

Malaysian eStories: the Passing of Oral Traditions

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Abstract

With new media and mediums, the art of oral traditions such as storytelling has evolved. Children and youngsters today learn stories from visual media such as the television, the Internet and more current, the Smartphone and tablet. How does a given cultural or traditional story retain its substance? Does a change in medium or media influence the manner in which stories of oral traditions are understood? This paper explores the manner in which Malaysian children and youngsters today, learn and understand stories of the past. It attempts to identify the manner in which youngsters understand, accept and acknowledge these stories. It also looks at how children too in turn, pass stories on, as studies such as that by Lopamudra Maitra (2008) claim, “Folk tales and tales from oral tradition are an important way of communicating with children. Acting especially as repositories of moral and social lessons and religious instructions discovered by grandparents and parents through time, these traditions have always been an important part of growing up.” This is a research that attempts to identify the manner in which traditional and cultural stories continue to be told in the present, and into the future.

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Introduction

Like most cultures, oral traditions are the most basic forms of knowledge transference known to man. From stories told around campfires, to those in homes, to writings on cave walls, verbal or oral tales are told of experiences that are shared with a larger inner social group, the family. Oral traditions are considered as the manner in which stories of the past are told as legacies for the future. While there is an abundance of literature on the transformation of traditions gathered from various perspectives, one definition of oral traditions as identified by Jan Knappert (1998) declares it as 'unwritten literature'. Unwritten literature within these terms refers to the many cases in which story traditions only became literature after they were orally composed and told. With oral traditions, memory functions as a key role in the continuation, or passing down, of these stories especially among small clusters of society as stories that continue to be told orally are remembered vividly by the storytelling of it all. On that note, like any other culture from around the world, Malaysia too is no stranger to the changes taking place within society, changes that influence generations to come. Tales of old was once passed down from one generation to the next via oral stories. The power of the voice and the imagination offered means of ensuring that tales were mentally grasped, captured, retained and built within the minds of its listeners. The trend today, however, is much the opposite. Visual media and visual mediums influence youngsters as it feeds, on probably a lesser note, their lack of imagination. It is this visual culture that media companies in efforts to keep up with the frenzy, conjure short films, feature films, web clips, web toons, animation, and the works, to cater for this new evolution into the mode of storytelling. But do oral traditions continue into these new forms? If so, how are these stories told, passed on, or shared? Or are these stories of old totally overlooked?

The 'passing' on of these stories of oral traditions is important and cannot be taken lightly, especially when there are journals dedicated to the evolving discussion and debate of oral traditions (such as <http://journal.oraltradition.org>). They function as a means of documenting a society's cultural history as stories of life and practices are told. Such is the situation as explained by Mohd Taib Osman (1989) in *Malay Folk Beliefs*, in which,

Ironically, folk beliefs are in themselves a documentation of that history for as we look at the existing folk beliefs today, or at least as they are faithfully and ethnographically recorded, they are easily recognized as a conglomeration of disparate elements, and sometimes seemingly incongruently mixed and related to one another.

The stories themselves thus provide the means of not only historical record, but depict the cultural representation of a given nation. It identifies the nuances of a societies beliefs, fears, ideologies, and philosophies that form the foundation of a given community. While the idea of communal sharing of stories differs among cultures, its role is to ensure that the listener understands the fundamental lessons that can be found in them.

The notion of 'passing' within the context of this paper takes on a connotative approach. The literal passing, from one person to another, is the physical action of sharing as tales are told. Oral traditions being 'overlooked' or 'bypassed' on the other hand is greatly influenced by the changing mode or medium in which stories today are told. The art of telling stories begin at home in which parents tell their children tales of their own personal life. As children grow older, go to school and gain experience, they are introduced to other stories of life via books and reading materials in which, one commonly told Malaysian story is the tale of the Sang Kancil and his adventures. While the true origins of the Sang Kancil tales are unclear, it has been passed down from one generation to another differing only in its form. The first known, if not documented tale of the mouse deer is linked to the historical beginnings when the nation was first discovered and formed. (King) Parameswara on resting against a tree (named Melaka) witnessed how a white mouse deer kicked one of his hunting dogs into the river. Upon seeing the courageous act of the mouse deer, the King decided to set up the state of Melaka on that very spot. As oral traditions go, the tales of the sang kancil has no identified or recognized author, true origin, or time when it was created, but has been assimilated into the knowledge of a given social culture. The Sang Kancil tales refer to the adventures of a mouse deer as he endures the experiences of living in a harsh and demanding jungle. It ranges from ideas of survival, friendship, wittiness, and bravery, as a whole, positive and good values.



Image1/Link1: *Hikayat Sang Kancil dan Monyet* (1984), was produced by Filem Negara Malaysia for local television



Image2/Link2: *Hikayat Sang Kancil dan Buaya* (1985), produced by Filem Negara Malaysia for local television

The transference and change of this form of oral traditions thus takes ground in that modern/mobile technology has changed the manner in which these tales are told. The younger, more visually oriented generation Y and Z, come to contact with these tales through a whole different medium. It is on that note that this paper attempts to identify the manner in which these tales are passed on, as well as acknowledge the

manner in which GenY and GenZ comprehend, absorb and retain these stories. As Lopmudra Maitra (2008) states, folktales function as ‘repositories of moral and social lessons and religious instructions’. It needs to be stated that this paper does not intend to address the new form of oral traditions as methods of teaching and learning, but more as a process of storytelling in which the narrative is crucial towards the continuation of social cultural values and traditions.

Malay(sian) Oral Traditions

Historically, as identified by prominent Malay literary scholars such as Mohd Taib Osman and Muhammad Haji Salleh, the original Malay word-art was in the form of a free composition in the spoken language. This free composition came in the form of a *pantun* (a four-line stanza poem) that represented both love-song and living expressions of a popular philosophy of life. It was from this starting point that folklore and popular beliefs then became stories. But as Knappert (1998) explains, a tale is not yet a literary composition as,

A long, sustained effort is needed before a ballad becomes an epic, before a legend becomes a romance, before the fable becomes a book of animal-wisdom. A long period of festation is required for a given cultural community, so that this evolution can take place; it usually goes hand in hand with the transition from a truly oral art to a written literature. It is essential though, that the spoken language continues to fertilize the literary language.

Knappert’s perspective is further iterated ten years by national laureate, Muhammad Haji Salleh in *The Poetics of Malay Literature*. Muhammad Haji Salleh (2008) believes that literature is spread over a vast area of the artistic field. He discusses that all works in the Malay language, including those in the various dialects, provide “an extraordinary variety of forms and genres, styles and idiosyncrasies, where the traditions of Malay language and literature are combined and mixed into the customs and special local *adats* and ways.” These varied forms of oral traditions reflect the fundamental cultural practice of the Malay community as ‘the roots of modern Malay literature are buried deep in the traditional’ as the nineteenth century marked events of traumatic changes within the region (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2008). The nineteenth century was a period when the world of Malay literature changed, “from being a shared social experience of listening to a text spoken or read within a community, to a more private individual one, taking place within one’s own room and privacy – in all ways that this new approach entailed.”

Malay(sian) tales were believed to be developed by individuals to form a collective experience suited to their environments, situations, experiences and given tasks. The notion of ‘significant speech’ as defined by Havelock (1982) was the range in which experience preserved in books and writings of all kinds were where the ethos and technology of culture was preserved. Havelock elaborates by claiming that, it is through ‘a significant speech that a society may help an important meaning or a good mind be developed.’ It is this approach of perceiving literature that invariably categorizes it as a ‘collective treasury of a people’s knowledge, collated from its great span and range of experience.’

Only an accomplished tongue may catch the soul, content and character of a people if we wish to continue to note and express all that we live through, physically, spiritually or intellectually. We must have the most current instrument of thought and expression. Besides that the language that may catch all these aspects is a significant language. (Havelock, 1982)

While stories form the fundamental layer of a society's past and present, it is through literature that it is documented. Literature in the Malay language is considered a composition of melodious but suitable sounds to sketch or describe a situation, a person or idea. In its best form it is considered a language that is in song that supports a meaning. In which case, oral stories are considered examples of their styles where language is composed for the ear. The gathering of local storytellers was developed at an early stage. Through Malay oral traditions and literature, animal stories such as the tales of the Sang Kancil (a mouse deer) were formed. The stories were short and dramatized by succinct dialogues are woven with 'messages' and moralistic significance of the story. To a given extent, even oral stories of the past quite significantly fall into the modern form of the three-act structure in which the beginning, middle and end of the story are significantly interjected with twist and plot turns.

In exploring literature of the region with emphasis on local folklore, James Danandjaja (1984) *Folklor Indonesia* describes folklore as being part of a collective culture. Based on Danandjaja's referencing of Jan Harold Brunvand, it is suggested that folklore is 'disseminated and inherited over the generations in collective societies of all kinds, in a traditional manner in different versions, be it oral or in patterns accompanied by gestures of mnemonic devices.' Due to the oral nature of the folklore that is anonymous, it emerges in different versions and forms. However, they are able to serve a social function of instructing and educating the young and are able to provide entertainment when needed. In turn, these shared stories are of collective ownership of the society it belongs to. The conclusion that can be made is that Malay folk stories and literature have a collective ownership that has its own patterns and forms. As a result, it is believed that Malay literature has become a social institution. It has evolved in being a process in which the storyteller goes from village to village to tell stories to villagers gathered on verandahs, balconies and open spaces. The tales that are told are considered 'main pillars of literature as an instrument of entertainment, instruction, customs, medicine and native laws, that are necessary foundation of the society'. However, no literary community is static.

Trending Oral Traditions: a New Wave of Storytelling, the eStories

In efforts to pass on these oral traditions, stories are told in various forms. While many started through print media, it was not long before visual mediums such as the television became a household name. Children were introduced to narratives of various themes as visual mediums took over the twentieth century. However, the digital age of cyberspace has forced the telling of these stories to change. The fast paced and mobile lifestyle demands a change of not only pace but ease of accessibility to immense amount of information at any given time. When once sources

were from books, books today are now legible digital texts. Based on the latest survey by Media News Trends in June 2013 (<http://www.newmediatrendwatch.com/markets-by-country/11-long-haul/55-malaysia>), there is an estimated 17 million internet users in Malaysia. This number represents 60.7% of the total population of 27 million people. Out of that, 11 million are between the ages of 15 and older, which as the survey discovered accessed the internet from home or work.

The first story a child is introduced to is at home in a closed and controlled environment. Tales told are of daily affairs and events, and shared with the family (the public). As children's social structures expand, their exposure, involvement and experience with the environment begins to evolve. They meet and make friends in which stories are exchanged. The older the children become the more stories they hear as well as create. It is the type of stories that are passed on or told if not retold that differs. The environment at this point of time is no longer isolated to the small family and social nucleus but expands to include a wider public as well as mediums of information transference that is available to the public at that point in time. Hence the evolution of oral traditions begins to make its journey. The stories of old are represented in the form of print, to read. In which from print it reforms itself to visual and audio mediums such as the television and radio. However, it is in this new age of mobile information that the amount of stories that circulates and is circulated becomes infinite.

Early sampling of how children comprehend stories is that no matter the circumstance, stories all begin as oral tales. It is in the creation of the imagination of the children's minds that they begin to formulate their own 'limited' mental images to associate with the stories they hear. As children listen to more stories and experience life, they begin to formulate their own stories based on their surroundings and the influences within that surrounding. While oral tradition would be a dominant fact of everyday life, children's surroundings such as the television, radio, digital mediums such as the smart phone and tablets, recreate, reformulate and re-form their imagination with a somewhat structured, if not instructed framework. The types of stories that children are introduced to are based on local folktales such as the Sang Kancil stories, the adventures of Hang Tuah and his friends and Pak Pandir tales of moral values.

The current local trend of passing on these stories as an eStory can be seen on YouTube. From the local producers of the successfully Upin and Ipin animated television series, Les'Copaque produced the animated series of local folklores such as the Sang Kancil stories under the program *Pada Zaman Dahulu* (or 'Once Upon a Time'). A clear demarcation of this new form of story telling is with the opening theme song and credits that declares, *hikayat lama berwajah baru* "old tales with a new image."



Image3/Link3: “Sang Kancil dan Perigi Buta,” *Pada Zaman Dahulu* (TV Series),
published online 21 September 2012 (248,500 views)



Image4/Link4: “Sang Kancil dan Gergasi,” *Pada Zaman Dahulu* (TV Series),
published online 21 September 2012 (622,262 views)

The stories told within the context of the animated series attract the attention of young children, while retaining the original context of storytelling in the stories that it tells. For example, the programme usually begins within the context of the modern. Children are introduced and are seen as being occupied by modern gadgets and wasting the time away with insignificant activities. The programme sets the pace by offering a transition, in which the children are faced with various predicaments. Their grandfather however, appears on hand to offer guidance and advise, in which he sets his examples through the animal folktales that he tells. All this occurs visual through animation whereby children have immediate access to the content/programme not only via the television but also through the internet as the programme becomes virtual

Conclusion

On that note, it can be said that the oral traditions of Malay folk tales have evolved into a new form of storytelling and access. The virtual nature of the tales themselves allows for the formation of the eStory. The ease in which children today have on hand access to these stories reduces that gap with regards to time, or when they hear of are told these stories. Their experiences are heightened within a short period of time. Thus, it can be suggested that as long as society continues to communicate among themselves, oral traditions will not die. It will only evolve from oral form to that of various mediums that are either technology driven, or one that is made accessible to the public. No matter what form stories take such as that of the eStory, they are still stories told from one generation to another. Children listen, watch and comprehend these stories before the stories are then passed down first through oral traditions and later evolve through various new mediums. There is no need for society to keep up with technology as everyone tells a tale everyday of his or her life. Technology only functions as a mode of repackaging these stories into a form that is shared with the

wider audience or public. While trends of these oral traditions take on new forms, the stories themselves continue to be passed on. Children and teenagers continue to have access and exposure to traditional stories and with time these stories too will be passed on. As long as stories are a part of our daily lives, it is something that not easily fades.

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