TRANSMIGRATIONS: THE CONTEXT OF THE FOLKTALE

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Dr. Vayu Naidu founded the Vayu Naidu Storytelling Theatre Company, based in London. She was awarded a post doctoral Fellowship by Arts and Humanities Research Council and Funding by Arts Council England. Her methodology using emotive intent through RASA and developing an understanding of oral imagination and performance oral traditions derived from African, Indic, and Celtic traditions informs her performing work and practice. Her company has Apprenticeships where she trains Storytellers in the specific methodology she has researched in education and community and business. The Company now has two Artistic Associates: Craig Jenkins and Ruby Sahota.

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Courtesy of Dr. Vayu Naidu

Folktales by their very nature are a paradox. They are born of a collective imagination and wisdom, but cannot be verified by any tangible evidence. In other words, stories cross-fertilise through language, cross regions, migrate and become appropriated in other cultures. This is only because they have the veracity of an experience; in the listening. One only needs to look at the efficient cataloguing of Stith- Thompson, A. K. Ramanujan, Brenda Beck, and the canon goes on, to appreciate the enormity of the task and the significance of the oral tradition.

In a time of digitization and boundary breaking communication, the ‘folk tale’ takes on its multidimensional avatar of contemporaneity. It has urban contexts both in what is disseminated through youth culture, as well as how the old tales can be used to make new meaning.

This is about how 2 old stories have taken on new skins and find relevance in new environments. The relevance of the folk tale is signposted in two areas of activity: in Business, and Migration, and then as a historical art form informing case studies of my work.

But first: The Business. I have been working in situations of responding to conflict. I received an invitation (January 2012) to do a presentation to the Institute of Arbitration for its Members on resolving disputes. My belief: Story is a vehicle of mediation for clearer understanding. My method is to examine the anatomy of Storytelling: Predicament, process and resolution. These are the salient principles from which I have developed and based a methodology. The story of USES OF AN ARTIST (folk tales from India - A. K Ramanujan) is exemplary for this exercise. My method is to transpose the folk element to the contemporary audience and within it are all the ingredients of conflict, and I make it interactive for the participants to suggest the solutions before revealing the end of the story.
The interactive element within institutions takes the place of the call-response, where traditionally the context was familiar with shared values. In a global society shared values have to be rediscovered and rearticulated which is dependent on professional contexts.

The second: I was invited to write a story based on a folk tale that looks at the beggar as divine. The first story that crept into mind was that of Shabari. She was from the hunter tribe. She rejected marriage when she saw what went into the preparation of the wedding feasts, and was rejected when she turned her back on her tribe by the monastery where she sought a space to learn. Her context as outcast, and outcaste is significant in the revelation that she experiences that is verified by the scriptures, and then accepted by the canon. For the organization that gave me the brief about Migration and identity, I researched and found Shabari’s story working beyond the solely devotional context I had always heard it in. It enriches our understanding of her experience of casting out, being out caste, but determinedly migrating from hapless to hopeful and conquering self doubt in the daily preparation of the arrival of illumination; self sufficient and sociable. It is an important example whether one is interested in the secular, or sacred.

Following my recent encounters of working on folk tales within urban and unfamiliar contexts, I will now proceed with how Storytelling works in the profession and practice with the Vayu Naidu Storytelling Theatre Company, UK and India.

The Old Story-Teller

The Ao-Nagas say that they once had a script which was inscribed on a hide, and hung on a wall for all to see and learn. But one day a dog pulled it down and ate it up. Since then, the people say that every aspect of their life, social, political, historical and religious has been retained in the memory of the people through the Oral Tradition.

- Temsula Ao

WHAT’S BEHIND IT ALL?:

Take One: Social context: The good thing about a recession, at the moment in England, is that it involves stocktaking. Amidst the riots about betraying bankers and rising unemployment there is stocktaking of another kind. It’s about reviewing what’s essential. Nothing vague; just a simple quest: What’s behind it all? There are no answers and it is not a mystical question. Interestingly, during the recession, our audiences have risen for our Performance Storytelling events and it has made us very aware of the question within a wider social context. The question itself has brought people from diverse professions and the lack of jobs forging into an unknown future, attempting new personal business plans for a virtual outcome. In dealing with this quiet revolution in life, practitioners are asking the same question about Storytelling. One of the oldest questions that was ever asked when someone sat in front of a Storyteller telling that tale was: “what’s behind this story?” And here begins the quest for meaning.

Take Two: What’s behind it all? - Storytelling. It is embedded in us to find out the purpose or usefulness of things that we are involved in and subscribe to.

2004, 27th December it was 7 am. I was watching the sunrise off the East Coast Road (ECR) that runs from Chennai toward Mahabalipuram. The sunrise at this time of year after the monsoon has dramatic variations with nimbus cloud and light variations as the Crimson sun rises to gold then to neon disc. Over 15 years we looked forward to this ritual of waiting for the scattering of crows at dawn, as lean limbed coffee brown fishermen would heave a
catamaran into the grey sea and then ride it like a sea horse, singing sea shanties. But this year, we turned back because the ayurvedic yoga teacher decided to meet earlier as it was a holiday and wanted to make most of the idyllic weather.

Half an hour later we heard gunshots in the distance and were told that it was the Gypsies shooting bandicoots. Fifteen minutes later there was screaming and wailing and men, women and children came running into the house shouting: “Kadal pongee pocchi”, the sea has boiled over. The Tsunami wave had struck at 8:30am. The local radio news had no coverage of it. In the ensuing chaos of people fleeing, jumping into overloaded buses and lorries that had been sent for evacuation fairly swiftly, we were standing by the embankment when one of the Panchayat’s women representatives, Kanamma, came and introduced me to the goatherd who was her neighbour. He looked at me directly and, in Tamil, said: "You know that story of that sage, Markandeya?"

I was wondering where this conversation was going at a time like this. He continued in Tamil, oblivious to my dialectical frown: “see, even our Tamil radio doesn’t know what’s happening. They can’t make sense of this because they say it hasn’t happened before. But last year, there was the Koothu (Travelling Storytelling Theatre) that told us a story. Markandeya was sitting, thinking everything was fine – watching the cattle, goatherds, and cows, courtiers, women all go about their business with no thought for tomorrow, or even the next moment, as we all do, somehow knowing it will all go on forever. He blinked, and the Storyteller said to us that when he opened his eyes, Markandeya found himself in utter blackness tossed by a wave that lifted him with the grip of a mad elephant’s trunk, and when he tried to let go, he was tossed for days and days, and they say for days he was tossed on acres of ocean. As it was pitch black, he lost all sense of time… It makes me think, this is how this deluge is. This wave, they call the Tsunami”.

I was struck by his literal and metaphoric use of the wave within the Markandeya story. Literal, indicating the seismic shift of water and ravaged landscape by the Tsunami, and metaphorically for the panic and chaos that ensued from a very idyllic setting. It was also striking that here were people, grasping through their visiting performance Storytelling Theatre Koothu (rather than televsional memory), a tapestry of narrative to make sense of what they had just seen. Amidst the screaming children, the evacuees, the derelict villages, the radio repeatedly playing Tamil film music instead of factual information, the paradox of idyllic weather, and the fact that all of this took place without warning - the narrative enabled all of us, with the goatherd’s memory and articulation, of the impact of orality in Storytelling. It placed our immediate dislocation in perspective. The Koothu had offered a collective and cultural memory from a narrative of the past that signified this sense of abandon, by Nature – in the present. Simultaneously, by virtue of narrative, the topical experience was heightened into what is accounted for as Epic. It made us as Tsunami survivors and sympathisers across the world realize we are traversing those polarities continually –the daily that becomes extra-daily and epic - unlike the way 9/11 did.

The beachfront village of Kuppum in Perur, off the ECR had been destroyed by the Tsunami, and the villagers felt betrayed by the Local Government for not sending out a warning in time, and were baffled that the Amman sea-goddess had let them down or was teaching them a lesson that they could not yet understand. The few fishermen who were evaluating the loss met me and my husband as we walked with jerrycans of drinking water to them. They did not want food for now, they had coconuts, they said. Their collective plea was: “Kapatu, please
tell people our story.” Passing the story on was an act of giving and touching all of us who survived, to be reminded of humanity and be bridged by compassion.

I returned to Chennai in February 2005 on a University of Kent Humanities Teaching faculty award to convene Storytelling workshops with Tsunami survivors (the fisher community) and Tsunami sympathisers (NGOs and social workers and arts practitioners). One of the fisherman S.Kalaivanar, who had been sent by his NGO from Sirkali wondered ‘what good would stories do?’ ‘Kathai vidathai’ – stories are air and they fall apart, was very much his attitude. After Tsunami seeing many of his neighbours killed and devastated, he stopped sailing out to sea. This was serious as his family had been in the fishing trade for over four generations and he did not see how he could transfer his skills elsewhere. Anger and depression were setting in. His attitude was very challenging for me as I was propelling my theories and belief in Storytelling into the birthplace of oral cultures and had already started facing resistance! The only thing he and I and possibly the 28 others who had subscribed to this workshop had in common was that over the last few months we all had recurring dreams of being tossed by sea waves, bodies, Tsunami debris, falling off from boats, waking up wherever we were with the taste of sea salt. Through the intensive Storytelling workshops, both survivors (fishermen – numerate and literate in Tamil, living in coastal areas) and sympathisers (social workers, women, graduates and post graduates in English and Tamil, living in Chennai) discovered a participatory voice in engaging with traditional stories that gave them the necessary distance and paradigm within which they could place the emotions of the fear, shock, betrayal, helplessness, rescue-relief that they had experienced during the Tsunami and its aftermath. The stories that had been created during this period with cross-gender and cross caste/economic contexts were then to be “performed” to the refugee villagers at Kuppam village. The children in the audience of villagers participated in the action and were relieved to see their uncles and fathers in the workshop ‘act out how the wave came, but also survive it – as they now heard them tell the story of terror’. Many women wept and said the Storytelling performance ‘brought back the horror but at least now there was space to talk about it collectively’. The men said that “it made them realize the scale of what had happened and how children can’t have fishing as the only means of livelihood and that education with technology for understanding weather patterns should be provided’. Here was Storytelling contemporized as context using a traditional form enabling reflections on form, livelihood and communication as leisure and information.

After the “performance” Kalaivanar vanished only to return an hour later and urged all of us to partake of his gift. He had got Kuppam’s villagers to provide him a catamaran and he wanted to treat us by sailing us out to sea! He wanted to celebrate that performing and storytelling had given him the space to work through his trauma of not being able to return to the sea. A great way to end a story by the sea, about the sea and her children. It was a salutary example of how orality works and how storytelling manifests the significance of the oral imagination.

Orality and the oral tradition of Storytelling is about listening (not reading, or having it read out) to a story, re-membering it as a part of cognition, and recollecting it, in this case as a window and paradigm of aspects of life integrating the geophysical and the emotions; to be reassured that there is an individual and collective memory. Orality is also about telling a story so that it is shared as an experience to be identified and categorized as it could have happened before, and possibly to someone else in a similar situation.
Orality and Literature are not mutually exclusive. They enable each other and I might even stretch the case that Oral literature has faster access due to its live performance capabilities. The performance of Oral Literature was a live and collective act even before theatre or literacy came into the public domain; it is the most contemporary of art forms by making the extra-daily daily, and the daily distilled into the moment.

ORAL TRADITION OF STORYTELLING AT WORK:

There are many forms of what I term as Performance Oral Traditions of Storytelling at work in India such as Kathavaad, Katha kalakshe pam, Kathai Koothu, and Kattai Koothu, Yaksha gaana, Manganiyaar, Gayani, Baul, to name a few who are solely interested in narrative, with embellishments of song, scrolls, movement and limited accoutrements to enhance the story that could be legendary, or local myth with a spiritual significance.

My interest in researching Storytellers is in seeking their ‘presence’ in the performance. Presence is about totality and unison of all energies within the performance of the storytelling. This is an underlying truth in oral traditions that I have worked with from Africa, Scotland, Ireland, Scandinavia, and France. In identifying ‘presence’, there is an encounter with the anatomy of Storytelling.

The external features of storytelling as an oral tradition comprise of:
- hand gesture,
- movement in diagonals and arcs
- facial expressions emoting moods and characters within the narrative
- Eye contact

The internal features of storytelling comprise of:
- Voice and intonation
- Imagery and diction in narrative
- Characterization
- Pacing

While these form the internal and external features of the anatomy of Storytelling, another vital component that is regarded as the essence of Indic and African Storytelling is, emotive intention. In the Indic traditions of Storytelling, this emotional consciousness is Rasa, the aesthetic that is the “juice”, heartbeat and essence to all performance arts – dance, music, storytelling, and theatre.

‘Presence’ in a Performance Storyteller/ing is the culmination of the emotive intention/Rasa of the character within the story and the emotive intention/Rasa that the Teller wants to communicate about the significance of the story. The significance of the story is further divided into two parts – the first part being the craft of narrative in telling the story. The second being the interpolations the storyteller makes from contemporary references, into the selected story. It is this second part that distinguishes the verve and presence in a storyteller who serves the story. I have categorized storytellers who are Reciters and Interpolators. The Indic oral tradition is vibrant because it is kept alive by rituals and rites of passage, but predominantly by the interpolations of contemporary references to the old stories by the ‘presence’ of the storyteller who can invoke the past as a collective cultural memory and make meaning of it in the 21st century to the individual listener. It is not magic; it is intellectual athleticism, spiritual and emotive connectedness, and dexterity of linguistic and
Performance language with the sheer intention to connect. It is vital that at an early stage of preparation, the Storyteller discovers the type of imagination that he or she are most comfortable with; textual or visual.

Performance forms of Storytelling act like servers – Kathavaad, tolobommalatu, among others are telling stories of local lore, or in the case of the Epics, are using the narrative Ramayana to create analogies, metatexts and variations by capturing the audience with the principle of the familiarity of the story, but remaining attentive to the twist or surprise at the end of the story that unravels a new meaning.

The chemistry of the oral tradition of storytelling works like Jazz. The storyteller selects a story that could be familiar, but ‘knows’ it rather than ‘learn’ it from a script. While performing, the storyteller is connected by ‘wavelength’ to the mood of the audience, the time of day, the social context, and fine tunes it to his or her own physical and emotional energy and is open to ‘gifts’ of accidental occurrences within the performance incorporating them into the telling. It is about improvisation, but needs a very stable foundation. Finally it is about remembering what Duke Ellington said about an oral tradition: that ‘it don’t mean a thing, if it ain’t got that swing’.

In England now the Storytelling movement is taking force as there is a great demand to listen to story and the Society for Storytelling, Vayu Naidu Company, The Cric Crac Club, the Barbican and Storytelling Festivals among others promote and advocate performance storytelling, as the pressures of life and an unstable economy are mounting. I started a series in the Leather market Pub called LICENCE TO TELL and while at first was given enough marketing advice that the storytelling would have to be for entertainment only bordering more on comedy, the rigour of developing new storytellers who prepare their stories from a world wide collection has brought the audiences sitting with a pint or two in pin drop silence waiting to know what happened next to whom and why are stories, like people and life, so different in their expectations and endings? At the British Museum we are performing stories from the Puranas, transposed into English, bringing the INDIAN SUMMER exhibition alive across June to August. My new work BHAKTI & THE BLUES (features jazz vocalist Cleveland Watkiss) integrating poems, bhakti stories and afro-american folktales evoking the connection of a shared inheritance of the longing to belong to an infinity will be out on tour this autumn with the intention of traveling to India.

To conclude, Storytelling as performance, a profession, for leisure and as a livelihood is empowering. The storyteller, through the story within the oral tradition offers a parallel universe which like the margin of our arithmetic exercise book offers a rough space to work out our fears, fantasies, enter other experiences evoke the delectable and the diabolic and make our choices about life. It is the space and key to free will, and this is where the Storyteller must tread with confidence and humility, as the oral tradition is a great responsibility to be a container of the past, chronicling references for the present that will inform the future. And here is Temsula Ao in Songs From The Other Life poems, again (Grasswork Books, Pune: 2007):