

The African Oral Tradition Paradigm of Storytelling as a Methodological Framework: Employment Experiences for African communities in New Zealand

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to argue that the African oral traditional paradigm of storytelling is an effective and appropriate methodology to use in the investigation of employment-related experiences and challenges of New Zealand-based African communities and the impact of these experiences on their well-being. Through the utilisation of African oral storytelling, as a methodological framework, this paper attempts to critically examine the meanings, feelings and experiences of African communities in New Zealand with regards to employment experiences and challenges.

Introduction

Although this qualitative research is about the employment experiences and challenges faced by Africans in New Zealand, the key focus of this paper is to argue that the African oral traditional paradigm of storytelling is an effective and suitable social research methodology, especially for this topic which deals with Africans as participants.

The article attempts to discuss, amongst others, the following issues, regarding the African oral traditional paradigm of storytelling: what is African storytelling?, the uniqueness of African storytelling, African storytelling as a communal participatory experience, style and structure of African storytelling, the power of African stories, moral lessons behind African stories, the pedagogical significance of African storytelling, the utilisation of cultural proverbs and parables in African storytelling, African traditional knowledge, cosmologies and epistemologies in African storytelling and lastly the indigenous paradigms and the de-colonisation of African social research methods and methodologies.

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In many parts of Africa, after dinner, upon the sound of a tantalising drum, villagers would congregate around a central fire and settle down to hear and listen to stories (Achebe 1958). The storytellers told many interesting and captivating stories. Storytelling has been a ritual for the people of Africa in the evening after a hard day's work.

The psychological intent of exposing the children to storytelling justifies the reason for telling folktales in Africa (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1964). The calm nights and sitting around the fire set the tone for storytelling. The attention and enthusiastic response of the audience made the stories interesting and captivating (Vambe. 2001). The folktales did not follow any sequential order. The stories are told subjectively once the theme of the story is decided. The narration of the stories are accompanied with singing, drumming, percussion instruments, clapping, and dancing (Achebe 1958). The proverbial songs are utilized to highlight the expression of the characters (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982).

These stories were about the many gods and goddesses worshiped by their ancestors and some were about their heroes and heroines; leaders and kings who fought and won great wars and battles (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1964). There was no written language. Stories kept their history alive (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982).

In February 2012, Sam Yada Cannarozzi, one of the internationally renowned storytellers, said "...storytelling is an intimate and universal art form that is over 50,000 years old!" (Sheppard 2009).

Background

What is Storytelling?

Storytelling is a method of recording and expressing feelings, attitudes, and responses of one's lived experiences and environment (Gbadegesin, 1984). The function of storytelling has been identified as mediating and transmitting of knowledge and information across generations, conveying information to the younger generations about the culture, worldviews, morals and expectations, norms and values (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Asante 1987, Kouyate 1989, Alidou 2002, Chinyowa 2004).

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), storytelling is retelling a tale or narrative to one or more listeners through voice and gestures. It is not the same as reading a story aloud or reciting a piece from memory. The storyteller creates and generates a series of mental metaphors and images associated with words. This means storytelling can be packaged in forms such as songs, music, dances, plays, dramas and poetry (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Utley 2008). Stories may be sung, along with musical accompaniment on a certain instrument.

Every human culture in the world seems to create stories as a way of making sense of the world (Achebe 1958, Vambe. 2001). Storytelling traditions vary all over the world, yet have

many things in common, such as oral narration, moral teachings, use of gestures and repetition.

What is African Storytelling?

Traditionally, African people are rooted in oral cultures and traditions and as a result they have esteemed good stories and vibrant storytellers (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Vambe. 2001, Chinyowa 2004, Vambe 2004). Ancient writing traditions do exist on the African continent, but most Africans today, as in the past, are primarily oral peoples and their art forms and stories are oral rather than in written form (Achebe 1958, Chinyowa 2001). Since olden times, storytelling within the African culture has been a way of passing on traditions, codes, values of acceptable behaviour, as well as upholding and preserving good social order. Before writing and reading was developed in ancient Africa, Africans used storytelling as the most form of preserving their history, traditional culture and ritual ceremonies (Chavunduka 1994, Vambe. 2001). The tradition of African storytelling is one of the oldest in African culture, across the continent (Vambe. 2001).

African Concept of Ubuntu

Traditional oral stories of African people have been woven out of the substance of human experience, struggles with the land and the elements, movement and migrations, wars between kingdoms, conflicts over pastures and waterholes, wrestling with the mysteries of existence, and life or death (Achebe 1958, Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982). African stories reflect relations among humans, man and woman, and humans and the animal world. This is shrined in the African concept of "Ubuntu" (Mandela 1994). Ubuntu means "I am what I am because of you". The whole concept is centred on people or humanity (Mandela 1994, Carson 1998). These stories offer explanations of natural phenomena, teach morality, provide African people with a sense of identity, and are entertaining as well as instructive. The animal trickster stories are the favourite among the folktales because they include an animal trickster with human habits, beliefs, and weaknesses. These stories instil moral values in the people of the tribe or community (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Mandela 2002).

The Uniqueness of African Storytelling

The uniqueness of African storytelling is enshrined in its distinctive ability to provide entertainment, to satisfy the curiosities of the African people, and to teach and impart important moral lessons about everyday life (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Utley 2008). Repetition of the language, rhythm and gesture are important characteristics of African oral storytelling (Matateyou 1997). Storytellers repeat words, phrases, gestures and verses or stanzas. The utilisation of repetition techniques makes it easy to understand and recall the stories from memory. When the audience is familiar with the stories, they actively participate as they learn important aspects of their culture (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Utley 2008).

Storytelling in Africa has been demonstrated in many diverse manners and was used to serve many different purposes (Soyinka 1978, Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1998, Mandela 2002, Utley 2008). Masembe (2015) states that storytelling was central to her childhood in Uganda, where

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elementary school students are required to tell stories to their classes as part of the curriculum.

Characteristics of African Storytelling

African storytelling: A Communal Participatory Experience

Oral African storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience and phenomena (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986). It is a shared communal event where people congregate together, listening, and participating in accounts and stories of past deeds, beliefs, wisdom, counsel, morals, taboos, and myths (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Utley 2008). In most cases, African storytelling is set-up in an environment where the storyteller and the audience interact and both parties have rights and obligations (Soyinka 1978, Berry 1991, Vambe. 2001). This can be equated to the present-day western focus group set-up. Everyone in most traditional African societies participates in formal and informal storytelling as interactive oral performance. Such participation is an essential part of traditional African communal life, and basic training in a particular culture's oral arts and skills is an essential part of children's traditional indigenous education on their way to initiation into full humanness (Achebe 1958, Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1965, Sheppard 2009). In many of these African cultures, most accomplished storytellers are respected community members who have mastered many complex verbal uses of proverbs and parables, musical, and memory skills after years of communal-traditional training (Achebe 1958, Mungoshi 1975, Chavunduka 1988, Chinyowa 2000, Vambe. 2001).

The Style and Structure of African Storytelling

Within the African setting, most stories are divided into three many parts namely: the introduction, the body section and the conclusion (Matateyou 1997, Vambe 2004). After engaging the participation of the audience, the storyteller sets the scene by introducing the characters and defining the conflict using all sorts of techniques and gestures. For example in Zimbabwe, the audience performs a real dramatic play by joining the storyteller in signing, dancing and rhythmically shouting, in response (Vambe. 2001, Chinyowa 2004). The storyteller utilises a language that is vibrant and full of images and symbols. The storyteller imitates many characters in the story. At the conclusion, the closure of the story emphasises a moral or final statement that was initially indicated in both the introduction and the body section (Chinyowa 2004). The structure of the story illustrates its importance and significance (Chinyowa 2004, Vambe 2004).

Regarding the style, the storyteller makes a call and the audience responds accordingly. For example in Zimbabwe, the story goes as follows:

- Storyteller: "*Paivapo* " meaning "*Once upon a time* ."
- Audience: "*Dzefunde* ." meaning "*Let it be so*" (Chinyowa 2001).

African storytelling explains the following three elements:

- Why we tell stories?
- What makes a story worth telling?
- How stories are told

The Power of African Stories

Chinua Achebe, in his book, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), explains that a story does many things. It entertains, it informs and it instructs. The stories support and reinforce the basic doctrines of a culture. The storyteller would work out and calculate what is right and what is wrong, what is courageous and what is cowardly, and turns it into a vibrant story (Achebe 1987).

To demonstrate the power, influence and significance of a story, Chinua Achebe said:

- "...It is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story ...that saves our progeny (off-spring) from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us." (Achebe, 1987.p.50)

Significance of African Storytelling

The Pedagogical Significance of African Storytelling

According to Chinyowa (2000), modern scholarship and academic researchers have tended to treat Africans as a people with no sound tradition of storytelling. At times, African oral performances are regarded as simply quasi-dramatic phenomena. Chinyowa (2000) argues that there is a pedagogical African storytelling tradition which has its own distinct significance and importance within the African theatre and performance industry. African storytelling (and theatre performance) is closely linked to the African people's humanistic philosophy and hence its functions are central medium of social, cultural, mental and emotional edification Chinyowa (2000). Chinyowa (2001) calls for an objective paradigm shift regarding pedagogical approach in storytelling.

Chinyowa (2001) argues the study of the African oral storytelling or narrative performance has been confined to mostly anthropological compilations and/or translations of different types of folk tales. Using illustrations from the Zimbabwean Shona trickster stories, Chinyowa (2001), argues that African storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool for communicating the people's knowledge and wisdom. Far from being a mere source of entertainment, the story helps to sharpen the people's creativity and imagination, to shape their behavior, to train their intellect and to regulate their emotions.

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Vambe (2004) challenged western criticism that has sought to vilify and demonise African oral storytelling. He argues that African oral story-telling tradition has survived within the black Zimbabwean novels in English. The author critically analyses the works of eight leading Zimbabwean creative writers, revealing how they have used oral story-telling traditions in their literature. He argues that throughout the colonisation, liberation and post-independence periods, African orature (for literature) was and remains a mode of expressing resistance to authoritarian ideas and cultural dominance, and a social vision.

Moral Lessons of African Storytelling

The main lesson behind these oral African stories is to teach and impart principles of morality and provide youngster with a sense of identity and belonging. The young people will learn valuable lessons about life (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Utley 2008). African storytelling has been used to interpret the universe, resolve natural and physical phenomena, teach morals, maintain cultural values, pass on methods of survival, and to praise God (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Vambe. 2001, Utley 2008, Kunene 2012).

The trickster stories are found in many African cultures. Trickster stories use animals with human features to convey wisdom. These stories also use animals to help people understand human nature and human behaviour. These stories play a crucial role within the culture in which they are found. The animal trickster stories are meant to be entertaining as well as instructive. Animals are used in different ways to portray human strength and weaknesses (Achebe 1958, Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Hove 1997).

African Cultures: Proverbs and Parables in Storytelling

The use of African proverbs and parables in oral storytelling demonstrates the collective wisdom of the people as they express their structures of meaning, feeling, thought, and expression. This is of cardinal importance when it comes to social and ethical and cultural issues (Kunene 1991, Obiechina 1993, Chinyowa 2000, Vambe. 2001).

Obiechina (1993) argues that the story itself is a primary form of the oral tradition, primarily as a mode of conveying culture, experience, and values, but the utilisation of proverbs and parables would enhance weight and significance of a story. Proverbs and parables is also a means of transmitting ancient knowledge, wisdom, profound feelings, and attitudes in oral societies (Obiechina 1975, Obiechina 1993).

According to Achebe (1958), it would be almost impossible to study African literatures without studying a particular culture and its traditions on which African writers draw, for their themes and values, narrative structures and plots, rhythms and styles, images and metaphors for their artistic and ethical principles. To emphasise the importance and intertwined relationship between African writers and their cultural traditions, Solomon Iyasere (1975) says:

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- " the modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind" (Iyasere, 1975, p.107).

African novelists like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Chenjerai Hove and Charles Mungoshi frequently introduce African traditional proverbs and parables in their oral stories, so as to enrich their content and make it more relevant to their African readership. This goal of using proverbs and parables is to achieve harmony and wisdom in the community and expose bad anti-social and cunning tortoise-like behaviours (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1964).

Storytelling: "Traditional" Knowledge, Cosmologies and Epistemologies

The incorporation of 'traditional' knowledge and epistemologies is also a crucial element of an "Indigenous paradigm". In recent years, the notion of "traditional knowledge" has gained more attention in the academic world (Legat 1991). "Traditional knowledge" refers to a body of knowledge which is grounded in the traditional way of life of Indigenous peoples and is often characterized by local knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982, Legat 1991). Traditional knowledge includes cosmologies, spirituality, relationships with the natural environment and the use of natural resources of a people. It is expressed through stories, language, social organization, values, institutions and laws (Legat, 1991).

Indigenous peoples have argued that their knowledge systems or oral traditions are a non-Western counterpart of Western science (Deloria, 1995; Colorado, 1996; Helander, 1992 & Kuokkanen, 2000).

Decolonization and African Storytelling

Storytelling: "Indigenous Paradigm" and De-colonizing Social Research Methodologies

According to Kuokkanen (2000), since the end of the 1960s, Western academic research methodologies, notions and epistemologies have been challenged. This criticism of Western philosophical and theoretical foundations can serve as a starting point for an "Indigenous paradigm" since it shares similar goals with poststructuralist theories, such as anti-universalism and the dismantling of the Grand Narratives, hierarchies and dichotomies (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Kuokkanen 2000). Dion-Buffalo and Mohaw (1992) argue that postmodernism is regarded as a movement which announced the abandonment of Western supreme ideologies and this should be seen as a consequence of the termination of five hundred years of western expansion and dominance.

Kremer (1997) argues that there are still an increasing number of western epistemologies and research methodologies which are still based on euro-centred thinking as the game-master. Kuokkanen (2000) urges indigenous people to go further than poststructuralist or postmodern objectives and refuse to remain apolitical about the dominance of western research methodologies, paradigms and ideologies and seek to deconstruct and de-colonise these foreign western processes. There is a need for true indigenous self-determination to be intensified in the de-colonisation process (Kuokkanen, 2000). Indigenous peoples must become independent from Western intellectual structures since a significant part of colonialism is being dependent on modes, structures, epistemologies, methodologies and approaches of the West (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Kuokkanen 2000). Therefore, the main objectives of an "Indigenous paradigm" include the continuation of the criticism of Western dualistic metaphysics, Eurocentrism and biased privileging of Western systems of knowledge.

"Indigenous paradigm" has to recognise and fully accept indigenous methodologies and epistemologies as being equal to Western systems of knowledge within the academia (Kremer 1997, Kuokkanen 2000). As long as Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies are not recognized in the same manner as Eurocentric epistemologies, Indigenous scholars and researches remain in a marginal, colonial position within the academic institutions.

It is crucial that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars acknowledge that Indigenous epistemologies have a value of their own right. There is also no need to attempt to re-shape Indigenous epistemologies into Eurocentric frameworks and provide definitions of Indigenous science as this will be allowing Western thinking and dominance to structure and disempower Indigenous being and knowledge (Kremer 1997). Kremer (1997) suggests that instead of demanding that Indigenous peoples give definitions satisfactory to the Western paradigm, it is time to challenge minds conditioned in the Eurocentric ways of knowing to objectively seek to understand and appreciate the narrative nature of Indigenous peoples' being and knowing.

It is evident that an "Indigenous paradigm" has a clear social and political agenda which aims at the overall decolonization of Indigenous societies. Secondly, it maintains a critical stand towards Western metaphysical dualism which still informs much of current patterns of thinking and research practices. Thirdly, an "Indigenous paradigm" is based on a holistic approach which strives towards a balance between different areas of life and which does not separate intellectual, social, political, economic, psychological and spiritual forms of human life from each other. Fourthly, within an "Indigenous paradigm", research has a clear connection to the researcher's own culture. This means that cultural practices and forms of expressions are reflected in the ways of conducting research, in language, style, structure, methods as well as assumptions of knowledge and the role of the researcher (Kuokkanen, 2000).

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Indigenous oral traditions have been dismissed as primitive stories. Such dismissal has been based on the self-serving colonial cultural myth that Europeans are more developed and "civilized" than Aboriginal peoples (LaRocque 1990). There is therefore an urgent need to reconsider the appropriateness of Western theories and practices in analysing Indigenous peoples' literature (Kuokkanen 2000). Many Indigenous writers and critics have emphasized the importance of the socio-cultural and historical contexts of oral tradition. Once decontextualized, stories lose their meaning and become merely "dead voices" (Petrone, 1990; Krupat, 1996).

Decolonization of African Research Methods and Methodologies

African research methods and methodologies are as old as our ceremonies and nations (Adelowo 2012). Elabor-Idemudia (2002) argues that before colonization, the African culture was richer, with many appropriate ways of gathering, discovering and uncovering knowledge. However, these ways of knowing were invalidated and side-lined by the western way of knowing (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986, Elabor-Idemudia 2002). According to Elabor-Idemudia (2002), the aim of such a strategy was to impose a superior/inferior relationship around the knowledge of African people and to enforce western paradigms, methodologies and ideologies on how the knowledge had to be passed on. Elabor-Idemudia (2002) further argues that it is important to decolonize social science research on the non-western developing nations (e.g. Africa) to ensure that African people's world lens-views are not constructed through Western command and ideologies. Kunene (1991) showed that it is crucial to acknowledge and present African research methods and methodologies that reflect the beliefs (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986), values and rituals rooted in African societies. Adelowo (2012) argues that although Africans' arrival in New Zealand is recent, their customs and cultures should be explored to reveal the depth of their lived experiences. The application of storytelling as a paradigm is culturally appropriate and befitting for this study as all the participants and communities will be of African descent.

Research Paradigm/ Framework: African Oral Traditional Paradigm of Storytelling

African Storytelling as a Methodology

The African oral tradition of storytelling will be used to share stories of African participants and their communities' employment experiences. Gbadegesin (1984) argues that the history of a people is re-constructed through oral testimonies and cultural data supplied by individuals or communities, which is basic for future construction, using oral means of transmission. The use of storytelling as an African paradigm has the benefit of empowering African communities in New Zealand as they share their personal and collective employment-related experiences and also suggest solutions to these related-challenges (McAdams 1993).

In a similar way to African oral traditional paradigm of storytelling, the Pacific Island epistemological approach, *Talanoa* (Prescott 2009), has been successfully used and essentially removes the cultural distance between researcher and participant as the exchange between the researcher and participant(s) is done via dialogue that takes the form of an unstructured/ semi-structured interview (Morgan 1998a). In addition, the Purakau, a collection of Maori traditional oral narratives that contain philosophical thoughts, epistemological constructs, cultural codes and worldviews that are fundamental to the identity of Maori has been successfully utilised as an indigenous methodology.

The African Oral Tradition of Storytelling: Philosophical Background

The African oral tradition of storytelling or framework is a genre of thought and knowledge created out of experience rooted in the cultural image and interest of the people of African descent. The basis of this tradition/framework is grounded in an African worldview (Carroll 2008). These worldviews and values play a pivotal role in the storytelling role of African communities as they narrate their employment-related experiences in New Zealand (Kambon 1992, Bishop 1998). Schiele (2000) stated that some of the dimensions of the African-centred worldview are spirituality, oral tradition, harmony, rhythm, stylistic expressiveness, interpersonal orientation and communalism. These dimensions also determine how the African communities will tell their stories and testimonies on the lived employment-experiences in New Zealand (Dixon 1976, Owens-Moore 1996).

Stories are suitable means of organising different kinds of information and these are fundamental to how the African communities in New Zealand can express themselves and their world-views, feelings and thoughts to others regarding employment-related experiences. Adelowo (2012) argues that storytelling equipped African women in New Zealand to become custodians and conduit of African culture.

Research Strategies

Qualitative Approach

The qualitative approach accommodates and complements the African oral tradition of storytelling because Africans are storytellers by nature (McAdams 1993) and therefore the use of storytelling is an inherent part of their tradition and way of life. In addition, the qualitative approach is recommended for this study as it seeks to investigate the social impact of the employment-related experiences and challenges on the lives and well-being of African communities in New Zealand. Marshall and Rossman (1999) indicated that qualitative approach is a widely accepted method for studying social phenomena such as employment-related experiences and challenges.

Research Methods

Individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants and four focus groups discussions were held with New Zealand-based African communities in order to understand their employment-related experiences and challenges. The purpose of using focus groups is to obtain the collective stories shared by participants from different African communities' perspectives. The utilisation of focus groups represents the African concept of "Ubuntu" (Mandela, 1994; Johann, 2006).

Significance of African Storytelling to this Research

The significance of African storytelling as a methodology in this research is appropriate because as individual participants and focus group members share their stories and testimonies regarding employment-related experiences, they will be expressing their views, thoughts, feelings and experiences in a way they are familiar with (Gbadegesin, 1984). As the function of storytelling has been identified as mediating and transmitting of knowledge and information across generations, about the culture, worldviews, morals and expectations, norms and values, it will be more appropriate to use it (storytelling) in this research as Africans share their employment-related experiences in New Zealand (Kouyate 1989, Alidou 2002).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that oral African storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience and phenomena. This means it is a shared communal event where people congregate together, listening, participating and sharing ideas (Achebe, 1958 & Utlely, 2008). African storytelling is set-up in an environment where the storyteller and the audience interact and both parties have rights and obligations (Soyinka 1978, Berry 1991). Everyone in most traditional African societies participates in formal and informal storytelling as interactive oral performance (Achebe 1958, Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1965, Sheppard 2009). This is similar and more appropriate to focus group set-up.

The use of African proverbs and parables in oral storytelling will buttress and demonstrates the collective wisdom of both individual participants and focus group members as they express their feelings, thoughts, and expressions (Kunene 1991, Obiechina 1993, Chinyowa 2000, Vambe. 2001).

Discussion

The above discussions contribute to the African storytelling methodology in the following ways:

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- A Communal Participatory Experience-This can be equated to the present-day western focus group set-up
- The Style and Structure- The structure of the story illustrates its importance and significance (Chinyowa 2004, Vambe 2004).
- African Cultures: Proverbs and Parables in Storytelling- the use of proverbs and parables would enhance weight and significance of storytelling. Proverbs and parables are a means of transmitting ancient knowledge, wisdom, profound feelings, and attitudes in oral societies (Obiechina 1975, Obiechina 1993).
- The power of storytelling- The stories support and reinforce the basic doctrines of people's culture. Storytelling is a powerful tool (Achebe 1987).
- Moral lessons- The main lesson behind oral African stories is to teach and impart principles of morality and provide youngster with a sense of identity and belonging (Kunene 1991).
- Pedagogical Significance- African storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool for communicating knowledge and wisdom. Storytelling is far from being a mere source of entertainment, the story helps to sharpen the people's creativity and imagination, to shape their behavior, to train their intellect and to regulate their emotions (Chinyowa 2001).

From the above discussions, it is evident that the African oral traditional paradigm of storytelling is an effective and appropriate methodology to use in the investigation of employment-related experiences and challenges of New Zealand-based African communities and the impact of these experiences on their well-being.

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