

# A HISTORY OF ORAL AND WRITTEN STORYTELLING IN NIGERIA

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*ABSTRACT:* Storytelling is a powerful process in adult education as a useful instructional approach in facilitating adult instruction and learning, especially during preliterate eras. What began as oral tradition has evolved to include written literature. A popular Eurocentric perspective in the early 19th century was that before the arrival of Europeans Africa was a savage continent devoid of culture. Once Nigerian authors began to produce novels and other written works, authors such as Chinua Achebe continued using storytelling to debunk this Eurocentric narrative. Achebe employed storytelling and proverbs to establish that the continent wasn't devoid of culture. This approach resonated with readers and reignited interest in the storytelling tradition. Achebe provided historical information using storytelling narratives to help readers learn about life and culture in prehistoric African societies before the invasion of Europeans. Storytelling in both the oral and written tradition can help adult learners understand the impact of colonialism in Nigeria.

*Keywords:* Adult Learning, Oral Tradition, Storytelling, Nigeria

Storytelling is one of the oldest methods of interaction and communication in human history. Before the advent of the written word, historical events were transmitted to future generations through the use of compelling stories. A significant approach of human capacity was the ability to preserve its historical heritage using narratives. Every civilization has a historical and cultural heritage which people hold dear (Nduka, 2014), and transmitting history and cultural heritage through the oral tradition of storytelling is a common phenomenon of human practice. This shared way of knowledge not only details life's events but also preserves the history of people and societies from one generation to another.

As an instructional approach, storytelling has broad applicability in human learning both for children (Amali, 2014) and adults (Tate, 2004). The strong sense of emotional appeal and personal experience that is incorporated into storytelling makes it an appealing method in adult learning and instruction (Rossiter, 2002). Storytelling motivates learners as well as helps them access, express, and retain information and knowledge (Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007). It promotes brain-based learning and reflective thinking (Tate, 2004). Through storytelling, people and societies around the world learn, develop the codes of behavior, and formulate meaning-making in their lives (Adichie, 2013).

Mbiti (1966) observed:

Stories are to a certain extent the mirror of life; they reflect what the people do, what they think, how they live and have lived, their values, their joys and their sorrows. The stories are also a means of articulating man's [sic] response to his [sic] environment. (p. 31)

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Storytelling is universal and is popular in many cultures where it became the medium the people used to preserve their beliefs, social values, wisdom, and cultural experiences as well as to transfer them from one generation to another. Through history, adult educators like Plato and Jesus of Nazareth have used stories to connect, demonstrate, illustrate and communicate with learners. This was true also in pre-literate Nigeria societies, where storytelling was used as a medium to educate, preserve oral history, and convey cultural norms to the indigenous people (Verbina & Damodaran, 2013). Nigerian communities used storytelling as oral discourse, since writing was unknown to most of the populace (Achebe, 1959). Storytelling occurred in both formal and informal settings. Some storytellers were considered oral artists or court historians, developing special talents in storytelling including the memory and endurance to tell lengthy histories (Ajuwon, 1985). In other settings storytelling was a communal participatory experience (Tuwe, 2016) or a way for parents to educate their children (Verbina & Damodaran, 2013). Even farmers who had worked all day in the fields would relax in the evening by telling stories in the evening (Ajuwon, 1985).

In informal and formal settings, the telling of stories in Nigeria is and was used by professional narrators, educators, and parents to teach respect, moral instruction, norms, societal values, and preservation of the historical, cultural customs (Gardner, 1990). In other words, storytelling was used to preserve the identity of the people. Storytelling was also used to promote listening skills among young Nigerians. As Oduolowu and Oluwakemi (2014) stated, in the traditional African environment, specifically Nigeria, young children were told stories in the form of oral narratives by parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts. This way, the younger offspring were able to learn how to obey instructions from their elders by practicing listening skills and learning about their heritage. For adult listeners, stories were used to depict the wisdom, knowledge, and power of elders.

These stories sometimes incorporated proverbs, which are short, memorable sayings that express a belief or piece of advice. “These words are words of ‘experts’ from a continuum that stretches from the ancestors to elders in the community” (Avoseh, 2013, p. 240) In fact, ancestors are considered to have “intellectual ownership of proverbs” (Avoseh, 2013, p. 240). Proverbs can be used for admonition, to warn of impending danger, or for counseling and encouragement depending on the context.

Folktales also have value to society in Nigeria (Amali, 2014). Folktales have a distinguishing feature and can include a combination of music, voice, drama, and dancing (Tuwe, 2016). It is an integral part of the oral society and played a significant role in the community life of Nigerians and also reflected a communal lifestyle of living (Achebe, 1959). Folktales were used to relate the diverse cultural and traditional aspects of the society (Amali, 2014). For example, in those days in Nigeria communities in rural settings, after the day’s hard work, people would congregate around the village square every evening, a prototype of the modern day community center to listen to music, watch dances and special narratives that took on different characters.

The folktales are stories organized around a particular purpose and theme, either to relate a moral lesson, tell a human truth, describe the adventure of war and tell stories of personality types and figures (Achebe, 1959). This way, the folktales stories kept the history of Nigerian people alive, and people learned significantly from the narratives. According to Amali (2014), the Idoma people of Benue State that occupies part of the western areas of Nigeria, used folktales to demonstrate to people what the society expects of them such as acceptable behaviors. Folktales were also used to educate young children. Through this process, both the young and adults alike were able to learn the messages conveyed by the narratives of folktales. In other words, the values of the society were portrayed through folktales.

This oral tradition continued for thousands of years. There is evidence that Nigeria was inhabited at least 13,000 years ago (Shaw & Jameson, 2002). Much of what is known of Nigeria and its indigenous people in the pre-literate times is traced to oral traditions of storytelling (Gardner, 1990). Since then there have been several waves of foreign influence. By the eighth century (C.E.), Arabic influence had come to Nigeria along with the Arabic language and the practice of Islam (Nigeria History, 2012). By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, written and spoken Arabic were flourishing in northern Nigeria and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century some stories of the Hausa (members of the largest ethnic group in Africa) were translated into Arabic (Gardner, 1990). Then began a period of contact with Europeans who were driven by missionary zeal and the desire for trade. First came the Portuguese in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and they established catholic missions in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Stewart, 2000). By the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the power of the Portuguese declined as English and Dutch traders became more active in Nigeria. The British captured the Nigerian capital of Lagos in 1851 and began to colonize the country as an imperial power. Missionaries translated the Bible into Yoruba and Igbo languages and spread the Christian religion.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, European explorers that visited Africa continent told and wrote stories about Africa to justify colonialization and exploitation of African territories. Many of the stories depicted Africans as people without culture and civilization. Nduka (2014) pointed out that although few Western writers had actually visited Africa, they wrote with a colonizer's perspective that "paint[ed] Africa black" (para. 5). Those stories negatively informed many in the west about life in Africa, and to this day it is difficult to erase the Eurocentric view about Africa. Stewart (2000) noted that:

Although Nigeria was the creation of European ambitions and rivalries in West Africa, it would be an error to assume that its peoples had little history before its final boundaries were negotiated by Britain, France and Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. (para. 1)

By the 1930s several African writers (i.e., Mohammed Bello and Pita Nwana) began writing stories and novels to debunk Eurocentric narratives. Other writers began reflecting the power and influence of native stories in their work. The literary style was predominately fantasy-based until the late 1940s when a shift to realism occurred

(Ajuwon, 1985). The newer work included human characters and dealt with universal themes such as justice, corruption, religion, love and marriage.

Chinua Achebe was born in Nigeria in 1930 and became a prolific poet and novelist with a career that spanned many decades. In 1959, just as Nigeria was about to become independent, Achebe published his first novel titled *Things Fall Apart*, which is believed to be a response to Joseph Conrad's work *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe (1959) employed storytelling as an approach to establish that the Africa continent wasn't devoid of culture, as promoted by European early explorers; rather, Africa was a home of culture and this approach did resonate with many readers.

In this and his later writing Achebe took the style of oral narratives to communicate Nigerian culture using animated stories, and dialogue of life and culture in prehistoric eastern Nigeria. The stories in *Things Fall Apart* took the form of individual and community characters, proverbs, riddles, jokes, folktales, etc. (Verbina & Damodaran, 2013). The stories were used to communicate lessons of different messages from moral attributes to cultural practices, communal lifestyle, hard work, war, witchcraft, feminism and masculine to both young and old people in the community (Achebe, 1959). For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, the story of the fighter was told who was well known in the villages because of his strength and personal achievements. Okonkwo's fame spread like a "bush-fire in the harmattan" (Achebe, 1959, p. 3), the dry, dusty trade wind which blows from the Sahara Desert over West Africa. Okonkwo was unlike his father Unoka, who was weak, lazy, and improvident. When any money came his way, Unoka will make merry and frittered it all away. As a result, he was always borrowing and died in debt without taken any chieftaincy title in his community which was a mark of wealth and respect. This story illustrates the difference between hard work and laziness, failure and success among the Ibo people in Nigeria.

Achebe (1959) demonstrated this in most of his characters in *Things Fall Apart* and repeatedly used proverbs in his epic novel. He believed that "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (p. 7). Nigerian scholar Mejai Avoseh, believes that the "brevity and succinctness of proverbs" is part of the reason for this analogy (personal communication, October 4, 2016). Other famous proverbs include "he who brings kola brings life" which refers to the kola nuts which are important in spiritual practice in Nigeria. Also, "if a child washed his hands, he shall eat with kings" which means that a good reputation and integrity will take you to greater heights.

Novels that were written both before and after Nigeria gained independence in 1960 are still considered important literature. Nduka (2014) noted that "acculturation and western civilization have made the younger generation to [sic] pay less attention to some of the cultural beliefs because they see them as irrelevant and obsolete" (para. 10), so it is important to have the traditions preserved through the stories. These stories can be passed on through the oral tradition or through novels and other written works to promote a society's heritage.

This rejection of colonialism and reclaiming of identity by writers such as Achebe can be useful not just for Nigerians who remain in the homeland, but also those who have dispersed and become part of the Nigerian diaspora. These five to fifteen million people are in most areas of the world but the largest populations of Nigerians can be found in the United Kingdom, the United States, and South Africa (The Nigerian Diaspora, 2014, para. 1). A more contemporary Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who came to the United States at the age of nineteen to study, wrote a novel titled *Americanah* (2013) which allows a view into the world of Nigerians who emigrated to London and the United States. Adichie was able to remember and narrate her experience and that of Nigerians in the United States through the influence of storytelling. Her constant comparison of her childhood experience in Nigeria and her adult life as a student in the U.S. details how storytelling can help people remember and narrate events in their lives using stories as a connection point. Storytelling helps to promote historical heritage.

Also, as adult learners and educators gather together in instructional and learning contexts, collective sharing of experiences both by learners and educators spring multiple perspectives that can translate to multiple knowledge and ideas. This way everyone becomes active participants and contributor to the learning process.

### **Significance of Storytelling for Contemporary Nigerians**

In writing about adult education in Nigeria, Onyenemezu (2012) acknowledged that the country is facing challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Recently youth and young adults have been restive in the Niger Delta region resulting in violence and youth militancy in militias. More recently, Boko Haram is wreaking havoc through bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations. Onyenemezu argued that examining adult education could help to alleviate the instability and increase political and economic development. Oddly, when Zuofa and Olori, (2015) recently researched adult learning methods in Nigeria, they did not include storytelling. Evidence suggests that it would be an effective method of adult education in Nigeria. Whether in formal, informal, or non-formal learning, telling the stories of historical facts and cultures are significant aspects of connecting adult learners with their cultural heritage.

Although Achebe first wrote of the impact of colonizers on Igbo clans in 1959, as recently as 2014, Nduka expressed concern that the Igbo culture will be lost. He lamented that when fathers do not know the history and stories of their own culture, it is a tragedy that they cannot answer the questions of their children about festivals, the indigenous calendar, the age-grade or age-group system, chieftancy within the community, or meanings of proverbs.

Storytelling is useful for members of the African diaspora not just to remember their own history, but to adapt to their new homes. Tuwe (2016) studied African communities based in New Zealand and argued that the oral tradition of storytelling was useful when dealing with work-related challenges.

Decolonization involves challenging Western epistemologies and embracing an indigenous paradigm and traditional knowledge. Recognizing the power and influence of native stories can assist decolonization and reverse the perception of colonizers being knowers and indigenous people as being ignorant.

First, the legacy of the helping Western colonializing Other must be resisted...As agents of colonial power, Western scientists discovered, extracted, appropriated, commodified, and distributed knowledge about the indigenous other. (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. 5)

In order to undo western dominance and unravel colonialism, it is necessary to create knowledge based on African philosophy which includes “community-centred [sic] ways of knowing, the story-telling framework, [and] language as a bank of knowledge” (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p. 49). Storytelling satisfies all three of those aspects. Since storytelling was a social practice and a participatory experience, it is community centered. The storytelling framework has been used for millennia in Nigeria in the oral tradition, which continues even with the evolution of written stories. Finally, language is a bank of knowledge since proverbs and cultural history are included in both the oral and written tradition. Although European colonizers renamed lands, bodies of water, and other African assets by inflicting names related by the colonizers and missionaries, in stories, Nigerians could reclaim their indigenous knowledge and language by reclaiming the original names.

In addition, storytelling as a motivational tool has the potential to expose learners to the path of success using inspirational stories that can foster strong connection. Denning (2011) noted that much of what we know is composed of stories, and many of them describe how circumstances and situations in the past have been successfully handled. In other words, through the application of stories, adult learners can gain knowledge that will be useful for undertaking life’s arduous tasks. For example, hearing stories about conflict resolution, one could learn how to resolve a conflict. A personal life story could culminate in learning transformation and new understanding (Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007).

When people organize their experiences into stories, the resulting narrative “may be an ideal process in that it characterizes movement of development toward some future end” (Weissner & Pfahl, 2007, p. 28). Dillard (2008) has capitalized on this notion by adopting the idea of using the term African *ascendant* rather than *descendant* to describe “the upward and forward moving nature of African people through the diaspora as well as on the African continent herself” (p. 291). This is itself a decolonizing perspective.

When people examine their own stories, they can examine them in relation to larger cultural contexts (Rossiter, 2002, p. 4). Adults have the potential to make changes and rewrite their lives stories (Pfahl & Wiessner, 2007), reducing their colonized world views. Storytelling allows individuals to rewrite themselves, but it can also have a larger impact: indigenous peoples who are combatting the effects of colonialism can unite a group or community and rewrite communal memory (Weissner & Pfahl, 2007).

## Implications for Non-African scholars and educators

When reading research about indigenous people or conducting research with indigenous people, it is important but challenging for scholars who are part of a dominant culture to view through an appropriate lens and be aware of our colonizing perceptions. Indigenous scholars have begun to push back to that end (Chilisa, 2012; Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Denzin et al., 2008; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999).

The term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, it probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research...It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us...’We are the most researched people in the world’ is a comment I have heard frequently from several different indigenous communities. The truth of such a comment is unimportant, what does need to be taken seriously is the sense of weight and unspoken cynicism about research that the message conveys. (Smith, 1999, pp. 1, 3)

Hence, it is important to let Nigerian voices speak in both fiction and research. An example is scholar and scientist Osamuyimen (Uyi) Stewart (2000) who noted earlier that Nigeria had a rich history before European contact and is himself Nigerian. Although he is a highly regarded scientist, and IBM Distinguished Engineer, and Chief Scientist of IBM Research Africa, Stewart honors the indigenous way of knowing. Rather than stating a positivist perspective that preferences academic research and empirical findings, in his writing about the history of Nigeria he acknowledged that the “posting is a collection of oral tradition passed down to [him], [his] critical evaluation of folklore, and ideas from a variety of written sources [mostly African]” (para.1). This Nigerian-born scientist, who graduated from the University of Benin, Nigeria, then went on to earn a Master of Philosophy at Cambridge University in England, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Canada, acknowledged the oral tradition and the importance of folklore, rather than adopting a western scientific approach.

The oral tradition, which evolved to include written literature, allows the Nigerian people to ensure the preservation of the history and culture. Nduka noted that even if the younger generation neglects the teachings, they are preserved “so as to ensure that generations yet unborn would have access to them” (2015, para. 9). In that way indigenous knowledge systems can be restored.

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