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The Stories People Tell: Are They Part of the Democratic Process?

by Michael Traber*

Abstract

This article offers some reflections on the locus of peoples' stories, or their *Sitz im Leben*, i.e., leisure time. It explores this concept briefly from the perspectives of social anthropology and mass media studies. It then draws a political typology of peoples' stories which are of some significance to Africa's modern story-tellers, the mass media.

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Les contes populaires: font-ils partie du processus démocratique ?

Résumé

Cet article est une réflexion sur les contes populaires, sur le *sitz im leben*, c'est à dire sur les temps de loisirs des gens. L'auteur explore ce concept sous l'angle de l'anthropologie sociale et celui des études de communication de masse. Il en tire une typologie politique des contes populaires qui ont une importance réelle pour les conteurs modernes de l'Afrique, les mass-médias.

Introduction

We have heard time and again that Africa's cultural richness lies in the stories of her people. But rarely have we thought about this from the perspective of mass communication. If story-telling is one of the pillars of African culture, our media should be one of the most creative in the world. They should be as 'down-to-earth' as people's stories are. They should be full of humour and echo all the laughter that explodes around the firesides of Africa. They should be cynical stories at times, critical at others. And if they were genuine African stories, they would embrace and encapsule those values and convictions without which Africa would not be what she is. In brief, African mass media could take on the story telling tradition and carry it beyond the limiting threshold of interpersonal communication.

Story telling in Africa is not some sort of cultural construct or surface reality as the mass media are. Stories in Africa have a variety of social, cultural and political roles. They are part of the reality which people experience and about which they feel deeply. One of their roles is entertainment, or leisure activity, which, as we shall see, is essential for the maintenance and recreation of a community.

Their other role is aculturation and socialization. Stories, though they may be funny, are a serious way of educating people, particularly the young. And story telling has always been an intensely political activity. They are part of the political process, even though politicians and the media may ignore them at their own peril. Many governments in Africa and elsewhere have been toppled because they failed to listen to the stories of the people but relied, instead, on the press. It is dangerous for any state not to take the people's stories seriously. Examples abound.

Story-telling, Communication and Leisure Time

From the point of view of a social anthropologist, the notion of leisure is central to the debate on communication (or 'culture in process'), community and religion. Leisure is also called recreation — that of the individual, the family, the community and society (particularly agrarian societies). Stories play a central role in such recreation. They can be the spontaneous stories of a traveller who brings news, or they can be highly structured, almost ritualistic types of stories which commemorate an event or an occasion like a community festival or the rites of passage.

There was, and still is, the yearly cycle of celebrations and festivals, which are neither purely secular or religious. They are usually both. Such celebrations are essentially a renewal of the family and community, and the initiation or reintegration of individuals into the community. In addition,

community rituals are, at least, a partial answer to life's vital questions, particularly in crisis situations. They also provide a sense of security and protection you experience and celebrate the fact that you belong, and you realize anew that life has meaning, makes sense, and is worth living, in spite of the odds stacked against it.

All ritualistic media — stories, mimes, dramas, dance, songs and singing — have a high degree of structured performance. They are structured ways of negotiating meaning through signs and symbols. And they are structured in such a way that people can participate in them, for they know the rules.

The world of story telling and of rituals is also the world of religion. While all religions tell us 'to pray always', the fact is that personal prayer and community worship have been reserved for the time we do not work, particularly Fridays and Sundays. The combination of leisure time and community worship or 'service', and the community activities emanating from them, or associated with them, are, no doubt, a powerful mixture of factors affecting the lives of almost all African people, yet very little attention has been paid to it by academics.

One function of leisure time, and one reason for rituals, is the need of the individual and the community to step out of everyday life and work, and to set out for a Utopian world. This is the meaning of what is often denigrated as 'escape' or 'religious fantasy'. The key element of rituals, closely associated with leisure time, is what Victor Turner calls the 'liminal' experience, a word taken from the Latin *limen* or threshold. 'The ritual takes us to the threshold or intermediate space of two worlds: the world of everyday, short-term goals, and a world of transcendent, cosmic meaning' (R. White 1986, p. 814). We shall return to this when we speak about the ritualistic function of the mass media.

The story of the mass media and, in particular, television, has, in the last five to eight years, given us a new vision, and a new theoretical handle for analysis, namely, the interpretation of media as story-telling rituals and myths. It is a logical extension of the play theory of mass communication, which states that media were leisure activities and thus eminently 'playful'. A great deal of research has been done in this field, from news as a State ritual to Gregor Geothal's *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar* (1981). But the underlying thesis is: mass media cannot be dismissed as just entertainment. They are a major form of leisure time activities and rituals in which individuals and the community explore 'other worlds' than the one they live in. They are important for the defining and redefining of the broader meaning of life. When engaged in mass media, particularly television, 'we leave everyday life to enter into an imaginative space to 'entertain' possible meanings of life.' (R. White 1986, p. 816).

In this imaginative space we see, read or listen to new versions of

folktales, people's stories, which define values in terms of heroes and villains, their conflicts and specific resolutions. Our own life stories are thus interpreted and somewhat defined. Further, every media ritual gives some meaning to history and those who make it. That is, it reveals power structures and aims at maintaining 'order'.

This view of the media deprives them of the pre-eminent role of agenda setters and political power brokers. Instead, their role is thought to be much more subtle and ephemeral. At their best, the media are community rituals with religious implications, which affect our lives profoundly, both as individuals and as a community. In the negotiation of meanings, however, or in the reading of semiotic text, the receivers are much more circumspect, much more eclectic and, above all, much more active than communication scholars once thought them to be. It is with this in mind that we should now approach the typology of stories and their significance for the political process.

Typology of Stories and Their Potential for the Political Process

The concept of story, which, the semioticians believe, has a ritualistic and mythic function, is bedevilled with semantic problems. The connotative meaning of story is, in most cultures, derogatory, i.e. something that does not need to be taken too seriously. This meaning applies particularly to people's stories. In contrast, the journalist selects and constructs the real stories, depicting, he or she assumes, real life. Yet we all know that if we wish to look beyond the surface reality, we abandon newspapers, radio and television, and bury ourselves in other story-telling media, which tell us more about the heart and soul of a people. Then we go to the novelists, the poets and what has been called 'oral literature'. So the concept of the story is badly in need of rehabilitation.

The Foundational Story

To underline the sharp edge of people's stories, we begin with a type of story which represents the symbolic constitution of a community and its very *raison d'être*: the foundational story. There are two obvious examples. The story of Jesus is the very foundation for the stories of Christians. And the story of Mohammed is the basis of everything his followers believe in, practice and proclaim. From the perspective of a social scientist, the Bible and the Koran are Africa's two most important stories which are constantly retold, reinterpreted and re-enacted.

But there are other foundational stories in our communities and societies. They often refer to our origins, our ancestors, our creation, our gods and God. The past is thus invoked to make sense of the present and provide a prospect for the future.

All foundational stories have strong political implications. They often provide the very parameters of political discourse, and an intensity and spread of discourse which few other stories can muster. But foundational stories have also led to abuse, manipulation, suppression and, indeed, wars. They have given birth to the best and to the worst.

A modern foundational story which is not often seen and interpreted as that is Marxism-Leninism. Its classic text or 'scripture' is hardly readable. But its main ideas have been appropriated by a revolutionary movement in this century and by a host of social institutions, including governments.

African communicators should give some thought to the foundational stories of their nations. In the first few years after the attainment of liberation and national sovereignty, these stories seemed to be clear-cut, and centered directly on the person who led the country to independence. Then the story started to disintegrate, no longer held, was no longer genuine, and was gradually replaced by propaganda. What is sad in this is the fact that the collective memory of a people and a nation went into a state of shock.

The Collective Memory

This is the source of a great variety of people's stories which organize the past. It is associated with many 'traditions', or the right ways of doing things on the one hand, and with heroes and heroines and villains on the other. But a people's collective memory also has to deal with frustrations and failures. In periods of foreign domination it can cope with those fairly easily: from the slave trade to the massacres which European history books euphemistically call colonial wars or the quelling of an uprising. Since independence, the burden of the collective memory has become more difficult to bear. What do you tell your children about the first or second military coup, or what the Naira or the Cedi used to buy? Yet, the inability to remember and talk about the past can lead to psychic trauma, both in individuals and in communities and nations. The classical example is, of course Germany, both Germanies. Many Germans wanted to wipe out the Nazi past. They were neither prepared to talk about it, nor wanted to be reminded of it by others. But history is constantly catching up with them, and the psychic trauma grows deeper.

The collective memory is particularly strong with displaced and deprived people, like the Palestinians, Armenians and Kurds. It is also important to minorities of all kinds, ethnic and religious. They then tend to rely on their foundational stories.

There is finally a collective memory which transcends the political. It is sometimes called popular cultural struggle. The best example of this continent is South Africa. There are literally hundreds of groups of blacks and many popular movements which aim at regaining the collective

memory enshrined in workers' and peasants' culture. This is done through modern story-telling and through songs from the past. It is expressed in poetry and popular plays, as well as through books of people's history. The reactivation of the collective memory gives the people a sense of identity, and is part of the process of emancipation, or democratization.

The Interpretation of Stories

There is only one foundational story of Christianity. Yet there are dozens of churches, each one claiming to have the right interpretation of that story. There is only one Koran, yet many different Islamic movements, each one, once again, claiming to have the right interpretation. We know, of course, that the interpretation of the Holy Books was only one of several factors which led to the establishment of different Christian churches and different Islamic identities. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the foundational stories was an important element in this. In their book, *Tellers of the Word*, Cooper and Navone write: 'There can be no community life, no consensus, and thus no common action without participation in the *common understanding* of the meaning of a common story, and without a common commitment to that story's value' (p. 248). The inability to share a common story, or have a common interpretation of the story, may mean the break-up of a community — and thus the creation of breakaway communities.

A high degree of consensus in the interpretation of stories seems to be necessary to make them socially and politically relevant. We know very little of how what consensus is achieved, how it grows or disintegrates. Also, we need a lot more research to know of the role which the politically dominant discourse plays in people's story telling and in the interpretation of stories, including those of the mass media. May I offer a tentative hypothesis for future research? It reads: If a story is identified with and in support of the established power structures (as mass media in Africa, with few exceptions, generally are), the people's media or people's stories challenge that by constructing their own counter-stories.

The Pseudo-stories

First there is the fake story, which is no story at all but parades as one. It's the pictorial or verbal story of cutting a ribbon (with a pair of scissors presented on a special cushion or tray), or of pressing a button, or of taking the salute, or of opening a seminar (few closures these days!), or of climbing up the stairs of an airplane and turning around and waving from the top. Nor is descending from the aircraft really news, let alone a genuine story. And the same is true for inspecting a guard of honour, when the head of state or of government is subjected to a military ritual which does not

allow him to even walk normally. Nothing really happens in these so-called news reports. And the same holds true for most politicians' speeches. Nothing at all happens after the minister says, 'thank you, ladies and gentlemen', and everybody claps hands.

These are all 'fake stories'. But they are comparatively harmless, and serve a certain purpose. The real villains among the pseudo-stories are those which distort reality in a much more profound way. They are stories about achievements which don't exist, about improvements in the economy which we know will never be attained, about corruption which will be eliminated, and about problems that will be dealt with, or at least 'looked into'. These are pseudo-stories, and we know they are. Yet we print and broadcast them.

Counter-stories

They are an explicit endeavour to put the record straight, to counteract false interpretations of foundational stories or of the community story and to demask unauthentic and pseudo-stories. They want to generate dialogue and, indeed, controversy in order to renegotiate the true meaning of stories. Counter-stories are also a rebellion against the power of the established story and their tellers.

Which are the channels of counter stories? In some African countries there is still an 'alternative press', sometimes called 'advocacy press', which challenges the political powers on the issues and problems of the people. Sadly, however, many of these alternative newspapers and magazines have been closed down in the last few years, and hardly any new ones have emerged. Nor have those which have survived developed into genuine people's newspapers, which would dispense with the 'advocate' so that the people's voice can be heard in a direct way. We could all learn a lesson from our friends in South Africa who have pioneered the idea of truly democratic and participatory newspapers, offering the people's own counter stories.

Rumour is another form of counter-story. It has become a major information and political problem in Africa, badly in need of research. Rumour-mongering usually arises in situations when information is withheld and/or when information is no longer believed or trusted. People then start speculating as to what is really happening. Communication by rumour, we know from research done in the USA and Europe, is extremely efficient and potent. Rumour-mongering is, as it were, the people's revenge for the lack, or distortion, of public information.

The most important residue of counter-stories, however, lies in the story-telling that takes place during lunch hour in the factories, in the get-togethers of relatives, friends and neighbours in the evening, in the after-meal conversations around the fire in thousands of villages and outside

fishermen's huts. Who are the journalists and politicians who listen to these stories? The emphasis here is on listening, rather than on interviewing or lecturing. Which brings me to my last point.

Listening is Crucial to the Democratic Process

The Chinese concept of 'barefoot medic' was adapted some eight years ago to the reporter. His true vocation was to be a barefoot journalist. Unfortunately, the term 'barefoot politician' has so far not received any credence, except in Nicaragua.

Who is a barefoot journalist? One who identifies with the people. One who is prepared to listen to them and take their stories seriously. A barefoot journalist has no other 'agenda' than that set by the peasants and workers. He or she has a high degree of affinity with the people, or sympathy, or identification.

What is totally lacking in our journalism education is the art of listening. It is worst in radio. Radio could indeed become the media of people's stories. But this would mean that radio journalists move out of their studios and record the people's stories. The old profession of 'roving reporter' needs to be revived.

Most African governments consider the press a bridge between the government and the people. If the press is that bridge, it is a very narrow one indeed, and its traffic is almost entirely one-way. But the democratic process depends on such bridges, much wider ones, and of various types. Above all, however, the flow of the traffic has to be reversed. The people's voices and stories must be heard for democracy to survive and to develop.