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SIMBU'S UNTOLD TALES: A CASE STUDY ON ORAL STORIES IN TABARE LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

That Papua New Guinea is an oral society is no secret. PNG is rich in songs, legends, myths, and other folklore. These pieces have been passed orally from one generation to the next and have a wealth of meanings that are worth knowing and preserving.

It is fortunate that there are numerous oral stories in Tabare, one of the languages of Simbu Province. However, at present, it seems these traditional oral stories are not being told anymore and “handed down” to the younger generations. One of the unique things about these stories is that when they are told, they are sometimes accompanied by the pan flute or the jaws harp. When the stories are told in Tabare, they hold onto their original meaning. That is, when they are told in Tok Pisin or English, a certain degree of the original meaning of the stories is lost.

In this paper, reasons as to why some of the oral stories in Tabare are not being passed to the young people, and why they should be, will be discussed. Ways of how to preserve them will also be proposed.

KEY WORDS: Oral Stories, Simbu, Tabare, Nonequivalence, Generations, Cultural Untranslatability, Modern Technology

As the sun sets in many villages around the world and night falls, that is a special time because it is the time when people will gather in their houses and sit around a huge, glowing fire and listen to stories of old. In that house, a tradition continues that has been carried down from generation to generation. What has become of this tradition of storytelling? Lamb (2008) writes, “... in ancient days, when life pulsed with magic and mystery, storytelling commanded a critical place in the life of a clan.”

INTRODUCTION¹

PNG, like Africa, has a long literary tradition, although very little of this literature was written down until the 20th century. In the absence of widespread literacy, Papua New Guinean literature was oral for the most part and passed from one generation to the next through memorization and recitation. Before the spread of literacy in the 20th century, texts were preserved in memory and performed or recited. These traditional texts served many of the same purposes that written texts serve in literate societies — for example, entertainment, instruction, and commemoration. Some examples of Papua New Guinea’s oral literature are myths, legends, folktales, songs, chants, poems, and fables. The collective body of oral texts is described as folklore, verbal art, or oral literature. A more recent term is, “orature” (Owomoyela, 2008).

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the elders and community members in Mu Village, Simbu and those in Goroka who were the interviewees. Their assistance was abundantly appreciated.

Much of PNG's written literature is in English and in Tok Pisin. PNG also has a wealth of oral literature from the twenty provinces. Many pieces of oral literature of PNG have seemingly gone unacknowledged from the time of colonization to the present. However, it is currently receiving increased recognition and being revived and preserved in many of the provinces. This paper will focus on the oral stories of the Tabare language in Simbu Province. According to Foley (1986), Simbu is the largest Papuan language family. It consists of Kuman, Dom, Gumine, Salt-Yui, Chuave, and Sinesine (Foley, 1986, p.237, cited in Brown, 1995, pg. 261). Other languages have been included by Wurm (1971).

The term "oral literature" is sometimes used with "folklore" but it usually has a more widespread focus. Oral literature shares the use of heightened language in various genres (narrative, lyric, epic, etc.) with written literature, but it is set apart by being actualized only in performance.

Oral literature can be conveyed orally over generations or written down specifically for oral performance. To collecting folklorists and oral historians in recent years, the process of transmission indicates that oral literature has not been replaced by books and electronic media. Whenever a ghost story is told around a campfire, a protest song or a lullaby is sung, or a riddle, tongue twister, or counting rhyme is shared, or fables, proverbs, legends, or myths are told, oral literature lives in performance (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006).

This study aims to help preserve the oral literature of Tabare in Simbu Province and also to suggest solutions as to how the Tabare speakers can keep telling their stories to the younger generations. This case study looks at a couple of examples of oral literature (short folktales) in the Tabare language. The folktale is a prose form of literature and is usually told for nighttime entertainment. Folktales feature human beings and animals, either separately or together. They are often used for instruction and to make commentaries about society (Hawley & Spillman, 2003).

As it is the first time for the author to do research in the area of an indigenous language (her husband's mother language) in PNG, this paper will be treated as a preliminary study. Hearing from some members of the Tabare tribe that their oral stories aren't being told anymore, the author became quite interested in the reason(s) why.

The purpose of the study is to discover the following:

1. Why the traditional stories in Tabare are losing their importance.
2. How the traditional stories can be revived and preserved.
3. What is lost in translation when they are told in Pidgin or English.
4. What ways the younger generations can be influenced to learn these stories of their ancestors.

As we did in the past, we look to a story for entertainment, to gain wisdom, and perhaps a sense of identity with our past. The stories that we read can reach beyond the written word to create a connection with our ancestors as well as with future generations (Lamb, 2008).

Close to 4,500 years ago, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* fascinated Babylonians with tales of the king who was both divine and human. Almost three thousand years ago, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written by the epic poet Homer, grasped the imaginations of Greeks with tales of the Trojan War. The Arabian Nights, Hamlet, Cinderella, as well as King Arthur, Captain Kidd, Pocahontas, and Pancho Villa have all been part of and celebrated by oral tradition (Lamb, 2008). Throughout history, the stories that we have read have spoken highly of our past, enlightened our present, and have made us see our future in a different way.

For writers, storytelling still is very important in many areas of our lives. Folklorists highlight the ability of oral literature to act as the voice of a tradition. By collecting oral literature, they preserve some aspect of the culture of ethnic groups which are merging with the mainstream (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006). Whether it is books, TV romantic comedies, video games, or movies, story continues to bring us together. Yet, with all the different types of progress over thousands of years, it still remains a great challenge to bridge the gap between the opposing parties of tradition and modernization.

FINDINGS

The collection of data for this paper was gathered from seven community members and elders ranging in age from thirty-five to eighty from Mu Village, SineSine District, Simbu Province. Four Tabare speakers, ranging in age from thirty to thirty-eight, were interviewed in Goroka, Eastern Highlands Province. The author asked each participant ten questions and gathered the data from those interviews.

In the responses to the ten questions, it was found that there is indeed a gap that has occurred in the storytelling between the older generations and the younger generations. The gap is due to three main reasons:

1. Modern technology – television, computers, mobile phones, DVDs, MP3s ...
2. Education – many elementary school teachers prefer to teach in Tok Pisin or English rather than Tabare – especially in the schools along the highway in Simbu where Tabare is spoken.
3. A language barrier between the old people and the young people who don't speak Tabare but speak Tok Pisin as a first language. In addition, the stories lose their original meaning when translated into English or Tok Pisin.

The responses to the first couple of questions were rather general in that the author was told all interviewees speak Tabare. Ninety percent (90%) of the participants can tell a traditional oral story in Tabare. Ninety-one percent (91%) of the participants were told traditional stories to them in Tabare by their parents. At present, those participants speak mostly Tok Pisin with their children and haven't taught them Tabare.

Fifty percent (50%) felt that the stories had certain values - the values of knowing right and wrong and about obedience and disobedience.

Eleven percent (11%) indicated that they are aware of a special way that the stories can be told. One way is with the accompaniment of music from a pan pipe or a jaws harp. If one part of a story has wind blowing, the storyteller might blow the flute to imitate the sound of the wind. Another way is through the use of strings. Women sometimes tell stories while making bilums. As they tell a story, they show the action (chasing, dancing, falling...) in the story with the strings of yarn while they weave the bilum. While listening to the story, the listener learns how to exercise the hands and also how to tie a knot. They listen to a story and learn a skill at the same time – particularly the traditional skill of tying a rope around a pig's neck.

The interviewees were also asked if they think the oral stories are disappearing. Ninety percent (90%) of the participants seemed to agree that the parents are not telling the traditional stories to their children. The original versions of the stories are in Tabare (often in an older version of Tabare), and the parents themselves are not so fluent in Tabare at present. So those original versions of the stories are not getting told. Even if they tell the stories in Tok Pisin or English, the version will be a bit different than in Tabare.

Modern technology

Concerning the reason relating to modern technology, 64% of the participants felt many children prefer to watch a movie or television instead of hearing a traditional story because the movie on TV involves more action and excitement. Forty-five percent (45%) of the interviewees said that they can at least start a story in Tabare but then have to switch to Tok Pisin because they don't know enough Tabare and their children don't understand Tabare. The children also have mobile phones on which they are constantly checking for missed calls, playing a game, or texting a message to a friend, or reading a message from a friend.

Education

Concerning education, 30% of the participants said that the teachers aren't teaching Tabare in the elementary schools in the district where Tabare is spoken but are using Tok Pisin and English instead. Because they can speak Tok Pisin better than Tabare and English, many teachers prefer to use Tok Pisin. Some will use English occasionally. However, the culture surrounding the Tabare language is not going to be revived if only Tok Pisin and English are used. One of the elementary school inspectors in Simbu confirms this and feels strongly that the only way to revive our dying culture is through elementary education (interview with Janet Ilai, 2012).

Language Barrier

Concerning the language barrier, 30% felt there is a wide gap between the older generations and the younger generations regarding the issue of storytelling. The young kids don't speak their father's or mother's native language and so cannot understand an oral story in the native tongue. However, they would be able to understand in Tok Pisin. Some of the older people don't speak Tok Pisin fluently though and would confuse the meaning of the story for the children.

From the interviews, it was further discovered that the speakers of Tabare find speaking this language more meaningful than speaking Tok Pisin or English. There are words of the stories that are lost in translation when they are translated from Tabare to Tok Pisin or English. While speaking Tok Pisin or English, they will automatically switch to speaking Tabare. When a story is told in Tabare, the listener receives the full, rich meaning of the story. If it is translated to Tok Pisin or English, the listener doesn't receive as rich a version. The reason is related to a term known as "cultural untranslatability" or "non-equivalence". Non-equivalence occurs when there is one word in one language that cannot be translated to the same or similar word in another language because it expresses an unknown concept in the target language. For example, in Tabare, there is no expression for, "Thank you." In a language such as Vietnamese, there is no general word that corresponds to "wear". There are different words for 'wear'. Depending on the context of the situation, one word meaning 'wear' is more applicable in a certain situation than another word for 'wear' (Binh, 2010).

DISCUSSION

With the entry of modern technology into society, it has of course caused a change in the lifestyles of the younger generations. Their lives have become more dependent on computers and mobile phones so much that oral storytelling has become a thing of the past – except perhaps on special occasions like family gatherings or special holidays or events. Oral literature like poetry used to be told when there was a birth, courting ceremony, funeral, initiation, planting and harvesting in gardens.

It is not surprising that there is a language barrier between the older generation and the younger generations. There are words that are in one language that aren't in another. One PhD student wrote his thesis on non-equivalence. He indicated, "... no matter how excellent a translator can be in terms of both linguistic and cultural backgrounds, there are always concepts that cannot be translated from one language to another." It is a phenomenon called "cultural untranslatability" by numerous international researchers and scholars (Binh, 2010).

The phenomenon of cultural untranslatability can apply to Tabare and English as there are some words in English that are not in Tabare. For example, the expression, "You are welcome" is not in Tabare. For this study, the author looked at two short oral stories.

In these stories, there are words in Tabare that are not in English. When a Tabare speaker says them, they hold more meaning for the Tabare speaker than if the word were in English or Tok Pisin.

Story 1 – The Two Boys and the Frog

Example:

Tabare: Mugale su gele tongro nil ku sual ibe nil kolale pim uwe.

English – word by word translation:

Bamboo two made water (where it falls) water (wanted to fetch) they went.

The standard English translation is the following:

Two bamboo containers were made for the children to fetch water from the waterfall.

Tok Pisin: Ol wokim tupelo wara mambu bilong ol pikinini bilong pulumapim wara long wara kalap.

There is no Tabare word for ‘container’. One has to read the context of the sentence to capture the entire meaning. When translated into standard English, it is inferred that the word “mugale” means “bamboo container”, not only “bamboo”. In English, it is more comprehensible to say, “Two bamboo containers were made ...” instead of, “Two bamboo were made ...”

In Tabare, “mugale” sounds natural and is the equivalent of saying, “bamboo” or “bamboo containers”.

In the Tabare sentence, “gele” is a word that is difficult to translate on its own into English. When “gele” is put with “tongro”, it means “made”.

Also, “children” is inferred in the words, “gele tongro” in Tabare. In the English translation, “children” is used and in the Tok Pisin translation, “pikinini” is used. The English and Tok Pisin versions add words where they are already understood in Tabare. “Children” is not a part of the direct translation in Tabare. Thus, if one is a Tabare speaker, one can understand that meaning in the sentence. There is something that is lost in the translation from Tabare to English or Tok Pisin because some words are missing that would normally occur in English or Tok Pisin. One has to be a speaker of Tabare in order to understand the original meaning of the language.

Story 2 – A Heavy Rain

Example:

Tabare: Nim osu ono sunguwa piltere gage sua iri pi matai sil dungal binamil i moip ya.

English: rain big one fall down therefore children two mentioned went sediment rock where the rock is beside it they stay.

Standard English: It rained heavily and the two children went to take shelter beside the loose and fallen sedimentary rocks.

Tok Pisin: Bikpela ren i pundaun na tupela pikinini i ranawe go hait arere long lus sen i stap long en.

There is no word for “shelter” in the Tabare sentence. “Moip ya” is translated as “they stay” not “shelter”. If there is a word that is translated as something else into English or Tok Pisin, there is something lost in the translation. If an elder tells this story about the heavy rain to a younger person who knows some Tabare, there still might be some loss of meaning because the younger one might not know the word “moip ya” and need someone else who knows Tabare to tell him what it means. Not knowing Tabare so well and not comprehending the elder’s words, the younger person might not be able to convey the full meaning of the story to his children.

When the old people speak Tabare, they use words that are in the older version of Tabare. This version is more difficult for the younger people to understand because they haven't been taught this language. If they haven't been taught this language, they cannot pass on the traditional stories to the next generation.

CONCLUSION

The oral stories in Tabare are being passed from the older to the younger generations less and less at present. This change has occurred due to three main reasons relating to modern technology, education, and the loss of meaning in the translation from Tabare to English or Tok Pisin. As the oral stories in Tabare are not being told much anymore, that leaves a great and grave challenge to the future generations to revive this precious, meaningful tradition. Our ancestors conveyed knowledge, accumulated wisdom, and entertained crowds through the magic of words. The younger generations could do the same but are not fluent or as fluent as their parents and grandparents.

Be it through books, TV, movies, plays, storytelling still plays a significant role in our lives and brings us together. However, with all the progress that has occurred over thousands of years, trying to close the gap between the competing forces of modernism and tradition continues to remain a great challenge.

Even though there is an unfortunate decline of oral storytelling in Tabare and major transformations towards modernization have occurred in PNG society since its independence, the positive fact remains that a large number of people remain in close contact with traditional cultures and institutions in PNG. Oral traditions continue to play important roles in their lives. As social beings, we will probably always look to stories as great forms of excitement, wisdom, and comfort. It might be when we are in high school, college, or in our later years. "And in making these connections, we honor where we came from, who we are, and what we can become" (Lamb, 2008, pg. 5).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are being made in an effort to preserve the oral stories in Tabare and give a wake-up call to the government of Simbu that these stories are still around, have rich meaning, and are extremely important to the Tabare speakers. They also might be of interest to other language groups in Simbu and PNG.

1. Record the oral stories in Tabare.
2. Have a community awareness of the oral stories – one night a month there could be an oral storytelling evening – the parents or grandparents who know the oral stories could tell them in the *hausman*.
3. Fundraising could be done. Local businesses and members of parliament could help support the wish to revive this tradition in cash or other means. The money could be used to buy materials for making big books and other authentic materials in Tabare for the elementary schools where Tabare is spoken.

4. Tabare could be taught in the elementary schools in the district where Tabare is spoken. Let the vernacular be spoken so that it doesn't die. The teachers can help the students understand that it is important to preserve the oral stories that their grandparents or elders have taught them so that they don't lose that part of their culture.
5. The provincial government in Simbu could make a policy that the elementary schools in Simbu use the vernacular as their language of instruction, using Tok Pisin where necessary.
6. Parents must teach their children Tabare so that it doesn't die. They can home-school their children in the vernacular.
7. Even though the younger generations might not speak Tabare very fluently, they can ask the elders to help them with translation work. If they become more proficient in Tabare, the young people will understand the oral stories better and eventually might be able to pass them on to their children.

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