

By Alastair Hagger

Re-Telling The African Story

Africa is now reclaiming its own stories, and harnessing generations of storytelling craft to reconfigure the ways in which it is represented and perceived.

Anansi the spider was jealous. When it learned that every story ever told belonged to the sky god Nyame, it longed to have these tales for itself. But Nyame told the spider the stories could never be sold; the price was too high. “Bring me the great python, the mighty leopard, and the ferocious hornets,” laughed Nyame. “In exchange for these gifts, all the stories of the world will be yours.”

Anansi would not be denied, and used its wits and creativity to deliver the sky god its formidable trophies. Now the stories belonged to Anansi. And to Africa.

For centuries the West has understood that to control the narrative was to control history, and to control history was to shape perception. It also learned that if storytelling could sell ideologies, it could also peddle goods and services. We live in the Age of Story. Every brand, every political manifesto, is built on a narrative architecture. Now Africa is reclaiming its own stories, and harnessing generations of storytelling craft to reconfigure the ways in which it is represented and perceived.

Ras Mutabaruka is founder of *The African Perspective*, “a Pan-African media platform that tells African stories from an African perspective with a mission to re-brand Africa”.

As a Rwanda immigrant to Canada who had grown up without a radio or television, he quickly understood that Western representations of Africa were a distortion of what he had known.

“TAP came from that moment of sheer frustration,” he says. “At university I found myself complaining about the *BBC* and *CNN*, so I asked myself, ‘You’re a natural storyteller. Why don’t you tell people about the Africa they don’t know?’ Telling nuanced stories from an African perspective sounded like a crazy idea. If you look for example at the way the climate crisis is reported, Africa is just the victim. But Africa is also the solution; 40% of the world’s solar capabilities are in Africa. These are editorial and creative decisions about what gets written – and what gets done.”

The stories can be delivered in ways unique to each of the myriad cultures and peoples of the continent, but he



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says there are narrative pillars identifiable in many of Africa's storytelling traditions. "It's oral, it's an occasion, it's communal. In most of these cultures there are specific people selected to be the storyteller. And they tell parables, without the Western directness. There are different ways to pass on that message."

The reclamation of African storytelling modes requires an understanding of how such modalities have been recorded and understood in Western analysis.

Matthew H. Brown is Associate Professor of African Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin, where the late Harold Scheub taught for over 40 years and developed an international reputation as an authority on the documentation of African oral traditions and folklore.

"Even though he was considered a major figure in understanding African storytelling, it wasn't necessarily the case that his method was adopted by everyone," says Brown. "But his basic argument is that storytelling is about change. To tell stories is to grapple with transformations of some kind, that people go through rites of passage. Many of the characters in these stories are solitary creatures, who are then re-incorporated back into their community. There's a useful way to comment on how humans organize themselves by taking this animal perspective."

How, then, does this solitary cypher retrieve its heritage, and the allegorical power inherent in these traditions, in order to reshape the ways Africa is both commercially and politically portrayed?

"To decolonize that set of politics is tricky," he says, "because it's about showing that Africa is unique and different and has its own way of knowing, but without replicating this colonial idea that Africans are fundamentally different. There's a modern world that Africans know could not have been produced without them. The storytelling paradigms, at least in that kind of media, keep holding them at arm's length from having access to it."

The potential to bridge this gap will flower from knowledge – repositories of African thinking accessible to those to whom it truly belongs. Sylvia Arthur is Founder of the Library of Africa and the African Diaspora, "a decolonised research library, archive, writing residency and research institute" based in Accra, Ghana.

"African stories have rarely been told by Africans themselves and have been limited in their scope, primarily to serve a political purpose," says Arthur. "The performance and experience of storytelling is key in African modes. It's about moving the reader or the listener to feel as well as think, to act and not just be passive. It is communal, participatory, interactive, and engaging – a way to mobilize people."



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She believes this mobilization must lead to ownership, of both the cultural capital and the means of production. "The single-story narrative will continue to plague African storytelling in the Western context," Arthur says. "The simple solution is to own more publishing houses, film and music production companies, online platforms. Technology allows for mass communication, but storytelling in its purest form is still, fundamentally, an intimate means of communicating – and this is one challenge that African storytellers will need to take on in order to maintain the authenticity of the form. Technology can mediate, but it can also obfuscate and alienate. Striking the right balance is essential."

Once Anansi has overcome the python, the leopard and the hornets, what does it do with the hard-fought stewardship of the stories it coveted for so long?

"The transfer and custodianship of cultural knowledge has traditionally been the domain of academic institutions," Arthur says. "But we are an institution with an African and activist bent. We straddle the line between academia and popular culture by making this kind of knowledge attractive and accessible. The key is in finding how best to package this cultural knowledge, and taking it directly to the audience – rather than expecting them to come to you." 