Chapter 20
Tackling the Preservation of African Tales in the Technological Era: Ghana’s Legends

Diana A. Abankwah
University of Namibia, Namibia

Ruth M. Abankwah
University of Namibia, Namibia

ABSTRACT

It appears that the great story-tellers of the Ghanaian society and the traditional singers, bards and griots were the “knowledge houses” of the Ghanaian society. This tradition is slowly dying out in the technological era. This study sought to determine the extent to which the Ananse oral tradition is still practiced among Ghanaians living outside Ghana, particularly Botswana and Ghana where the study was conducted. The study employed an exploratory qualitative approach using interviews. The findings reveal that although elders and storytellers were able to weave morals into children’s activities from a very young age, Ghanaians who were not raised speaking their native tongue find it difficult to relate to the messages woven deeply into the Ananse stories. The study concludes that globalisation has reduced the importance Ghanaians attach to Ananse stories. The authors see a need for strategies to be put in place to resuscitate the oral story telling tradition of Anansesem.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the character of Ananse the Spider (also spelled ‘Anansi’) and the effect of urbanisation and technology on the oral tradition of Anansesem. The chapter sets out to: delve into the persona of Ananse the Spider in the minds of Ghanaians; portray the role of Ananse in the Ghanaian community; demonstrate the significance of games and songs connected with Anansesem; demonstrate the need to preserve Anansesem to prevent the legend from extinction in a technological era; and recommend ways to revive the oral story telling tradition of Anansesem.
of reviving the Anansesem storytelling tradition in the current technological time. The chapter presents the character of Ananse, the Spider and the effect of urbanisation and technology on the oral tradition of Anansesem.

The chapter is organised into eight sections starting with a background, literature review which discusses the persona of Ananse in the minds of Ghanaians, stories on Anansensem, the role of Ananse in the Ghanaiian community, the significance of games and songs to Anansesem and the need to preserve the Anansesem stories. This is followed by the statement of the problem, methodology and presentation and discussion of findings. Finally, the chapter ends with a conclusion and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

There is an African adage that says that “when an old man dies, a library burns down.” Documenting information in the form of memories is an old practice in many African traditions. It has been passed on from generation to generation. Nonetheless, this practice is progressively dying with the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have led to new ways of communicating and preserving stories. This chapter presents the character of Ananse the Spider and the effect of urbanisation on Ghana’s story telling traditions.

Nkosana (2012) argues that her grandmother is an archive because she is consulted on various issues which include; illness, family lineage, genealogy, disputes, marriage, customary practices, health, and spirituality. She is knowledgeable about the deepest and darkest family secrets. For generations, Africans have passed on legends and myths that have contributed tremendously to the African oral tradition of storytelling. For instance, the Zulus had legends of Chaka (1931) as cited by (Okpewho, 1983), whilst the Xhosa told of the ntsomi folktales.

According to Okpewho (1983), the Manding griots of West Africa sang of the Sunjata legend and the Hampate Ba and the Igbo had ‘How the Leopard Got His Claws’ (1972). ‘Stand forever, Oh Zima-Mbje’ is a story compiled from old Mashona, Venda, Bechuna, and Varozwi songs and stories (Mutwa, 1998). This is a true story of the Lost Phoenician empire in Southern Africa, which is still sung and told around fires in South and Central Africa (Mutwa, 1998). Other stories in Africa include a Limba story about a trickster spider popularly known as ‘wosi’, which was told by an old man who lived in the northern uplands of Sierra Leone (Finnegan 2007). This story which was translated in English in 1961, depicts a greedy scheming spider who was able to outwit his opponents. The Limba stories depict many themes and traditional timeless tales which still move many narrators and audiences (Finnegan, 2007, p. 69).

In Ghana, tales of Ananse the Spider are common among the Akan and Ashanti communities. These legends (known collectively as Anansesem or Spider tales) were used as a means by elders to educate and familiarise Ghanaian children with the customs, beliefs and norms of their society. However, Okpewho (1983) observed that this age-old cultural tradition has steadily been threatened by new modes of living, making it “necessary to preserve something of the old ways in the interests of history and cultural continuity” (Okpewho, 1983, p.160).

Although Web 2.0 technology has contributed to the proliferation of e-books which can be accessed by young and old, (Web 2.0 Resources for 21st Instruction, 2015), it has diminished the storytelling culture in some Ghanaian tribes, such as the Akan and the Ashanti. Those interested in following up the Anansesem tales no longer need to seek out the griots of old, but can now simply Google watered down versions of the original stories. Books on traditional folk tales of Ghana such as the one written