



STORYTELLING AS TECHNOLOGY:

A Culture-Centric Approach to Progressive Teaching with an
Emphasis on Fostering Communal Globalism and Nurturing Growth Mindsets.

Djeliba Baba the Storyteller
California, USA
Email: Baba@BabatheStoryteller.com

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ABSTRACT

As educational systems, the world over are being affected by global, economic, and politically driven crises, many indigenous cultures have managed to find ways of preserving their customs and seem untouched by time. While the educational infrastructures of leading nations continue to decline, the potential pedagogical contributions of, often, economically impoverished indigenous cultures across the globe have gone largely ignored. Despite huge advances recently in developmental and cognitive research, institutionalized assumptions have calcified our progress in education.

For decades, the debate has been framed as literate cultures vs. oral cultures. The time has arrived to advance our awareness to a point where our discussions center on the marriage of literate "and" oral modalities of instruction. The concept of storytelling bridges the gap between "dominant literate" and "dominant oral" pedagogical structures. It has the potential to alter narrow perspectives that are preventing effective instruction. The ancient West African bardic tradition of Jaliyaa is the specific oral tradition examined in this paper and the role of the Griot (traditional oral historian). It is through the path of the Griot, or storyteller, that we may find a way to form a bridge linking centuries of indigenous wisdom with contemporary research while simultaneously building globally minded citizens."



Two men were in a small canoe crossing a wide river. One was an intellectual, a scholar of high standing in academia and accustomed to sharing his insights. The other man was a laborer, currently making his living ferrying travelers across the huge waterway.

As the laborer rowed in silence, the scholar attempted to engage him in conversation. "Have you read any good books lately?" he inquired. "No," was the workingman's short reply.

Undeterred by the terseness of the response, the academic pressed on further, "Have you engaged in any studies recently worth speaking of?" "No," answered the laborer as he rowed.

The scholar became suspicious of the man's brusque, distant demeanor. "Sir," he queried, "do you know how to read?"

Not missing a single rhythm in his rowing, the laborer simply answered, "No."

"I can see," said the scholar in a tone of condescension, "that you have wasted much of your life pursuing other, less reputable, activities than growing your intellect."

The laborer stopped rowing and pulled his oars in. Placing the oars across the canoe, he stood up and spoke.

"Mister do you know how to swim?" he asked.

"No, I do not," answered the scholar.

"Then mister," said the laborer, "you have wasted your whole life because this boat is leaking."

He then jumped over the side of the canoe into the river and began swimming towards the distant shores.

We are living in an age where rapid change is the norm. What is fact today may be known as foolishness tomorrow. What we wake up to, and are sure is science, may be reduced to mystical alchemy by evening. Like our erudite passenger in his sinking boat, education has not kept pace with the needs of the 21st Century.

It is my contention that, as human beings and a global community, the answers to our most pressing socio-economic concerns rest in the development of our collective consciousness. While we all comprehend the adage, *"it takes an entire village to rear a single child,"* the time for literal understanding has passed. Our proverbs, aphorisms and tales are replete with complex metaphor and symbolism that has yet to be fully appreciated.



There exists an urgent need to redefine our current concept of storytelling. It is essential that we see it less as a contrivance of narrative entertainment and more as a technological device. This change in perception can aid in generating beneficial reforms in the art-science of education, specifically as it relates to teaching.

Although a great amount of research has been published relating to new discoveries of the inner workings of the brain (Bendheim, 2009, Frank 2009, Medina 2008, Gazzaniga 2008, Pink 2005), only a few industrious pioneers have delved into the brains reaction to storytelling (Gottschall 2012, Boyd 2009, Haven 2007, Hays 2006). Many cultures in The East and parts of Africa have, for millennia, utilized the power of narrative as a foundation for their systems of education.

Most of the concepts conveyed in this paper emanate from primary sources of research and a progressive framework for information dissemination based on storytelling as technology.

To narrow our focus of inquiry into how “dominant oral cultures” (Ong 1988) may serve as models to our “Storytelling as a Technology” thesis, we will examine the inner workings of the ancient West African Bardic Craft known as Jaliyaa. This ancient bardic tradition dates to the 13th Century, during West Africa’s golden age. The craft was, and is, practiced by a particular social subset among the Bambara peoples. Not quite a caste system, but more an indigenous social order, the subset of our concern is known as Nyamakalaw. I need to state early on that, for the most part, the Bambara people, as they are familiarly referred to, are as comfortably ensconced in the 21st Century global community as most other cultures of the world. The reason for examination of their ancient oral practices has much more to do with the important role that Nyamakalaw play in helping to create a balanced society among the Bambara.

Bambara society may be said to be divided into several strata of familial orders, one of which is Nyamakala ('wielders of Nyama'). Nyama is an occult power believed necessary to perform certain functions such as Smithing or serving as a diplomat/bard/Griot (jeli / djeli). I will narrow our attention even further and focus on a specific subset of Nyamakalaw known popularly as Griots.

I will be using the word Griot throughout this paper due to its cross-cultural familiarity. The word Griot has grown in popularity recently with everyone from writers to comedians adopting the moniker. Before preceding any further, it is important for us to spend a few moments on the etymology of the word Griot to lay a foundation for its future use.



Etymology of the word Griot

There are many theories on the origin of the word “Griot.” One suggests that the word comes from the French word *guiriot*, which first appears in publication in a manuscript dated the year 1637, titled “Relation du voyage du Cap-Verd,” written by a Capuchin missionary named A. de Saint-Lô.

Another theory suggests that the word Griot is derived from the Portuguese word *criado*, which means, “He who eats, learns and lives in the master’s house.” This theory reflects the traditional relationship of the griot and patron. It has also been suggested that the word may be a derivation of other terms for Griot, used by many indigenous West African Cultures: *gawlo* (Fulbe), *gewel* (Wolof), *jawal* (Soninké) are but a few.

Indigenous Terms for Griot

Since the Bambara (a subset of Mandé speaking people of West Africa) are my particular focus, it is important to know and understand the indigenous term, which relates to “Griot.” Among the Mandé speaking people of West Africa, the term *Jeli* (pl. *Jeliw*) and *Jelimuso* (female) is more specific.

The oral history, or storytelling craft, of the *Jeli/Jali* is known as *Jeliyaa/Jaliyaa*. Due to the use of foreign script and the pervasiveness of dominant oral cultural practices, there are numerous spellings for the word *Jali*. You will find it spelled: *Jelli*, *Diali*, *Djeli*, *Yali*, *Dyali*, or even *Dyeli*. For the sake of simplicity, when cited, we will use *jeli*. When used in this paper, the term *Griot* will refer to the indigenous practitioner of the ancient oral art of *Jaliyaa*.

A Griot World View

Storytelling as understood in the West does not exist for the indigenous practitioner of *Jaliyaa*. Among *jeli*, words are viewed as powerful vehicles of *nyama* (life force). This reverent mindset is in direct conflict with the Western concept of words as commodities or expendable.

The community whom the *jeli* instructs engages in the act of listening from a place of reverence for words. There is no equivalent to this paradigm in the West except in religious and spiritual practices. During the act of *Jaliyaa* the *jeli* is said to emit *nyama* through the force of his words.

The respect for the words of a *jeli* are so entrenched in Bambara society that nobles practice the act of supplication through offerings of gifts and money to ease the effects of *nyama*.

While not steeped in religion, the art of *Jaliyaa* may be seen as a practice put in place to maintain social order. There is a division of labor and responsibilities among the separate strata of Bambara society and relationships are based upon these ancient divisions.



Social Role of the Griot

Historically, Griots enjoyed a freedom in their use of speech that was not afforded others in the society. The Griot was the only person who, at times, had the right to act uninhibitedly, even impudently in their use and display of their verbal art form, Jaliyaa. No one was immune from inclusion in the words and songs of praise or derision. Equally, if the occasion called for it, Griots would also exercise vehement castration of a person's character in a public forum.

There is a very famous story of a young noble boy who was playing with a Griot child. The young noble struck the young Griot across the face. After the offended youth ran home and told his family what had happened, they immediately gathered outside the home of the noble family. The Griot family began singing, chanting and dancing in front of the home of the aggressive child. They created songs of derision and chants calling for correcting the wrong. Among the Bambara, the power of this collective voice carried Nyama, that force of life.

The offending family were willing to give up everything they had in order for the Griot family to stop the offending chants, music and singing.

The reason for their freedom of expression might rest somewhere in the culture's perception of their inherited ability to affect and influence the spirit, good or bad, by their use of language. The relationship of fear and admiration of the Griot may have laid the groundwork for the freedom they enjoyed in exposing, lyrical song or prose, the virtuous or degenerative traits of others.

In their repertoire of word skills, the Griot is master of praises, genealogies, songs, poems, tales, proverbs, and epics. Traditionally, most of this verbal repertoire would have been inherited from parents, relatives and other Griots but, currently, it is in a state of evolution, attempting to meet the needs of contemporary society.

There are many social occasions, which necessitate the talents of a Griot. Typically, naming ceremonies, or Kulio, require the presence of a Griot to announce the name of the child. The Griot also performs at weddings, political inaugurations, gatherings, social functions and, may even make an appearance in the time of a family grieving the death of a loved one.

We, contemporary artists and educators, must examine the historical social roles of the Griot in order to help clearly define our place in society.



Deification of the Written Word

In the West there has been a deification of the written word over the spoken. Rather than view the written word as a technological tool, it has become, like the man in our boat, one of many litmus tests for gauging the elusive concept of intelligence.

As technologically advanced as our societies have become and as much as we value balanced arguments, a debate over the pros and cons of “literacy” is non-existent. Literacy, as it once might have encompassed all things literate has, over time, has become dominated by the written word.

As far back as the 5th Century B.C.E., Western Philosophers were decrying what, to them, was a new technology. Plato has Socrates say in the Phaedrus, “Writing is inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind.” He further urges to examine that, “writing destroys memory.”

If we fail to include in our discourse on education the pros-cons of literacy, then we fail as enlightened educators.

The written word takes us from an aural experience into another sensory world, sight. When we engage the written word, it transforms speech into thought. Words spoken exist only in the context of human relationship.

There is a long-standing fallacy that West Africa, possessing primarily oral cultures did not produce a written script. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are very few cultures in the world that have not developed some form of script. Our confusion occurs when we fail to examine, deeply, the roots of cultures. In ancient Mali, West Africa, there were secret societies that possessed what can be labeled as “craft-literacy.” One secret society “the Komo” produced a script that was only used for ritual purposes. Those in possession of the script’s knowledge served in, the equivalent of, an indigenous priesthood.

To better understand why societies such as these did not mass educate their populations on the use of such scripts, we need to understand the values of a given society.

Among dominant oral cultures, the spoken word is given higher value over what might be written. “As a man speaks, so he is.” Among these cultures, a spoken word has life because of its relationship to the human form. It is common for the word placed neatly on paper to be viewed as having died.

Among dominant literate cultures, the opposite is true. The written word has much more legitimacy than what is spoken, as evidenced by our political and legal systems.



A young man sat in a large gathering of people waiting for a visiting healer to lay hands on them.

Each person was suffering from sickness or deformity but suffered through the long lines waiting for their chance to visit with the shaman.

After many hours the young man finally reached the front of the line and stood before the sage. The young man didn't appear to have anything wrong with him physically. He appeared healthy.

"Why have you come my son?" asked the shaman.

The young man stammered, "I have heard that you are capable of performing miracles."

"What is it that you desire?" inquired the shaman.

"I do not know how to read, I would like you to give me the power to read," begged the young man.

With that, the shaman placed his right hands over the head of the young man and recited a lengthy incantation, after which the young man departed with the ability to read.

Some years later, the shaman was traveling back through the countryside of this young man. As was his custom he set up encampment outside of the town and welcomed all visitors.

A large crowd gathered and, just as the shaman was about to address them, a loud voice rang out, "Don't listen to him! Leave! Do not trust this man!"

The crowd cleared. There, standing among them was the young man.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the healer.

The young man shouted back at him, "You're a fake, a charlatan!"

The shaman asked, "Why are you saying these things?"

The young man waved a thick hardbound book over his head and shouted, "I read it here in this book!"

Once the brain is engaged in the pursuit of literacy it is forever altered, it is restructured. Engaging a page with its lines and linear structure modify how we perceive ourselves, and the world around us. Writing and reading creates an environment that nurtures the concept of solipsism, where each of us is a universe unto ourselves.



If we are able to come out of our self-imposed monastery of written language, then the technology of storytelling can offer us a world where meaning has a greater relationship to context. In our solipsistic world of literacy, writing concentrates meaning largely in language itself.

The art of Jaliyaa is primarily about relationship. Where there is not community there is no reason for the speaker, or Griot to exist. In fact, the Griot is primarily concerned with the building of relationship. Among the Bambara, the “objective observer” is a non-contributing interloper.

Once we in the West begin an honest examination of our relationship to words, both written and spoken, then we can greater access the efficacy of storytelling as a technology. For our learners, the technology of storytelling will shift us from a highly visual space into one of sound and relationship.

Towards a Unified Understanding of Storytelling as Technology

To begin to examine storytelling as a technology and gain from our relationship to dominant oral cultures, we must first understand that there are differences in the way we each perceive the world.

We can increase our awareness and understanding by a quick examination of another group within Nyamakala, Black Smiths. Smiths work with heat and raw materials from the earth. Griots are associated with smiths because the elements of their elocution are seen as belonging to the very same realm as that of the elements of fire, air and water.

On a basic level, for the Griot, sound and movement are the foundations of all aspects of Jaliyaa. Sound and movement are the substance from which words are formed and gestures are created. In Jaliyaa, sound is power and action. Sound from a human being has a direct relationship to thought. Sound from a human being is one of the physical manifestations of thought.

For the Griot, sound is sacred because it produces an intimate relationship between speaker and listener. For the speaker, words are transmitted from within the person. Once emitted, this sound travels through the elements before it is finally taken in by the listener. Human beings experience sound in only two fashions, either resonant or dissonant. It is that simple. The Griot exercises his craft by knowingly altering and manipulating patterns of speech for effect.

Resonance creates harmony, dissonance disharmony. Being in harmony with the rhythm, tone and cadence of another’s words is empowering, nourishing and vitalizing to a listener. It can even be said to produce a sense of euphoria. Not being in harmony with a speaker’s rhythm, pitch and tone puts a listener in a state of dis-ease which psychologists today term “Cognitive Dissonance.” Sound creates a sensation within every listener that occurs in a space and time.



The Griot understands that sound exists only when it is going out of existence, as it is dying. This understanding promotes the collective veneration of words.

For Storytelling to be an effective technological tool, words cannot be taken for granted. Only the educator who comprehends the depth of every word will be successful in employing storytelling as technology.

Practical Application of Storytelling as Technology

Despite divergent methodologies, there are “some” parallels in the West with the work of Griots in Jaliyaa. The differences lay in how the systems of instruction are deployed. The formulaic and mnemonic systems of the Griot are analogous to the science of prosody in the West. The difference in deployment of prosody in Western speech and that of the Griot goes back to our theme of respect for speech.

Prosody is the rhythm, stress and intonation of speech. Where speech, among dominant literate cultures is meant to be expendable, this same focus on rhythm, stress and intonation among traditional societies is viewed as a powerful manifestation of a world unseen.

It is well documented that music and rhythm affect memory in a positive manner. Recall is much greater among human beings when we employ music and rhythm. The Griot infuses ordinary language with rhythm, patterns, repetition, alliteration and assonance. Thought is intimately intertwined with memory systems and Griots use them to their advantage to promote memory in each listener. These systems of storytelling technology used by the Griot are not so complex that a serious, motivated student cannot master them.

To better comprehend the realm of the Griot’s craft, it should be understood that, among these dominant oral cultures their laws were enshrined in formulaic sayings, proverbs and aphorisms. These ancient oral declarations are not mere jurisprudential decorations, but they constitute law. This is narrative technology in action.

Our use of storytelling as technology lies not in making up new stories or recreating the wheel, but in managing our interaction with our listeners. To more effectively engage our listeners, as the Griot does in his society, we must concern ourselves more with relationship, or community building, and rely less on an unstable need to possess a literate understanding of the world. Every telling of a tale has to be introduced uniquely into a distinct situation.

It is not my intent to vilify writing and reading or radicalize the concept of storytelling as technology. I desire a balanced approach to education that will include what other cultures of the world can contribute. It is not blasphemy to promulgate the fact that writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the interpersonal. Without understanding this, then how are we to mitigate its negative aspects?



Storytelling as Technology & Empathy

As a Griot engages his community, words and music weave a communal cocoon. The listener is not viewed as a passive receptacle of the Griot's artistry but as an integral link in the process of community building. When a listener is engaged, he/she has no barrier to acceptance of the speaker's content. Listeners identify with characters in stories and the storyteller is merely a vessel for the transmission of the listener's experience. The listener is engaged in an empathic relationship to characters in the story meant to elicit such responses.

When a Griot engages in Jaliyaa, through recitation, singing or even dancing, the primary objective is the building of relationship. The effective dissemination of information is a byproduct of that relationship.

The act of writing separates us from a communal experience and sets up conditions for "objectivity," in the sense of personal disengagement.

If we are not careful in our dominant literate culture, we will produce a type of personality unable to navigate interpersonal relationships. The pathology of this form of objectivity is syllogistic thought patterns. These are patterns of thought disconnected rather than connected to human communication.

An example of where our syllogistic patterns of thinking may take us, where we might be headed can be seen in these two examples:

If a triangle has angles of 30° and 60° , then its third angle is 90° . If an angle in a triangle is 90° , then it is a right triangle.

This syllogism appeals to the logical-mathematical aspects of our brains, which we all can reach consensus on. What happens when we deal with themes much more abstract?

If God is love and love is blind and Stevie Wonder is also blind, therefore Stevie Wonder is God.

We all have encountered people unable to escape these syllogistic patterns of thought. Storytelling as technology acts as a diffusion for this type of linear processing in that it creates, for its participants, a person-to-person, human lifeworld, rather a world of relational abstractions.

To move away from the theoretical and into the practical we can see that the Griot masters the craft of Jaliyaa by listening for months and years to other Griots. These master Griots never sing or recite a narrative in exactly the same way twice. They use repetition and standardized formulas in connection with standard themes.



Examination of this paradigm calls for a re-examination of the apprenticeship system of instruction, which has long fallen out of favor as an archaic relic of the past.

Education and Storytelling as Technology need their own unique language, not borrowed from any of the other sciences. Psychology and statistical analysis have served their purposes in the evolution of modern education but have constrained, rather than freed intellectual progressivism.

If we look at the ritual language used by Griots we may find a template worth serving our own needs. The ritual language of the Griot is analogous to writing in that it has a permanence that colloquial language does not. Viewing the Griot's ritualistic language from our knowledge of prosody will aid us in understanding the role language may play in advancing the technology of storytelling.

Jiridon wo, sodon wo, yeredon de nogon te.

One may know how to mount or ride a horse, but self-knowledge is better

If we can allow for the premise of Storytelling as Technology, then we must also agree that there is a need to open ourselves to a global community and be global learners ourselves. The dominance of any one paradigm over another is an anachronism in our age of constant change.

Conclusion

The introduction of new technologies alters our social constructs on many levels. At times technology has had the result of “leveling the playing field” for those less fortunate. At other times, technology can create greater divides between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Storytelling as technology is not the introduction of a new technology. If anything, this is a reexamination or re-shaping of our perceptions in order to promote newer, creative paradigms within education.

Storytelling as Technology, when viewed through a lens of educational progressivism has the potential to “level the playing field” for diverse populations of learners. Unlike the smith whose materials are manually exhumed from the earth, the Griot's resources exist within the context of each of us understanding the relationship between speaker and listener on a less than superficial level.

All technologies possess some social significance. They are manifestations of human thought in the same way that words are. Storytelling as technology is only as useful as its practical application. When writing was first introduced to the Greeks, many of their most prominent philosophers rebelled against it as a corrupt technology capable of destroying memory. What we understand now is that societies must engage in a balanced discourse in order to ensure that technologies do not cause corruptions to our social order.



Technology is neutral, or inevitable. If we view technology in the way of the Griot, then we would say that it just “is.” Human choices determine what technology “will be.”

Because we are talking about relationship, any discussion of Storytelling as Technology must be approached with discussions of ethics and social responsibilities. Traditionally, education has focused disproportionate allocation of resources towards the written without considering a balance towards the oral. Educators have been trained to see the future of education only through the technology of the written word. Nowhere is this more evident than in our incessant testing of potential learners and an almost pathological need for data analysis. Where is the role of relationship in this unbalanced use of technology?

Literacy as a technology should not displace interpersonal development or oral communication. Artists and educators need to employ historical and critical analysis when promoting and adopting any technology. When we do not engage in dialectics, whether they be for/against any technology, we are burying our collective heads in the sand and allowing others to define our respective crafts.

It is my humble opinion that the world’s global communities possess many of the answers plaguing our current systems of education. Storytelling is one progressive form of technology that can aid us in re-examining our relationship to our listeners and learners.

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