

Storytelling: A Vehicle for Cultural Preservation

By: Chelsea Stephenson

Storytelling is an important cultural thread that makes up the colourful fabric of Jamaican society. Louise Bennett Coverley, Ranny Williams, Charles Hyatt, Dr. Amina Blackwood Meeks, and many others, have played an integral role in promoting and protecting this aspect of Jamaica's heritage.



Louise Bennett Coverley

Jamaican folktales are not just for entertainment; they showcase our language as well as provide a vehicle to impart important lessons. Whenever pen and paper are absent, storytelling has been used as a tool to pass down information from one generation to the next. It is the social and cultural activity of sharing stories, sometimes accompanied by drama and embellishments, which enrich the listeners' entertainment.

Every culture has its own stories, riddles or narratives which are shared as a means of education, cultural preservation, teaching proverbial lessons, and instilling moral values. In any specific culture, stories can have its own purpose, depending on the occasion; audience; performer; and even current events. As one of the world's oldest art forms, storytelling is not just the act of telling a story which features a particular character, but can also include

individuals having conversations about the happenings in their daily lives. Today, storytelling has cemented itself as an infallible part of Jamaica's intangible cultural heritage.



Ranny Williams

West African Influence

Much of Jamaica's storytelling heritage comes from our West African ancestors. Stories and storytelling are a major aspect of culture and, as a large proportion of Jamaica's population is descended from West Africa, it is no surprise that we have retained this feature as part of our culture as well. In West Africa, storytelling is not just reserved as a form of entertainment, but is also used as a tool to preserve the history of the people. In West African societies, there are storytellers and oral historians, called 'griots', who hold the social memory of the community. They are also keepers of facts and the important events of the time. The profession is passed down from one family member to another and, from an early age, children of griots begin their own training to become griots. Griots have impressive memories and are historians, genealogists, musicians, advisors to nobility, storytellers, advocates, messengers, and ambassadors. Their importance to West African societies is immeasurable.

Anancy Stories

In Jamaica, Anancy stories are a popular example of tales that entertain, while having a moral connotation at the end of the tale. Originating in West Africa, Anancy (Ananse or Anansi) is a very prominent character in many West African epics and is featured heavily along with other animal tricksters. A wily spider, Anancy is often featured with a cast of other animals. Anancy

stories are used to teach different lessons and, for every situation, there is an Anancy story. For example, in the story of Anancy and Turtle, Anancy tried to outsmart Turtle because he did not want to share his meal and ended up being outsmarted himself.

Anancy stories were brought to Jamaica and other parts of the New World by the enslaved members of the Ashanti tribe. Books were not the basis of traditional West African life, particularly before the transatlantic slave trade and the subsequent colonization of countries by the Europeans. In indigenous societies, all forms of communication, including education, was done orally. Through the oral tradition, the indigenous population learned history, their role in society, speaking skills, as well as the traditional myths and legends of the people. With stories passed on from generation to generation, the African identity has been preserved to be enjoyed by future generations, despite the slave masters' attempts to destroy it.

National Storytelling Day

In 2014, Governor-General Sir Patrick Allen proclaimed November 20 as National Storytelling Day. This yearly recognition of the storytelling tradition is a way to safeguard this aspect of Jamaica's cultural heritage, especially among youths, as well as to promote positive values.

The Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) plays a key role in the safeguarding and retention of storytelling, especially among the youth, through their Festival of Arts Speech Competitions. Students perform at these competitions and are judged on their elocution, execution of Standard English or patois prose, recitation of poems, and storytelling skills, etc. Many of Jamaica's most recognizable actors, broadcasters, orators, and politicians received exposure through the JCDC's speech competitions.

The African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica/Jamaica Memory Bank (ACIJ/JMB) also champions the retention of aspects of Jamaica's intangible cultural heritage, including storytelling. The interviews conducted by the Jamaica Memory Bank paint a picture of Jamaican society and are largely based on storytelling. Individuals from many walks of life are interviewed and the

information they provide is invaluable and enlightening on past events and traditional practices.

Whether it is an Anancy story, a poem by Louise Bennett Coverley, an anecdote or a tale from everyday life, storytelling in its various forms is an important aspect of Jamaica's cultural identity.

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