

Re-Membering Broken Cultures in *Story for a Black Night*

Nancy Huse

Postcolonial literature includes writing by Peace Corps workers. When Robert Locke (aka Clayton Bess) served in Liberia in the late sixties, he wrote *Story for a Black Night* as a response to a set of experiences he filtered through his own cultural understandings. Looking at a few details of this rich story, published in 1982 and awarded the 2002 Phoenix Honor Book designation by the Children's Literature Association, offers many reasons for treasuring this tale as part of a vibrant international youth literature. Reading the work now provides a window on the complex historical process we employ in judging the worth of books.

The disjointed “re-membering” of the title can suggest the fullness of the story. The phrase carries history, meaning, and poetry in the way the story itself does. This gloss on the text is a small echo of a well-made story, and as a playful metaphor *remember* allows readers to play with words as Momo, the boy who grew up to tell the tale, played with the ball his auntie brought him from Monrovia—something to please him, something to keep him alive in the midst of a family smitten with smallpox. That his aunt cared for Momo is part of the brilliant complexity of the story, and one of its markers as children's literature. Auntie brought both horror and humor to the boy.

“Re-membering Broken Cultures” then is a way of signaling the wholeness, the healing this story brings to our postcolonial consciences. Made slowly by massing the layers extracted from a rubber tree, the ball carries the weight and buoyancy of both colonizer and colonized. It is the product of cultures that met long ago, in ways we are only now beginning to piece together, and to mass as usable past. Gerda Lerner, writing *Why History Matters*, points out that the dead “continue to live by way of the resurrection we give them in telling their stories”; they live in the ways we give voice to the past and vision to the future. We give experience new form; we give the chance to be different, when we tell stories (211). These statements of Lerner seem unexceptional to literary critics, yet hearing them from a groundbreaking historian has relevance to our task. The ball, Auntie's gift, is a minor detail in *Story for a Black Night*, but it helps to move the work of the young Peace Corps worker “Clayton Bess” into the major leagues of meaning. Auntie, whose well-fed body bounces *ba-loop, ba-loop*, to the boy's amusement when he is young and when he is old, is not the hero of the story, but neither is she the villain. Her life is intertwined with her sister's, and her mother's, and with the cultures that formed together the philosophical and religious moment that is this story.

One way that cultures “bounce back” or continue from low points is the act of remembering (no hyphen). In this sense, storytelling in Africa has served—like all literature—to transmit values. Writing about Nigerian children's literature, Osa Fayose lists the values folktales carry:

- Honesty

- Hard work leading to achievement
- Perseverance
- Courage
- Respect for elders
- Obedience to the society
- Consideration for others. (6)

This list of values basic to Nigerian tribal cultures is important in reading *Story for a Black Night* because too often the values of English-speaking countries, especially the Enlightenment notions of individual rights, and the questioning of absolutes, are described as unique, and superior to the mores of indigenous peoples that Europeans have colonized. This tendency to claim courage, charity and complexity for the Judeo-Christian/Greco-Roman cultures should make us wary readers of literature by Westerners about the colonized peoples. So having African critics like Fayose claim valor and kindness for indigenous cultures is a crucial act.

Aware of colonialism as a shaping force, I feared *Story for a Black Night* at first reading—or feared my inability to transact what might be an imposition of Christianity onto an African context. But I am no longer “scary” as a reader of it. I use the adjective “scary” the way the text uses it: to be *scary* is, in this story, to be *scared*, but the active form preserves the agency of reception. In a black night, even one with countless stars, story-telling in Africa is scary in the way we use the word to signify what is done to us. But in that context of the campfire, we each are scary in the other sense. Our moral and emotional fires light or even burn the darkness. We “each be scary” in both senses. Fayose indicates the intentness of listeners around a campfire; each is taking in, reacting to, the performances prior to her or his own. A storyteller is deliberately different from all others, even though all stories follow conventions of telling, of singing, and of moral emphasis. In shifting to writing, many African literatures preserve this intense interactive folktale framework. Thus, written stories “remember” the traditions, so that we will take note of them, be scary as readers.

When I reread this text, and discussed it with others, I lost one part of “scared” reading. The story seems wholly resonant, a weaving of words that “bounces” back from each try. That quality preserves the scariness in me; I am an intense advocate of the work. My retelling, my emphases, would not be the same as my readers’ experience, but I think if readers of this essay read *Story for a Black Night* they too will become scary. The transaction is what I mean by the hyphenated re-membering of damaged cultures that goes on in the old man’s story of his smallboy memories. Unlike the pronouncement of *Cry the Beloved Country* that the tribe is broken; unlike “the horror, the horror” at the heart of Western views of the worlds we have colonized, this book contributes to what is a growing body of literature by former Peace Corps workers, people who learned to see cultures as integral and significant. One way this occurs in the Clayton Bess story is the discussion Momo’s mother has with her own mother about the morality of infanticide for the good of the living. Ma tells Old Ma that she has been changed by reading. “Pa sent me to school, Ma. You too. What you thought I would do there? I read, and learned. They made me different. From you, from Pa. I don’t know right anymore, and wrong. I only

know I can't kill this baby" (26). Though Old Ma uses powerful logic—an abandoned baby with smallpox will kill Ma's family if she takes her in, and even states that she would bury her own baby (and her heart along with it) to preserve the group (76)—the younger woman confronts the ambiguity she and her also literate sister (Auntie) see in the sequence of events. Rather than "acting as good Christians"—Ma has given up reading the Bible since Momo's father died, while the Bible is invoked by other characters for ill purposes—both Ma and Auntie had held on to the tangled threads of the present, hoping for an ending that might preserve everyone's life.

In a brilliant use of repetition, the phrase "I don't understand" is a link between Old Ma and her two daughters, and summed up by Ma when she turns to her son, "Confusion, Momo, ain't it?" (77). Yet there is no confusion about Ma in the narrator's re-membered world. His story peoples the black night with those who acted with logic, those who acted with cruelty, and the woman (his mother) who acted with charity and is the hero of the tale. Though this story is complex and fair to all the characters, Ma remains in the narrator's memory: "Too beautiful. Her head was high, and she stood straight and strong, the baby to her breast. Beside her, all Africa seems small." He places his mother into African myth, re-membering his birthplace and birth culture, yet he also re-members the community of readers, peoples it with those who make good use of words and those who fail to heed the purpose of words. And, though focused on his own courageous mother, the narrator claims to be talking about "Mama Kiawu," the mother who abandoned her sick baby to strangers. Good and evil lie in human action, yet this action, like the rubber ball Auntie gave her little nephew, is a mass of resilient and manylayered material. Tightly wound, the filaments of the story contrast and connect: the wife of the minister misreads the signs of guilt and innocence. Old Ma accurately determines who is evil, while a Mandingo woman, coming up to Ma on market day to touch her smallpox scars, identifies good. "'Oh,' she said, stay smiling. 'Oh, you must give me your heart.'"

Leaving this spiritual insight to the Mandingo, one of a wandering people, *Story for a Black Night* reminds the reader of Alex Haley's *Roots*, and of the African diaspora. Even in the blackest of nights, Smallboy can rest because his grandmother's African heart, and his mother's, were not of darkness.

Works Cited

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