures gather around a fire for tales that answer mystical questions of why we are here. This paper aims to honour those stories and story holders and not a comparative discussion of storytelling traditions. Apart from situating myth and story, this paper is a pure celebration of my heritage in the interrelation of music and musical tales. My early initiation into musical legends influences how I encounter music therapy as folklore. If music therapy were folklorist, participants would benefit from the more-than-medicalisation of music, but the imaginal's swell provides sound grounding for all beings.

Keywords: *Sulwe, Cula, mythology, black African folklore*

What would it take to heal,
The virulent skin disease
Propped up by the lie
That dark chocolate's real
Value is in sourcing pythons
In the woodland savannah?

What would it take to exorcise,
The demon of self-loathing
Glimpsed by the deprivation
Of the gravitas of the ebony corpus
In the scatterings of the cradle of humanity?

Introduction

The epigraph is the first half of a poem I wrote while exploring race relations' difficult question. I like to ask questions that do not lead to answers. While I like questions, I like stories more. I have been curious about stories and their mythopoetic potency for most of my life. Consequently, my postgraduate research was informed by and situated in storification. While Africa is striding towards the physical archiving of stories in books partly due to rapid urbanisation and social changes, most continental cultures continue to gather around a fire for tales that answer mystical questions of why we are here. This paper aims to honour those stories and story holders. The article is not a comparative discussion of storytelling traditions. Apart from situating myth and story, this paper is a pure celebration of my heritage in the interrelation of music and musical tales.

Background

In 1987, at the age of five, I left my parental home to go and live with Bina Winnie. She lived in village Buumba. Buumba is my maternal ancestral village in Chitongo, in the hinterland of Mazabuka in southern Zambia. Buumba was my home for five years, and Bina Winnie was my biological mother's elder sister. Because of her elder position to my mother, Bina Winnie, also known as ba Malita, according to buTonga, was my older mother. It was in those years, living with artistic ba Malita, that I entered primary school. More than entering the education system that has set me up for the journey here, I was initiated into the buTonga practice of Storytelling. ba Malita was a consummate artist who potted, pounded corn and cooked while accompanying herself with pervasive tunes. She spontaneously broke into song and dance. During ceremonies, she led crowds into ritual music and dance. Her artistry stayed with her until it was her turn to enter the communion of ancestors. I revelled in ba Malita's free-spiritedness. She lived fully and kept the faith of the community a celebrated matriarch for many years.

Mythological Patterns

Imagine me sitting around a moonlight fire, surrounded by my kins, waiting to hear a tale from ba Malita at the end of the day. As a child, I knew that the lure of the night was listening to stories of lions and elephants supported by musical refrains. Stories of animals played an essential role in organising the community. The animals would take on human qualities of attentiveness, pleasure, and delight. These tales were folklore passed down from generation to generation, an important tradition and custom. Many mythological stories explained how the world came into existence. BaTonga, like most people of Africa, did not use written language until modern times. Instead, they possessed rich and complex oral traditions, passing myths, legends, and history from generation to generation in spoken and sung form.

BaTonga have professional storytellers—called Basikwaana—who preserved the oral tradition. Basikwaana use musical poetry and prose narratives, aphorisms, riddles, tongue twisters, praise names, and praise poetry and verbal formulas to tell stories of origin, community and humanity (buntu) (Bascom, 1964). Apart from generalised accounts of African mythology, baTonga tales began to appear in the early 1800s, and present-day scholars labour to record the continent's folklore, myths and legends before they are lost to time and cultural change (Bascom, 1964).

African mythologies were filled with supernatural beings or deities influencing human lives, while others were spirits of ancestors. BaTongamythology is filled with spirits, invisible beings with powers for good or evil (Moonga, 2019). The ritual of Storytelling honours the deities. What might appear as a simple storytelling session carries symbolisms of celebrating ancestry. The spirits of dead ancestors remain around their living descendants to help and protect them – as long as these relatives perform certain rituals and pay them due respect (Knappert, 1995). The storytelling ritual follows

a set pattern, call and response, narrative, chorus with climax, and the anticlimax. The design is venerated as appeasement to the ancestors and spirits. Such Storytelling is a community exercise in reenacting the collective memory of the clan. A clan among baTonga is a group bound by a devotion to a particular person, belief, or god (Colson, 2006). This is the culture ba Malita initiated me into in the five years I lived with them. I constantly return to that initiation to appreciate my buTonga possessing rich and complex oral traditions.

Situation Review of Storytelling

Storytelling is ubiquitous in every human community. The forms differ depending on many historical factors, such as forms of documentation. In some cultures, Storytelling has taken the form of writing, film, and art. While writing and film are amiable forms of Storytelling, spontaneously spoken stories are vital in that we cannot capture them in words on a piece of paper with ink or even on film.

In most traditional Africa, we are faced with a clash of cultures, evidently resulting from the continent's colonisation. We sit with the push for literary advancement on the one hand and the seduction of culture preservation on the other. The academic environment is interestingly advancing more liberal undertakings that encourage the pursuit of the diversity of voices. However, the more western inclined canon still bears the burden of demonising primal orientations for indigenous communities. Post-colonial academia expands the field of investigation to include indigenous knowledge systems as a valid form of knowledge production in the world's knowledge economy. Academic democratisation adds permanence to some of our folklore, authenticating the plasticity of artful Storytelling.

Extensively, amiable thinkers have articulated the force of stories and myths in enlivening individuals and communities (Moonga, 2019). Houston (1987), Campbell (1977), Campbell and Moyers (1988), Abram (1996), Moore (1992), and Berry (1988) have authoritatively written about the role of mythology in community building and ecological harmony. Writing about African cosmology, Oruka (1972), Idowu (1973), Afigbo (1997a, 1997b), and Okpewho (1983, 2009) bring to mind the role of mythology as traditional tales of a people, gods, nature, and the universe as they know them. The accounts portray the interrelationships of all beings. Societies pass mythological stories on from one generation to another. The telling of such stories is not limited to facts. Abram (1996), in the *Spell of the Sensuous*, captures it aptly when he writes:

To hear a story told and retold in one's childhood, and to recount that tale in turn when one has earned the right to do so (now inflected by the patterns of one's own experience and the rhythms of one's voice), is to preserve the coherence of one's culture actively. The practical knowledge, moral patterns and social taboos, and indeed the same language or manner of speech of any non-writing culture maintain themselves primarily through narrative chants, myths, legends and trickster tales- that is, through telling stories. (p. 181)

Story Songs

Most stories I heard had refrains that the story hearers joined in. I imagine that the chorus had multiple functions to keep the listeners connected to *Sikwaana* (Single storyteller-*Basikwaana* is plural). Staying in tune as a whole story community emphasises that Storytelling is never the preserve of the storyteller. Stories are always a community activity. The following story I heard ba Malita tell is an example of shared Storytelling.

Sulwe a Cula

ba Malita began her stories with "Mukaninga" in the true tradition of call-and-response.

"Kalangati," we would respond, sitting down with glittered faces, especially lit by the glow from the woodfire. At the end of a long day of climbing trees and sliding on the hills with bruised knees and dusty faces, the evening's tales were a welcome respite.

"Kwakali Cula a Sulwe," ba Malita would continue.

Cula, the frog, had a rare beauty but had no self-esteem of which to speak. Sulwe, the hare, on the other hand, had all the esteem and not recognisable beauty. That story captured my imagination so much that I would request it over and over. Cula and Sulwe would go looking for suitors in the village. The two found it difficult to succeed as they did not meet all the desired qualities; Cula had beauty and no esteem, while Sulwe had regard without beauty. It took them a long time to carve out a plan that would bring the two qualities together. In different ways, each thought of how they would make themselves appealing. An opportunity presented itself when they had to entertain the village community due to the troubadours' disappearance. None of them had ever played the drums nor sung before, not to themselves and certainly not to anyone else. Performing at the village festival was a rare opportunity to impress the village girls and take it they did.

"Ngundu! Ngundu!" Sulwe beat the drum. Meanwhile, shy Cula did not know what he could do. His voice would always choke in his Croak.

"Croak! Croak!" Cula tried to intone a tune. The voice would not come through until someone in the audience responded to Cula's ultra-bass.

"Kubota lukanda lwakaya kuli cula," a girl with a coloratura voice responded. The way she sounded the "how beautiful the skin that went to Cula" was at once disparaging and affirming. Her beauty attracted Cula and angered Sulwe. Suddenly Sulwe believed himself to have become a master drummer.

"Ngundu! Ngundu!" Sulwe played.

"Croak! Croak!" Cula called.

The village's beautiful coloratura responded, "Kubota lukanda lwakaya kuli Cula."

ba Malita, in mid-story, would invite us to sing an unrehearsed refrain. The refrains were simple enough for us to master within a few moments. We would become the chorus while she sang the "Ngundu-ngundu". The introduction of the refrain indicated the climaxing of the story. We knew it by the intensity of ba Malita's voice. We repeated the chorus each time she "called". Each cyclical return to the refrain builds on the story.

"Cula is attracting the attention of the village's beauty. Sulwe, with his efforts, is almost unseen, to his annoyance. Sulwe decides to pull the plug on Cula by announcing to the village community that Cula is not what he appears to be; that Cula has no esteem of his own and depends on Sulwe for his livelihood," ba Malita would narrate.

"Sulwe's envy ruined the moment of breakthrough Cula had. Cula went on to win the heart of the beauty against all the odds."

"Kubota lukanda lwakaya kuli Cula," we sang loudly, almost like we were celebrating a rare victory for Cula.

Significance of the Stories

I suggest that these stories are a representation of art, craft, and community. As I mentioned earlier, Storytelling is a way of building community. Stories allow people to gather. Joining in the story-song is participating in making the story come alive (Tuwe, 2016). Our chorusing in the story lifts our waking consciousness to an imaginal space where community happens (Moonga, 2019). Inspiration cultivates the imaginal realm. These stories bear beauty, truth and goodness. They are also attractive because they raise our consciousness to a domain where our highest values and ideals become essential.

The story's function is to potentially teach and inspire the community to reach for higher purposes. Because stories are non-judgmental, they do not seek to emphasise what is right or wrong, and they transcend tribalism and supremacy because privilege is shared. In buTonga Storytelling, the narrator never concludes by aligning the account to a moral. Whatever the perceived lessons in the story for the community, the participants make their interpretations in time. I believe that the story-centric approach is why stories continue to influence participants long after the voices have be-

come silent. As an adult, I continue to draw inspiration, amusement and counsel from the tales I heard in my childhood. I catch myself often when a memory of a tale offers me perspective or counsel. A story is a call for the possible relationships that linger in the hearers' consciousness for life.

Perhaps in our quest to make the world better and our relationships healthier, we must tell stories. We can huddle around a story. I wonder how the practice of baTonga storytelling tradition would enrich music therapy. As demonstrated in the story, I have shared above, singing in stories galvanises the community. The singing lifts the collective consciousness to a level that transcends the limitations of daily struggle. In that shared realm, our lives can heal and expand.

As we celebrate black aesthetics, we could challenge ourselves to invoke that beauty's intangible expressions, exterminated through colonialism. Colonialism reduced our experiences to redactable and measurable contingencies. Colonial instruction and subsequent distancing of local life-affirming rituals diminished the story to morality and function. We became robotic in our relationships as the concrete was privileged against inspiration and aspiration. I will leave you with the second half of the poem called *Just Questions*.

As we celebrate
 What would it take to close
 The learned helplessness,
 Waiting for a messiah
 From a land far away,
 And perhaps from someplace yonder?

What would it take to create
 A world of hearts open.
 To welcome folk with skin.
 With the gift of melanin
 Moreover, bones firmed by the Kalahari sun?

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About the Author

Having graduated from the University of Pretoria with a Master's Degree in music therapy, I practice as a registered Arts Therapist with the Health Practitioners Council of South Africa (HPCSA). Grounded in anti-oppressive and non-interference practices, I accompany people on their journey towards finding ways of living meaningfully with the struggle in medical settings, schools, and communities. I serve as a part-time lecturer at the University of Pretoria, as deputy chairperson for the South African Arts Therapies Association, the World Federation of Music Therapy Council as an Africa Region Liaison and editor at the *Voices* journal.

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