

## **A Window to the World: Learning About World Cultures Through their Tales**

*By Judith Black*

Since most of us cannot travel down the Ganges, climb up into the Himalayas, or make our way deep into the rain forests of Brazil, we often rely on the stories that emerge from a culture as our window into it. Story is a brilliant way to explore cultures to which we don't belong, and places that we cannot physically enter. When telling a story with the explicit purpose of teaching about the culture that spawned it, we have an obligation to pursue authenticity.<sup>1</sup> This requires a great deal more work than simply adapting it for your listeners. Many American published collections have been 'white breaded' for American readers. By 'white breading,' I mean that they have been adapted for their intended audience, rather than retold as a representative of the culture they emerge from.

Editors imagine that their readers will not welcome the challenges posed by names they cannot pronounce, odd story lines, unhappy endings, or details (from the scatological to rituals of death) considered unacceptable in US children's literature. If you choose to adapt the tale for the audience, making no claim this it is a true representation of its culture of origin, then these are all reasonable choices. If, however, you are using the tales to teach about this culture, then these 'white-breaded' stories will be of no use.

One perfect example of 'white breading' occurred many years ago when 'multiculturalism' was the hottest thing in education. Several years ago, my friends Victor Cockburn (singer/songwriter) & Judith Steinberg (poet), collectively known as Troubadour, were commissioned by a large educational publishing house to put together a tape of multicultural tales. They commissioned their friends from the storytelling community to develop stories that represented their culture of birth. Harriet Masembe was to share a tale from West Africa. Lee Min Mo would tell one from China, and I was the Jewish girl on this proverbial block. The publishing house wanted written versions of the stories, so that they could get a sense of what was to be included. We all sent in the scripts of our stories and got them back with angry red lines struck through very specific terms with new ones, chosen by the publisher, hand printed above them. There we all were, a bevy of disgruntled storytellers contacting one another in complete dismay; all recipients of the angry red lines.

In my story, the word challah (the special erev Sabbath loaf enjoyed in homes throughout the world) had been replaced with "egg bread." Sabbath itself had been equally dismissed and replaced with "Friday night." The cuts went on and on, and our collective question was: "How will these tales represent their culture of origin if you have sapped from them all that is a unique part of that culture?" Outraged, we all agreed that we preferred to pull our stories rather than have our cultures 'white breaded.' Fortunately, the publishing company was willing to listen to our concerns and relented. (This is not the usual course of events.)

Let's say that you are committed to telling a story as a representative of the culture it came from, but know that it will not 'play' to your contemporary American listeners. Once, a teacher in Lowell MA asked me to come and tell stories about rice to her 60% Cambodian class. She made it clear to me that most of them were ESL students, and she wanted stories from their culture of origin that would feel familiar to them, but still engage the other

students in the classroom. After some research, I found a book of Cambodian tales collected by a cultural anthropologist, which included a few stories about rice. Learning to properly pronounce the name of the rice grinder was challenging enough as the language, based deeply in tonality, could offer one word with 3 or 4 or 5 completely different meanings depending upon tone of voice: sending a tone up, or down, or waving it. The students got a huge kick out of hearing me struggle with the language, and enjoyed being in the teaching position by helping the teller say it correctly. The gist of the story was as follows:

A young woman had lost her husband and so she and her unhappy baby moved back to live with her family in the countryside. They were rice farmers and went each day out to the fields, leaving her and the almost constantly weeping baby at home. A trickster wanted the wealth of the home and conceived a plan: he dressed in the saffron robes of a deeply respected monk, and once the family had left for the fields, he planted himself in front of the house and began to pray.

The young woman was deeply honored by the monk's presence, and she ran out to thank him. He told her how he heard the cries of the baby and had come to try and drive away the evil spirits that possessed the poor being. They decided to build an altar to the ancestors and she came out of the house with incense, fruit, pictures, and other necessary items.

After the appropriate prayers had been said, but the child was still howling, so the monk determined that the evil spirits must be frightened out of the child. Did the family have a *Tbal Kdong*<sup>ii</sup>? The woman brought out the rice grinder: it was a thick stone bowl, attached to a heavy mallet on a lever, which is kept in its raised position by a weight on the opposite end. When one wants to crush rice into a smaller grain usable in porridge or even pound it into flour, the weight is removed and the mallet flies down, crushing the rice in the bowl.

The monk convinced the woman that the evil spirits could be frightened out of her child if she simply placed him in the bowl. Seeing what could happen to them if the mallet was released, they would leave the child. Alas, the baby continued to cry. The 'monk' called for the mother to release the weight and hold the lever in her hands, saying that now those evil spirits would know that only her will stood between them and certain death. He then went into the house and robbed the family blind, while the woman stood holding the lever until her family came home from the fields, relieved her, and rescued the baby from the rice bowl.

The End.

"The End?!" I hear you cry, "Is there no justice for that scoundrel?" If this story had originated in Western culture, there certainly would be; the trickster would never get away with such a devilish act. I was disconcerted by the way the story ended, but I knew that this was an authentic Cambodian folk tale. In order to honor that culture, I was obliged to tell the story the way it had always been told. However, there was no need to do this in blind discomfort, and so I began to research Cambodian culture in order to better understand the story and create a viable bridge for those who would respond as I had upon first hearing it.

The process was illuminating. What I learned was many fold:

- Before Buddhism came to Cambodia, the spiritual practice of its people revolved on ancestor worship, and was rife with evil spirits. The Buddhists felt that this primitive belief structure would limit the humanity and expression of people and encouraged them to give up.
- Buddhism does not require an active, immediate punishment of wrongdoing. Because what goes around comes around, later in this life or in the next, criminals will have to live with the fallout of their acts.

Learning these two facts made the story much more satisfying and enabled me to frame the telling in a context that would allow all listeners to enjoy it and feel fulfilled. Rather than altering the story for its US-born listeners, I told the story so that they were taken through a window—not only to another place, but also to another value/spiritual structure. Because I maintained the authentic structure and characters of the story, while taking the time to understand how it resonates in its culture of origin, it became a wonderful teacher tool.

How can you tell that a story is an authentic representative of its culture of origin? What I look for are a number of signs:

- ***Are the stories well documented?*** Collectors who care about authenticity will offer many details and references about a story's source. These may include where they heard it told, who did the telling, the setting, time of year, and audience response.
  - Often an appendix of motifs and tale types will be included and one can see which of the included stories fall into which universal categories.
  - Finally, those who care about authenticity often offer the songs or chants with rhythms and/or tunes included.
- ***Are there parts of the story that you are uncomfortable with?*** Many of us in the U.S. grew up with stories in which events happen in repetitions of three; there is a clear and singular story line that introduces setting, characters, problem, and resolution; and the ending is almost always 'happily ever after.' When a story doesn't follow these standards, we feel itchy. That's a good itch!
- ***Are you having a difficult time pronouncing names and places?*** That's good news. They probably come from a language you are not familiar with. When a story from the Congo features Dick and Jane, be suspicious.
- ***Are you experiencing any red flags around characters, theme, or plot? Do they feel too familiar to represent a culture far from home?*** A dear friend, knowing my social proclivities, gifted me a book [The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales from Around the World](#). When I came to the story 'How the Summer Queen Came to Canada: A Canadian Indian Tale,' all my flags started whipping around in the wind. The tale featured Glooskap, a close relative of Gluskabe, an Abenaki hero/fool who I'd heard about in many a tale told by Joseph Bruchak. The wording of this story bore no resemblance to other indigenous tales I had heard. Then a character called Tatler the Loon popped up. Native people have too much respect for their natural world to bestow its creatures with cute names. Tatler the Loon was soon followed by Blob the Whale, and I began muttering to myself. By the time they traveled down the "Rainbow Road" to the "Wilderness of Flowers" and met the

“Winter Giant,” I was jumping out of the chair to give a Joe a call. (Yes, storytellers all know each other!) I shared my outrage and questions and he kindly said, “Native people don’t have Queens, you could have put it down after the title.” But I heard the weariness in his voice.<sup>iii</sup>

Stories are a brilliant bridge to other cultures. When we choose to tell them in order to help children and adults cross those bridges we are obliged to understand the cultures that spawned the tales, so that we may successfully lead our audiences to a new place of discovery and understanding.

---

<sup>i</sup> If you have found a folk tale and love its characters or storyline or motif, by all means tell it. This is what most storytellers and educators do. Note where it came from, and let your listeners know that you have adapted the tale. (That is, you have made it your own, but you are not telling it as a true representative of the culture it emerged from.)

<sup>ii</sup> (Phonetic spelling) A rice crusher, a tool owned by almost all rural families in Cambodia.

<sup>iii</sup> Native Americans have had their stories mauled, maligned, and remixed for the ears of Anglo culture for centuries. They are, to my knowledge, the only indigenous people that have asked people outside of their culture to please not tell their stories. There are many reasons for this, ranging from having their original lands stolen, experiencing racial genocide in a previous generation, and being forbidden to educate their children in their language and culture for generations, to the frequent misuse and misunderstanding of the stories, which represent their spiritual beliefs. If you must share their stories, many say, share the trickster tales, but leave the others for those who understand them. If you are willing to apprentice a native teller and receive the stories, that is one path to truly knowing and understanding them, otherwise it seems best to simply do as we are asked, and find other stories to tell.