

STORYTELLING AND THE LIVES OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

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In remembered good times, many asylum seekers see themselves sitting in their gardens surrounded by friends and family, laughing, talking, passing round bowls of food. Of many losses, one of the most keenly felt is the loss of this warm, sustaining community.

In 2003, I was employed by The Village Storytelling Centre in Pollok to meet and interview people in our local refugee and asylum-seeking community with a view to gathering traditional stories from their home countries. Initially, I had some misgivings. Wouldn't they regard such a request as a distraction from their pressing need to focus on ways of convincing a hard-faced bureaucracy that their asylum claim should be accepted? Indeed, as it turned out, most of the people I met had had their initial applications refused. Also, I wondered, shouldn't we be allowing them, even encouraging them, to talk about the traumatic experiences that had driven them into flight?

I underestimated the nourishing power of storytelling, for both teller and listener. Over the previous few years, the asylum seekers had done a lot of listening and telling. But what a contrast with those encounters—with immigration officers, lawyers, judges—where they were supplicants, their listeners at best disinterested or perfunctory, at worst hostile. We were asking them to take part in something which was about pleasure: the pleasure of telling, of being listened to, of recreating, of listening and imagining. A story. Remember it, share it with us. The listeners might experience the wonder at hearing something completely new or they might recognise the outlines of a familiar story and be delighted by the variation the teller has brought from their own country, from their childhood, from the telling of their grandmother in one of those happy, lost days.

Of all the people I asked, from many different countries, only one responded negatively. 'I can tell you stories about Jews killing Palestinians.' She was

weary and bitter. I had asked in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Perhaps she misunderstood me. It was better if I had time to explain and give examples. But, with the others, it was as if fists with finger nails pressed into palms opened like flowers. In African countries, the storytelling tradition remains strong. Even in a big city like Kinshasa, people still sit around fires and tell their versions of old tales. One of those was the very first story I recorded. It was told by Londi Beketch, and it was to be significant later on, beyond the traditional story collection. It began:

A long time ago in my country, in a village far in the forest, there was a king who had a wife and one daughter. The village had many, many troubles. But the worst trouble of all was the huge snake that lived nearby in the forest. It was so huge it could swallow a man in one gulp. Everyone was afraid of it. Anyone who wandered too far from the village would be attacked and eaten. It would not leave the village in peace ...

As I met new groups of people, I found that hearing one story encouraged the emergence of another. The Selkie (the Scottish legend of the seal woman or the seal man) evoked stories of other creatures (or gods, as in an old Chinese tale) who entered the lives of humans.

The Congolese snake awoke a global kindred. It represented the threat, the evil, the foe that had to be combated. In a Kurdish version of the Grimm tale, the cradle cursed princess is hidden in a tower in a remote island tended by faithful servants and a boatman, safe from the curse until, inexorably, it arrives, hidden in a beautiful basket of fruit: the venomous snake.

The power of the snake motif drew others into the storytelling circle. A story about a snake? It's not a traditional one. Never mind. All stories welcome: we have no rigid definitions in this art

form. A true story? Ah! The Sri Lankan snake, lurking in the woodpile ended the life of a favourite aunt, its poison resistant to efforts to drag it from her bloodstream. In a Congolese farm, a huge black snake (Guma Ya Moido) with eyes that glowed in the dark met its end at the hands of a mesmerist. When they cut off its head, they reached inside and pulled out a dead hen, grandmother's pet hen. She had her revenge by using the snake's skin as a carpet, its meat as a meal for many and its fat as oil, usable as a curative drink or an embrocation for sore backs.

So enjoyable did the snake stories become that a woman who spoke practically no English had to contribute. It was her memory of another snake clan, a Turkish rural variety, that crept into farmhouses, this time drawn by the aroma from barrels of freshly made yoghurt. 'Snake' was easy enough to mime. But 'yoghurt'? Everyone offered suggestions as, with fluent hand movements, she tried to communicate the origins of yoghurt, its consistency, its taste, its smell.

Listening to the stories which were not autobiographical, the traditional tales, I had a sense of the way in which people have always used myth as a way of coming at reality in a vicarious way. But also striking were stories that had a more obvious combination of myth and reality. These are stories with strong archetypal motifs, but also with settings in real events, actual traumatic times in a people's history.

This dual characteristic is one traditional tales often share with the stories of the great fabulists of European literature. In the novels of Charles Dickens, for example, commentators have recognised the faces and gaits of the fairy tale characters that fed the writer's childhood imagination: the ogres and witches, the cruel stepfather, the fairy godmother, the young man on a quest. Yet, as real people inhabiting contemporary industrial London, Dickens' characters are entirely credible. It is ironic that, in Dickens' seemingly lurid

depictions of the nineteenth century city, there is probably understatement in terms of the realities of childhood illness and mortality and of the mental and physical abuse suffered in orphanages and dumping schools.

Likewise, a contributor to *Buffalo Horns* (2004), our anthology of stories from around the world, describes her story, 'The Stubborn Child', as coming from 'village history of the tribal wars' in Cameroon. She sets it in a village called Balbessi in North West Cameroon and includes a description of the lifestyle of the central character, a mother of six children who runs a farm on her own. During a time of famine, two huge men knock on her door. In spite of her sense that they are ill-intentioned, the laws of hospitality dictate that she must invite them in and cook food for them. One by one she sends her children away on pretend errands and then makes her own escape. Only the sixth boy, who thinks he's missing something, disobeys his mother and returns to the farmhouse, where, once all the other food has been exhausted, he is eaten. Weeks later, when his mother and brothers return to the farmhouse, they find all that remains of him is his skull, hanging on the wall, uttering a familiar moral about the consequence of disobedience.

It is this image of the skull, together with other details of the austere setting, that lend the 'The Stubborn Child' an unusually harsh tone. There are, of course, other traditional stories, especially in unexpurgated versions, in which children are neither rescued before being swallowed by giant or wolf nor yanked from the devouring stomach before digestion. But behind the patterned story texture of 'The Stubborn Child', we can perhaps discern a grisly actuality from a time of starvation and social dislocation.

As links between asylum seekers and The Village Storytelling Centre strengthened, we became increasingly aware that drawing parallels between their real experiences and the incidents of

myths was far from fanciful. It seemed, therefore, that one thing we could do was to help people to find ways of expressing the tensions of their own lives, especially as, after *Buffalo Horns*, there was a group who wanted to keep coming to The Village, both for the pleasure of storytelling and for the feeling of community.

What we offered was a Creative Writing class. For our purposes, we were able to draw on the model of the writers' workshops, developed by writer and community activists in the early 1980s, particularly in working class communities undermined by the Thatcher government. The best writers workshops gave reaffirmation to people by helping them to develop writing skills and to find their own voices while articulating their feelings about their lives and concerns, existential, community, or political.¹ The Village class offered participants space to share anecdotes, stories, past and present experience, while at the same time helping them to improve their language skills. As the season went on, and as bonds grew stronger and inhibitions weaker, I found that increasingly people arrived at the class with stories they had to tell, stories of their immediate lives: the letter of rejection, the meeting with their lawyer, the forced removal of a family of friends, conflict with a neighbour, their children's attachment to their school, news of relatives. Dealing with such events through writing, often through the discipline of a particular workshop assignment, was both therapeutic and a way of becoming aware of new facets of the experience. A selection of the writing that arose from the class appeared in *Village Stories* (2005).

Another spontaneous development (in terms

of impetus from the asylum-seeking group) after the publication of our first book, *Buffalo Horns* (2004), was the performance of a short play based on one of the stories. For the launch of our second book, *Village Stories* (2005), we dramatised another story, *Mayele*, a Faustian tale of the Rumpelstiltskin variety, as told once again by Londi Beketch. An interesting feature of this story is the denouement in which the power of the evil spirit is defeated by the inventiveness of the boy, *Mayele* (the wise one), and the collective effort of the village community. The seed was sown that would grow into one of the main themes in *The Flats*.

Of all community arts, drama is the most powerful because it requires an intense co-operative effort in the making of something new, a creation that continues to be alive, dynamic and unpredictable until the day of its performance. Also, community productions, unlike professional equivalents, can include far bigger casts. After our rehearsals of *The Flats* got off the ground, our cast grew from ten to sixteen, as more people, some of whom had earlier said they would just fetch and carry or perform a backstage function, asked if they could be on stage too. Performers are at the heart of the production and, in the case of *The Flats*, as well as the fun and the excitement, there was a chance to express a range of feelings about their own situation.

The initial desire to perform a 'big' play arose out of the buzz and comradeship being generated in the creative writing group. It was also driven by the energy of one or two members who had dreams of being stars of the stage! This was especially true of Ayisha, a feisty Algerian woman, whose enthusiasm often kicked rehearsals into life. More than anything it was fuelled by the realisation that, through the drama, we had the chance to tell people's stories, stories of what they had suffered in their own countries and of what they were experiencing in their present lives as asylum seekers in Glasgow. At the time of the production of *The Flats* in June 2006,

1 It is no accident that, with the emergence of major writers such as Alasdair Gray, James Kelman and Tom Leonard, the nineteen eighties in Glasgow saw the beginnings of a great upsurge of literary activity, characterised by political radicalism and daring linguistic innovation. Kelman, in particular, was committed to the nurturing of working class writing and played an active role in the workshop movement.

only one of the eleven asylum seeker members of the cast of sixteen, had been granted refugee status. Despite evidence of oppression and torture, credible on any reasonable balance of probabilities, the applications of the other ten had been rejected. They had been in the U.K. for between three and six years, during which time they had been refused the right to work. They lived in fear of the dawn raid. This tactic of invading homes in the early morning and forcibly removing handcuffed families to detention centres, was justified by the Home Office as being the most efficient method of apprehending all family members at the same time.

Within the asylum-seeking community there was an increasing awareness that community displays of traditional arts, fascinating and enjoyable as they might be, could not express the pressing realities of their present lives. There was, and continues to be, an inescapable irony: wherever a group of asylum seekers does a performance of cultural stories or music or provides a feast of international cuisine, politicians of every stripe, regional or national, can be called upon to attend and deliver a speech extolling diversity and congratulating the community for promoting integration. At the same, all the main political parties support the hardline policy, 'the climate of disbelief' as the Independent Asylum Commission calls it, which denies so many asylum seekers the right to remain in these same communities. Such disingenuousness invited satire. With the situation for so many of the city's asylum seekers reaching crisis point, it also demanded the exposure that could be achieved through a large-scale dramatic production.

It was at this time that The Village made the acquaintance of Rachel Jury, producer of ConFab, an arts organisation dedicated to encouraging grassroots writing and drama. Her energy both as inspirer of community projects and fund raiser was vital in helping us to conceive the drama and get it into production. At the time of our project, other

groups throughout the city were working in various ways to help asylum seekers and to publicise their plight. Our contribution to this movement was given extra impetus when Rachel was able to bring Catrin Evans on board, a dynamic young theatre director committed to radical, socially conscious theatre and to the cause of asylum seekers.

Drama needs a story with conflict at its heart. The more in your face the better. If we could devise a story of conflict, set it in a block of flats, bring it to life with gallus, kick-ass dialogue and, at the same time, engage with the wider political dimensions of asylum, we might end up with a rich and vibrant drama.

Early in the process, we worked on memories and anecdotes about the good times recalled from home, as well as those about traumatic events and the experience of arriving in the U.K. This material gave us lines that formed the basis for ensemble scenes.

But, as to the main story. For some time, in Ayisha's accounts of her conflicts with an unfriendly aggressive neighbour, I had detected nuances other than the neighbour's obvious racism. There was a class difference between the two women. Throughout the city, asylum seekers had been housed in working class areas, or perhaps more accurately, decayed working class areas, where a significant percentage of the population could be described as the dispossessed: the long term unemployed, people with few educational qualifications or job skills, often with alcohol and drug problems. Many asylum seekers come from middle class backgrounds. They could thus find themselves living side by side with people with whom, in other circumstances, they would have little contact. In our local area, there were plenty of people who welcomed the incomers and formed bonds with them, but, if you were unlucky, as with Ayisha, you might find yourself next door to someone who was difficult to love.

Despite this, I found that, with a few asylum

seekers, their disdain could be excessive. And to be truthful and authentic, to reflect the plight of all the people living in the flats, the play would have to deal with more than the issue of asylum. The local character we wanted to have in the play couldn't just be a cipher or a racist caricature. So, before we even had anyone who could play the part, I sketched out the character of the neighbour, giving her a long monologue parallel to Ayisha's, depicting her as a strong woman who had escaped with her daughter from the abuse of a violent partner. Her routine, unreflecting, racist comments are matched by Ayisha's character's unsympathetic attitude to her lifestyle.

By a stroke of great luck, we were almost immediately able to recruit the final member of our cast: Susan, a local working class woman, who had had a taste of community acting during International Women's Day. She later confessed that, before her experience in *The Flats*, she would unthinkingly have agreed with the misconceptions and racist attitudes we were satirising. For Susan, *The Flats* was a transformative experience. She was also a powerful actor and, being herself a survivor of a violent marriage, was able to bring a moving authenticity to her performance.

Our community play now took shape: the gritty, realistic story of two women, both in flight, both needing protection, interspersed with ensemble scenes satirising politicians and asylum officials. In this context it was now possible to celebrate the activity that had originally brought us together: traditional stories. Because, of course, it was indeed wonderful that this diverse group of people, with their different languages and stories and music, had come together in our community. Even the sound of the languages (from Afghanistan, Algeria, Cameroon, Congo, Iran, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka) as each actor in turn welcomed the audience to the ceilidh, was uplifting. And Isabella from Rwanda has a beautiful voice. It

would have been unforgivable if she hadn't sung at some point in the play.

After experimenting with the possibility of using several bits of stories, we hit on the idea of taking one story and weaving it, snakelike, through the whole drama. It wasn't a difficult choice. The Wise Man and the Evil Man, Londi Beketch's story of the forest snake that terrorised the village had the resonance we wanted. In the story, the man who kills the snake is not the hero. He is Ndoki, the evil one, who lives deep in the forest, a horrible monster with maggots clinging to him, a shape-changer who transforms himself into a handsome young man and makes his way to the village. When he has slain the snake and won the hand of the king's daughter in marriage, he leads her and her retinue to her new home in the forest. Halfway there, he resumes his horrible shape and devours the servants. The terrified princess is forced to travel on with him until they reach his home, a house made entirely of human bones.

A voice-over by Londi tells the mythical story in sections throughout the play, each part juxtaposed with a scene from the Glasgow story so that it gives added impact or makes an ironic comment: the double-faced politician, the house as prison, the trauma of a dawn raid, the strength of united communities. The princess is rescued by a resourceful young man, and Londi, in person, concludes his story, and the play, by saying:

'And so, from that day, the village became a good place to live. Ndoki tried to approach but found that the village was protected by a spirit that was stronger than his. So the village lived in peace and the people were free to do whatever they wanted. There was no snake and no evil one. He had gone away and he never returned.'

For the two women in the play, this ending either expresses an optimistic possibility or an ironic

contrast with the bleak reality of their situation.

There had also been an uncertain ending in the story of the play's production. Though the rehearsals were convivial, they were also hard work, and, for people with many stresses in their lives, it wasn't always easy to maintain the necessary level of commitment and concentration. Practical difficulties arose, not least in relation to the cost of bus hire and crèche provision (sometimes we had more than twenty kids). Rachel later confessed that at one point the problem seemed close to being overwhelming, and she had considered pulling the plug on the project. The rapturous audience response after the first performance was evidence enough that she made the right decision. The cast's elation was palpable. They had got their message across.

The strength of *The Flats* lay in the fact that it arose out of both the actual felt experience of the participants' lives and the dynamic of a group that had been forming and strengthening over the previous two years.

Months after the performance, under the heading 'Legacy Cases', the Home Office granted leave to remain to a large number of asylum seekers throughout the city, including our ten cast members.

The government had drawn a line in the sand. Henceforth, with the inception of the New Asylum Model, applications would be processed and decisions made more quickly, before newcomers had time to become part of a community with a collective spirit stronger than Ndoki and the immigration officials.

REFERENCES

- Stewart, Liam (ed) 2004, *Buffalo Horns*, Glasgow: the Village Storytelling Centre
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