

Curriculum Unit Osayimwense Osa

The primacy of the spoken or oral word in Literary Studies

A Function of Storytelling is *education and entertainment* with a focus on proverbs.

Preamble

In almost all cultures of the world, the spoken word is far older than the written word. It is a major part of the folklore of various world cultures, and should be studied for a thorough understanding and appreciation of humanity. No one can claim to be the author of literary productions based on the oral or spoken word because oral tales just cannot be copyrighted. This why the collectors of folk tales never claim to be the authors. *An African Night's Entertainment* (1962) by Cyprian Ekwensi is a long folktale that he heard from an aged Hausa mallam (scholar) in the 1950s. In the adapter's note to *Folktales from Ethiopia with comprehension exercises and reading –speed skills* (1971), John Rogers thanked the authors from the original collection. I am not sure that Russel Davis and Brent Ashebranner are really the authors of *The Lion's Whiskers: Tales of High Africa* published Toutledge and Kegan Paul and Brent Ashebranner. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech" is far more famous than his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* primarily because of the energy and vitality of the spoken word in the speech. Birago Diop does not claim to be the author of *Tales of Ahmadou Koumbah*. This is why the title is the way it is.

Some proverbs that enrich storytelling

In Wollof specifically, there is a traditional proverb, "*Boroom lammin du reer.*" In English translation, it has to do with clear communication.

The owner of a tongue can never be lost. The core, essence, and nexus of this proverb has to do with expression—expressive language skill communicating or spanning a broad spectrum of simple prosaic expression to sophisticated verbal dexterity. It is wise to communicate in gestures or by any means necessary.

At the same time too, the Senegalese also maintain strongly that one must talk little, and listen much (Ella walla bou ntoute, teg degue lou bou barey).

In another part of West Africa, Nigeria, it is clearly stated in the classic of African and World Literature, Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*, "among these people, the art of conversation is regarded very highly. And proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten." In Maramba Ba's *So Long a Letter*, the power of the spoken word is prominent. In the heart of the epistolary nature of the novel (a series of letters between two women friends) originally published in French, is the live nature of the spoken word.

In various cultures of Africa, the power of the oral word or spoken word is very powerful and it is reflected in the saying, "words are eggs." Once words come out of anybody's mouth, they are automatically broken eggs and can never be mended. This is why children are taught formally or informally to be very careful with their use of words to the point of remaining absolutely silent when others are losing their heads in shouting. As a matter of fact, what we say reveals the heart or inner person, "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." Do not be all that surprised to find some people from other cultures that are very careful before uttering anything.

"He who rises early finds the way short" (Lou nga telle telle dloka, yonre dhitoula) reflects the necessity for speed and accuracy, and discipline. Is this not a recall of the core of the traditional story, "The hare and the tortoise"?

By the end of this unit, students will:

- Appreciate the power of the spoken word in literary studies
- Accord importance to both the spoken word and the written word
- Craft their own memorable and meaningful statements with attention to diction and knowledge of folklore.