

# ORALITY, STORY AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN AFFECTING WORLDVIEW AND VALUES

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**Theme:** Social Transformation

**Research Domains:** Cultural Diversity and Resilience / Community Vitality

## ABSTRACT

Cultures are dynamic and are always in flux. What happens, however, when cultural changes are not good – when there is evidence of an eroding values system? Can a particular culture's worldview intentionally and substantially change? It is unarguable that one's worldview, culture and values are entrenched and to influence the alteration of these is difficult. However, the idea that affecting one's worldview, culture and values to the point of change is not impossible. What this article proposes is that worldviews, cultures, and values can indeed be changed, resulting in not only the transformation of an individual's life, but an entire culture as well. Storytelling in particular is a catalyst that can bring about substantial changes in worldview, culture and values.

## INTRODUCTION

*What is written in ink can fade away by a single drop of water;  
what is written on the heart will last an eternity. [1]*

*Once the story leaves your mouth,  
it is carried away in the hearts of your listeners. [2]*

Cultures are dynamic and are always in flux. They might be equated with languages in that a static unchanging language becomes a classical language, no longer living but only studied within the halls of academia. Language is dynamic; it changes over time or else it dies. That is why there are differing versions of Portuguese in Portugal, Brazil and the Portuguese speaking nations of Africa. Likewise, the English of Britain, Australia, and America is considerably different. Just as languages change, over time cultures change; they are not static. What happens, however, when cultural changes are not good – when there is evidence of an eroding values system, or when self-centered materialism creeps into the mainstream of

society? Is the idea of intentionally affecting cultural transformation possible? Can, in fact, a particular culture's worldview substantially change, and, if so, how? It is unarguable what cultural anthropologists say about how entrenched are one's worldview, culture and values. To influence the alteration or changing of these is extremely difficult. What can be challenged, however, is the idea that affecting one's worldview, culture and values to the point of change is next to impossible.

Two popular Buddhist folktales are *Empty Cup Mind* and *A Monk with Heavy Thoughts*. *Empty-Cup Mind* illustrates the value and, sometimes, necessity of changing worldview, that of replacing the old with the new. *A Monk with Heavy Thoughts* takes one from the mind to the heart, emphasizing the necessity of speaking to the heart and not just the mind.

### Empty Cup Mind

A wise old monk once lived in an ancient temple. One day the monk heard an impatient pounding on the temple door. He opened it and greeted a young student, who said, "I have studied with great and wise masters. I consider myself quite accomplished in Buddhist philosophy. However, just in case there is anything more I need to know, I have come to see if you can add to my knowledge." "Very well," said the wise old master. "Come and have tea with me, and we will discuss your studies." The two seated themselves opposite each other, and the old monk prepared tea. When it was ready, the old monk began to pour the tea carefully into the visitor's cup. When the cup was full, the old man continued pouring until the tea spilled over the side of the cup and onto the young man's lap. The startled visitor jumped back and indignantly shouted, "Some wise master you are! You are a fool who does not even know when a cup is full!" The old man calmly replied, "Just like this cup, your mind is so full of ideas that there is no room for any more. Come to me with an empty-cup mind, and then you will learn something." [3]

### A Monk with Heavy Thoughts

As two Buddhist monks walked along a muddy, rain-drenched road, they came upon a lovely woman attempting to cross a large mud puddle. The elder monk stopped beside the woman, lifted her in his arms, and carried her across the puddle. He set her gently down on the dry ridge of the road as the younger monk discreetly admired her charms. After bowing respectfully to the woman, the two monks continued down the muddy road. The younger monk was sullen and silent as they walked along. They traveled over the hills, down around the valleys, through a town, and under forest trees. At last, after many

hours had passed, the younger monk scolded the elder, “You are aware that we monks do not touch women! Why did you carry that girl?” The elder monk slowly turned and smiled. He said, “My dear young brother, you have such heavy thoughts! I left the woman alongside the road hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?” [4]

These two folktales are not merely stories for the sake of entertainment. They have been told and retold, passed on from generation to generation, because they are both entertaining and instructive. They teach, as well as reflect, Buddhist worldview. The stories illustrate the power of the story in Buddhist culture, as well as provide examples of how the use of stories is a culturally appropriate, accepted, and effective communication method for conveying concepts within that culture. This has been the case for not only many centuries, but also millennia.

Life transformation takes place at the heart level. To change the heart is to change worldview. To change worldview is to change culture. What this article proposes is that worldviews, cultures, and values can indeed be changed, resulting in not only the transformation of an individual’s life, but an entire culture as well. As such, there are certain catalysts affecting cultural change that can be harnessed for such propositions as Bhutan’s policy of Gross National Happiness and Rwanda’s plan for a “purpose-driven nation.” These are only two examples, but the possibilities are endless. His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king of Bhutan, proclaimed that the ultimate purpose of government is to promote the happiness of the people. He said: “Gross National Happiness is more than Gross National Product” [5]. Rwandan president Paul Kagame has committed his government to a five-to-seven-year self-sufficiency project inspired by U.S. pastor Rick Warren and his “Purpose-Driven” network. Warren is the author of the global bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*. He intends to see Rwanda as the first “purpose-driven nation.” [6] With both of these endeavors, and others like them, careful attention must be given to the role of oral tradition and the impact it has on cultural transformation, since it holds the key to effectively catalyze worldview and cultural transformation.

## **WORLDVIEW, CULTURE AND VALUES IN ORAL TRADITION**

What is worldview, and how does it affect culture and values? To put it succinctly, “Worldview study concerns the basic underlying assumptions, whether on tacit or overt levels, that people hold about reality” [7]. Cultural anthropologist Charles Kraft, further explained that a people’s worldview provides them with a “lens, model or map” through which reality is perceived and interpreted [8]. “Our worldview not only guides us in the commitments we make but we are committed to our worldview as well,” Kraft said [9].

A people's worldview includes the most basic assumptions, values and allegiances of that people. This deep level of culture affects and underlies all surface level behavior. ...to discover why people behave in the ways they do, we must look beneath the surface to the things people believe and assume. These deep-level assumptions..., values and allegiance... are largely unconscious, having been learned from childhood as if they were the only possible assumptions. They are, therefore, assumed without proof. [10]

Kraft went on to say that all human interpretation is based on worldview assumptions. "Whenever we observe something, whether it is something merely standing there or something happening to us or to someone else, we automatically assign meaning and value to it," he said [11].

People ordinarily follow their worldview habitually and unconsciously. The worldview assumptions underlying our behavior are mostly quite unconscious to us, though we may become aware of certain of them. ... We are taught these assumptions, values and commitments before we knew anything about alternate possibilities with which they could be compared. This is meant that we accepted or, rather, imbibed what we were taught as absolute, the only right way. Such unconscious acceptance as the only right way, then, led to the development of habits of assuming, thinking, feeling and behaving that felt natural to us. And this naturalness was also without competition. This is, we did not select between one habit and another. There was only one choice with regard to any given issue, so the habits got developed under the best possible circumstances for habit development and they became very strong. [12]

Kraft is adamant that in order to understand a people, one must understand their worldview. "Though we can learn a lot about a people by observing their surface-level behavior, we will never know them deeply until we learn the deep-level assumptions and motivations behind their behavior," he said [13].

Cultural anthropologist and cross-cultural communications specialist David Hesselgrave asked the question, "How are worldviews formed in the first place?" He then answered: "...by the telling of a story (and stories within a story) and drawing inferences from it. That's why all peoples have their story (myth, legend, history – in one sense it makes little difference) and draw upon it to sustain their values." [14]

In gaining a basic understanding of worldview, one can see how intricately woven the concept is with that of culture. One cultural anthropologist simply defines culture as "everything that is part of one's everyday life experience" [15], and Kraft cites culture as "the

integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance” [16]. Furthermore, Kraft concurred with anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action [17].

With worldview and culture, one mirrors the other. At the same time, it becomes nearly impossible to separate one’s values from his or her worldview. “Values and worldview are very closely related,” McKinney said. “For example, values can be viewed either as part of worldview or as emerging from a worldview. Which way you choose to view them depends upon your theoretical perspective.” She added that worldview, values, emotions, and behavior overlap, operating both dependently and interdependently. [18]

Values are accepted or normative ideals of behavior. They involve judgment – bases of evaluation of behavior and actions. Values within various groups are part of their ethical systems that define what is perceived as right, moral, and good within society versus what is disapproved of, immoral, and viewed as wrong. Values distinguish between duty and happiness. They are the basis of many of our decisions.

Values are a cultural universal in that they point out how people should and should not behave. Every culture has a system of values. They are the core of a moral order within a culture. They provide the ideals towards which people strive.... [19]

“Every social group, subculture, or community has its own pattern of values,” Mayers said. “In part, these are derived from the sum of all the values of the members of the community. In part, they are in addition to any and all individually held values. These values make a community unique. They are what causes [sic] a community to grow and maintain interest in life.” [20]

Values are whatever a group or individual within a group considers of importance. Values refer objectively to the worth of an object, thing, action, beliefs, etc., or subjectively to the perceived worth of the same. In each

automatic or consciously made decision, some value underlies the choice of one thing over against another. Since the socialization process is designed to make as much action as possible automatic in response, it thus is responsible for developing or underscoring values. The entire life of an individual can be plotted simply by indicating the choices by which the individual lives. These choices reflect values that underlie the social groupings of which an individual is part within society. The values cause an individual or a group to select out from the total range of activity and identify those specific aspects that the individual and group chooses to make a part of the everyday life experience. [21]

Like Hesselgrave, McKinney makes a strong connection between the transmission of values and that of oral tradition. "The transmission of values occurs through various means such as advice given by elders, including parents to children, customs, taboos, gossip, songs, education, the media, and oral traditions," she said. "Outside researchers can derive values through studying what is transmitted from one generation to the next." [22] She defines oral traditions as recollections of the past that are commonly known in a given culture. "...you can view oral traditions as verbal folk art in a culture," McKinney said. These would include folktales, proverbs, riddles, praise songs or exclamations, heritage tales, legends, poetry, myths, music, performances, etc. "The term oral tradition applies both to the process and its product," she said. "Definitions of culture from the cognitive perspective relate directly to the collection of oral traditions. ...you must study oral traditions, among other things, in order to obtain the knowledge that people have within their memories. [23]

Kraft concurs. "One of the most productive ways of getting at worldview is to collect and study what I call here 'oral and written literature,'" he said. "These are the myths, folktales, proverbs, song lyrics, poems, riddles, novels and the like. Such materials are produced by the people themselves as expressions of concepts they value." [24] Stressing the importance of collecting and studying a people's folklore, Kraft pointed out seven ways in which oral and written literature function to reinforce worldview assumptions:

1. ... provides a basis of common origins and identity.
2. ... answers questions about human destiny and what may help or alter it.
3. ... reinforces basic assumptions of authority, respect, and rights to land or other material possessions.
4. ... clearly pictures who are to be included and who are to be excluded, who are the "we" and who are the "they."
5. ... teaches and reinforces moral values.
6. ... serves to illustrate ideal and sub-ideal behavior and the rewards and punishments that go along with either.

7. ...serves as encouragement in times of difficulty and uncertainty. [25]

Dorji Penjore of the Centre for Bhutan Studies emphasized the impact folklore can have on the formation and transmission of values. A researcher with a focus in the area of oral traditions, he said:

Distilled folk wisdoms like proverbs for example validate values and beliefs, which are reinforced practically in adult life. Folktales make children imagine and create their own mental pictures, and this mental exercise leaves deepest impression on them, imprinting folktales' rightful place in their imagination. Folk wit and wisdom are not taught through formal arrangement, but through direct observation in earlier stage and direct participation in events themselves. To children, entertainment is the end, and values inculcation comes as a by-product. Scolding parents distill folktales into proverbs and use them to guide children's behaviours, thoughts and actions.

Listening to folktales momentarily transports the audience, mostly children, to a different world; later reflection connects the folktale world to the real world that they would soon face as adults. It is when they first understand and link these two worlds that values so imparted are used in their interactions with man, animals, physical world and spirits. These wisdoms are not ordinary one; they have been time-tested through many years of interaction or experience with the real world. The morals of tales are packaged into proverbs. "A confederation of frogs can kill even a tiger" for example is a distillation of the folktale, "Come on Acho Tag! Jump!" Stories express moral or practical wisdom and provide an insight into the adult world. It is common for village elders to quote from some well-known folktales: "like in the tales, you will end up with nothing," or, "don't behave like a tiger in the tale." Child is exposed to knowledge, experiences, morals, customs, rituals and belief that they are supposed to live through as adults through tales. [26]

Author and cross-cultural communications specialist Tom Steffen also made a strong connection among worldview, culture and oral tradition. He said:

Worldview, the linguistic-cultural assumptions and presuppositions that distinguish one people group from another and form subcultures within, finds its foundational meaning in myths and stories. Myths and stories convey their message through historical or fictional characters and beings, sometimes rationally, sometimes in contradictory ways. They are communicated orally, in written prose or on the screen. Those not found in print or picture change in

time as legitimate and illegitimate contextualization takes place. Nevertheless, these two powerful genres form, warn, heal, and transform every worldview, whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaism, scientific, or Christian. To survive, any worldview requires the recitation of myths and stories. [27]

Steffen concluded that myth and story not only form worldview, but transform it as well. He is not alone.

### **“IF THIS IS YOUR LAND, WHERE ARE YOUR STORIES?”**

Edward Chamberlin, Canadian professor of English and Comparative Literature, shared the following story, an incident from which he derived the title of his book on stories and national/cultural identification.

It happened at a meeting between a [native America] Indian community in northwest British Columbia [Canada] and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn't understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question. “If this is your land,” he asked, “where are your stories?” He spoke in English, but then moved into Gitksan, the Tsimshian language of his people – and told a story. All of a sudden everyone understood...even though the government foresters didn't know a word of Gitksan, and neither did some of his Gitksan companions. But what they understood was more important: how stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart. [28]

“If this is your land, where are your stories?” This question carries with it the impact of a doubled-edged blade: Not only do the stories of a people define who they are and the space they possess, but the stories of a people are also the tools used to possess that space.

There are two African folktales that so poignantly illustrate this. One, *The Departure of the Giants*, is from the Horn of Africa, while the second, *Strength*, is a Limba tale from West Africa. Each is too long to convey in its entirety, so a summary will have to suffice.

*The Departure of the Giants* is a tale of giants and how they once occupied the land to the detriment of the “little people.” Reluctantly, God decided they could no longer be on the earth and gave them the choice of leaving with his blessing or leaving with his curse. They chose to leave with his blessing, which was to honor their desire for the women to give birth

to only sons and the cows to give birth to only females. Eventually both – the giants and the cows – died out. The story has a wonderful ending:

The roofs of the tombs fell long ago, and all that remains are piles of stones.  
Because they remember what happened to the giants, people of the tribes  
sometimes say when life seems too generous to them: *Take care, let us not die  
from blessings like the giants did.* [29]

*Strength* is a tale that turns from delight to disaster. It is endearing, sobering and thought-provoking. One day elephant has the idea to have a contest to see who was the strongest. Chimpanzee tied a small tree in a knot. Deer ran three miles into the forest and three miles back. Leopard mightily scraped the ground with his powerful claws. Bushbuck plowed a road through the cane-fields with his horns. Elephant brought down a huge tree. With each feat, all declared that, indeed, it was a show of strength. Then it was man's turn. He whirled, twirled, did somersaults and cartwheels. "That's not strength," the animals said. Man climbed a tree and threw down the palm nuts. "That's great, but not strength," the animals said again. Then man took a gun and shot elephant dead.

Man was jumping and bragging.  
"Strength! Strength!  
Wasn't THAT strength?!"  
"Strength. . . ."

Man looked around.  
The animals were gone.  
They had fled into the forest.  
"Strength! . . ."  
There was no one left to hear him brag.  
Man was alone.

In the forest the animals huddled together and talked.  
"Did you see that?"  
"Was that strength?"  
"Would you call that strength?"  
"No. That was DEATH."  
"That was DEATH."

Since that day the animals will not walk with Man.  
When Man enters the forest he has to walk by himself.

The animals still talk of Man . .  
That creature *Man*. . . .  
He is the one who cannot tell the difference  
    between strength  
    and death. [30]

McKinney said, “The collection and study of oral traditions are crucial for understanding essentially oral societies, and they serve as the bases of the literature of literate societies. Events in both oral and literate societies are the bases for the continued development of oral traditions.” [31] It is not until the role of story in worldview and culture is firmly grasped that one can fully comprehend the necessity of story in worldview change and in life and cultural transformation. “But why story and storytelling?” Thomas Boomershine asked in his book *Story Journey*. “Story is a primary language of experience. Telling and listening to a story has the same structure as our experience,” he said. “The episodes of our lives take place one after another just like a story. One of the ways we know each other is by telling our stories. We live in stories.” [32] He continued:

Storytelling creates community. Persons who tell each other stories become friends. And men and women who know the same stories deeply are bound together in special ways. Furthermore, good stories get retold and from an ever-expanding storytelling network. There is something about a good story that virtually demands retelling. New connections are established between persons who have heard and identified with the same stories. And the deeper meaning of the story, the deeper are the relationships that are formed by the sharing. [33]

“The telling of tales in oral cultures is so crucial because...continuity of culture cannot rely on anything other than memory and internalizing the habits and mores of tradition through rote and mimicry,” communications specialist Andrew Walker said. “If the tradition is not accepted as authoritative through faithful copying or reconstruction, the culture will die.” [34]

## **THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS**

“The heart does not respond to principles and programs; it seeks not efficiency, but passion,” said authors Brent Curtis and John Eldredge in their book *The Sacred Romance*. “Art, poetry, beauty, mystery, ecstasy: These are what rouse the heart. Indeed, they are the language that must be spoken if one wishes to communicate with the heart.” [35] “Life is not a list of propositions, it is a series of dramatic scenes. Story is the language of the heart. Our souls speak not in the naked facts of mathematics or the abstract proportions of systematic theology; they speak the images and emotions of story.” [36]

Without intellectual assent or intentional behavioral change, the stories enter the heart and affect change. Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, said that much later, after one hears a story, he or she proclaims “what are these doing here?” but then finds oneself embracing the truths embedded within the stories. “All of a sudden we see things and people we had never noticed before,” he said. “We hear words and sentences that make sense of what we’ve had intimations of but couldn’t quite place.” [37] Curtis and Eldredge conclude, “The deepest convictions of our heart are formed by stories and reside there in the images and emotions of story” [38].

Kraft said, “For solid changes to happen throughout a culture, people must make basic changes in the worldview of that culture. Just as a tree can only grow as the roots allow it to, so a culture and the society that lives by that culture can only function as well as their ‘worldview-habits’ allow them to.” However, he warned that change in worldview-habits needs to be accompanied by a change in behavior. “Changes in both the cultural structuring of the basic assumption and in the personal living out of those assumptions need to take place,” he said. [39]

Kraft refers to one’s worldview as one’s life script. This script not only provides the mechanism for how one perceives the world, as a lens, so to speak, but also serves as a map for how one relates or responds to the world around him. [40] The stories can serve as the catalyst for a new script, laying a foundation for a new worldview, resulting in life transformation. Kraft warned, however, that change of worldview is a personal thing. “Any ‘power’ of culture (including worldview) is not in the patterns themselves but in the habits of those who follow them,” he said, “so change in surface culture or worldview is a matter of people changing their habits.” Kraft continued, “A script does not change itself. If it is to be changed, it is the people who use it that make the changes. Since culture and worldview do not have life in and of themselves, they cannot change themselves. Like scripts, those who use them give life to the patterns they provide – usually by habitually following them, sometimes by altering the old patterns or by creating new ones.” [41]

British theologian and expert on worldview studies N. T. Wright said that stories are a basic constituent of human life. “They are, in fact, one key element within the total construction of worldview. Stories thus provide a vital framework for experiencing the world. They also provide a means by which views of the world may be challenged,” he said. [42] “Stories are, actually, peculiarly good at modifying or subverting other stories and their worldviews. Where head-on attack would certainly fail, [a story] hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favour which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden away for safety...Stories in having this effect, function as complex metaphors.” [43] He said that stories come into

conflict with each other because worldviews and the stories which characterize them represent the realities of one's life. People are threatened by the intrusion of an opposing worldview or story because it challenges their understanding of reality. "The only way of handling the clash between two stories is to tell yet another story explaining how the evidence for the challenging story is in fact deceptive," Wright said [44].

In essence, Wright said that in order to change one's worldview, he or she must hear a better story. Steffen agreed: "To change a people group's worldview requires the hearing and/or seeing of different stories" [45].

## CONCLUSION

Nansen saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a cat. He seized the cat and told the monks, "If any of you say a good word, you can save the cat." No one answered. So Nansen boldly cut the cat in two pieces. That evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him about this. Joshu removed his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked out. Nansen said, "If you had been there, you could have saved the cat." [46]

"If you had been there, you could have saved the cat." This Zen Buddhist folktale is both a difficult tale and a powerful one. The questions it provokes are these: Who is there, and who is ready to make a difference? Who will come to the forefront telling the stories of old, addressing the situations of today, and shaping the lives of tomorrow? Cultural transformation takes place at the heart level. Stories touch the heart, the heart touches society, and society shapes culture. Today's world is one impoverished of both stories and storytellers. There needs to be a concerted effort to call forth the storytellers and arm them with the "weapons" necessary to catalyze a transformation of society and culture – transformation for good, preserving, restoring, and recapturing the right morals and values that lead a nation and its people toward peace, prosperity and happiness.

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