

Storytelling and cultural traditions

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Students from the Hawaiian Immersion School, Kula Kaiapuni 'O Waiau, perform a hula dance during the 18th annual Ho'omau benefit concert at the Waikiki Shell in Honolulu, Hawaii, February 16, 2003. At the time, more than 1,000 students from 3 to 18 were receiving their education in the Hawaiian language within the 10 schools located on Oahu. Photo by Ronen Zilberman for AP

Storytelling has existed in all cultures for a long time. Before there was writing, there was storytelling. It is still used today to entertain, inform and pass down cultural traditions and values.



Oral storytelling is telling a story by using your voice and moving your body. Oral storytelling includes rhymes, songs, poems and more. There can also be different types of stories, legends, prayers, and instructions.

Here are some examples of how storytelling helps different cultures pass down their traditions.

Choctaw Storytelling

Like all Native American tribes, the Choctaw have a tradition of oral storytelling. They tell the stories to keep their history alive and to educate young Choctaw people. For example, there are two stories about where the Choctaw people come from. One is about the first Choctaw people

traveling east to find a better life. The other says that the people were created from a large hill called a mound. The stories also talk about history and life lessons. Many of the traditional stories use animal characters to teach these lessons in a humorous way.

Native Hawaiian Storytelling

The Native Hawaiian word for story is "mo'olelo," but it can also mean history, legend, or tradition. It comes from two words. The first, mo'o, means succession, or the passing down of something. The second, olelo, means language or speaking. Together they mean "to pass down language," because the stories are told orally. Native Hawaiian stories include the tale of the first Hawaiian, who was born from a vegetable called a taro. Other stories tell of travel across the seas.

Native Hawaiian storytellers are special members of society, and they know a lot about history and genealogy. Genealogy studies the ancestors of a family. Hawaiian storytelling does not only use words. It also uses mele (song), oli (chant), and hula (dance).

The stories are very important to Hawaiians. They are entertaining, but they also teach young Hawaiians about behavior and traditions.

Western African Storytelling

The people of sub-Saharan Africa also have a strong tradition of storytelling. Sub-Saharan Africa is the part of Africa below the Sahara Desert. In many parts of Africa, the whole village comes together after dinner to listen to the storyteller. Like other cultures, the storyteller entertains and educates people.

Griots are very important in west African culture. Griots are people who tell stories, sing songs, and help kings. Some of the most famous stories from western Africa are about Anansi, a trickster spider.

There used to be schools where people could learn how to be a griot. Usually, the job is passed from an older member of the family to a younger member. Both men and women can be griots, but women are called *griottes*. The men are often considered more important than the women.

The Jewish People And The Passover Seder

Passover is an important Jewish holiday celebrated in the spring. The holiday celebrates the Jews' Exodus, or escape, from slavery in Egypt. The Passover celebration includes a feast and a storytelling tradition called a seder. During the seder, Jews eat a big meal and retell the story of the Exodus. The storytelling begins when the youngest child at the seder asks what makes this special night different from other nights. Then the questions are answered by telling the story of the Exodus and explaining some of the Passover traditions. This story of Exodus is written down in the Jewish book, the Torah. The same story is also told in the Old Testament of the Bible.

Irish Storytelling

The seanchai were the traditional Irish storytellers. They would travel from village to village, telling ancient stories and tales of wisdom. They told the old myths as well as local news and events. Many of the stories in the Irish oral tradition are tales of kings and heroes.

Today, storytelling and interest in storytelling appear to be making a comeback. As one Irish storyteller put it, "It's a need for connection." Storytelling helps people feel connected to each other in real life.

Quiz

1 Read the paragraph from the article.

Like all Native American tribes, the Choctaw have a tradition of oral storytelling. They tell the stories to keep their history alive and to educate young Choctaw people. For example, there are two stories about where the Choctaw people come from. One is about the first Choctaw people traveling east to find a better life. The other says that the people were created from a large hill called a mound. The stories also talk about history and life lessons. Many of the traditional stories use animal characters to teach these lessons in a humorous way.

Which answer choice accurately summarizes the paragraph?

- (A) The Choctaw Native American tribe has two different stories to explain where they came from. Most people believe the story about the people looking for a better life, but there is also a story about a mound.
- (B) Many Native American tribes write down stories about animals for their children. However, these stories can be confusing since they give different explanations for where the people came from.
- (C) Many Native American tribes use animals in their stories to make them funny. It is the best way to keep the next generation interested in the stories about the past and not get bored.
- (D) The Choctaw Native American tribe tells stories to teach history and life lessons to the next generation. They teach two stories about where their people come from.

2 Which sentence from the article supports a main idea from the article?

- (A) The other says that the people were created from a large hill called a mound.
- (B) They are entertaining, but they also teach young Hawaiians about behavior and traditions.
- (C) Usually, the job is passed from an older member of the family to a younger member.
- (D) The storytelling begins when the youngest child at the seder asks what makes this special night different from other nights.

3 According to the article, what is one way Jewish people celebrate their history?

- (A) They tell the story of escaping from slavery during the Passover feast.
- (B) They travel to different villages to read the book of Exodus.
- (C) They go to a special school to become Exodus storytellers.
- (D) They use special songs and dances to teach the children during Passover.

4 Based on the article, what is a good way to describe the relationship between storytelling and cultural traditions?

- (A) Storytelling has been an important way to change and improve cultural traditions for many years.
- (B) A lack of storytellers is destroying many different cultural traditions around the world.
- (C) Storytelling helps to preserve and continue important cultural traditions all over the world.
- (D) Storytellers must have a deep understanding of cultural traditions in order to write new stories.