

Cultural Storytelling and Oral Tradition

By Emmanuel K. Ofori

In most African churches, it is common for listeners to intersperse a preacher's message with song and other commentary. The singer may weave in traditional principles or a biblical story to bring home the main moral or spiritual lessons of the sermon.

So during one of my sermons when I was serving Ghana Calvary Methodist United Church in Toronto, it came as no surprise to hear "*Oheneba Mesaya, wo mma retwen wo o o, ...!!*" ("Your children are waiting for you, Messiah the Prince") echo through the congregation. The song was started by one of the *Abibidwom* (traditional Christian folk song) singers in the church. Within a short time the whole congregation was on its feet singing and dancing to the traditional Akan rhythm.

Most African/Ghanaian sermons are delivered in the same way as folk stories are told. Families used to gather by the fireside to listen to elders and storytellers. While their stories were being told, the listeners would interject comments or sing a folk song, the purpose of which would be to encourage the storyteller, help bring out the message clearly to the listeners, or both.

By the Fireside

Stories told by the fireside were known as *Anansesem* or *Anansesem* (spider stories). Among the Akan of Ghana, the spider is the personification of shrewdness and craftiness, and considered to be very clever. His first name is Kwaku (male born on Wednesday).

One story tells of how Kwaku Ananse once thought of himself to be the wisest person in whole wide world. As a schemer, he tried to gather every piece of wisdom he could find and keep it in a safe place, so that he would be the only wise person in the world. After gathering all of the world's wisdom, he went for a gourd—a type of trailing or climbing plant related to the pumpkin, squash, and cucumber, and bearing fruits with a hard rind. He removed all the contents of the gourd, and in his wisdom, decided to hoard the world's wisdom in it.

When he had sealed off every piece of wisdom he could find in the gourd, he felt it would be better secured on top of the Silk Cotton tree, beyond the reach of people. He decided to climb the tree. He tied the gourd in front of him; the gourd was now between him and the tree. He found it to be in his way as he made several fruitless efforts to climb. He became more frustrated and angry with himself.

Meanwhile, his son, Ntikuma, who had been watching from a distance, came closer and suggested to his dad to tie the gourd behind him as mothers carry their children on their backs. He yelled at his son to get lost. But after thoughtful consideration, he tried the son's suggestion, and in a twinkle of an eye, he was at the top of the tree. Ananse then realized that he could not achieve his mission, because some wisdom was left in the head of his own son. He then let go the gourd from the top of the tree. It smashed on the ground and all the wisdom he had in it scattered on the face of the earth.

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Significance of Anansesem

What is the significance of these stories? In this particular story, we learn that no one has a monopoly over wisdom. Each person has a measure of wisdom that can be used for the common good. One can use this story in a sermon to reinforce, for example, Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ where he teaches that each member of the body has a measure of skill or gift for the common good. I have used the story in children's story time in church to teach a similar lesson about the need to share.

Secondly, storytelling was a way of passing on the torch of religio-cultural traditions and customs from one generation to another. No story is told as an end in itself. Each story, like Jesus' parables, carries one or more morals, life principles, or lessons. Also, story time gathered the family or the household together, reinforcing the communal life of the people.

How are the stories told?

Among Africans/Ghanaians, stories were told orally. As they are narrated, interspersed with songs and interjections by the listeners, the message is reinforced and keeps the people alert and awake. I have heard this story retold in many places in Ghana, but found this medium of transmission to be very powerful as the content and songs associated with this story remain unchanged.

Conclusion

I have retold this story as I heard it by the fireside while growing up as a little boy in Ghana, but I was not able to sing any songs or use non-verbal expression. When these stories are transmitted in the written form, they lose some of their "flavouring spices." I have heard the same story told by some friends from the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, and from the southern United States. The retelling of these stories tells me of the resilience of the people of African descent, showing us that more than 300 years of slavery, hardships, and persecution have not been able to kill the spirit of the oral religio-cultural traditions of their African heritage. The core moral principle in the story has been kept intact.

The story of Ananse and his attempt to hoard all of the world's wisdom, and its retelling among African peoples in the diaspora, demonstrate the power of orality. However, the story has taken on some contextual and cultural aspects from its new environment. It has been repackaged for its new audience. For example, Ananse is referred to as Anancy, Anancyi, Ananansa, Aunt Nancy, or Kacou Ananze. One will find these names and similar variants on the Internet, on YouTube, and in books. There are differences in content, context, and characterization of Ananse.

These media of transmission thus lose some of nuance and non-verbal presentation of each of the stories they seek to transmit. However, in spite of some variants, distortions, and exaggerations in some of the presentations, I do find that this transmission through new media has helped Kwaku Ananse, featured in uncountable *Anansesem*, to enjoy a wider audience than the original form could in Ghana.

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