

# SYNTHESISATION OF STORYTELLING AND TECHNOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

Storytelling in the African epistemological context is known for its ability to communicate morals and values, and is instrumental in conflict resolution and peace building. Conversely, the strength of modern technology is in the mass distribution of products. However, the relationship that exists between tradition and modern technology has not exhausted its potential to be innovative. In order to contribute to the discourse on the role of technology in the preservation, restoration and dissemination of indigenous knowledge, the view presented in this article explores the nature and use of certain technologies and their communication strategies within a personalised domestic setting. Herein traditional content in a technological package is presented. This article therefore seeks to explore ways that speak to the need to deconstruct African identity and tradition and poses the question 'Who am I?' as it sits at the heart of being innovative with modern technology.

## INTRODUCTION

From an African perspective, an understanding of the interconnection of phenomena guides progress and the well-being of self. Interconnectedness promotes the merging



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of phenomena, such as in the concept of *ubuntu*, which implies that ‘a person is a person because of others’. This is the idea of a beginning with no end, like the circular shape that dominates African structures, for example, round kraals and dome-shaped huts, all representing a circle. From the time of the missionaries, African culture and tradition have been perceived as backward, primitive, lacking in development and the like; thus it was placed on the periphery of modernisation (Rananga 2008). That resulted in our culture being marginalised by African people themselves; consequently it was dissociated and disconnected with new progress, like advances in technology. Paradoxically, cultural material played a prominent role in the popularisation of electronic media; but the credit went only to technology, as progressive and innovative. Hence, since the time of the missionaries on this continent, Africa’s rich cultures have experienced an intricate quest for liberation. There is a struggle for socio-cultural-political fundamental reformation, as African people strive to eliminate acquired hegemonic terms such as ‘barbaric’, ‘childish’, etc. In an attempt to contextualise culture in modernity, the article begins by first acknowledging the importance of forging human interaction among people from various centres of knowledge, for the purpose of developing culture. That being the case, this article argues that if the theory of interconnectedness can be strengthened it will reveal that a segregation of tradition and modern technology is unnatural. While referring to technology as a friend due to its facilitative character, Postman (1992) points out that there is an inevitable relationship between technology and culture. He does, however, warn that technology destroys important sources for humanity: ‘It creates culture without a moral foundation. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living. Technology, in sum, is both friend and enemy’ (ibid, 1).

We therefore concluded that any attempt to merge culture with technology (electronic media especially) is not as complicated as finding the ways and means to eradicate hegemony against Africa and all that She (Africa) represents. Ferguson (2006, 2) points out that Africa is viewed as ‘a common signifier for “a series of lacks and absences, failings and problems, plagues and catastrophes” or by how African cultural production is simplistically viewed under the shadow of colonial history’. The article comes from a premise that proposes to eradicate hegemony and re-emphasise the contribution culture can make to the development of Africa. True development should inspire communities to value their own intellect and consequently to begin to perceive themselves as creative and innovative – like any other nation. As an initial step towards building Africa, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1997) speaks of ‘decolonisation of the mind’. During a process of mind decolonisation, African people’s negative perceptions about themselves should begin to move towards the opposite end of the spectrum. An end goal for this process is that a paradigm shift occurs, so that the mind that makes cultural materials appear useless and oldfashioned, instead begins

to view itself as valuable. For this purpose, human interaction is placed at the centre of cultural practices and modern technology.

## METHODOLOGY

To identify new and innovative methods through which to connect culture and technology, different research methods were applied in this study. The main approach was that of observation. Additionally, interviews, social interaction and literature review research were also used. In observation, two distinct cases were identified: 1) an observation of an elderly man, living on a mountain in Swaziland, who told stories and had a gift for sculpting at the same time; and 2) the well-known practice of young rural boys in South Africa who spend time moulding objects such as animals and human figurines using river clay. Another similar case is that of young girls who play 'stone' games. When playing the game, they give the stones characters or names in order to communicate or interact with one another using that girl's voice. This children's game is popular, especially in the townships.

In the three cases mentioned above, work is mostly produced in singles; the telling of stories is separate from sculpting, though executed by the same person, for example the mooing sound of a cow is imitated by the boys. The process is the same with the girls' stone game, where a player applies voice intonation and polarisation techniques for the different characters she creates. In an attempt to apply this theory to the work of the old man, new ways that involve critical thinking and creativity need attention. In this situation, voice and images can be connected and merged into one entity using a specific technology as a conduit.

This does not, however, imply that playing games in that fashion is wrong or in any way limited. Neither does it imply that cultural products and modern technology have never interacted at any given time, or that there has never been an interconnection between the two entities. Instead, this article attempts to contribute and expand already existing creativity in the merging of culture and technology. For that reason it is herein maintained that certain types of modern technology have been less explored compared to others, and this is where traditional material can still find effective expression. The interaction between traditional materials and technology is discussed in the next section.

## REGRESS IN CULTURE

This section begins by attesting to the argument maintained by Chancellor Williams four decades ago (1989), that the path leading to counteracting negative perceptions about Africa – which Africanists and cultural proponents have opened – has to be cascaded down to ordinary members of society. Williams went on to say that, unless this happens, perceptions will remain and people will continue to act in accordance

with that hegemonic understanding brought about by such perceptions. Williams further argues that critical thinking about situations is vital for development, as is self-reflection. Accordingly, tradition and stand to progress further if practitioners refrain from looking at technology from the outside in, but rather regard this material as part of the whole; without which the circle or whole would be incomplete. From Williams' point of view, thinking ability is critical and the thought process should begin by putting into place methods that will assist society in unthinking the way they were taught to think – that is the only manner in which to counteract hegemonic ways of thinking.

Essentially, any thinking that aims to advance the lives of people should be understood and explained together with the World Decade for Cultural Development's (1988–1998) statement, that development is not synonymous with economic growth, and that some aspects of development are intangible. Development should incorporate the attainment of a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence. According to Scheub (1994), culture (of which storytelling is a part) is endowed with emotional and spiritual content as well as wisdom. Thus, the ways and means of passing on an intangible heritage to the people have to be explored, for the development of the people.

## MODERN TECHNOLOGY

On the other side of the cultural fence is technology. Advances in technology have their advantages and have benefited mankind in many ways. Technology continues to play a critically important part in people's lives. For example, media technology enables wide knowledge sharing across cultures and societies, it enables easy access to information and more. However, our starting point is that technology is a tool which requires content. Content must be generated (mainly by human beings) for technology to be useful and relevant in people's lives. A question arises as to how it is possible to separate technology from cultural material. This article argues that the two entities, technology and culture, are interconnected and interdependent. While culture benefits from technology by receiving wider exposure, culture to a great extent contributes to the existence of technology and, consequently, both entities expand their popularity. For technology to benefit culture, apart from the financial dynamics involved, thinking and creativity come to the fore.

### Cultural material in modern technology

Cultural products not only impact technology, but also feature in other spheres of society. Hofmeyr (1992) observes that for many years missionaries in South Africa used their Western ways of spreading the word of God, but that Christianity did not take root until cultural materials, which included singing and music, were

introduced into churches. Relevant to technology is an example of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The *Broadcasting Act, 2009*, states that the SABC exists in order to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of South Africa. In the sphere of culture, the practicality of this clause is observed and supported by those advertisements that take the shape of storytelling and folktales. One of those is the Digital Satellite Television (DStv) advert where a woman tells a highly dramatic and emotional story, in which every scene is exaggerated. The reaction of her friend, who is a listener in the advert, is telling: her eyes and mouth are wide open, her body movement follow those of the story-teller. At the end of the advert the character states: ‘DStv tells stories just like Africans do.’

Another relevant advert is that for Castle Lager beer. Here, the king is drinking the beer to show his greatness. He then announces to his people that he is about to marry off his youngest daughter to the wisest young man of them all; and that he wants all the young men to show off their greatness, to see whether it surpasses that of the king. ‘Whoever passes this test will marry my daughter,’ he says. One by one the young men present their talents, one by one the young men fail the test, until the last one shows how he will improve Castle Lager and make it healthier. He wins the hand of the king’s daughter. This advert resembles a particular folktale in which each competitor had to eat chillies without grinning – to prove their bravery. The similarities between the advert and that of the aligned folktale are glaring. This confirms the viewpoint that popular images play a critical role in electronic media, and that popular culture works hand with hand with the media.

The same was (and still is) the case with radio stations’ record playing when they were first introduced to the African community. Black musical groups flocked to recording studios and their music instantly reached far and wide. People listened to radio stations for their content spoke to the popular consciousness. Cultural material became critical in the stations’ programme content. In a similar manner, although radio storytelling programmes were particularly presented for children – as per the created hegemony that African storytelling was for children – storytelling nevertheless made it to this electronic medium. Interconnection was achieved.

While modern professional storytellers predominantly perform their stories on stage, there are those who make use of radio platforms. On Ukhozi FM, Sanelisiwe Ntuli tells traditional stories every week, Monday to Wednesday at 09:30. Nelidzane Netshirembe tells her stories on Univen Community Radio on Tuesdays between 12:30 and 13:30pm. For many years, on a weekly basis, Gcina Mhlophe was featured on SABC 1 presenting storytelling sessions. Engaging with electronic media provided performers with new job and career opportunities, and in the process the culture of storytelling was spread to more people whom they could not have easily reached in the first place without radio. This recovery of an ancient art through radio was an attempt to reposition tradition, not only for preservation purposes but also

by attaching economic value to it. However, the argument that Rananga (2008) puts forward, that radio compromised the performance aspect of storytelling, cannot be denied. There is no denying that to a certain extent, storytelling programmes on radio sustained the lifespan of folktales, retaining them in the consciousness of the people, and under these circumstances both the tradition and the art form were preserved. Nevertheless, the performance aspect of it was indeed compromised, hence live storytelling performance began to emerge in urban areas on the eve of the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa.

### Less explored technology in promoting culture

Proponents of African culture try not to associate themselves with what they perceive as Western. They defend and protect what they regard as African. Some become protective of culture to the extent that it is assumed to be static; thus on a broader scale its functionality is overlooked. This perception hinders any possibilities of contextualising culture in a manner that will recognise the contributions a culture made to modern civilisation (Diop 1974). Alternatively, people should recognise the existence of their own intellectual traditional work and find ways to utilise this to their advantage, while interacting with resources like technology. Such decolonisation programmes will focus, in particular, on psychological synchronisation with the self, and highlight cultural identity as well as individual responsibilities in an increasingly technologised world. In this way, affected individuals will feel part of developments, because their 'being' is acknowledged and integrated in the process. Included in these programmes should be in-depth training in analytical processes and independent thinking.

In order for that process to materialise, Williams (1987) suggests that certain preconditions need to be in place, as without such strategies 'the genius of any people for thinking, inventing, discovering and building will be inhibited or eventually die under extreme circumstances'. One of the preconditions is that people must become poverty-free, settle down and stop roaming from place to place in an attempt to meet basic needs like water and food. The second is that leaders should engage in nation-building strategies to the extent that people feel secure as individuals that in their country, there is justice for all. Basically, people should feel secure and experience safety, peace and stability. They should worry more about development, than about the next plate of food or about finding a place to stay. As such, where there is lack, people worry about their day-to-day survival. In the context of the topic of this article, unless these conditions are in place, an ordinary member of society will not be worried about how culture can be developed, preserved or perpetuated. This is evident from the South African situation. What Williams argues is that the majority of local artists worry about entertaining or selling their traditional work to tourists in order to meet their basic daily needs, rather than thinking about how to make their

work sustainable, how it can be further developed, or how it translates into long-term substantial economic benefit.

Having time to think provides space for innovative ideas to develop; in this condition one has time to observe deeply what is happening, what material is available and how that can be renewed. Here is an example of a good idea that connects tradition to technology. It is that of a young woman who has come up with the idea of recording stories into dolls. Instead of a live human being telling stories, or audiences listening to stories recorded on CDs, the stories are recorded on animal dolls. These traditional stories can be listened to at any time by anyone who has such a storytelling doll; and consequentially, the stories are known widely through this technology. Therefore, apart from the electronic media there are other technological methods through which African culture can find expression; many of these methods are yet to be explored. It is on this basis that we introduce the concept of dolls as another type of modern technology through which culture can be perpetuated and preserved. In many ways, the idea of storytelling dolls speaks directly to the theory of interconnectedness. Instead of a storyteller telling stories him/herself, his/her stories are archived and 'told' by dolls. This indicates not only a process of innovative thinking, but also a migration of oral traditional material to modernity. It reflects a direct way of fitting culture to modern technology. Interestingly, the process of producing this innovative idea began with the critical thinking of one person; it was followed by an interaction between that person and others people, and the subsequent merging of two skill-sets. The initial plan came from the IT world and later interacted with one from the field of culture and tradition. As with any other good idea, it took two interacting human beings from the fields of culture and technology to realise a space for culture to be expressed. As such, critical thinking poses the questions: 'Who am I?'; 'What am I made of as a person?', and self-reflection enables a surfacing of circumstantial and situational awareness. In attempting to answer these questions, the aim would be to engage in deep thinking about one's roots and one's ways of knowing. It should allow new consciousness about the self to emerge.

## CONCLUSION

The article has outlined certain arguments in relation to technology and culture in the African context, with a particular emphasis on South Africa. The first is that although Africans were taught that their culture and all its material are worthless, counter-theories should be created and applied so that, in form and shape, culture advances parallel to technology. Second, the article suggests that from the inception of technology, culture has been used to benefit technology, but the value of culture to technology has been either overlooked or ignored. It would not be surprising to find out that this is because the intention was not to preserve culture or tradition as such, but to draw people's attention to modern technologies. Third, according to this article

and basing our analyses on Williams' (1987) assertions, within the broader scheme of things, minimising the impact of hegemony requires an active re-evaluation of the psychological effect of apartheid and colonialization, which remain major factors in shaping the thinking of the 'previously disadvantaged'. Accordingly, as much as there were well-constructed and consistent apartheid programmes aimed at changing the mindset of Africans so that they do not value themselves, it is unlikely that the majority in this group will automatically engage in a paradigm shift and suddenly start believing in their own worth and that of their culture. However, in this article the point is made that continuous robust programmes aiming at decolonising the mind need to be organised in order to witness new, contextualised creativities. In essence, the separation of the arts and technology not only results in a separation between humans themselves, but hampers people's progress and development.

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