

CHIKA ANYANWU

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### Transcript

Thank you. I'm a traveller and in the spirit of my ancestors a traveller pays homage to the people they visit, and so, to the owners of this land, I pay homage, and to my ancestors, I say thank you for leading me to this place. Good afternoon.

[voice over, *Human Essence*]

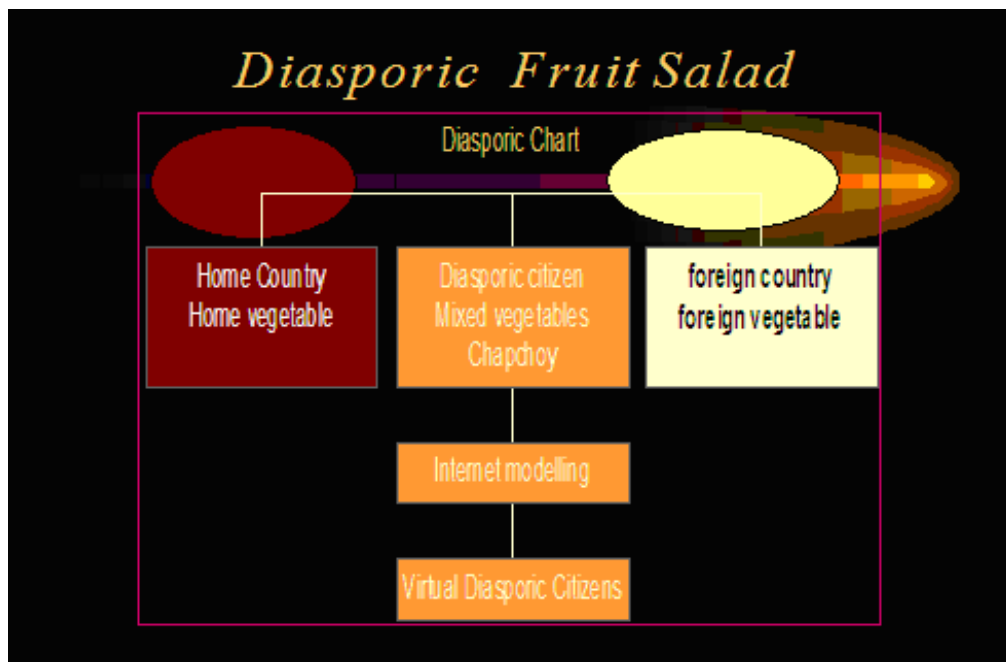
Heart and soul, body and mind, but the very essence of our existence is spirit. What is it about the human spirit that produces the courage and the strength to beat insurmountable odds, to survive and endure, despite unbelievable circumstances? Our spirit embodies the very essence of our existence. We believe that it has been handed down from generation to generation, beginning in Africa, the mother land, where for years we believe that the creator heard us when we cried, saw us when we faltered and helped us along the way and now. More than ever, it is time for us to get back in touch with the spirit that lives inside us all because without it we are less than whole, but with it there is nothing that we cannot overcome, for the essence of our existence is ... spirit.

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[end voice over]

Good afternoon, for this talk I'm not going to go high-tech, but I'm going to share with you a project that we just started, called digital African storytelling, a part of a major project titled *Virtual African Diaspora*. This is a collaborative venture and I would like to network with anybody who is interested because it's an open platform. 'The past continues to speak to us... but it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual "past," ....It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, myth' (Hall 2003:237).

I come from a story telling tradition. In my culture, we learn about the cosmos and ourselves through the stories told to us by our forebears. Today I want to share with you one of those stories told to me by my father, who in turn was told by his forebears. I have been unable to tell it to my own children because, as a diasporic citizen, I gave birth to 'fruit salads' or chap choy in Cantonese. My fruit salads spend their evenings watching *The Simpsons* and glue their eyes to cartoon networks, or busy themselves destroying aliens on PS2. They have no time and patience for stories whose imageries they cannot localise, see on the screen, or manipulate like their Tamagotchi. They spend their time feeding and manipulating their Tamagotchi to ensure it is alive and transform into baby Tamagotchi. They are able to calculate how many Tama-years to make a new Tamagotchi. Unfortunately, they find it difficult to comprehend the number of years their grandfather or great grandfathers lived in far away Africa. They spend the rest of their time on Nintendo or PS2 games, and of course Hollywood movies. So, instead of dreaming about Africa, this is what we get (visual illustration of dream world). This is the type of new children that we have.



My fruit salads are reminiscent of all modern computer mediated children - irrespective of their socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds - who are born in urban cities. So let me share with you my pre-

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computer-age traditional story about the tortoise and the dance contest. This was our version of PS2 and Nintendo games. We spent our evenings in the company of our parents and grandparents listening to such scary, and often wise, stories. You can see a similar style in Chinua Achebe's works, especially in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, because we all come from the same cultural background.

Once upon a time in the animal kingdom, all the animals were invited to the sky for a performance in honour of the sky king. Knowing their flying limitations, many of the animals made alternative preparation for participation. The elephant said it would stay on earth and blow its trumpet loud enough to reach the sky. The giraffe said it would stretch its neck to reach the sky and do a neck dance. The lion said it would go on top of the mountain and roar loud enough to energise everybody for a wonderful performance. The squirrel said it would climb as fast as the birds could fly to the sky. The bat said it would depart a night before the performance to prepare the place before their arrival. The chameleon said it would imitate any of their competitors' steps to give them an edge. But the tortoise wanted desperately to attend but because it could not fly the birds donated some of their feathers to enable it fly with them.

Before they departed for the sky, the tortoise suggested that they all chose a stage name for which they will be addressed. They all welcomed the idea and chose various names. The tortoise said it would like to be known as ALL OF YOU. After their wonderful performance, the organisers brought food and drink for them. But before they could start eating, the tortoise asked the organisers who the food was meant for. They replied, "It is for all of you". The tortoise said to the other animals, well you heard them, the food is meant for me. So the tortoise ate all the food and drinks meant for all the animals. The other hungry animals felt betrayed and angry at the tortoise's selfish trick. So they asked the birds to take back their feathers from the tortoise since he came on a borrowed costume. All the birds plucked their feathers from the tortoise and flew back leaving the tortoise featherless. So started the fall of the tortoise from the sky with overfed stomach and no feathers. The tortoise hit the ground with such a force that its shell broke into several pieces. All the animals that heard what happened left him there to die. But the snail took pity on the tortoise and asked the spider to help sew the broken shell together. As the spider sewed, the snail used its slime to glue them together. This is why the tortoise's shell is very crooked.

But what is the lesson from this story? We do not need to go far to see a realistic portrayal of such mythic stories in present day leadership squabbles in Africa where greed and selfishness is the order of the day. Let's do a situation analysis of a country in Africa, taking Nigeria as a case study.

Nigeria has abundant natural resources and human capital that have not been properly utilised to enhance the people's future. The country has been saddled with corrupt military dictatorship for most of its 45 years of independence. It is the seventh largest producer of oil in the world and one of the richest in gas. But despite this wealth, in 2005, the Paris Club cancelled \$18b from its foreign debt. Nigerian professionals living in other countries of the world, and who help to build the economies of these other countries, run in the hundreds of thousand. On the other hand, bad economic management has forced Nigerian children and their parents living in the country to migrate to big cities where survival of the fittest is the order of the day. Most

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young people flood Internet cafes to plan their next scam email (popularly known as '419' coined from the anti-corruption military Decree 419). The village is left desolate and sparsely populated by old and dying grandparents who, incidentally, are custodians of the people's oral tradition and history. There is therefore no smooth generational cultural transition and continuity as a result of this abrupt dislocation of cultural education caused by urban migration.

The cities on the other hand have become melting pots of frustration, joblessness, greed, exploitation, and a cacophony of discordant socioeconomic malaise. City nights are only accessible to those with guns, while the rest of the population crouch under their beds and pray to wake up in one piece. The diversity of city dwellers also means divergent cultures and varied mythological beliefs. The security threat in cities also means that there is no carryover of village moonlight stories. The people's fears and diversity find a temporary relief in a foreign ideological construct built since colonisation in the form of divine intervention, especially as political leaderships have failed to provide basic social services and a sense of belonging. The result is a proliferation of religious groups in every street corner and homes. These are the same religions that subjugated the traditional belief systems of the people at the time of colonisation.

In other parts of Africa, there is incessant political turmoil: Zimbabwe, Darfur and Rwanda are current examples. There is ecological disaster in Ethiopia, while ethnic war ravaged Somalia. Southern Africa is battling with the effects of HIV AIDS which is decimating the younger generation and leaving millions of orphans with no hope. There is currently a serious crisis brewing in Kenya regarding changing the country's constitution in order to curb bribery and corruption. These and a host of others are the gruesome pictures that grace the global media about Africa, simply because cunning tortoisers in their midst have decided to answer 'All of You', and therefore greedily siphoned the people's wealth into their private pockets - with the help of networked spiders from foreign countries.

With this type of seemingly hopeless situation, the average child born in Africa is caught in what Du Bois refers to as strenuous life: constant struggle in a bid to balance cultural dislocation and contradictions with economic survival. These children are floating in a society that has almost lost its foundational values in the pursuit of money and Western values. According to the poet, Haki Madhubuti, 'Learning to take hold of one's life is very difficult in a culture that values property over life' (Newman and Bond 2000, p.314). On the other hand, the images these children see every day from the media have neither positive iconographic representation of Africa nor give them any sense of participation and belonging.

Children educated with and under these kinds of negative stereotypes grow up to despise the foundation of African cultural heritage, which has created balance for generations of Africans. African children grow up becoming slaves of a techno-culture that they have no proper understanding of or direct control over because the traditional story telling culture - which espouses social and cultural significance to their parents - has been collapsed into one of economic rationalism, expressed through environmental devastation, greed, exploitation, scam, dishonesty and crimes. Such children grow up disillusioned, insecure, powerless, malnourished and in constant need of direction from corrupt leadership. According to Mathea Ekra (Wresch

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1996), then Minister of State, The Ivory Coast, “those who have recently achieved their independence must take care this time not to miss the last train of the twentieth century”. This new train is the information highway and its added technologies.

The argument here is that the language of indoctrination conditions the language of engagement and perception. In the Information Age, our worldview is conditioned by mass mediated information. Lois Tyson (in Mhando 2001) says, “how we see and understand ourselves and the world is governed by the language with which we are taught to see them”. According to Macleod (2005), ‘the majority of online content currently emanates from the US, is text based, and written in English. Not only does this exclude those in developing countries with low basic literacy levels, but it is also of questionable cultural relevance’. “Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy” (bell hooks 1992, p. 1).

The basic question according to Martin Luther King is therefore, how might blacks discover in the process of achieving equal justice, their ultimate identities as members of our interconnected global human family? And that is the question and trigger for those of us in the Diaspora. This question is the foundation of the digital storytelling project. It’s all about narratives from the point of view of Africans in the homeland and diaspora. It is about the preservation of cultural memory and knowledge which form the essence of life. The project is a snapshot of history and development, and of community gathering and nation building. It is about empowerment, education, self-reliance, moral consciousness, and economic self-sufficiency in the age of information technology for children from low socioeconomic background. While it uses Nigeria as a pilot case study, it is expected that the template will be transferable to many other cultures and peoples with similar socioeconomic and political disenfranchisement. This is achieved through the adaptation of traditional stories similar to the above, into interactive digital stories to be used in schools. The idea is to use folklores, mythical figures, animals, magic, fables, proverbs and music to mould moral, ethical, cultural, historical, civic empowerment and self reliance in the daily interaction between children and new media technologies, especially the Internet.

In many traditional African societies, children are not told that their actions are either right or wrong, instead, they are told a story through which they are able to judge their own actions. This method has held the people together for centuries. This style of learning is similar to what Randall Kindley (2002) refers to as ‘scenario-based learning’, which suggests that learning is a natural byproduct of “authentic activities that are common to the community of practice in which the learner is involved”. Unfortunately Western education did not capitalise on this rich educational resource. The consequence is a society in search of identity and moral leadership because the contradictions of ‘one size fits all’ has suddenly become manifest through the globalised nature of new media technologies.

The story telling tradition takes an antiphonal responsorial system of communication. It is built on a communal system of living. An elder starts a story and intones accompanying diagetive songs to which

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children respond. At the end of the story questions are asked and children come up with answers. Children also ask questions where some mythical narratives get complicated or confusing. These questions form the foundation of their knowledge of the community, and create a sense of identity and belonging.

This storytelling structure is very much aligned to the hypertextual structure of the Internet. It is nonlinear or finite. Each of the stories and mythical figures used lead to other stories and mythical figures. Its telling technique is interactive with antiphonal responsorial style, especially in its accompanying music and dance sequences. While the elder starts the story or intones the songs, s/he does so as a custodian of such knowledge but not as the sole custodian. In the absence of elders, children take turns to start and tell the nights stories. Storytelling is a nightly ritual. In wet seasons everybody gathers in the family hut, which is usually at the centre of the compound, to listen to stories, and in dry season they gather under the family totem tree with shadows of the moon cast by the leaves.

A story can be told as many times as possible depending on the activities of the day or the lesson that the elders want everyone to learn from what has been happening. Stories are as dynamic as the people's journey. As they travel they acquire stories and tell such stories to their families. It is not just the narrative that makes one story more interesting than the other, but also the music, songs and sometimes dance that accompany such stories.

The principle of this project is to create a self-reflexive narrative structure which acts as a psychotherapeutic elixir, similar to what Rhodesa Jones does in California with African American women in incarceration. The first step is the establishment of what we call virtual community centres similar to Internet cafes. But instead of being an Internet café it acts as local training centres where we hold regular traditional workshops on storytelling. We identify these centres by analysing existing local government divisions in the country. This took cognisance of available network infrastructures. We balance these geographical locations with accessible communication networks, and/or alternative sources of information. This also helps to balance religious differences with cultural differences, the two critical issues that affect African political landscape.

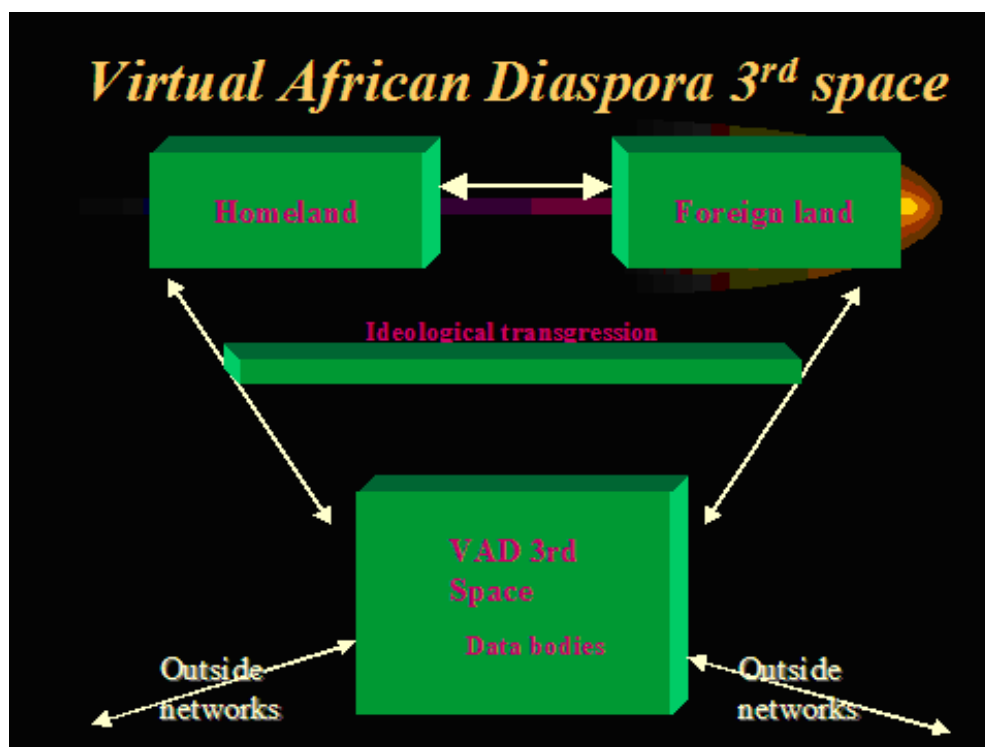
The second stage of the project is the training of local trainers. These trainers are charged with the maintenance of the resources as well as training other community members. These include Internet access, basic photography, word processing, digitisation of images and stories, scanning of images and upload skills. Apart from using these networked computers for gathering research data, community members are allowed to use the networked computers for Internet access and word processing jobs at reduced costs. The income from such use helps them upgrade and maintain the equipment. This structure ensures that the community is self-sustaining, owns and controls the operation of the centre.

The third phase of the project is meant to produce teaching materials to be used in schools, research centres, libraries, galleries and public spaces such as buses. The fourth stage is the consolidation of the community centres as independent self-sustaining bodies. Finally, we use the information from the database to

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implement specific national objectives such as health promotion, environmental policy, education and self-empowerment.

Basically what I am talking about today is based on what I call the African Digital Memory Bank. It is an ideological transgression or intersection between our foreign migration, homeland and technological uptake. I call it transgression because we are dealing with what I can now call the virtual space of globalisation, because we have already passed the stage where one would say that foreign land is different from the homeland. In the technological age, those of us in the Diaspora are no longer different or far from those in Africa. Virtual spaces are spaces which one can't actually escape from, whether you are in Nigeria or Ghana or any other part of Africa. For example, there are a lot of people who go online to oppose the governments of their physical geographies and spaces. You can therefore be physically there but ideologically elsewhere.



This digital memory box is a network connecting the inside to the outside Africans. Those of us in the Diaspora can therefore be regarded as the 'House Nigger' trying to help the 'Field Nigger' (Ngwainmbi 2001). My African American colleagues may understand what I'm talking about here. I want to conclude by saying that the dynamics of memory requires constant fuelling of passion and connectivity, social and collective responsibility. In the words of Williamson (1992) "our fear is not that we are inadequate, our fear is that we

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are powerful beyond measure, it is our light and not our darkness that most frightens us, we ask ourselves who we are, to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous, actually who are you not to be”.

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