

Storytellers paint Uganda's pyramid of ancient wisdom

By AR Correspondent / Thursday, May 17 2012 at 09:56

Tweet

0

Share

0

ShareThis

New

Print

Font size: A+ | Reset | A-



Some of the illustrations used to animate the stories. Photo | CORRESPONDENT

It is rare for one to come across a book that appeals to every reader: young and old; ancient and modern; literate and barely literate. But such a book—in print, audio and audiovisual formats—was recently launched in Kampala, Uganda.

Co-edited by Dominica Dipio of Uganda's Makerere University and Stuart Sillars of Norway's University of Bergen, the 276-page *Traditional Wisdom: Folktales from Uganda* has been praised by critics as a 'definitive collection of Ugandan folktales from diverse cultures', a 'gem for enthusiasts of cultural studies, scholars of orature and folklore, and lovers of stories' and as a 'tome that takes the reader galloping through a millennium of folk-telling on a written chariot of dramatic script'.

This book is the result of research carried out on the folklores of the people of Uganda that stated in 2007. The main objective of the project, writes lead researcher and co-editor Dipio, an associate professor of literature, 'was to document and disseminate the richly imaginative cultural forms of Ugandan people, using a multi-media approach'. Dr Dipio adds that 'the specific focus on folktales was occasioned by its ability to embed the values of a people like no other genre of folklore can. Furthermore, stories have the universal quality of border-crossing and uniting people of diverse backgrounds as they focus on what is essentially human'.

Dr Dipio, who has written and co-edited several publications in her wide ranging research areas of literature, film, media, religion and cultural studies, says the researchers and their assistants collected more than 100 tales from various ethnic groups in Uganda in the local languages in order to publish a bi-lingual collection.

Passionate engagement

"This, however, was dropped for the practical reasons of the voluminous size of such a publication, and for the fact that readers may be interested in only one or two languages at most. This decision comes with a cost: the loss of “flavour” in the translated stories. The editors have, however, tried not to “drain” the tales of their oral features in course of translation,” writes Dipio in her preface to *Traditional Wisdom: Folktales from Uganda*. She aptly notes that "There are expressions in the local languages that do not have equivalents in the English translation".

The book is divided into five sections complete with an endorsement and index of narrators and narratives. The narratives, too, are arranged in five sections based on the various themes the folktales address. They include *Tales of Friendship and Treachery*, *Tales of Origin*, *Tales of Family Relationships*, *Tales of Social and Political Relationships*, and *Tales of Monsters and Ogres*.

The themes in the stories could ring a bell on contemporary issues. There are stories touching on themes such as treachery, greed, betrayal and the price one pays for each of these almost universal vice. Some stories explain how and why things are the way they are today. For instance, the origin of beer, water masses, forests, and mountains is explained.

The importance of patience, wisdom, diligence, discipline, and hard work is also stressed in some stories. The tension between the younger and the older generations in the management of public affairs is addressed just as the vanity of outward appearance that is only skin-deep is exposed for what it is.

Each story is summarised with an appealing realistic illustration drawn by Richard Kato that the designer, George Kangara Karanja, has used well on the pages and the cover of the book.

Austin Bukenya, a well known scholar of folklore, describes the book as 'the latest fruit from Makerere's long and passionate engagement with oral art.'

Global outlook

Although *Traditional Wisdom: Folktales from Uganda* focuses on the folktale, Bukenya writes in his endorsement of the book that 'the collection gives us valuable insights into other forms of orature, since there is always an 'interfluence' among its various genres. The proverb blossoms into narrative, just as easily as it sums up the story, and the whole performance is animated with song and drama'.

While observing that 'the constraints of print may obscure some of the liveliness of these tales', Bukenya notes that the decision of the editors to 'work directly from performed narrative still reflects an impressive level of vivacity in the text'. To him, the book 'is an irresistibly enjoyable read'. He commends editors Dipio and Sillars for emphasising what he refers to as 'the wisdom aspects of the folktale: the philosophy, the psychology, the moral, social and spiritual values of the narratives'.

The 'global' outlook of this work, Bukenya writes, is reflected not only in its national coverage of the folktale, as contrasted with the mono-ethnic presentations common in East Africa, but also in the cooperative collection and editorial collaboration of Ugandan and Norwegian scholars from Makerere and Bergen universities.

Aaron Mushengyezi, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Literature at Makerere University, says this book replaces the old griots 'who chronicled both the official and popular stories of their times so that traditional wisdom is passed on. Where the script takes away from the oral nature of these tales, the audio and visual formats return the oral quality that is lost in translation from local languages to English'. He concludes that "...this collection of traditional wisdom is a delightful must-read for a wide range of audiences, for good stories appeal to all'.

Also praising the book is Tom Odhiambo, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi. Dr Odhiambo says that the stories 'pay homage to the fact that our humanity thrives in the telling of stories; stories that keep us together, keep us busy, teach us about who we are, what we can become, and how to relate better to the environment around us."

James Ogoola, the Principal Judge of Uganda, describes *Traditional Wisdom: Folktales from Uganda* as a book for every reader: young and old; ancient and modern; literate and barely literate that ushers the reader into "the very heart and soul of a thousand years of an African people".

Skin deep

Saying "folktales of Africa were at once simple to grasp, but equally subtle – pregnant with complex layer upon layer of underlying mystery and meaning, hidden underneath the seemingly simple surface", Ogoola further states that the "simplicity of the stories is only skin deep. Underneath lies deep complexity. The format of animal animation tells a revealing tale of human conduct, a people's philosophy and psychology, as well as their ethics and metaphysics".

-The book is on sale in Kenya and Uganda. Inquiries about it can be sent to: director@commatterskenya.com..

Sorry, the browser you are using is not currently supported. To use the comments, Disqus recommends the following browsers:

- [Firefox](#)
- [Chrome](#)
- [Internet Explorer 9](#)
- [Safari](#)

Doha talks

SPEAK OUT

Read Story: [Doha talks](#)