

The Role of Oral Literature in Moral Development



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Abstract

“Literature teaches us how to live”. These words echo the sentiments of writer and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov for whom the value of any literary work lies in its ability to contribute to the formation of the human person. Literature provides possibilities for interaction with others, enabling individuals to enter into a reciprocal exchange of enriching the lives of each other. It enables them to make a profound experience of self thus becoming responsible actors in society. Failure to respond to this fundamental need of the human person contributes to a loss of purpose of any literary work. Literature is not an end in itself since it enables the human person to project towards his final purpose. In this argument, Todorov touches on one of the fundamental roles of moral theology, which provides a perspective of how a Christian must live in order to win favour with God. In addressing concepts such as ‘freedom’, ‘conscience’ and ‘responsibility’, moral theology establishes the framework for Christian development.

The ancient traditions of oral literature also served this purpose. They provided a code of conduct by which the society was guided. They helped make a distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, sin and virtue by provoking the consciences of individuals, thus encouraging them to make decisions that would have a positive impact on themselves and on others. Are these old traditions, which played such a significant role in society, lost forever? Or, do the present social ills force us to be submerged into an attitude of helplessness and a feeling of nostalgia for what used to be? A recent study on the influence of oral literature in today’s society gives us a glimmer of hope as it explores the role of oral literature in moral development.

Keywords: Oral Literature /Culture / Moral Development

In an essay in which he addresses the present reality of the status of literature and the literary arts, literary critic and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov raises a red flag as he tries to bring to the attention of his readers that modern literature is in peril. His argument rests on the fact that modern literature no longer fulfils its function in the formation of the human person. If Todorov has expressed his love for literature, it is because, as he puts it simply, “it teaches us how to live”. For him, literature is a reflection of the beauty of life, through which it is able to broaden its horizons and contribute to an enriched human experience. He explains that:

Literature provides possibilities for interaction with others, thus being able to enter into a reciprocal exchange of enriching the lives of each other. It provides irreplaceable sensations that give meaning to the world in which we live, thus bringing out its beauty. Far from being a simple attraction or a distraction reserved for the educated, literature gives each individual the opportunity to respond to his vocation to be human.¹

According to Todorov, literature does not emerge from a vacuum but is directly related to a certain anthropological experience that enables a society to express itself through a value system, based on moral principles. In other words, Todorov is of the view that literature should never deviate from its principal responsibility of enabling individuals to make a profound experience of self and become a responsible actor in society. What gives meaning to literature, if not its ability to understand the world in which we live. He seems to echo the sentiments of French writer and philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, who admits: “Very slowly, I discover the real.” The reality of which he speaks refers to our sentiments, the love and the hatred that are deeply rooted in us; everything points to the real “me”. Judging from this perspective, we can affirm that literature transcends mere fiction to shed light on our human experience.

The above reflections help establish a link between literature and the human sciences. The Vatican II Documents affirm this relationship, giving an important place to the Theological Science: uniting the sacred with various expressions of culture. In defining the role of the Church in the formation of a world that is more human, the Second Vatican Council obliges Christians to try to understand and embrace the deeper meaning of culture, thus giving to it a well deserved place in the vocation that is integral to human development.

Oral literature, is defined by African Writers, Jane Nandwa and Austin Bukonya as “those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression.”² It is a type of unwritten literature that reveals a fictional truth which resembles a spoken novel.

¹ T. Todorov, *La littérature en péri*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007, p.26.

² Nandwa & Bukonya, *African Literature for Schools* 1983), quoted in Philip Etyang, *Folklore and oral literature defined*, Kenyatta Universita, 2011.

URL: http://www.academia.edu/1009840/Folklore_and_Oral_Literature_defined

This unwritten form of literature presented as folktales, proverbs, legends, myths, riddles is one of the most ancient aspects of our Caribbean culture. Woven within a specific socio-economic, political and anthropological context of enslavement and migration, it was initially used as a form of social interaction and entertainment. Due to its unique structure of addressing the daily issues in this evolving society, oral literature, particularly folktales and proverbs, provided a system of laws through which a code of conduct was established. They played such an important role in the moral formation of our Caribbean society that today, many of the present social ills within our society are attributed to the absence of the values taught through those means.

In our modern society, we are faced with a very pertinent question. Does oral literature have any value today? In a society that has undergone a revolution in its social structure, is it possible to develop an appreciation for folktales and proverbs? To what extent do these literary genres continue to have an impact on the moral choices that individuals make in society?

We shall explore those questions by developing three principal aspects of oral literature:

- Oral literature: a code of conduct ;
- Oral literature: an educational tool;
- Oral literature: a means of new evangelisation in the Caribbean Church.

1. Oral literature: A code of conduct

One of the characteristics of oral literature is its ability to establish a code of conduct founded on moral principles. Moral values are based on habits, rules and customs adopted by society. This form of literature engages a process of discernment that helps to distinguish good from evil; what is an acceptable norm from what is unacceptable; what is life giving from what becomes an obstacle to social or moral development. To what extent can folktales and proverbs help make those distinctions? Oral literature is indeed the literature of the soul because it emerges from the depth of our human and spiritual experience.

During an interview with a young lady from a rural community in St. Lucia, she related a particular folktale that she things epitomises the role of folktales in our Caribbean culture. It is a créole folktale entitled : *La Bel ek la Lèd* (The Beautiful and the Ugly)

The story is told of two young women who lived with their Mother. La Bel had a very pleasant character while la Lèd was always very mean. It happened that La Lèd went to the river one day and encountered an elderly woman who was having a bath. The woman said to her, "My daughter, can you scrub my back please?" La Lèd stood in shock. How on earth could an elderly person ask her to do such a thing. She responded, 'Never! I will never do this!', and walked away. In spite of her ungratefulness, the woman called out to her and asked her to stop at her house on her way home. There she would find a bag of rice and some eggs. She was asked to take a grain of rice and one egg to prepare for lunch. La Lèd had heard that this old woman was very rich. She decided to disobey the orders that were given, filled her bag with rice and took half a dozen eggs. When she went home to prepare them, she noticed that everything in the pot had turned into snakes. She ran away in fear.

Having no knowledge of what had happened to her sister, La Bèl went to the river and had a similar experience with the elderly woman. She willingly scrubbed the woman's back and followed the orders that the woman gave. She took one grain of rice and one egg and prepared them for lunch. As she looked into the pot, she noticed that everything had turned to gold. She became very rich and lived a comfortable life.

In exploring the moral value of this folktale, the interviewer explained that such folktales address issues as egoism, racism, obedience, respect, love, goodness, truthfulness, humility, acceptance, appreciation, forgiveness, courage. She said, for example, young people may develop a negative attitude towards the elderly in society. In St. Lucia, in particular, elderly person were once referred to as "magi nwè", which means, "witch or wizard. Old age meant that there was an automatic initiation into sorcery. Often the elderly were alienated by the younger generation. Folktales like these can be used to change that mindset. They can also teach a lesson to the older persons in society who often lament that there is no hope for today's youth. They're completely lost. Making such generalisations can overshadow the good that exists, that sometimes remains hidden and unknown. The folktale proposes a different approach towards the aged who are bearers of wisdom. The result of respect towards the elderly is a blessing while lack of respect can have serious consequences.

What about proverbs? The proverb, by its structure, also provides a moral and a code of conduct. Most folktales either end with a proverb or can be associated with one of those wisdom sayings. There is a lesson to be learnt that is often related to practical daily experiences. In the above example, the Haitians would say, “*Bon bonjou montré chémen*”, which signifies that respect opens the way to great achievements. And for Martinicans, they know that “*lonneté pa matjé asou fidji pèsonn*” which means that you can’t know how truthful, honest or grateful someone is by looking at his face. This would be equivalent to our English folktale “Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Oral literature is a tool by which discipline can be taught and maintained in society. In what concerns folktales and proverbs, they provide a system of rules and regulations expressed indirectly. They are very important in maintaining order. A society without laws can be compared to fireworks with no colour: we look in anticipation only to find ‘**that noise**’ very disturbing. Or, can we possibly envisage a church without structure? It is the colour that gives value to the fireworks. That colour that we speak of, the end result, is possible, only if the steps are properly followed and executed. Likewise, it is within an organised system of rules and regulations that humans have learnt to live and interact.

On a societal level, the actions of individuals are judged according to a legal code, which often defines their destiny. If today, we speak of a legal system with its documented laws, it is because we were inspired by a social system with undocumented rules. Yet, a formal system with its own “*savoir faire*” that only experience can help us fathom the impact that this code of conduct had on those for whom it was intended at the time. Members of a society are expected to live according to those norms, customs and laws established by society.

When we speak of society, we perceive a group of people living within a certain geographical location thus interacting with each other on a daily basis. They develop certain customs which they adopt and which initiate them into a particular lifestyle. This initiation is not aimed at mere participation in the life of this people. It is a sign of affiliation to the group and an acceptance of all the values upheld by its members. This explains the interest of any form of initiation in all aspects of human life and human living, whether sociological, anthropological, political, psychological or religious.

The relationship between folktales and ancient civilisations show that oral literature lies within the framework of specific traditions. Its mythical appearance gives it a fantastic dimension that reveals its authenticity. In what concerns proverbs, “words and expressions that emerge from the depth of our memory, this sacred space through which our liberty is expressed, has been used as therapy in the midst of difficulties, to understand the deeper sense of our existence. It is an instrument through which a society transmits its sense of originality and its vision of the world to its members. What form does this process of transmission take? How do we situate oral literature in the context of our daily living so that it becomes an expression of our ‘reality’? In other words, is oral literature capable of awakening in us a sense of consciousness of the reality that exists in the world and influence our way of responding, so that we can contribute to a society founded on moral values. If oral literature is to play this role, it must assume its responsibility to educate.

2. Oral literature: an educational tool

In the process of education, Philosopher, Composer and Writer, Jean Jacques Rousseau places instruction in a subordinate position. Before formal instruction begins, it is necessary that we instil in the ones to be educated, particularly the young, a desire to learn. This is accomplished through a personal experience in which the child discovers himself in a more profound way. For this philosopher, education consists in the transformation of the human person. This transformation is also cultural. The school becomes the place of transmission if we are to preserve the wisdom of our ancestors. Oral literature helps establish a relationship between the child and his ancestors thus enabling children to discover their history.

Our ancestors are the cultural memory of the people. Their lives were nourished by oral traditions and everything that belongs to that genre. They are often considered as the cultural library of the society. It is for this reason that ethnologist Amadou Hampaté states that “when an elderly person dies, we lose an entire library”.³ Whether this is considered myth or reality, in African societies where orality was the tradition, the memory of the ancestors is held in high esteem. They are the means of imparting values, traditions and local customs that give a sense of identity to a particular society. The

³ <http://www.babelio.com/auteur/Amadou-Hampate-Ba/6837>, Quotations of Aamadou Hampâté Bâ.

death of an elderly person contributes to cultural alienation, the disappearance of a rich culture threatened by cultural transformation influenced today by modern technologies and social networks.

What is education, if not a formation that enables individuals to make a profound discovery of themselves. The rapid evolutions in the scientific domain can rob education of its purpose of discovering oneself and force us to take into consideration the reflection of the philosopher, Plato: “But finally, all this helps us to reflect on this important question: after having exhausted all scientific domains, we are still left with one question : who are or we?” or more specifically, who am I? It is a question that is asked in the world of literature, particularly in the Caribbean context with its history of colonisation. It is a question that is of interest to us as we reflect on establishing a Caribbean identity. It is a moral question as it touches on the most profound aspects of our existence. It is a question that not only links the present to the past but that connects our present experience to the oral traditions on which our history is founded. Therefore, it is important that we explore the role that the latter plays in the transmission of moral values within the education system.

Cultural activist in St. Lucia, George ‘Fish’ Alphonse explains that children enter the education system with a rich cultural experience that needs to be developed. Establishing a relationship between formal education and the reality that exists in society is imperative if education is to be authentic.

I would like to share with you some practical examples of the impact that oral literature can have on children and how it awakens their consciences to moral values. In what concerns this conference, the objectives of this research are:

- to teach moral values through the use of folktales and proverbs;
- the formation of young story tellers within the school system who can contribute to the transmission of moral values in the society through creative approaches.

Two schools were used as samples: a group of grade five repeaters from a boys’ primary school in an urban area and a mixed school from a rural area. A scale of ten objectives was used to help in the formation of young story tellers within the education system. Those ten objectives were explored during ten sessions with each group. I would like to discuss four of those sessions through which the moral dimension, of the study was explored.

After having explored the meanings of a folktale and a proverb during the first session, the second session was aimed at identifying the moral in some folktales and proverbs. The sessions started with a folktale entitled ‘Dog’.

Dog, who is known to be a fast runner invited Crab to enter a competition. They were to run from Vieux Fort (South of St. Lucia) to Castries (North of St. Lucia). Although Crab was aware that he was no match for Dog, he did not hesitate. He accepted, so the competition began. Dog counted, one, two, three, go! and started the race by doing something that all dogs do: that is to stretch out its tail. With a leap, Crab jumped and held onto Dog's tail and there the race began. Dog ran as quickly as he could because, not only did he want to win the race, but he wanted to do it in record time so as to embarrass Crab. He ran through Micoud, up to Dennery, through Bexon, gasping for breath, but he would not stop. Not for a moment did he look out for his friend, Crab. All the while, Crab was taking a comfortable ride up to Castries holding on to Dog's tail. When Dog finally reached Castries, he threw himself to the ground, exhausted, sweating, his tongue running its own marathon. Crab quickly jumped to the ground and waited calmly behind him, relaxed as if he had just woken up from sleep. Only then did Dog decide to turn back. To his surprise, he saw Crab sitting behind him relaxed and comfortable, not a drop of sweat running down his face. In amazement, he shouted:

"Crab, you are already here!"

Crab answered : "Dog! You know how long I've been there waiting for you!"

Disappointed, Dog admitted, well man, you won the race, and left with his tail between his legs.

After the folktale was told, even before asking any questions, a discussion started among the students:

"You see, you must never underestimate people even though you may think they are weak";

"That's true you know, it's not good to be too boastful. You see what happened!"

"Dog wasn't humble or he would not have put Crab through this."

"Why are you worrying about Crab, putting all the blame on Dog. Crab should have been humble enough to say to Dog, that it doesn't make sense entering a race with him. Yes, he won but he cheated."

"You all are talking about Dog and Crab. We have some Dogs and Crabs in the class!"

I pretended not to understand and asked: "Dogs and Crabs in the class?" One student insisted:

"Yes Sister, ask them what happens when we have home work or test."

At that point, I realised that the folktale had forced the children to focus on habits that they had adopted thus bringing to their attention values that they should uphold. Not wanting to impose any of those values unto them, because I wanted it to be a personal discovery, I simply remarked that sometimes when we listen to folktales, they help us to do exactly what you have done: to judge our own actions in relation to the moral in the folktale. However, what is more important is, rather than look at the fault in the other person, to evaluate our own actions in relation to the morals that the folktales teach.

Using a variety of other folktales, the children discussed the morals to be learnt. The following are examples of folktales used throughout the sessions and the children's way of analysing them. Sometimes, there analysis was linked to a scripture passage.

Folktales

1. Compère Lapin et Compère Chat vont faire la pêche.
2. Pourquoi la lèvre du Lapin est fendue ?
3. Compère Chien
4. Compère Lapin et le Poisson.

Responses :

1. We must not deliberately set out to fool others
Greed does not pay.
There will always be someone smarter than you. Appreciate who you are.
Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you. (Bible)
2. Do not ridicule others.
The strongest is not always the wisest.
If you constantly try to fool people, wait for your turn.
Be honest.
There is always a punishment for being ungrateful.
3. Learn to share
If you hoard everything for yourself, you risk losing everything. (Bible)
Sharing multiplies, greed diminishes.
Think of what is being told before getting into it. Be fair.
Do not be afraid.

I don't think that the invitation to focus on oneself went very far at the initial stage because we went through a similar experience during the session that followed. The focus was on identifying the moral in proverbs. Using some creole proverbs, we performed a similar exercise. The following table outlines some of the proverbs used and the children's explanation of the tales:

Creole Proverbs	Responses
<p>1. <i>Lè ou ka tann gwan palé, ouvè zowèy ou.</i> When an elderly person speaks, keep your ears alert.</p>	<p><i>Listen to older people.</i> Old people have wisdom. (My mother reads the scriptures to me every morning)</p>
<p>2. <i>Sa ou pa konnèt gran pasé-w.</i> There is more to life than you know.</p>	<p>There are lots of things you don't know.</p>
<p><i>Sé pou ou mantjé néyé pou ou apran nager</i> When you reach a point where you have to strive to save yourself from drowning, it's at that point that you learn to swim.</p>	<p>We can learn from bad experiences. Sometimes you have to feel to learn.</p>
<p>3. <i>Tout zanndoli sav ki les pwé bwa i ka mouté.</i> Every lizard knows which tree to climb.</p>	<p>We need to know how to deal with people and when is the right to relate to them. (Some boys, when they have a good snack for break, don't climb their tree)</p>
<p>4. <i>Bowik kouyon, mé i sa poté chay-li byen.</i> The donkey is foolish but he knows how to carry his load.</p>	<p><i>Stupid people can work hard.</i> (slow coach gets the best mark)</p>
<p>5. <i>Chak flè ka fléwi an tan-y.</i> <i>Each plant flowers in its own time.</i></p>	<p>Everyone has his own rhythm. There will be an opportunity for everyone. Just wait. (People become drug traffickers because they don't want to wait. Work first, save your money then you can build your house.)</p>
<p>6. <i>Sé pa toudi kouwi sé wivé.</i> <i>What is important is not just running the race but reaching your destination.</i></p>	<p><i>Run to the end.</i> Don't give up. It's not just saying, I want to succeed; you must do what has to be done to succeed (I'm not the only one.)</p>
<p>7. <i>Jou ka ouvè pou tout moun.</i></p>	<p><i>The day opens for everybody.</i></p>

The sun rises on everyone.	That sounds like the bible that states that the sun rises on the good and the bad. (I wonder why) Everybody has an opportunity to choose so at the end they can only blame themselves.)
8. <i>Makak karésé yich li, i tjwéi.</i> Too much caress had monkey to kill his child.	<i>The monkey did not want anybody to touch the child.</i> <i>Some parents don't correct their children.</i> <i>We have one in the class.</i>
9. <i>Moun ki won pa fouti vini kawé.</i> Don't try to put a square peg in the wrong hole.	We cannot change people. People can change themselves but they cannot change anybody else. (Well change yourself because you really annoy me.)

That level of interaction was maintained during all the sessions.

The tendency on the part of the children was to find the fault in the other rather than make a personal discovery of themselves. Therefore, the sessions that followed were aimed at developing a more positive approach to the moral to be learnt. Rather than dictate to others what should or should not be done, they were allowed to discern, what would be the best thing to do in each situation.

Having done six sessions aimed at building their self confidence, developing the art of story telling, etc., they had come to the realisation that folktales and proverbs are based on real life experiences with a particular lesson to be learnt. The seventh session focused on their personal reflection. They were preparing to become storytellers within the school system and in the wider society. They were asked to reflect on a story that they would like to write – their own tale, and the impact that they would like the story to have on the readers.

The exercise, which had a greater impact on the slow learners in both groups, helped to develop their competence in the area of composition. A group of eleven year old Grade 5 repeaters, whose compositions were limited to writing a paragraph about themselves, were able to write a well structured story. Those of the other group also displayed that kind of competence. What they wrote were simple tales but they touched on some of the most

fundamental issues in their own lives, in their families and in the wider society. It is not surprising to know that the weakest child of the two groups, who comes from a creole background and whose progress had been inhibited because of this situation, presented what I judge as an impressive piece of work. I would like to give you an idea of his story.

Using animal characters, he described a situation which we later discovered was based on a personal experience and a present reality.

Konpè Chat

In a garden, in a quiet village, lived Konpè Chat, Zanndoli and Konpè Lapen. Although they were good friends, Zanndoli and Lapen did not appreciate Konpè Chat's ways. Konpè Chat was lazy, often stole the vegetables and fruits from the garden and brought them home to eat all by himself.

One rainy afternoon Zanndoli and Konpè Lapen were working in the garden while Konpè Chat stayed home to keep himself warm under his blanket. Konpè Lapen and Zanndoli thought up a plan to get rid of Chat. They thought that the best thing to do was to tie Konpè Chat in a bag and take him to a far away forest where he would never be able to return to the garden.

After a long day's work, Konpè Zanndoli and Konpè Lapen went back home and found Konpè Chat sleeping. Lapen, being the smartest, went outside to empty a bag of vegetables that he got from the garden so he could use the bag to put Konpè Chat in. He put the bag over Konpè Chat on the bed, but Konpè Chat, feeling something over his head, got scared and with a sudden jump, went right into the bag. Konpè Lapen hurried to close the bag. Zanndoli tied it up and they left with Konpè Chat. When they arrived at the forest, they threw Konpè Chat into a hole and quickly covered it. They left him there and went back home.

As soon as they arrived home, Konpè Zandoli, who went to close the windows, saw Chat approaching. He yelled at Konpè Lapen to come and see. They were in shock and wondered whether they hadn't tied the bag tight enough. They quickly thought of a second plan.

When Konpè Chat entered the house, they tied both of his legs, brought him to the sea and threw him into the deep water. There was a shark waiting to attack him but instead, it bit the rope that was tied to Chat's legs thinking it was Konpè Chat. Fortunately, Konpè Chat quickly swam to shore while the shark left with the rope. When they went back home Zanndoli and Konpè Lapen said to each other : « We must get rid of Konpè Chat ! ».

They decided that they would pretend that they were playing a game with him on the road. They would try to encourage him to cross the road when a vehicle was approaching so he could be crushed and gone forever. Konpè Lapin and Zanndoli stood on either side of the road. As soon as Zanndoli saw a vehicle approaching, he called to Konpè: “Chat, come here!” Chat did as he was told, ran swiftly under the vehicle unharmed. What a surprise! What frustration!

They finally realised that Konpè Chat had escaped all the traps that they set for him as if he had nine lives. They reflected for a while and decided that since they could not get rid of Konpè Chat, they should stop wasting time and energy. Instead, they thought of what could be done to learn to live with him. What seemed to be a big problem had been solved.

The moral of the story is that we must learn to accept people as they are because as the proverb says, « Moun ki rond pa fouti vini karé ». You can't force a round peg into a square hole.

My First Medal

For a long time, I was the only one in my class without a sports medal. I was ashamed of myself since I was already in grade five and I felt that I had not achieved anything. My friends often made fun of me. I was ridiculed every time I had to participate in a Physical Education competition.

When we had Physical Education, no one wanted me on his or her team. They would embarrass me. Every time I asked to participate they would say, «These people are crazy! They are sending him to this event! Look! He's falling! ». Often I had no team to play with so I would return to the classroom. Everyone felt that they were more important than me.

I wanted to make a great change in what was happening to me. For the next sports meet, I decided to sign up for an event which was ‘Musical Chairs’. Having submitted my name, I started practicing two days a week with my mom and my cousin so that on sports day I was well prepared and ready to win.

It was a bright Monday morning on which we had sports. As usual, I was sitting in the stands waiting for the event musical chairs to be called. When my event was announced, I bolted onto the field. Everything started off peacefully with the usual music that accompanies musical chairs.

KP was the first one to go out. I knew that Devron would not take long before he got out so I had made up my mind to put up a battle with him. When there was only one chair left, Josh tried to knock me off my feet but instead he fell to the ground, so I quickly sat down and won my first medal. Indeed every plant blooms in its own time.

These stories are not mere coincidence or simply fun stories written for entertainment. They are very profound and authentic. They address real problems and propose solutions based on moral values. Rather than become defiant or violent, which seems to be the norm today, they propose an alternative approach. They are forced to look within themselves to find the strength that is hidden there. This is proof of the power of that form of literature and the impact it can have on individuals. If oral literature can be an educational tool to teach moral values, can it also be a means of evangelisation?

3. Oral literature : A means of new evangelisation in the Caribbean Church

Today, as we speak of new evangelisation, we reflect on creative means of bringing the Gospel message to God's people. Oral literature can play a significant role in evangelisation in the Caribbean church as it is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious habits of the people. We are a people of expression. Our Caribbean culture is creative. We have a rich tradition and we need to recognise that what we have is valuable. Part of what we have is an oral tradition that has been handed down by our ancestors; a tradition that helps us not only to celebrate the resilience of our ancestors but to recognise that this power still exists today. It is part of our historical experience. We think of the slaves on the plantations or the Maroons hiding deep into the forest establishing a new society in the midst of an existing plantation society. The question of identity was very present even then. If I run away from an existing structure, it is because I no longer want to be identified with it. I'm going to create the type of society with which I want to be identified. It is part of our cultural experience because out of this society emerged this oral tradition, rich in its content and forms of expression. It is part of our spiritual experience, for, as Gerard was explaining, it is man's spiritual search for healing. It is within that context that we continue to live out our spirituality as Caribbean people.

The Vatican II documents establish harmony between culture and Christianity. In addressing the role of the Church in the world, the Documents explain the most urgent responsibility of Christians in relation to culture.

“Furthermore, while adhering to the methods and requirements proper to theology, theologians are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to men of their times. For the deposit of faith or revealed truths are one thing; the manner in which they are formulated without violence to their meaning and significance is another.”⁴

Literature holds an equally important place in evangelisation. The Council recognises its importance, as Christians are exhorted to find in the literary arts, a profound expression of the deeper meaning of their existence:

“Literature and the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. For they strive to probe the unique nature of man, his problems and his experiences as he struggles to know and perfect both himself and the world. They are preoccupied with revealing man’s place in history and in the world, while illustrating his miseries and joys, his needs and strengths, and while foreshadowing a better life for him. Thus they are able to elevate human life as it is expressed in manifold forms, depending on time and place.”⁵

The Documents help us to formulate some generalisations:

- That the world situates us in a cultural context;
- That this cultural context is intimately related to our Christian experience.
- That the Church should be open to embracing cultural practices that serve as a means of evangelisation.

The final objective of the sessions was that the children would become story tellers, teaching moral values through creative expression. This will be done on a community level. Why?

Oral literature has always been expressed in a particular social context. Communities meet together, they share, discuss and make of this a powerful tool of socialisation. That they may have a positive moral impact, the folktales and proverbs are used not just for fun but to create an awareness of the value systems by which the life of the community should be guided.

Whereas it may be fun for our Parish Priest to begin his sermon by a resounding: Kwik! Kwak!, though he needs to be careful with his approach because it might just become a mere Anansi story, what I am referring to is something deeper: the extended Church. It’s about meeting people where they are at. As we rightly said, we cannot evangelise the whole world in the same way. So I’m talking about establishing networks within our communities where people gather and share this common experience. It is hoped that this can be a new form of evangelisation in the community. We are faced with a reality, particularly with the younger

⁴ W. –M Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York, Guild Press, 1966. p. 268.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 269.

generation, of a refusal to accept anything that appears to them as imposing a belief system even though this may not be the intention. There is a general attitude of defiance where they are called to embrace moral values: “No one tells me what to do; I have a right to..., I am in control of my own destiny”. They lose interest in what is good, what is holy, what is sacred. It might be interesting to think of creative ways of imparting the gospel values so that they can be more receptive. Oral literature may be help in cultures where the people are able to identify with such an experience.

CONCLUSION

Emerging from a rich historical and cultural experience, oral literature can provide a creative means of teaching the Gospels so that, like the children, individuals can make free but positive judgments that will help establish a new code of conduct in society.

The aim is that (according to the Documents of Vatican II) the Gospel can be preached in a way better suited to them so that they can receive it more willingly.⁶

⁶ Ibid. p. 271.

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