



## STORYTELLING & ARCHIVE CENTER BAMAKO, MALI

I am a Malian writer, painter and storyteller living in the U.S. My passion for stories began as a child, growing up with my grandparents in the village. As a little boy, my cousins and I would form a *fairai*—sitting in concentric circles around a fire, waiting anxiously for Grandma's arrival to tell stories.

My Grandmother was truly inspired; her charismatic personality lit up the scene of her evening story times with us. I always chose the best spot in the circle, directly across from Grandmother, so I could watch her expressions and hear clearly her inflections. The intensity in her face captured and pulled us in, impressing upon us the importance of the moment. This was more than simple entertainment.

Her voice rose and fell in high and low pitches as she personified creatures and trees, captivating us and eventually luring us into becoming one of the elements in the story, transporting us on a field trip in our minds. We would find our own spot in her stories, interacting along with others. Grandma's voice continued to float, swooping high and low and joining harmoniously the singing chorus of nocturnal creatures surrounding us--frogs, owls, crickets. We were in harmony with our surrounding nature. The lesson learned is that both animals and men have been instructors to one another from the beginning of time.

A feeling of peace would flow into my mind on those evenings, down to my heart and then to my fingers and toes. I felt happy, important and free.

Other great story events took place in the village during the long summer nights when farm work was over. The marketplace transformed into an arena, bringing the entire village community together.

One of my favorite story performers was *Sogoninkun*-- a man dressed in colorful mudcloth and decorated with magical charms. He wore a snug red hat spotted with white cowry shells and divided down the center with long horsetail hair from his forehead to the back of his head. He personified a wild animal as he chanted with a piercing voice, telling stories of peace and reconciliation between man and wildlife. But other times, *Sogoninkun's* voice would revert to song, telling stories of how our own human ruthless behavior can be the greatest threat to a community. As a shepherd boy at the time, *Sogoninkun's* songs meant a great deal to me.

Blacksmiths told stories of fire and forge, and their partners, women potters, told stories of the earth.

*Griots*, the oral historians, would sing of the great deeds in past history of the lands, to set an example for the new generation. They sang of the past's great heroes to wipe the tears of their loved ones.

Young farmers performed masked dancing, telling stories of animals and nature and their relationship to mankind. Their *Chibow* organization formed a choir that delivered powerful messages about respect, unity and the importance of sharing through praise songs.



All of these performances told stories and each linked us to some cultural part of our community—the farmers, the blacksmiths, the potters, the artisans, the traders, the *griots*, and so on. Even today they open people’s eyes to both social and environmental problems. They serve as communal problem solving tools and connect us to our ancestors.

But what is equally important about these events are the faces, the personalities and the voices of the storytellers. They bring everything alive and transform simple moments of entertainment into great moments of enlightenment.

It’s been 40 years now. But in my mind’s eye I can still hear the voices of those storytellers; I can still see the intense gestures in their faces and recall their personalities as they continue to inspire.

This was a gift I treasured from my elders as an African boy. But a gift of stories is only valuable if shared and passed on to future generations. In my youth, children had close relationships with their elders. They shared stories about the history of our village and words flowed from the elders’ mouths to the new ears of the young generation. Since my childhood days in Mali, this close relationship between elders and young is coming apart fast. Storytelling scenes are almost non-existent and the traditional folktales are dying out.

I have been working with children and adult audiences throughout the U.S. and West Africa for the last 30 years. During my annual travels back to Africa, I have noticed the gap growing between the young and elderly. The tradition of storytelling is quickly fading away from people’s minds. I find it important and necessary to keep this valuable tradition of storytelling alive. This is why I am creating a Storytelling & Archive Center in my neighborhood in Bamako, Mali—to reeducate people about the importance of storytelling. The preserved stories will not only be used by Malians, they will also be used in the U.S. in my classes to inspire students in writing as well as to learn about African culture.

Storytelling is an art that has been essential to the development of humankind since the birth of language--an art that allows us to reach across the divides of race and culture to find the common denominator uniting us all as one.



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