

## TRANSCENDING THE FOLKTALE: FROM STORYTELLING TO ESTORIES

Wan Aida Wan Yahaya\*

\*Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia, [aida.yahaya@gmail.com](mailto:aida.yahaya@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The art of storytelling fades with the evolution of digital mobile technology that allows for stories to be shared through various forms of media and mediums. When once stories were told at bedtime or around campfires, today, children 'Google' or 'YouTube' the kind of stories they want to listen to. Where does this place the folktale within a society's cultural domain? Does it merely become part of a past text, a figment of past imagination? Realizing the importance of folktales, organizations such as UNESCO have come up with special projects in which these folktales are shared among neighbouring countries and cultures. Nevertheless, the power of the online medium cannot be overlooked in its ease of access and availability. This paper aims to identify the manner in which the Malaysian folktale today transcends the fundamental art of storytelling and adapts itself to the new form of digital content. It argues that in its flexibility to mould itself to change, stories are able to retain the essence of a nation's given tradition and cultural history.

**Keywords:** Folktale, Storytelling.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital mobile technology has altered the way in not only how we communicate, but also in ways that information is shared. While most forms of communication are verbal in nature, print media depicts another form of communication that has had to transform to accommodate changing times. When once stories in books were known as bedtime stories, stories today take on a much more virtual nature. When once, storytelling was considered an art, told and passed down through generations, today, storytelling is more visual as that found in films and on television. And now, storytelling is virtual as stories are transformed into digital online content that not only allows for the verbal and the visual, but also for the ease of mobile access. Thus, are stories of the past in the folktale a representation of an outdated imagination? It would seem not, as many societies attempt to retain cultural tales through various means as these stories are deemed subtle in its identification of social background and the values that it has to share.

In realizing its importance, bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in 1997 proposed efforts for the 'International Protection of Expressions of Folklore.' As their Executive Summary declares, "The 1989 UNESCO *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* is generally recognized as the highest profile declaration on the importance of intangible heritage in the world," (UNESCO-WIPO, 1997, p2). More recently, the Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding Under the Auspices of UNESCO and their project *Telling Tales from Southeast Asian and Korea* (2012) [<http://asianfolktales.unescoapceiu.org/sub1.htm>] have extended itself to inculcate the sharing of cultural

traditions and folklore to the Southeast Asian region, inclusive of Korea. The project gathers a wide range of folktales from eleven Southeast Asian countries and Korea, in which primary school children can read or watch folktales from their own country or from other partner countries. This is a noble effort in encouraging the sharing of cultural traditions with a wider community in efforts to not only preserve traditional stories but for a better social understanding of each country within the region. However, this paper does not intend to explore the UNESCO-WIPO projects, but identifies its efforts as an attempt by an organization to ensure that the folktales of a given society do not lose its cultural identity. There may be much to argue on this note, nevertheless, let us explore the manner in which Malaysian folktales (similar to many from around the region) have adapted itself to the new century, allowing for the stories and tales themselves to transcend time.

Like many cultures, the Malaysian folklore is based on tales of old, told by elders and passed down from one generation to the next. The invention of print allowed for these stories to be documented and preserved in text form that enabled for the sharing of these stories to a wider group of society. The nature in which stories evolved and were documented was in itself society's attempt to ensure that an essence of their traditional past remained relevant to contemporary society of the time. As highlighted by Mohd Taib Osman (1989), "...folk beliefs are in themselves a documentation of [that] history for as we look at the existing folk beliefs today, or at least as they are faithfully and ethnographically recorded, they are easily recognized as a conglomeration of disparate elements, and sometimes seemingly incongruently mixed and related to one another." For many, the preservation of stories or folktales allows not only for a historical record but an attempt to depict the cultural representation of its identity as a social group. These folktales identify the *nuances of a society's beliefs, fears, ideologies, and philosophies* that form the foundation of the community, and while the sharing of these stories may differ among cultures, its teachings and values remain very much the same. As previously written from earlier research on works by Jan Harold Brunvand, James Danandjaja (1984) suggests that stories are "disseminated and inherited over the generations in collective societies of all kinds, in a traditional manner in different versions, be it oral or in patterns accompanied by gestures of mnemonic devices." The idea that stories today transcends the folktale is not so much in the change of the content but by the means in which these folktales are shared today. Development of technology such as the tablets and the smart phones has allowed these stories to become accessible from anywhere in the world, and at any time. This method changes the nature in which the folktales are told but does not detract the value of its original story.

## 2. TRANSFORMATION

### 2.1. The Google-YouTube Generation

The idea that stories are now 'Googled' or searched on 'YouTube' is probably a practice that is not familiar to generations prior to those born after the turn of the millennium. And while many still struggle with using the basic computer, much less the smart phones or tablets, the digital age is a lifestyle for children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Access to unlimited amounts of information has allowed for children of the younger generation to have access to information at their fingertips. Statistics of Malaysian online users alone stand at 18 million out of a population of 29 million, a number that is increasing by the day. While the numbers are general in nature, information gathered indicates that those between the ages of 16-24 represent 73% of users who access the internet on a daily basis. It provides an overview as to the high volume of internet users in a country such as Malaysia in which, while popular users are above 16 years of age, those 16 and below remain unaccounted for, indirectly representing an 'invisible' mass of internet users who may be just as active.

Ayelet Segal (2012, p4) in *Engaging with the YouTube Generation* addresses the manner in which learning and the manner in which young learners understand has differed, "Today most students turn to the web first and increasingly search YouTube, even before Google. The immediacy and huge fluidity of video on almost every topic is quickly making it a primary medium for education and knowledge." Children who have access to online content are able to search for information within their knowledge capacity. As Segal identifies through his work, attention towards YouTube and Google allows for immediate exploration of information that opens for an 'infinite wealth of engaging online information to satisfy their curiosity'. The manner of the online world allows for sharing, feedback, layers of information and brings forth the 21<sup>st</sup> century skill of 'digital articulation'. It is this structure of information change and sharing that has transformed the manner in which folktales are told. The need to conform to the demands of modern technology, forces the folktale to adapt itself into new forms that are not only accessible, but remains relevant to present society. The transformation in which information is shared and disseminated changes the very foundation in which oral traditions began and new stories are told.

## 2.2. Malaysian Folktales of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Stories of the Sang Kancil

As previously identified, with the transformation of information sharing and knowledge gained, the form in which Malaysian folktales attempt to link itself is through the production of animated content. With the advancement of animated technology, Malaysian stories are experiencing a change in its telling. Initially based on folktales from classic texts, in attempts to gain the attention of the younger generation, especially young children, the current trend is the adaptation of these classic tales into animated forms. A number of local animation companies have taken it upon themselves to adapt these tales and reformulate them within contemporary settings. One example of a popular Malaysian folktale is the story of the Sang Kancil and his adventures that is believed to be a compilation of traditional folktales about the local mouse deer. It is considered a popular children's fable not only of Malaysian culture but also Indonesian Javanese culture as both nations share similar roots along the Malay Archipelago. Perceived as small and meek the Sang Kancil outwits and triumphs against numerous enemies and challenges in his daily adventures. Some say that the Sang Kancil stories resemble that of the American Brier Rabbit tales. In taking the animated form, these folktales expand their outreach not only to screen mediums but also to the digital world through sites such as YouTube. And while the form of the tales has changed, society's cultural domain remains intact through the narratives told as these stories remain present and relevant to contemporary society.

In efforts to adapt, animate and disseminate these stories, one relevant example within the Malaysian scene is efforts made by the producers of Les Copaque. The producers are the creators of the popular Malaysian TV series, *Upin and Ipin* that has not only been able to gain the attention of local Malaysian children, but also those from Indonesia and many others from around the world. The programme is a children's animation series in which the main characters are 5 year old twins. The stories centre around their world of family and friends as they go about on their daily adventures (much like the Sang Kancil stories of the past). The stories identify relevant cultural and traditional history and practices in efforts to pass down constructive values to these young audiences. An extension from the *Upin and Ipin* series is another animated programme by the same producers, entitled *Once Upon A Time...* (trans. 'Pada Zaman Dahulu...'). It is directly through this programme that Malaysian folktales are told and retold within a contemporary setting. The content itself begins in present modern day society before through flashback, tells the tales of the past; creating an animated form of storytelling in itself. The series is not only popular on prime time television, but it is also accessible online in which these younger group of audiences repeatedly view the stories that have managed to capture their attention, at their own leisure.

## 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, folktales, digital content and the identification of cultural identity are brought full circle. Efforts to preserve elements of a traditional or cultural folktale, evolves to accommodate changing times. In the hopes that the essence of the core storyline does not fade is the values retained within them. The Malaysian folktale is currently in a new phase of adapting to change as it shifts from the film and television screen to the digital mobile screen allowing for the next generation to have easy access to the stories at any given time. Like many societies around the world, change is in the form of its transitions, as Stuart Hall (1992) states:

National cultures are a distinctly modern form. The allegiance and identification which, in a pre-modern age or in more traditional societies were given to a tribe, people, religion and region, came gradually in Western societies to be transferred to the *national* culture. Regional and ethnic differences were gradually subsumed beneath what Gellner calls the 'political roof' of the nation-state, which thus became a powerful source of meanings for modern cultural identities.

As Hall identifies issues of culture and cultural identity in the late twentieth century, he lists the various ways in which a national culture is able to develop its own characteristics. Hall identifies the *narrative of the nation*, as it is told and retold in national histories, literatures, media and popular culture. Secondly, the moment when these narratives place an emphasis on *origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness*, so that national identity is represented as primordial. Next, when we need to be aware of the tendency of nations to invent traditions. Fourth, when the idea that nations are based on foundation myths, stories that locate the origin of the nation, the people and their national character in an earlier time. Finally, when some nations at times see themselves as symbolically grounded on the idea of pure, original people or 'folk'. As change comes upon contemporary society, the demand to retain fragments of the past remains as traditional and cultural folktales transcends these times.

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