

...Promoting African identity through Storytelling

Prof Linus Abraham



Africans should first and foremost be telling our own stories. For too long the African identity and condition has been shaped in foreign western locations that have denigrated and dehumanized our identities for purposes of enslaving and colonizing us. It is important we move the locus of storytelling to Africa. Africans should tell their own stories.



<https://www.corpcommghana.com/team/>

THE topic suggests a causal relationship between storytelling and identity, more specifically “African Identity.” It raises assumptions underlying the relationship between storytelling as discourse/knowledge, its power implications and its impact on identity construction. What is the ideal (or not ideal) story being told, who is telling them, and with what effect on the construction of African identity(ies)?

Not surprisingly there are continuing debates on what constitutes an authentic African cinema; not just whose storytelling can be deemed African, but whether the story telling should be geared towards political deconstruction of the colonial gaze that has traditionally created inferior African identities (thus we should go back for what is deemed authentically African stories) or should the story telling model the global market trends of genre films for entertainment and escapism (which some critics see as potentially stigmatizing African identity and celebrates its subordinate/peripheral role in the global culture).

The presentation attempts to touch on the following:

1. What is storytelling and its importance?
2. Storytelling as a meaning making technology
3. Storytelling (especially in film) as discursive avenue for identity construction and its power implications
4. What constitutes the ideal African story and storytelling? And,
5. Discuss the philosophy of the paradigm of African Identity and Development, as a way of suggesting the boundaries of the ideal type of African Storytelling (Film) to construct the ideal African Identity.

What Is Storytelling?

Storytelling describes the social and cultural activity of sharing stories. Every culture has its own stories or narratives, which are shared as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation or instilling moral values.¹ Storytelling was the primary way of passing along information, long before the written word even existed, is thus said to be as old as any culture.

¹ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storytelling>

As often used, the term "storytelling" can refer in a narrow sense specifically to oral storytelling and also in a looser sense to techniques used in other media to unfold or disclose the narrative of a story.

Traditional Storytelling: Storytelling in indigenous cultures is used as an oral form of language associated with practices and values essential to developing one's identity. Oral storytelling in indigenous communities is said to differ from other forms of stories because they are told not only for entertainment, but for teaching values² – though I will not hesitate to say modern stories, consciously or unconsciously play a similar function of teaching values. Storytelling was and is a way a way to teach younger members of indigenous communities about their culture and their identities.

African Storytelling: Storytelling is deeply rooted in African culture. Since ancient times, storytelling in the African culture has been a way of passing on traditions, codes of behavior, as well as maintaining social order.

Octavia Utley, in her article titled, "Keeping the Tradition of African Storytelling Alive,"³ gives a good summary of the significant role of storytelling in traditional cultures. She contends that the tradition of African storytelling is one of the most ancient in African culture. She argues that since ancient times, storytelling in the African culture has been a way of passing on traditions, codes of behavior, as well as maintaining social order. Even without the existence of writing in ancient Africa, there had been ways for Africans to transmit their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, using forms of art, myths and ceremonies.

Traditional oral literary forms of African people have been woven out of the substance of their human experiences. The tales reflect relations among humans, man and woman, and humans and the animal world. They offer explanations of natural phenomena, teach morality, provide African people with a sense of identity, and are entertaining as well as instructive. Octavius rightly points out many of the tales reflect relations among humans, man and woman, and humans and the animal world and offer explanations of natural phenomena, teach morality, and providing African people with a sense of identity, all orchestrated in a way that was entertaining as well as instructive.

The animal trickster tales are the favorite among the folktales because they include an animal trickster with human habits, beliefs, and weaknesses. The animal trickster tales, which are found in many African culture, are the favorite among the folktales because they include an animal trickster with human habits, beliefs, and weaknesses. Trickster tales use animals with human features to convey wisdom. Trickster tales also use animals to help people understand human nature and human behavior.

While the animal tricksters differ from culture to culture, the animal tricksters occur in tales from the West, East, Central, and Southern African community. The hare is said to be the most prominent trickster among people of East, Central, and Southern Africa. He is also important among the Jukan and Angass of Nigeria. The tortoise is the trickster hero among the Yoruba, Edo, and Ibo of Nigeria. The spider is the animal trickster in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana. Each culture is aid to have own its own unique way of describing and utilizing its trickster. Animal tricksters have exceptional qualities, mental agility, and extraordinary capabilities. They are portrayed as lazy, greedy, talented, clever, and mischievous. They deceive friends, acquaintances, and adversaries in pursuing their own selfish ends. The storyteller's audience appreciates the wit that leads the animal trickster from one victory to another. Emmanuel Matateyou⁴, summarizing the importance of storytelling in the Cameroonian and African culture, contends that storytelling, like rhetoric, is the exercise of the mind – this hearkens to Foucault's

² Archibald, Jo-Ann, (2008). *Indigenous Storywork: Educating The Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*. Vancouver, British Columbia: The University of British Columbia Press

³ Octavia Utley. "Keeping The Tradition Of African Storytelling Alive." https://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/initiative_09.01.08_u Retrieved on March 10, 2019.

⁴ Emmanuel Matateyou, of *An Anthology Myths, Legends and Folktales from Cameroon*, 147.

notion of discourse as action. The words have great power; folktales keep the community united; they help reserve the knowledge, wisdom, and techniques which are part of the society.

Contemporary Storytelling: Technological revolutions in communication has radically expanded the reach of storytelling beyond its limited geographical confines of particular place. New forms of media are creating new ways for people to record, express and consume stories.⁶ Documentaries, including interactive web documentaries, employ storytelling narrative techniques to communicate information about their topic.

Storytelling as meaning Making Technology: Stories are technologies of meaning making that human beings use to answer questions and explain the complexities of their lives. They are a central part of human communication. Whether in the form of a novel, history text, a song, news story, a painting or film, they are meaning making forms that help us to answer the *Who, What, Where, How and Why* of particular events that we encounter and experience in our lives.

Human life and existence are so complex, events spanning the paths of our lives sometimes leave us baffled, some leave us weeping, and some leave us laughing. Often, we are left with questions about our experiences that the human mind seeks to answer. And this is where the urge to create and tell stories comes from – it is because of the human need for explanation and meaning. Humans are meaning making beings and hunger for meaning: “Why do nice people always finish last; and do they really?” “Why do disasters happen – why are churches also destroyed in earthquakes?” The more we look at what remains unexplained in our lives, the more we have the urge to create stories – we use narrative fiction, documentary, journalism or some other forms as vehicles for proposing questions, ideas, and possible solutions and meanings.

Often a person needs to attempt to tell the story of an experience before realizing its value. In this case, it is not only the listener who learns, but the teller who also becomes aware of his or her own unique experiences and background.⁵ Stories, therefore, are important to tell, not only for those who get to relive them, but for those who can listen and learn from them. Stories allow for everyone to express all of their identities and to share information in their cultures. Storytelling is what connects us to our humanity. It is what links us to our past, and provides a glimpse into our future.

Importance of Storytelling: Nathaniel Ranson compares the importance and impact of storytelling on culture to “passing on our genetic code.” He summarizes the importance of storytelling in saying that: “I find storytelling to be at the utmost importance in measuring the effect and longevity of culture. Wives tales, ghost stories and fairy tales are all reflections of the society in which they take place, in addition to what values are carried through generations. Furthermore, it is because of storytelling that so many industries are able to have widespread success and influence. It is the expression of our legacies, lessons and histories that ensure cultural identity remains intact – akin to passing on our genetic code – because the stories that make up our development can determine what our future will be”⁶.

Importance of Storytelling in Advertising and Marketing: Storytelling is increasingly used in advertising today in order to build customer loyalty^{7 8}. Commercials have been using less informational approaches that harp on the hard qualities of the product, but rather tell entertaining stories that gets the target audience to identify with the lifestyle that product is selling. The commercial doesn't show the product it is selling, except maybe at the very end, once the story finishes. According to Giles Lury, this marketing trend echoes the deeply rooted need of all humans to be entertained. Stories are

⁵ Doty, Elizabeth. "Transforming Capabilities: Using Story for Knowledge Discovery & Community Development" (PDF). Storytelling In Organizations. Archived from the original (PDF) on 2013-08-13.

⁶ (Nathaniel Ranson, Sept 7 2017 <https://www.brk.org/the-importance-of-storytelling/>)

⁷ "The art of storytelling in 7 content marketing context questions". *i-SCOOP*. 2014-07-01. Archived from the original on 2017-07-05. Retrieved 2017-07-08.

⁸ Plain Language at Work. "The best story wins Archived 2014-10-06 at the Wayback Machine." Mar 25, 2012. Retrieved Dec 19, 2012.

illustrative, easily memorable and allow any firm to create stronger emotional bonds with the customers⁹.

Amy Cowen¹⁰ draws attention to a universal feature in the most successful promotional campaigns - all tell a story, i.e.; the use of story in marketing and commercials. "People are attracted to stories from an early age. There is a reason why parents teach valuable lessons through this method—stories are engaging and they capture the attention of the listener from the beginning to the very end. And this is exactly why storytelling is such a powerful content marketing tool. It holds the attention of the audience."

(Paul Jarvis) Research has established that the use of narratives helps the human brain to focus and thus learn better: "Stories are a catalyst for emotion since they take facts and other things we want to retain and put them into an emotional structure. Apparently, we're still hardwired to learn better if someone's words have meaning and emotion to them (proven with science!) because the use of narrative helps our brain focus. Antonio and Hanna Damasio, USC Professors of Neuroscience, did studies on how emotion shapes our thoughts. It turns out, they shape them a great deal and we don't learn without them"¹¹.

In the Creation of Contemporary Content Storyteller is King.: Tristan Abbott notes that storytelling has become absolutely necessary skill in content creation, because for those who consume content, a good story makes consuming the content that much easier. Having good content or having a good idea does not translate into good stories, and the ability to tell a good story is an extremely useful skill. As she notes, "a recent *Harvard Business Review* article discussed the issue of storytelling and its importance, concluding that during this time of information saturation, telling a good story is essential to being heard and getting your message out. The article concluded that no matter what aspect of business you are involved in, storytelling is an essential skill."¹²

Storytelling as a Political Praxis: Storytelling and Identity: As we have noticed, storytelling as a medium of communication does not only provide entertainment, it also provides information and facilitates learning, but it can also be a technology of power that can be used consciously, or unconsciously, to shape the attitudes and identities of people, either enslaving them or liberating them from the dominant hegemony.

In this sense questions of who is telling the story, for what purpose, to what effect, and in whose interest does it serve are questions that come to the fore. Therefore, some academic approaches "treat narratives as politically motivated stories, stories that may enslave some group or empower certain groups and free them from enslavement. Instead of just searching for the main point of the narrative, the political function is demanded through asking, "Whose interest does a story serve"? This approach mainly looks at the power, authority, knowledge, ideology and identity; "whether it legitimates and dominates or resists and empowers"¹³

According to Bingel, Krutz, Luh and Mütze (2000; p58), from this political praxis, stories provide a "privileged site" for the analysis of identity...stories become productive sites of active and effective identity constitution which not only play a key role in our daily efforts at self-making, but ... also serve to forge communities.¹⁴ Stories become discursive sites with implications of power in shaping identities

⁹ Lury, Giles (2004). Brand Strategy, Issue 182, p. 32

¹⁰ (<https://www.allbusiness.com/storytelling-important-content-marketing-106271-1.html>)

¹¹ <https://www.inc.com/paul-jarvis/the-5-common-elements-of-good-storytelling.html>.

¹² Tristan Abbott. <http://www.econtentmag.com/Articles/Editorial/Commentary/The-Importance-of-Storytelling-Big-and-Small-98660.htm>. Aug 11, 2014)

¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storytelling>

¹⁴ Svenja Bingel, Vera Krutz, Katharina Luh And Anneki Mütze (2000). 'The auntie's story': Fictional representations of Māori women's identities in Witi Ihimaera's." *Women's Studies Journal*, Volume 25 Number 2, December 2011: 56-73. ISSN 1173-6615 © 2011 Women's Studies Association of New Zealand

of individuals and groups. In an issue of the Quartz Africa, the editor Yinka Adegoke references a study by the Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project which analyzed some 700,000 hours of US television news and entertainment to see how Africa and Africans are portrayed in US media. He says the representation of African was largely negative. He notes that "while none of this feels surprising on the surface it's worth reiterating how these perceptions end up influencing real policy and business decisions about Africa." He notes that it's important that African countries do better at telling the positive stories they have about themselves both internally and to the world, because it's only them who call tell their stories better¹⁵.

What Constitutes Authentic African (Cinema) Story Telling: Naturally Africans who have been disparaged and been made to feel inferior by Western storytelling have been asked to tell their own stories in the process of emancipating themselves. So, questions about what is an African story and what is an authentic or authentic African story have become central discussions since the development of African Cinema after colonization. Tcheuyap (2011)¹⁶, in his article titled, "African Cinema(s): Definitions, Identity and Theoretical Considerations" (which largely draws on insights from *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (2010) by Manthia Diawara), contends that there is a shift in perception of what constitutes authentic African cinema (story) and what should it be geared towards. He writes:

"...contemporary directors, many of whom have not experienced traumatic colonial experiences, do not feel compelled to "film back" or to be politically committed....since the 1990s, these directors have abandoned the ideologically oriented aesthetics of the pioneer African filmmakers, which they severely criticize....Whereas pioneer filmmakers obsessively focused on a critique of (post)colonial Africa or on the rehabilitation of a mutilated identity and distorted history, post-1990 directors resolutely go beyond nationalism and situate their discourses in the turbulent flows of globalization ... contemporary films are less moralizing, less didactic, less concerned with legitimizing the nation," than previous ones." (Tcheuyap, 2011, p10-11)

He argues that what may be called "popular" African cinema seems to focus very much on genre specific films, with the choice of genre directed towards commercial and entertainment cinema, two options which were considered as almost heretical practices at the peak of nationalist filmmaking that systematically (and almost naively) rejected any "escapist" or "capitalist" notions of cinema. He argues that that well-known "African" cinema is on the verge of being buried by a generation of directors who not only did not experience colonialism as Sembène Ousmane, but also do not feel obliged to "speak" for African people or "teach" them anything.

Not surprisingly, these discursive transformations have, at times, been criticized by scholars who seem concerned with the loss of an "African ontology" or an "African" cinema that should remain immune to "alienation" all the while conserving its "purity" in spite of global circulations and cultural transformations. Manthia Diawara, contends that these formal experimentations are nothing but a mere "recourse to a Eurocentric formalism, which represses the contents of their lives and privileges the position of Western spectators in art cinema festivals."

Hosted at www.wsanz.org.n. P58

¹⁵ [Remi Adegoke](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/28/africans-worry-how-africa-portrayed-western-media). "Why Africans worry about how Africa is portrayed in western media?" <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/28/africans-worry-how-africa-portrayed-western-media>. 28th Nov 2013. Downloaded Jan 6th 2013.

¹⁶ Alexie Tcheuyap (2011). African Cinema(s): "Definitions, Identity and Theoretical Considerations", *Critical Interventions*, Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture, 5:1, 10-26, DOI:10.1080/19301944.2011.10781397).

Ideal African Storytelling to Shape an Appropriate African Identity: In light of the above discussion, how can we then define African cinema? There is likely no straightforward answer. What is clear, though, is that no single conceptualization is sufficient.

Given the contested nature of the ideal African Cinema, I try to reflect on what may constitute appropriate African storytelling to affect the ideal African identity(ies) that we can imagine to ensure the development of the African people.

Undergirding the contested nature of African Cinema (i.e., appropriate story telling) are arguments about the crisis of African Identity and the need for an African renaissance in consciousness that will lead to development of the continent. Here the hegemonic role of storytelling in raising the conscious of the African people becomes paramount.

In reflecting on what may constitute the idea African Cinema to affect the appropriate African identity, I draw on Frank Okema Ndubuisi's *The Philosophical Paradagim of African Identity and Development* (Ndubuisi, 2013)¹⁷. Ndubuisi's project is to draw on contemporary African philosophical enquiry to chart a course for delivering Africa from its identity crisis to show the way for the appropriate development of the continent.

Ndubuisi summarizes the essence of the philosophical paradigm of African identity and development. He notes that:

"Africa's truncated slave trade, racialism and colonial experiences shook the foundations of the traditional conceptual paradigms, institutions and worldviews. And having passed through these cultural dislocations, it calls for a critical inquiry from which we can discern fundamental elements vital for development. The African now wishes to concretize his social, political, religious, economic and cultural ideas as an independent free and mature human being. He wishes to be the master of his world with its burden and joy to count and be counted in the family of nations.

"Here philosophical paradigm of African identity and development tries to bring out the way the people think with the aim of rediscovering and situating them on the right track that is being original and authentic with the view of arriving at a desired goal. "It is critical inquiry done on the concepts and manner of African identity and development, believing/hoping to find what would be the basis and solution to African identity crises and meaningful development."

Calling for a black renaissance, he notes that "the first condition for black renaissance is the knowledge of the fact there is the African problem of economic backwardness, political instability, technological inertia and total dependence on the West. The problem is the knowledge that Africans lack the political will and freedom to determine their destiny in the scheme of things in the comity of nations" (p 225).

Storytelling and Emancipation of African Identity: Having recognized the importance of storytelling (and cinema) as an important tool for meaning making and a tool for identity formation, I adopt the philosophical paradigm of African identity and development, in suggesting that African filmmakers, as important storytellers shaping the future of our nations and pupils, should consider our state of development and our identity crisis in telling stories that have the goal of emancipation of the African mind and situation to ensure the development of the black man.

This sounds rather grandiose and as if it hearkens back to notions of authentic African cinema with the political goal of deconstruction of colonial and post-colonial structures that engendered Africa's

¹⁷ Frank Okema Ndubuisi (2013). *The Philosophical Paradagim of African Identity and Development*. Open Journal of Philosophy, Vol.3, No.1A, 222-230. Published Online February 2013 in SciRes (<http://www.scirp.org/journal/ojpp>)

identity. Yes, it is part of that but more. It also gives a call to the newer generation of filmmakers (ala Nollywood) that see beyond nationhood and identity and see themselves as part of a global community pushing current trends of genre oriented and more commercial films, to be critically aware of the continent's identity crisis and the potential power of their stories in shaping the identity and development of the African people.

I think both trends of filmmaking can co-exist. We can have meta-narrative films that are very political in their goals but also very commercial in appealing to a popular audience. And we can have very popular genre-based films that go beyond just commercial interests. What is important is an awareness of conditions of Africa (political, economic, social) in their storytelling that attempts solutions to the African problematic in its multi-faceted form.

Telling Our Own Stories: Given the hegemonic importance of storytelling, Africans should first and foremost be telling our own stories. For too long the African identity and condition has been shaped in foreign western locations that have denigrated and dehumanized our identities for purposes of enslaving and colonizing us. It is important we move the locus of storytelling to Africa. Africans should tell their own stories.

Madafo Lloyd Wilson¹⁸ makes reference to a story reprinted from the *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, Spring 2002 that illustrates the importance of African's telling their own stories:

The young boy went to his grandfather and said, "Grandfather, is it true that the lion is the king of the jungle?"

"Yes," said the old man, "but why do you ask?"

"Well," said the boy, "in all the stories that I read and even in the ones I hear, man will always defeat the lion. So, how can this be true?"

The old man looked his grandson in the eyes and said, "It will always be that way, my son, until the lion tells the story."

But in telling our own stories, filmmakers should be aware of their power to shape African identities. Our storytellers should be part of the renaissance of African personality and identity. In their storytelling they should adopt the philosophical paradigm of African identity and development. Here as Ndubui's contends:

"Here philosophical paradigm of African identity and development tries to bring out the way the people think with the aim of rediscovering and situating them on the right track that is being original and authentic with the view of arriving at a desired goal" (p 225).

The desired goal here being a true knowledge of the reality that should inform representations of Africa on the screen in such a way that raises the consciousness of the African and moves us towards development.

¹⁸ Madafo Lloyd Wilson. *African and African American Storytelling*. <https://www.ncpedia.org/culture/stories/african-american>
Retrieved 10 March, 2019.