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## The adverse impact of the flow of African storytelling between older and younger generations as a result of the movement of people from rural to urban areas

### *The case of the Bapedi storytelling tradition*



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#### ABSTRACT

Migration from the rural to urban areas has a negative impact on the preservation of Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. Within Bapedi people's cultural context, storytelling has been passed down from generation to generation, for ages. The transmission process takes place in social environment that provides authentic social cues about how knowledge is to be applied. Bapedi culture is characterized by ideas, customs, taboos, and social behaviour of Bapedi society. Due to the movement of people from rural to urban areas, children are in desperate need of new ideas and concepts regarding everyday life. The primary objective of this study was to investigate what is gained and what is lost in the process of migration. The main questions the study addressed are: a) how effectively can storytelling from Bapedi cultural perspective be taught in the urban areas? b) what are the attitudes of Bapedi children in both urban and rural areas regarding storytelling? c) what is gained and what is lost in the process of migration? d) what is the relevance of storytelling within Bapedi people's historical context, and e) what is the transmission process of storytelling within Bapedi people's cultural context? To achieve the objectives of this study, contextual approach was employed, and data was collected through observations and interviews. Relevant sources to the context of this study in the form of published journal articles, book chapters, books and theses were also consulted to compare and complement data collected from the field research. Closer investigation has revealed that prolonged separation following migration often disrupt parent-child relationships and has a negative impact on the transmission of values and knowledge as well as the preservation of Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. It was concluded that losing contact with elderly people, children might miss the opportunity of psychological and educational benefits, such as enhanced imagination to help visualize spoken words, improved vocabulary, and more refined communication skills, as well as indigenous knowledge about morals and cultural values.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Bapedi society is one of the ethnic groups found in Limpopo Province in South Africa. A large percentage of Bapedi people is found in Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality (GSDM); see Figure 1. They speak the language ‘Sepedi’, one of the eleven official languages found in South Africa. Within Bapedi people’s cultural context, storytelling is as old as Bapedi culture, and is ancient as humankind. It is one of the traditional modes of learning employed in transmitting Indigenous Knowledge (IK). This type of mode has proved to be one of the most effective modes of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the other/another. It forms part of aural-oral learning system, and memorization helps the children to learn stories by heart.

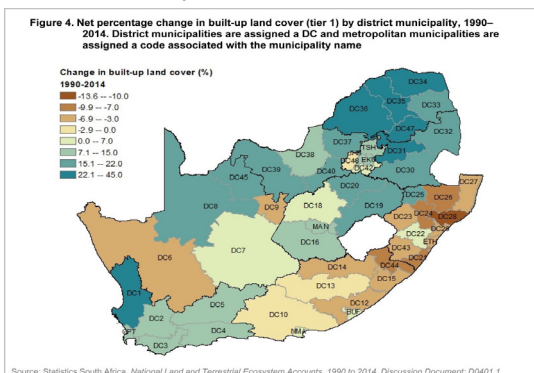


Figure 1: Geographical Location Map of South Africa showing Limpopo Province & Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality (DC47). [In almost all the remote areas found in Limpopo Province, Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality inclusive, unemployment rate is very high. Some](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBD_enZA954ZA954&q=Local+municipalities+in+Sekhukhune+District&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&vet=1&biw=1280&bih=609&dpr=15; [accessed 10 October 2022].</a></p>
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families are living a hand to mouth existence. Based on the foregoing, some parents are compelled to temporarily relocate to the urban areas to seek for employment/jobs, and of course for survival. Unfortunately, the movement from rural to urban areas has the adverse impact of the logical flow of African storytelling, Bapedi story telling tradition in particular, between older and younger generations. The adverse impact is a concern to most families because the migration deprive children the opportunity to learn about their cultural heritage and identity through story telling. Elderly people in the Bapedi culture are regarded as the reservoir of Indigenous Knowledge. Children rely much entirely on their parents and grandparents with regard to the transmission of indigenous knowledge with reference to morals, cultural values, indigenous music, oral literature, myths, art and rites through which Bapedi cultural heritage and identity are built. Accordingly, the study is structured as follows; first it presents the introduction, followed by the research strategy and theoretical underpinning. Following next, previous related studies are discussed. A contextual approach is employed in this research, based on the researcher’s personal experience. It reflects first-hand information to be collected, documented and analysed. The interviews aim to identify the challenges that face contemporary Bapedi society, as well as the significant role played by storytelling in the Bapedi culture. The interviews address research questions such as 1) how effectively can storytelling from Bapedi cultural perspective be taught in the urban areas; 2) what is gained and what is lost in the process of migration? and 3) what are the attitudes of the children regarding storytelling in both urban and rural areas? Therefore, this study focuses on exploring how storytelling can be used as a tool to preserve the Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. The study

has adopted Theory of identity and social identity theory to illustrate how storytelling can be used as a tool for safeguarding Bapedi rich cultural heritage, skilful story telling practices, and ancestral teachings inherited from the ancestors. Finally, the study highlights concluding thoughts and recommendations of the study.

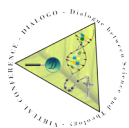
## II. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The researcher employed contextual approach, observations, and interviews to collect data, and documentary analysis to examine previous studies related to storytelling in African context, and to develop suggestions and/or recommendations to address challenges encountered in the Bapedi culture with regard to Bapedi story telling tradition, as a result of the movement of people from rural to urban areas (migration). The present study is based on Theory of identity and social identity theory, as proposed by Stets & Burke (2000). According to these scholars, in theory of identity and social theory, the self is reflective in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications. In *Social identity* theory, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987), describe this process as self-categorization, and in identity theory, it is called identification (McCall and Simmons 1978). According to McCall and Simons (1978), through the process of self-categorization or identification, an identity is formed. Endorsing the above viewpoints, Hogg and Abrams (1988) opine that in social identity theory, a social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group. These scholars believe that a social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves

as members of the same social category. They are of the view that through a social comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labelled the in-group; and persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group (Hogg & Abrams 1988). The theory is applicable to this study because in Bapedi culture through the process of self- categorization or identification, an identity is formed; and a social group (Bapedi people) is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category (Bapedi culture). Theory of identity and social identity theories are adopted for this study because within Bapedi people's cultural context, the self is reflective, and Bapedi people view themselves as members of the same social category, same ethnic group (Bapedi).

## III. PREVIOUS RELATED STUDIES

African storytelling in African context has been rehearsed by various scholars such as Ambala (2020); Baldasaro et al. (1989); Chapman (1998); Davies (2021); Davies (2019); John & Visser (2017); Marsden et al. (2000); Sithole & Bondai (2020); Slottje (2009); Stevenson (2019) & Tuwe (2016). In particular, Sithole and Bondai (2020:61) share insightful information regarding 'Taboos and storytelling for teaching and learning with special reference to Curriculum Decolonization in Africa'. They postulate that original stories could be animated so that pupils interact visually, cognitively, and emotionally engage with the actors in the various stories (2020:61). These scholars emphasize that without exception, African taboos in the past and in the contemporary times are tools for cultural and educational transmission and enforcement of desired behaviour in society (2020:56).



Endorsing the above viewpoints, Marsden et al (2010:1) believe that digital storytelling could play a role in rural African communities, as there appears to be a high degree of compatibility between the rich oral storytelling heritage of those communities and the audio narrative of digital stories. These scholars contend that many African cultures may be described as predominantly oral; knowledge is preserved by telling rather than writing, and storytelling performances are an important social and culture-defining practice (2010:1). According to these scholars, stories ranging from indigenous folktales to stories about relatively recent historical periods, such as Apartheid-era narratives, may be preserved as text or video. These scholars are concerned that these media lack the original live oral dimension of these stories (2010:4). Congruent to the above views, Davies observes that the importance of storytelling in African culture has long been acknowledged, even as it is evident in everyday verbal exchanges that rely on expression, interaction, and animation (Davies 2021:5; John & Visser 2017). Davies believes that stories are a form of organizational communication and are told and retold among members of an organization as the construct meaning that defines the organization's past events and future possibilities (2021:8).

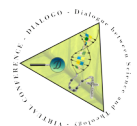
Other scholars such as Finnegan (2007); Gamil (2017); Gunara et al. (2019); Harashani (2018); Keller (2014); have made an enormous contribution in the fields of Anthropology and storytelling in African context. Sharing more insight on the subject, Keller (2014:4) writes that traditionally, storytelling was a communal endeavour, oral and interactive. Keller reminds us that no matter what we believe, it is hard to deny that words were in fact the beginning of everything for us (2014:9). According to Keller, words

compose stories, and stories compose history (2014:9). Keller is of the opinion that stories are shared, and they travel. Furthermore, he argues that nothing is more important than preserving the words of the people (2014:15). In consonance with Keller's opinion, Gamil (2017:166) postulates that storytelling can be defined in many ways. He cites an example that many researchers put different definitions for storytelling in general and in tourism in particular. Gamil further opines that stories have an impressive role in life; they inspire people and create the human and emotional connection (2017:166). He contends that stories can transfer the values, the history, and the culture to the future generations (2017:166). In the same vein, Gunara et al. (2019:223) states that through the process of self-categorization and identification, identity is formed. In his view, the cultural identity of indigenous people is also characterized by similarities in livelihoods, cultural artefacts, artistry, and more specifically the same ancestors, in which each member of the society can draw a genealogical relation to the same ancestor (2019:224).

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### A. Parent-child relationship

Literary evidence has shown that prolonged separation following migration often disrupt parent-child relationships and has a negative impact on the transmission of values and knowledge as well as the preservation of Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. During interviews, it was also established that losing contact with elderly people, children are likely to miss the opportunity of psychological and educational benefits, such as enhanced imagination to help visualize spoken words, improved vocabulary, and more refined



communication skills, and Indigenous Knowledge about morals, and cultural values.

### *B. The significant role played by storytelling in the Bapedi culture*

When asked about the significant role played by storytelling in the Bapedi culture, all participants felt that besides empowering children with morals and cultural values, it has psychological and educational benefits, such as enhanced imagination to help visualize spoken words, improved vocabulary, and more refined communication skills. Some participants felt that story telling strengthens the parent-child relationship. During interviews it was also established that in the Bapedi society, oral storytelling is about telling a story through voice and gestures. The impression created during interviews was that, the oral tradition can take many forms, including epic poems, songs, rhymes, chants, and others. When asked about the relevance of storytelling within Bapedi people's historical context, all participants agreed that not all the stories transmitted in the Bapedi culture are historically accurate or even true. According to them, truth is less important than providing cultural cohesion. Storytelling can encompass proverbs, prayers, religion, fables, legends, myths, and instructions. Attesting to the above observations, Tuwe (2016:4) opines that in African context, storyteller utilises a language that is vibrant and full of images and symbols and imitates many characters in the story. According to Tuwe, stories support and reinforce the basic doctrines of a culture (2016:5). In his view, at times, African oral performances are regarded as simply quasi-dramatic phenomena (2016:5). Tuwe is convinced that far from being a mere source of entertainment, the story helps to sharpen the people's creativity and imagination, to shape

behaviour, to train their intellect and to regulate their emotions (2016:5). In the same vein, Sithole and Bondai (2020:59) opine that storytelling is one of the most powerful indigenous or localised ways of teaching and learning which, if applied with expertise and commitment, could inevitably enhance knowledge production, acquisition, and utilisation. Sithole and Bondai further assert that stories provide a social context to learning and a healthy social environment is critical to learning and the human brain's ability to function properly (2020:60). Furthermore, these scholars argue that the use of storytelling as a pedagogical renaissance is likely to broaden learners' awareness and appreciation of other culture (2020:61). Children in the Bapedi culture learn about their culture through storytelling, music – through songs, dances, musical games, and lyrics that embody memes of culture that are framed in music. These 'cultural lessons' per se are not necessarily formalized lessons but rather moments which are omnipresent (sometimes spontaneous and sometimes formal lessons) and engage children on a daily basis (see Photo 1).



**Photo 1:** Children in Sekhukhune district learn about their culture through story telling (Ga-Mashegoana village, 17.03.2007), Photographer: Morakeng Edward Kenneth Lebaka.

V. CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED IN THE BAPEDI SOCIETY WITH REFERENCE BAPEDI STORYTELLING TRADITION

Analysing the data, it was evident that contemporary Bapedi society is alarmed by an increasing number of challenges such as migration to urban areas (temporary), changes in lifestyles, economic booms, modernization, and globalization. The exposition of this study has shown that prolonged separation following migration often disrupt parent-child relationships and has a negative impact on the transmission of values and knowledge as well as the preservation of Bapedi cultural heritage and identity. Indications from the investigation suggest that losing contact with elderly people, children might miss the opportunity of psychological and educational benefits, such as enhanced imagination to help visualize spoken words, improved vocabulary and more refined communication skills, as well as indigenous knowledge about morals and cultural values.

A. The learning progression of storytelling in the Bapedi culture

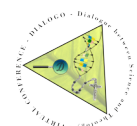
It is worthwhile to mention here that during the enculturation process, children learn by listening and memorization. The learning progression is informal, aural-oral and memory based (see figure 2); Repetition helps children to memorize, recall, remember and master the themes of the narratives. There is no written work, and no marks are awarded to any achievement or success. Success incentives are in the forms of intrinsic motivation and praise. Animals and birds are often used in Bapedi people’s story telling tradition to make the narratives interesting, worth-listening, easy to learn, and unforgettable. Narratives are also characterized by metaphorical and proverbial language.

B. The transmission process of storytelling within Bapedi people’s cultural context?

Content, Context and Communication

Table 1: Teaching and learning plan for stories in the Bapedi culture.

Narrating/Singing	Passing on stories to know them by heart involves memorizing them. The process is simple: during the transmission of stories parents and others offer the necessary support. Call-and-response and imitation are common structural arrangement in Bapedi storytelling tradition.
Listening	Stories in the Bapedi culture are transmitted orally. Through the processes of listening, demonstration, observation and internalization, communal undertaking and enculturation process becomes a reality.
Internalization	A linkage between the learning of the lyrics, melody, and movement (from words to movement-incorporating internalisation and an abridged enculturation process).
Observation	Children learn by observing the parents and others as they narrate stories during demonstration.
Aural recall	This is how the children remember the narratives by ear. Memorizing narratives helps them to develop a mental ‘map’ of the narratives.



Repetition	As repetition of narratives is one of the most important compositional features, it often serves as a useful means by which the narrator emphasizes and projects to the listening audience/children the principal idea or ideas of the narrative.
Instruction	The transmission process is direct, organized, and instructional. Most Bapedi themes are educative either by use of direct statements or by use of idioms, metaphors and proverbs that are poetically structured to stimulate further reasoning and realization of meaning through deduction.
Demonstration	In most cases, the learning process is a group activity. Demonstration implies some definite mode of instruction, and there are a number of examples of such instructive techniques. Different rhythmic patterns are demonstrated within the footwork, movements, and gestures of the dance, depicting animals or birds associated with the narratives.
Group Performance & Mastery	After the children have mastered the narratives, they can start narrating them. The narratives are repeated innumerable times until all children have mastered every detail. Different movements of animals or birds are choreographed into a complete performance of singing and dance.

The results in *Table 1* focus on transmission of stories, narrating/singing, learning through listening, observation, internalization, aural-recall, repetition, instruction, communal undertaking, group performance and mastery. Further observations made on the transmission of

storytelling within Bapedi people’s cultural context are listed and discussed in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2** below shows a proposed diagram for the teaching and learning progression of stories/narratives within Bapedi people’s cultural context.

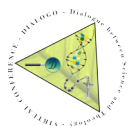
**LISTENING**

Singing	Aural recall	Repetition
Call-and-response is a common structural arrangement in Bapedi storytelling tradition.	This is how the children remember the stories by ear. Memorizing the song helps them to internalize the stories.	As most of the stories are short and repetitive, children memorize the stories almost immediately.



**OBSERVATION AND INTERNALIZATION**

Instruction	Demonstration	Imitation
Stories are consciously and directly taught to the children.	Different gestures are demonstrated depicting animals or birds associated with the narratives.	The children learn by observing and imitating the parents.



**GROUP PERFORMANCE**

Internalization	Coordination	Gestures
Learning through slow absorption and unconscious internalization of the sounds.	Children on their own, drawing upon their creative intelligence, use recreation, variation and gestures to make their narratives impressive.	Different movements are choreographed into a complete performance of singing, narration and dance.

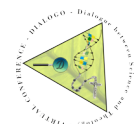
**Figure 2:** Proposed diagram for the teaching and learning progression of storytelling in the within Bapedi people’s cultural context. In the Bapedi culture, Local Knowledge (LK) is a systematic process informed by the concept of indigenous music and storytelling as a social experience, as well as an agency for the management of people and society.

The body of evidence-based inquiry and research has revealed that knowledge is preserved by telling rather than writing, and storytelling performances are an important social and culture-defining practice. Oral accounts and literary evidence have also demonstrated that learning by doing is one of the most effective modes for the transmission of Indigenous Local Knowledge (ILK). In particular, Keller (2014:23) opines that socially, stories are ubiquitous. They unify, edify, and entertain. In his view, every kind of story matters. Congruent to the above viewpoints, Davis (2021:7) postulates that stories are subjective and intersubjective accounts of past experiences and are used by leaders to propagate the values and norms of their

preferred organizational cultures. He is convinced that storytelling can occur in the context of casual social interaction among group members, which is referred to here as interpersonal communication (2021:12). It has emerged from this study that in the Bapedi society, especially in remote rural areas, where there is no electricity supply, most families are without televisions, this type of a situation strengthens parent-child relationship, but also affords children a golden opportunity to learn from their parents about the morals, cultural values, indigenous music, oral literature, myths, art and rites. It has become evident from the interviews that within Bapedi people’s cultural context, storytelling has been passed down from generation to generation, for ages. With regard to the preservation of Bapedi cultural heritage and identity through storytelling, it was encouraging to learn from the participants that irrespective of the adverse impact of the flow of African storytelling between older and younger generations as experienced in the Bapedi society, a large percentage of children is still learning about their culture through storytelling as a result of strong parent-child relationship.

*C. Single verse stanza and Imagery*

Reviewing the results yielded thus far, it is clear that greater numbers of Bapedi stories are composed in single verse form. The diversity of length ranges from four lines to twelve. Noteworthy is the fact that there are no fixed rules of length followed by the narrators/parents in narrating the stories, but the frequency in which a pattern occurs informs us about a thought coordination and organization. It has also emerged from this study that in the Bapedi culture, imagery is a technique in storytelling adopted to create pictures in the minds of the audience/children in order to stimulate their imagination of



the objects and subjects described and represented, and to arouse their response. Findings of this study show that within Bapedi people's cultural context, several images are created by the narrators to act as symbols that represent the themes of the narratives and how they feel about the characters they describe.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS, SUGGESTIONS AND/OR RECOMMENDATIONS

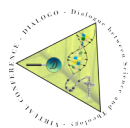
The study described and discussed the whole spectrum of African storytelling from Bapedi people's cultural perspective, within the context of history, pedagogical significance of African storytelling, entertainment, moral lessons behind African stories, the uniqueness of African storytelling from Bapedi people's cultural perspective, African storytelling as a communal participating experience and challenges encountered in the Bapedi society with regard to Bapedi storytelling tradition, and explained how storytelling is transmitted without written transcriptions. Based on observations, interviews and viewpoints by different scholars cited in the text, it can be concluded that losing contact with elderly people, children might miss the opportunity of psychological and educational benefits, such as enhanced imagination to help visualize spoken words, improved vocabulary, and more refined communication skills, as well as indigenous knowledge about morals and cultural values. The impression created during interviews and observations was that Bapedi people use stories to define who they are, how they perceive themselves and others, and how they conduct themselves in the Bapedi society. It has become evident from the interviews that children's stories have many social meanings. They are one of the basic and fun ways to communicate. It has emerged from this study that Bapedi people sustain and strengthen Bapedi

cultural heritage and identity through story telling. Based on these findings and discussions, it is arguable that storytelling within Bapedi cultural context is used to entertain, inform, to promulgate Bapedi cultural tradition and values, as well as to educate.

In the light of the findings and discussions of this study, the over-riding recommendations of the study are that 1) a research study of this kind should be taken seriously in South Africa for an exploration of indigenous values influencing learning systems; 2) since the Bapedi local heritage is so rich in significance, it could, if kept alive, lead to exciting creative possibilities in the present and future; 3) Bapedi people should keep and perpetuate their valuable heritage, which is still needed for survival and for the welfare of our next generation. The data so far gathered are illuminative, however, they would benefit from being supplemented by those from other culture. Such evidence should help provide more definitive information on cosmologies and epistemologies in African storytelling. As a way of redeeming the loss and reviving the heritage of the Bapedi storytelling tradition, it is further recommended that storytelling and taboos be taught as a subject in both primary and post primary institutions.

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