

Beyond African Ecclesiastical History: A Comparative Look at Storytelling Techniques

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Abstract

This article sets out to demonstrate the import of storytelling techniques in ecclesiastical history and across the various academic disciplines. As techniques in communication, they are critical pillars in both ancient and modern history. Storytelling is one of the facets of culture that has remained largely intact for generations, especially in tropical Africa. In appreciating that storytelling techniques go beyond mere narration (refer to language proficiency, figures of speech, music, and drama, among others), the article draws from some Euro-American and African examples to demonstrate their broad spectrum and execution. It asks: How have storytelling techniques manifested across historical times, especially among some critical events such as the Protestant revivals of 18th-century Europe and America, the Second World War (1939–1945), and in the postcolonial African quests for a just and democratic society? Despite the ambitious nature of this article, it will only cite a few representative cases so as to address this concern. Given this, London's Methodist preacher, Rev. William Edwin Sangster, serving at London's Westminster Central Hall during the Second World War, and Kenya's Archbishop David Gitari, who served during the turbulent times of single-party dictatorship (1980s and 1990s), have been cited to give an informed understanding on the significance and execution of storytelling techniques over the years. An extensive review of relevant literature and some limited interviews with people who are connected to this topic have been considered.

Keywords: figures of speech; oral techniques; storytelling techniques



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Introduction

Ordinarily, storytelling techniques include the use of animal fables, humour, symbolic artefacts, myths, ballads, song-tales, proverbs, riddles, folktales, anecdotes, fairy tales, and dance-songs among other gestures (Gachoki 2021). Among Indigenous societies, storytelling, as a teaching methodology, was a communal affair that remains a valued technique of gluing the society together. Hardly does a person grow so old that they no longer love captivating stories. Historically, as is the case today, stories were used as a means of preserving and transmitting the social and spiritual heritage of a given society. Each story “has to be distinguished accordingly because stories have different settings, aims and values” (Gathogo 2001, 84).

In view of this, the article explores some storytelling techniques: logic and epistemological soundness, humour, campfire narrations, tales by moonlight, personification, communal justice, and earlier triumphant stories, in order to establish their efficacy in ecclesiastical history and beyond. This drives it to also compare Ireland’s bards (poets) in Europe and narrators in ancient Africa, both of whom utilise Indigenous techniques that encompass natural phenomena and religious consciousness, and build moral lessons that influence society. Besides the Indigenous Irish, other Indigenous peoples such as the Maori of New Zealand, the Mayas of Guatemala, and the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia, First Nations, Inuit, and Metis of Canada, the Sámi of Northern Europe, the Native Americans and Alaska Natives of the United States of America, and the Celtic people who inhabited the United Kingdom since the Iron Age also underline the value of storytelling techniques in their learning and practices (Chikaire et al. 2012).

Equally, aboriginal Tasmanians or Palawa (the smallest Australian state) and France’s peoples from its overseas territories such as Pacific Islanders, Kanaks, Mahoris, Amerindians, and Bretons make up another set of Indigenous groups (Dean and Levi 2003; Pagden 2001). In India, Adivasi peoples are believed to be the Indigenous peoples of India, while pre-Columbian people are viewed as the primal inhabitants of South America. Further, Coclé, Lenca, Aztecs, and Maya are viewed as the original inhabitants of Central America (Vieira and Viaene 2024). The Berbers (in Maghreb), the Copts and the Nubians (in the Nile Valley) are believed to be the Indigenous peoples of North Africa. Although the Indigenous peoples are globally under several threats (extinction, climate change, landlessness, poverty, discrimination and prejudices from “superior” cultures, acculturation and assimilation by Westernisation, limited access to capital, displacements, colonial impacts, and the failure to recognise their respective jurisdictions), the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, by the United Nations (UN), strengthened their relevance in the 21st century (Dean and Levi 2003; Pagden 2001). Nevertheless, despite its endorsement by about 148 countries, its provisions have not been systematically implemented; hence, their rights to education, natural resources, languages, identities, health, employment, ceremonies and rituals, and general communal rights remain an incomplete agenda right

into the 21st century (Vieira and Viaene 2024). Nonetheless, their reliance on storytelling techniques cannot be gainsaid.

Beyond storytelling techniques among the Indigenous peoples, the article addresses other subthemes such as the efficacy of storytelling techniques and the key attributes of a storyteller. A comparative look at Indigenous society and Church history and a pre-Christian East Africa versus the Great Awakening of the 18th century forms part of this treatise in an endeavour to understand the efficacy of storytelling techniques over the centuries. The article ends by sampling Rev. William Sangster and Archbishop David Gitari, both of whom employed storytelling techniques during their respective turbulent times. This is geared towards offering a practical demonstration of the efficacy of storytelling techniques.

Conceptual Clarifications

Indigenous Research Methods (IRMs) proceed from the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), as the latter are rooted in home-grown epistemologies of survival, experiences, and learning, and are incorporated in all the vicissitudes of life (Chikaire et al. 2012). As a methodology that engages oral discourses (tradition and histories), IRM's intellectual sunshade is the IKS, hence the interconnectedness. Oral history and its oral techniques such as storytelling (refer to poetry, logic, epistemological soundness, and campfire narrations, etc.) have been in use in the Indigenous societies across the globe for generations. It is no wonder that archaeologists have brought forth evidence that shows the historical flow of oral traditions as transmitters of knowledge and arts among world civilisations (Iheanacho 2021; Powell 2003). In particular, the ancient Greeks used it to understand and explain their worldviews (Mackay 1999). Thucydides, the Greek historian, who wrote in the 5th century BCE, documented several accounts of eyewitnesses of the Peloponnesian Wars which attest to this, as they accelerated the societal healing through narrating painful experiences (Iheanacho 2021; Powell 2003). As John Foley (in Mackay 1999, 1) has noted,

The Judeo-Christian Bible reveals its oral traditional roots; medieval European manuscripts are penned by performing scribes; geometric vases from archaic Greece mirror Homer's oral style. ... Indeed, if these final decades of the millennium have taught us anything, it must be that oral tradition never was the other we accused it of being; it never was the primitive, preliminary technology of communication we thought it to be. Rather, if the whole truth is told, oral tradition stands out as the single most dominant communicative technology of our species as both a historical fact and, in many areas still, a contemporary reality.

Similarly, African societies have utilised oral traditions in their historicity to understand their past, present, and the future, since time immemorial (Kenyatta 1938). A reliance on oral techniques brought forth knowledge of history, crafts and skills, myths, legends, origins, religion, economics, politics, kinship, and the general environment (Mbiti 1969). As in the case of Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism), oral

traditions and their historical contexts remain a critical component in their spiritual dispensations (Iheanacho 2021; Mackay 1999). To this end, Iheanacho (2021, 2) sums it up thus:

Oracy can legitimately be described as the hallmark of African civilisation. African historians such as Théophile Obenga and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, and literary icons such as AyiKwei Armah, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe and a host of others, have searched through African oral tradition for a luminary past to highlight a positive image and identity for the black people. ... The creative use of African oral tradition is quite visible in the writings of the first and second generations of African writers from the 1950s to the late 1980s. Their skilful retrieval of African oral narratives and their incorporation into structure, theme and style gave birth to the Africanisation of the novel form.

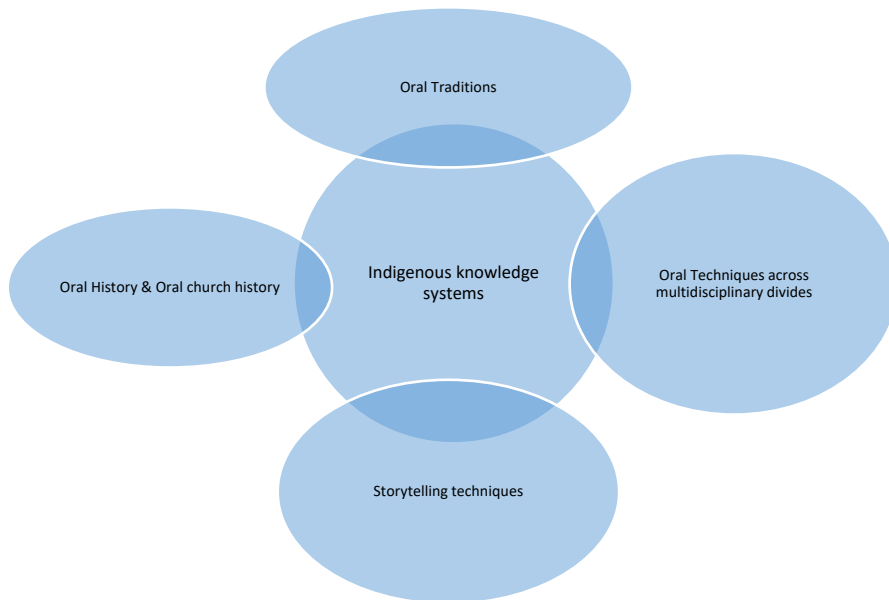


Figure 1: Conceptual clarifications diagram

In appreciating the “four paradigm transformations in oral history,” and oral church histories, Alistair Thomson (2007, 49–70) reviews the various paradigm shifts in oral practices since post-World War II. Prior to this, the age of the Renaissance, spanning from the 14th to 17th centuries CE, had unofficially spurred oral sources as a critical tool in academia. In a nutshell, the Renaissance period was characterised by scientific, intellectual and cultural rebirths that were critical in shaping up “future” academic activities. The Renaissance culminated in the death of an all-powerful church, as the quest for rebirths and/or new paradigms triggered new realignments across all departments of life. To this end, Thomson (2007) contends that the first paradigm transformation of oral history and practice was witnessed after the Second World War (1939–1945) as post-war rebirth (renaissance) ushered in the use of memory as a critical source for historical research. A case in point is Paul Thompson (2000) who contends

that the prehistory of the modern history movement is rooted in the ancient times when historians began to rely on eyewitness accounts of important happenings. This trajectory continued until the 19th century when the development of History as an academic discipline gave birth to the primacy of archival research, and documentary sources, a phenomenon that saw the marginalisation of oral evidence (Thompson 2000).

The second paradigm transformation of oral history and practice, from the late 1970s, was in part a response to positivist critics who argued that memory is an unreliable source of history and failed to see its role in breaking the dichotomies of professionals versus ordinary peoples. It sought to usher in post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity, which started handbook guidelines for assessing the reliability of oral memory (O'Farrell 1982; Thomson 2007). As a progression of oral history and practice, the 1970s progressed to the 1980s, which saw an emphasis on "Oral History and political memory work[ing] in a biographical era" (Thomson 2007, 58). Since the early 1980s, memory has come to be used for empowerment and advocacy in diverse contexts: consider age divides, social care, community-based development projects, and among marginalised groups such as homeless, destitute, and displaced persons. The use of oral testimonies in courts of law, in post-conflict resolutions, and in matters dealing with Indigenous people's rights has also become a commonplace since the early 1980s. Thus, testimonies and memories have become critical tools in the last half of the 20th century and the 21st century, as there is a general post-Freudian acceptance that talking about oneself has a therapeutic significance (O'Farrell 1982; Thomson 2007).

The third paradigmatic transformation in oral history puts more emphasis on objectivity as the historian and/or researcher has to analyse from a broader perspective. It is a shift from subjectivity to objectivity (O'Farrell 1982; Thomson 2007). Although the positivists' notions of objectivity have been questioned by feminist theorists and postmodern anthropologists, among others, a more interactive process of interviewer-narrator and their respective content has been mooted as a major paradigmatic shift. The fourth paradigmatic shift in oral history is the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Thomson 2007). In this shift, social media networks such as emails, WeChat, Messenger, webcams, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, X (Twitter), WhatsApp, Telegram, Snapchat, Quora, Vimeo, Threads, ShareChat, Xiaohongshu (RedNote), and the internet in general are fostering oral history's international dialogue (Thompson 2000; Thomson 2007). Further, digital technologies are innovatively changing the ways in which we document, record, preserve, catalogue, share, transmit, interpret, and present oral histories.

On the whole, oral history along with its oral techniques, storytelling techniques in particular, liberates African history as it ushers in community-minded postcolonial interpretations of the vast region. As Thomas Spear (1981, 133) has noted, "African history was to be the history of Africans, a history that had begun well before the European 'discovery' of Africa. The problem was the sources." For while the Western historiography relied on written sources, the African context could best be understood

by relying on oral techniques as the primary methodology. The challenge can however be said to have remained in the fact that its accuracy can be subject to “lapses in memory and falsification in the long chains of transmission from the initial report of the event in the past to the tradition told in the present” (Spear 1981, 133). Nevertheless, elaborate and meticulous methods that prescribe how traditions should be collected and transcribed, including how their chains of transmission should be traced and variants compared, have been empirically established since the last half of the 20th century, as implied earlier. Further, African oral histories have not changed substantially despite the coming of westernisation, and prior encounters with traders in the East Coast of Africa (Gathogo 2024; Walsh 1992). Take the case of the Mijikenda of the East Coast of Africa. From time immemorial, they have always utilised their sacred sites (*Kayas*), similarly refer to the Sambhogakaya, Dharmakaya, Nirmanakaya, and Rupakaya (Walsh 1992). They have also retained their structures that embrace age-sets, sub-clans, and lineages. There are no established innovations that can be recalled to demonstrate the changing patterns despite trading with Muslim merchants from the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt since the mid-8th century CE (Gathogo 2012). The coming of Portuguese traders in 1471 and the colonial occupation after the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885 did not affect the oral sources substantially, as oral activities were accompanied by relevant activities (Spear 1981; Walsh 1992). Remaining true to their ancestral heritage, with repetitive cycles of orderly social processes, has always been the norm that obtains right into the 21st century. In my endeavour to narrow down oral history, I shall specifically address the value of storytelling techniques by surveying some critical areas: the attributes of a storyteller, the efficacy of storytelling techniques, samples of storytelling techniques, Indigenous society and church history, and demonstrate the significance of storytelling techniques by drawing from the example of the pre-Christian East Africa and the Great Awakening of the 18th century Europe, a phenomenon that provides watertight case studies.

Besides this, the article views the various attributes of a storyteller in ecclesiastical histories or in the general society as including “charisma, compassion, egalitarianism, [ably] working with diverse students [peoples], gender fairness, a sense of humour, and other desirable traits such as smart, creative, honest, emotional stability, patience, motivator, novelty, critical, [and has genuine] interest in students [audience],” among others (Kottler, Zehm, and Kottler 2005, 22). In employing storytelling techniques, which go beyond mere narration, several preparatory measures and observances would ensure its efficacy. Such may include but are not limited to, language proficiency, a phenomenon where one can easily play with figures of speech such as anaphora, assonance, irony, personification, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, flashbacks, building suspense, Socratic questioning (Kasyoka 2008), some measured drama, tone variations, use of conflict as friction, and limited use of song and dance, among other skills. This drives us to consider some storytelling techniques as seen across historical times.

Some Storytelling Techniques

Bards in Ancient Ireland

As a pedagogical prehistoric tool, among world civilisations, storytelling has retained its relevance right into the 21st century. This has remained true across interdisciplinary divides: oral history, history, communication, anthropology, education, business, and nursing, among other areas (Davidson 2004). Oral traditions, which are evident in various civilisations, precede published and online media, as oral stories were passed on from one generation to the other. In various societies, narrators would use natural phenomena (creation, gods, myths, and origins), to guide, teach, lead, heal, entertain, and keep cultural secrets. They would deliver this through poetry, chants, dance and songs, among other techniques (Gathogo 2021). In ancient Ireland, bards (poets who were highly trained) were more associated with the church. As storytellers, they employed assonance (repetition of vowel sounds), consonance (repetition of identical words), syllabic (count of syllables), and half rhyme (similar ending sounds), among other literary techniques. As court poets in Ireland, bards served as satirists and chroniclers who mocked the enemies of the king or praised his friends. Through ancient storytellers, their (bards') influence is still felt in Ireland in the 21st century (Butler 2017). Their roles compare with those of African Indigenous storytellers, especially in the role of educating, entertaining, preserving people's history, relating with the natural phenomena, and promoting religious consciousness and the moral-ethical standing of the society.

Logic and Epistemological Soundness

Storytellers in church history or oral history, particularly the homilists, have always relied on logic and epistemological soundness as a measure of ensuring that the narrator is well-informed and able to lead throughout the entire exercise (Duduit 2024; Stott 1982; Thompson 2000). Certainly, proficiency in language means that the storyteller in the African Indigenous context knew the place of riddles, proverbs, sayings, drama, songs, dance, and relevant bodily gestures to employ at any given stage (Personal communication with Erastus Njeru Muriuki, at Thumaita village home, 18 March 2024). This resonates well with a good preacher who must equally connect with his or her audiences with ease, undertake the assignment passionately, communicate proficiently and logically, be epistemologically sound, and audience-sensitive, and a person who builds a deep spiritual life that resonates with his or her audiences. Other good qualities are authority, clarity, veracity, and authenticity, most of which are also good qualities for a storyteller (Lee 2004).

Humour as a Technique

Another ideal characteristic of an effective teacher, homilist, and storyteller is seen through his or her sense of humour (Kottler, Zehm, and Kottler 2005). In rural Kenya, as in the rest of tropical Africa, it is all too easy to grow up thinking that humour is for comedians. As noted above, however, humour is a figure of speech, just like paradoxes,

symbols, and metaphors. It is a critical technique that was used by the 18th-century evangelical revivalists, leaders of the so-called Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s (though some came much earlier), such as George Whitefield (1714–1770), Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), Henry Scougal (1650–1678), John Wesley (1703–1791), and Charles Wesley (1707–1788) among others. Indeed, humour plays a critical role in teaching as it lightens the challenges of the learners and the teacher for that matter. When the students/audiences are bored, their capacity to grasp is negatively affected, but when humour comes in, it reduces this boredom and transforms it into a drama—hence, the learning mood re-appears. To this end, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), the great Indian nationalist, extolled the critical role of humour when he said, “If I had no sense of humour, I would long ago have committed suicide” (Gandhi cited in Gathogo 2015, 8). In view of this, storytelling that is spiced with humour is impactful to its intended audience and beyond this.

Campfire Narration

In African Indigenous societies, stories would be narrated at night, around a campfire where the cold of the night would be controlled. As in the modern churches where adherents and/or consumers of the Gospel message are categorised in diverse ways: Sunday school for those below 15, Youth Service for those above 15, and the main Sunday/Saturday service for all (largely adults), pre-missionary storytelling camps in the Kenyan context are considered along diverse audiences (Personal communication with Erastus Njeru Muriuki, at Thumaita village home, 18 March 2024). Such included counsel by elders for initiates, marital counsel, and elderly women/men preparing youths on particular issues of concern. Such elders employed oral methods and storytelling techniques in their bid to deliver the promise. A medical practitioner would however take his or her audience to the field for practical, experimental purposes (Kenyatta 1938). Despite being an oral technique, training medical persons went beyond storytelling. Characteristically, a community leader would also be seen as a storyteller as s/he had a critical role of cautioning the general society on a coming danger or an existing misfortune/challenge, and would build a consensus with others, and eventually give the way forwards (Parker 2023).

Tales by Moonlight in the Indigenous Society

Concerning African children, adults could bring them to a particular spot by moonlight. Subsequently, a village fire could be set up, as all surrounded it (Parker 2023). Through storytelling techniques, African children are taught about God and humanity (Ubuntu), practical skills, social value through apprenticeship, participation, observation, humility, and cultural knowledge. An emphasis is placed on community welfare, and norms (Gachoki 2021). In these tales by moonlight, they could hear the stories that were relevant and thematically delivered. Such were called Tales by Moonlight (Kenyatta 1938; Mbiti 1969). The stories, told by an experienced storyteller, sought to empower the children by educating them on critical areas such as taboos (societal prohibitions) and upholding virtues (courage in the face of tough animals and invaders, hospitality to

strangers and amongst themselves, justice to all and fair-mindedness, among other themes) (Kenyatta 1938; Mbiti 1969).

Upholding Communal Justice and Existentialism

Storytelling in pre-missionary Africa could also be dispensed by upholding communal justice as an aspect of existentialist gestures. In such a case, selected elders would narrate their stories as they delivered the verdict after listening to all concerned parties. That is, the plaintiff, the defendant, and the invited witnesses. During the “court” session, whose deliberations were not put in printed minutes, two elders held the twigs of branches that represented each piece of evidence as it was given (Kenyatta 1938). In their endeavour to ward off existential threats to their survival, the Indigenous society relies on its “professionals” and/or specialists. In turn, specialists in diverse areas (medicine practitioners, rulers, counsellors and healers, diviners, mediums, seers, rainmakers, priests, and magicians, among others) in pre-missionary Africa would equally deliver their respective stories as the situation and context demanded. In the case of priests, they would deliver their “topical sermons” efficiently. For example, they would deliver a lesson about greed by narrating the story of a greedy hyena who would eat all pieces of meat as others died of hunger (Personal communication with Milton Munene Gachau, at Kianguenyi village home, 19 March 2024). They would personify the animal to caution the audience about the danger and impact of selfish living in the community. Such techniques, of delivering critical information for mass consumption, would also apply across the various societal themes. Hence, a rainmaker would also educate the society on the value of sacrificing to the Supreme Deity through ritualistic slaughter of sheep/goats without blemish. This would eventually prepare the audience for the incoming Abstaining Day (*Muthenya wa Mutiuro*—a day when locals abstained from going to their shepherding or farming activities), where the ritualists warded off the dry spell after appeasing the almighty God (Gathogo 2017).

Recalling Earlier Triumphant Stories

From the foregoing, it is clear, in most civilisations of the world, that when people are reminded about their earlier triumphant stories, preceding heroes and heroines, old sayings and proverbs, and ancient ways of undoing wrongs, that they are empowered to face the future with informed comparative techniques of overcoming hurdles (Personal communication with Milton Munene Gachau, at Kianguenyi village home, 19 March 2024). Certainly, illustrations and stories have graphic ways of capturing our imaginations and illuminating our respective minds just as windows do to a house. As imparters of moral-ethical living in society, the narrating elders were driven, in Mahatma Gandhi’s dictum, to not only “preach satyagraha” but also “live satyagraha” (Gachoki 2021, iv). Hence, a heavy responsibility was placed on narrators/storytellers, just as is the case with homilists in ecclesiastical history. Consider, for example, homilists such as Martin Luther, John Wesley, “Billy Graham ... John Stott, John Calvin, CH Spurgeon, Karl Barth, [Saint] Augustine, [and Thomas] Wakefield ... and so on,” whose lifestyles were envied by their respective contemporaries (Gathogo 2022,

2). Indeed, what homilists and African storytellers said, decades or centuries ago, remains in our memory banks across the generations, despite being preserved in diverse ways: on YouTube, videos, the internet, in published works, or as mere oral narrations.

Indigenous versus Ecclesial

Indigenous Society and Church History

In both African Indigenous society and church history, storytelling has always served to invite the audience to reflect deeply on the subject at hand. In the early church, when St. Paul narrated about Alexander the metalworker who “did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds” (2 Tim 4:14), he invited his audiences to reflect deeply on the wages of being a sadist in a community, as the almighty God also has a role in sanctioning us for what we do to others. Hence, storytelling in the African Indigenous society, as well as in church history, links people’s histories of struggles and triumphs right from their origins to the present. They give weight, evidentiality, and authenticity. In African Indigenous churches, which began in the 1920s in Kenya after some disagreements with European-dominated missionary churches, numerical growth was seen as their leaderships employed local forms of communication: dance, songs, drama, musical instruments, proverbs, sayings, riddles, and figurative language that resonated with the local Africans (Njino 1992).

Church history is replete with stories of great homilists who ably illustrated their sermons by careful and/or relevant ways of using storytelling techniques. Such included: Billy Graham (1918–2018), John Stott (1921–2011), Desmond Tutu (1931–2021), David Gitari (1937–2013), Lawi Imathiu (1932–), John Chrysostom (347–407), Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Bishop Ambrose (340–397), C. H. Spurgeon (1834–1892), William E. Sangster (1900–1960), John Wesley (1703–1791), and Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), among others (Gathogo 2001; Njino 1992). Certainly, it is experientially established that audiences tend to pay more attention to and remember sermons better when speakers use storytelling techniques to narrate and illustrate related issues that resonate with the respective subject under consideration. Clearly,

[t]he purpose of an illustration [as storytelling] is to throw light upon the subject of discussion. It is to the sermon what a window is to a house: for it lets light in. It becomes a window of speech in that it throws some light to unclear issues. It is true to say that no one cares much to listen to a sermon which contains no illustrations; for no one would want to live in a house without windows. This is the view of most homiletic scholars. [C.H.] Spurgeon [the homilist] supports this view by asserting that a building without windows would be a prison rather than a house for it would be quite dark, and no one would care to take it upon lease; and, in the same way, a discourse without a parable is prosy and dull, and involves a grievous weariness of the flesh. There is theo-historical justification for using storytelling in preaching and other ecclesiastical ministries. Our Lord Jesus set forth, by his example, the value of illustrations when he narrated several parables. He did this by first educating on the value of parables (Mk 4:10-12). He then delivered the following: The parable of the sower (Mk 4:1-9), the weeds (Mk 4:26-29),

The Mustard Seed (Mk 4:30-32), the Leaven (Mt 13:33), the hidden treasure (Mt 13:44), the Net (Mt 13:47-50), the lost sheep (Mt 18:10-14), the wedding feast (Lk 14:16-24), the ten virgins (Mt 25:1-13), the talents (Mt 25:14-30), the good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37), the rich fool (Lk 12:16-21), the lost coin (Lk 15:8-10), the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), the persistent widow (Lk 18:1-8), and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14) among others. (Gathogo 2001, 84)

From the foregoing, storytelling remains a critical missiological technique right from the African heritage to the early church, and throughout church history. It is certainly difficult to adequately communicate Christian truth, or any other truth for that matter, without the aid of concrete imagery. Equally, church history cannot be taught without imageries, pictorial talking, comparative gestures, vivid presentation, and illustrations in general; hence storytelling techniques have remained a critical partner in promoting the agenda of the Great Commission (Mt 28:17–20) throughout Christian history. When the Methodist clergy, Rev. William Edwin Sangster (1900–1960), was criticised for telling too many stories as he delivered his sermons during the Second World War, he remarked: “My people need lamp posts to light them on their way” (Stott 1982, 241).

Pre-Christian East Africa and the Great Awakening of the 18th Century

Pre-Christian East Africa

The Portuguese’s attempt to introduce Christianity in the 15th century in the East Coast of Africa and the European missionary explosion of the early 19th century found an African context where socio-religious consciousness was well communicated through storytelling and/or through oral narratives, among other oral techniques (such as symbolism, drama, humour, riddles, songs, sayings, proverbs, and figurative-symbolic language, among others) (Gathogo 2024; Mbiti 1969). Epistemologically, these stories communicated moral-ethical and religio-social issues, and were geared towards “informal” education and eventually saving the community from contemporary and future challenges (Personal communication with Milton Munene Gachau, at Kianguenyi village home, 19 March 2024). Animal and bird stories would caution against greed (as symbolised by the Hyena), cunningness and subtleness (as symbolised by the Hare fairy tales, which also symbolised hypocrisy, betrayal, and unreliability), dictatorships (as symbolised by the Lion and Eagle), and the misuse of energy and sadistic destructions of others’ fortunes (as symbolised by the Elephant) and so on. They could also encourage virtuous living and/or integrity-driven lifestyles, as in the case of a Dove, which symbolises innocence, trustworthiness, and reliability. Cat and Dog stories would be narrated to encourage dedication, care, and genuine friendship. Hence, they were largely a religio-cultural affair that gets people closer to the living, the unborn, the ancestors and God. The former three made up an African family (Kenyatta 1938, Personal communication with Milton Munene Gachau, at Kianguenyi village home, 19 March 2024).

The Great Awakening of the 18th Century

Storytelling techniques (consider oral theo-ecclesiologies, narrating the story of Jesus, his church and his disciples, use of songs and dances, use of technical devices and so on) are the key reasons behind the success of the Great Awakening and/or Protestant revival movement of the 1730s and 1840s (Brekus 2013; Caldwell 2017; Smith 2015). These Anglo-American ecclesiastical revivals relied heavily on storytelling techniques, as noted in this treatise. As Gerald McDermott (1992, 1) has noted, “The 18th-century awakening consisted of three massive revivals divided by an ocean, a sea, and thousands of miles: the ‘Great Awakening’ in the American colonies, the English ‘Evangelical Revival,’ and the revival of continental Pietism under Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf,” and there were common characteristics across the various Protestant revivals that swept Euro-American territories. These commonalities, among the major and minor revivalists of the 18th century, who largely employed oral techniques in their bid to live up to the Great Commission (Mt. 28:17–20), were preceded by corporate prayers, good narrators such as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and Charles Wesley as their leaders, and were inspired by the contents of the 16th-century reformation preaching themes, as in the case of “the just shall live by faith” (Brekus 2013; Caldwell 2017; Smith 2015). As narrators of the story of the resurrected Christ and his church, “they sought not to impart new information, but to stimulate to action. They were determined to challenge their hearers to respond” (McDermott 1992, 1). This is in tandem with African storytellers who sought to impart morals to the society, and who would use diverse techniques such as riddles, sayings, proverbs, rhetorical questions, and appealing narratives that were geared towards triggering action or driving the audience to think critically and creatively (Gachoki 2021; Mbiti 1969). By employing reverse psychology, the revivalists were trying to convince some resisting audiences to abandon their opposing sides and embrace the Christian faith. Reverse psychology is a technique, largely used in public speaking, where the narrator makes someone do or say what they want. This is done by requesting someone to do the opposite of what is requested, though deliberately expecting the person to disagree with the speaker (Gonzalez-Berrios 2022). On the flip side, children use reverse psychology to make caregivers bulge by suggesting what they do not want, rather than what they want, as in the case of “I don’t want to eat sweets and biscuits today. I just want to eat dull food” (Gathogo 2011, 28). Certainly, this is “self-anticonformity” as twisted communication goes against the wish of a person (Gathogo 2011, 29). In light of this reverse psychology, which storytellers and preachers have constantly exploited when dealing with stubborn audiences, the 18th-century revivalists would encourage their audience to love evil, destruction, the prospect of no afterlife and vices, a phenomenon that would lead their respective audiences to disagree with the proposition (McDermott 1992).

In this understanding, the Euro-American revivalists employed storytelling techniques in various dimensions, for as McDermott (1992, 1) has further noted,

Whitefield was the most effective of this new breed of preachers. If they were fervent, he was positively passionate. As Harry S. Stout says, Whitefield preached as though

there were no tomorrow. As was reported, “Sometimes he exceedingly wept, stamped loudly and passionately, and was frequently so overcome, that, for a few seconds, you would suspect he never would recover; and when he did, required some little time to compose himself.” After Whitefield preached at Northampton, Edwards’ wife, Sarah, wrote, “It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible. I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broken only by an occasional half-suppressed sob.” Edwards also wept during Whitefield’s sermon.

To demonstrate the heavy reliance on storytelling techniques (the use of oral deliveries, technical devices, and creative, appealing messages), McDermott (1992, 1) further says:

To enhance the emotional power of their preaching, evangelical ministers climbed into the pulpit with few notes. They thought that the less they relied on notes, the more easily they could respond to the Spirit’s suggestions and their audience’s needs. Edwards wrote out his sermons word for word for the first 13 years of his pulpit ministry. After the outbreak of the Great Awakening, however, he used only spare outlines for notes. Whitefield usually preached without any notes at all.

Besides the above, the 18th-century revivalists ministered to prisoners and jailers on passage vessels as they crossed Ireland. John Wesley witnessed his outdoor sermons attracting two thousand to twenty thousand people who were greatly moved by his storytelling techniques (Caldwell 2017). Certainly, this state of things encouraged him to move on and answer the call of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:17–20).

The heavy use of music, songs, and dances for dramatic effect by the revivalists marks another storytelling technique that contributed to the emotionalism of the eighteenth-century Protestant awakening that has remained a landmark in ecclesiastical history. As the revivalists rediscovered the power of songs and dance and music in general, they could no longer resist its magnetic pull in stirring religio-spiritual feelings (Caldwell 2017). They thus made “singing God’s praises” a critical methodology that was given much emphasis due to its effect, especially in Northampton, England. This led Jonathan Edwards to conclude that singing in all services had the power to arouse religious affection in the Christian worshippers. Besides music and worship dances, the revivalists also told stories about their evangelistic success in a captivating manner that led their audiences to hear about their diverse exploits and techniques in service to God and humanity. In particular, when the revivalists narrated the news of the revival in Germany and Holland, Jonathan Edwards and his Northampton church, in England, were greatly inspired and encouraged further, as they confessed (McDermott 1992). In other churches, the stories from the neighbouring countries strengthened the faith of the believers in England (Northampton) (Caldwell 2017). Likewise, believers in Cambuslang, Scotland, were positively affected by the stories regarding the success of the Great Awakening in the United States. A case in point concerns Elizabeth Jackson, a spinster, who was moved by her local priest who was narrating the “success of the

Gospel abroad; [and] was greatly affected at the thought that so many were getting good, and I was getting none” (McDermott 1992, 2).

Thus, in utilising storytelling techniques (narrations, singing, drama, literary techniques, facial expressions, body gestures, and so on) the revivalists of the 18th century in Euro-America swept across British America and Protestant Europe. The American colonies experienced a permanent imprint that informs the American religiosity right into the 21st century (Smith 2015). Breaking away from the traditional ritualistic and liturgical theologies, the Great Awakening saw the rebirth of Christianity in America, and indeed the birth of Pentecostalism in Azusa Street in 1906 can be attributed to this earlier revival that ushered in “a deep sense of spiritual conviction” and commitment to the God of Christendom, and which also gave a new standard to one’s morality (Caldwell 2017, 27). For the African Americans (former slaves), the revival was a monumental event that captured their spirituality and resonated with their presumed Indigenous spirituality that they could reminisce or learn through stories that were narrated across various generations. Their authentic religion where people worshipped in truth and spirit had come in handy (Lambert 2002). Certainly, a revivalist spirit is commonplace in African-American-dominated areas. Who knows? It could be the 18th-century revivalist fire which was ignited via storytelling techniques but cannot be extinguished, as it is historically well-rooted and fairly watered by scholarly narrations across the decades.

Sampling William Sangster and David Gitari

William Edwin Sangster (1900–1960) and Illustrations

As a Methodist preacher serving at London’s Westminster Central Hall during the Second World War (1939–1945), William Edwin Sangster addressed the worsening situations on the global map by employing storytelling techniques and several illustrations (Stott 1982). During this period, his storytelling techniques would help in pulling multitudes. On average, he would preach to over three thousand worshippers who thronged his church on a weekly basis. As the Second World War progressed, and as most churches had their memberships decreasing, he still had the largest “Sunday-evening congregation in London, filling the 2, 500-seat hall, and he opened the large basement as a bomb shelter for those in need” (Duduit 2024, 1). Besides storytelling, Sangster “combined evangelical intensity with a brilliant mind and gifted use of language” (Duduit 2024, 1).

Indeed, as one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century, Sangster’s use of storytelling techniques is not an isolated case in church history. Rather, his contemporaries included, but were not limited to John R. W. Stott (1921–2011), an Anglican cleric who is remembered for his illustrative, precise, and faithful expository sermons; Clarence Edward Macartney (1879–1957), a prominent conservative Presbyterian cleric and author who is famous for his book *Great Women in the Bible*; David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981), a Welsh Congregationist who was primarily a medical doctor—and who is famous for his statement that “preaching is logic on fire”

(Duduit 2024, 1). Other notable homilists of the 20th century in the Western world are George Campbell Morgan (1863–1945), Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969), Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), George Buttrick (1892–1980), Billy Graham (1918–2018), and James Stuart Stewart (1896–1990).

David Gitari (1937–2013) and Prophetic Sermons

In the Kenyan context, the Anglican Archbishop of Kenya (from 1997 to 2002) employed storytelling techniques to not only win disciples for Christ but to also fight postcolonial dictatorships. As early as 1975 when he preached over the national radio, the then Voice of Kenya, he used rich figures of speech to condemn neo-colonialism. As a good storyteller, he narrated the biblical episode of Cain killing his brother Abel to demonstrate how political assassinations were entering the Kenyan nation—at the time a country which was barely 12 years old since it attained its constitutional independence from the British government (Gitari 2014).

As noted by Stephen Muoki Joshua and Stephen Kapinde (2016, 82), the single-party dictatorship of the 1980s saw the then President, Daniel Moi, embarking

on a coercive centralizing process like his predecessor [Jomo Kenyatta] that entailed the curtailing of free expression in parliament and the limiting of the autonomy and independence of the judiciary.... [Coupled with this, the country experienced] political persecution as well as the criminalisation of opposition groups and restrictions placed on political gatherings were moves calculated to strengthen the *de jure* one-party state.

In this quest for a just and democratic African society, Gitari teamed up with other like-minded clerics, who used similar techniques to fight the excessiveness of the state. Thus, as Joshua and Kapinde (2016, 84–85) have noted,

In the frontline of individual Church activism were [Bishop] Henry Okullu who served as the bishop of the Maseno South Diocese of the Anglican Church; Rev. Alexander Muge, an outspoken Anglican bishop of Eldoret diocese, who was assassinated in 1990; Rev. David Gitari, the Anglican prelate of Mt. Kenya East diocese; and Rev. Timothy Njoya, a moderator in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), who was later demoted by the Church leadership due to his unrelenting criticism of the state. This “quartet” was commonly referred to by politicians, as “a thorn in the flesh” to Moi and his political ilk.

To this end, David Gitari (who served as Bishop of Mount Kenya East from 1975 to 1990, and later as Bishop of Kirinyaga from 1990 to 1997, and later as the Archbishop of Kenya, from 1997 to 2002), employed storytelling techniques (oral narratives, myths, Indigenous songs and dances, drama, proverbs, riddles, figurative and symbolic language, slogans, humour, and sayings). In a research article on “David Gitari’s Prophetic Ministry in Kenya, 1986–1991” (Gathogo 2007), Gitari’s storytelling techniques were characterised by the use of slogans and repetitive phrases, relevant oral narratives, appealing to global historical happenings with relevant messages, appealing

to ancestral resources—a phenomenon where a hymn book with ancestral melodies was released, and the use of an all-inclusive approach where he teamed up with all professionals or specialists who acted as a bulwark against state extremism (Gathogo 2007, 235–257). To strengthen the faith of his Anglican adherents who were being threatened by the noisy Pentecostal waves and the threats from the political operatives, in his local Kirinyaga County backyard, Gitari introduced a repetitive slogan, which was practically a loaded song, thus: “*Ona ni kure mbura, ona ya Micumari, Kanitha nii ndikoimma-I ...*” (Even if it rains Nails [heavily], I will never abandon my church...) (241). In such cases, the use of symbols and figurative language is clear, as raining nails refers to heavy flooding which can be translated to mean huge challenges, as in the case of church-state conflict on moral-ethical and socio-political matters. For offering a prophetic ministry, Gitari’s church was targeted by some state operatives who looked at ways and means of embarrassing him (Personal communication with Erastus Njeru Muriuki, at Thumaita village home, 18 March 2024). In April 1989, Gitari was attacked by armed politically instigated thugs, whose killing bid was thwarted when he climbed into the front of his storey building and locked its entrance door. As he moved up, he was at a vantage point to call for neighbours’ help, which he readily received as the political thugs left the scene in a hurry (Gitari 2014). Gitari (2002, 1) explained this episode thus: “They cut into the grills and I had to escape through the roof. And from there I called the neighbours and these people ran away” (2002, 1). Nevertheless, he continued with his prophetic ministry after this episode, as he was always fond of quoting 1 Tim 1:7, which says: “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and self-discipline.” He lived by these words in their most literal form possible.

As a participant observer, the researcher noted that Gitari would lead the congregants to respond to his slogans and repetitive coinages in a hearty way that resonated well with the ever-enthusiastic audiences, which gives the impression that he was a great public educator and storyteller of no mean repute. These storytelling techniques were largely expressed through coded language which could easily reach the targeted audiences (Personal communication with Erastus Njagi Muriuki, at Thumaita village home, 18 March 2024). It certainly strengthened their faith and indeed ushered in some liveliness in an otherwise cool Anglican faith, which is arguably too liturgical and seemingly rigid. Such storytelling techniques are commonplace in postcolonial Kenya. It informs the *modus operandi* in post-missionary ecclesiology in the Kenyan context.

Gitari’s counterpart, Bishop Henry Okullu, of the then Anglican Diocese of Maseno South, had used storytelling techniques in May 1990 to educate the masses on the need for a constitutional amendment that was meant to open up democratic space via a multiparty political system. By then, the country was a *de jure* one-party state, under the Kenya African National Union (KANU) as the only legalised political party. The Bishop had also expressed his concerns about the number of strikes in public institutions and lamented the police brutality that emerged as they “dealt” with agitators/demonstrators. Okullu explained that the Kenya of the 1980s and early 1990s was no different from the

brutal apartheid regime that generally stifled people's rights and peaceful demonstrations in particular. Considering that the Kenyan Government "previously called for the democratisation of South Africa and the removal of the Apartheid policies that had marginalized the majority of South Africans" (Githiga 2023, 162), Okullu's orality hurt the governing system deeply. By then (the 1970s, 1980s, and early part of 1990s), South Africa was largely seen as the skunk of the world, where unapologetic police brutality against the black populace was commonplace. This is evidenced by the fact that the international media platforms were keenly chronicling these injustices and sharing them publicly for global consumption. The skunk is the notorious producer of sulphur-smelling spray from its anal scent that comes out whenever it feels threatened by its assumed adversaries. This rotten-egg scent takes weeks to clear and can go beyond half a mile, with a stench that results in eye-stinging, nausea, and partial blindness; hence, it is a defensive gesture that hurts beyond the normal way of scaring its presumed enemies. For people who took Kenyan passports to travel abroad, the travel document allowed the recipients to move across world countries "but not to the foul-smelling skunk of the world, in the name of apartheid South Africa of 1970s and 80s" (Personal communication with Milton Munene Gachau, at Kianguenyi village home, 19 March 2024).

Okullu's comparison of Kenya in 1990 with South Africa was certainly a hard pill for Kenyan officials to gulp. It hurt absolutely, as some government functionaries attempted to "silence" some "storytelling clerics" such as the Anglican Bishop Alexander Muge of Eldoret (who died after a suspicious lorry crush near Kipkaren, in the present-day Uasin Gishu County, on 14 August 1990, at the age of 44) as well as Bishop Gitari, whose home was attacked by political thugs on 21 April 1989, and Bishop Okullu, who was threatened of dire consequences by the government operatives, though the national reaction after Muge's "car accident" could have scared the schemer's against the latter (Personal communication, with Milton Munene Gachau, at Kianguenyi village home, 18 March 2024).

Through oral techniques (read storytelling), Gitari (2002) admitted that the quartet (Rev. Dr Timothy Njoya, Bishops Gitari, Okullu, and Muge) played a critical role in Kenya's democratic revolution of 1980s and 1990s, though he began his quest for a just and democratic society in 1975 after the assassination of the socialist and populist member of parliament for the then Nyandarwa North (Hon. J. M. Kariuki) was brutally murdered on 2 March 1975, by people who were believed to be government operatives. Gitari (2002, 1) thus says, "We played a part in multiparty, in making Kenya multi-party, though I think the [person] who was really on the forefront of that was Timothy Njoya, who preached a sermon in favour of multi-party on 1st of January 1990. And then he was followed by Bishop Okullu. I think I was a latecomer on that exercise" (Gitari 2002, 1). Gitari went on to say,

Back in 1975 I preached a sermon of condemnation of the government for the assassination of J. M. Kariuki by giving ... a radio sermon, five minutes, just before the

news in the morning. They were called “Lift up Your Hearts.” And I challenged the government, mainly on the issue of the sanctity of human life. Here was a man who was quite innocent but his life was taken away by people who were very close to [the then President Jomo] Kenyatta. And nobody has ever been arrested for the murder of J. M. even [though] Parliament had appointed a ... commission and gave a report with names of people who might have killed him. I preached after the [assassination] of [the then Foreign Affairs Minister Robert] Ouko [13 February 1990]. (Gitari 2002, 1)

Given this, the use of oral discourses (storytelling in particular) in both the 20th and the 21st centuries cannot be gainsaid as key achievements such as constitutional reviews and democratisations, ecclesiastical growth, educational agenda, and general social growth have benefited from it across historical times. Undoubtedly, Gitari’s, Muge’s, Okullu’s, and Njoya’s use of oral discourses and/or storytelling techniques has ably demonstrated this. Similarly, the histories of William Edwin Sangster, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Irish bards, and the 18th-century Protestant revivalists—George Whitefield (1714–1770), Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), John Wesley (1703–1791), and Charles Wesley (1707–1788) among others—and indeed the African Indigenous society, have demonstrated the place of storytelling techniques in social-ecclesial affairs of the people.

Conclusion

The article began, in its introduction, by drawing the scope of storytelling techniques as a global phenomenon, though with a bias towards Africa. It then identified the attributes of a storyteller, and the efficacy of storytelling techniques, addressed some sampled techniques, and surveyed ecclesial versus Indigenous ways. It also surveyed pre-Christian East Africa and the Enlightenment and Great Awakening of 18th-century Europe in its bid to strengthen its hypothesis that storytelling has a historical basis in the history of Christianity and its efficacy is evidentially visible. In its last section, it sampled the British cleric, Revd. William Sangster, and Archbishop David Gitari, whose dalliance with storytelling techniques has vital lessons for 21st-century Africa and the global society. With Africa’s precolonial and postcolonial histories remaining largely oral, despite being in the age of science and technology, the need to convert them to written oral histories remains a prudent idea. This will help take Africa beyond oral ecclesiastical histories and indeed enrich the entire world of academia with authentic problem-solving techniques.

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