

Living Legacies: An Ethnographic Study of Grandmothers' Stories in the Niger Delta

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ABSTRACT Applying the ethnographic approach, this paper examines how grandmothers' stories selected from among two ethnic groups in the Niger Delta of Nigeria have been used in fostering intergenerational relationships discourse. It explores the meaning and functions, aims, metaphors, structures and the delivery modes of grandmothers' stories used in intergenerational relationships as the people struggle with the threat to the erosion of some of the major positive artifacts in their culture. It concludes by synthesizing contemporary challenges seemingly minimizing the overall use and impacts of grandmothers' stories in intergenerational relationships, and suggesting the possible implications of the discussion for networking regionally and, possibly, globally.

INTRODUCTION

Known internationally for its rich mineral oil deposits, the catastrophe induced by the destruction of its flora and fauna and the devastation of its indigenous economy together with the challenges that come from the persistent protests by its people, the Niger Delta of Nigeria must be a place of interest to scholars who are keenly interested in environment, social relationships and social justice. The region is home to several ethnic groups among whom are the Edos, Esans, Afemais, Owans and Akoko Edos in Edo State; the Itsekiris, the Ibos, the Ndokwas, the Ijaws, the Isokos and the Urhobos in the Delta State; the Ijaws and a small group of Urhobos in the Bayelsa State and the Ijaws in Rivers State; the Efiks in the Akwa-Ibom and Cross River States; and the Ibos in the Abia, Enugu, Imo and Anambra States. The study that informed this paper was located among the Isoko and Urhobo ethnic groups for the basic reason that they are geographically, economically, socially, politically and ethnically contiguous.

Apart from the oil exploration-related catastrophe confronting the people, the Niger Delta is equally experiencing large-scale unemployment among its educated and highly skilled youth who are increasingly becoming restive just like their counterparts in South Africa (Moller 2010). In most cases, the young ones cannot comprehend why they should be undergoing such profound deprivations in the midst of so much natural wealth. In times like these, grandparents are almost always expected to provide convincing response to the socio-economic chal-

lenges, many of which are beyond their ability to handle. Yet the grandmothers have used the metaphors embedded in stories to bring up the grandchildren to understand, appreciate and sustain the culture of understanding, cooperation, unity, peace and amicable relationships in the light of the changing demographics the region's communities are experiencing. That means also that transiting into the grandparenting segment of life in the region does launch the elderly into a kind of fundamental shift in thinking, adaptation and relationships. The individual's entry into the system of grandparenting tacitly introduces one to a shift that compels you to begin to see and perceive issues relating to and assisting grandchildren in new ways. In a similar way, you begin to see your priorities in a different light as you step into a new role. For example, one may be confronted with a two-year old grandchild who could and would say "no" to almost everything, including what the grandmother may have considered as positive, considerate and well-intended kind gestures. Suddenly, you find yourself spending more weeks or months or even years laboring with a personality ethic that is strenuously influenced by external factors beyond your control as a grandmother.

The Problem

The first motivation for telling their stories was probably located in the African axiom that "a dying old man or woman is like a burning library." Beyond that motivation, the writing of African history had not evolved at the time the

stories were acceptable formats for enculturation processes. The exigencies of the times we now live in certainly bring about the awareness that neglecting the oral tradition of storytelling could be counterproductive.

Secondly, the demands of interest and challenges of the modern age have been unrelenting and somewhat intellectually tasking. For example, the people now need to protect themselves, family and community from the pressures imposed by increasing contacts with external forces, arising partly from globalization.

Thirdly, the challenging rate of change in political arrangements as in when modern nation states were formed without much regards for cultural identities; but, with a domineering consideration of political convenience of the European colonial powers. This was what partly altered the ability of cultures to withstand external influences as peoples who were previously living within the same geographical space found themselves on the two sides of the border as the case was among the Yoruba in the present Republics of Nigeria and Benin.

Furthermore, with the rapid change in technology and competition driven by the globalization of almost everything, the grandmothers have realized that there is need for their grandchildren not only to learn but to relearn with a view to reinventing their cultures so that they are not entirely and wholly consumed by the forces of change.

Finally, the insidious drive for the study of science and technology in Africa could have meant placing less emphasis on research in the humanities. So studies of this nature are not widely and commonly reported in the literature. The prominence given to science and technology in the agenda for development in Africa is rightly geared towards gaining relevance in the increasingly competitive world. In such competitions, the survival of all that was excellent and helpful in the past is clearly at stake. One result of this reality was that grandmothers probably found a need to preserve whatever was left of their culture through the method of storytelling.

The attitudes and behaviors of grandchildren born into an environment that is possibly most challenging because of enormous ecological damage resulting from oil exploration and the largely unregulated demand for equity and ecological social justice should call for social para-

digm shifts. Ostensibly, the demand for ecological social justice frequently induces violence, and young people are exposed to that phenomenon very early in their lives. Then, the grandparents, especially grandmothers, are expectedly requested by the working-class modern parents to assist in enforcing the change in attitudes and behaviors among grandchildren with the intent that communities experience equitable social stability.

Success in bringing about positive change in attitudes and behaviors of grandchildren demand that everyone should begin to see things somewhat differently (Covey 2004). It demands that everyone should focus on strongly held attitudes and behaviors that have been rooted for hundreds of years in age-long customs and traditions. In interesting ways, grandmothers' stories are rooted in customs and traditions. The problem then is to effectively articulate how best popular grandmothers' stories can be relayed to make good impact in intergenerational relationships in Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Using ethnographic methodology, this paper explores the aims, structure and modes of delivery of grandmothers' selected stories in the contexts of their relevance and effectiveness in promoting intergenerational relationships. The paper may be particularly useful in informing current communication practices in intergenerational relationships. Achieving such a goal may also be valuable in suggesting how this African mode of communication in intergenerational relationships may be modified and adopted by other cultures that are still confronting the challenge posed by restive activities of the young ones.

The Ethnographic Approach

This study adopted the ethnographic qualitative research methodology mainly because of the nature of the phenomenon being studied and then the limitation of time and space. By ethnographic approach, we refer to the desire to apply our understanding of African culture to observe and interrogate communications in which stories are freely used. Interrogation was deliberately based on the ideational theory of cultural communication. Creswell (2009) has

quoted Fetterman (1989) as having said to have observed that the ideational theory implies that change is a result of mental activities and ideas.

It is common to find in discussions of this nature an appeal to generalizations based on experiences. However, combining ethnographic hard descriptions with predominantly quantitative data derived from elaborate studies by sociologists would be the right thing to do. In this case, what people say and do in such large-scale studies quite often do not reflect the realities in different contexts, especially those of Sub-Saharan Africa (Chilisa and Preece 2005; Mertens et al. 2013).

The ethnographic portrait used here is that of African researchers who are keenly interested in studying single phenomena encapsulated in selected social contexts. The researcher's contention is that a deep understanding of the interpenetration of different African generations through the use of stories must have served useful purposes in intergenerational relationships with respect to the people studied. The area studied has revealed compliance with the specific nature of the meaning, language, functions and values of African grandmother stories. The researcher purposively selected for analysis and discussion some grandmothers' stories that are used in cultural communication with respect to intergenerational relationships from among the Isoko and Urhobo ethnic groups in the Western part of the Niger Delta.

RESULTS

The meaning, language, functions and values of African Stories was of immense interest, and here is what emanated from the field.

Meaning

In the Niger Delta, stories are understood to be aphoristic communication items that are laced with deep meanings, truths and wisdom known to a limited circle of people within the culture but which from their popular and common usages have become accepted by everybody within a culture or community (Sibusiso Nyemebezi 1963). African grandmothers' stories undoubtedly consist of wisdom and home truths expressed in a concise and terse manner such that they recommend themselves to a more or less extended circle of speakers of a given language

(Sibusiso Nyemebezi 1963 quoting Krappe 1930; Mhlophe 2004). The stories depict typical African wisdom couched in culture and language. Grandmothers' stories are applied to communication in intergenerational relationships so much so that the younger generations are made to get to know, appreciate and apply them in their daily interactions, thereby ensuring that the tradition of storytelling is sustained.

Somehow, African stories are located in mythology. African mythology itself is linked to the spirits, essentially spirits of the dead. Africans believe that such spirits mediate between the living and a Supreme God who directs the lives, affairs and future of the living (Sibusiso Nyemebezi 1963 quoting Krappe 1930; Mhlophe 2004). It is commonly believed that the Supreme God endows the spirits of the dead with wisdom and this is transferred to the specially privileged living person who is inspired in constructing stories that eventually influence and impact relationships building. Most Africans believe that there is life after death, and it would therefore be risky offending the spirits of the dead.

Nevertheless, some of the stories originate in mythology and from the observation of nature, animals and people's behavior with a view to ascertaining how such behaviors influence relationships among generations. What this means is that the grandmothers stories represent the material culture, experiences and social behavior of our peoples with the major intent of building stable intergenerational relationships that could be enduring.

Language

African wisdom is delicately couched in African culture as expressed in the people's languages. The thesis of this paper is that in line with the proposition by Clark (1996: 29) that language use is really a form of joint action so also are the stories used in intergenerational exchanges among children, youth and the elderly. Clark (1996) has defined a joint action as one that is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in coordination with each other.

In most cases, the elderly are the custodians of traditional stories. That is why the people strongly acknowledge the fact that a dying elderly African is like a burning library or even destroyed computer software with all its systems

and data. That is probably also the reason why the young are quickly introduced into the literary culture of acquiring stories such that the young and old eventually exchange wisdom through them. It is not therefore the literary culture of only one person speaking and the other listening. The methodology has become such that the joint action manifests as speakers and listeners perform their individual actions but in unity just like ensembles in modern literature.

The Functions of African Stories

African culture, poetry and methodology are deeply rooted in information delivered through the medium of language. The information passed on from generations to generations is about the people's past, behaviors, attitudes, values, surroundings, activities, perceptions, emotions, plans and interests (Clark 1996). Africans generally believe that community preservation has to be based on a common ground, and for Africans storytelling, as noted by Gallagher (2010), is as well a primal instinct of humanity. For the children, youth and elderly to act, they have to agree to coordinate what they intend to do and how to do it, appealing to that common ground.

What is Common Ground?

Clark (1996: 93) has made it be known that the technical notion of common ground was introduced by Stalnaker (2008) based on an older family of notions that included common knowledge (Lewis 1969), mutual knowledge or belief (Schiffer 1983) and joint knowledge (McCarthy 1990). In this way, the common ground of two people, in effect, may be the sum of their mutual, common, or joint knowledge, beliefs, and suppositions, and metaphors in African stories play a major role within this context (Clark 1996; Owen 2011). Once such common grounds are established, mutual relationships are most likely to evolve amongst generations.

Evolved African stories have continued and would continue to depict a wealth of oral wisdom and tradition frequently couched in African literature. However, such literature is generally communicated and retained by the elderly in philosophical discourse situated in metaphorical contents (Owen 2011; Berman and Brown 2000). The stories may also come in

forms of drama, songs, dance and music. In almost all cases in the development of the stories, there emerge some salient elements of discreteness, circuitousness, allusion and even morals teaching, the deep meanings of which are eventually revealed to everybody (Hodgson 2010).

Within the intents and structure of the stories, it is easy to discern intelligence, friendliness, cooperation, trust and greed, mistrust, humility, charity, love, caution, boastfulness, jealousy, allegiance and defense. Within them, one may also observe alertness, laziness, speed, bravery, cowardice, patience, impatience and advice.

The orientations depicted within African grandmothers stories mean that they are aimed at instructing, teaching, advising and enriching moral development and culture. As in the Netherlands where, according to Mercken (2003), there is profound interest in generating in every neighborhood a certain level of social cohesion aimed at offering residents a livable community where they feel comfortable and included. African grandmothers' stories serve several counseling goals in intergenerational relationships. Because many of the stories originate from observing behaviors, they sometimes become counseling psychology enriching materials that may be useful in modifying behaviors and in assisting personality development to some extent. This is what one may find in the sample cases below.

Story Number 1: The Evil of Greed

"Once upon a time, two young girls born by two different women to the same man went to fetch firewood from the forest. Unfortunately, the younger of the two girls got so busy fetching firewood that she did not realize that her elder sister had left her in the forest. As darkness came, the little girl started wailing. For she knew she was lost. The elder sister got home to announce the disappearance of the younger sister. Immediately, a search party was organized for the missing girl, but she was never found. The missing girl's mother cried and cried, suspecting that a lion might have devoured her only child. The search party gave up the search.

Whilst the missing girl cried without end, an elderly woman emerged from nowhere in the dark forest and took her into a remote home that was clearly invisible to anyone. The eld-

erly woman fed the missing girl, and asked her to be her maid. The missing girl accepted to do so, and served with all her heart.

After seven days of service, the elder woman returned the missing girl to the village at night with a small gift. The elder woman instructed the missing girl to lock up the gift in a room that must not be opened until after three days. The elder woman disappeared into the forest as soon as possible.

The whole village was happy at the girl's return. The missing younger girl narrated to her mother her encounter with the elderly woman, the "mysterious gift" item and the instruction on how it should be handled. The mother then locked up the gift in a room for three days. On the fourth day, the girl asked her mother to open the room where the gift was stored. As soon as the door was forced open, huge sums of money started pouring out and instantly the mother and her only daughter became instant millionaires (very rich). The mother and daughter were very generous and gave to any one who was in need in the village including her step sister and her mother.

In no time, the mother of the missing girl's elder sister became very jealous, and would not see eye to eye with her mate. The elder sister's mom hatched a plan, and lured her daughter into planning another trip into the forest for the purpose of fetching firewood. She instructed her daughter to remain behind whilst the other girls returned to the village. The missing girl's elder sister heeded her mother's advice, stayed behind and was searched for but was not found. As she cried in the forest, the elderly woman emerged from nowhere in the forest. She took the girl into her home and asked her to be her maid. The girl agreed but was very lazy, unfaithful and disobedient. After seven days, the elderly woman returned her to the village at night. The elderly lady also gave her a gift, giving the same instructions as she gave to the younger sister. The elder sister's mom was so happy knowing that she would soon become a millionaire that she constantly piped through a hole in the wall of the room to see the changes that may be taking place. She also went about the village boasting about the prospects of her becoming a millionaire very shortly.

After three days, the elder sister's mom gathered huge containers, and requested the able bodied men in the village to help her force the

door of the room where she kept "the mysterious gift" open. A day that was supposed to be their happiest suddenly turned sour and tragic. What happened? As soon as the door was forced open, big snakes crawled out of the room with terrific speed. They bit several people many of whom died. The biggest python swallowed the elder sister and her mom, and the whole village was thrown into confusion, wailing and immense sorrow."

Major Lessons

Greed and jealousy should have no room in relationship, and it is not possible to violate or ignore or short-circuit the African child development process of obedience and industry as displayed by the "missing younger girl" in her relationship with the elderly forest woman and expect valuable result. Short-circuiting the virtue of obedience and industry can only possibly result in disappointment, frustration and even death.

Story Number 2: Only the Best Suitor

"In a village once lived a man and woman who had great difficulties in child bearing. After several years of marriage, they finally had an only daughter who meant everything to them. They became over protective of the daughter. They wanted the best for her and would not let her explore the world all by herself as many other parents in the village would do.

When this only daughter was ready to marry making up her mind became a big problem. She was approached by many suitors, the tall and the short, the young and old, rich and poor, the handsome and not too handsome, the educated and illiterates, the smart and the not-too smart. You name it! She complained about all of them. Sometimes, she would complain that this suitor was far too short, and at other times, she would complain about the weight or height or level of education or wealth or parental background. Virtually no suitor met her specifications.

One day, one of the suitors who really loved the only daughter became so despondent about his failure to win her and ask her hand in marriage began to lament on his way to visit his friend in the nearby village. As he was lamenting, one ugly, poor and illiterate elderly man heard him. "What happened to you that you are

lamenting like this?” The elderly man asked the lamenting suitor. The elderly man got the details of all that had happened to this suitor. Immediately, then he made up his mind to teach the beautiful only daughter some basic truths about life. What did he do? The elderly man from the near-by village decided to borrow the best parts in anybody he met on his way to propose to and marry this girl. By the time he got to the village where the only daughter lived with her parents, he became the most handsome and eligible suitor in the village and it was acknowledged by all who saw him. He made his way to the home of the girl.

Immediately the only daughter and her parents saw this disguised, young and handsome suitor, they welcomed him warmly. He introduced the purpose of his visit. Without thinking twice, the only daughter and her parents accepted the proposal. He became known in the village that the best suitor had been finally found. Almost all the villagers heaved a sigh of relief that the only daughter of this popular family had finally found the man she really wanted to marry. The marriage was quickly arranged, concluded and the “handsome” man took his wife home.

As they made their way to the next village from where the man came, he began to return all the parts he had borrowed. In no time, he dropped all the borrowed parts and his true identity came out, but it was too late for the only daughter to change her mind since the tradition in her village did not allow for divorce. In her village, the rule was that “till death do us part!” The only daughter began to cry all day and all night, but it was already too late for anything to be done, as no one was allowed to alter the age-long tradition that guided marriage in her village. She had no choice but to live with ugly and poor elderly man for the rest of her life! That was how the girl missed the lifetime opportunity of becoming a happily married only daughter of her parents.”

Major Lessons

Parents must never fail to allow their children come to a realization that it is not possible to find a totally perfect human being. In choosing to be the center of influencing your children’s choices in life, you borrow strength in some cases, and end up reinforcing in them continu-

ous dependence on external factors to get things accomplished. This is one way parents force children to acquiesce and stunt their ability to develop the power of balanced and independent reasoning.

In searching for a marriage partner, it is sometimes foolhardy not to investigate the background of the one you want to marry. And we are warned that greed should never be a consideration in making up your mind who you want to marry. Sometimes, you are better off looking beyond the present and making a determined effort to stick it out as far you have genuine love for your proposed partner in marriage.

Story Number 3: Why the Cricket’s Teeth Are Black

“One day, the cricket and the dog were debating who was the fastest in swimming. The dog said no other animal can actually beat her when it comes to swimming. The cricket also said that it might not be able to swim as fast as the dog but it could do well, all the same. A day was arranged for both of them to compete. The cricket and the dog were asked to swim across the big river in the town, and whoever was the first to arrive at the other end of the river would be crowned as the fastest swimmer. On the set day, they plunged into the river and as the dog was making his way forward to establish its claim, it was distracted by something it liked eating. Immediately the dog sighted that thing, it went for it and spent some time eating until he was full. Whilst the dog was savoring that thing, the cricket maintained a good distance and was much focused. The distance between the two was so wide that the cricket arrived at the other end much earlier than the dog. On the other side of the river was the huge fire that had been organized so that the competitors could warm themselves. The cricket got to the fire to warm itself while the dog was yet to arrive. The cricket was so elated at the thought of being the fastest swimmer that it began to laugh uncontrollably. The cricket laughed so much that it eventually fell into the fire and burnt its teeth. That is why the teeth of the cricket are stained till today.”

Major Lessons

In the race of life, it is advisable for one to remain focused and consistent at all times if you

want to hit the target. If the dog had been focused and consistent, it probably would have received the crown. It is also not useful to laugh at the calamity of other competitors. If the cricket had not engaged in laughing at the dog, it would not have fallen into the fire and got his teeth burnt, and thus become one of the few insects in this category that has black teeth, and this story tells us that discretion is the better part of valor.

DISCUSSION

The grandmothers' stories highlighted above show that most of them are directed at instructing people on proper conduct, respect, adaptability, industry, appearance, adversity, self-praise, greed, and avoidance of advice that is purely injurious to the advisee and valuable norms and traditions of the people. However, not everyone in the ethnic groups studied accept advice given by the elderly. Perhaps, the quality of mind of the one giving the advice is generally considered in the cultural communication among generations of the people. Available literature suggests that stories are commonly shared among children, youth and the elderly but with the later playing the role of a custodian by virtue of the importance attached to oral tradition.

Stories are used by the grandmothers in the enculturation process of the young ones. Some of them may have been geared towards critiquing colonization and education in social justice and spiritual development when necessary (Zeichner 2009; Edwards and Sherwood 2011; Ruth 2013). That they have existed thus far in spite cultural altercation from the West should suggest however remotely that may seem that Africans value their stories and would continue to use them in intergenerational interactions that are common during moonlight gatherings and other socio-cultural events.

African stories are under grave attack from cultural globalization, but they have remained consistently useful to date (Mhlophe 2004). Africa is currently experiencing a much freer access to Internet connectivity, and this could have some impacts that should be calling for more research inputs. It is possible that the free Internet access to all kinds of values that appear inimical to those cherished by Africans may take a heavy but frequently unexpressed toll on the frequency with which the stories are transmit-

ted from one generation to the other. In fact, there are many people of African origin or those who reside in the continent that are almost completely novices when it comes to cultural exchanges using stories. Again, African media has been so easily invaded by the electronically more powerful West. It may not be true, but one is watching and getting afraid that it may only be a matter of time before our stories are jettisoned in preference for the understanding of Hardley Chase and Harry Potter's literature and then the "Superman" and all the Hollywood superstar films that are very remote from African culture and value systems.

The pervading influence of the influx of foreigners into the region mainly because of the oil industry, and its possible effect on the cultural communication patterns of the people has meant the ethnic groups have been ingenious in applying storytelling to build social relationships. We also know that impact is being made by the new movement known as African Renaissance. It may well be those cultivating African grandmothers' stories used and converting some of them into literature the way Africa's Chinua Achebe has so aptly done might be one way of resolving problems related to social relationships.

As at the moment, it is only ethnographers and those in the areas of language and psycholinguistics who are possibly pursuing scholarship aimed at the appreciation, cultivation and growth and applications of African grandmothers' stories. Scholars who are interested in African literature are yet to pay any serious attention to grandmothers' stories in the contexts of how they have been used in intergenerational relationships in past years. Very few are yet to explore how the stories can be adequately studied across geographical boundaries within Africa, and synthesized such that they can be maximally integrated into psycho-linguistic interactions and intergenerational relationships within Africa on the one hand and the delayed exchanges between scholars in the North and South who may be interested in the subject of "resisting" cultural globalization in a wider global context.

CONCLUSION

The researcher has briefly highlighted in this paper a selection of grandmothers' stories that are used in intergenerational interactions. The

use of grandmothers' stories has worked well for so many years among the communities studied. The new challenge that faces the use of the stories is modernity and cultural globalization that is perpetuated by the Western media with its pervading influence among the developing nations in Africa. Even with the intervention of globalization, it is interesting that the ethnic groups studied have held on to the use of African stories in intergenerational communication and relationships. How long the stories would continue to play the roles they have been playing is probably contingent on so many factors. We propose that the resurgence of African Renaissance offers us much hope for the continuous application of grandmothers' stories. This also implies that those who are involved in intergenerational relationships networking would have to work much harder in spite of grossly inadequate resources than is now the case.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The pervading influence of Western media on African culture is obvious. Many young Africans are fast adopting and adapting Western values in spite of the many values that African culture has to offer. Those values had been very much incorporated in African stories and had been handed down to younger generations in the past and with good results. It is recommended that these values must be strengthened and preserved in oral and written forms for young Africans. If this is not done, many of Africans may never get to appreciate the things that hold African social fabric in place.

The documentation of grandmothers' stories needs to be accelerated and research funds generously made available to researchers and ethnographers who are at the forefront of developing the interests of the African youth in our culture and traditions.

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